

# Information Disclosure and Implementation of County Public Communication Framework in Nakuru County, Kenya

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## **ABSTRACT**

The need for proactive disclosure of information among public entities has been at the core of democracies for long. This has always seen governments pass policies detailing different ways that public bodies should release information. In Kenya, one of those policies is the public communication framework entailed in section nine of the County Governments Act (2012). However, despite the existence of the framework, the vision of proactive disclosure of information at the county level is not being realized, partly due to the way the framework is being interpreted and implemented. This study looked at how the County Government of Nakuru, Kenya, has implemented the framework. Results showed that the County has partially implemented the framework. The study recommends the establishment of a public communication office, the need for the County to use the media more for grassroots communication and the acceleration of the inclusion of marginalized persons in county dialogues.

**Key Words:** Access to Information, Accountability, Public Participation, Transparency

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The need for proactive disclosure of information among public entities has been at the core of democracies for long. James Madison, the principal author of the first amendment to the American Constitution, wrote in 1822 that it was far much better to have popular information instead of a popular government (Kennedy & Moen, 2007) while America's third President, Thomas Jefferson, once observed that if he were to be given the liberty to choose between a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, he would pick the latter. Writing about the same, John Milton, an English Poet, put it that the right to access information and the freedom of expression according to one's free will was the most important liberty in life (Hargreaves, 2005). Based on the trust that citizens place in holders of public offices, such persons, and the entities they represent, hold public information merely as custodians and are thus required to release it to the public even in the absence of a request (Limpitlaw, 2016; Katiba Institute, 2018).

Governments ought to establish various mechanisms in order to achieve the goal of proactive disclosure. The county public communication framework as entailed in part nine of the County Governments Act (2012) is one the policies in Kenya on public communication. It places a responsibility on county governments in ensuring that they establish mechanisms for public communication including setting up a specific office for this particular purpose. However, despite the existence of the framework, there are gaps in accessing information among devolved governments. This gap starts at the national government level where public communication has been reported to be disjointed (Kenya Gazette, 2019). As if picking from this, county governments are poorly interpreting and implementing the county public communication framework just like it is happening with policies on the overall devolved system of governance. But earlier studies (see Opiyo, 2017; World Bank, 2015; Muriu, 2013; World Bank, 2013; IEA, 2010) have only looked at public communication from the wider angle of devolution. Thus, the process of how county governments are specifically interpreting and implementing the county communication framework is still a problem that has not received appropriate attention from scholars. This study sought to establish how use of mass media, use of digital media, and use of public meetings determines implementation of the county public communication framework in Nakuru County and how that use impacts on proactive disclosure of information.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Literature review on public communication and implementation of public communication framework

**2.1.1 Public communication:** Public communication is the communication that makes possible the formation of publics; it is communication in public affairs (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008), where public affairs in this case can be seen as a process of management that enables corporate organizations to influence public policy, policy makers and stakeholders who are in essence critical players in the attainment of organizational goals (Heath, 2013). Liu, Horsley and Yang (2012), interchange the term with government communication asking whether it matters, while Sanders, Crespo and Holtz-Bacha (2011) add the word 'sector' to narrow down the term to 'public sector communication'.

Other scholars see it as political communication saying communication is political if it is about the exchange of messages among political actors or basically purposeful communication about politics

(Donsbach, 2008; McNair, 2011). Rosillo-López (2017) says this kind of communication should not only include written and verbal communication, but also symbolic acts of communication. She says it is related to the concept of the public sphere where actors should make ‘public’ their views, opinions, policies, and goals, to their fellow citizens.

There are thus several ways in which a government can implement a public communication framework: use of mass media; use of social media; use of ICT hubs; use of websites; use of public meetings; use of billboards; use of public announcements; use of emails; use of (bulk) text messages etc. This study summarizes these into three broad categories of: mass media; digital media; and public meetings. As will be seen, these three mechanisms allow for public deliberation – the process that builds a perfect public sphere and a healthy democracy.

