

Perception of members of county assembly on participatory communication in the budget-making process: A case of Makueni County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The research sought to understand the perceptions of Members of County Assembly (MCAs) on participatory communication in the budget-making process within the context of Makueni County, Kenya. This study is also based on the context of the 2010 Constitution that institutionalized public participation as a core principle of governance. While Makueni County's reputation is picked as a pioneer in participatory governance, limited attention has been paid to MCAs' perception of the effectiveness of communication methods that facilitate citizen involvement in budget decisions. The study was anchored on both public sphere and deliberative democracy theories, which posit that citizen engagement is driven by perceived influence, access to information, and accountability. The study adopted a pragmatic mixed-methods design combining surveys and interviews. A census of 47 MCAs was targeted, with an 85.1% response rate, supplemented by key informant interviews with county officials and civil society representatives. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings of the study revealed that public barazas (community meetings) dominated as the primary communication method (52.5%), with broader combinations including stakeholder forums and social media platforms, as well as surveys employed to varying degrees. The regression analysis indicated that while stakeholder engagement was positively associated with effective budget outcomes ($\beta=0.219$, $p<0.05$), overreliance on existing participatory methods had a weak negative relationship with effectiveness ($\beta=-0.257$, $p<0.01$), signaling the need for diversification of approaches. The study noted that MCAs generally rated participatory methods as effective (90%), citing inclusivity of youth and marginalized groups, timely consultations, and regular updates through multiple channels; however, digital platforms were found to be significantly underutilized (75% agreed), civil society and private sector actors were minimally engaged, and feedback mechanisms, though present, required strengthening. The researchers concluded that while participatory communication has enhanced inclusivity, transparency, and dialogue in Makueni's budget-making process, critical gaps persist in digital adoption, stakeholder diversity, and communication effectiveness. The study further recommends broadening stakeholder representation to include civil society and private sector actors, strengthening digital infrastructure and MCA training to expand citizen outreach, and improving feedback systems to ensure citizens' inputs are acknowledged and acted upon, thus advancing inclusive and equitable as well as accountable budget governance.

Keywords: Budget-Making, Kenya, Makueni County, Members of County Assembly (MCAs), Participatory Communication, Stakeholder Engagement

I. INTRODUCTION

The modern governance has increasingly emphasized participatory approaches to decision-making, recognizing the need for inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. In Kenya the Constitution of 2010 revolutionized governance by mandating public participation as a core principle, particularly in devolved units such as county governments. Budget-making process in the new Kenyan constitution dispensation is a critical component of county governance, requires active engagement between the Members of County Assembly (MCAs), stakeholders, and the public to ensure equitable resource allocation and effective service delivery (Hao et al., 2022). Participatory communication, which involves the active exchange of information, ideas, and feedback between stakeholders, is fundamental in achieving this goal.

Globally, some scholars have reviewed participatory communication approaches in governance. For instance, Gilman, (2016) in "*Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America*," surveyed how participatory budgeting empowers citizens to identify community needs, collaborate with elected officials to develop budget proposals, and vote on the allocation of public funds. The author situates this process within the broader context of U.S. democracy, highlighting its potential to enhance civic engagement and address citizen disaffection and mistrust in government. Through theoretical insights, case studies, and interviews, Gilman presents participatory budgeting as a compelling alternative to traditional democratic practices, aiming to build a more empowering model of governance. Gilman (2016), and supported by Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014), all in USA and Europe, note that

participatory communication involves key principles like dialogue, where stakeholders share information, opinions, and perceptions, leading to mutual understanding and collective decision-making. Additionally, Wampler et al. (2021) in a global perspective of participatory communication notes that participation of stakeholders is a key component in budgeting process, along with empowerment of the public through allowing individuals to take control of their development, while promoting self-reliance and confidence.

Further in Europe (especially in Spain) and America, Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014) perform a meta-analysis of literature review and peer-scholarly studies on participatory budgeting (PB). The authors note that PB is not instituted in at least 1,500 cities across the world, with its central features being the yearly cycles of budgeting, open meetings, and the combination of representation and deliberation. The authors noted for more careful consideration of some of its least known features like managing stakeholders' meetings and exercise of power in decision-making, which might lead to emancipation of citizens. Correspondingly, Wampler, et al. (2021) in their work titled "Participatory Budgeting in Global Perspective," analyzed the worldwide adoption and impact of participatory budgeting (PB) programs. They identify six distinct PB models, each varying in design and outcomes, to account for the diverse implementations across different contexts. The researchers offered a comprehensive examination of PB's potential to enhance civic engagement, promote social justice, and improve governance outcomes globally. In addition, Wampler et al. (2021) cite practices like community engagement, use of diverse media like traditional media, face-to-face interactions, and digital platforms to reach a broader audience and also accommodate different preferences. The study insisted on the importance of feedback mechanisms and capacity building for the public to make public participation successful.

