

Public participation and community engagement in domestic water supply management in Kenya: Progress and directions

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Abbreviations

ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
CBM	Community Based Management
CIDP	County Integrated Management Plan
CIMP	County Integrated Management Plan
DMM	Delegated Management Model
IGTRC	Intergovernmental Relations Technical Committee
MCDI	Millennium Community Development Initiatives
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
O&M	Operation and Maintenance
PPP	Private Public Partnership
SAP	Structural Adjustment Plan
SCMP	Sub-catchment Management Plan
SDM	Service Delivery Model
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UWSP	Urban Water Service Provider
WAG	Water Action Group
WASREB	The Water Services Regulatory Board
WRA	Water Resource Authority
WSP	Water Service Providers
WUA	Water User Association
WUC	Water User Committees

Executive summary

This report, produced by the University of Oxford in collaboration with representatives from civil society, research institutions, government organisations, and NGOs, evaluates public participation and community engagement in domestic water supply management in Kenya, analysing policy progress, practices, and challenges within an evolving governance landscape. By exploring public participation in the context of Kenya's pursuit of water security, the report examines how community engagement can foster sustainability, transparency and empowerment.

Background and context

Kenya's water governance has undergone significant reforms over the past several decades, beginning with colonial policies that prioritized British settlers, through independence and the current decentralized approach enshrined in the 2010 Constitution. This foundational document established water as a human right and a devolved system of governance that aimed to decentralize power to the county level. Water supply models have been transforming towards service delivery approaches that recognise the importance of the wider enabling environment, including governance structures, political economy aspects, and life cycle costing, among others. Currently, there are multiple models coexisting in rural and urban areas, e.g. institutionalised service delivery management models, Public-Private-Partnerships, adaptive management, and self-supply. However, 63% of the Kenyan population experience multiple deprivation in water access, ranging from 25% in Baringo to 75% in north-eastern and south-western regions (Njoroge et al., 2024).

Legislative changes, particularly the Water Acts of 2002 and 2016, aimed to reform Kenya's water sector by attracting investment, improving efficiency, and establishing participatory governance frameworks. Public participation, constitutionally mandated, is seen as central to improving water access, yet translating this principle into effective practice has proven challenging. A complex and evolving governance landscape now involves national, county, and local actors who must navigate issues related to institutional coordination, legal compliance, stakeholder engagement, and resource allocation.

Key insights from community engagement

The report provides different typologies and categorizations of community engagement and public participation, including (1) key focus areas in Kenya's Policy on Public Participation, (2) vertical and horizontal forms of community engagement, reflecting whether engagement is externally initiated (vertical) or grassroots-driven (horizontal), (3) depth of public participation and impact drawing from IAP2, (4) forms of decision-making and responsibilities, and (5) guiding principles and values of community engagement.

The report finds that meaningful engagement is often hindered by a lack of standardized participation metrics, inadequate capacity among community institutions, and limited access to technical resources. Despite these challenges, some case studies highlight success stories where proactive community involvement has fostered ownership and responsibility in water project maintenance, bolstering sustainability.

Current challenges and structural barriers

Several structural and systemic barriers obstruct effective community engagement in Kenya's water sector:

- **Inconsistent implementation and bureaucratic inefficiencies:** Decentralized governance has created new expectations among local populations, but complex institutional structures alienate communities. Top-down accountability prevails without direct accountability to communities. Past failures and corruption have created mistrust and resistance to new initiatives, particularly in relation to land rights. Grievances and alternative dispute resolution principles are not adequately governed.
- **Capacity gaps and resource constraints:** Many community water management institutions lack the technical expertise, access to funding, and access to information required for effective community engagement. Community based organisations can play a significant role in bridging the gaps, e.g., by providing community guides to essential documents. The support of CBOs is insufficient without systemic changes.
- **Limited mechanisms for data and knowledge exchange:** Information flows between communities, government, and service providers are frequently one-sided and extractive, often lacking feedback loops to address community concerns. Weak information-sharing infrastructure limits communities' ability to engage meaningfully and advocate for their interests.
- **Social inequities in engagement:** Inclusion of marginalized groups—particularly women, youth, and disabled individuals—remains a significant challenge. Gender inequalities in water governance persist due to multiple reasons, such as social norms, unequal land ownership rights, and limited financial access. Intra-household perspective remains patchy and underexplored. Elite capture and exclusion of vulnerable groups often exacerbate these inequities.

Recommendations and best practices

The report provides recommendations aimed at enhancing public participation and promoting more effective, inclusive water governance in Kenya:

- 1. Structured community engagement frameworks:** Establishing clear, enforceable standards for continuous community engagement, including metrics for public participation depth and quality, could help translate public participation mandates into actionable practices across counties. Transparent assignment of responsibilities is essential for all parties. Integrating feedback mechanisms at each stage of project development is crucial for adaptive and responsive governance.
- 2. Capacity building for community institutions:** Strengthening the technical, financial, and operational capacities of local water user associations (WRUAs) and other community institutions is essential to sustainable engagement. Technical assistance, along with continuous training, can empower communities to actively participate in managing water resources. At the same time, high demands for contributions, can become unsustainable, putting pressures on competing responsibilities and community relations.
- 3. Transparent data and information sharing:** Creating platforms and protocols for two-way data sharing among stakeholders would enhance transparency, build community trust, and improve service accountability. By engaging communities in data collection, these platforms can also promote locally relevant, actionable insights into water management practices.
- 4. Promoting equity and inclusion:** A commitment to inclusivity—through the representation of marginalized groups in decision-making bodies, gender-sensitive engagement approaches, and youth empowerment—is essential. Addressing systemic injustices such as gender inequities in rights and creating women-only or disabled-only platforms can enable these groups to vocalise their unique needs. Multi-sectoral approaches are likely to bring the best results
- 5. Continuous decentralisation and multi-stakeholder partnerships:** Continuous decentralisation at various scales could aid horizontal community management, for example, through financial devolution. However, this needs to be supported by a culture of integrity aimed to address corruption and mismanagement. Coordination among national, county, and community actors is necessary for effective resource management and policy alignment. Collaborative projects with NGOs, local government, and other stakeholders can bridge resource gaps, reduce project duplication, and promote multi-level accountability.



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1. Introduction

Why public participation and community engagement in water?

Public participation and community engagement are essential for the successful implementation of water and sanitation projects, as they enhance sustainability, transparency, and partnership. Furthermore, these practices can act as catalysts for positive social transformation. Public participation is a cornerstone of democracy (Saab et al., 2018; Shipley & Utz, 2012), recognised in the Rio Declaration (principle 10) and as a human right (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 21). Specifically in relation to water, Target 6b in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to “support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management”. Public participation is a deliberative process in which the public’s needs, concern, and values are integrated in problem-solving or decision-making in policy formulation, legislation, or project implementation. The main goals of it are to inform, engage, consult, collaborate and empower public (Mbithi et al., 2019). Projects in which communities actively engage and feel a strong sense of ownership yield greater benefits, fostering positive attitudes and enhancing collaboration.

Despite broad consensus on the importance of public participation, its interpretation and application vary widely across contexts. As water management models continue to evolve, including the expansion of professionalized water supply maintenance systems, it becomes valuable to examine how public participation in this sector is adapting to these changes.

Although widely recognized as important, the terminology and principles of community engagement and public participation lack well-established definitions.

In preparing this report, we noted varying perspectives among authors and reviewers on these terms, reflecting similar findings in global studies. Some researchers highlight the fluidity and ambiguity of these terms and the necessity for improved clarified typologies (Ekman & Amnå, 2012); similar conclusions have been made by the Intergovernmental Relations Technical Committee (IGTRC) in Kenya. To further advance these definitions we analysed how these terms are used in various reports and studies on Kenya (Constitution of Kenya, 2010; IGTRC, 2016; Munene, 2019; Omolo & Rex, 2024; Ronoh, 2017; Srinivasan et al., 2019; The World Bank Group, 2013), concluding:

- *Public participation* broadly refers to the involvement of all people who have an interest in or may be affected by a development project, characterised by their ability to influence decision-making, particularly when those decisions impact their lives (Munene, 2019; Ronoh, 2017). In Kenya, it is constitutionally mandated and focuses on ensuring inclusion of citizens’ voices in development plans.

- *Community engagement* refers to the active relationship-building efforts by government institutions, NGOs, and other to collaborate with communities, fostering a shared sense of purpose. It is often a long-term process; it emphasizes partnership-building and community empowerment. Unlike public participation, it may extend beyond specific initiatives and can be promoted through traditional gatherings like Baraza meetings. *Community* is defined as a group of people who are linked through shared location and governance needs (McCabe et al., 2006). They may or may not have a sense of harmony and belonging.
- Horizontal community engagement (community-driven mobilization) is a form of community engagement initiated within the community itself, often as grassroots mobilization. Community members organize and empower themselves to address shared concerns or participate in decision-making processes. This approach emphasizes a flat hierarchy and is more informally structured.
- Public participation and community engagement may overlap and interact, the boundaries between them are not always clear.
- Importantly, **neither process equates to *community-based management (CBM)***, which involves communities taking on both technical and non-technical management responsibilities, authority, control, and often cost-sharing (Harvey & Reed, 2004; Lockwood, 2004; see overview in: REAL-Water, 2023). Despite significant differences between community *participation* and community *management* practices, the long history and tradition of CBM dictate that these terms are colloquially nearly conflated in the regional practices of water supply (Harvey & Reed, 2007; Shields et al., 2021).

In Kenya, the principle of participation is enshrined in the Constitution of Kenya (2010), which sets a framework for participation in multiple spheres, including protection and conservation of the environment (Article 69(1)d) and the process of policy-making (Article 232(d)). “Because the Constitution gives sovereign power to the people of Kenya, it emphasizes citizen participation in all the Chapters in the form of values and principles” (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012, p. 16). The devolved system at the heart of the constitution aims to bring governance back to the people (Lumumba & Franceschi, 2014). **Public participation is now a primary requirement in all policy and statutory functions of Kenya’s executive and legislature.** In addition, almost all of Kenya’s statutory instruments enacted after the promulgation of the Constitution in 2010 contain provisions on public participation, with which developers are required to comply. Kenya also adopts the Declaration of the Right to Development (UN General Assembly resolution 41/28, 1986) as part of Kenyan law.

Public participation has long been recognized as crucial, yet it requires continuous re-evaluation and adaptation. In international development, public participation has been well established since 1990s (e.g., see overview in Narayan, 1995) raising the question: are these discussions still relevant today? As water supply models evolve and socio-political dynamics shift, approaches to public participation must also transform. New or intensifying challenges—including conflicts among stakeholders, neglect of local needs and initiatives, overburdening of vulnerable populations, gaps between policy and practice, top-down governance approaches, institutional fragmentation, resistance to change, and issues specific to certain water supply models—make it imperative to reexamine and innovate in public participation strategies. Moreover, in Kenya, there are no clear standards for effective public participation or enforceable norms and standards (IGRTC, 2016), making the process less defined.