**2.1.2 Implementation of Public Communication Framework:** Implementation is the process of enacting government policies by relevant agencies (Birkland, 2015). It involves making decisions with a view of satisfying certain programmatic goals within a larger problem (Pandel, 2009). Public communication frameworks/policies aim to create what Limpitlaw (2016) refers to as “an information society” where informed members (of the society), it is believed, make informed choices. Ultimately, as studies have shown, the successful implementation of public communication frameworks (largely, freedom of information laws) leads to an expanded democratic space with a number of indicators, key among them: transparency, accountability, and effective public participation.

According to Grimmelikhuisen et al., (2013), there is a direct connection between freedom of information laws and government transparency. This is in the way information is collected and disseminated within a given government. Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt, (2012) while also using the term ‘open government’ say, transparency is in itself the act of making open, government information. Kluvers and Tippett, (2010) see a link between implementation of public communication frameworks and government accountability saying accountability involves the rendering of an account by an agent (the government and its officials) to the principal (the citizens and watchdog institutions). It is this exercise of rendering an account that requires the provision of information. Hazell, Worthy, and Glover (2010) also connect accountability to proactive disclosure of information. However, they note, it may not be an outright mechanism for accountability in itself but stress that information is a key ingredient for any form and channel of accountability. Public communication frameworks also build democracy by providing for legal requirements that bring people together to deliberate (Msibi & Penzhorn, 2010). For local participation to be enhanced, governments need to share information on policy matters (World Bank, 2013). Thus, the degree to which a government communicates with its citizens can be looked at in terms of the capacity of citizens to take part in deliberative processes.

There are other outcomes for the implementation of public communication frameworks such as reduction of corruption and redress for harm (Darch & Underwood, 2010). But looked at keenly they can be collapsed under the three benefits of transparency, accountability and participation which in this study are looked at from the perspective of an expanded democratic space. There is no democracy if citizens: are not able to talk to one another; have no access to information; and have

no democratic spaces for public deliberation (Dahlgren, 2005). A successful democracy depends on a public that is well informed about government actions (Fairbanks, Plowman & Rawlins, 2007; Erkkilä, 2012).

## **2.2 Literature review on Mechanisms for Implementation of Public Communication Framework**

**2.2.1 Mass Media:** The mass media are known to play the following roles: to entertain, to inform, and to educate. They also play the role of agenda setting. But as Wessler and Schultz (2007) put it, their most important role in a democratic public sphere is their capacity to facilitate a public deliberation – the collective argumentative process through which communities turn their problems into solutions. A public sphere, says Dahlgren (2005), is an accumulation of communicative spaces and the mass media serve as the communicative links between citizens and power holders in society. Media use maintains democracy by boosting dimensions of democratic citizenship such as political knowledge, participation and socialization into political norms and ideals (Nisbet, 2008). Different media genres (news and commentaries, talk shows, discussion programs and interviews) help to achieve this to various ends (Wessler & Schultz, 2007).

McNair (2002) notes thus, any democracy-related study in contemporary conditions is also a study of not just how the media interpret issues and influence the political process, but also about how they facilitate the efforts of politicians to persuade their electorates of the correctness of their policies and programmes. Li (2017) has observed that this power to facilitate public deliberation partly lies in the ability of media discourses to negotiate the shifting of the global order at different fronts since the media provides a space for shared experience and wider conversations. Zhang (2011) makes a similar argument saying world leaders are less using coercion as they are soft power – to rule – and the media have become important tools (for them) for achieving that by playing the following policy roles: a source of information for policy makers; a channel of communication for decision makers within different branches of the government; and provision of information for agenda setting.