Preceding studies highlight varied experiences in citizen participation in public budgeting across different contexts. Smith (2015) investigated electronic participation in Georgia, USA, showing growing use of social media in local government budgeting but with low prioritization by officials. In addition, Yadamsuren (2006) in Mongolia found that weak regulation, poor awareness, and limited communication hindered citizens' involvement in local budgeting. Locally in Kenya, Ogoti et al. (2024) in Nyeri County established that social and print media significantly influenced public participation, while radio had minimal impact, with education and awareness shaping outcomes. The reviewed studies reveal geographical, methodological, and theoretical gaps that justify further exploration in Makueni County.

The study used the theory of participatory communication in budget-making explains citizen engagement as driven by perceived benefits such as influence, accountability, access to information, and improved services (Johannessen & Collins, 2024). The study highlighted the government's role in creating transparent, mutually beneficial communication channels that foster legitimacy and ownership in governance. Public feel empowered when their voices shape decisions, reflecting social exchange dynamics where individuals seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs. This framework directly supports the study's objectives by linking citizen participation to impacts and challenges in county-level budget processes (Berger & Webster Jr, 2018).

The Constitution of Kenya 2010 institutionalized public participation as a legal and operational requirement for governance processes, including budget-making. The County of Makueni has emerged as a notable case in the implementation of participatory governance, setting an example in the inclusion of citizens in budgetary decisions. Members of County Assembly (MCAs) play a vital role in this process by serving as intermediaries between the county government and the public. Their perception of participatory communication significantly influences the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement and the transparency of budget decisions.

The county of Makueni is regarded as a trailblazer in participatory governance, presents a unique context for examining the integration of participatory communication in budget-making. The county has been lauded for its progressive approach to citizen engagement and transparent governance. Nevertheless, the perceptions of MCAs, key actors in the budget process, regarding the effectiveness of participatory communication remain understudied. The MCAs views are critical as they play a pivotal role in representing constituents, facilitating stakeholder involvement, and overseeing the budget process.

Hao et al. (2022) note that participatory communication enables the active exchange of information, ideas, and feedback between government institutions and stakeholders. In the context of Makueni County, the county assembly serves as a critical link between the executive and the citizens, facilitating communication during budget preparation. Muthomi (2024) notes that various methods, including public forums, media outreach, and digital platforms, are used to engage stakeholders. The effectiveness of the participatory methods in ensuring inclusivity, awareness, and informed decision-making is a primary focus of this study and how it influences decision-making at the county executive levels.

This journal paper sought to discover the perception of Members of County Assembly on participatory communication in the budget-making process in Makueni County government. The research was guided by two objectives including: exploring the participatory communication approaches used by Makueni County Assembly during the budget-making process; as well as to evaluate the level of stakeholder engagement facilitated by Members of Count Assembly on participatory communication in the budget-making process.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The County of Makueni continues to face challenges in achieving an inclusive, transparent, and responsive budget-making process despite its reputation for innovation in public participation. While Kenya's Constitution mandates citizen involvement in governance, participatory communication within counties often remains inconsistent and superficial, hindered by factors such as political interference, limited capacity of MCAs, inadequate feedback mechanisms, and communication barriers. These shortcomings have resulted in weak stakeholder engagement and inefficiencies in resource allocation. Moreover, little is known about how Members of County Assembly (MCAs) perceive participatory communication and its influence on transparency and effectiveness in budgeting. This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by exploring MCAs' perceptions of participatory communication in Makueni County to enhance accountability, efficiency, and inclusive governance in the budget-making process.

1.2 Research Objectives

The following were the research objectives:

- (i) To explore the participatory communication methods used by Makueni County Assembly during the budget-making process.
- (ii) To assess the level of stakeholder engagement facilitated by Members of Count Assembly on participatory communication in the budget-making process.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The following were the theories used in the study. First is the Public Sphere Theory proposed by Jürgen Habermas (1962) provides a foundation for understanding participatory communication in democratic processes. It emphasizes the existence of a public domain where citizens engage in rational-critical debate to influence political decisions and ensure government accountability. This model accentuates key elements such as inclusivity, deliberation, autonomy, and the media's role in facilitating discourse. Critics, including Nancy Fraser and Adut, as observed by Arendt et al. (2010), argued that Habermas's model is overly idealistic and excludes marginalized voices, while modern interpretations incorporate digital platforms as new public spheres for engagement. For the context of Makueni County, this model explains how participatory communication enables citizens to debate budget priorities, hold leaders accountable, and enhance transparency in governance.

Secondly, there is the Deliberative Democracy Theory by Young (2001) which builds upon Habermas's ideas, emphasizing inclusive, reasoned, and respectful dialogue in decision-making. It views legitimacy in democracy as dependent on citizens' active participation in discussions that shape collective outcomes. Core principles include equality, transparency, public reasoning, and consensus. The theory has critics like Mouffe and Curato as mentioned by Szklarska (2020) highlighted that the theory assumes overly rational participants and may overlook emotional and power dynamics that affect inclusivity. Despite these challenges, the theory is relevant to participatory communication because it explains how platforms like public forums and social media can foster dialogue between citizens and policymakers. In Makueni County, this framework supports understanding of how deliberative spaces enable informed contributions to budget-making processes.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Participatory Communication and the Budget-Making Process