The aim of the report is to discuss public participation and community engagement in domestic water supply in Kenya by outlining the progress in practices and legislation, analysing challenges and highlighting the gaps in research and practice. It covers both rural and urban areas while acknowledging variation between regions, infrastructural needs, and the history of different places. The report discusses cases and studies across different water management models. While there is a general preference towards the transition towards the professional water supply models (see section 2.4), a multitude of models and variations exist across the country, and so is public participation. This report also considers risks around poorly executed community engagement.

The report draws from three sources.

It is largely inspired by two workshops:

1. Workshop in Oxford, the UK titled, *Community Responsibilities in Water Supply Projects – Discussion Across the Models* on February 21, 2024, with 27 representatives from INGOs, consultancies, and academia, and
2. Workshop in Nakuru County, Kenya titled *Discussing Water Projects: Context, responsibilities, and relations with and in the community* on April 17, 2024, with 37 policy makers and governmental agencies, NGOs, multilateral organisations, associations, community-based organisations, and academia.

Both workshops discussed successes, challenges, and nuances of community engagement in water through the lenses of cooperation and responsibilities, community institutions, data sharing, conflicts, and inequalities. In most cases, generalised views and ideas are used in this report, though in a few cases, authors of specific ideas are named.

3. In addition, we used literature reviews to support the discussions from the workshops. Therefore, this report should not be read solely as the workshop proceedings. We have reviewed studies on Kenya's domestic water supply/ management/ governance, and related legislative framework.

The report is limited to the case studies of the representatives from both workshops and literature on Kenya. On a few occasions, literature from other countries has been used, those instances are clearly demarcated.

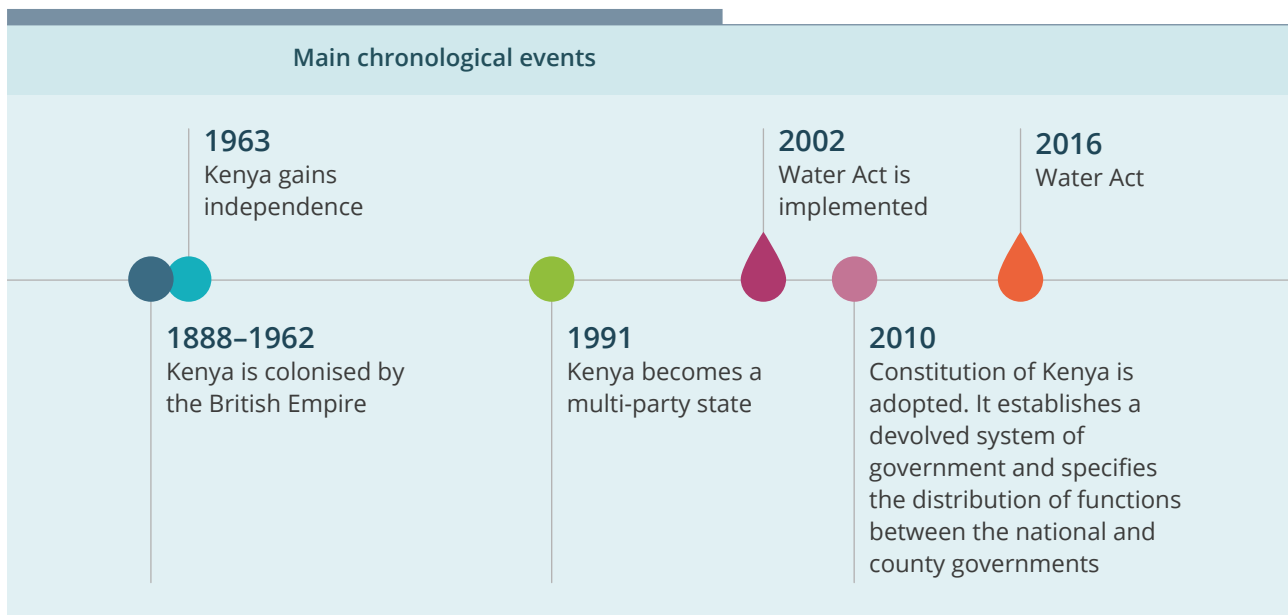
The process of writing was composed of multiple discussions on the format and the topics with the leading team. The leading team wrote sections of the report and contributed ideas in other sections. Consortium authors provided inputs and examples of their work. Reviewers commented on 1-2 drafts of the report.



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2. Background: Brief overview of Kenya's water governance and commitment to public participation

In this section, we briefly outline public participation and community engagement in the context of water governance in Kenya, and provide an overview of different historical drivers, evolutions of water supply models, and ideas behind public participation and community engagement, as well as legalisation in relation to the necessity for public participation. A selection of policies are presented deeper in Appendix 1.



2.1. Kenya's water governance and water supply models before 2002

Water governance in the 20th century in Kenya was highly influenced by national and international political changes, paradigms, and experiments in political economy that influenced the roles of communities in water.

During colonization, accountability primarily flowed upward, with water development efforts largely favouring British colonial settlers. The water was vested in the Crown, and so was its use (Sambu & Tarhule, 2013). Rural Kenyans and several counties of Kenya were marginalised and received limited finances for development. At the same time, in this period a transition happened from “people going for water” to “water going to the people” (Nyanchaga, 2016, p. 14).

After independence, water governance in Kenya was anchored under the principle of *Harambee* (self-help) that was typically manifested through self-organisation and community-based management (CBM). This principle was continuously stipulated by different policy provisions and variations, including guidelines in 1997 that defined communities as custodians of the water supply (Mumma, 2007). This approach put heavy responsibilities on communities to organise water supply. Self-help groups, known as water user associations, were expected to increase a sense of ownership, responsibility over the operations and maintenance, willingness to financially contribute to the system, as well as manage common water resources (Githu, 2022; Yacoob, 1990). While official registration as a self-group was easy, statutory law protection was guaranteed only for associations, making the process difficult to achieve for marginalised communities (Mumma, 2007). That prevented rural communities from being legal owners of water schemes or being able to access grants (Githu, 2022). By 2002, only ten schemes from more than 550 rural water supplies under the District Water Offices had been handed over to community groups (Mumma, 2007; Sambu & Tarhule, 2013). In some places, like in Mount Kenya Highland-Lowland System official associations were responsible for managing and regulating multi-user conflicts, including reporting to legal authorities (Kiteme & Gikonyo, 2002). Women’s role and the necessity for empowerment and inclusion were acknowledged in several projects, e.g., Kenya Finland Rural Development Project (formed in 1975) (Kunguru, 1988).



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CBMs were considered a bottom-up solution for sustainable water projects, firstly stipulated by the African Socialism of a newly independent country, later supported by the neoliberal policies. The approach experienced an initial success, more than 3,400 diverse water supply schemes across Kenya were built between 1964 and 1968 improving water access from 25 to 44.6%; though the number has fallen again to 28% in the 1970s (Sambu & Tarhule, 2013). CBM was promoted for many reasons: the belief that costs to the government could be reduced by up to 30% (Kabuage, 1983), the impact of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and other economic limitations, as well as the increasing role of NGOs. In the 1980s, the emphasis within CBM shifted towards cost recovery due to the rising costs of operations and management of water schemes and more macro- level concerns (e.g., the debt crisis) (Sambu & Tarhule, 2013). Later, the rise of CBM was also partially in response to the failing approach of the transfer of sophisticated technologies and modernisation of systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, driven by the World Bank and the African Development Bank (Adams et al., 2020).

In the late 20th century, **neoliberal agendas began to shape water governance**, leading to waves of privatisation across Sub-Saharan Africa. These efforts, however, often saw limited implementation, high rates of cancellation, and austerity measures that negatively impacted water access (Adams et al., 2019). As a result, water accessibility remained low; by 2000, only half of Kenya's population had access to potable water (World Bank, 2010). In response to this limited progress, various Private Public Partnerships models emerged as alternative approaches to improve water access (Adams et al., 2019).

2.2. Kenya's water governance post 2002

A set of reforms post-2002 have radically transformed national political structures and water governance, mainly through devolution and constitution, leading to two-tier governance and the landscape of multi-partnership. Public participation has been placed at the core of these changes, as it aims to shift power to previously marginalised geographies, the realisation of citizens' rights, and transfer ownership of development.

The National Water Policy of 1999 and the Water Act 2002 (Act) triggered extensive reforms to Kenya's water sector. The Act was launched to transform institutions and social services that were broken due to austerity and the failure of SAPs. The main objectives of these reforms were to improve water resources management, meet growing demand for water services, attract more professionals into the sector, attract greater investment, and create a modernised sector that was more robust and more capable of responding to the emerging challenges such as climate change and rapid urbanization. The key reform features included: separation of policy from other functions; separation of water resources management and water services provision; separation of regulatory functions from investments and operations; separation of asset holding from operations; increased user participation; enhanced pro-poor orientation; and socially responsible commercialisation in the provision of water supply and sanitation services. Conflict resolution was conferred by the act to the Water Appeals Board as an alternative to legal procedures.

In 2010, Kenya promulgated a new constitution- the Constitution of Kenya

2010 (CoK-2010). Fundamental to the new constitution was the creation of two levels of governments: the national government and devolved governments (county governments). The ownership, use, and regulation of water resources, consumer protection, and national public works were assigned to the national government, while county governments were assigned water service provision, sanitation, catchment management, and county public works.

Applicable public participation legislation:

- The Constitution of Kenya, 2010
- The Employment Act, 2007
- The Urban Areas and Cities Act, 2011
- County Governments Act, 2012
- Water Act 2016
- Intergovernmental Relations Act, 2012
- Land Registration Act, 2012
- National Land Commission Act, 2012
- Prevention, Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons and Affected Communities Act, 2012
- Transition to Devolved Government Act, 2012
- Kenya Wildlife Conservation & Management Act, 2013
- Public Private Partnership Act, 2013
- Environmental Management & Coordination Act, 2015
- Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions Act, 2015
- Access to Information Act, 2016
- Climate Change Act, 2016
- Community Land Act, 2016
- Land Laws Amendment Act, 2016

The constitutional reform in 2010, described in section 2.1, not only devolved certain aspects of water governance to newly formed county governments, but also entrenched the right to water and sanitation in the Bill of Rights, effectively making water and sanitation a human right. These developments created the need to align the Water Act 2002 to the Constitution. Consequently, a new act – the **Water Act 2016** came into effect in April 2017 and is under implementation. In the Kenyan context, the attainment of the progressive realisation of the right to water depends on three crucial elements, namely, investment level, performance of the utilities, and orientation on demand (targeting), seen in terms of service improvement to the poor within a wider context of effective governance. The allocation of resources and ensuring this is linked to the investment of the sector needs is anchored at the policy level. The other two aspects of ensuring increased focus on the poor and the continued improvement in performance by the utilities are within the domain of the utilities and the county governments. The role of regulation in this arrangement is to ensure the progressive realisation of this right within a framework that protects consumers and the environment and helps to reconcile the various social and economic interests.