Wessler and Schultz (2007) argue for the use of mass media for political deliberation. They say, in the print media this happens in dimensions such as quotations of arguments by various social actors in the news, question and answer sequences, op-ed pieces, guest commentary as well as letters to the editor. For radio and television, they take a key interest in political talk shows saying, they allow for immediate challenges and responses that help audiences gain more insights into the different issues being discussed. Further, use of different mass media platforms could have different implications for democracy and the public sphere with radio and television being associated with high levels of political knowledge as compared to newspapers (Nisbet, 2008). Again, the more a mass media outlet is closer to the people, the more it is preferred by residents and the more it achieves better results on participatory communication (Msibi and Penzhorn, 2010).

From a mass media perspective, much of public communication is therefore about how much space or airtime a public institution is able to be accorded for the articulation of its issues compared to other competing issues. While space and airtime can be paid for in terms of advertisement, an institution can compete for it through effective media relations – that is, by working closely with

journalists to get coverage and hence have its agenda promoted. This way, the media helps an institution in achieving soft power since as has been noted, ultimately, success is not just about who is more powerful in terms of the strength of their army but whose story is more powerful (Zhang, 2011); what has been referred to as the process of the “battle for hearts and minds (Taylor, 2017). Government institutions have keep finding reasons to engage the media, making media relations a key public relations function. They do this because media coverage can help them gain credibility and good reputation among target audiences (Theaker, 2012; Mackenzie, 2007).

**2.2.2 Digital Media:** When the term ‘digital media’ is used, it mostly connotes the use of communication technology to achieve different goals or the use of technologically created communicative spaces that are electronic and interactive. The term has also been used to refer to technology-savvy persons with the term ‘digital natives’ being used to refer to such kind of persons (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). Often, the term is used interchangeably with that of social media to refer to a number of tools that permit the interaction of users directly within a computer mediated environment (Lampe, et. al., 2011). This way, digital media can be seen broadly as media that facilitate online communication, networking and or collaboration (Ruso, et. al., 2008). Edwards, et. al., (2013) note that these media are largely made possible by a shift from the informational web (Web 1.0) to interactional web (Web 2.0). Thus, apart from being called new media, they are also called Web 2.0 and many other definitions that describe their sociability (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

A number of digital media tools are being used in the public sector for communication. They include: Websites, Facebook, Microblogging sites such Twitter, Web Logs (Blogs), You Tube and Flickr (Edwards et al., 2013) and most recently, WhatsApp. All these provide different opportunities for participation, collaboration and transparency (Mergel, 2013). Digital media possess a big potential for technology connectedness as they provide instantaneous communication opportunities with publics. A study by Lampe et al., (2011) found that policy makers use digital media to micro-broadcast news about their agencies, to crowd source feedback about policy and to mine opinions from stakeholders. Digital media are also very useful in the public sector as tools that can be easily used to communicate disasters especially when other mainstream forms of communication fail or for reaching publics that are always and easily excluded from public deliberation such as the youth (Hiltz et al., 2013; Poell & Borra, 2012; Helsper & Eynon, 2010).

While studies confirm that digital media are being used for public communication, they also show that they are being misused or underused. A study focusing on the content of government websites crucial for citizen engagement in Nepal by Parajuli, (2007) found out that 15% of government ministries did not have dedicated websites that could provide information that could be downloaded offline. Graham and Avery (2013) also found out that while digital media tools were important in building relations between government and its stakeholders, they were being underutilized in local municipalities in America. A study conducted in Australia by MacNamara and Kenning (2011) on trends in social media use in Australian political communication found out that while politicians were using digital media for sharing e-electioneering content, they were not inviting dialogue through their posts. These studies point to a lack of optimization of digital media as tools of government-citizen relationships despite their potential. Digital tools have also been used for

political mobilization, within the region. It will be noted that the civil actions that saw several governments in the Arab countries get toppled; what is referred to as the ‘Arab Spring’, were associated with the use of digital media. In Kenya, digital media are also being used for political communication and it has now become a trend for every politician to have a Website; Facebook page; Twitter handle; or a WhatsApp page with some kind of conversations with their constituents. A study by Omanga (2019) focusing on the digital conversations of one political conscious WhatsApp group in Nakuru – the Nakuru Analysts – found out that digital media enable publics to enhance their ‘political personhood’ even moving their online conversations to offline political actions.