Some studies have examined how participatory communication act as a catalyst for inclusive and transparent budget-making processes across global and local contexts. Chapman (2021) found that participatory technologies in Russia enhanced elite-mass communication, increasing government approval through inclusive dialogue, though contextual and methodological limitations may affect transferability to democratic settings like Kenya. In addition, Muthomi (2024) in Oregon, USA, noted that government officials increasingly used hybrid approaches, social media and traditional forums, to foster participatory budgeting, emphasizing adaptability and inclusivity. Further, Al Hudithi (2017) in Saudi Arabia demonstrated that participatory communication grounded in social capital fostered efficient budgeting decisions by improving information exchange within organizations. Likewise, Lorsuwannarat (2017) in Thailand underscored public participation as a reformist tool for improving decision-making at multiple government levels. Collectively, these studies affirm that participatory communication promotes transparency and citizen trust, though contextual factors such as governance systems, institutional capacity, and communication culture influence outcomes.

Further, Sintomer et al. (2012) linked participatory budgeting to deliberative democracy, emphasizing civic engagement as central to participatory modernization, whereas Shomary and Mbuti (2022) in Tanzania found that participatory communication improved administrative efficiency and budget outcomes at the municipal level. In

Kenya, Gachoka (2021) highlighted that participatory forums in Makueni County strengthened trust between citizens and leaders, making the budget-making process more inclusive and responsive. Generally, these studies converge on the importance of participatory communication in enhancing citizen engagement, but they reveal gaps regarding how elected leaders, as opposed to administrators or civil servants, utilize participatory communication to influence budget-making processes in Kenyan counties.

2.2.2 Participatory Communication Methods, Citizen Engagement, and Budgetary Decisions

Research shows that the methods and media used in participatory communication substantially affect citizen engagement in budgetary decision-making. For instance, Smith (2015) found that electronic participation tools like social media enhanced transparency and dialogue in local governments in Georgia, USA, though government prioritization of such tools remained relatively low. Yadamsuren (2006) in Mongolia observed limited citizen awareness of participatory channels, resulting in low participation in local budgeting. On the contrary, Ogoti et al. (2024) in Nyeri County established that social and print media significantly influence participation levels, with social media emerging as a stronger predictor of engagement than radio. Similarly, Keshine (2018) in Laikipia found that communication barriers such as limited access to newspapers and meeting venues reduced participation effectiveness, while effective information sharing and consultation improved inclusivity.

Locally in Kisii County, Agalo et al. (2018) emphasized that social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook enhance participatory communication, although government preference for traditional media limits their reach. In addition, Juma et al. (2023) further demonstrated that WhatsApp messaging facilitates accessible and real-time public participation in Migori County's budget processes, albeit challenged by high internet costs and coordination issues. Njiru (2020) also established that participatory communication platforms in counties like Makueni increased inclusion of marginalized groups in budget decision-making. Collectively, these studies reveal that the method and medium of participatory communication determine citizen engagement quality and inclusivity. However, there remains a research gap in assessing the interplay between communication strategies, technological adoption, and citizen responsiveness in county-level budgeting in Kenya.

III. METHODOLOGY

The section provides the methodology used, which outlines the research design, methods, and ethical considerations for the study on MCAs' perceptions of participatory communication in Makueni County's budget-making process. This research embraced a pragmatic mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data through surveys and interviews. Further, a descriptive cross-sectional design was used to capture perceptions at a specific point in time, focusing on participatory communication mechanisms, impacts on transparency, levels of stakeholder engagement, accountability, as well as barriers to effective participation.

The research was done in Makueni County, well-known for its innovative public participation practices, making it an ideal case for examining participatory communication in governance. The target population was about 47 elected as well as nominated MCAs, supplemented by key stakeholders such as the governor, clerk of the assembly, budget officers, and civil society representatives for triangulation. The researcher embraced a census approach was adopted due to the relatively small size of the population, which ensured diverse perspectives were captured expansively.

The information was collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured questionnaires, as well as key informant interview guides. The questionnaires had both closed-ended as well as open-ended questions, organized around the research objectives, and employed a 5-point Likert scale to measure perceptions. Key informant interviews were used to enrich qualitative insights. Further, validity was ensured through expert reviews and pre-testing in Machakos County, while reliability was tested through a pilot study and Cronbach's alpha analysis. In qualitative data, validity and trustworthiness was boosted through triangulation.

Quantitative data, the researcher embraced descriptive and inferential statistics such as chi-square tests and linear regression, processed through Excel, while qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis. The researcher embraced ethical principles like informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and adherence to approvals from NACOSTI and county authorities were strictly observed. This ensured that the study maintained academic rigor, integrity, and respect for participants' rights.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Response Rate

The study targeted 47 MCAs for the questionnaires, where 40 of them managed to successfully fill and return the questionnaires. This translated to 85.1% response rate. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response

rate of above 60% is considered adequate depending on the nature of study and respondents, hence the response rate was considered adequate for further analysis of the data. The summary is shown on table 1.

Table 1*Response Rate*

Targeted Population	Responses	Response Rate
47	40	85.1%

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The section shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents (MCAs).

