

The impact of our approach on pre-existing participation and feedback mechanisms provided by government or other duty bearers in Kwale County

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1) Executive Summary

In January 2018, ahead of the start of an eighteen-month project in Kwale county, Kenya, a paper focusing on *Opportunities and challenges for community participation and feedback in Kwale* was submitted by Integrity Action to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to understand whether the devolution process started in 2013 has brought about any changes in service delivery in the county. In this paper, the author highlighted that:

- Information needed for meaningful participation during and before participation meetings is not systematically available nor accessible/intelligible
- Project Implementation Committees members are not properly trained
- Public officials are not trained to seek and respond to community feedback
- There is no incentive for officials to truly seek feedback on projects
- There is no trust between communities and public officials

As a result, the author highlighted that problem solving activities in the county remain a challenge and public participation is still not inclusive, accessible and fully meaningful.

June 2019 was the end of our first project in Kwale which aimed to contribute to more equitable and better quality services in health, livelihoods, education, water and sanitation by empowering citizens and those that serve them to act with integrity, as well as encouraging institutions to become more accountable. Community Monitors have been trained across the county to constructively engage with institutions and encourage them to become more accountable. As Programme Implementation Manager at Integrity Action, I visited Kwale County between 16 and 22 June 2019 and spoke with a number of key stakeholders, a list of which can be found in Annex I. My discussions focused on whether our approach had contributed to public participation mechanisms in Kwale county and to what extent in order to follow up on the previous paper written by Integrity Action in 2018¹.

Key project findings

My key findings are the following;

- Efforts from community monitors in accessing information and in making it accessible to the rest of their communities has resulted in the availability of more transparent and accessible information in the villages where our approach is being implemented. These positive effects on the accessibility of the information provided by the government has facilitated more meaningful public participation
- Our collaborative approach (especially through Joint Working Groups, where problems found by monitors are highlighted and potential solutions discussed) has

¹ More information about the methodology applied for this research can be found in Annex 2.

provided a platform for building trust. As a result, Integrity Action has observed a high Fix Rate in the villages we work in due to effective problem-solving

- Joint Working Groups have enabled public officials and communities to discuss problems identified during the monitoring of public services. They have been proactively used by public officials to seek and respond to community feedback

It is important to note that the results of my research are by no means empirical nor scientific and are based on an eighteen-month project experience, a one-week visit in Kwale and no more than thirty interviews. It is also important to highlight that all the stakeholders interviewed for this paper have an interest in providing positive information, whether for this funded project to continue (for community monitors and civil society activists), or for maintaining/establishing a positive image of the government when it came to meeting with public officials. Therefore, information provided might be biased and to a greater or lesser extent affected by my position and by the context.

2) Did monitors contribute to improve transparency and access to information?

The devolution process started in 2013 to reduce the distance between citizens and government. Over the last six years, significant improvements have been made for citizens to influence public expenditure and ensure that citizens' needs and demands are addressed. However, I was told by civil society activists that the county faces challenges when trying to engage disadvantaged groups especially in marginalised areas. Despite significant efforts to make information more accessible, the capacity of government officials to facilitate public consultations and disseminate user-friendly information is reportedly low. Through our trainings, we prepared community monitors to obtain such information and use their soft skills to interact with duty bearers. When I visited the communities and projects in Kwale in June 2019, I wanted to firstly understand to what extent community monitors had been able to obtain this information and share it with the most marginalised.

My first visit was in Vanga village, a marginalised village in the South of Kwale near the Tanzania border. Due to the proximity with Tanzania, a lot of the village members are actually not Kenyan and therefore cannot vote, meaning that this village is left behind in term of priority for public services. I had my first meeting with the community under a tree. Villagers explained that information about the date of the public participation forums was usually shared by public officials the day before if at all, making their participation very challenging. Community monitors of Vanga village have played an important role over the last eighteen months in informing communities about these meetings. *“By liaising directly with public officials and seeking information, we obtained information on date/place of those meetings, and we informed the community”* – he said. This enabled some Vanga village community members to prepare and participate for the very first time in those forums.

Community monitors also spent time with communities to present relevant documents and explained them ahead of meetings. They present budgets and priorities. However, this practice has been quite *ad hoc* as it requires skills to understand documentation which is not so accessible. By being prepared, some community members were able to meaningfully participate in these forums which are still perceived by community members as a “box-ticking exercise²”.

On my way back to the hotel, I asked the taxi driver to stop in a village where we do not operate at all and asked people if they ever participated in public participation forums. *“We have to wait for hours and we have to drink our saliva. When the officials arrive, I do not understand what they are talking about”* – said a woman from the village. She is the only one who ever attended such a meeting. *“It is because I am an activist”* – she explained. It looked to me that community monitors identified the need to support communities in understanding and accessing this information, but were not necessarily able to do so.