**2.2.3 Public Meetings:** A public meeting is an organized, social gathering of three or more people that is open to anyone to attend. It serves several purposes including provision and acquisition of information; discussion of issues; review of projects; evaluation of options; development of recommendations; and making of decisions; among other purposes (McComas, Besley & Trumbo, 2006). Depending on their contexts, public meetings can be called public hearings (Piotrowski & Borry, 2010), or even town meetings (Tracy & Durfy, 2007). Public meetings can either be informative – held to share information to the audiences, or consultative – held to gather citizens’ input as well as pass information. Piotrowski and Borry (2010) say that public meetings provide a mechanism for keeping the government in check and for achieving accountability and transparency. But as they found out there are eight things that must happen for such results to be realized, the key among them: timely communication of notices and agendas of forthcoming meetings; the timely publishing and communication of minutes of previous meetings; and the selection of meeting venues that promote equity and representation. Meeting venues they say, should be easily accessible to all persons including persons with disabilities.

This idea is supported in a study on why citizens do or do not attend public meetings by McComas, Besley & Trumbo (2006). The study suggests that people fail to attend meetings when they realize that their opportunity to be heard is minimal. McComas, Besley, and Black (2010) warn against what they see as ritualistic tendencies in public meetings – the repeating of the same rules until meetings end up being monologues. They say it should not always be assumed that meetings will always achieve consensus. This may be as a result of the poor execution of processes which may kill the larger group identity either by carving out an individual identity or a sub group identity. They emphasize that group solidarity and formation of consensus should be a key indicator of a successful public meeting.

Regionally and locally, public meetings have also been studied and or identified as necessary tools for the development of democracy. In their study of the South African local government, Msibi and Penzhorn (2010) see meetings as interpersonal, intimate, and localized communication channels that advance horizontal (as well as vertical) processes of sharing information. In Kenya public meetings are provided for in the law as public participation fora on which all community decisions should be based. That way they have majorly been looked at under devolution with most of the studies citing them as key ingredients to the efficiency of decentralized units. These studies use public participation interchangeably with social accountability and civic engagement to just show how much importance is placed on public meetings in achieving transparency and accountability.

The studies caution against ritualistic tendencies such as ‘elite capture’ which may hinder equity and thus affecting effective public deliberation in the meetings (IEA, 2010; Muriu, 2013; World Bank, 2015; Opiyo, 2017).

## **2. 3 Theoretical Framework**

This study employed two theories: the framing theory and the public sphere theory.

**2.3.1 Framing Theory:** Frames are ways of selecting, organizing and presenting discourse. They provide a way of understanding events or issues (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2016). Weaver (2007) says that frames help us to contextualize issues through selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration. Because of this, frames can also be seen as news angles or themes especially when looked at within the context of news writing (McQuail, 2010). Framing is thus the process through which we contextualize issues to get meaning, and framing theory, aims at identifying schemes through which individuals see the world (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Framing theory is useful in studying the biases with which different communicators approach different issues in their communication processes. In this study, the theory was used to analyze how the County Government of Nakuru crafts its messages for its different publics and how such framing influences the implementation of public communication framework.

**2.3.2 Public Sphere Theory:** The debate about the public sphere is always connected to the debate about the general availability of opportunities within a democracy to build public opinion – including dissenting opinion – and all the rights and freedoms among citizens that prove the existence of a transparent and accountable government. Indeed, a link exists between theories of the public sphere and democratic theory (Ferree et. al., 2002) since the public sphere is itself a space connecting civil society and the state, in which citizens can debate freely, issues of common concern (Brady, 2004; Haas, 2006). For there to be a public sphere there ought to be the opportunity among citizens to formulate public opinion, the sphere should be available to all and they should be able to deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion (Adut, 2012). The public sphere is thus characterized by opportunities to access information, that is, through institutional communicative spaces that are universally accessible whether the spaces are physical or mediated or whether they are formal, informal, spontaneous or planned. This also encompasses deliberate attempts to limit the realization of the free flow of information including communication biases such as subjective framing of issues and sharing of information by communication specialists in government institutions as well as cultural biases such as those brought in by gender, class, economic status, etc., that inhibit equal sharing of information among communities (Squires, 2002; Dahlgren, 2006). In this study, the public sphere theory was used to analyze the deliberative space that Nakuru County is, its key players and the opportunities that each of these players are presented in the space and how their contributions are accounted for in the development of a healthy democracy.

