

## **Communication Channels and Community Engagement: A Study of the Budgeting Process in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya**

By

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between communication channels and community engagement within the budgeting process of Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. The study examined diverse communication platforms and their impact on citizen participation. The study sought to understand how information flow shapes community involvement in resource allocation decisions. The research hypothesized that robust and accessible communication channels empower residents to actively participate in the budgeting process, enhancing transparency, accountability, and public expenditure effectiveness. Drawing from existing literature on community engagement and communication channels, the study identifies gaps in knowledge regarding the specific impact of communication channels on community engagement in budgeting, particularly in developing country contexts. The research contributes to the understanding of how communication strategies influence community participation and inform the development of evidence-based recommendations for enhancing citizen engagement in the budgeting process. This study employed a descriptive survey design. Data was collected from n=172 respondents through questionnaires and interviews. Key variables included communication channels, community feedback, guided participation, and program decisions. The study found a positive correlation between these factors and budgeting effectiveness. Robust communication, community feedback, guided participation, and community-driven programs were identified as crucial for successful budgeting. The research recommends strengthening communication channels, capacity building, and leadership roles to enhance community engagement in the budgeting process.

**Key Words:** Kenya, Budgeting process, Communication channels, Community engagement, Public participation & Elgeyo Marakwet County

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### **Introduction**

Community engagement is a dynamic process that involves the active participation of community members in identifying, prioritizing, and addressing issues affecting their well-being according to Stillman *et al.* (2009). It goes beyond mere consultation, emphasizing collaboration, empowerment, and shared ownership of solutions. Effective community engagement fosters trust, builds social capital, and strengthens the capacity of communities to address their challenges (Chaskin, 2001). Through involving community members in decision-making processes, organizations can enhance program relevance, sustainability, and impact (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Crucially, community engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It requires tailoring strategies to specific community contexts, considering factors such as culture, history, and power dynamics (Fine, Weis & Powell, 2000). Building strong relationships based on mutual respect, transparency, and accountability is essential for successful community engagement initiatives. In prioritizing the voices and needs of community members, organizations can create more equitable and inclusive communities according to Lee-Binz and Payne (2006).

Communication channels are the pathways through which information is transmitted between individuals or groups (McLean & VanSlyke, 2003). These channels can be verbal, nonverbal, written, or electronic, each with its own strengths and limitations. The choice of channel significantly impacts the effectiveness of communication, as it influences factors such as message clarity, speed, and reach (Daft, 2016). For instance, face-to-face communication allows for immediate feedback and nonverbal cues, while email may be more efficient for disseminating information to a large audience.

Understanding the characteristics and capabilities of different channels is crucial for selecting the most appropriate medium for a given communication purpose. The digital age has expanded the range of communication channels available, with technology facilitating both synchronous and asynchronous interactions (Trevino & Nelson, 2007). Social media platforms, instant messaging, and video conferencing have transformed how we connect and exchange information. However, the proliferation of channels can also lead to information overload and communication breakdowns. Therefore, it is essential to carefully consider the target audience, message content, and desired outcome when selecting communication channels to ensure effective and efficient information sharing.

Effective communication is paramount in fostering meaningful community engagement, particularly in the complex realm of public budgeting (Rogers, 2003). This study focused on the intricate relationship between communication channels and community engagement within the budgeting process of Elgeyo Marakwet County, and examined the diverse communication platforms employed by the county government and their impact on citizen participation, hence sought to understand how information flow shapes community involvement in resource allocation decisions. It is hypothesized that robust and accessible communication channels are instrumental in empowering residents to actively participate in the budgeting process, thereby enhancing transparency, accountability, and the overall effectiveness of public expenditure. This contributes to the existing body of knowledge on

participatory budgeting by providing insights into the role of communication channels in facilitating or hindering community engagement in a Kenyan context, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of communication strategies, and informs the development of evidence-based recommendations for improving communication practices and enhancing citizen participation in the budgeting process of Elgeyo Marakwet County.