Community monitors have also acted as a powerful information channel about citizens' rights and public services which communities are supposed to benefit from. I visited eight

² “Voice and Teeth. Opportunities and challenges for community participation and feedback in Kwale. County, Kenya”, Annalisa Renna, Integrity Action, 2018.

villages where community monitors are active. When speaking with villagers, I found that they were well aware of projects that affect their lives. They knew about future projects and current problems. In Vanga village, a community member explained – *“we agreed on the priority being the construction of an ECD³. Then, the primary school and finally the secondary school, but this is to be implemented by the national government, not the county”*.

Monitors regularly organise *barazas*⁴ to inform communities about progress and challenges in the monitoring of the project. They also share information with communities related to Bills of Quantities (BQ) and budgets. During the community meeting I had in Vanga, everyone in the assembly was able to tell me the budget of the ECD and the primary school, and the yearly budget allocated by the county government for their maintenance. The community monitor showed me the official BQ of the ECD. While I was reading it, a woman from the community told me *“we even wrote a letter to the County Government to request additional classrooms”*. I left Vanga village quite impressed by the community’s level of involvement in those projects and wondering how county representatives respond to this attitude. *“They do not systematically appreciate this. Sometimes they also see well informed communities as a threat”* - answered a civil society activist.

3) Who owns the projects and services?

Back at my hotel in Ukunda, where we do not operate, I discussed with the receptionist and told him about my visit to the ECD in the morning. *“Here, in Kenya, the projects do not belong to people, they belong to the officials”* – he said, laughing. I am confused, as after my first day in Kwale, I started to get the feeling that in the communities where our project was active, citizens were slowly gaining ownership over public services. What is citizens’ perception of the public services they are supposed to benefit from?

In Tiwi village, where community monitors do not monitor projects, a civil society activist shared with me – *“communities usually talk about a project as someone’s project. For instance, they will often say ‘the Ward Officer’s ECD’, they do not talk about the ECD as their project, even though they are the direct beneficiaries”*. I felt like communities usually assume that the first beneficiaries of public services are not themselves, but the county representatives responsible for their implementation.

A community monitor in Mwena village confirmed that this feeling was widespread in his community as well. *“This is because sometimes, communities do not benefit from those services at all”*, he said. However, civil society activists told me that by becoming more aware of their rights, communities started engaging with the county authorities at ward and village level on good service delivery on an individual basis and during community meetings.

When I visited and discussed with communities in Kinango village where we have projects being monitored, I found citizens to be very much aware of the problems identified by monitors regarding the construction of the Kinango school for the deaf, and very clear on what they could expect from this project once the work is finalised. One older community member even told me about the community monitor’s visit to the Ministry of Education at

³ Early Childhood Development Centre.

⁴ Community meetings in Swahili.

the county level and to the deputy governor upon realising that benches and seats were missing in the school.

It occurred to me that the more citizens were informed and owned their projects, the more they will hold authorities to account. Community members in Kinango invited ward administrators to community forums so they can hear their reports about the spending of government money on public projects.

4) Do monitors generate trust?

In the past six years, Kenya has continued its progression toward devolution and achieved some success in its efforts to decentralize power and bring the government closer to its citizens. However, after visiting and discussing with some communities in Tiwi village, I found that the lack of trust from communities towards public officials was still quite persistent. Structures are in place for the two entities to meet, and they are widely used. But what exactly happens in those forums when everyone is in the room?

I spoke to a civil society activist who regularly attends meetings and liaises closely with county government representatives. He shared with me that this lack of trust was actually working both ways. *“Public officials know they will have a hard time when it comes to meeting communities. Community members will ask difficult questions and they will complain. Public officials are defensive. Those meetings turn quickly into a collective punitive moment. In the end, everyone leaves the meeting with no answer and a shared feeling of frustration”*. In the past, meetings had been aborted because angry citizens would resort to heckling the leaders and acting in a way that risked raising tensions and anger.

It is true that Kenya has historically struggled to hold public officials accountable and that the expansion of government has increased the number of public servants managing government resources. This can also be perceived by communities as an aggravating factor of potential mismanagement, and therefore, aggravate the lack of trust.

Through this project, community members have started interacting directly with public officials. This interaction takes place firstly through Joint Working Groups (JWGs), which I will expand on in the next paragraph, but also independently from JWGs.