## **3. 0 METHODOLOGY**

The study was qualitative and employed a descriptive study design. Kombo and Tromp (2006) argue that a descriptive design aims at showing the state of affairs as it is. Goodyear, et. al, (2014) observe that qualitative research approaches are the best for policy related studies due to the centrality of the human person in policies or programmes making it necessary for a researcher to ask deeply ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. As guided by Dornyei (2011) on descriptive studies, this

study aimed at describing, understanding and clarifying the experiences of citizens on the implementation of public communication framework in Nakuru County. The study was carried out in Nakuru Town East Sub County in Nakuru County and has five electoral wards. It hosts the County's Headquarters and its town, Nakuru Town, is always characterized by a high level of political activity and is earmarked to assume a city status. The Sub County is cosmopolitan in nature.

The study population thus comprised of citizens who are voters in the Sub County, County Staff (Sub County Administrator and Ward Administrators), and Members of County Assembly (MCA's) in the five targeted Wards. This study was interested in the above groups of persons as they always interact in the public affairs of the county with each playing different respective roles in as far as public communication is concerned. Specialists in public communication and devolution issues were also contacted for key informant interviews. The study was purposeful in picking its sample with homogeneous and maximum variation sampling techniques being used to arrive at the most suitable persons for interviewing.

The data collection instruments that were employed for the study were focused group discussions (FGD's) and semi-structured interviews. A total of 4 out of the 5 targeted FGD's were conducted comprising of 10 participants in each FGD. For the key informant interviews a total of 12 interviews were done from an initial target of 6. The data collected was first recorded in audio format and later transcribed. It was then analysed thematically. Themes, as Clarke and Braun (2013) and Maguire and Delahunt (2014) argue, are patterns in qualitative analysis. Guided by Kombo and Tromp (2006) the major issues that came up during discussions were identified based on the intensity in which they were repeated in the discussions.

## **4.0 RESULTS**

### **4.1 Use of Mass Media and Implementation of Public Communication Framework**

The study found out that the county government has been using mainstream media channels for purposes of public communication. This has mainly been to advertise tenders, vacancies, land rates waivers and for general public relations purposes. The study found out that the county government enjoys a good working relationship with the media fraternity in the county. However, it has not used that relationship to file information that can answer accountability questions. The study found that, the county government has not been using the mainstream media effectively to pass across information that can spur healthy civic conversations since the information shared through these channels is minimalist in nature.

Respondents acknowledged the existence of a communication office (Directorate of Communication) situated within the Governor's office, which acts as a media liaison office. The problem that was highlighted in connection to this, was the manner in which the office packages and shares information since its ultimate goal is to brand and communicate the Governor as compared to public communications. The study found out that there is a challenge of creating an independent office for public communications as stipulated in the framework. This was linked to what was generally seen as fear among governors in the country, of losing control of the communication docket, by letting an independent office run communications functions. The study found out that this challenge, is a key cause of implementation gaps on devolution laws including the framework, not just in Nakuru but in several other counties in the country.

Respondents decried what they termed as a “national posturing” of the county government and its officials where they desire to use national media more often than the local media for issues that would have been better discussed on local media platforms. This it was observed has seen governors spend most of their communication budgets on national media as opposed to local media that are more accessible and closer to their people. But respondents also noted a gap in the law in as far as the use of mass media is concerned. The law requires that adverts be placed in at least two media with a national reach. The study found out that, this has been an easy way for the county government to avoid working with Nakuru based media houses in passing across information as they have no national reach.

