Title of Thesis:	**"*Kwa Ground Vitu Ni Different*": Supportive Structures and Inhibiting Factors in Young People's Civic and Political Participation in Kenya.**
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Abstract:

This research explores what civic and political engagement means to young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet County in the Rift Valley, in the western part of Kenya - the current forms this takes, and what young people seek to achieve through civic and political activity. Through a detailed study of individual behaviour, using in-depth interviews, group discussions and observation of both online and offline public forums, it examines the enabling factors in the wider socio-political environment and the critical blockages to what young people consider meaningful civic and political engagement. Among the challenges faced by young people seeking their place in society is a civic and political culture which has historically marginalised them. This project seeks to understand how young people navigate these challenges and participate in the opportunities afforded them to make their voices heard, to influence policy and legislation, to hold their political leaders to account, and to take up positions of civic and political leadership themselves.

Taking seriously the everyday Kenyan insight captured in the phrase '*kwa ground vitu ni different*' (things are different on the ground), this study adopts a critical realist theoretical framework based on the writings of Roy Bhaskar (1998; 2008; 2017), which distinguishes between empirical, actual, and real domains, offering ontological depth for analysing youth civic and political participation within this context. The enquiry incorporates concepts such as post-coloniality, agency, and power to situate individual experiences in relation to broader structural and cultural factors. The research employs a qualitative design and, in accordance with the critical realist approach, selects methods appropriate for the explanatory goals of the study. Data is analysed using a thematic analysis framework adapted from Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021), identifying experiential, inferential, and dispositional themes aligned with Bhaskar's ontological domains. The study presents a conceptual model representing the complexity of factors influencing youth participation, extending beyond the categories of "barriers" and "enablers".

The research highlighted that enduring postcolonial and neo-patrimonial power relations fundamentally shape how youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet County participate in civic and political affairs, producing limited formal opportunities and encouraging them to turn to informal and digital spaces which are themselves not entirely unproblematic. This points to a need for further research into the processes through which transformative practices might be embedded sustainably within Kenya's civic and political ecosystem including approaches to civic education - whether delivered through schools, community initiatives, digital platforms, or peer-led programmes - that can sustain long-term democratic participation and counter prevailing patterns of disinterest, disengagement and dissatisfaction.

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List of Abbreviations

ADP	Annual Development Plan
BLM	*Bunge la Mwananchi* [The People's Parliament]
CBD	Central Business District
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CEC	County Executive Committee
CECM	County Executive Committee Member
CIDP	County Integrated Development Plan
CO	Chief Officer
COKASA	Coast Kalenjin Students Association
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CR	Critical Realism
CYF	County Youth Forum
CVA	Citizen Voice and Action
DFID	Department of International Development
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EDA	Elgeyo Marakwet Equitable Development Act
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
FLLoCA	Financing Locally-led Climate Action Program
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GoK	Government of Kenya
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IBP	International Budget Partnership
IIEC	Iten Integrated Environmental Conservation
JGP	*Jiinue* Growth Program
KCB	Kenya Commercial Bank
KEMSA	Kenya Medical Supplies Authority
KES	Kenya Shilling
KHRC	Kenya Human Rights Commission
KSH	Kenya Shilling
MCA	Member of the County Assembly

MDAs	Ministries, Departments, and Agencies
MEDS	Mission for Essential Drugs and Supplies
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
MSME	Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NYC	National Youth Council
OGP	Open Government Partnership
PEPEA	Programme for Empowerment and Progress through Education Abroad
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome
PMC	Project Management Committee
PWDs	People Living with Disabilities
SACCO	Savings and Credit Cooperative
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VTC	Vocational Training Centre
WDC	Ward Development Committee
YYC	Yes! Youth Can

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Thanks to Ken, Brian, Fiona and Mercy and the Board of Iten Integrated Environmental Conservation (IIEC). A chance encounter between an old teacher and an "old boy" in 2018 led to an idea and a partnership that has enabled this work. A small team of youth members of IIEC, led by Brian, provided incredible logistical and technical support for the field work - without which this research would not have been possible.

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I dedicate this work to my ever-loving wife, Liz.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work. An AI tool was used for editing and writing style assistance (https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/copilot-word). This dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow, or any other institution.

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Chapter 1 - Overview

1.1 Introduction

This project seeks to explore what civic and political engagement means to young people, the current forms this takes, and what young people seek to achieve through civic and political activity. It explores the experiences of young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet County in the Rift Valley, in the western part of Kenya. The title draws on a widely used Kenyan Sheng[1] phrase, *kwa ground vitu ni different* ("things are different on the ground"), which captures a central concern of this study: the gap between formal or official narratives of participation and the lived realities encountered by young people in everyday civic and political life. Through an in-depth study of individual civic and political activity, involving interviews, group discussion and observations of both online and offline public forums, it examines the factors that encourage the engagement of young people and those that hinder it in this context. In doing so, the study examines the enabling factors in the wider socio-political environment and the critical blockages to what young people consider meaningful civic and political engagement.

1.2 Background and Rationale for the Study

Among the challenges facing young people in Kenya today are an oversubscribed and under resourced education system, an ever-greater demand for limited further education or early career opportunities, and a civic and political culture which has historically marginalised certain groups, particularly women and young people. A central objective of this research project is to understand how young people participate in the opportunities afforded them to make their voices heard, to influence policy and legislation, to hold their political leaders to account, and to take up positions of political leadership themselves. The research explores such opportunities – whether facilitated in the context of the constitutional requirements for public participation – or developed among young people themselves in response to the inadequacy of such arrangements for their participation. The overall aim aligns with Roy Bhaskar's theory of human

[1] Sheng is an acronym for Swahili and English slang, used primarily among urban youths.

emancipation (*see* Section 3.2.5 below). The questions this research seeks to answer are relevant to advancing social justice through the empowerment of young people, the promotion of their well-being, and their integration as full and equal members into the communities of which they are part. Young people's perspectives and experiences are prioritised - not only as respondents but as active participants in the planning, data collection and analysis. The aim is for the results of this study to inform advocacy, policy, and activism efforts that will challenge non-responsive structures and the practices which discourage the meaningful and impactful engagement of young people in civic and political affairs.

While the study does not consider empirical data collected within the school setting, the formal education system nonetheless forms an important part of the broader environment in which young people's civic and political capacities are shaped. My professional experience in both classroom teaching and youth-focused development programming (more in 1.6 below) initially directed my attention to questions of whether young people experience schooling as a space where the skills of participation in a modern participatory democracy are learned. I thought of testing the vision of the school as "a small-scale republic" (Snir et al., 2016, p. 759), assuming the implications of the failure to fully achieve this would have real world consequences in respect of young people's capacities to take advantage of opportunities to participate in direct democracy. Theoretical and historical perspectives, however, underscore the continuing relevance of such questions.

Giroux (2006) argues that education should prepare young adults to act as citizens "equipped to exercise their freedoms, competent to question the basic assumptions that govern political life, and skilled enough to participate in shaping the social, political, and economic orders that govern their lives" (Giroux 2006, p. 232). But the Freirean vision of education as emancipatory is often at odds with the realities in Kenya of teacher-centred pedagogy, the dominance of examination preparation, an overloaded curriculum, and the limited space for extra-curricular activities or meaningful student involvement in school governance. Though there have been many reform attempts in post-colonial African education since Nyerere's warning that Tanzania's education system risked "divorc[ing] its participants from the society it is supposed to be preparing them for" (1967, p. 390),

there remain fundamental issues with the extent to which "post-colonial learning environments…appear to sharply diverge from postcolonial life worlds and the conceptions of postcolonial learners" (Barongo-Muweke, 2016, p. 32).

In Kenya, these issues are not only pedagogical but also systemic. Since the introduction of free primary education in 2003 and the government's 2018 policy to achieve a 100% transition to secondary school, enrolment pressures have intensified. In 2019, almost 200,000 more students transitioned to secondary school compared to the previous year. In many rural and low-income urban contexts, this has resulted in severe overcrowding - class sizes of 67 to 92 learners in some northern counties - limiting opportunities for individualised learning and participatory teaching approaches[2]. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, "liberatory pedagogical practices…are undermined by sheer numbers" (p. 160). Curricular gaps compound these challenges. Despite the most recent education system reforms[3], Kenya's secondary curriculum contains no dedicated civic or citizenship education strand, reflecting a failure to align schooling with the constitutional vision of active citizenship and with longstanding understandings of "education as a means to more effective citizenship" (McCowan, 2009, p.20). Authoritarian governance structures in schools - characterised by centralised authority and non-participatory decision-making - tend to socialise students into hierarchical, top-down relationships, which later becomes their lived experience of governance, despite the rhetoric of participation.

Although my research centred on young people's accounts of more immediate environmental and contextual factors influencing their engagement - such as social media and digital technology, local governance cultures, and the role of community networks - this study nonetheless reinforces the significance of formal education as a long-term shaping force. The findings appear to suggest that without curricular and pedagogical reforms that emphasise the importance of participatory skills, critical thinking, and civic knowledge, formal schooling risks encouraging disengagement from

[2] Data from Mutisya, 2020

[3] Several recent critiques of the new Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) reforms in Kenya have highlighted implementation challenges related to teacher training gaps, resource shortages, and lack of adequate stakeholder engagement (e.g. Cheruiyot, 2024; Maiyuria et al., 2024; Wanjau et al., 2024)

the civic and political affairs. Additionally, some young leaders are shown to replicate the hierarchical attitudes and practices of their elders rather than breaking with them, while older generations, themselves shaped by earlier educational experiences, often encourage youth disengagement in their behaviour. This research thus contributes to debates in education not through school-based fieldwork, but by situating civic learning within the wider system of influences on youth participation.

While there has been a significant amount of research in recent years into the workings of the new devolved institutions in Kenya, most of this has had a more technical focus, situated away from the sites where public deliberation takes place. Analysis has tended to resist a focus on the personal experiences of deliberation of citizens themselves. For this study, I partner with a local youth group to understand better the current context, identify deliberative forums appropriate for observation, and identify youth for in-depth interviews. My local partner is Iten Integrated Environmental Conservation (IIEC), a youth-involving community-based organisation in Iten, the County town of Elgeyo-Marakwet. It was established in 2012 and works in environmental conservation as on good governance and social justice issues. The organisation engages youth in educational initiatives, social audits, human rights monitoring, civic education, and environmental activities. IIEC also advocates for human rights and accountability by reporting misuse of funds and conducting voter education to enhance community engagement and good governance. The Board of IIEC provided guidance in the planning of the project and facilitated introductions to County Government officials and the approval of field work in the County by the County Commissioner. Three youth members of the IIEC team acted as research assistants and helped with identification of youth and other key informants for interviews, physical and online sites for observation, and important sources of documented information relevant to the topic.

