

An Evolving Model of Public Participation: Lessons from Kwale County



Figure 1A photo taken during an assessment of County Initiatives in promoting meaningful participation of women and vulnerable groups in public participation processes in Kwale County, Ukunda Ward

Introduction:

Public participation is changing in Kwale County. The County is slowly moving away from a culture of citizens turning up to forums and listening to the priorities of the County Government to a culture where communities are proactively proposing, influencing and tracking development priorities throughout the County planning and budgeting processes. This shift is phenomenal, especially for women and vulnerable groups who have traditionally been excluded from public participation processes. Previous research on Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) in Kwale highlighted low participation of women in budget discussions, limited access to County budget documents, low awareness of GRB and limited engagement between citizens and their representatives. Further, the female literacy rate in the County is recorded to be approximately 47.4% which contributed to social and cultural barriers to participation (Kwale County Government, 2018).

It is against this background that Kwale County, working with civil society and community structures, has strengthened how citizens are prepared, engaged and connected to decision-making at the County. This has led to not only change in public participation, but also in written community proposals, budget allocations, projects and greater involvement of women and vulnerable groups in decisions affecting them. Below is a highlight of exemplary practices from Kwale County that demonstrate how public participation is becoming more meaningful and translating into tangible results for communities.

1. Bringing participation closer to the communities

Public participation in the County begins from the 77 village units, a process which is more accessible to the communities. Ward and Village Administrators are required to mobilize

residents at the grass root level and the County uses its decentralized administrative structures to disseminate information on forthcoming public participation forums. Once the public participation meeting schedule is announced, the Administrators bring residents together to discuss their needs and prioritize development projects before the formal public participation forums. This gives communities an opportunity to discuss their needs informally, agree on the issues that matter most and go into the formal forums with clearer priorities.

This County process is complemented by efforts from civil society organizations who support in civic education and budget literacy. For instance, Bajeti Hub supports training of local Budget Facilitators and Budget Champions through the Coast Regional Budget Hub to enhance communities understanding of County planning and budgeting processes. Facilitators help community leaders to understand and analyze key County documents such as the Annual Development Plan (ADP), County Fiscal Strategy Paper (CFSP) and budget estimates. At the community level Budget Champions serve as a link, between budget information and the everyday concerns that citizens have about development. They help residents interpret County planning and budget documents, identify where community priorities can be raised within the budget cycle, and articulate these priorities during public participation. They also support communities to follow up on whether priorities raised during public participation are reflected in County plans and budgets and to track subsequent budget commitments and projects.

In addition to formal fora, residents also discuss budget issues and priorities in WhatsApp groups. With the help of Budget Champions, these platforms allow residents to examine County budget information and rank their priorities before formal forums. This effort is helping to move from residents primarily raising grievances to presenting more informed and structured proposals on the development priorities they want the County to address.

2. Allowing communities to decide their own priorities

For the last three financial years, Kwale County has applied what stakeholders describe as an “open cheque” approach to public participation. Instead of presenting residents with pre-selected projects from which to choose, communities are given an opportunity to identify their own development priorities.

Once the priorities are identified, they are compiled and consolidated for validation at the sub-county level. Villages are expected to select representatives in the validation exercise. The representatives are expected to go over the proposed projects with County officials and confirm that the priorities identified are what the communities had proposed. The process also provides an opportunity to consider the proposals in the light of available resources before the priorities are taken forward further through the County planning and budgeting processes.

This has been exemplified by the validation exercises held at the Matuga School of Government on 20 August 2025 and 18 August 2026. Representatives from Kwale's 77 village units met to review consolidated community priorities for the FY 2026/2027 and FY 2027/2028 County Annual Development Plans, respectively. At each stage, Community representatives including, village elders and Persons with Disabilities had an opportunity to review proposed projects for the financial year. Residents were also asked to have the

priorities they identified reflected in the final development plan and, once resources were allocated, to monitor the implementation.

3. **Strengthening the voice of women and vulnerable groups**

The County Government has taken targeted measures aimed at ensuring that women and other vulnerable groups are able to take a more meaningful part in county planning and budgeting. As part of the “Tupo Tusikizwe” Gender Responsive Budgeting initiative, engagement was carried out in 10 wards across three sub-counties, targeting women, youth and PWDs. Consultative forums were convened which included both communities and Members of the County Assembly attracted 807 citizens, 510 women and 297 men, with women making up about 63% of the participants (COVAW, 2025).



Figure 2 A community member shares her views during a public participation forum in Kwale County

The engagement went beyond mobilizing people to attend public participation forums. Participants were equipped with necessary skills to analyse County planning and budget documents, identify priorities and develop lobby papers for engagement with decision-makers. In this way, women and vulnerable groups obtained practical tools enabling them to turn their concerns into proposals

which could be submitted through the formal County planning and budgeting processes.