Table 2*Demographic Characteristics of the MCAs*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	13	32.5
	Male	27	67.5
Years in office	1 to 3 years	19	47.5
	4 to 5 years	1	2.5
	Above 5 years	20	50
Levels of Education	Diploma	5	12.5
	Postgraduate	21	52.5
	Undergraduate	14	35

The findings show that most of the respondent MCAs were man (67.5%, n=27) while the remaining 32.5% were women. This could be a reflection that the county has well balanced representation, where the constitution of the MCAs meets the third gender rule. Further, the representation enables the researcher to make interpretations based on the balanced sampled respondents. In relation to the years in office, there were half (50.0%, n=20) of them who were serving over five years in office, indicating they were at least in their second term of service or probably third term. Having served more than one term, they were assumed to have experience and expertise in participatory communication methods and their impacts in accountability and making informed budgetary decisions. There were another 47.5% of the respondents who had served for about one to three years, indicating they were the first time MCAs. Lastly, there was 2.5% (n=1) of the respondents serving between 4-5 years, indicating the possibility of having served in the last county assembly through a by-election. The years served by MCAs shows experience in using participatory communication methods in budgeting processes.

In relation to the education levels, a significant number of MCAs at 52.5% (n=21) had postgraduate education while 12.5% had diploma as their highest level of education. Further, another 35.0% had undergraduate level as their highest level of education. This meant that most of the MCAs had higher education to understand the concepts of participatory communication and its influence in budget-making processes. Further, it can be observed that most MCAs were educated and therefore assumed that the concept was well known to them.

4.2 Participatory Communication Methods Used for Budget-Making Process

The participatory communication methods commonly used by MCAs for budget-making processes were as shown on Table 3.

Table 3*Participatory Communication Methods*

Participatory communication method	Frequency	Percent
Public barazas (meetings)	21	52.5
Public barazas (meetings) & Social media platforms	2	5
Public barazas (meetings) & Stakeholder forums	1	2.5
Public barazas (meetings); Stakeholder forums, & Social media platforms	9	22.5
Public barazas (meetings); Stakeholder forums; Social media platforms; Surveys and questionnaires	4	10
Public barazas (meetings); Stakeholder forums; & Surveys and questionnaires	2	5
Stakeholder forums	1	2.5

The study established that public barazas (meetings) were the most common form of participatory method used in budgeting engagements, as supported by 52.5% of the respondents. Public barazas were common, as used alongside other means. For instance, there were 22.5% of the respondents who noted that a combination of three approaches was used, including public barazas, stakeholder forums, and social media platforms. There were 2.5% of the respondents who noted that only stakeholder forums were used for participatory communication in the budgeting process. The rating of the effectiveness of the participatory communication methods as used by MCAs was shown on Figure 1.

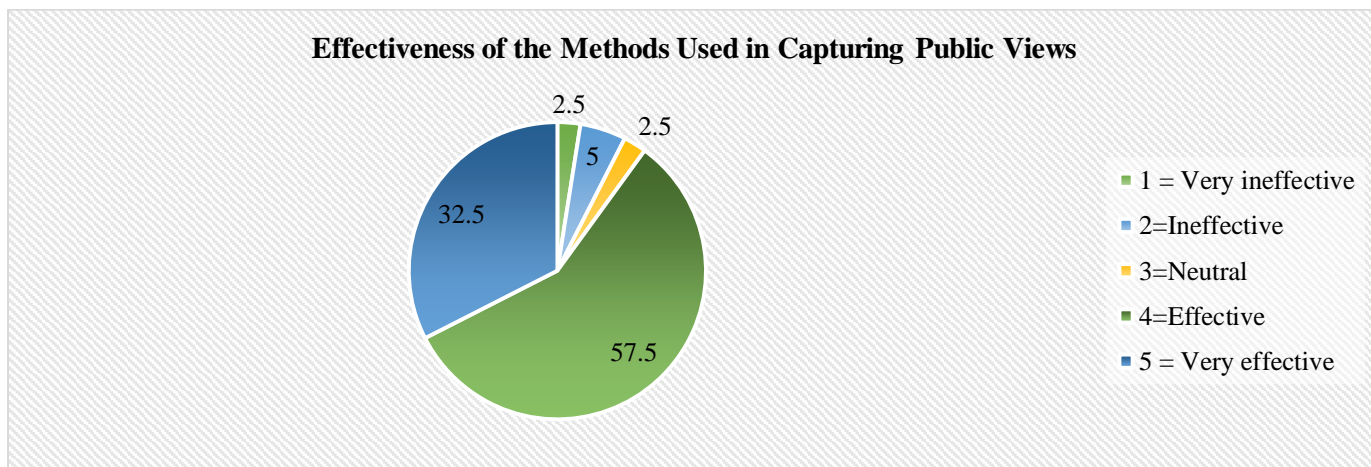


Figure 1
Rating of Participatory Communication Methods for Public Participation

It was established that a majority of respondents at 57.5% of them said it was effective, and another 32.5% mentioned it was very effective. In total, there were 90.0% of the respondents who felt the participatory communication methods were either effective or very effective. There were 5% of the respondents who felt that the participatory approaches were not ineffective, and another 2.5% felt they were very ineffective. The study therefore observes that the respondents agreed that the participatory methods were effective.