One of the key gaps that was further identified in respect to use of mainstream media, is radio use. Respondents noted that owing to its accessibility among locals (as compared to television and newspaper) radio can be a very good tool for public communication. They however lamented its use saying that the county government has been fond of using vernacular radio stations (especially in live shows of its top leaders), an exercise that has seen them lock out other communities during such discussions. In a big way, respondents felt that the use of mass media is exclusionary and never done in a timely manner for effective or meaningful outcomes. This was mainly noted in the use of newspapers where adverts, even those on public participation forums, are placed so close to the events and in very hidden sections of the newspapers hindering the communication. Respondents thus favored the use of radio (with an emphasis of Nakuru based radio) for public communication. Generally, while respondents appreciated the role mainstream media plays in public communication, they said that it was not being used well and was not initiating the right public deliberation debates and civic participation. Some respondents however posed this challenge to the media itself saying it was not doing enough in raising accountability questions against the county government. Other respondents suggested that it would be important for the county government to choose one of the local radios and come up with a regular programme on county government activities that would be advertised among the residents for strategic listenership.

The study confirms the results of previous studies on the use of mainstream media for public communication. In a study on the changing role of local news media in enabling citizens to engage in local democracies, within the Leeds Council in the United Kingdom, Firmstone and Coleman (2014) found out that local press and radio were the most preferred channels of public engagement but was being underutilized. Findings in other studies have also supported the use of media for the expansion on the democratic space with a bias towards the use of (talk) radio (Bosch, 2011; Omwoha, 2014). These findings were also confirmed by Wabwire (2013) and Kadesa (2017) in their studies on use of mass media for development at the grass root which noted that instead of governments using the relations they have and the opportunities presented by mass media institutions for the expansion of democratic spaces in their regions, they use them for publicity, reputational management and general public relations purposes. This study also confirms the findings in a study by Nyabuga (2018) that the media has failed its watchdog role in asking for accountability questions among devolved governments and thus needs to do more.

A study by a government taskforce that investigated the state of public communication in the country in 2019 found a declining trust in public communication. Among the reasons that the taskforce gave as accounting for this are: a lack of coherency in government communication strategies; a limited appreciation of what access to information portends to socio-economic development among communities; exclusion of certain groups from public deliberation, among

other reasons. Like this study the taskforce noted the sorry state of the lack of operationalization of progressive laws on access to information, only that while this study's concern was Section 9 of the CGA, the study by the taskforce was on all the public communication frameworks in the country and its key focus was majorly the national government. This study reveals that the problem of gaps in public communication and the implementation of public communication laws, is not just prevalent in the national government but in the devolved governments as well.

#### **4.2 Use of Digital Media and Implementation of Public Communication Framework**

Results show that the County government has been using digital media for purposes of public communication. Respondents identified several digital media platforms that the county government uses for this purpose. They include: Facebook, WhatsApp, Website and Twitter. Respondents identified Facebook and WhatsApp as the most used platforms. For Facebook and Twitter, respondents noted that the county government communicates either through a general account of the county government or through the accounts of the Governor, his Deputy or the account of the First Lady. For WhatsApp, respondents noted that, the County Government does not run any official WhatsApp groups but has persons who represent its interests, who either run WhatsApp groups or who have been added in different WhatsApp groups through which they share information about the county government. Thus, respondents acknowledged that the county government has been using digital media platforms to share information.

The study identified a number of gaps in the manner in which digital media tools are used. To start with, respondents noted an outright attempt to make visible the offices of the Governor, the Deputy Governor, and that of the First Lady, at the expense of other offices with public communication needs. Thus, what is eventually communicated (branded or profiled) is not the County Government but these specific offices, first and foremost. This, the study found out, has negative impacts on the public communication function in the county since the need that is fulfilled is a political communication one as opposed to the envisioned function of public communication.