Figure 1 Community monitors in Kinango

“Mama Uchi (community monitor in Kinango) is my ears and eyes on the field. She visits projects and then she calls me to report. I know exactly what is going on and I just need to solve the problems when she calls to report” – said Hanah Ngala, village administrator of Kinango. Hanah Ngala and monitor Mama Uchi have established a solid relationship where they will call each other whenever a problem is identified so that they

can solve it together. Mama Uchi will also inform Hanah of any concerns from the community, so that trust can be maintained.

During a meeting with the Kinango community, I asked them about their relationships with county representatives. A woman from the community said - *"I don't have any problem with our village administrator. She helps Mama Uchi"*. I had the feeling that community monitors had gradually become the bridge between public officials and communities, acting in the interest of their communities but in strong collaboration with public officials.

Was there a risk, however, that community monitors would be seen as representatives of public officials? In most of the interviews I conducted, community monitors stated that having closer relationships with public officials is a way to gain trust and respect from the community. However, it is to be reported that one community monitor experienced this change of status differently. *"Communities can also turn their back when they think you are on politicians' side"* – she explained. In that case, hostility from the community started before she became a monitor. We therefore cannot assume that the lack of trust from the community is due to her proximity with public officials, or to the fact that it was not originally from the village.

On the other hand, public officials shared with me that they found that community members in Kinango were prepared to engage constructively through dialogue and willing to give them a chance to respond to the issues raised.

I felt like as the project had progressed, the community became less adversarial and the leadership more responsive to the community's demands. However, it was not clear to me how this shift had been triggered. I explore this in the next section.

5) Where do citizens and duty bearers collaborate?

On my fourth day in Kwale, I attended a community meeting in Swahili in Mwena village. Members of the PMC (Project Management Committees, which are formed by citizens and civil society activists to monitor each development project in Kwale) were here together with community. With the devolution process, it was decided that PMCs should be formed for any infrastructure project to be built. Live interpretation was difficult but it looked like male community members and PMC members were arguing. The civil society activist explained that *"the community is not happy because the chairperson of the Project Management Committee never attends meetings. The Committee does not monitor the water pan⁵ that has never been working. It has been years. No one knows anything about it"*. I found women quite silent, so I asked them about the project. *"Years ago we were told that we will have water for laundry, cooking and domestic use, but to date, we still have to walk long distances to get water and we don't understand why,"* – they explained. Although they are responsible for collecting water, they were not part of the PMC. The village administrator blamed the PMC members. *"They should be more upfront. They never organise meetings. It is difficult to obtain information and updates"*. Finally, it was agreed to organise new elections for the water pan PMC.

After the end of the meeting, I met with the secretary of the PMC. *"It is difficult to organise meetings as PMC members do not systematically attend. In our PMC, the chairperson and*

⁵ water storage technology: a type of tank which collects and stores rainwater, enabling areas affected by water shortages to ensure water for domestic use and supplement farming during dry spells

the village administrators do not get along. One systematically organises meetings without involving the other so we cannot solve anything. We decided to organise new elections but the chairperson did not inform the community, so he was re-elected. We know nothing about the budget of this project. There is no transparency”.

I had witnessed how much a lack of collaboration between key stakeholders can affect a project. But I had also heard that PMC members were selected by communities and supposed to be beneficiaries themselves. In that case, why did they not act together to solve problems? *“PMCs are different depending on projects. Some are elected democratically. Members are chosen by communities. In other instances, PMC members are just picked by duty bearers”* – explained a civil society activist in Chipanghani village.

One question raised by our approach concerns the Joint Working Group, which is set up as a forum for discussing and solving problems. In some locations these are established as a *new* forum, but in others it makes more sense to work with an existing meeting. Interestingly, in this project we saw both approaches used. One community monitor told me, *“There is a functioning PMC here, so for this project we used it and we just added the community monitors in it. With the PMC members, we attended public participation forums and agreed on priorities. First an ECD and then a primary school. When I visit the contractor, I introduce myself as a PMC member”*. Another one tells me, *“In my case the PMC was not even active. It was not transparent and there were no meetings, so we established a Joint Working Group. Members are two community monitors and the village administrator”*. Through this JWG, five out of five problems identified by community monitors were solved⁶. Community monitors shared with me that before this experience, they had never interacted with public officials. I went back to Kinango and met with JWG members of an ECD project. They explained that in their case, they felt our collaborative approach had a positive impact on the relationships between communities and public officials.

Whether those groups were PMCs with added community monitors or brand new JWGs, it occurred to me that by working collaboratively and achieving results, trust was re-established between the Kinango communities and village administrators. This was supported by findings from a survey we carried out with monitors before and after the project, which looked at (among other things) monitors’ confidence that the local authorities would do what they can to solve problems. There was a significant increase in this level of confidence. My observations and interviews indicate that PMCs/JWGs have slowly shifted towards being a constructive rather than a punitive environment for public officials. This has resulted in stronger collaboration between the different stakeholders to identify, mitigate and solve problems.