The study reveals that young people's civic and political engagement is unevenly distributed across formal, informal, and digitally-mediated spaces and that institutional design and political practice play a central role in shaping youth participation. These dynamics are underpinned by deep structural and historical mechanisms which will be explored in this study. This research will be relevant to stakeholders in supporting youth participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet, and more broadly in Kenya, and cast light on the

appropriateness of formal, informal and non-formal education efforts geared towards promoting young citizens' engagement in deliberative processes.

1.3 Research Questions, Design and Methodology

This research explores what are the inhibiting and encouraging factors when it comes to young people's civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County in Kenya. A key concern, following Weiss (2020), is to develop "youth-specific explanations and definitions of what political participation means" (Weiss, 2020, p.9) and to recognise "the breadth and different dimensions of their political engagement" (Pontes et al., 2018, p.5). In this study, youth perspectives on participation are explored through the following research question:

- What supportive structures and inhibiting factors facilitate or frustrate young people's civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County?

The following sub-questions address three interrelated dimensions through which the main question is answered: first, how young people understand participation; second, the formal, informal and alternative forums through which participation is pursued; and third, the learning, information and experience through which participatory capacity is formed. These dimensions help explain the supportive structures and inhibiting factors that shape youth civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County:

- How do young people understand and define civic and political participation in their context?
- How and through what formal, informal, and alternative forums do young people seek to participate in or influence public affairs?
- What role do learning, information, and civic education play in shaping participation?

The study draws on a range of literature, academic disciplines and sources to inform the understanding of youth civic and political participation in contemporary Kenya. It uses Critical Realism as the meta-theoretical foundation to enable the study to move beyond surface events to underlying mechanisms, and considers conceptual tools provided by

several other theories to help interrogate the research question. A methodological approach is adopted with critical realist understandings of key issues such as casualty, validity, explanation, and reflexive engagement interrogated, and their implications for this study considered. Yin's (2018) case study design and critical realist approaches to interviews, focus group discussion and observations are presented as appropriate methods and tools which both honour the complexity of the situation and are respectful of the people who have agreed to share their personal experiences and perspectives.
This study adopts Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) framework for thematic analysis to guide the exploration of themes encountered in a structured way aligned to the critical realist meta-theory. This framework is shown to accommodate additional complementary frameworks for analysing power that are relevant to the themes encountered. Findings and analysis are presented in a combined narrative reflective of how analysis emerges alongside participants' accounts organised around a five-category typology of influences on young people, which better captures the complexity of issues encountered than a simple dichotomy of "barriers" and "enablers".

1.4 Youth Definitions and Perceptions of Participation

"Participation" for young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet emerges as a broad concept that involves, among other things, active engagement, inclusivity, empowerment through information, and collective action. It reflects their desire to be heard and to influence the decision-making processes that affect young people's lives and communities. This understanding underscores the importance of creating supportive environments that facilitate genuine participation and representation of youth voices in governance and community development.

Honwana (2012) describes African youth who see participation as ethically and communally grounded, demonstrating moral obligation, relational belonging, and the responsibilities of citizenship. In her (much broader) study of African youth she reports:

> "...the young people I interviewed are engaging their societies using hip-hop culture in radio stations, websites, music lyrics, photographs, as well as public debates and community interventions. They connect with society in the church,

> the mosque, the streets, their schools, and neighborhoods. They work to improve peasants' agricultural production, protect people from HIV and AIDS, and educate young voters about their right to be heard. They do all this in their own way, not through partisan political engagement (Honwana, 2012, p.135).

As in this example, youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet also frame their participation in terms of service to others, not self-advancement. Equating participation with service, duty and societal advancement is tied to a transformational or even an emancipatory idea, in that the definition is rooted in a desire to effect change. Honwana critiques understandings that see youth as individuals responsible for their own development and reveals a picture of African youth embedded in dense social networks, where decisions are often motivated by collective survival or dignity. Notions of liberal individualism are de-emphasised in favour of interdependence, and participation is, at least partially, rooted in moral responsibility: "an approach to citizenship that encompasses both rights and participation (obligations and contributions to society's greater good) appears to be fitting" (Honwana, 2012, p.135).

The change young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet reveal that they want to see, clearly points to a desire for prioritisation of the youth agenda, at the heart of which is a desire for change in politics-as-usual, in political leadership itself, and the concentration of power and wealth among an elite at the expense of more equitable distribution of resources. This is revealing of a high level of political consciousness on the part of young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet, and a belief in social justice. Youth in this study also seem to view governance as a determinant of life chances and engage to demand rights, resist corruption, and push for a more equitable society. This reflects what Freire (1996) describes as *conscientization* - a critical awareness that leads to transformative action. It is less the idea of demanding "the right to be heard" or "our seat at the table", and more one that seeks a completely different way of managing civic and political affairs locally, that reverses the top down, managerialist mind set, replacing it with an empathetic, equitable and accountable model of public engagement.

Young people essentially view participation as not just active but instrumental, believing in its potential for transformative - and even emancipatory change. They express high

expectations for effective and genuinely transformative participation, which will improve their lives and address marginalisation, particularly among women, and those in rural areas (who face barriers to participation including physical distance, transportation challenges, and lack of access to mobile networks and the internet). Young people see participation as a means of overcoming reluctance (again, particularly among young women), cultural inhibitions and rural disadvantage, if opportunities for real, open, and transparent engagement are not frustrated. This "dispositional" dimension of participation (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021) reveals some of the psychological and structural factors which are the "generative mechanisms" (Bhaskar, 2008, p.14) shaping engagement. This research applies Wiltshire and Ronkainen's experiential–inferential–dispositional framework (described in Section 4.3.5.1 below) to the themes emerging in the discussions with young people and key informants in Elgeyo-Marakwet, as they reveal the meaning and promise of participation from their perspectives.

Prominent in discussions about participation are the factors that inhibit young people from taking part fully and effectively in civic and political life. Young people recognise the systemic barriers that hinder their participation, such as political manipulation, cultural norms, a lack of confidence (particularly of young women), and so on. For example, one female youth highlights that societal expectations often discourage women from voicing their opinions in mixed-gender settings. Additionally, several young people point out the disconnect between government-provided opportunities for participation and the actual engagement of youth, emphasising the need for change in the way government approaches soliciting young people's views.

1.5 The 'How?' and 'Where?' of Youth Participation

Young people interviewed[4] talk of participation through both formal institutional avenues and informal community-based spaces, reflecting the diversity of "repertoires of participation" (Sloam, 2014, p. 219) highlighted in much of the literature on the subject.

[4] This research uses pseudonyms throughout when referring to participants (interviewees, focus group members etc.). Given the widespread use of Christian/Biblical first names, I use Swahili names (which are uncommon in Elgeyo-Marakwet) to avoid any mistaken attribution.

Formal forums include public *barazas*[5], civic education events, and county-level participatory programmatic or budgeting processes such as for the Annual Development Plan (ADP), County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) and the Financing Locally-led Climate Action Program (FLLoCA). These reflect structured spaces for consultation, albeit with limitations in responsiveness and inclusion. Informal spaces, such as 'hotels' (i.e. tea shops), sporting events, and especially social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, X Spaces, and Facebook), function as alternative arenas for deliberation and activism. Here, youth create communities for discussion that are flexible and peer led. Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and youth associations also emerge as critical channels, particularly for leadership and collective action. Examples include *Tumaini La Vijana* [Young People's Hope], the Tambach Youth Economic Initiative, and Coast Kalenjin Students Association (COKASA), through which young people pursue development goals, lobby for resources, and nurture a sense of collective agency.

Social media plays a transformative role in youth participation. Young people are engaging in everyday acts of citizenship without the bureaucratic barriers of formal spaces, while youth influencers use platforms to expose governance failures, demand accountability, and mobilise collective voice. These online engagements often catalyse offline action, including dialogues with government officials, demonstrating the fluid boundary between digital and physical civic spaces, in what Castell's calls a "hybrid world of real virtuality" (Castells, 2012, p. 233). This digital hybridity supports emerging literature that sees online participation not as detached or passive, but as deeply embedded in civic and political agency.

However, the experience of networked youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet reveals important divergences from dominant Global North narratives on digital engagement, particularly those framed by theories of "connective action" (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012, p.743). First, the level of digital commitment among young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet is striking: youth commonly participate in numerous WhatsApp groups reflecting a dense and continuous digital presence as opposed to *ad hoc* mobilisation. These networks function as sustained arenas for debate and interaction, closely tied to everyday governance

[5] *baraza* is a Swahili term used to describe gatherings, councils, or meetings where people come together to discuss issues, make decisions, or engage in communal dialogue.

concerns. An X Space meeting observed on Monday 15th July 2024 entitled "Occupy Elgeyo Marakwet County" (*see Figure 1*), which lasted for five hours, with over 4,300 participants remaining engaged well past midnight, underscores the intensity of commitment that characterises youth participation in virtual spaces in Elgeyo-Marakwet.

Second, the substance of engagement in these virtual spaces, as evidenced in the wider data set, is marked by a strong communitarian ethos, with discussions frequently centred on community betterment, improved service delivery, and public accountability. In observed interaction on X and WhatsApp, young people engage on diverse topics such as health care (including concerns about the adequacy of local health services, the availability of medicines and the quality of maternal health care); environmental concerns (such as the conservation of forests); accountability in governance (including calls for transparency from the County Government regarding project completions, pending bills, and the use of public funds); and land issues (such as discussions about compensation for displaced communities). These (and other) topics reflect a broad range of concerns that the young contributors address, highlighting their engagement with community issues and governance well beyond the limits of issues strictly relevant to young people themselves. This reveals a form of moral citizenship rooted in a strong sense of community, where digital engagement is not merely expressive but anchored in collective responsibility. This is at odds with the "groundswell of academic opinion", according to Loader et al. (2014), which suggests that:

> the political attitudes of many young people in many parts of the world can increasingly be characterized by a less deferential and more individualized…self-actualizing…and critical disposition…which marks a departure from the dutiful norms of citizenship (Loader et al., 2014, p.145)

An assessment by Bennet and Segerberg (2012), of youth 'movements' in "the more economically developed industrial democracies" similarly revealed

> individualized orientations [which] result in engagement with politics as an expression of *personal* hopes, lifestyles, and grievances… People may still join actions in large numbers, but the identity reference is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale *personal* expression rather than through

> common group or ideological identification (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012, p.743-744, *my emphasis*).

As noted, the attitudes and behaviours observed among young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet present a very different picture to the assessments above, serving as a reminder of the need for sensitivity to the uniqueness of this context, and caution in applying well-developed theories relating to participation from elsewhere.

Third, while the literature on digital activism in the Global North does demonstrate significant use of digital media for political communication, it tends in those contexts to be more hierarchical and controlled, and not used for direct, participatory engagement with the public in what could be termed in Kenya as online civic spaces or "digital publics" (Omanga, 2019, p.177). In contrast with practice in the Global North, the Elgeyo-Marakwet context reveals frequent participation by political actors in digital forums – most especially WhatsApp groups. Local administrators and elected officials are often embedded in the same WhatsApp groups as citizens, facilitating a level of proximity and responsiveness that blurs the boundaries between formal authority and informal discourse. The Governor was himself also a participant in an X Space meeting held by the same youth who organised the meeting observed in the course of this study (*Figure 1*). This hybridity challenges existing typologies of digital participation and suggests the need for more context-sensitive frameworks that account for the everyday forms of networked citizenship in evidence in Kenya.