Further, the researcher sought to establish how the County Assembly has adapted its communication strategies to enhance public engagement in budgeting. Several responses were given, where use of radio communication (10.0%) was mentioned as the most commonly used approach for ensuring public participation. Another common approach mentioned by 7.5% was the use of oversight by MCAs through their local offices to ensure that the persons notified were engaged and gave their feedback. Further, about 5% of the respondents noted that the county staffs attended barazas as well conducting their own independent validations on whether there were public participations. Further, the county made the public aware of the public participation meetings in advance, as mentioned by 5% of the respondents. Some of the quotes were as mentioned in response to the methods used for participatory communication;

“By attending barazas and conducting its own independent validation forum.” MCA 1, Male

“By establishing a communication unit at the county assembly” MCA 2, Male

“By use of oversight, they use their local offices to ensure all persons are notified, share proposals to community for more participation and engagement.” MCA 3, Male

“By use of public barazas (community meetings), and social media and print media to validate participation and create awareness among the public” MCA 5, Female.

From the secondary data, Muthomi (2024) for USA, Chapman (2021) in Russia, and Al Hudithi (2017) in Saudi Arabia noted that social media and government websites, social media forums, and social media platforms respectively were used for enabling public participation. The findings in this study concur with Smith (2015) in Georgia, USA, who observed that usage of electronic media was uneven across the states but was gaining popularity. In a similar finding, Ogoti et al. (2024) noted that social media and print media were strongly associated with effective public participation in the case of Nyeri County in Kenya. Further, the researcher sought to identify the components of participatory communication methods as used by the MCAs in budget-making processes in Makueni County. The responses were shown on Table 4.

Table 4
Participatory Communication Methods

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
The use of public forums effectively gathers citizen input during the budget-making process.	10.0	5.0	45.0	40.0	0.0	3.15	0.921
Digital platforms are underutilized in facilitating public participation in budget discussions	7.5	12.5	5.0	70.0	5.0	3.53	1.037
Traditional media channels (radio, newspapers) are the primary sources of budget information for constituents	12.5	17.5	5.0	65.0	0.0	3.23	1.143
Feedback mechanisms for public input on budget matters are well-established and accessible.	10.0	10.0	15.0	65.0	0.0	3.35	1.027
Language barriers hinder effective participatory communication in budget consultations	22.5	40.0	2.5	35.0	0.0	2.5	1.198
The County Assembly regularly updates the public on budget proceedings through multiple communication channels.	2.5	12.5	5.0	80.0	0.0	3.63	0.807

There were 15.0% (10.0% strongly disagree and 5.0% disagree) that the use of public forums effectively gained citizen inputs on budget-making processes in Makueni County. There were 45.0% of the MCAs who were neutral on whether the public forums provided appropriate inputs on budget-making process. This showed that a significant number of MCAs felt that the public forums were not reaching out the citizens as required. Further, there were 40.0% of the respondents who agreed that the public forums were effective in gathering citizen inputs on budget-making process. The implication is that the public forums used for public participation do not elicit citizen inputs on budget-making processes, necessitating a need for change or review of the public forums used.

There were 20.0% (7.5% strongly disagree and 12.5% disagree) of the respondents disagreeing that the county government was underutilizing the digital platforms in facilitating public participation in budget discussions. On the other hand, a significant majority of respondents at 75.0% (70.0% agree and 5% strongly agree) agreed that digital platforms were underutilized in facilitating public participation in budget discussions. The findings show that the digital platforms, especially the social media, are not commonly used to communicate on the budgeting processes.

There were 30.0% (12.5% strongly disagree and 17.5% disagreeing) of the respondents disagreeing that the traditional media channels (radio, newspapers) are the primary sources of budget information for constituents, while another 5.0% were neutral. On the contrary, a significant majority at 65.0% agreed that the traditional media channels formed the primary source of information for the constituents. This was also supported by the mean of 3.23, showing the general perception was that the respondents agreed that the traditional media was the most commonly used channel for eliciting inputs from citizens.

The study established that a significant majority of respondents, at 65.0%, agreed that there are well-established and accessible feedback mechanisms for public input on budget matters in the county. This was also supported by the mean of 3.35, showing most of the respondents agreed that there were well-established and accessible feedback mechanisms. On the contrary, there were 15.0% who were neutral and another 20.0% (10.0% strongly disagreeing and 10.0% disagreeing) that there were no established and accessible feedback mechanisms for public inputs on budgeting. The implication is that there is need to strengthen the feedback mechanisms for the citizens who give input on budgeting processes to get their feedback on the actions taken.

A significant majority at 62.5% (22.5% strongly disagree and 40.0% disagree) disagreed that language barriers hinder effective participatory communication in budget consultations. There were another 2.5% who were neutral, and 35.0% agreed that language was a significant language barrier to effective participatory communication in budget consultations. The mean of 2.5 shows that most of the respondents disagreed that language barrier was not a hindrance to participatory communication.