Public officials have used JWGs and proactively organised meetings to obtain information from community monitors on the project they were monitoring. It is also the key structure where documentation was provided to monitors. The Village Administrators and Sub-County Administrators assisted monitors in obtaining necessary documents, especially Bills of Quantities (BQs). The officers at the National Constituency Development Fund offices also provided monitors with the list of all projects and budgets in Kwale County.

⁶ You can visit this project on developmentcheck [here](#).

In addition, JWG meetings were being used as feedback meetings by government officials. County government officials used this forum to share the progress of the different projects with communities and seek feedback from communities.

6) Conclusion and Recommendation

Ultimately, the successful decentralization of power in Kenya depends on the government's ability to rebuild public trust in the institutions that have routinely let citizens down. However, providing spaces and opportunities for communities to proactively seek information and engage in public participation have generated positive outcomes and encouraged public officials to engage more systematically with communities. There seems to have been some increase in the level of trust on both sides.

The link between our approach and the meaningful participation of the community in public participation forums is less obvious. This is because monitoring those effects was not part of our project. Involvement of community monitors in this area was unexpected and led by monitors. Civil society activists stated that there is a strong appetite from monitors to engage with communities on participation. I also noted during interviews that all of the community monitors actively participate in those forums. We believe that more efforts could be dedicated to exploring how monitoring can be applied to Kenya's own participation mechanisms, including public participation forums. For example, can citizen monitors hold local government to account on its commitments to involve citizens in annual budgeting?

It is to be flagged that in my interviews with public officials, [DevelopmentCheck](#) was not mentioned very much. When I enquired about the tool, I came to realise that most of the interviewees had never heard of it. Interestingly, when describing and showing them the tech tool, they were all thrilled at the idea of receiving feedback and information directly in their office.

Therefore, Integrity Action recommends that in next project;

- *Community monitors are more systematically encouraged to mobilise communities to attend public participation forums or annual development meetings*
- *Community monitors are trained on accessing and understanding relevant documentation in preparation of public participation forums or annual development meetings*
- *Community monitors monitor public participation meetings to make sure they are inclusive, accessible and meaningful*
- *DevelopmentCheck is simplified and better promoted especially among government officials*

Integrity Action also recommends specific consideration of the fact that community monitors are volunteers, and therefore, not remunerated for their work. Extending their responsibilities should come with careful consideration about accommodating their needs to make volunteering possible.

ANNEX 1 List of interviews held between 16th and 22nd June 2019 in Kwale County

- Members of KWEA (Kwale Welfare and Education Association), a community based organization formed by young university graduates from Kwale County, based in Kwale town.
- Kinango Village Administrator, Madam Hanah Ngala
- Dumbule village administrator, Mister Abdallah Nzala
- County representative at the Ward level in Tiwi, Mister Hassman Hamisi
- Staff of KCNRN (Kwale County Natural Resources Network (KCNRN), a Civil Society Network (CSO) in Kwale County, based in Ukunda.
- Members and staff of KCYG (Kwale Youth and Governance Consortium) a community based membership organisation based in Ukunda.
- Staff of Kenya Water and Sanitation Civil Society Network in Ukunda
- Chief and community members of Vanga, a village in Lunga Lunga Constituency, Kwale County.
- Community members of villages in Ukunda, Lunga Lunga and Kinango Constituency, Kwale County.
- Community members of Kinango constituency, Kwale County
- Community monitors in Kinango, Lunga Lunga and Ukunda Constituency
- Representatives of Project Management Committees in Kinango, Lunga Lunga and Ukunda Constituency, Kwale County

Annex 2 – Methodology

I met with communities, public officials, duty bearers and community monitors. I used different methods to collect information. When meeting communities, I held focus group discussions, mainly engaging with community members in an informal setting in the village rather than in official premises in order to make everyone feels more comfortable. I engaged with everyone individually during village visits to hear everyone's voice, so that I could collect all the different views, even the views of the shyest individuals. However, community members I met with rarely spoke English. Therefore, I relied on interpretation by civil society activists. This might have affected

the information collected, as there is an interest from CSOs to provide positive information on a project they receive funding/support for. When meeting community monitors, I held focus groups and individual interviews. In most cases there was no need for interpretation, as the majority of community monitors I spoke to were able to communicate with me in English. I usually visited the projects they were monitoring during the interview to facilitate the conversation and conducted semi-structured interviews.

When meeting public officials/duty bearers, I held exclusively individual and usually fairly brief meetings. I had the opportunity to meet county representatives at a school inauguration and to observe them interacting with communities, which also provided me with important information.