Figure 1: *Flyer circulated on social media as part of the "Occupy Elgeyo-Marakwet County" campaign involving several X Space meetings and planning for a demonstration in Iten on 18th July 2024.*

This research, therefore, expands on the definition of participation exploring its instrumental and transformative potential as expressed by young people themselves. It looks at the challenges that hinder young people's participation and investigates the consciousness among local youth about issues of marginalisation of certain groups, such as women and rural populations, and the inhibitions they face in participating effectively. With a focus both on the barriers encountered and the supportive infrastructure for participation, the research explores how young people reveal they seek to take part in public affairs, their motivations for engagement, their resources to

participate and the systemic barriers they face in doing so. The deliberative forums organised by the County Government are explored, as well as alternative modes of political participation such as virtual and self-organised spaces.

Overlaying the analysis with the critical realist data analysis framework adapted from Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021), outlined in Chapter 4, I treat what participants directly say, feel and observe (conveying experiential themes), I make reasoned assumptions about patterns and processes beyond immediate experiences (exploring inferential themes), and I illuminate deeper structures, capacities, and constraints shaping action and understanding – i.e. the ontologically 'real' – even if unspoken, or not directly observed (thereby unearthing dispositional themes). Gaventa's (2006) "continuum of spaces" and frameworks like Lukes' (2021) Three-Dimensional Power and VeneKlasen and Miller's (2002) Visible-Hidden-Invisible Power align with critical realist principles, offering layered perspectives on power dynamics. These frameworks help with the analysis of how observable actions, structural constraints, and deep-seated beliefs shape youth agency and participation.

1.6 Pausing and Reflecting: Researcher Positionality

My motivation for prefacing the study with a positionality statement is to address Patel's demand that "we must be able to ask and articulate an answer to 'Why me?'" (Patel, 2016, p.59). I am conscious of the criticism of the process of developing such reflective biographical statements by some claiming that "academic scholars…cannot, on the one hand, claim to be burdened by their biography when conducting the research, yet, on the other hand, be emancipated from it while constructing a positionality statement" (Savolainen et al., 2023, p.1335). What follows is not an attempt to excuse my subjectivity, bias, personal interests or any blind spots, but rather to give some context to a personal journey which led to this research project and my efforts to maintain "respect, collaboration, and dialogue…as points of negotiation" (Battiste, 2013, p.98) throughout the process of planning and implementation.

As a European who has resided in Kenya for nearly three decades, my engagement with the context of this study is informed by long-term professional, personal, and social ties. My initial entry into Kenyan society was through the education sector, where I served as a secondary school teacher for over seven years – in the same location where this case study is situated. This experience provided early and sustained exposure to the lives, perspectives, and aspirations of Kenyan youth, and laid the foundation for my developing understanding of the structural and cultural dynamics that shape youth agency.

In addition to my time in the classroom, my subsequent professional trajectory has deepened my engagement with youth, governance, and civic participation across diverse African contexts. Over the past two decades, I have held senior leadership roles in programmes funded by FCDO (the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office of the UK Government), USAID (the former United States Agency for International Development), and other donors, managing initiatives that aimed to strengthen civil society, support democratic institutions, and foster inclusive governance. These roles afforded me the opportunity to work closely with local youth organisations, public institutions, and grassroots networks. While these experiences have significantly shaped my understanding of the institutional and policy-level dimensions of youth participation, I remain mindful of the power dynamics and donor thinking that often influenced these engagements. This perspective informs my critical approach to the research, where I seek to bridge more macro-level experiences with the grounded, lived realities of youth navigating civic and political life at the local level.

At one point, I served as Programme Director for a DFID[6]-funded initiative that supported grassroots and intermediary organisations working to enhance participatory governance. Notably, the grassroots organisation collaborating in this research (IIEC – *see above*) was previously an awardee under this programme. The organisation's current project director was my student at the local high school - a connection that underscores the relational dynamics at play in this research. These intersecting professional and personal ties offer a unique perspective, developed over time, on developments in education, politics, and

[6] The Department for International Development (DFID) was merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to form FCDO in September 2020.

youth-involving civil society organisations. They also necessitate critical reflection on issues of power, influence, and positionality within the research process.

My embeddedness in the region extends beyond professional affiliations. I have family connections, I speak Swahili and have (some) conversational ability in the local language (Kalenjin), which not only facilitates day-to-day interaction but also enhances my ability to navigate cultural nuances and informal spaces. These ties afford me access to social spaces that could be inaccessible to fully external researchers. I am thus able to operate as a participant-observer in a range of civic arenas - from *boda boda*[7] shades and pool halls to *barazas* and official public participation forums – which gives me some insight into everyday youth engagement. However, occupying such a hybrid positionality of both insider and outsider also requires a heightened ethical sensitivity to the boundaries between personal relationships and academic enquiry. This intersection of proximity and distance continually shapes how I interpret youth political agency and community dynamics.

I am also deeply aware of how my identity and positioning may be perceived within broader historical and epistemological frameworks. From the early stages in the design of this research project, I spent time considering the implications of a 'Northern' researcher studying civic participation in the Global South. These concerns resonate with longstanding critiques within decolonial literature, which highlight the extractive and imbalanced nature of knowledge production, where researchers from privileged situations (and institutions) in the Global North have historically studied communities in the Global South through particular anthropological or developmentalist lenses. This critical history compels me to approach my role with humility and sensitivity, acknowledging both the privileges I hold and the responsibilities they entail. While I may be situated geographically and socially within the context of this research, I recognise that my presence carries with it the historical baggage of outsider enquiry and that my task is to avoid replicating extractive practices of the past. My efforts to "think more seriously about effective and ethical ways of carrying out research" and ways of working with people in my context "in an ongoing and mutually beneficial way" (Smith, 2008. p.17)

[7] Motorcycle taxis

have led me to adopt a type of "partnership research" (ibid.) involving of local community members in both the planning and implementation of the research project.

My formative years in Kenya revealed to me the structured and often rigid nature of Kenyan boarding schools - particularly the regimental routines, the disciplinary regimes, and the restricted autonomy of students - offering a stark contrast to the relatively liberal schooling environment I had known in Ireland. My experience in the Kenyan school system continue to influence how I view youth civic and political participation today. I observed then, and continue to believe now, that secondary schools do not adequately prepare young people for engagement in the civic and political spheres. The expansion of access to secondary education over the past two decades in Kenya (discussed above) has not been matched by improvements in infrastructure or pedagogy. I perceive a fundamental disconnect between the ambitions of Kenya's progressive constitutional framework and the institutional environments in which many young Kenyans are socialised.

Although the youth participants in this study rarely reference their high school experiences explicitly, it is clear these institutional contexts play a formative role in shaping their civic dispositions. The absence of democratic spaces in schools - spaces where opinions can be expressed, debated, and respected - may contribute to broader patterns of disengagement or even scepticism towards civic and political participation. This long view of youth socialisation, informed by both lived experience and retrospective analysis, underpins my approach to understanding the contemporary realities of youth political agency.

Initially, I had sought to look more closely at young people's experiences in school and highlight what I hypothesised is the divergence from the expectations of civic and political participation of young adults in the post-formal schooling context with school-based practices. I was particularly influenced in my initial exploration of the issue by civic republican political theory (Pettit, 2012; 2014, Honohan 2002; 2006; 2017) and the question of the 'meaning of a republic' - a subject of lively debate in Ireland in the run up to the 100th anniversary of the "The Proclamation of the Irish Republic" in 2016. By contrast, I have never heard the question of 'the meaning of a republic' raised in the

Kenyan context - despite the long struggle here for a new political dispensation, centred around a desire to break away from decades of centralised, opaque, and authoritarian governance. Although many of the reforms brought in by the new constitution (in 2010) reflect the priorities of a "democratically shaped constitutionalism" called for by Pettit (2014, p. 128), it is a curious feature of modern Kenyan politics that the rhetoric of the "rule of law" and "constitutionalism" is not undergirded by any clear political, philosophical or theoretical basis - much less that offered by republicanism's freedom-as-non-domination. Work by Snir and Eylon (2016; 2017) looking at educational questions through the lens of freedom as non-domination, and in light of the issues raised by Pettit, was influential, ultimately helping steer me away from basing my exploration of issues of youth engagement in the school setting - and the danger of investing considerable amounts of people's time in stating the obvious.

I am acutely aware of how my racial identity, socio-economic status, and past affiliations first with school, and then with donor institutions, may shape community perceptions and interactions within the research, agreeing that "scholars...will always remain prisoners of their biography" (Savolainen et al., 2023, p.1335). But I approach this study with a strong commitment to transparency, humility, and the co-construction of knowledge that honours the lived realities, voices, and visions of social and political change held by Kenyan youth, fully acknowledging that "researchers must rely on the input of others" (ibid.).

1.7 An outline of the study

Chapter 2 contains a literature review with the objective of contributing to the conceptual framework for the study, outlining the state of knowledge and identifying gaps and limitations in the existing literature. Several of the most relevant bodies of literature are reviewed under themes of deliberative democracy, polyarchy, digital media, education and youth studies. The review underscores the need to go beyond visible structures and events to engage with the deeper mechanisms, meanings, and dispositions that shape how young people relate to the state, to political authority, and to each other. Chapter 3 goes on to set out the research paradigm, or meta-theory, in which the research is

situated. Supported by the literature review, it makes the case for a critical realist approach based on the writings of among others, Roy Bhaskar (1998; 2008; 2017), whose 'depth ontology' provides a useful framework for exploring the complex, layered realities of youth civic and political participation in this context. I present the aspects of the theory which guide the study beyond describing what youth do, to investigating why and under what conditions they act - or are constrained from acting. Chapter 4 develops the methodology. It defends the ontological and epistemological value positions associated with investigating youth perceptions and actions within the critical realist paradigm. The methodology, research design, data collection and analysis processes are outlined which, it is argued, support the study's conceptual approach. A data analysis framework and step-by-step approach to the process is detailed, during the implementation of which, a *Conceptual Model for Influences on Youth Participation* was developed and is presented here. This typology then helps structure the presentations of findings and analysis in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 5 and 6 combine the empirical findings and analysis in two main sections. Chapter 5 presents the "inhibiting factors" in youth civic and political participation. Chapter 6 explores the factors that this research considers form a continuum of "supportive infrastructure" with respect to young people's engagement. Chapter 7 concludes the study with a summary of the objectives, a synthesis of the findings, and a discussion of some of the broader implications of the research.