In addition, respondents noted that, the County Government has not used digital media platforms to ignite debates. In essence, these tools are used merely as 'notice boards' mainly for posting information that either the county government is required to share by law or to post information that will paint its image positively among residents. Most of the time when residents ask questions on the platforms the questions are never answered. Residents thus feel, these platforms are not providing an opportunity for quick responses on issues that are usually discussed offline. Respondents also questioned the authenticity of the accounts. Even for those accounts that have been personalized like that of the Governor, residents said, they never feel like they are talking to the Governor directly, but to one of his handlers. This is the same for the general account of the County Government since responses are never there and if they are there, respondents said, one never feels that they are receiving a response from the concerned sector head but from a junior officer who is not well versed with the issue. Respondents also noted the information shared, especially on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, takes the form of 'news media' format, a format that respondents feel does not answer to the public information needs of the population; it is information that does not effectively feed the needs of public policy. But other respondents noted that such information is still useful however incomplete it may look saying it enables them to track the activities of the executive arm of government.

These findings are buttressed by findings of earlier studies that have shown that while governments can use digital media platforms for public policy purposes, such platforms are never used optimally (Song & Lee, 2016; Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016; Simon et. al., 2014; Oginni & Moitui, 2015; Lee & Vandyke; 2015). Mutahi and Kimari (2017) as well as Kamau (2017) have noted that digital media tools have become such indispensable tools in the Kenyan political space that they cannot be overlooked partly because they enable populations especially the youth to be more engaged in political discussions. Ogemba (2017) found out that Kenyans want these platforms used more for purposes of public participation. Omanga (2019) specifically studied a WhatsApp page dubbed Nakuru Analysts and concluded that digital media spaces have the ability not just to expand democratic spaces in the county but also ignite offline democratic actions for residents. All these studies, guide this present study in concluding that what lacks is strategy on how to use these tools for meaningful purposes.

### **4.3 Use of Public Meetings and Implementation of Public Communication Framework**

Results show that the county government has been holding public meetings and seeks the views of residents whenever it is necessary especially during budget formulation. Respondents noted that while initially such meetings would be held at the Sub County level, these days they have been rolled out at the Ward level as well. Respondents also noted that recently the County Government sought views from the residents through public forums on the elevation of Nakuru town to a city. Thus, generally one can say, there is an attempt by the county government to fulfill the law on public meetings in the county.

However, several implementation gaps were pointed out. To start with respondents stated that there is too much political interference in the organisation and the execution of the meetings that they end up being less effective. It was noted that a certain clique of persons attends county government meetings to mainly show support to ideas that look pre-agreed upon while shouting down opposing ideas. This blame was placed on county government officials and MCA's. That way, the meetings rarely end up with a consensus as would be expected. Respondents also pointed out gaps in the way notices and agenda of the meetings are shared saying that they are usually communicated so late for them to prepare and thus give meaningful contribution. The study also found out that the heavy technical jargon with which the documents are written is also a hindrance to their meaningful participation. Respondents wondered why there are never popular versions of the documents. A gap was also raised on the absence of technical persons during these meetings to help break down the jargon or explain the issues better to the participants of the public meetings. Overall, respondents feel that they keep on being invited to the meetings to go and rubber stamp decisions of the county government.

The study found out that most residents have lost interest in public meetings. Respondents said that they don't feel that the government takes their contribution with seriousness. Inclusivity of the meetings was also highlighted as an implementation gap. During the meetings, respondents averred, certain voices never get heard. These are mainly the voices of women, the youth and PWD's. The reason that was pointed out is a lack of a strategy to see them represented during these meetings. For PDW's this is even worse as their different needs are never specifically heard. The meetings never have documents in brail or rarely have a sign language interpreter for those with hearing and sight impairment.

