

# Deciding Together: Citizen Satisfaction and Institutional Design of Participatory Governance in Kenya

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Photo: Vegetable farmers harvesting in Kenya. Image by boezie from Getty Images

## Executive summary

This policy brief provides practical insights for local governments on leveraging participatory budgeting (PB) to enhance citizen satisfaction and ownership of development projects. Based on a study in rural Kenya, three PB approaches—consultation, voting, and deliberation—were evaluated. All methods increased satisfaction and willingness to invest in projects, demonstrating their value in strengthening community engagement. Deliberation, while more resource-intensive, fostered deeper consensus and included marginalized voices, making it particularly effective for equitable decision-making. These findings guide policymakers in designing participatory processes that align with community needs, build trust, and improve the legitimacy of public decisions in resource-limited settings.

## About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

## Introduction

In recent years, participatory decision-making has emerged as a promising approach to enhance governance and promote community development. Participatory decision-making actively involves citizens in shaping public decisions, allowing community members to contribute their ideas, preferences, and concerns directly into policy-making processes. By fostering open dialogue and engagement, participatory decision-making can enhance government transparency, build trust, and promote community development by ensuring that projects and policies reflect the genuine needs and priorities of the people.<sup>3</sup> However, the effectiveness of different participatory methods remains a subject of debate.<sup>4</sup>

This policy brief explores how participatory decision-making benefits development policy outcomes. Specifically, the brief presents the findings of a study conducted in rural Kenyan villages to evaluate the

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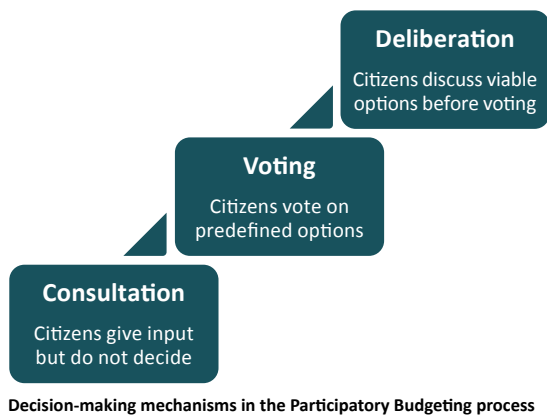
3 Mansuri, G., & Rao, V. (2012). *Localizing development: does participation work?* World Bank. Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. Harvard University Press.

Olken, B.A. (2010). Direct democracy and local public goods: Evidence from a field experiment in Indonesia. *American political science review*, 104(2):243-267.

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4 Grillos, T. (2018). Women's participation in environmental decision-making: Quasi-experimental evidence from northern Kenya. *World Development*, 108:115-130.

Grillos, T. (2022). Participation improves collective decisions (when it involves deliberation):



impact of different types of participatory budgeting (PB), one form of participatory decision-making. PB programs allow community members to directly influence how public funds are allocated, enabling citizens to propose, discuss, and vote on projects that address community needs and, importantly, which governments pledge to fund. These programs encourage civic engagement and help ensure that public resources are invested in projects that reflect the priorities and preferences of the community on key attitudes and behaviors surrounding development policy, such as citizen satisfaction with the process, willingness-to-invest time and labor in development projects, and the extent to which group decisions match individuals’ preferences.

The study offers valuable insights into the design and implementation of PB, and, by extension, participatory decision-making processes, particularly in low-income settings where PB has rarely been evaluated.<sup>5</sup> Our results demonstrate the strengths and limitations of different decision-making approaches, which will inform policymakers surrounding how to engage citizens in governance processes and improve the outcomes of development projects.

Our findings demonstrate that participatory decision-making can be a powerful tool for fostering community engagement, enhancing citizen satisfaction, and improving decision quality. However, the specific design of these processes is crucial. By carefully considering factors such as deliberation, elite capture, and contextual adaptation, policymakers can implement effective participatory approaches that can contribute to more equitable and inclusive communities.

### About the study

This study investigates the effects of participatory budgeting (PB) on citizen satisfaction, investment willingness, preference shifts, and resilience to elite capture in Kenya’s county-level decision-making processes. By comparing three PB approaches—consultation, voting, and deliberation—this analysis demonstrates the influence of different citizen engagement methods on the outcomes of development project selections and the participants’ perceptions of the decision-making process.

<sup>5</sup> Touchton, M., & Wampler, B. (2023). Participation, Development, and Accountability: A Survey Experiment on Democratic Decision-Making in Kenya. *American Political Science Review*, 1-16.  
Wampler, B., McNulty, S., & Touchton, M. (2021). *Participatory budgeting in global perspective*. Oxford University Press.  
Cabannes, Y, and Lipietz, B. (2018). Revisiting the democratic promise of participatory budgeting in light of competing political, good governance and technocratic logics. *Environment and Urbanization*, 30(1):67-84.