Chapter 2 – Democracy, Citizenship, and Youth: A Thematic Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the sources of literature of focus for the study. I then review the literature relevant to young people's civic and political participation in Kenya seeking to establish the conceptual foundations upon which my research project is built. The review identifies key findings and debates on the issues of democracy, participation, and education and their relevance to young people's civic and political engagement. It draws from a wide range of academic sources, reflecting the interdisciplinary and context-specific nature of the issue. The literature reviewed encompasses contributions from political theory, African philosophy, education studies, development practice and youth studies. This interdisciplinary approach is necessary given the diverse ways in which youth participation is shaped - through formal governance structures, cultural and historical legacies, the education system, and global and local discourses on youth, citizenship and development.

2.2 Types of Sources and Rationale for Inclusion

In this section, several types of sources are drawn upon:

1) Academic Literature: peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and other research findings offer foundational and contemporary insights into theories of democracy, participation, citizenship, and youth. The review engages political theorists such as Gutmann, Thomson and Habermas (on deliberative democracy), Verba (on participation), Dahl (on polyarchy), and contemporary scholars of education and post-colonial youth studies. These works are essential in framing the meanings and understandings associated with participation more broadly, while considering their particular relevance to the context of this study.

2) Kenyan-Specific Scholarship and Historical Analyses: Studies focused on Kenya's political evolution provide crucial historical and institutional context. These include analyses of colonial legacies, nation-building efforts, decentralisation, and youth policy.

3) Grey Literature: Policy documents and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) research outputs are reviewed to understand how youth participation is encouraged or constrained in practice. These sources help illuminate the policies, programme strategies and experiences relevant to the African and Kenyan contexts. In some cases, relevant unpublished theses are also consulted, offering analysis of empirical findings in comparable settings.

4) Media and Digital Platforms: Given the centrality of digital tools in contemporary youth activism, selected journalistic accounts, are consulted to capture new and dynamic forms of youth expression and mobilisation.

The following sections are organised thematically to provide clarity and coherence, mapping the conceptual terrain relevant to young people's civic and political participation in Kenya. Below I aim to highlight not only the diversity of scholarly perspectives and empirical findings, but also the richness of other sources contributing to debates around democracy, citizenship and youth participation. This foundation will serve to both contextualise and critically frame the subsequent analysis of youth engagement within the Kenyan context.

2.3 Thematic discussion

2.3.1 Deliberative Democracy

Gutmann and Thomson (2004) present several characteristics and purposes of deliberative democracy which will be useful in framing my analysis. Their broad definition holds that "deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives" (Gutmann & Thomson, 2004, p.3). They identify the "reason-giving requirement" (ibid.) first among its characteristics on the basis that people should be treated "not merely as objects of legislation, as passive subjects to be ruled, but as autonomous agents who take part in the governance of their own society, directly or through their representatives" (ibid.). Accessibility of the reasons so that they are comprehensible is the second characteristic, followed by the binding nature of decisions and, lastly, deliberative democracy should allow for the ability to revisit decisions, and

"the possibility of a continuing dialogue, one in which citizens can criticize previous decisions and move ahead on the basis of that criticism" (p.6).

Other definitions include Chambers' (2003) who holds that deliberative democracy "suggests ways in which we can enhance democracy and criticize institutions that do not live up to the normative standard" (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). It begins, she says, "with a turning away from liberal individualist or economic understandings of democracy and toward a view anchored in conceptions of accountability and discussion" (ibid.). She further points to the focus of deliberative democracy "on the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation" (ibid.). This is an issue on which many researchers and theorists of deliberative democracy turn to the work on discourse theory and communicative action of Jürgen Habermas who, according to Gutmann and Thompson, is "[m]ore than any other theorist…responsible for reviving the idea of deliberation in our time, and giving it a more thoroughly democratic foundation" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p.9).

Offering a "proceduralist view of democracy and deliberative politics", Habermas (1994, p.1) presents discourse theory as an alternative model of deliberative democracy than that which is offered by liberalism or republicanism, though takes, in his own words, "elements from both sides and fits them together in a new way" (p.7.) He claims his discourse theory

> works instead with the *higher-level intersubjectivity* of communication processes that flow through both the parliamentary bodies and the informal networks of the public sphere. Within and outside the parliamentary complex, these subjectless forms of communication constitute arenas in which a more or less rational opinion- and will-formation can take place (p.8, *italics in original*).

Habermas contrasts his discourse theory with liberal theory on the one hand, where "democratic process takes place exclusively in the form of compromises between competing interests" and, on the other hand, with the republican view where "democratic will-formation takes place in the form of an ethical-political discourse" (p.6). He claims discourse theory "integrates these in the concept of an ideal procedure for deliberation and decision-making" (ibid.) which he says exists in "the rules of discourse and forms of

argumentation" (ibid.). He says, "in the final analysis, the normative content arises from the very structure of communicative actions" (ibid.). Communicative action, he describes as being when "one actor seeks rationally to motivate another by relying on the illocutionary binding/bonding effect (*Bindungseffekt*) of the offer contained in his speech act" (Habermas,1992, p.58).

In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas (1992) claims "[w]hat is needed is a "real" process of argumentation in which the individuals concerned cooperate. Only an intersubjective process of reaching understanding can produce an agreement that is reflexive in nature; only it can give the participants the knowledge that they have collectively become convinced of something" (p.67). He distinguishes "rationally-motivated consensus" from "fair compromise" (p.72), privileging the former.

Habermas is also critical of the civic republican model's dependence on the moral character and public-spiritedness of citizens. He argues that such idealism assumes too much of the citizenry, being "dependent on the virtues of citizens devoted to the public weal" (Habermas, 1994, p. 4). This critique is highly relevant in contexts where structural exclusion, economic uncertainty, and political disillusionment challenge the cultivation of such civic virtues - particularly among youth. Habermas does not see legitimacy in virtuous character, but in communicative processes that produce a "general will shared by all concerned, a will that has been divested of its imperative quality and has taken on a moral quality" (Habermas, 1992, p. 74). This moral will is not imposed but emerges through inclusive, rational deliberation - an ideal that remains aspirational in many settings, but which nonetheless provides a critical standard for evaluating existing participatory practices. In the Kenyan context, this perspective invites us to examine the extent to which young people are treated as part of the 'general will' or merely manipulated as instruments of political mobilisation.

John Dewey believes that forming the will of the democratic community

> is a process of thoughtful interaction in which the preferences of citizens are both informed and transformed by public deliberation as citizens struggle to decide which policies will best satisfy and address the commitments and needs of the community (Rogers, 2010a, p.4).

Dewey is ambitious for deliberative democracy where he sees citizens "not merely as authorizing power, but as genuinely authoritative in decision making" (Rogers, 2010b, p.80). But his conception of democracy extends far beyond electoral procedures, positioning it as "the idea of community life itself" (Dewey, 2016 p.175). For Dewey, democracy is sustained not by institutions alone, but by the communicative relations among citizens as they engage in collective enquiry and mutual understanding: "common understanding and thorough communication…is the precondition of the existence of a genuine and effective public" (p. 196-197). He views the formation of the democratic will as a process through which "the preferences of citizens are both informed and transformed by public deliberation" as they confront shared problems (Rogers, 2010a, p. 4). Dewey emphasises that 'publics' emerge when people recognise they are jointly affected by indirect consequences and seek organised responses:

> The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for (Dewey, 2016, p. 69).

This orientation toward lived experience and communicative agency underpins Dewey's critique of technocratic governance. In one of his most pointed assertions, he argues: "No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few" (p. 225). He insists that "the man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches," underscoring the authority of lived experience in defining problems - even if experts are needed to craft solutions (p. 224). Dewey's thinking is thus highly relevant to this study, which explores whether and how young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet are included in democratic problem-solving - not merely as voters or recipients of development, but as 'publics' in their own right, capable of articulating needs and shaping collective futures.

Dewey is not concerned by the dangers of 'majoritarian democracy' (critiqued below) considering that "[m]ajority rule…never is *merely* majority rule" (Dewey, 2016, p.224). He considers in the process of a majority being elected, the minority are placated through "antecedent debates, modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities, the

relative satisfaction given the latter by the fact that it has had a chance and that next time it may be successful in becoming a majority" (ibid.). Clearly, however, the representation of the minority view through the representation of the majority depends very much on the quality and seriousness attached to debates and the sincerity and meaning of subsequent modifications made to reflect the perspectives of the minority. But Dewey contends "the heart of the matter is found not in the voting nor in the counting the votes to see where the majority lies. It is in the *process* by which the majority is formed (Dewey, 1997, p. 189, *my emphasis*). He says:

> the process of finding out the policy of the majority is the process by which the social organism weighs considerations and forms its consequent judgment; that the voting of the individual represents in reality, a deliberation, a tentative opinion on the part of the whole organism (p.190).

Deliberative democracy is, in Dewey's view, therefore, the activity of a 'social organism' which, through the active participation of individuals "approaches most nearly the ideal of all social organization" (p.192).

Despite the western influence in (more recent) political arrangements in Africa, African philosophers, such as Kwasi Wiredu, draw attention to pre-colonial systems of societal structure and identify a "rupture" caused by colonialism "in the integration of the civil with the political aspect of [African] social life" (Wiredu, 1999, p. 33). Contrasts can be drawn between the "pervasiveness of consensus as a mode of group decision-making" (p.35) and the "adversarial approach to politics" (p.39) brought about by the introduction in the post-colonial era of majoritarian democracy. Wiredu contends that "the majoritarian form of democracy seen in the multiparty systems…is drastically antithetic to both our own traditions of democracy and the complexities of our contemporary situation" (p.36).

Wiredu's critique questions the assumption that democratic legitimacy requires electoral victory, suggesting instead that legitimacy may arise through patient deliberation and negotiated agreement. While not idealising precolonial governance - often hierarchical and patriarchal - Wiredu's reflections suggest that indigenous deliberative traditions may offer resources for rethinking democracy in African contexts.

These traditions emphasise reason-giving, moral persuasion, and the authority of process over mandate, aligning in part with contemporary deliberative theory (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1994), while also raising questions about the role of elders, age hierarchies, and communal obligations in structuring public reasoning. Such insights are particularly valuable for understanding how contemporary youth in Kenya engage or disengage from formal participatory mechanisms, and how they may be crafting new, hybrid forms of deliberative practice rooted in local culture. Hybridity and culture are themes further explored below.

2.3.2 The State, "Polyarchy", and the Kenyan Context

Peter Ekeh's 1975 essay, *Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement* draws a useful distinction between what he considers the understandings of citizenship in the Western context and those of post-colonial African society. He proposes "two public realms in post-colonial Africa, with different types of moral linkages to the private realm" [namely] "the primordial public" [and] "the "civic public" (Ekeh, 2012, p.201). His work distinguishes attitudes when it comes to the rights and duties of the citizen in ethnic associations when compared to how the citizen views their rights and duties when it comes to the modern state. He notes the seriousness with which citizens approach their duties and obligations within the primordial public yet, by contrast, a lack of any moral obligation or loyalty when operating in the civic realm. This distinction is particularly relevant to analyses of political participation in Kenya, where attachments to community, ethnicity, and local networks may shape citizens' orientations to the state. However, the extent to which Ekeh's framework adequately captures contemporary youth political engagement remains an open question.