### **Assumptions**

Residents of Elgeyo Marakwet County have genuine interest in participating in the budgeting process and willing to engage if provided with adequate and accessible information through appropriate communication channels.

### **Statement of Problem**

The effective utilization of communication channels to foster robust community engagement in the budgeting process is a critical challenge facing many governments, including Elgeyo Marakwet County. While there is a growing recognition of the importance of public participation in resource allocation decisions, existing research and practices often fall short of achieving meaningful citizen involvement. Previous studies have explored the concept of community engagement and identified various communication channels as potential avenues for public participation (Rogers, 2003). However, empirical evidence on the specific impact of different communication channels on community engagement in the budgeting context, particularly in developing countries like Kenya, remains limited. Moreover, there is a dearth of research on the challenges and opportunities associated with leveraging technology-mediated communication channels to enhance citizen participation in the budgeting process of counties in Kenya. While some counties have made efforts to utilize social media and other digital platforms, the effectiveness of these channels in reaching and engaging a diverse population remains unclear. Additionally, the extent to which traditional communication methods, such as public meetings and community forums, continue to be relevant in the digital age requires further investigation.

### **Objective**

To examine the relationship between communication channels and the level of community engagement in the budgeting process of Elgeyo Marakwet County.

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### **Community Engagement and Participatory Budgeting**

Community engagement is an intricate process involving citizens in decision-making processes that affect their lives (Scholte, 2020). It transcends mere consultation, emphasizing collaboration, empowerment, and shared ownership of solutions (Narayan, 2005). While there is a growing recognition of its importance, the operationalization of community engagement remains complex and context-specific (Pollack, Crook & Gibbons, 2019). A gap exists in understanding the nuances of community engagement in different cultural and socio-economic settings, particularly in developing countries. Moreover, there is a need for more rigorous research on the long-term impacts of community engagement initiatives on community outcomes.

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process that empowers citizens to participate in decisions about how public budgets are allocated (Fung & Wright, 2003). It is seen as a powerful tool for enhancing community engagement and promoting accountability

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(Avramenko & Coelho, 2020). However, the implementation of PB faces several challenges, including issues of representation, power dynamics, and sustainability (Cabannes, 2018). There is a need for further research on how to ensure equitable participation in PB processes, particularly among marginalized groups. Additionally, more studies are required to assess the impact of PB on public service delivery and citizen satisfaction (Avramenko & Coelho, 2020).

Several factors influence the success of community engagement in budgeting, including trust, communication, leadership, and institutional capacity (Scholte, 2020). While research has identified these factors as important, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how they interact with each other to shape community engagement outcomes. Furthermore, the role of technology in facilitating or hindering community engagement in budgeting remains under-explored (Avramenko & Coelho, 2020). Understanding how to effectively leverage digital platforms to enhance citizen participation is crucial for the future of participatory governance.

Implementing community engagement initiatives presents various challenges, such as time constraints, resource limitations, and competing priorities (Pollack, Crook & Gibbons, 2019). Despite these challenges, there are also significant opportunities to create more inclusive and responsive governance systems through community engagement. Research is needed to identify innovative approaches to overcome barriers and maximize the benefits of community involvement. Additionally, there is a growing need for capacity-building initiatives to support communities and government agencies in effectively engaging with each other (Narayan, 2005).

### **Communication Channels and Community Engagement**

Community engagement involves citizens in decision-making processes (Schulte & Urwin, 2019). It is a cornerstone of democratic governance, promoting social inclusion, and enhancing service delivery (Floris, 2018). While research has extensively explored the theoretical foundations of community engagement, its operationalization, particularly in relation to budgeting processes, remains a complex challenge. A significant gap exists in understanding the specific mechanisms through which community engagement can be effectively integrated into public financial management systems, especially in developing countries.

Effective communication is a prerequisite for successful community engagement (D'Auria, 2018). A variety of channels, including face-to-face meetings, social media, and traditional media, have been employed to reach out to citizens. However, the optimal mix of channels for different community contexts and the effectiveness of these channels in promoting meaningful participation remain underexplored. Existing research often focuses on the potential of communication channels rather than their actual impact on citizen behavior and outcomes. Consequently, there is a need for more empirical studies that assess the causal relationships between communication channels and community engagement levels.