Photo: authors

We draw from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of different decision-making processes in 144 villages in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, Kenya. Each village received roughly \$1,000 USD from the United States National Science Foundation for a local development project designed to benefit the entire community—local teams that facilitated the decision-making processes described these funds as coming from “a donor”. Each village was then assigned to three treatment groups representing different participation processes used to select the specific project: Consultation, Voting, and Deliberation.

In the Consultation group, the researchers made final decisions on which project to select based on information from surveys on development project preferences administered to every household in the village. In the Voting group, community members voted on their preferred public good in person, through a secret ballot in a private voting booth. In the Deliberation group, participants engaged in facilitated discussions before voting on their preferred good.

Data was collected through pre- and post-treatment surveys, measuring outcomes such as satisfaction with the decision-making process, citizens’ willingness-to-invest time and labor in the development project, and the extent to which individuals’ preferences on projects matched the groups’ decisions. Statistical analyses were conducted to compare the effects of the different treatment groups.

## Results and Conclusions

### Positive Impact on Satisfaction and Willingness-to-Invest:

We found a notable increase in citizens’ satisfaction with the decision-making process and willingness to invest in the selected projects across all participatory decision-making processes. Although no significant differences emerged between consultation, voting, and deliberative groups in terms of satisfaction and willingness to invest time, labor, or money in development projects, each group in our study outperformed the baseline (*status quo*) county processes, which are historically consultative, non-binding, do not record individuals’ preferences, and lack inclusive participation. This finding underscores the broad potential of participatory mechanisms to foster a sense of agency and commitment among citizens, even when differences between types of participatory methods are minimal. These improvements indicate that, regardless of the specific process, involving citizens in decision-making can enhance perceptions of legitimacy and ownership of public policy decisions for development.

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***“The deliberative process, therefore, appears effective in creating a more inclusive decision-making framework that elevates underrepresented voices and fosters greater community understanding.”***

#### **Influence of Decision-Making Process on Project Selection:**

Though citizens’ satisfaction and willingness-to-invest did not significantly differ across the three methods, the choice of decision-making approach did affect the types of projects selected and the degree to which individual preferences aligned with group outcomes. Deliberative groups, where participants engaged in more in-depth discussions, saw a stronger alignment between individual and collective preferences than the voting or consultation groups. This suggests that deliberative processes may offer a space where participants can negotiate and reconcile individual priorities with group consensus, leading to decisions that reflect a broader, more nuanced set of community needs. For example, in deliberative groups, participants frequently revised their priorities, often aligning with the group’s shared preferences after weighing the pros and cons together. This collaborative element of deliberation may encourage more thoughtful and informed decision-making compared to simpler voting or consultation mechanisms.

#### **Preference Change through Deliberation:**

One of the most striking findings of the study was the observed shift in preferences among participants engaged in deliberative decision-making. Unlike voting or consultation, deliberation encouraged participants to reassess their choices in light of new information and perspectives introduced by other members, fostering an environment for preference change. For instance, some male participants initially focused on infrastructure projects, such as roads, but shifted their support to water storage projects after hearing the perspectives of female participants who highlighted the daily water challenges facing the community. This ability to accommodate diverse viewpoints not only supports more equitable decisions but also addresses the needs of historically marginalized groups. The deliberative process, therefore, appears effective in creating a more inclusive decision-making framework that elevates underrepresented voices and fosters greater community understanding.

#### **Absence of Elite Capture in Public Meetings:**

An encouraging finding was the lack of evidence for elite capture in any of the participatory groups, including those that employed open public meetings. Often, participatory processes are criticized for being susceptible to manipulation by powerful individuals or groups who could steer decisions in their favor, especially through deliberation. However, our results indicate that participatory budgeting, when



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structured effectively, can prevent such capture and maintain its integrity as an inclusive process. This suggests that public participation methods, particularly those that encourage deliberation and group dialogue, may provide resilience against elite influence, ensuring that decisions are reflective of community needs rather than individual interests.

Overall, our findings suggest that participatory decision-making processes, irrespective of specific methods, can contribute positively to governance by increasing citizen satisfaction and willingness to invest time, labor, and funds in community development projects. This improvement in civic engagement aligns with goals of participatory governance and may foster stronger citizen-government relations over time. However, the choice of process should align with the goals of the program. For governments pursuing faster decision-making or simple expressions of public preference, consultation or voting mechanisms may suffice. However, if the aim is to foster deeper engagement, encourage learning, and promote equitable decision-making that incorporates marginalized voices, deliberation offers distinct advantages despite its higher resource requirements.