There were an overwhelming majority of respondents, at 80.0%, who felt that the County Assembly regularly updates the public on budget proceedings through multiple communication channels. The remaining 20.0% (5% neutral, 12.5% disagree and 2.5% strongly disagree) felt that there were no regular updates to the public on the budget proceedings though multiple communication channels. The mean of 3.67 shows that most of the respondents agreed that there were regular updates to the public on budget making processes.



From the qualitative data, there were opinions to engage more frequently the persons with disability and that there is need make the budgeting process as simple as possible through simplifying the big budget documents. This was supported by some of the quotes below.

“PWDs to be involved in budget making process.” MCA 6, Male, PWD

“The document is so wide for public to understand. There is need to simplify the budget and make it abstract.” MCA 7, Male

“The public needs more time to interact with the budget for better feedback.” MCA 8, Male

The findings on the need to engage a wider scope of stakeholders was also echoed from other studies. For instance, Njiru (2020) noted that some key populations like persons with disabilities were left out, while also noting that participatory communication had increased participation from traditionally marginalized groups like youths and women.

4.3 Stakeholder Engagement on Participatory Communication for Budget-Making Process

The levels of stakeholder engagement were measured by the key stakeholders engaged, frequency of engaging them (stakeholders), platforms used, and the factors that determine the levels of participation among different stakeholders. The summary of the key stakeholders is shown on Table 5.

Table 5

Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholders	Frequency	Percentage
Community members	22	55
Civil society organizations	1	2.5
Community members; Civil society organizations; Government departments	1	2.5
Community members; Civil society organizations; Government departments; Private sector representatives	11	27.5
Community members; Civil society organizations; Private sector representatives	2	5
Community members; Government departments	3	7.5
Total	40	100

Community members formed the largest shareholders of public participation as mentioned by 55.0% of the respondents. Civil society organizations formed 2.5% of the key stakeholders, similar to the government departments. The combination of private sector representatives, government departments, and civil society organizations formed about 27.5% of the respondents.

The platforms used for engaging stakeholders in budget-making processes were face-to-face meetings (mentioned by 80.0% of the respondents), digital communication platforms like social media, SMS (short-message service), and emails as mentioned by 17.5%, and the least were official documents reports as mentioned by 2.5% of the respondents. From the findings, it was established that face-to-face meetings were most common, and most preferred by the respondents. The summary of the information is shown on Figure 2.

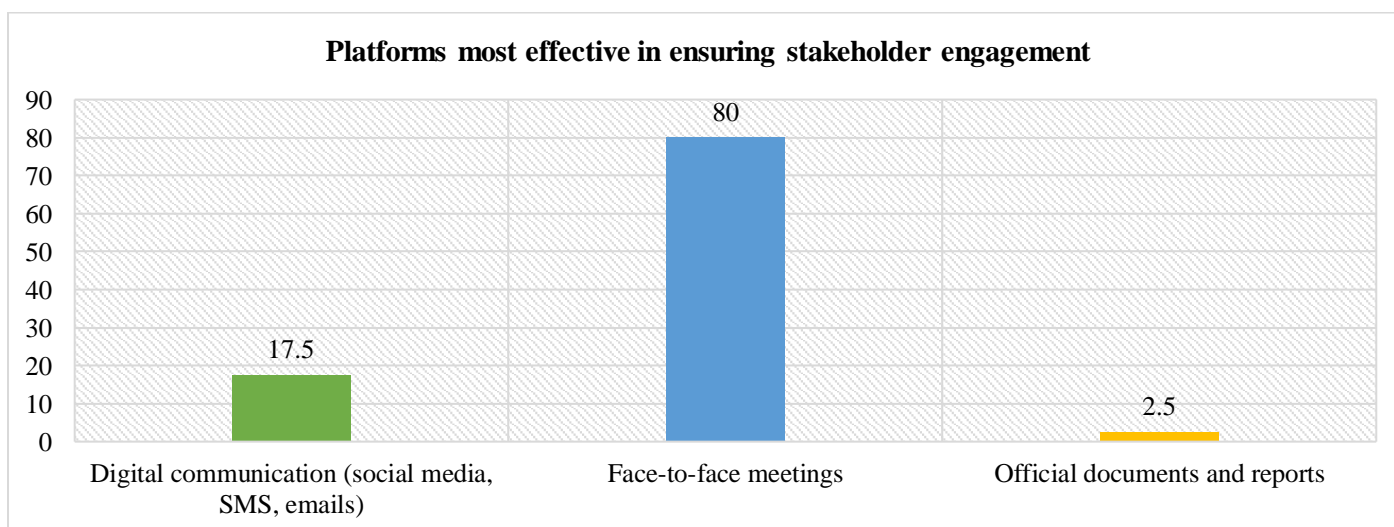


Figure 2

Platforms Most Effective for Stakeholder Engagement

From the other peer-reviewed studies, radio stations were used for the case of Nyeri, as opposed to this study's findings, where radio was not mentioned as much as a strong channel for participatory communication. On another note, the study established similar observations as noted by Keshine (2018) who argued that social media, radio stations and the public gatherings were common forms of public participation in Laikipia County. Similar findings were also recorded by Agalo et al (2018) in Kisii County, who, in contrast to the findings in this study, concluded that social media platforms were WhatsApp and Facebook to communicate participatory communication and participation on budgeting. There were multiple questions asked to measure the perception of the respondents on the most effective platforms for stakeholder engagement, where the results are shown on Table 6.