Numerous factors influence the success of community engagement initiatives, including trust, power dynamics, and resource availability according to Schulte and Urwin (2019). While research has identified several challenges, such as lack of capacity, time constraints, and competing priorities, there is a paucity of studies that examine how these challenges interact with communication channels. Understanding how communication strategies can mitigate these challenges is crucial for enhancing community engagement. Furthermore, the role of technology in facilitating or hindering community engagement

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requires further investigation. While studies have explored the potential of digital platforms, there is a limited understanding of how these platforms can be effectively integrated into broader communication strategies.

Evaluating the impact of community engagement is essential for demonstrating its value and informing future efforts (Floris, 2018). While various indicators have been proposed, there is no consensus on the most appropriate metrics for assessing the outcomes of community engagement initiatives. Moreover, the long-term effects of community engagement on governance, service delivery, and social cohesion are often overlooked. Developing robust evaluation frameworks that capture the multiple dimensions of community engagement is a critical area for future research.

### **Community Engagement in Budgeting: Case Studies and Best Practices**

Community engagement in budgeting has gained traction globally as a means to enhance transparency, accountability, and service delivery (Alcock, 2017). Studies from developed countries have demonstrated the potential of PB to empower citizens and improve public resource allocation (Fung, 2006). However, the applicability of these models to developing country contexts, such as Kenya, remains a subject of inquiry. While there is a growing body of literature on PB in Latin America and Africa, research specifically focusing on Kenyan counties is limited.

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on devolution in Kenya, which has devolved significant fiscal powers to county governments. This has created opportunities for enhancing community participation in budgeting. Studies by organizations like the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) and the Kenya Institute of Public Policy and Research (KIPPRA) have highlighted the potential of community engagement in improving service delivery at the county level (Otiso & Odhiambo, 2018). However, these studies often provide a macro-level overview of the situation, with limited in-depth analysis of specific county-level experiences.

A few case studies have emerged on community engagement in budgeting in specific Kenyan counties. These studies have provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of implementing PB at the local level. For instance, research on the experiences of Nairobi and Kisumu counties has shown that factors such as political leadership, civil society capacity, and institutional arrangements play crucial roles in the success of community engagement initiatives (Ouma, 2016). However, the number of such case studies remains limited, and there is a need for more in-depth and comparative analysis across different counties.

While there is a growing body of knowledge on community engagement in budgeting, the identification of best practices and lessons learned for Kenyan counties is still in its early stages. Studies have highlighted the importance of building trust between citizens and government, capacity building for community representatives, and effective communication strategies (World Bank, 2019). However, there is a need for more systematic analysis of successful community engagement initiatives to distill key principles and transferable practices. Additionally, the long-term impacts of community engagement on service delivery and governance outcomes require further investigation.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive survey design to investigate the impact of community involvement on the budgeting process in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. This design

allowed for the collection of data on various aspects of community engagement and its relationship to budgeting. By utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The study focused on identifying and measuring the key variables influencing community involvement in the budgeting process. Independent variables included communication channels, community feedback, guided community participation, and program decisions by the community. The dependent variable was the budgeting process itself, encompassing planning, forecasting, implementation, monitoring, and control. Data was collected through questionnaires and interviews to gather both quantitative and qualitative information from a sample of 172 respondents, including budgeting staff, community representatives, and government officials.

Elgeyo Marakwet County served as the study location due to its commitment to community involvement in the budgeting process. The county's budgetary information provided valuable context for the research. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure representation of different stakeholder groups, followed by proportionate simple random sampling to select respondents within each stratum. To enhance the study's rigor, a pilot test was conducted in Uasin Gishu County to refine research instruments. Validity and reliability were assessed through expert review and Cronbach's alpha coefficient, respectively. Ethical considerations were adhered to by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and obtaining necessary permissions. Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data collected through questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Qualitative data from interviews were thematically analyzed to identify patterns and trends.