Ani (2018) argues that "deliberative democracy is an important consideration for African nations…considering the divisive effects of aggregative politics on democracies involving multi-ethnic groupings" (Ani, 2018, p.819) and calls "for research on deliberation in Africa to go beyond philosophical discussions, and for empirical scholars to begin to test various arguments that have been made on different sides of the philosophical/theoretical debates about deliberation" (ibid.). He suggests testing

“discursive quality at the levels of interactions between public servants and people’s discussions about their public servants” (p.825). Ani’s intervention is significant in that it focusses on lived, situated practices of deliberation - where power and voice are unevenly distributed and culturally mediated. Yet there remains limited empirical work examining how deliberative practices are experienced by young people in devolved Kenyan contexts, particularly across the formal and informal spaces through which civic and political engagement often unfolds.

The literature offers helpful theoretical insights into democratic practice in Kenya - beyond understandings of electoral participation or institutional design. Concepts such as polyarchy (Dahl, 1971), neopatrimonialism (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994), and “the politics of the belly” (Bayart, 2009) offer important critiques of elite capture and instrumentalised participation, which may have particular relevance for youth in Kenya who may experience the state primarily through exclusion or coercion.

Robert Dahl’s (1971) uses the concept of *polyarchy* to describe “relatively (but incompletely) democratized regimes, or…regimes that have been substantially popularized and liberalized, that is, highly inclusive and extensively open to public contestation” (p.8). Dahl’s analysis, though drawing little evidence from the African colonial or post-colonial experience, nonetheless, offers a valuable lens for examining youth contestation and participation in Kenya. Dahl defines democracy not only in terms of formal institutions like elections and civil liberties, but as the “continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (p. 1). Yet, he also acknowledges that no real-world system fully meets this standard. His work is particularly relevant in the Kenyan context, where youth often experience the state through exclusion, neglect, or coercion, rather than as active, equal participants in public life. While Kenya formally guarantees mechanisms for participation (e.g. public consultations and youth representation), the actual ability of young people to formulate, express, and “have their preferences weighed equally” (p. 2) is frequently undermined by elite capture, lack of access to timely information, and tokenism - among other impediments.

Dahl notes that even polyarchies can systematically deprive certain groups, particularly those who are numerically small, politically weak, or lacking in resources:

> even an inclusive polyarchy can impose a relatively high state of deprivation on a small minority if that minority [...] is, for whatever reasons, weak not only in numbers but in all political resources, skills, and demands. [...] [H]istorically it has been possible to develop and even to sustain over a very long period a dual system that is competitive with respect to the dominant group and hegemonic with respect to a deprived minority (p.94)

This resonates with critiques of Kenyan youth being mobilised for votes or protest, but rarely integrated into sustained policy dialogue or power-sharing. Moreover, Dahl highlights the psychological effects of persistent marginalisation, such as "resignation, apathy, despair, hopelessness, self-denigration, fantasy, millenial dreams, pious acceptance, [and] fatalism" (p.102). These are dispositions often observed among youth disengaged from state-led participatory processes (*see discussion of Tumaini La Vijana* [Young People's Hope] in 6.4 below).

Dahl's argument that inequalities can be normalised and internalised - and that a culture of compliance or resignation may form among the marginalised is especially relevant to this study's exploration of dispositional themes (*see* Chapters 4 & 5):

> A deprived group may well believe that its present inferior condition is an inherent part of the order of things...subject only to change through some ultimate and perhaps apocalyptic redemption. A world-view justifying and "rationalizing" inequality does not persist only because it is to the advantage of the elites who benefit from the status quo. Among the disadvantaged groups themselves, such a self-denying world-view may help to make a miserable and often humiliating existence more bearable and understandable. A group confronted over a long period of time by seemingly ineradicable inequalities may learn to keep its demands low and thus bring them more into line with the harsh limits of the possible (p.100-101).

This draws attention to how power operates not only through exclusion, but through the shaping of what young people believe is possible or worth demanding – important

considerations in the development of my analytical framework where I draw on the work of Lukes (2021) and VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) to develop the power analysis layer of the framework. Dahl's insights help to explain why formal access to participation is not enough, and why deep structural and cultural transformations are needed to make youth engagement genuinely democratic. His analysis is useful in highlighting how formal structures of democracy can coexist with substantive exclusion, especially for marginalised groups. These theoretical insights find echoes in the voices of young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet, who articulate both a desire for political agency but also scepticism about the authenticity and effectiveness of the participatory spaces available to them.

While it is somewhat difficult to map Kenya's democratic trajectory to the "paths to polyarchy" presented by Dahl (1971, p.34), it could be said that the end of Daniel arap Moi's presidency in 2001 represented something of a transition when more of the "classic liberal freedoms that are a part of the definition of public contestation and participation" gradually came to be enjoyed (p.20). However, it was probably only with the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution, the first election under its provisions in 2013, and the subsequent creation of a new democratic infrastructure (including devolved government) in the years that followed 2013, which saw a meaningful transformation from a hegemonic to a more polyarchic dispensation in Kenya. This could be said to resemble more closely Dahl's "shortcut" (p.34) as a path to polyarchy – even if somewhat faltering.

This relatively recent (albeit uncertain) transition points to another issue in the Kenyan context, that of how people have been politically socialised and the marked difference between the social and political context in which adults of thirty-five years and above experienced their formative years and those who are today in their early twenties. Dahl holds that "[t]o believe in the institutions of polyarchy means to believe, at the very least, in the legitimacy of both public contestation and participation" (p.130). It is hard to be sure of the deeply held beliefs of those whose experience of politics and the workings of political institutions come from a time when "opportunities to oppose the government, form political organizations [or] express oneself on political matters without fear of governmental reprisals" (p.20) were far more limited:

> if most of the inhabitants of a country believe that the only proper relation of people to their government is one of complete hierarchy, of rulers to subjects, of command and obedience, the chances that the regime will be hegemonic are, surely, high (p.141).

The point Dahl makes here also signals a potential inter-generational tension in contexts such as this one. This tension has been the subject of extensive analysis in Kenya since the post-election violence of 2007/08, which not only exposed the instrumentalisation of youth in elite-driven conflict but also triggered critical reflection on how inter-generational political socialisation affects democratic expectations, participation and government responses to youth activism (Branch & Cheeseman, 2008; HRW[8], 2008; Kimari et al., 2020).

The continued relevance of neopatrimonial political culture in Kenya helps to explain why legal and institutional reforms aimed at strengthening participatory democracy seem to have yielded limited shifts in practice, particularly from the perspective of youth. Bratton and Van de Walle (1994) argue that transitions from neopatrimonial rule are often superficial because they are deeply conditioned by the practices of the *ancien régime*, in which leaders may have governed through personal loyalty, patronage, and discretionary authority rather than institutionalised norms.

The continuity of personnel, values, and interests poses a major challenge to participatory innovation. In Kenya, this dynamic may contribute to an intergenerational disconnect, where younger citizens - accustomed to digital participation, informal deliberation, and civic activism - confront an older political class still wedded to hierarchical models of governance. The risk, as Bratton and Van de Walle (1994) warn, is that democratic institutions may become controlled by elites who, apart from adopting a new vocabulary, continue to operate according to the norms of the previous regime:

> the nature of the preexisting regime shapes the dynamics and outcomes of political transitions [...] contemporary political changes are conditioned by mechanisms of rule embedded in the ancien regime. Authoritarian leaders in

[8] Human Rights Watch

> power for long periods of time establish rules about who may participate in public decisions and the amount of political competition allowed (p. 454).

These theoretical insights provide an essential foundation for interpreting how young people in Kenya experience, navigate, and respond to the realities of political participation. The findings and analysis chapters draw on these insights to unpack how youth themselves conceptualise participation, and how they contest or conform to the prevailing political culture.

Jean-François Bayart's *The State in Africa* (2009) provides a foundational critique of the nature of power, participation, and exclusion in postcolonial African states - one that is highly relevant to this study of youth political engagement in Kenya. Bayart is sharply sceptical of the democratic transitions in Africa, describing democracy as a "fairy story" that functions less as a transformative project than as "an instrument of internal legitimation and as an international norm" (Bayart, 2009, p. xxiv). Yet, he also concedes that democratic forms might still be reinvented from within Africa's own political trajectories, as part of a broader "history of extraversion" (p. lxix). Among his most salient claims is that African democracies have consistently failed to integrate young people - economically, institutionally, or ideologically – "in spite of the fact that youth are the majority of the population" (p.xxv). Youth remain structurally excluded from the benefits of citizenship, even as their political participation is selectively welcomed for legitimacy or spectacle.

Bayart's theory of extraversion - the practice by which African regimes draw on external resources to reproduce internal dominance - is particularly resonant when examining government-led youth initiatives, civic education programmes, and participation platforms. While these interventions often appear empowering, they can reinforce dependency, elite mediation, and symbolic inclusion. Bayart's critique aligns with Ferguson's (1990) warning against conflating state intervention with social progress, and with the tendency to suppress oppositional forms of action that fall outside sanctioned policy frameworks:

> the most important transformations, the changes that really matter, are not simply "introduced" by benevolent technocrats, but fought for and made through a

> complex process that involves not only states and their agents, but all those with something at stake, all the diverse categories of people who craft their everyday tactics of coping with, adapting to, and, in their various ways, resisting the established social order (Ferguson, 1990, p. 281).

This research takes seriously such critiques by not confining analysis to formal, government-led avenues of youth engagement, but instead exploring how young people participate across formal and informal - and visible and invisible - spaces.

Finally, the metaphor of the "post-colonial rhizome state" (p.xxvii), which Bayart uses to describe the hidden, informal, and dispersed character of postcolonial governance, also proves analytically productive when paired with Bhaskar's depth ontology (*see* Chapter 3). It invites enquiry beneath the surface of observable political acts - into complex systems of elite brokerage, patronage, and moral economies that shape how participation is defined, managed, or subverted. As the findings and analysis chapters of this research lay out, many young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet encounter the state not as a deliberative or responsive actor, but as a diffuse, elusive system of influence where access, voice, and legitimacy remain unevenly distributed.

2.3.3 Political Participation

Foundational definitions of public participation which much subsequent literature refers to are derived from the work of Sidney Verba and his co-authors from the 1960s and 1970s. They define participation as activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at *influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take* (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1978). By their own admission, their definition is intentionally narrow, where focus is on the aim of *influencing* the government, "either by affecting the choice of government personnel or by affecting the choices made by government personnel" (Verba & Nie, 1972, p.2). They talk about "democratic participation" which

> emphasizes processes of influencing governmental policies, not carrying them out; it emphasizes a flow of influence upward from the masses; and, above all, it does not involve support for a preexisting unified national interest but is part of a

> process by which the national interest or interests are created (Verba & Nie, 1972, p.3).