Table 6
Responses on Stakeholder Engagement

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
MCAAs actively encourage community members to attend budget planning meetings.	0.0	0.0	0.0	52.5	47.5	4.5	0.506
There is sufficient collaboration between MCAs and civil society organizations in the budget-making process.	2.5	20.0	15.0	55.0	7.5	3.5	0.986
Youth and marginalized groups are adequately represented in budget discussions.	0.0	5.0	22.5	47.5	25.0	3.9	0.829
Stakeholder feedback is genuinely considered and incorporated into the final budget decisions.	0.0	0.0	15.0	62.5	22.5	4.1	0.616
The timing of public consultations is convenient for the majority of stakeholders.	0.0	10.0	10.0	70.0	10.0	3.8	0.758
MCAs provide clear and understandable budget information to all stakeholders.	0.0	10.0	2.5	62.5	25.0	4.0	0.832

From the findings, it was established that 52.5% agreed, and 47.5% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that MCAs actively encourage community members to attend budget planning meetings. The mean of 4.5 shows that the respondents strongly agreed that MCAs encouraged community members to attend budget planning meeting. There is sufficient collaboration between MCAs and civil society organizations in the budget-making process, as supported by 62.5% of the respondents and a mean of 3.5. Similarly, there were another 22.5% of the respondents who disagreed that there was no strong collaboration between MCAs and civil society organizations in budget-making processes.

A significant majority of respondents at 72.5% (47.5% agreed and 25.0% strongly agree) agreed that youth and marginalized groups are adequately represented in budget discussions. This was also showed by the mean of 3.9, indicating respondents agreed with the statement. There were a relatively higher proportion of respondents at 22.5% who were neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing that the youth and marginalized groups are adequately represented in budget-making processes.

The majority of respondents at 85.0% (62.5% agree and 22.5% strongly agree) agreed that stakeholder feedback is genuinely considered and incorporated into the final budget decisions. The mean of 4.1 also showed that respondents strongly agreed that stakeholder feedback was genuinely considered and put into the final budget decisions. There were 15.0% of the respondents who did not either agree or disagree. There were an overwhelming majority of the respondents at 80.0% (70.0% agree and 10.0% strongly agree) who agreed that timing of public consultations is convenient for the majority of stakeholders. This was also supported by a mean of 3.8, showing respondents agreed with the statement. There were however a 10.0% of the respondents who disagreed with the statement.

An overwhelming response from 87.5% (62.5% agree and 25.0% strongly agree) of the respondents noted that MCAs provide clear and understandable budget information to all stakeholders. There were another 10.0% who, on the contrary, disagreed that the MCAs provided clear and understandable budget information to all stakeholders.

The findings in this study align with other empirical studies that underscore the importance of active legislative engagement and inclusivity in participatory budgeting. For instance, Gachoka (2021) similarly found that participatory communication in Makueni County enhanced citizen inclusion in budget processes, allowing community voices to be reflected in final allocations—echoing this study's finding that 85% of respondents agreed stakeholder feedback was genuinely incorporated into budget decisions. Likewise, Njiru (2020) established that in counties integrating participatory communication, there was increased representation of youth and marginalized groups,

consistent with the 72.5% of respondents in this study who agreed that such groups were adequately represented in budget discussions. Additionally, Shomary and Mbuti (2022) found that efficient communication and collaboration between local government actors and civil society organizations improved budgeting effectiveness, which supports the present study's finding that 62.5% of respondents recognized sufficient collaboration between MCAs and CSOs in budget-making. These convergent findings highlight that transparent communication, inclusivity, and collaboration among key actors are central to strengthening participatory governance and ensuring equitable budgeting outcomes.

4.4 Regression Analysis

The study variables were subjected to bivariate correlation using Pearson Chi-square correlation to establish whether the independent variables were correlated to the dependent variable, effectiveness in budgetary making processes. The results are shown on Table 7;

Table 7

Pearson Chi-Square Correlation for Participatory Communication and Budgeting

		Participatory communication methods	Stakeholder engagement	Effects of participatory Communication on budget
Participatory communication methods	Pearson Correlation	1	0.085	-.431**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.602	0.005
Stakeholder engagement	Pearson Correlation	0.085	1	.359*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.602		0.023
Effects of participatory communication on budget	Pearson Correlation	-.431**	.359*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.005	0.023	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

From the bivariate analysis, the effects of participatory communication on budget-making process were significantly correlated to participatory communication methods ($r=-0.431$, $p<0.005$), and stakeholder engagement ($r=0.359$, $p<0.023$). The implication is that participatory communication on budgeting making process is significantly influenced by the methods used, which had a weak negative correlation (-0.431) with the budgeting process. On the other hand, stakeholder engagement was shown to have a positive correlation with budgeting process outcomes (0.359).