Working with the Kwale County PWD Network, 30 women-led Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs) jointly developed a lobby paper during preparation of the FY2022/2023 Annual Development Plan (COVAW, 2025). This enabled women with disabilities to have a systematic means of consolidating and presenting their priorities through the County planning process.

Specifically, in Waa-Ng'ombeni Ward, young women who previously had limited involvement in civic processes were trained to understand the County budget cycle and analyse documents such as the Annual Development Plan and County Fiscal Strategy Paper. They then prepared and submitted the Ward's first memorandum drawn up by young women, containing recommendations on the Kwale County Biashara Fund (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2025).

Further, informed community participation has had an impact on the prioritization of establishment of safe houses for survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). As part of the Advancing Grassroots GBV Prevention and Accountability Project, the Hijabi Mentorship Program (THMP) within the Haki Ni Yetu project organized four public participation trainings and four budget advocacy sessions which reached 180 community members from Matuga, Msambweni, Kinango and Lungalunga. The programme equipped

participants with knowledge and skills in the areas of public participation, County planning and budgeting, constitutional rights and the implementation of the Kwale County SGBV Act. The initiative received support from the Haki Ni Yetu project, which was funded by the European Union Delegation to Kenya.

During consequent public participation forums, female community members from Waa-Ng'ombeni, Ukunda and Tiwi wards were among the strongest voices advocating for safe accommodation and psychosocial support for survivors. Through targeted community budget advocacy, civil society groups successfully secured the legal commitment for two safe houses and recovery centres in Kinango and Lungalunga Sub-Counties, as formally captured within explicit fiscal lines on page 162 of the Approved Kwale County Annual Development Plan (ADP) for FY 2026/2027. Even though the advocacy for the safe houses came from the residents of Waa-Ng'ombeni, Ukunda and Tiwi wards, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, the County prioritized the establishment of the safe houses in Kinango and Lungalunga, where access to SGBV response and support services were limited.

4. Extending participation to implementation

Community involvement also continues beyond the identification and validation of priorities. Community Project Management Committees, which are on volunteer basis and members are nominated by their community, participate in monitoring the implementation of County projects. Communities are also informed about projects approved for implementation during the financial year, enabling them to follow whether priorities agreed through public participation progress from County plans and budgets to actual implementation.

Figure 3 Community representatives share their views on inclusive public participation in Kwale County



The County also publishes key planning, budgeting and public participation documents, giving citizens access to information they can use to check whether their priorities have been incorporated into County plans and budgets and follow subsequent implementation. Together with community-level monitoring, this helps extend public participation beyond identifying what should be done to holding the County accountable for what was agreed.

Result/Impact

Evidence from Kwale shows how participation has led to decisions and development results.

- **KES 8 million was set aside for a girl's hostel at Galana Vocational Training Centre.** Through Gender Responsive Budgeting engagements, adolescent girls, young mothers and other community members identified inadequate accommodation as a barrier affecting girls' access to vocational education. Their advocacy contributed to a KES 8 million allocation for construction of a girls' hostel at Galana Vocational Training Centre (COVAW, 2025).
- **Community advocacy resulted in a maternity wing at Mteza Dispensary.** Residents identified improved maternity services as a priority through public participation and advocated for the establishment and equipping of a maternity wing at Mteza Dispensary in Lunga Lunga. County project records subsequently identify the maternity wing as a completed project (Participedia, 2025; Kwale County Government).
- **Young women moved from being participants to formally influencing County processes.** In Waa-Ng'ombeni Ward, young women who previously had limited engagement with County decision-making developed and submitted their first young-women-led memorandum. The memorandum presented recommendations on issues affecting them, including the Kwale County Biashara Fund Bill (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2025).
- **Women with disabilities gained a voice in County planning.** Thirty women-led DPOs jointly developed a lobby paper during preparation of the FY2022/2023 Annual Development Plan, providing an avenue for priorities identified by women with disabilities to enter the County planning process.
- **Women's participation in structured budget deliberations increased.** GRB deliberative forums in 10 wards across three Sub-Counties brought together 807 people, including 510 women and 297 men. Women made up 63% of those who attended. In addition to the number of people who showed up the forums helped participants examine budgets and express what matters most to women and people who need support.
- **The targeted support of the county opened up significant economic and leadership opportunities for women's groups.** The Governor has spearheaded a focused drive to bring informal village chamas and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) into formally registered corporate companies. The County has transformed these groups into legal business entities and trained them on corporate governance enabling women to become corporate directors and compete successfully for official County procurement tenders.

Overall, Kwale County's experience demonstrates that meaningful public participation goes beyond the number of forums held or citizens attending. Its value is seen when communities are able to identify and articulate their priorities, influence planning and budgeting decisions, and follow those priorities through to implementation. Strengthening this connection between citizen voice and County decision-making provides an important lesson for other County Governments seeking to make public participation more meaningful and responsive.

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