The Institutional and Regulatory arrangements in the water sector are based on the Water Act 2002 with the Water Act 2016 **aimed at institutionalizing the demands of the Constitution of Kenya-2010 in the current dispensation which devolved water and sanitation functions to the county governments with a 3-year transitional period to facilitate orderly migration.** The migration was an institutional issue that was carefully nurtured. The implementation of the two Acts was vested in the Ministry in Charge of Water and Sanitation (MoWS). However, the Water Act 2016 has no clear provisions for modalities to coordinate the various institutions including non-state actors. Coordination of the various players is ad hoc and remains problematic to the sector.

Decentralised water governance in Kenya is formed as collaborative and participatory, involving cooperation at different scales and levels to achieve efficiency, equity, and sustainability (e.g., see a deeper analysis on water governance for the Lake Naivasha basin by Ogada et al., 2017). The collaborative nature of water governance in Kenya is encouraged through different legal provisions, such as involvement of stakeholders in County Integrated Management Plans or public-private partnerships. Heterogeneity of stakeholders, collaborative governance, and multiple decision-making levels have been acknowledged in different contexts and studies, from Nairobi to rural semi-arid locations (Koehler et al., 2020; McCord et al., 2017; Ogada et al., 2017; Wamuchiru, 2017). Governance varies depending on the local context: institutions, infrastructure, history, as well as, management cultures, individual and collective values, norms, and interests (see discussion on management cultures in rural Kenya in the study by Koehler et al., 2020). **An overview of the institutional framework and key stakeholders can be found in Appendix 3;** see additional studies that highlight main stakeholders in the different Kenyan counties: Beisheim et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2004; Kiamba & Chintalapati, 2019; Ogada et al., 2017; Smutko et al., 2002.



Photo © WASREB

Devolution brought lots of hopes for power to local governments; however, it also came with a more complex institutional structure. The multi-partnership landscape in Kenya is complex, heterogenous, polycentric, and differs across counties, as some follow de-concentrated leadership and others a more centralised system. This is further explored in studies by McCord et al., 2017; Mwihi, 2018; Wamuchiru, 2017. Conflicts between national and county governments about their roles in the water sector, as well as, revenue allocation and collection, are common, affecting the creation of new institutions, e.g., basin-level committees have not been established for the 5 River Basins (Tana, Athi, Ewaso Nyiro, Rift Valley and Lake Victoria Basins) due to the lack of understanding and cooperation between WRA, national, and county levels of government. Devolution has also brought many expectations that are not always easy to fulfil. As the study by Chome (2015) indicates, new official elites in marginalised areas exceedingly experience “elite vulnerability,” having limited ability to entrench their regulatory power at the local county level and in “the unchecked advancement of their own priorities at the expense of local communities.”

2.3 Requirements to public participation

Public participation is regarded as an obligatory and collaborative process, serving to infuse citizens’ values and priorities in legislation to increase transparency and accountability. Several guidelines and policies stipulate public participation in water (see Appendix 1), and multiple initiatives like the creation of sub-catchment management plans (SCMPs) are collaboratively created by the Water Resource Users Associations guided by a team from the Water Resource Authority. The statutes require that public participation is initiated at all stages of policy development and project implementation. In project implementation, public participation is geared at obtaining a buy-in and acceptance in the commission of any venture in communities.



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Developers must also ensure compliance with the requirements of International Finance Institutions (IFIs) for stakeholder engagement, as a prerequisite to securing funding for investment in development projects. The IFC Performance Standards are one such requirement.

Developers must ensure that they proactively initiate and drive the public participation process for all project activities that fall within the public's interest. Accordingly, public participation must not be undertaken as a mere formality, but should be given true meaning, value, and significance. The public must be encouraged and provided the opportunity to contribute their viewpoints and ideas. Meaningful public participation also includes deliberate measures to ensure participation of women and marginalized groups such as youth, people with disabilities, and indigenous groups.

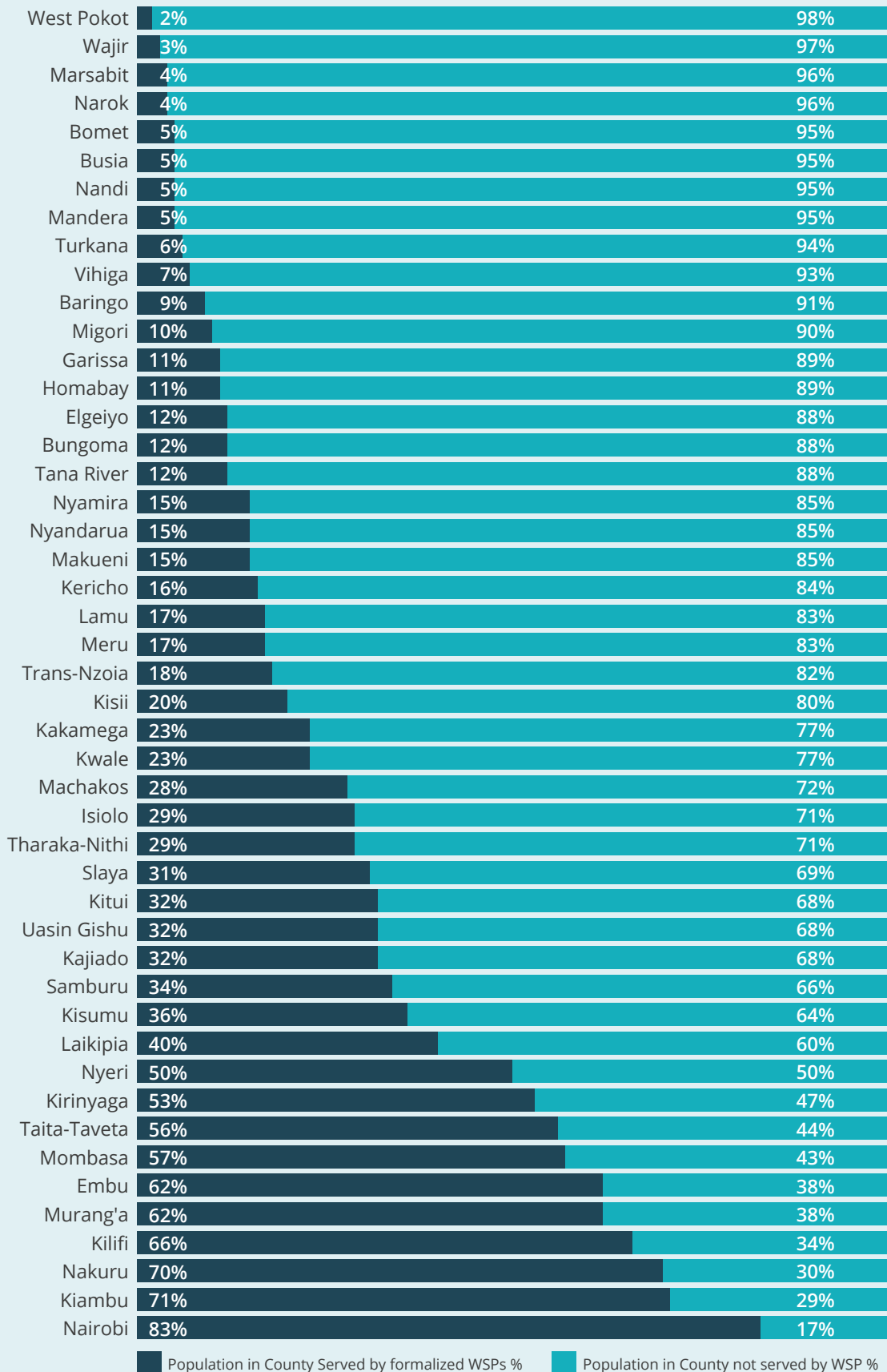
Despite multiple successes, several structural barriers are hindering effective and sustainable community engagement. Devolution brought high hopes to citizens; however, bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption created feelings of alienation, powerlessness, and dependency for local communities. **Implementation of frameworks is often inconsistent and costly.** The communities have a small share in decision-making and limited access to funding. Communities feel excluded. Some counties review County Integrated Development Plans only before the elections, and the communities are frequently left out of the decision-making or even consultation processes. County Public Participation Guidelines (Republic of Kenya, 2023a) acknowledge challenges in administrative translation of policies, such as lack of standards, mechanisms of coordination, inclusion approaches, effective planning and Monitoring and Evaluation, funding, and lack of appreciation by the citizens. As workshop participants argued, there is no direct accountability as local officials are appointed and not elected, with weak two-way knowledge exchange and slow progress on representation and inclusion at different levels. Women continue to be under-represented in the water sector, particularly at the senior level.

This **transformation can be achieved through continuous decentralisation at various scales, supported by principles of integrity.** Measures include relocating key public service providers and managers to the community level, electing local officials, and increasing financial devolution. Access to diverse financing sources, such as grants, loans, and blended financing, could also enhance community engagement. The need for bottom-up approaches is reflected in studies across Kenya, such as on collaborative water governance in Lake Naivasha (Ogada et al., 2017), and supported globally by the endorsement for Locally Led Adaptation (Global Commission on Adaptation, 2021). Several of these points are further elaborated in the section 3. However, without addressing corruption and mismanagement, these efforts will result in finance shortfall (Water Integrity Network, 2024). Therefore, it is critical to support this transition with a culture of integrity and by building alliances for collective action (Water Integrity Network, 2024).

2.4 Water management and water access today

As of today, water coverage in 2022/23 within Kenyan counties is variable, ranging from 83% in Nairobi to only 2% in West Pokot (WASREB, 2024); see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Water Coverage within all Counties 2022/23. Figure redrawn from WASREB (2024, p. 69)



There is an increasing demand for higher service levels, also defined by the target for safely managed water services under Sustainable Development Goal 6. Consequently, there is an increased emphasis on service delivery approaches which recognise the importance of the wider enabling environment (i.e., the system), including governance structures (policy, institutional, and regulatory (PIR) frameworks), political economy aspects, and life cycle costing, among others. This is analysed in-depth in the report by REAL-Water (2023). The World Bank has framed five building blocks of sustainability of service provision in rural water supply: 1) institutional capacity, 2) financing, 3) asset management, 4) water resources management, and 5) monitoring and regulatory oversight. This framework further recognises that government – national and sub-national – as well as communities have a role to play in ensuring sustainable service delivery regardless of the management model in place.