As mentioned, while more recent Europe-focused literature on youth participation continues to rely on definitions put forth by Verba and his co-authors, there is understandably a move towards broadening definitions and distinctions in terminology reflective of the developing complexity of the modern socio-political context. The definition of political participation proposed by Barrett and Zani (2015) is broader, if still familiar. They posit that political participation denotes

> those behaviours that have the intent or the effect of influencing political institutions, processes and decision-making at either the local, regional, national or supranational level. These behaviours may be aimed either directly at influencing the content or the implementation of specific public policies, or more indirectly at influencing the selection of the individuals who are responsible for making those policies (Barrett & Zani, 2015, p.4, *with reference to* Verba, 1995).

Beyond this, they also distinguish two forms of political participation - conventional and non-conventional, the latter they define as activities which take place "outside the electoral arena" and give examples as "signing petitions, participating in political demonstrations, protests and marches, writing political articles or blogs, daubing political graffiti on buildings, etc." (pp.4-5). Much of what they define as "non-conventional" is enabled by modern technological advances especially internet access and the social media. Their proposed "non-conventional" forms of political participation go beyond the narrow focus of Verba et al. (1972) which is on "ways of influencing politics that are generally recognized as legal and legitimate" eliminating "many of the tactics of political protest" (Verba & Nie, 1972, p.3).

Barrett (2012) differentiates political "participation" and political "engagement", the latter he defines as "having an interest in, paying attention to, having knowledge of or having opinions about either political or civic matters. As such, engagement is a psychological matter" (Barrett, 2012, p. 5). It could be argued that these are more passive manifestations of political participation, while more active participation involves participatory *activities*. While Verba and Nie (1972) accept that they "may be important

as sources of participation" they do not include "attitudes toward participation" or "psychological orientations" in their definition of political or democratic participation. Their focus is instead on "actual behavior of citizens in attempting to influence the government" (Verba & Nie, 1972, p.3).

Pontes et al. (2018) agree with the passive/active distinction between engagement and participation holding that "individuals may be cognitively or emotionally engaged without necessarily being behaviorally engaged" (Pontes et al., 2018, p. 4) - suggesting that behavioural (i.e. active) political engagement is synonymous with political participation. They propose that political engagement "should be defined as having interest in, paying attention to, having knowledge or opinions about, being conscious of, proactive about and constantly informed about politics" (p.13). They argue that "when researching young people, political engagement and political participation should be considered as discrete concepts and therefore operationalized as independent concepts" (p.14).

Finally, in her *Literature Review on Youth Political Participation and Political Attitudes*, Weiss (2020) concludes that "[i]t is necessary to develop further youth-specific explanations and definitions of what political participation means" (Weiss, 2020, p.9). She also notes an inconsistency across the literature in the inclusion of "new modes of participation that are increasingly common among younger generations" (p.2).

Taken together, these perspectives illuminate the difficulty of pinning down a stable, universal understanding of political participation, particularly in relation to young people. While Barrett (2012), Verba and Nie (1972), and Pontes et al. (2018) reinforce a distinction between the more passive orientations of "engagement" and the active behaviours of "participation", I believe this distinction is less useful in the Kenyan context where youth agency is often expressed through practices that blur such boundaries. As Weiss (2020) observes, definitions of participation must be youth-specific and responsive to new and emergent modes of involvement. This is especially relevant for this research given that Kenyan youth participate in ways that may be subtle, symbolic, informal, or digitally mediated. For this study, these debates provide a valuable reminder to resist rigid distinctions and instead adopt a more accommodative view that situates youth participation across the many dimensions encountered, such as in formal decision

making, community development, online activism, self-help efforts etc. The literature highlights multiple ways young people express their civic and political presence, rather than prescribing a single definition.

2.3.4 Political Participation and the Kenyan Context

Existing empirical work on civic and political participation in Kenya has expanded significantly since the roll out of the devolved units. However, it remains dominated by survey-based and institutional analyses that conceptualise participation primarily as attendance at formal forums or engagement with state-led processes, such as the County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP), e.g. Mutwiri (2016), Mbithi et al. (2018). Kilonzo (2020), Malusha & Njoroge (2023). While these studies identify important influences on participation, they offer limited insights into how participation is experienced, interpreted, and enacted in everyday social contexts, particularly among youth. Moreover, few studies move beyond descriptive or evaluative accounts to theorise the underlying mechanisms that enable or constrain participation across local political arrangements and informal networks. This leaves a notable gap in explanatory, contextually grounded, and youth-centred analyses of participation as a lived social practice.

Mutwiri (2016) identifies several critical factors that shape whether a citizen chooses to engage - where engagement is considered attendance at CIDP forums. The study's data confirms the problem of "low turnout," noting that across nine sub-counties in Meru County, attendance was a tiny fraction of the total population, with women's participation described as "very minimal" (p.8).

> "it is evident that the attendance of public participation meetings carried out…was way below average compared to the population of each Sub County. In all the meetings women participants attendance was very minimal with the men taking the centre stage. This requires attention in order for the public to be more involved effectively" (Mutwiri, 2016, p.8).

The study notes that 82.6% of respondents agree awareness influences participation, but that rural communities often lack information about the CIDP process and the benefits of involvement: “poor access to information about the CIDP process cause people staying in the rural areas not to participate effectively in the process” (p.18). Empirical results also show that “a majority of the respondents agreed that the multiple roles of women in the family setup limits their partaking” in formal participatory processes (p.55). Furthermore, “young men and women feel excluded in their societies thus demotivated from participating in participating” (ibid.). The study asserts that women’s attitudes towards the process of governance and “lack of confidence on the part of women by the wider society, limits their participation” (p.60). Conversely, “dedicating resources to support matters of importance to the citizens encourages community participation” (ibid.).

Mutwiri (2016) conceptualises participation almost exclusively as attendance at formal CIDP forums. Such an approach risks obscuring the uneven distribution of youth participation across different arenas and gives limited attention to the informal and digitally-mediated spaces in which young people may actually exercise agency and feel heard, including in WhatsApp groups, X Spaces, and in self-help networks. Although the empirical data usefully map surface-level “barriers” and “enablers,” the study remains, by its own description, a “descriptive survey” (p. 36), capturing what is observable at the empirical level through structured questionnaires. This leaves unresolved the deeper question of what underlying mechanisms generate these patterns of participation and exclusion. More broadly, the Meru study tends to frame participation in instrumental terms, as a means of supporting project implementation, rather than exploring participation as a potentially transformative or emancipatory process in the lives of young people themselves.

Mbithi et al. (2018) provides a further example of the tendency within this body of scholarship to privilege survey-based and institutionally focused analyses, often at the expense of deeper explanatory accounts of how participation is shaped. They use secondary data - the Afrobarometer (2015) survey data “to examine the determinants of successful public participation in the Counties” (Mbithi et al., 2018, p. 52). The survey responses are analysed to determine how “successful and meaningful public

participation" (p.57) processes are considered by respondents. The analysis does not consider the depth of deliberation or citizen agency, but survey responses linked to formal state actors, such as the performance of the Governor and the responsiveness of MCAs. The analysis is based, for example, on responses to the survey question 'Do you approve or disapprove of the way [your County Governor or MCA] performed [his/her] job in the past twelve months?' The hypothesis states that "a well-performing Governor [or MCA] increases the likelihood of meaningful public participation" (p.60). This basis for establishing that the deliberative process was either meaningful or successful is somewhat weak. Citizens are treated primarily as respondents evaluating a state service. This framing leaves limited room to understand youth as active agents who participate not only to "influence county decisions" (p. 18), but also through processes of community betterment and self-empowerment.

The policy recommendations of this relatively recent research, however, may provide some useful guidance for the current study. The researchers recommend "deliberative communication that is two-way and oriented towards problem-solving, as opposed to meetings that are restricted to the answering of questions and at which the organizers give no room for dialogue" (p.65). Additionally, they decry the lack of information on important issues for deliberation, contrary to the requirements of national and local legislation.

As with the previous research reviewed, however, Mbithi et al. tend to consider reality in terms of what can be measured in survey responses and "satisfaction levels". This leaves limited room to explain why such statistical patterns exist. From a critical realist perspective, moving beyond this empiricist "flat ontology" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 67) requires attention not only to observable responses, but also to the deeper social relations and forms of power that shape them. In this regard, frameworks such as Lukes' three-dimensional view of power (Lukes, 2021) are valuable because they draw attention to the ways in which invisible forms of power may shape what young people believe they are entitled to demand even before they enter a public forum.

Mbithi et al. (2018) measure "[d]ifficulty in influencing the County decision-making process" (p. 60) as an observable variable, without exploring the deeper structures that

shape such perceptions. As with similar approaches discussed here, the study identifies what is happening at the empirical level but offers limited explanation of why these patterns take the form they do. From a critical realist perspective, expressions of youth frustration cannot be treated as self-sufficient explanations, but instead need to be situated within the wider social, cultural, and political structures that condition participation. Mbithi et al. also argue that "[m]ost if not all County public participation takes place through face-to-face meetings. Thus people who attend such meetings are able to participate and provide their views with the objective of impacting the decision-making process" (2018, p. 61). This assumption narrows participation to formal, face-to-face government spaces and gives insufficient attention to the wider ecosystem of informal and digitally mediated arenas through which meaningful youth engagement may also occur.

Recent research on both Machakos County (Kilonzo, 2020) and Taita Taveta County (Malusha & Njoroge, 2023) further exemplifies the academic tendency toward "descriptive research design" (Kilonzo, 2020, p.51; Malusha & Njoroge, 2023, p.194) that prioritises structured questionnaires and administration-citizen interfaces. These studies again conceptualise participation primarily as attendance at state-led forums, focusing on the CIDP as the central mechanism for engagement. While they provide significant empirical data, they operate within the same "flat ontology" alluded to above that focuses on surface-level events - such as forum turnout and project identification - rather than the deeper structures shaping these actions.

Useful contributions can be gleaned from the research, for example, in Machakos, the empirical data reveals that while 66% of residents participate in project identification, only 10% are involved in budgeting - showing that citizens are effectively locked out of the most critical stages of decision-making. These findings point to the importance of examining whether similar exclusions operate in Elgeyo-Marakwet. In addition, Malusha and Njoroge (2023) provide a stark quantitative baseline for the disconnect between government rhetoric and citizen reality. In Taita Taveta, they report a significant discrepancy between the rating given by county officials of the success of the implementation of the CIDP and local residents' own ratings. The Elgeyo-Marakwet case

provides an opportunity to examine whether similar divergences between official and citizen understandings are present.

In terms of the limitations of these studies, what is again noteworthy in both the Machakos and Taita Taveta County research is the treatment of participation as an instrumental tool for project implementation and for securing state legitimacy:

> active public participation can lead to enhanced quality and transparent decisions on oversight of fiscal management, and…can assist in avoiding delay and extra costs in the implementation of programs, plans, and policies by Machakos County Government" (Kilonzo, 2020, p. 60).