### **Presentation and Discussion of Findings**

The study examined the influence of communication channels, community feedback, guided community participation, and program decisions by the community on the budgeting process in Elgeyo Marakwet County. The findings indicate a generally positive relationship between these factors and the effectiveness of the budgeting process. The results highlight the significance of robust communication channels in promoting community participation, revealing that feedback loops, capacity building, community interaction, and government-to-community feedback are essential for boosting engagement. This aligns with existing literature that highlights how effective communication is pivotal in fostering participatory governance, suggesting that strengthening these channels can enhance community involvement and contribute to more inclusive decision-making processes.

The study highlights the critical role of community feedback in shaping the budgeting process, emphasizing that effective feedback mechanisms, capacity building, and opportunities for direct interaction are highly valued by respondents. This suggests that actively incorporating community input is not only beneficial but essential for creating budgets that reflect and address citizens' priorities and needs. By integrating feedback loops, governments can ensure that budgetary decisions are more responsive and aligned with the actual requirements of the community, thereby enhancing transparency, accountability, and overall public satisfaction with the budgeting process.

Guided community participation was identified as a crucial element shaping the budgeting process, with respondents highlighting the positive impact of government guidance, structured community meetings, and the active role of local leaders in prioritizing projects. This approach fosters a more organized and inclusive decision-making process by ensuring that community input is systematically integrated into budgeting decisions. Such

structured involvement not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of budgetary allocations but also empowers community members by giving them a tangible role in determining local priorities. This emphasizes the value of adopting structured methods to involve communities in governance, ensuring that their voices are heard and considered in shaping outcomes that directly affect them.

The study highlighted that community commitment, active involvement in program design, and a focus on innovation are pivotal for achieving successful budgeting outcomes. When communities are empowered to take ownership of the budgeting process, they are more likely to develop tailored and effective solutions that reflect their unique needs and priorities. This participatory approach not only enhances the relevance and sustainability of the programs but also fosters a sense of accountability and investment among community members, ultimately leading to more impactful and enduring results. Through integrating community perspectives and leveraging their insights, budgeting processes can become more responsive and adaptable, addressing local challenges more effectively.

The analysis of the budgeting process revealed a broadly favorable view of the county government's approach to budgeting, suggesting that the current methods are generally effective and well-regarded. However, it also highlighted specific areas where enhancements could be made, notably the need to extend the duration allocated for budget scrutiny by the county assembly. This extension would allow for a more thorough examination of budget proposals, potentially leading to more informed decision-making and greater transparency. Addressing these areas for improvement could strengthen the overall budgeting process and foster greater trust and accountability in financial management practices.

The findings of this study have several implications for policymakers and practitioners. First, there is a need to invest in strengthening communication channels and platforms to facilitate ongoing dialogue between the government and the community. Second, capacity building initiatives should be prioritized to empower community members to participate effectively in the budgeting process. Third, the role of leadership in guiding community engagement should be emphasized. Finally, creating opportunities for community involvement in program design and implementation is essential for achieving desired outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

The study's findings conclude, drawing upon the pivotal role of community engagement in shaping effective budgeting processes. In the examination of the influence of communication channels, community feedback, guided participation, and program decision-making, the study revealed that robust community involvement is essential for achieving desired budgetary outcomes. Effective communication channels, including feedback loops, capacity building, and community interaction, emerged as key drivers of community participation. Moreover, guided participation through government leadership and structured community meetings significantly enhanced the budgeting process. Empowering communities to take ownership of program design and decision-making was also found to be crucial for achieving impactful and sustainable results.

## **Recommendations**

The study recommends on the need for policymakers to prioritize investments in strengthening communication channels and platforms to facilitate ongoing dialogue between the government and the community. Capacity building initiatives should be implemented to

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equip community members with the necessary skills to participate effectively in the budgeting process. Additionally, leadership should play a proactive role in guiding and facilitating community engagement. By creating opportunities for community involvement in program design and implementation, governments can harness the collective wisdom of citizens to address local challenges and improve service delivery.



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