Currently there are multiple models coexisting in rural and urban areas, and thus public participation is variable and approached differently as well. Despite several successful projects and policy developments, an effort to move towards systemic change is still needed in many places (see more in Luseka, 2023).

In urban areas, modes of water provision include piped water supply, public or user-owned urban water service providers (UWSPs) and informal water suppliers.

Some models, such as user-owned UWSPs, feature strong community engagement, supported by self-help organizations, community-based groups and donor agencies. For examples, a study in Kisumu (Nzengya, 2018) described how utilities work with consumers through a delegate management model (DMM) to serve the urban poor communities, leveraging local expertise in self-organization. Research on licensed WSPs (Koros et al., 2024) highlights that communities engage in tasks like environmental and social assessments, infrastructure development, operation and maintenance, and many tasks that require manual input.

In rural areas, models in play include institutionalised service delivery management models, urban WSPs expanding to manage rural utilities, and co-management between public actors and private third-party operators. Each model suits different contexts; for instance, Gatsby Africa in Kisumu County supports water services by contracting a private operator to manage operations and maintenance management while Water User Associations play supervisory roles to generate connections and improve revenue collections. Locally-based operators connect WSPs with communities, enhancing oversight, reducing losses, and promoting engagement.

One successful long-term model is Kakamega County Rural Water and Sanitation Corporation (KACRWASCO) which integrated non-functional projects into formal markets. Sustainable Service Delivery Model (SDM) collaborates with WSPs, counties and institutional actors at scale and speed, promoting consumer ownership and responsibility (Luseka, 2023).

Since 2000s, in rural areas, there has been an overall movement towards professionalising water service management (WASREB, 2024), driven by private sector involvement, community preferences and sustainable systems thinking. Innovations include maintenance contracts and results-based funding, addressing challenges of community-based management (Aguaconsult & WaterAid, 2018; Hope, 2015; REAL-Water, 2023; WSMTF, 2022). A study by Chepyegon and Kamiya (2018) indicates that rural community managed water supply systems have limited monitoring by WASREB and hence malpractices are common. Moving beyond basic and inadequately effective CBM may require increasing co-production, professionalisation, long-term support to communities, and alternative financing sources (REAL-Water, 2023).

Currently, different types of management are present depending on the presence, technical and financial capacity, as well as the existing performance and management of Water Service Providers, Small Scale Service providers, Financing Partners, Water User Associations (WUAs) and Private operators in their respective counties (WASREB, 2019). While some models heavily involve community institutions, others require less community input. Community engagement remains crucial for project success, though it can be overlooked in professionalised systems (see also: Korzenevica & Grasham, mimeo).

Debates continue about which water provision model is best suited to different contexts. Local preferences are often shaped by the priorities and interests of funders or donors. Regardless of the model chosen, it is essential to acknowledge contextual nuances, the local history of water provision, institutional settings, and other specific local factors.

Effective, adaptive management requires sustained partnerships with communities and access to local information, enabling timely responses to changing needs and increasing the chances of long-term sustainability.

Finally, **many, especially in poorer regions, rely on self-supply models where households manage their own water provision** (WHO, 2024). Self-supply, often lacking financial and water quality controls, shifts the cost burden to households and poses governance challenges (Cherunya et al., 2015; Water Integrity Network, 2024). Drawing from 2019 KNBS data, Wainana and Barbosa (2024) estimate that approximately 2.4 million of people in Kenya depend on self-supply, though this model remains under-researched. Some self-supply initiatives are unsupported, others receive support from NGOs and the private sector entities (Sutton & Butterworth, 2021), underscoring the need for well-structured community engagement strategies.

For more detail, see Appendix 2, which outlines supported and unsupported community management variations, local government roles, and private sector involvement.



Photo © Euphresia Luseka

3 Public participation and community engagement in water projects


Public participation and community engagement can be analysed and discussed from many angles. Currently, there is no established clarity as per what constitutes adequate participation in Kenya (IGRTC, 2016). Below we provide different typologies and forms of the processes. They are not mutually exclusive but can be used in different ways to discuss the variety of approaches.

Key areas of Kenya Policy on Public Participation are following: 1) Access to Information, 2) Civic Education and Citizen Awareness; 3) Capacity Building; 4) Planning, Budgeting and Implementation; 5) Funding; 6) States Facilitation and Inclusion of Special Interest Groups; 7) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning; 8) Feedback and Reporting Mechanisms; 9) Complaints and Redress Mechanisms.

Vertical and horizontal. Workshop participants felt that it is important to move beyond the focus on public participation as solely inclusion of the public in the projects. The proposal is to advance definition by including two forms of community engagement depending on the source, leadership and forms of mobilisation. *Vertical* community engagement implies linkages between outside organisations with the community, it is also characterised with collaboration with a different social stratum. That is most typical form of public participation. *Horizontal* community engagement is realised through mobilisation and initiatives originating from people within the community(-ies) themselves, united through social connectedness. This division also draws parallels with linking and bonding social capital (Woolcock, 2001)

Depth of public participation and impact: In international practice and literature, public participation is frequently considered as a progressive line or a ladder. Starting from the famous ladder of citizen participation developed by Arnstein (1969) to a commonly used spectrum of public participation as developed by the IAP2 (2018) (see Figure 2), it is graded typically from top-down transactional engagement, in which the public is expected to do what was told, to different degrees of consultation and involvement (such as short – term data collection or obtaining feedback on intervention), to more equal collaboration, and finally, empowerment and transformation, in which communities make the final decision.

Figure 2: IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation. IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation as designed to assist with the selection of the level participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. Redrawn from IAP2 International Federation, 2018.

		Increasing impact on the decision 				
		Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public participation goal		To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and / or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and / or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	To place final decision making in the hands of the public
	Promise to the public	We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible	We will implement what you decide

Forms of decision-making and responsibilities: The roles and responsibilities of communities and individuals in water supply projects vary depending on the engagement type, project goals, and water supply model. Regardless of approach, it is essential to critically assess: a) responsibilities, b) decision-making structures, and c) accountability among all stakeholders. Each model assigns specific roles to communities and individuals, such as fostering public awareness, building trust, enhancing communication, adopting water-saving practices, and establishing accountability mechanisms (Korzenevica & Grasham, mimeo).

These responsibilities are often channelled through community institutions, such as water user committees, and involve local knowledge contributions and active participation over limited periods. Additionally, responsibilities differ within households between men, women, and children who need to collaborate, share roles and decision-making.

Most projects follow a top-down accountability structure, with water providers primarily accountable to regulators and funders, while direct accountability to communities is more limited. The extent of community decision-making varies significantly across projects and models. In many water supply initiatives, community involvement in decision-making is minimal. However, transformational approaches aim to increase community agency by fostering joint, two-way decision-making, public control, and co-ownership. These resource-intensive approaches creatively integrate community perspectives at every project stage, assess power dynamics, and seek to reach marginalized groups. Transformational projects may also employ multi-sectoral strategies that address wider goals such as peacebuilding, poverty reduction, or gender equality, thereby empowering previously voiceless groups in society (Munene, 2019). In these models, responsibilities are shared among all stakeholders—individuals, households, communities, and providers—and guided by transparent, mutually agreed-upon mechanisms that allow communities to communicate their values and priorities effectively. Two-way accountability and accessible communication channels are also essential components.

Potential drawbacks of extensive community engagement. While community engagement is valuable, over-engagement can lead to imbalances in responsibilities and accountability, with communities bearing excessive burdens. High demands for voluntary contributions, especially in terms of time and resources, can become unsustainable, putting pressures on competing responsibilities and community relations, and community relations (for a global overview, see Korzenevica & Grasham, mimeo).

Figure 3: Word cloud from the opinions of the participants during the Kenyan workshop

What is community engagement for you?

80 responses



Guiding community engagement through specific **principles and values** may be more powerful than prescribing a specific form of engagement. Water Integrity Network has defined four key principles of integrity: Transparency, Accountability, Participation, and Anti-corruption (TAPA). During the workshop, additional principles were discussed, such as inclusion, complaint resolution mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation, contextual awareness, mutual knowledge sharing, and addressing grievances and historical traumas. Participants from the Kenya workshop expressed their opinions on principles and values of community engagement as shown in the Figure 3.

Case study: Integrity Management Toolbox (from Water Integrity Network)

Developed by the Water Integrity Network and Caritas Switzerland, the Integrity Management Toolbox for Small Water Supply Systems (IMT-SWSS) is a participatory methodology that helps small and community-run systems improve their performance. By addressing issues of functionality and sustainability via an integrity and good governance approach, the tool consists of support for compliance with local rules and regulations, practical ways to strengthen accountability and transparency, and an emphasis on inclusion of users and committee members in decision-making for the system. At its core, it facilitates agreement with the community on the principles they want to reinforce, the changes they want to see, and supporting the communities to implement these instruments and tools. The key governance values that the tool works through are transparency, accountability, participation, and anti-corruption. Usually, the project lasts for 1-2 years, and it includes coaching from a facilitator, analysis of the system by the community, and support from local duty-bearers. Through the IMT, the community gets to understand their system, identify areas of potential risks that will impact their management of the project, and how to address them. The process ensures a participatory, customised, non-confrontational, and sustainable approach to community management of small water supplies.

3.1 Cooperation with communities and other stakeholders

Attendees at the Kenya workshop highlighted significant progress in cooperation between communities and various water sector stakeholders in Kenya. For example, REAL-Water Assurance Fund Program found that involving county officials in community engagement facilitates deeper understanding of community needs and improves communication.

Best practices emphasize that **community engagement is not a one-time event but a continuous process.** It begins during project feasibility assessments, intensifies as the base case and capital investments are developed, and continues through the stages of securing financing until financial close. Community engagement is then consistently monitored and evaluated to allow for ongoing improvement throughout the project's lifecycle. **Science-practitioner partnership can support the process by fostering collaboration** in research design and data collection, and by setting investment priorities grounded in scientific evidence while considering political feasibility (Hope et al., 2024).

On the other hand, lack of cooperation and exclusion of diverse actors from decision-making, implementation, and management can strain the social contract with communities, increasing uncertainty and placing responsibilities beyond local actors' capacities. Achieving cooperation is often challenging. A study on water and environmental management in the River Njoro revealed that community representatives perceived weak community cooperation and underdeveloped community water institutions as barriers to effective collaboration (Jenkins et al., 2004). Similarly, Wamuchiru (2017) observed that in partnerships involving donors, CBOs, NGOs, and local communities, overlapping roles and siloed operations are common, as many institutions do not operate with mutually exclusive mandates.