Malusha and Njoroge are even clearer in their instrumental framing, stating that "the public's participation in administrative decision-making or decision-making related to the delivery of services is the main focus" (2023, p. 180). Such formulations narrow participation to an administrative and service delivery purpose, limiting opportunities to consider participation as a process through which young people may seek to redefine civic and political life on different terms, rather than simply secure a place within state-led structures.

Oduor et. al. (2015) reviewed the provisions in the Constitution and legislation on public participation both at the national level and the County level. Frameworks, processes and platforms were examined that facilitate participation and, although a claim is made that the study "assessed citizen participation and engagement in governance" (Oduor et al., 2015, p.2), the reporting is exclusively of structures for participation, and no participant voices are included. This emphasis on formal structures, rather than lived experiences, again reflects a broader tendency in the Kenyan participation literature to prioritise legal frameworks and institutional design over the perspectives of those expected to use them. Although these analyses are valuable for identifying the structures that ostensibly support participation, they may conflate the presence of structures with their actual effectiveness. Additionally, they often overlook how citizens - especially the youth - experience, interpret, or challenge these structures in practice. This broader tendency within the Kenya-focused participation literature highlights the need to move beyond structural accounts toward more empirically grounded analysis of participant voices,

particularly those of young people, whose experience of participation may be shaped less by the formal existence of platforms than by the negotiated and contested character of everyday political life.

In a study exploring women's empowerment through civic engagement, Memusi (2019) shows that while women's inclusion in public bodies may satisfy formal quota requirements, it does so without generating meaningful political agency. One of her FGD participants observed: "We are there in name but not in action" (p. 51). This distinction between nominal inclusion and substantive participation points to a persistent tension between participatory rhetoric and political practice. It suggests the importance of examining whether, when, and under what conditions institutional commitments to participation translate into real influence for young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet.

Memusi paints a vivid picture of the "masculine nature of the public space" (2019, p.48) in Narok and Kajiado Counties and points to "the failure of public participation to challenge unfair power relations, such that for most Maasai women, despite the provision of this affordance for political engagement, decision making largely remains *business as usual"* (pp.57-58) (emphasis in original). These findings provide an important orientation for the present study, which pays particular attention to the dynamics shaping young women's experiences of participation in the Elgeyo-Marakwet context.

Methodologically, Memusi's (2019) analysis draws on Ekeh's theory of the "two publics" (see 2.3.2 above) to explain the persistence of gendered exclusion despite formal institutional reforms. Continued reliance on this model, however, risks overstating the autonomy of the civic sphere in the modern-day Kenyan context and underestimating the extent to which culturally learned behaviours shape participation across settings. This raises the question of whether contemporary youth participation is best understood in terms of differentiated moral domains, or whether it instead reflects a more socially connected and culturally informed form of civic engagement.

Two limitations in Memusi's analysis are particularly important for the present discussion. First, women are treated largely as a broad demographic category, with limited attention to how exclusion may be differently experienced at the intersection of age and gender. This matters in the case of young women, who may face double

marginalisation: at once by masculine *and* older adult domination of the public space. Second, the study is confined to physical arenas such as public forums and forums for the management of public land called Group Ranches. Although these settings provide valuable insights into gendered power relations in these face-to-face settings, they do not illuminate how participatory dynamics may unfold in digitally-mediated environments. These limitations highlight the value of examining whether, and in what ways, virtual civic spaces reshape young women's opportunities for participation and political agency.

Finally, Memusi's (2019) conclusion suggests two important directions for further enquiry. First, she argues that Kenya's gender reform efforts often fail because they do not adequately reflect "the contextual realities of different communities" (p. 63). This highlights the limits of broad, decontextualised accounts of participation and points to the value of examining the hyper-local dynamics through which civic engagement is negotiated in places such as Elgeyo-Marakwet. Second, she notes the potential of "parallel platforms for women's political engagement" (ibid.) but does not pursue in detail how such alternative spaces might operate for other marginalised groups. This raises the question of whether youth-led structures, such as *Tumaini La Vijana*, may similarly provide spaces in which young people formulate and advance their own priorities.

Inuka Kenya, a grassroots social movement, together with the Civic Voice Initiative conducted a largely quantitative survey in 2024 on youth civic and political participation in Kenya. They interviewed over 1,500 youth across three counties. Their findings reveal some of the challenges young people face in civic and political participation in Kenya which are interesting to explore in the specific context of Elgeyo-Marakwet. Several "hindrances" are revealed through the survey such as the negative attitudes of adults to young people expressing themselves in public forums: "young people face dismissive responses like "*Wewe ni mchanga, unajua nini?*" (meaning 'you're too young to know anything')" (Inuka Kenya, 2024, p. 22). The inadequacy of "public awareness and sensitisation" was also pointed out by young people, as a factor hindering their meaningful participation, where civic education programmes "mainly focus on

[participation around] elections", to the neglect of strengthening participation in other governance processes (p.24).

Young people reported that their county governments do not really listen to them, leading to scepticism and mistrust. Many reported feeling their voices and suggestions are not taken seriously in decision-making: "responses reflect a general feeling of scepticism among young people in engaging in civic activities, as well as a lack of trust between them and the authorities…This feeling of being unheard is prominent in all counties" (p.25). While formal structures now exist to facilitate dialogue between authorities and ordinary citizens, and public participation is mandated by law, there are clearly signs of tokenism and a lack of sincerity revealed in this 2024 survey that will be useful to test in the Elgeyo-Marakwet context. Additionally, the survey reported that the main barrier to meaningful participation "is a breakdown in communication between the county government and the young people…[and that] the county governments are not effectively keeping their constituents, particularly young people, informed about their activities and planned events" (p.26). The failure of local authorities to provide adequate and timely information about programmes of public participation is a frequently cited criticism in assessments of pubic participation practice in Kenya (e.g. IBP[9] Kenya, 2020; Ronoh et al., 2018; OGP[10], 2017). This study explores these and other barriers in an effort to understand deeper meanings, motivations and consequences of governance practices the context of Elgeyo-Marakwet.

The survey concludes that "in Kenya, political participation is influenced by power dynamics and hindered by various structural obstacles that discourage young people from participating" (Inuka Kenya, 2024, p.28) and signposts a number of those "structural obstacles" which are explored in this study. Issues identified include the association of politics "with violence and negative energy" and "division among young people along ethnic lines" (p.29), elitism in politics and how only certain permitted groups are considered eligible to lead, and the association of politics with money "that without substantial financial resources, engaging in politics is pointless" (ibid.). While these findings provide a useful empirical reference point, the report remains largely an account

[9] International Budget Partnership
[10] Open Government Partnership

of surface-level events rather than of the underlying generative mechanisms that produce them. From a critical realist perspective, this leaves limited room to examine the deeper "real" domain: the enduring postcolonial and neopatrimonial power relations that may shape why such behaviours occur in the first place. Indeed, the Inuka Kenya report itself concludes that a "focused analysis is needed to understand the barriers limiting [young people's] participation" (p. 34). This points to the value of moving beyond descriptive survey data toward a more explanatory account of how and why youth participation is enabled or constrained, particularly in rural contexts such as Elgeyo-Marakwet, which remain less visible in studies centred on Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu.

2.3.5 Technology and digital media-enabled participation

The emergence of social media as a tool of political agency has radically transformed how youth in Kenya participate in public life. Academics, journalists and other commentators make frequent use of the phrase "tech-savvy youth" in discussing the Gen Z-led wave of activism which began in June 2024 with protests against the Finance Bill. It is a seemingly ubiquitous descriptor for young people in a movement characterised by leaderless, decentralised and digital mobilisation. These youth-led efforts have unfolded largely outside formal participatory mechanisms: "The current resistance campaigns are largely youth-led, online based, decentralised and seen as leaderless, mostly unfolding outside the established political class" (BBC, 2025). Platforms such as WhatsApp, X, TikTok, and Instagram have become vital civic infrastructures: not just for communication and visibility, but for real-time organising, surveillance of state action, and public contestation. As Lagat (2025) notes, these platforms have become "command centres" (para. 10) for youth activism "rewriting the script of civic engagement" (para. 3) through resistance, creativity, and solidarity. In this context, the digital space is not merely an accessory to civic life, but it is front and centre - where youth transform smartphones into political tools or "civic tech" (para. 16). One example of such tech cited by Lagat (2025) is a "barricades app" which served as a resource for young people to navigate physical barriers erected by the police to frustrate their effort to

mobilise in Nairobi city centre: “As Deputy Inspector General Gilbert Masengeli claimed the CBD[11] remained open, firsthand accounts and videos on X revealed otherwise. People posted photos of blocked highways, trekked journeys, and restricted access - painting a raw, unfiltered portrait of life under state clampdown” (Lagat, 2025). She says that young people “have turned platforms into classrooms and battlegrounds, educating peers on constitutional rights, exposing injustices, and coordinating real-time strategies” (ibid.).

This reporting demonstrates how developments in technology and digital media and their exploitation by “tech-savvy youth” have expanded the boundaries of participation by making activism more accessible, visible, and responsive to the immediacy of political events. Digital influencers such as Nyandia Gachago argue that online spaces decentralise information and can bring about “the amplification of even the smallest of voices, giving them a platform to be heard” (Ntoyai, 2024). Survey data suggests that digital mobilisation now plays a central role in political engagement in Kenya, “with 65% of respondents reporting that they relied on social media platforms for updates and developments” with “60% of respondents [having] participated in the protests on June 25, 2025, either by attending in person or by supporting the movement online” (Geopoll, 2025). However, while digital spaces have undoubtedly opened new arenas for youth voice and agency, they also come with risks. As Ogenga (2024) cautions in a recent blog post, social media is a “double-edged sword” - just as it “has opened space for citizen participation and engagement”, it can also fuel disinformation, hate speech, and electoral violence: “social media”, he claims “was used to incite hatred and violence during [recent] elections” (Ogenga, 2024).

The recent academic literature, then, considers both the emancipatory and destabilising potentials of digital engagement. Kipkoech (2023) explores this tension by framing his analysis within the "competing theories" (p.873) of cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism. His study “fails to offer any support…to the “revolutionary” impact of digital media use on political engagement” and "finds that social media has no significant relationship with political participation in Kenya" (p.880). However, he acknowledges that

[11] CBD – Central Business District (i.e. city centre)

his sample had a mean age of 37 and notes that significant associations are more likely to be found in younger samples who are "more zealous social media users" (p.880). It is also notable that his data sample is “from the 2016 Afrobarometer Round 6 on the quality of democracy and governance in Kenya” (p.872), raising questions about how far the findings capture more recent and youth-specific forms of digitally-mediated participation.