But a challenge was also posed to residents. The study found out that at times residents come to the meetings with fixed minds making it difficult to reach a consensus. Some respondents were of the view that, with such hardline positions, the outcome of the meetings would still be the same irrespective of how well they are conducted. High expectations from participants with respect to facilitation for transport or lunch were also seen as impediments to the proper implementation of the law on holding of public meetings.

Earlier studies on public meetings have confirmed that they are important avenues for the expansion of the public sphere. In a study conducted in Florida, USA, Williamson (2019) confirmed that meetings are important sources of getting citizen input on public issues and thus recommends on strategic representation at meetings especially for historically marginalised sections of the society. Other studies have also confirmed the manipulation of public meetings by government officials (Gasper & Davies, 2018) hence the need to have meetings so well planned in order to avoid making them “rituals gone wrong” (Gwala, Theron, & Mchunu, 2015). Like this study, Kaseya and Kihonge (2016), found out that when residents are well engaged on their responsibilities they come out and demand for their rights in public participation that civic education a central role in the success of public meetings (public participation).

## **5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Summary**

This study looked at how the County Government of Nakuru is implementing Section 9 of the CGA on public communication framework that requires County Governments to establish public communication mechanisms with an aim of proactive disclosure of information. The study limited itself to the use of mass media, digital media and public meetings with respect to implementation of the framework. On use of mass media, the study found out that the county government is not effectively utilizing mass media channels by concentrating on national channels that residents feel are too far from them. On use of digital media, the study found out that the county government uses digital media platforms in a manner that does not encourage deliberation. The study found out that the government only uses the platforms in a one-way communication, and hardly does it give responses when residents ask questions. Just like on the use of mass media and digital media tools, the study found out that the government is using public meetings either to merely fulfill the law, or in a manner that does not encourage effective debate on the issues that concern residents.

### **5.2 Conclusions**

The study concluded that there is minimal implementation of the county public communication framework as espoused in Section 9 of the County Governments Act (2012) in Nakuru County which has heavily impacting on access to government held information among residents. While the county has tried to put in some measures to share information with residents, the spirit of executing such measures was not based on proactive disclosure of information but on the need to meet the minimal legal requirements in as far as the public communication framework and other laws on freedom and access of information are concerned. The full implementation of the framework is necessary and urgent

### 5.3 Recommendations

**The County Government should implement the public communication framework fully by first establishing a Directorate of Public Communication and Information:** The office should be a one stop shop for access of information in the county; and should have the responsibility of a Spokesperson for the county government. The office should also make an effort to simplify the information it shares with citizens while sensitizing residents on how to access government held information. The County Government should use more of Nakuru based media houses in the dissemination of information. The media are closer to the people and can achieve better results in delivering public communication campaigns. They are also cost effective as compared to media with a national reach.

**The County government should utilize digital media platforms maximumly by making them avenues of deliberative talk:** This is by giving more details on projects in the website and making it more user friendly. In addition to sharing the main reports on the website, the county should also share popular versions of the same for ease of use by residents. The County Government should also be quick in responding to queries by residents on their social media handles so that residents can enjoy the sociability of these kind of media. By responding and clarifying on issues the government will be able to deal with misinformation whenever it arises.

**The county should develop a criterion for public meetings:** The criterion should include a set standard for mobilising for those meetings and for ensuring that citizens are getting information well in advance. Such a strategy should be clear on how different voices will be heard during the meetings and all the measures taken to ensure that meetings are not disrupted either by rowdy crowds or by people diverting the agenda of the meetings. The county government should also do public meetings on a continuous basis and part of the information that they need to share during the meetings is progress with implementation of projects since citizens feel that there is a gap on feedback mechanisms on progress reports. **Recommendations for further studies:** This study was carried out in a county where communication is carried out from the office of the governor. There are other counties that have established autonomous public communication offices that may provide opportunities on learning how the sharing of the communication responsibility is being executed. The study also recommends further detailed studies on each of the public communication mechanisms as forums for accountability, transparency and citizen participation.

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