Communities tend to mistrust and resist new initiatives, often due to past failures and corruption. For example, in the KACUWASCO project in Navakholo, there was a misconception that the new water supply would increase infertility. Similarly, the REAL-Water Assurance Fund Program initially faced skepticism, with community members questioning the program's benefits. Building trust requires ongoing, transparent, and honest communication about realistic goals and processes. Moreover, the history of co-production of services should be taken into consideration, and new interventions should aim to build up on the existing mechanisms.



Photo © Mary Ngikadelio

Despite a widespread recognition of the need of INGOs to engage multiple stakeholders, many INGOs continue to work exclusively with communities, often overlooking local government. This approach misses opportunities to strengthen governance through multi-party cooperation, risks marginalizing certain communities, and can foster dependency on the NGOs.

There is sometimes frustration that communities may not act according to what external agents consider rational. Contextual nuances – such as cultural, symbolic, and historical ties to water and social relations around water use – often influence community decision-making. People’s choices are shaped by gendered norms, local power dynamics, but also social obligations and networks. For example, studies in Kitui and Kiambu show that people, particularly women, need to negotiate their rights to water, establishing informal mutual self-help agreements (Bukachi et al., 2021; Hillesland et al., 2023).

Accountability is frequently expected of communities, but accountability to them from water service providers is often limited. Information flows between operators, regulators, and communities are irregular, weakening provider accountability to communities. Obosi (2017) notes that consumers often lack benchmark expectations against which they could hold service providers accountable. Similarly, Ananga’s (2017) study on community-operated water schemes in Kisumu’s informal neighbourhoods found that management clarity, billing transparency, well-defined roles, and accessible leadership improved scheme success. Conversely, some schemes initially performed well but faltered as management structures deteriorated and meetings ceased.

Land acquisition for water projects, especially those requiring new pipelines, is complex and sensitive in Kenya. Water projects in Kenya, particularly those requiring new lines, typically require a substantial amount of land. According to the Water Act, development projects can compel land acquisition, with the Land Act (section 110) requiring fair compensation. However, land ownership is a highly emotive and political, making land-related grievances a common source of community opposition to water projects. Community engagement, transparency, fair compensation and cooperation are essential to manage community concerns and ensure fairness, understand community grievances and distribute benefits with affected communities.

The practice of engaging communities specifically and only to meet licensing and permitting requirements often breeds dissatisfaction and can lead to an environment of enmity between stakeholders and developers.

Walter et al. (2017) emphasize that community engagement should be integrated systematically into core project activities to: 1) lower the project’s risk profile, 2) minimize disputes and grievances, and 3) prevent cost and time overruns during construction. Adequate resources—both human and financial—are needed to support effective, long-term community and stakeholder engagement.

Case study: Safe Water Project

In Trans-Nzoia County's Kiminini-Mitoto Safe Water Project, the Christian engineering NGO Water Mission demonstrated a commitment to community engagement at every stage. Through a participatory exercise, the Water Mission Engineering, the community development team, and the community representatives assessed topographic measurements and later conducted a social fieldwork composed of meetings with the community leaders, interviewing residents, collection of water use and other demographic data, and inspection of the area. The project design underwent multiple approvals, including community on the number of requested water points for the community. The community provided an in-kind land contribution and elected a committee trained in bookkeeping, system operation, maintenance, and financial management. Water revenues are saved in a community account to pay water vendors, system operators, and for maintenance. The community saves the water revenues on the account from which they pay water vendors, the system operators, and maintenance. They are held accountable to the community and give their reports through annual community meetings. They also have an office term limit and are guided by a constitution and monitored by Water Mission and the county government.

3.2 Community institutions and capacities

Kenya's diversity requires a deep understanding of local contexts. **Too often, external assumptions about community needs are imposed** without thoroughly examining the specific needs of different community groups or recognising gaps between external perceptions and internal realities. Moreover, the study by Koehler et al (2018) in coastal Kenya shows that communities may have different values, perceptions, and management of risks. There is a risk that community engagement becomes a tool to legitimise activities and promote universal values and principles while ignoring local needs.

Governance approaches designed for urban settings are often applied to rural areas without fully acknowledging the distinct challenges of rural contexts. In response, WASREB (2019) introduced guidelines to strengthen rural water systems based on the specific types of water provision. These guidelines emphasize consumer engagement in line with constitutional requirements through information provision, consultation, complaints resolution, policy development and Monitoring and Evaluation. Despite the frameworks, the implementation of water supply services is often inconsistent and costly.

Local community institutions often receive limited support, face institutional and financial challenges, and lack sufficient capacity. Many WRUAs have not been established despite the initiation of the WRA to establish WRUAs of a minimum of 100 km² for cooperative management of common water resources. Currently, there are 687 WRUAs established out of potential 1,237. Moreover, there is limited technical capacity for the local community water projects. Volunteering activities continue to be expected even for critical water catchment conservation services, conflict management, and surveillance of illegal activities. Several of these issues can be supported by associations like Millennium Community Development Initiatives (MCDI); however, they cannot replace essential structural challenges that need to be systemically addressed. A study by Wamuchiru (2017) on water supply in Nairobi further discusses the capacities of different stakeholders.

Lack of community cohesion and functioning institutions can be significant obstacles to successful water supply projects. For instance, in Water Project X, despite substantial financial support from the international donor through the Community Development Trust Fund, control of the water supply rests with an individual who sells the water to the community. Efforts by the grant manager, MCDI, to establish a community-led water management committee were scuttled by mistrust and suspicion among the community. Additionally, attempts to engage a professional water management entity also failed, as managers who visited the project area opted not to proceed due to the evident divisions within the community (personal communication with professional water project managers).

On the other hand, too many committees can hamper the efficiency and create fatigue from meetings. Especially when new institutions are established, it can stretch resources, create more work, and hamper motivation. Efforts aimed at community engagement should be targeted.

Fostering a sense of ownership is essential for meaningful in-depth engagement with the community. As global studies indicate, different forms of participation enhance a sense of ownership over the safe water infrastructure, and subsequently, the sense of ownership enhances beneficial outcomes (Ambuehl et al., 2022). Meaningful forms of participation that foster ownership are context-specific but generally include four main types: investing the self (e.g., labour or material contribution, financial investment), having control (e.g., overseeing construction work, decision-making over the operation of infrastructure), knowing intimately (e.g., being familiar with the way of working, technical functionality, purpose that the infrastructure serves), and using the safe water infrastructure (Ambuehl et al., 2021).

In turn, an increased sense of ownership results in positive attitudes (e.g., perceived water taste, safeness, confidence in repairing), increased access and use (e.g., perceived access, use, expected functionality), and greater stewardship for the infrastructure (e.g., caretaking, responsibility, less overuse). In the Kenyan context, Chepyegon and Kamiya (2018) indicate that lack of ownership often results in low acceptance of projects, with increased risks of sabotage or delays. Women play a particularly vital role in water and sanitation projects, as they are most affected and tend to be more receptive to community development initiatives.

Case study: Kenya Finland Western Water Supply Program

The Kenya Finland Western Water Supply Program (KFWWSP) began in 1981 in Western Kenya, with implementation by Kefinco, a Finnish joint venture. Initially, beneficiary communities were not engaged in water development activities. After realization that sustainability would be difficult without the participation of beneficiaries, a community involvement sector was established during Phase II. While communities were then included in the process, issues such as unclear ownership, unresolved land disputes, and insufficient guidelines for operation and maintenance remained. This project demonstrated the importance of participatory approach in decision making, defined ownership under community terms, local capacity building and transparency.

The impact of additional responsibilities on communities, local committees, or individuals should be evaluated and continuously examined. The capacity and limitations of local actors should be carefully assessed. Individual perspectives should be considered with attention to long-term motivation, personal benefits, and potential vulnerabilities for the people involved and their households. Moreover, interventions can have a significant impact on the social organisation of the community. In the study in Kisumu, Butcher (2016) highlights how, under the Delegated Management Model, community roles and responsibilities have taken on new symbolic meanings. Community policing, for instance, became associated with the project obligation, mutual solidarity, and reflection of local ownership.

While initial engagement may be empowering and welcoming, over time engagement may have detrimental effects on people's lives, livelihoods, or other household members.

Transparent assignment of responsibilities is essential for all parties. Coordination and cooperation should be looked at both holistically and in detail, with a particular emphasis on the responsibilities, capacities, and transparency of all parties involved at every scales. Individuals and households should be included in the discussion of responsibilities. Several smaller responsibilities can be performed over the phone. Transparency and division of responsibilities are further elaborated in the study by Mwihaki (2018) on Kiambu and Thika sub-counties and by Ananga (2017) on urban informal neighbourhood schemes in Kisumu.

One of the successful practices that WaterAid has implemented is through establishing of a simple, clear, and participatory tool called [WhoDoesWat](#). It facilitates dialogue between multiple stakeholders to strengthen management arrangements. At the heart of the tool is the process to agree on the responsibilities of all the parties involved, clarify existing principles, resolve disputes, and agree on the new arrangements.

3.3 Knowledge, data, and information exchange

Information flows are often one-way and extractive. While feedback mechanisms from the community are crucial due to the high contextual needs, they often remain weak. Information flows is predominantly top-down, with limited mechanisms for consumers to share their experiences with other stakeholders. Moreover, when various entities – such as NGOs, researchers, and government bodies – collect data on water use and management, engagement with the community in the process is often minimal. As a result, communities frequently encounter unfulfilled promises, a lack of clarity, and frustration over their unmet requests for relevant data. There is no dedicated infrastructure for public participation, such as information centres or platforms for participation (IGRTC, 2016). Similarly, Shields et al. (2021) argue that community participation is often seen to be transactional and not transformational in the form of contribution to construction or information sharing.

Case study: Digital communication

Digital communication is a promising tool for accountability, two-way communication, and equity. A case study by Mary Simiyu carried out in a rural county in Kenya showed that ignorance about the water utilities digital platforms on service delivery denied many consumers their rights to safe, clean and affordable water and sanitation services. Awareness campaigns on how to demand new or improved services, pay for the same, report complaints, and demand accountability from the water utility should be given priority. This would make the water utility improve on service delivery and make the consumers more willing to pay for the services rendered. Digital platforms would save time, money, and energy in trying to access services, and in the long run, both the consumer and the utility would benefit. An informed community ensures that standards in service delivery are improved on and maintained. Sustainability can be maintained with accountability and transparency.