Furthermore, multilinear regression analysis was carried out. The findings d were the results are presented on table 8.

Table 8

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.647a	0.419	0.37	0.368

a Predictors: (Constant), Part comm methods, stakeholder engagement

The model summary shows that the three variables of participatory communication methods; challenges and barriers; and stakeholder engagement contributed to 41.9% change in effectiveness of budgeting process at the county government. This shows that the participatory communication had a significant contribution towards efficiency in budgeting process as supported by quality budgeting processes, and informed decisions at the citizen level. The ANOVA summary is presented on Table 9.

Table 9

ANOVA^a Summary

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.517	3	1.172	8.644	.000b
	Residual	4.883	36	0.136		
	Total	8.4	39			

a Dependent Variable: Effects of participatory comm on budget

b Predictors: (Constant), Part comm methods, stakeholder engagement

From the ANOVA (analysis of variance) table, the model was significant as shown by p -value <0.001 . The predictors participatory communication methods, challenges and barriers, and stakeholder engagement were significantly correlated ($p=0.000$). The regression coefficients are presented on Table 10.

Table 10
Regression Coefficients^a

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4.889	0.556		8.8	0
Stakeholder engagement	0.219	0.091	0.319	2.404	0.022
Part comm methods	-0.257	0.07	-0.468	-3.67	0.001

a Dependent Variable: Effects of participatory communication on budget-making process

From the regression analysis, effective budget-making process at the county was significantly influenced by the stakeholder engagement ($p<0.022$). Further, a unit increase in stakeholder engagement (more and effective stakeholders' participation) was associated with 0.219 times increase in effectiveness in budget-making process. This shows that there is need to engage in an elaborate, inclusive, and county-wide stakeholder engagement during budgeting. Lastly, a unit increase in participatory methods was associated with a 0.257 decrease in effectiveness in budget-making process. This shows that there is a need to review the participatory communication methods used, and embrace that reach more citizens for budget participation and planning.

The regression analysis further reinforces the critical role of stakeholder engagement in enhancing the effectiveness of the budget-making process. The positive and significant relationship ($p<0.022$) indicates that inclusive and meaningful participation directly contributes to more effective budgeting outcomes. These findings align with Shomary and Mbuti (2022), who observed that active collaboration between citizens and government institutions leads to more efficient and transparent budgeting. Similarly, Gachoka (2021) emphasized that engaging diverse stakeholders builds trust and improves the legitimacy of budget decisions. However, the observed negative coefficient (-0.257) for participatory methods suggests that current communication approaches may be limited in reach or effectiveness, echoing Njiru's (2020) call for more adaptive and context-specific participatory models that ensure wider public engagement in county budget processes.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concluded that face-to-face meetings remain the dominant participatory communication method in Makueni County's budget-making process, with 80% of respondents favoring them for their effectiveness in fostering direct dialogue. While digital platforms such as social media and SMS are slowly emerging, their limited uptake highlights infrastructural constraints and a population preference for physical interaction. These participatory approaches have allowed communities particularly grassroots members who constituted 55% of participants—to voice priorities, provide feedback, and stay informed on budgetary decisions. Moreover, participatory communication has enhanced inclusivity and transparency, with respondents affirming adequate representation of youth and marginalized groups, timely consultations, and clear communication of budget information by MCAs.

However, the findings also revealed critical gaps. Regression analysis suggested that increased reliance on current participatory methods may actually reduce the overall effectiveness of budget-making, pointing to the need for diversification and modernization of strategies to reach broader demographics, especially those excluded from in-person forums. While community members were most engaged, civil society organizations, private sector actors, and government departments had minimal involvement, reflecting disparities in stakeholder inclusion. Although engagement frequency was generally high, the study underscores the importance of broadening participation channels and adopting more balanced approaches that strengthen inclusivity beyond community members to ensure a more representative and effective budgeting process.

5.2 Recommendations

The following are the recommendations for the county assembly and the county executive to improve efficiency in budget-making processes. To enhance inclusivity in the budgeting process, the county assembly should broaden stakeholder representation by actively involving civil society organizations, private sector actors, and relevant government departments alongside community members. A more diverse mix of participants will help balance interests, enrich deliberations, and strengthen the legitimacy and acceptance of budget decisions among citizens.

Furthermore, the county assembly and the executive should strengthen digital communication platforms to make public participation more accessible. Investing in digital infrastructure and equipping county officials with skills to use social media, mobile platforms, and email will enable wider outreach, particularly to youth and citizens who cannot attend physical forums. This strategy will help address the current underutilization of digital tools, reported at only 17.5%, and mitigate technological barriers that were identified by 80% of respondents.

Lastly, there is a need to improve the communication and facilitation capacity of Members of County Assembly (MCAs). The county assembly and executive should institute refresher training programs focused on participatory communication and budget engagement practices. Through addressing the identified 15% training gap among MCAs, these programs will strengthen their ability to conduct inclusive, clear, and effective consultations with diverse stakeholders, ultimately improving public trust and the quality of budget deliberations.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest at all.

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