In sum, the study indicates that participatory budgeting holds promise as a tool for building trust and empowering citizens in Kenya’s counties. When structured to facilitate inclusive and equitable dialogue, participatory budgeting can enhance not only the efficiency but also the quality and legitimacy of development decisions.

## Policy Recommendations

We provide the following policy recommendations to guide governments, CSOs, CBOs, and community members in developing and implementing participatory decision-making processes that lead to citizen satisfaction, willingness-to-invest time and labor in development projects, and perceptions of equity in development. These recommendations stem from the aggregate results of all three types of decision-making processes from this study.



**Community-centered approaches** are essential for successful development programs, as they ensure decision-making processes are grounded in local needs and priorities, fostering a sense of ownership within the community. Empowering communities in this way enables them to actively shape and sustain their path to development. Governments should promote inclusive participation by engaging

marginalized groups and ensuring that all members have equal opportunities to contribute to decision-making. Furthermore, it is important to respect cultural norms and tailor participatory decision-making initiatives to each community's unique context.



**Strengthening deliberative decision-making** requires skilled facilitators to guide discussions, ensuring that all voices are heard. Encouraging participation from diverse groups within the community brings a variety of perspectives to the discussion that enrich the decision-

making process. Conflict resolution strategies are essential to address disagreements constructively, which help to maintain a collaborative environment. Additionally, investing in training and education helps participants better understand participatory budgeting concepts and decision-making processes, leading to more informed contributions. Deliberation resulted in decisions that match individual participants' preferences at greater rates than voting and consultation processes. Yet, deliberation is costly in terms of participants' time and government resources to facilitate this type of process.<sup>6</sup> We therefore recommend that governments with more capacity implement deliberative processes and compensate participants for their time to achieve arguably better decisions from a community perspective.



**Ensuring accountability and transparency** in participatory budgeting programs requires making all information about processes and decisions publicly accessible, which fosters trust within the community.

Simplifying information, such as through citizen budgets<sup>7</sup>, can help make these details clear and understandable for all participants. Next, decision-making processes should be scheduled at times and venues that are convenient for the community, enabling broader engagement. Additionally, a robust system for monitoring and evaluating program effectiveness is necessary to hold decision-makers accountable and ensure these programs remain responsive to community needs and priorities.



To **address potential challenges** in participatory budgeting programs, safeguards should be implemented to prevent elite capture and ensure that powerful individuals or groups do not dominate the process. In our study, fears for elite capture of deliberation

<sup>6</sup> Touchton, M., N. Borges and B. Wampler. (2017). Democracy at Work: Moving Beyond Elections to Improve Well-Being. *American Political Science Review*, 111(1):68-82.

<sup>7</sup> See ICLD's [Toolbox for Citizen Budgets](#) at the local level.

## Discussion Questions for Local Civil Servants and Politicians

### 1. How can we ensure that participatory budgeting (PB) programs in our community are truly inclusive and representative of all voices?

- What strategies can we implement to reach marginalized groups and ensure their meaningful participation in PB processes?
- How can we address potential barriers to participation, such as language barriers, lack of transportation, or limited access to information?
- How can we promote diversity and inclusion within PB decision-making bodies?

### 2. What are the key challenges and opportunities for implementing deliberative decision-making in our local context?

- What are the potential benefits and risks of adopting a deliberative approach to PB?
- How can we overcome institutional barriers or resistance to deliberative processes?
- What resources and support are needed to facilitate effective deliberative discussions?

### 3. How can we ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of PB programs in our community?

- What strategies can we implement to build capacity within our community and government agencies to support PB?
- How can we integrate PB into existing governance structures to ensure its long-term viability?
- What mechanisms can we put in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of PB programs, and how can we use this information to inform ongoing improvements?

did not materialize, which suggests no tradeoffs among different decision-making structures and elite capture. Adequate funding and resources are also crucial to support the successful implementation and sustainability of PB initiatives. Overcoming institutional barriers, such as bureaucratic hurdles and limited political support, is essential to foster an environment where PB can thrive. By tackling these obstacles, PB programs can better serve and represent community interests effectively.



**Fostering long-term sustainability** in participatory budgeting programs requires dedicated investment in capacity building for both community members and government officials. By embedding PB into existing governance structures, its practices and benefits can

become a stable part of local decision-making. Continuously learning from program experiences and adapting to changing needs ensures that PB remains relevant and responsive. Through these steps, PB can evolve as a resilient and enduring tool for community engagement and development.



**Supporting research and evidence-based practice** in participatory budgeting requires conducting thorough evaluations to assess program effectiveness and identify best practices. Sharing knowledge and lessons learned from these evaluations helps inform future policy

development and enhances PB implementation. Encouraging research into PB principles, mechanisms, and impacts advances understanding and provides a foundation for improving program design. Through these efforts, PB can become more effective, informed, and impactful across diverse communities.

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