Data collection is often uncoordinated, and data is not shared. Different institutions collect similar data from the same communities that they then do not share with each other, leading to fatigue, reduced willingness to cooperate, and reduced efficiency. There are also difficulties in accessing data from the government for CSOs.

Community concerns about water supply interventions are important and must be addressed before the project begins. Keturah Moikwabe from WASREB notes that communities frequently raise issues related to water and sanitation project impacts, such as environmental degradation, displacement, and the disruption of livelihoods. Additionally, there are often concerns about land ownership and compensation, with unclear land rights and insufficient compensation for land use being key challenges. Moikwabe also highlights the significance of benefit sharing, as many communities feel excluded from the economic benefits that come with water projects. Addressing these concerns early on is critical for fostering trust and ensuring the equitable distribution of project benefits.

Communities often lack access to information and struggle to effectively advocate their interests. Collaboration with NGOs and CSOs can empower communities, enabling them to participate more meaningfully. Important information is often highly technical and difficult to understand. In order to assist communities, MCDI has produced the Community Guide to the Water Act of 2002, in response to the limited knowledge among the communities on the Water Act and the rationale behind the current institutional arrangement. MCDI also actively participates in policy and legal review processes, e.g., the most recent validation workshop of the Water Bill of 2023, to vocalise local interests. In another case explored by Ananga (2017) on urban neighborhood schemes in Kisumu, collaboration and networking between community-based organizations and other partners, along with the ability to secure a SANA (Sustainable Aid International in Africa) grant, played a significant role in the success of the project.

Case study: Water Action Groups

Water Action Groups (WAGs) were introduced to Kenya in November 2009 as a pilot initiative of WASREB to serve as a feedback mechanism for water sector institutions in Kenya and to strengthen citizens' voice in decision-making in the water services sector as a means of protecting consumer interests. The Pilot was implemented in four urban centres – the three cities of Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu as well as in Kakamega Town. Four WAG teams of six to fourteen volunteers were appointed by WASREB from communities in pilot areas. The WAGs Pilot was structured around an action learning process – learning by doing. Community engagement implied introduction, building awareness of the role of WAGs, and identifying issues of concern through consumer complaints forms and focus group discussions. During the third quarter of the year, WAGs began to test the regulatory function of sector reforms, escalating concerns that had not been addressed by the Utilities to the Regulator for action. They also conducted public hearings where sector institutions heard directly from the communities represented by WAGs, as well as a scheduled and structured series of meetings between WAGs and the water sector institutions. The last quarter was used to consolidate the lessons of the Pilot and consider requirements for institutionalising WAGs. This rights-based approach and the empowerment of consumers were a strong underlying theme in the WAGs Pilot and recognised the roles of both duty bearers and rights holders as critical to the attainment of access to water services for all.

Some of the successes of WAG included highlighting gaps in service delivery. For example, the presence of WAGs forced utilities to re-examine adherence to the complaint's mechanism. Further WAGs proved to be a useful channel for communication from sector institutions to the consumer and vice versa. The WAGs Pilot brought together capacities of actors from diverse sectors – government, State corporations, non-governmental organisations, and communities. Through this partnership, the voice of citizens was brought to the centre of decision-making in the water sector with the aim of ensuring that the development of the sector responded directly to consumer needs and priorities as articulated by consumer representatives themselves.

Some of the challenges were water sector institutions working in silos and resulting lack of goodwill within the sector on issues requiring collaboration and consultation. Voluntary involvement of WAG teams brought issues of sustainability and fairness, as well as initial resistance from staff.

3.4 Conflicts, Disputes and Grievances Management and community mobilisation

There are multiple conflicts that interfere with water supply including conflicts between ethnic groups, conflicts between refugees and local communities, between institutions, different users and interests, and between the community and institutions.

Various Kenyan statutes address grievance management, however, there are many aspects missing in the provision. Several policies address grievance, including the Community Land Act 2014 (section 58, 59, 60 and 61) and The County Government Act, No. 17 of 2012. The Land Act outlines the procedures to resolve grievances, provides a redress mechanism, and allows for the use of traditional dispute resolution methods. However, the Act is silent on the protection of participants in terms of their risk of retribution for participation, and does not provide for a budget, or a feedback mechanism that is timely to the complainants. The County Government Act calls for a platform by which citizens will be able to submit their grievances with a particular inclusion of vulnerable people, marginalized disadvantaged communities.

Alternative dispute resolution principles (ADR) mechanisms are promoted in the Constitution of Kenya and the National Land Policy. However, there are currently no regulations in place to govern ADR mechanisms or to outline how they should be conducted in the country. Part of the problem in accessing ADR is that individuals and communities are more likely to resort to the judiciary, as the concept of ADR has not been internalized or accepted by individuals and communities. A grievance mechanism should: (1) enable grievances to be received and responded to in a timely manner, (2) enable for a redress mechanism where an external body can be brought in to solve a grievance where necessary, (3) be transparent and enable accountability in its processes, (4) be culturally appropriate (5) be scaled to potential project risks, (6) be staffed and well budgeted. Moreover, grievance mechanisms must be gender-sensitive.

This means that women should hold leadership positions within the mechanism, and it should be designed to address the specific issues that women may raise, such as gender-based violence, barriers to land ownership, or compensation concerns.

Often horizontal community engagement evolves due to water injustices at different scales, (neo)colonial interests, loopholes in legislation, and formal or informal protection of corporate interests. Movements like #ShiftThePower have been initiated to challenge the existing power status quo and promote locally led decision-making.

Case Study:

The shift from community-based management occasionally jeopardizes community rights and ownership of water resources, leading to numerous conflicts in which underprivileged communities suffer. In the Bathi WRUA sub-catchment, three communities have been experiencing these difficulties. In the case of Ruiru Dam I, which was originally constructed to serve European Settlers, it currently supplies water to Nairobi by passing those who live next to the dam. A buffer zone was created around the dam, preventing residents from trespassing and accessing the water. Ruiru Dam II has been planned under the Private-Public-Partnership (PPP) model, implying that the water project is to be taken away from the villages and given to a private company to manage. This conflict has been viewed through the lens of interpretations of the Water Act; however, later, the Athi Water Works Development Authority Chief Executive Officer was charged with corruption in relation to the tender for the construction of Ruiru II and other projects. Currently, the project is suspended. Finally, the Matimbei Water Project (a dam that was dug by the community) in the same region has been handed over to a private company, and as a result, villagers have experienced inflated prices for insufficient water while remaining custodians of the ecology of the river. In all three projects, communities have been marginalised and intimidated.

MCDI and the Bathi Water Resource Users Association, one of the founder members of the Athi River Community Network (ARC�) under the support of Stichting Both ENDS and End Water Poverty (a global civil society coalition), have been supporting communities to conduct legal research, mobilise, and advocate for their rights. In the case of the [Matimbei Water project](#), the organisations helped people take the project back.

In conflict zones, understanding community dynamics is crucial. Each conflict zone has its own unique socio-political, cultural, and economic factors that influence water access and usage patterns. Conflict exacerbates humanitarian needs, and water scarcity, in turn, often escalates tensions. Therefore, strategies for conflict mitigation and resolution must be integrated into water supply initiatives. A thorough risk assessment of environmental and socio-political issues is needed to anticipate and address potential escalation of conflicts. Acknowledgement of communities' resilience and advancing their empowerment can strengthen social cohesion. UNICEF has also led a progressive approach in incorporating WASH in peacebuilding activities, e.g., among many, between refugee and host communities (UNICEF, 2023 (2nd ed)).

In the case of perpetuated conflicts, a multi-sectoral approach is likely to bring the best results. A multi-sectoral approach is important, such as the Triple Nexus which tackles 1) the immediate needs of humanitarian and long term sustainability of systems, 2) population movements, and 3) ensuring that water is used as a mechanism for social cohesion. Oxfam has found that by investing in the O&M of systems through bundling them up, having dedicated management and prioritising community engagement improved the sustainability of systems even in the drought. Putting efforts into local peacebuilding to improve negotiation between users, especially in the context of overuse, ensuring the safety of women using systems, and by acknowledging and understanding the conflict dynamics, the water committee can engage with the dynamics proactively and reduce conflict in areas of migration.

Case study: Oxfam

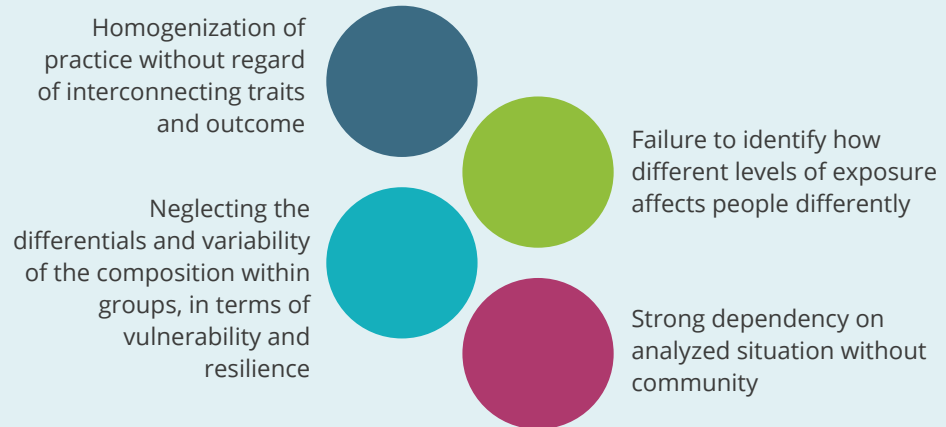
In a recent Oxfam internal review of programs or interventions that caused or exacerbated conflict, a significant cause of conflict was the lack of coordination between service providers. This lack of coordination resulted in competing agendas and badly designed or implemented projects fuelling or causing conflict. The biggest cause of conflict was limited WASH resources and services, as defined by limited amounts of water available, inaccessibility of services and inadequate provision either geographically or physically. The lack of sustainable and coordinated services, not only influences the health of the population but also increases the likelihood of conflict.

3.5 Inclusion: Intra-community and intra-household power dynamics

There are two types of inclusion that are important for meaningful community engagement, firstly, **inclusion of community representatives as stakeholders** in decision-making and planning, and secondly, **inclusion of diverse and particularly marginalised groups** at different institutions and in decision-making. Both types require continuous effort in addressing structural inequalities. Participation and exclusion are one of the most discussed topics in community participation literature (Adams et al., 2020), particularly along the axes of elite capture and gender inclusion. As studies indicate, the importance of representative and gender equitable intra-institutional dynamics cannot be overestimated for community management, healthy democracy, as well as economic and social justice (Ifejika Speranza & Bikketi, 2018; Sivi-Njonjo, 2016). However, diversity of representation of intersecting social groups, critical evaluation of responsibilities, and intrahousehold dynamics are still underexplored. The main challenges in the identification of vulnerability in water are described in Figure 4.

Community engagement in water supply projects can and should be incorporated into multi-sectoral social transformative projects. Meaningful participation from vulnerable groups should be sought, with efforts made to understand and address social norms, power relations, and other barriers. For instance, creating women-only or youth-only spaces can reduce social stigma, enabling women voice their unique needs and contribute to agreed-upon by-laws for governing water resources. This approach is further discussed in the study by Yerian et al. (2014) on Marsabit County.

Figure 4: Challenges in general identification of vulnerability in water (Author: Elizabeth Wambui Mwangi, WashVoice)



Elite

Engagement with local elites can benefit a project but may also exacerbate social inequalities. Evidence shows that elites sometimes redirect benefits toward themselves or their close networks, often to the detrimental of the most vulnerable who may lack the resources and capacity to advocate for their rights and are often dependent on elite support. Rigon (2014) in their study on informal settlements in Nairobi, argues that elites have “learned” the language of participation and are skilled at manipulating bottom-up and community ownership discourses to lobby external stakeholders, for whom engagement with the elite can more convenient.

Conversely, other regional studies (Kita, 2019; Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013; Rusca & Schwartz, 2014) suggest that elites serve as critical gatekeepers and enablers, with the resources to advocate on behalf of the community. Although elites often lead decision-making processes – something preferred by vulnerable populations with limited capacity or interest in engagement – over time, they can contribute to a more equitable distribution resources.

Gender

The gender organisation of society influences the distribution of water resources and responsibilities (Ifejika Speranza & Bikketi, 2018). Thus, involving women in water governance is essential for enhancing sustainability, health, increasing water access, and reducing conflicts (e.g., Coulter et al., 2019). This is widely acknowledged in various institutions, e.g., Water Resources Users Associations must have gender mainstreaming incorporated, many NGOs employ a policy of 50% of the membership in water committees to be reserved for women, and leaders of community water groups typically acknowledge the importance of women representation (as in the study of Laikipia by Ifejika Speranza & Bikketi, 2018).

Despite progress, gender inequalities in representation persist for various reasons

(Coulter et al., 2019; Hannah et al., 2021; Ifejika Speranza & Bikketi, 2018; Kameri-Mbote, 2016; Korzenevica & Grasham, mimeo; Ombogoh et al., 2022; Shields et al., 2021; Yerian et al., 2014):

- Top-down approaches in implementation: Efforts focus on filling seats rather than ensuring that women can take initiatives, influence decisions, or hold meaningful positions. Women are often assigned roles such as treasurers in WUC due to perceptions of their responsibility with money. There is still a prevailing notion that women are expected to work for free.
- Patriarchal norms: Women who assume roles typically held by men may face backlash, social risks, and reinforcement of masculinist norms. Cultural expectations often discourage women from speaking in front of men or leading discussions.
- Unequal rights: Gender disparities in rights, such as land ownership, and recognition of customary and religious laws by the constitution create structural barriers.
- Financial reasons: Many women lack necessary financial resources to pursue membership.
- High burden of responsibilities: Competing demands, such as caregiving responsibilities, add to the challenges women face in their interests of participation in resource governance.
- Lack of capacity: Limited educational opportunities, both formal and informal, often leave women with weaker negotiating skills.

The interplay of intra-household and community level gender dynamics in water governance in Kenya remains underexplored. Emerging literature on water sharing practices in Kenya and the intertwinement of land and water rights suggests that water governance goes beyond formal rules (Bukachi et al., 2021; Hillesland et al., 2023). These studies indicate that women and men can hold different rights and access to water and that informal norms are vital and continually upheld. Despite these academic advances, several questions remain. What role does family play for the elite? How do women representatives engage with other women? How do family relationships impact water governance? How do vulnerable group representatives perceive their responsibilities and roles?

A study on Nepal (Korzenevica, 2016) indicates that community political engagement, especially for men, is a time- and resource-intensive endeavour that requires family support, particularly from young people in the family. Similarly, research on Southeast Asia (Elmhirst, 2011) suggests that family relationships can play a crucial role in enforcing rules and ensuring access to natural resources.

Young people

Young people worldwide have to take on diverse leadership roles in water governance. In Kenya, young people aged 15-34 make up 36% of the population (KNBS, 2019), and addressing this “youth bulge” should be a priority for socio-economic development (National Council for Population and Development, 2017). However, there is limited evidence on young people’s roles in water governance or how this group is targeted in interventions. Some research indicates that younger women are particularly less likely to engage in water governance (Yerian et al., 2014). Global reviews suggest that young people’s potential is often diminished due to institutional neglect, lack of meaningful employment, and insufficient focus on their capacity building (Vojno et al., 2022).

Intersectionality, diversity and Leave Noone Behind principles

Additional vulnerabilities – such as, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, refugee status – add layers of complexity. Strategies to include these varied groups remain underdeveloped (Korzenevica, 2023; Shields et al., 2021). Achieving inclusion requires an understanding of systemic injustices, structural oppression, and social inequalities, alongside a holistic analysis of how social differences affect access to, quality of, and affordability of water resources.

Most importantly, it requires deep listening, giving marginalized groups platforms to express their needs and priorities.

UNICEF (2021) has been leading work on this topic across the world, creating a universal guide on “Leave Noone Behind in WASH”, which emphasizes recognizing the diverse vulnerabilities, understanding root causes of marginality, and integrating various groups in WASH initiatives. That aligns with a growing body of research highlighting the need to represent individuals with disabilities in water governance (Wilbur et al., 2024).



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4 Conclusions

Public participation and community engagement should be viewed not as imposed objectives but as ongoing processes that foster participatory democracy, transparency, accountability, and collaboration. In Kenya, there has been progress in promoting public participation in water supply management through policy improvements, cooperative governance, and context-sensitive models, often facilitated by NGOs. However, public participation and community engagement remain vague concepts, beginning with a lack of clear definitions and a consensual understanding of the terms. This ambiguity is compounded by the absence of guidelines, enforceable rules, and quality metrics to ensure meaningful and measurable engagement.

Water is life, and water is social. Effective water governance can strengthen relationships, promote cooperation, and address power imbalances by amplifying marginalized voices. However, if water is viewed purely through a technocratic lens – overlooking social and gender dynamics, as well as formal and informal cooperation mechanisms – water services risk not only missing key opportunities but also encountering significant challenges, such as reduced project sustainability, increased social inequalities, community resentment, and further marginalization. For public participation to be effective, it requires sustained investments throughout the project lifecycle, encompassing monitoring, evaluation, and continuous feedback loops in both directions. Science-policy partnership further enhance the potential benefits. Above all, true participation, as Shields et al. (2021) argue, requires reflexivity and humility. While community engagement enhances sustainability; efficiency should not be the sole focus.

Many communities remain consistently marginalized due to inadequate, insufficient, or even harmful community engagement practices. These communities often struggle to advocate for their needs because of weak channels for upward accountability, limited capacity, and few opportunities for meaningful expression. Unresolved grievances and growing mistrust set a negative precedent for future projects. In some cases, horizontal engagement has emerged as a necessary form of resistance to challenge entrenched power structures. While community-based organizations and alliances play a vital role in empowering and mobilizing communities, their impact is constrained without structural support and broader institutional backing.

Kenya's diverse contexts—each with unique power dynamics, histories of intervention, senses of ownership, and cultural and spiritual connections to water—highlight the importance of recognizing and including women, youth, disabled individuals, and other social groups. The role of elites, as both gatekeepers and potential beneficiaries, complicates these dynamics, underscoring the need for careful analysis of power relations within community engagement efforts. The inclusion should not be treated as a checkbox to satisfy donors but as a critical element for project success. Projects that fail to approach these aspects with established, meaningful mechanisms risk becoming harmful and unsustainable. While there has been a shift from focusing merely on the number of drilled boreholes toward the quality of water systems and governance, the "Leave No One Behind" principle of the SDG agenda serves as both a marker and pathway for success. Comprehensive representation of diverse groups is essential, but evidence of strategies for engaging all social groups—not just women—remains limited. To address this, in-depth exploration of power relations is necessary to understand the complexities of elite engagement, structural vulnerabilities, and social group diversity.

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Appendix 1: Chronological policy development

This is an overview of policies, but for a comprehensive document, please refer to The Status of Public Participation in National and County Governments (IGRTC, 2016).

The importance of water was first acknowledged in the **Sessional Paper No. 1 of 1965** on Africa Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 1965; Rondinelli, 1991). It highlighted the need for water conservation, the expansion of water supplies, efficient use of water resources, and the development of skilled manpower in the sector.

The Development Plan for 1984-88 (Government of Kenya, 1984) recognized the importance of collaboration between the government and beneficiaries.

The **National Policy on Water Resources Management and Development** (Sessional Paper No. 1, 1999) further emphasized that “the community should be involved at all stages of water projects development (including water resources investigations planning, implementation and operation and maintenance)”.

This session paper was operationalized through the **Water Act No. 8 of 2002** (Water Sector Reforms), which separated water policy formulation from the management and regulation of water resources. The Act decentralized the provision of water and sanitation services and promoted public-private-people partnerships, while also providing various avenues for community participation.

The National Water Sector Policy (2009) outlines key principles for stakeholder engagement.

Article 10(2)(a) of the **Constitution of Kenya (2010)** mandates national values and principles of governance, including patriotism, national unity, devolution of power, democracy, and public participation. The recognition and implementation of public participation elements within the water sector, at both the national and county levels, are imperative. These include meaningful consultation, public representation in decision-making bodies, public awareness, access to information, and mechanisms for justice, conflict resolution, and dispute resolution in the water sector. Adequate space must be provided for stakeholder participation, tailored to the specific requirements of each situation.

In terms of gender inclusion, the Constitution mandates that no more than two-thirds of the members of elective or appointive bodies should be of the same gender, alongside the protection of marginalized groups (Article 10) and the promotion of equal opportunities for men and women in political, economic, cultural, and social spheres (Article 27).

Kenya has ratified the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** and the **Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol)**.

Counties are now required to develop **County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs)** that outline the overall framework for development, with stakeholder involvement.

The **Water Act of 2016** emphasizes public participation through the National Water Resources Strategy II (Section 10) and the **Water Service Strategy** (Section 64). The Act also allows for community initiatives to apply for grants from the **Water Sector Trust Fund** (Section 114), with public consultation required for any proposed actions (Section 139). Public consultation is a mandatory requirement for any action related to water and sanitation provision, as outlined in Section 139 of the **Water Act of 2016**. This Act also addresses equitable access to land, the elimination of gender discrimination, and equal opportunities for both genders.

The **Water Resources Management Authority** and the **Integrated Water Resources Management and Water Efficiency Plan for Kenya (IWRM and WEP; RoK 2009b)** aim to engage women in projects, empowering them and addressing the practical and strategic needs of both genders (Ifejika Speranza & Bikketi, 2018).

In 2016, the **County Public Participation Guidelines** provided a framework for citizen engagement.

The **Water (Amendment) Bill (2023)** and the **Public Participation Bill (Republic of Kenya, 2023b)** define public participation as "the process through which the public is engaged in understanding and contributing to decision-making processes by state organs and public officers at the policy-making, law-making, and implementation levels" (Section 2). The bills promote transparency and accountability, enhancing public participation in governance processes. They also require facilitation of public participation in policy and law formulation, budgeting, and financial management, and ensure that meaningful opportunities for public involvement are provided.

The **Kenya Policy on Public Participation (2023)** defines key policy areas for effective public participation: access to information, civic education and awareness, capacity building, planning and budgeting, funding, inclusion of special interest groups, monitoring and evaluation, feedback and reporting mechanisms, and complaints and redress systems. This policy is intended to be implemented in coordination with national and county government actors.

Appendix 2: Rural water supply management model typology

Table 1: Rural water supply management model typology (Redrawn from Aguaconsult & WaterAid, 2018)

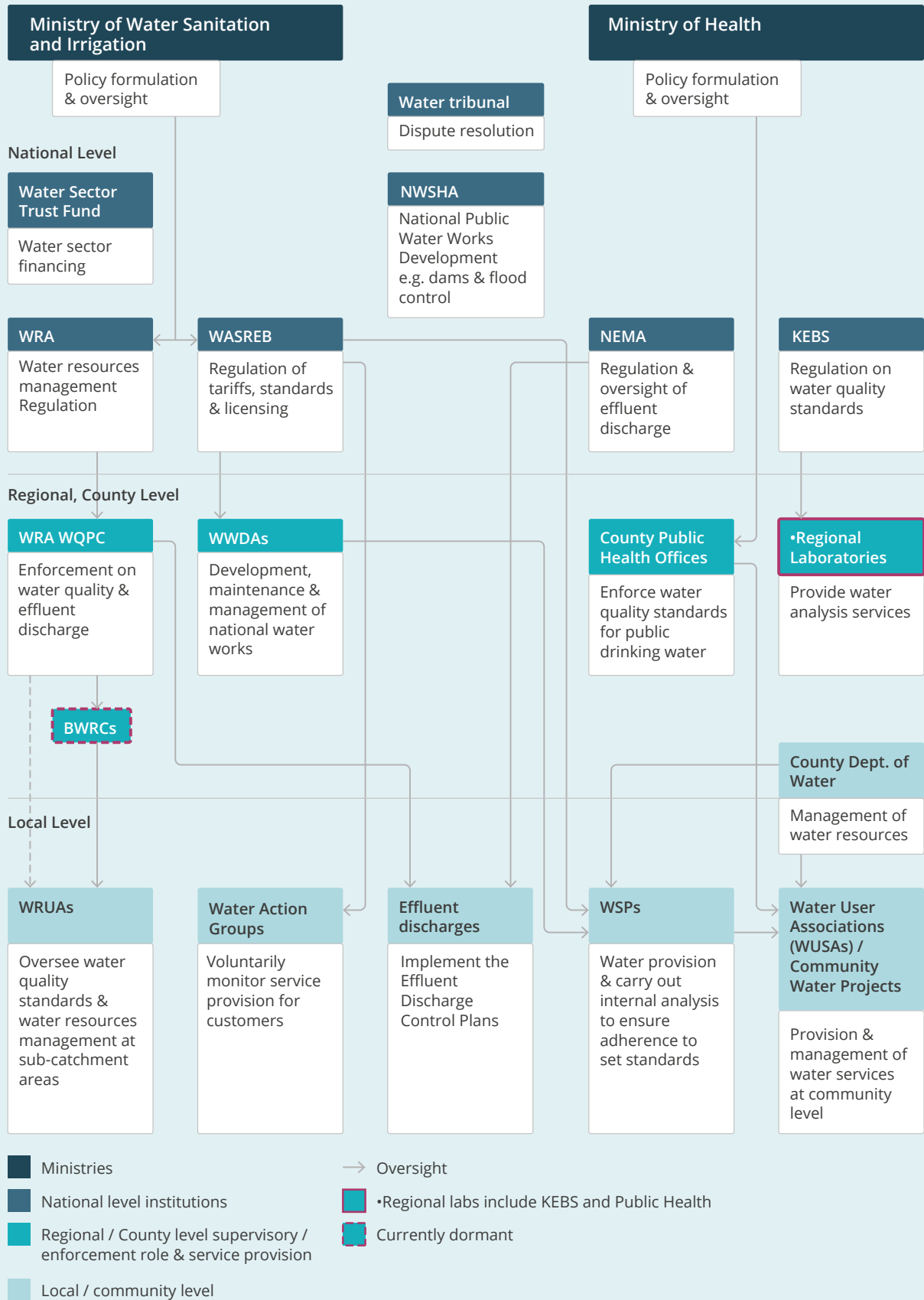
	Typology
Basic Community Management	CBM 1: Community Management with minimal or no external support
Community Management 'Plus'	CBM 2: Community Management with external support and some level of professionalism
	CBM 3: Community management with delegation of some or all functions to private operator through a management contract
	CBM 4: Grouping of community-based management organizations into Associations or Federations to support management of rural water supply schemes
Local Government	LG 1: Direct management of scheme by local government
	LG 2: Local government delegation to community operators through management or lease type contracts
	LG 3: Local Government delegation to private operators or maintenance companies through management or lease contracts
Public Utility	PB 1: Public Water Utility at town, district, state or national level manages the rural water supply scheme
Private	PV 1: Ministry or asset holding entity delegates operations and/or maintenance responsibilities to a private company through management or lease type contracts
	PV 2: Privately owned and operated schemes (invest, build and operate)

Appendix 3: Institutional framework

Stakeholder	Rationale	Stakeholder Expectations
The Ministry in charge of Water and Sanitation	The Ministry provides policy advisories that support sector institutions in executing their mandates.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Prudent financial management ii. Improved sector performance iii. Effective sector coordination
Water Service Regulator Board(Wasreb)	The regulator sets, monitors and reviews rules and regulations to ensure water services provision is affordable, efficient, effective, and equitable. The mandate also includes making recommendations on how to provide basic water services to marginalized areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Setting standards ii. Enforcing regulations iii. Consumer protection iv. Sustainable provision of water and sanitation services
Water Works development Agencies.(WWDAs)	Development of cross county infrastructure and reserve capacity as water service providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> v. Maintain prescribed standards in asset development vi. Bulk water operations. vii. Mobilisation of funds for bulk water works.
Water Resources Authority(WRA).	This regulator protects, conserves, controls and regulates use of water resources which ensures sustainability of the resource for onward provision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Information ii. Compliance by WSPs iii. Demand management iv. Collaboration
Water Service Providers(WSPs) both formal and informal.	WSPs provide water directly to consumers. It is important to continuously engage with them to ensure compliance with the standards for water service provision. Also on the provision of data used to generate information on the sector performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Monitoring for performance improvement ii. Capacity building iii. Sector information
Consumers of piped and un-piped water in Kenya	Consumer engagement on the planning, implementation & monitoring on the provision of water and sanitation services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Access to safely managed water, affordable services ii. Participation iii. Information iv. Redress

Stakeholder	Rationale	Stakeholder Expectations
The leadership of County Governments	The Constitution's Fourth Schedule, distributes functions between the two levels of government, and has devolved water services to county governments. The goodwill of the leadership of county governments is, therefore, a vital component of sustainable water and sanitation services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Improved sector performance ii. Information iii. Standards iv. Implementation of sustainable model for community water supply systems as per prescribed regulatory guidelines. v. Mutual collaborations and partnerships
Development Partners	Critical in terms providing funding and technical expertise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Prudent management of resources ii. Effective project implementation iii. Improved sector performance
Ministry of Health	The shared SDG 6 on water and sanitation, where MoH is the lead in public health necessitates close collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Information ii. Collaboration iii. iCoordinated sanitation efforts
Other Ministries and government bodies.	Inter-governmental co-ordination is necessary to create enablers to increase access to water through financial prudence, enhanced security and shared information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Prudent financial management ii. Improved sector performance iii. Effective sector coordination iv. Information
Private Sector	This stakeholder is a strategic investment partner to augment public funding and funding from other partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Adherence to guidelines for investment in sector ii. Accurate Information about the sector and its potential iii. Clarity on sector reforms
Civil Society	They enhance transparency and good governance by contributing to increased public debate on issues surrounding the formulation and implementation of government budgets as well as in supporting greater transparency of public revenues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Improved services, particularly to the vulnerable ii. Prudence in management of public resources iii. Transparency in information
Learning / Research Institutions	They enhance innovation through research and development in new and emerging areas. They can also assist to build capacity of other stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Collaboration on Water Services innovations (Training, Research and Development) ii. Information
General Public	Satisfaction of the general public is key in gauging the impact of the progressive realisation of the right to water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Improved service delivery ii. Information
Media	The media plays a key role in creating and shaping of public opinion and well-informed protects public interest and creates public awareness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Information on water service provision ii. Improved service delivery
Professional Bodies	Collaboration with professional bodies act as oversight to the professional ethics of the sector; improve the capacity of staff to carry out respective roles towards the sector mandate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Membership and participation 'In good standing' of professionals in the sector

Figure 5 Institutional framework for water supply and monitoring (Redrawn from REAL-Water, 2022)



At both the county and national levels, there are formal coordination mechanisms established through statutory instruments, such as the Intergovernmental Relations Act of 2012, the Council of Governors, the Intergovernmental Technical Relations Committee, and the National and County Government Summit. Additionally, non-statutory instruments like County Executive Committee Members (CECMs) and the Water Services Providers Association (WASPA) also play a role.

According to Otieno et al.'s (2023) empirical study involving policy actors, non-statutory instruments have been particularly successful in fostering trust, building consensus, and cultivating goodwill among partners. Intergovernmental Technical Relations Committee has not been operating effectively in establishing a neutral position or acting proactively to prevent problems. Current coordinating instruments are not regular and lacking enforcement mechanism. Moreover, there are political disparities and mistrust between actors at national and county government levels, not least due to a contested issue of resource allocation to county governments (Otieno et al., 2023). Many international organisations refrain from cooperation with the local governments. Decentralised and local initiatives are sidelined. It is thereof common that in different projects, leaders of Project Management Committees make decisions without consulting others (Ifejika Speranza et al., 2018).



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