Kipkoech’s scepticism regarding the democratic potential of social media also appears tied to a relatively narrow definition of participation. He conceptualises participation primarily in terms of activities intended to affect government action, measured through attending campaign rallies or meetings, persuading voters, working for a party, and contacting officials. This electoral and institutional lens treats participation largely as something that occurs within the formal political system. Such an approach risks overlooking forms of political agency that are informal, digitally-mediated, and oriented not only towards direct influence on government, but also towards identity, community, critique, and discursive engagement. This is particularly important in relation to younger citizens, for whom platforms such as X Spaces and WhatsApp may function as significant arenas of civic and political expression beyond the state-centred activities captured in Kipkoech’s measures.

Twinomurinzi (2024) explores digitally-enabled participation in Kenya using social media posts (from X) on 20th June 2024 identified with selected hashtags. He presents digital platforms (X, Facebook, Signal, Telegram) as "strategic" and "decisive" tools (p.1) that “bypass traditional media gatekeepers” (p.8), enabling "mass grassroots mobilisation" (p.1) and allowing historically marginalised voices to amplify dissent. He argues these platforms enable young people, particularly those associated with the Gen Z movement, to construct powerful political narratives through storytelling and infographics. At the same time, he acknowledges the risks of “surveillance, control, and exclusion” (p. 2), pointing to the ambivalent character of digitally mediated participation.

Twinomurinzi’s analysis is particularly valuable in treating themes such as the emancipatory potential of social media, leaderlessness as a political strategy, and the articulation of grievance through digital platforms. However, its focus on a single protest

moment and on youth-generated online content necessarily offers a more event-specific account. It leaves more open questions about how such dynamics are experienced over time, how they play out beyond urban and protest-centred settings, and how state actors interpret and respond to digitally mediated forms of participation. Twinomurinzi himself points to the need for future studies to examine "the government's perspective, including their strategies and use of digital technologies and platforms to respond to the protests and manage governance" (2024, p. 13). This highlights an important gap in the emerging literature, namely the need for research that places youth digital participation in dialogue with official institutions and broader local governance processes.

Omanga (2019) and Ouku (2023) are two studies which explore specifically WhatsApp participatory dynamics in Kenya. They provide useful insights inviting further examination of key issues in my context, while also highlighting certain analytical and empirical limitations.

Omanga (2019) finds that debate within the WhatsApp groups he observed "revolved around the performance of political leadership in the county and its perceived implications for Nakuru County" (p.181). He also notes a "deliberate effort among members to educate themselves on the various roles and functions of the devolved units in the new county government" (ibid.). This suggests that such groups may serve not only as spaces for political debate, but also as sites of civic learning and informal political education. Omanga further observes that, although the WhatsApp group "is a digitally convened public, it is not bound to the digital realm, but periodically translates voice to other civic engagement on the ground" (2019, p. 184). The distinction between online and offline political action, he argues, was "often blurred", and better understood as "a continuum where online activity was directly aimed at impacting on actual social conditions" (ibid.). This is an important intervention because it emphasises the political significance of digital publics not simply as arenas of expression, but as spaces that may shape action beyond the platform itself. He argues, "the social political changes spearheaded by [WhatsApp] groups as alternative 'publics' cannot be ignored, and their actual impact requires further research" (2019, p. 187).

Omanga (2019) however, does not consider how participation may be shaped by gendered dynamics, leaving unresolved questions about differential access, voice, and influence within such spaces. This points to the importance of examining how cultural norms and gendered power relations may constrain women's participation, even in ostensibly open digital spaces.

On the other hand, Ooko's (2023) study of two WhatsApp "communities" in western Kenya, does explicitly note that "there were fewer female than male members" (p.513-4) in the groups she observed, but does not explore the underlying reasons for this disparity. Her study, nevertheless, offers several substantive insights of clear relevance. Drawing on her observations, Ooko (2023) concludes that "proximity to power and political leaders" has generated heightened interest and participation in politics by rural citizens as devolved governance has created opportunities for them to have a greater say over service delivery, making the county level "a new site of power" (p. 523).

She further argues that the presence in these groups of local powerholders such as the MCA, county officials, the MP, and the Chief creates a "political frontier which positions the ordinary citizen (we) against a constructed enemy (them) where ordinary citizens demand direct accountability" (p. 518). These observations are important because they suggest that WhatsApp-based engagement may expand opportunities for participation while also reshaping political identities and relationships to authority. At the same time, they leave open questions about whether similar dynamics are evident in other rural settings, and about the deeper mechanisms through which such relational identities are produced, sustained, or transformed in online interaction.

Although Ooko (2023) does not explicitly define the term "political participation", her analysis appears to treat political participation as any and all contributions made within the ward-level WhatsApp groups she observes "which [were] formed for political interest" (p.513). This raises an important conceptual question, since not all activity within such groups necessarily constitutes political participation in a meaningful sense. As Omanga (2019, p. 186) notes, digital spaces may also contain elements of "triviality", while at other times they may actually *constrain* participation through practices such as the "personal attacks on individuals" he identifies (p. 187). Ooko's analysis is therefore

valuable in showing the participatory significance of WhatsApp communities, but it also leaves open questions about how participants themselves understand engagement in such spaces, what kinds of activity they consider political, and under what conditions digital interaction enables, dilutes, or constrains civic and political participation. Relatedly, while Ooko's concern is with "maximalist participation within the WhatsApp communities" (2023, p. 507), less attention is given to how such online engagement may connect to, shape, or be shaped by offline civic and political activity. This wider question of participation across, rather than only within, digital platforms remains an important area for further enquiry.

2.3.6 Educational Pathways to Civic and Political Participation

This section incorporates a discussion of formal, school-based "citizenship education", non-formal extra-curricular activities, and informal "civic education" in a range of educational contexts with the potential to influence civic and political participation. Formal civic or "citizenship education" refers to school- or college-based teaching and learning within the formal education system. Non-formal civic learning refers to organised or semi-organised learning outside the formal curriculum, often through extra-curricular activities that remain linked to institutional settings. Informal civic learning refers to the more diffuse, socially embedded, and experiential processes through which political knowledge, norms, and agency are acquired in everyday life, including through peers, community spaces, work, and digital interaction. While these categories are analytically distinct, in practice the boundaries between them are often porous, and some spaces may combine non-formal and informal elements. I draw on empirical literature that captures the direct and indirect effects of formal education, extracurricular activities and informal learning on participation.

Research consistently finds strong associations between education and participation. Campbell (2009) refers to education's "ubiquity as a control variable in models of civic and political participation" (p.771), while Persson (2015) calls it "one of the 'usual suspects' in political behaviour research" (p.700). Disagreement persists, however, about the mechanisms through which this relationship operates. While dominant

models emphasise formal schooling, civic skills, and institutional opportunities, emerging evidence suggests that relational, experiential, and network-based learning environments may be important but remain underexamined, particularly in non-Western youth contexts.

A key point of reference in this debate is Verba, Schlozman and Brady's *Voice and Equality* (1995) examining how people come to be politically active. Based on an original survey of 15,000 individuals, their seminal work explains how inequality in participation results from a number of factors, prominent among them being access to resources such as education. The central contention of Verba et al. is that "those who wish to take part also need the resources that provide the wherewithal to participate" (1995, p.3) and that "education plays an important role in this process of resource accumulation" (p.18). Verba et al. hold that "studies of political activity emphasize the strength of the relationship between formal education and participation" (1995, p.420). Their formulation, however, reflects the wider tendency in participation research to privilege formal education as a primary route into civic and political action.

Much of the literature on civic learning has examined it through formal institutional environments. One regularly cited cross-national dataset on civic learning, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), claims to be "the largest international study on civic and citizenship education ever conducted" (Schulz, 2010, p.4). Based on data collected from over 200,000 students, teachers, high school principals, their findings suggest that "school experiences positively influence basic political engagement but *not more active involvement in forms of conventional civic-related participation*" (Schulz et al., 2010, p.257, *my emphasis*).

Within this largely school- and college-centred literature, some studies argue that education may have direct effects on later democratic engagement. In her study of a cohort of college graduates who received their baccalaureate degree during the 1992–1993 academic year, Hillygus (2005) found that the

> effects of a college curriculum on future engagement are especially notable. A social science curriculum has a consistent, positive and statistically significant effect on both measures of political engagement…The impact of a humanities

> curriculum is somewhat smaller and less consistent, but also tends to find a positive relationship with future participation (p.37)

Her overall conclusion is that "it seems plausible that a college education, in and of itself, may directly affect democratic behavior" (p.41). This work is useful in showing that formal curricular experiences may themselves shape participation, even if the wider debate remains contested.

Other studies suggest, however, that education's political effects may lie less in the formal curriculum than in the social and extra-curricular experiences that educational settings make possible. Drawing on life-history interviews with political and social leaders in the Philippines, Schweisfurth et al. (2018) demonstrate that higher education's contribution to political agency often lies less in the formal curriculum than in the social networks, "bridging capital" (p.2), and extra-curricular experiences a higher education enables. Their findings suggest that the leadership capacities of the leaders of political and social movements interviewed were frequently developed *outside* classrooms and sometimes even *despite* the formal curriculum:

> The sites for these interactions were rarely named as the lecture theatre or seminar room, where the prevailing pedagogies distanced students from each other. Rather, extra-curricular activities of all kinds created opportunities for interaction and for the exercise of leadership. These acted as platforms for personal development and conscientisation as well as exposure to political or in some cases underground movements (p. 6).

Their findings are important because they shift attention from formal curriculum to the relational and participatory spaces that surround it.

Regardless of the "frustrating, divided picture" (Persson, 2015. p.699) which research on the causal link between education and political participation seems to present, studies have tended to focus in large part on institutional settings. Even where scholars move beyond the formal curriculum, they often continue to examine politically formative experiences within educational settings or among relatively elite actors. Far less attention has been paid to informal, peer-led, civic learning spaces, particularly in Global South contexts. This leaves underexplored the possibility that political agency is

cultivated through youth-driven networks, mentoring practices, and community-embedded initiatives rather than formal instruction, or social experiences in educational settings alone. Addressing this gap is central to the present study.

Verba et al. contend that the "development of civic skills does not cease with the end of schooling but can continue throughout adulthood" (1995, p. 310). This is an important insight for understanding participation beyond the domain of formal civic education, particularly where learning may continue through everyday social experience. In this respect, their discussion of the "non-political institutions of adult life" - defined as "the workplace, voluntary associations, and churches" (Verba et al., 1995, p. 307) - is especially relevant. It suggests the importance of examining the adult institutions and social settings through which young people continue to acquire civic knowledge, political dispositions, and participatory skills after leaving formal education. Such an approach is particularly useful in contexts where young people are navigating employment, unemployment, and associational life, and where informal learning may play a significant role in shaping civic and political engagement.

Verba et al. (1995) further suggest how relevant institutions might be identified, namely as settings that expose young people "to political cues, even in the context of endeavors having no connection to politics. Wherever people are brought together…they may chat about politics" (p. 370). This perspective broadens the analytical lens beyond explicitly civic or political institutions to include the everyday settings in which young people gather, interact, and exchange views. Relevant sites may therefore extend to youth group meetings, social gatherings, workplaces, *boda boda* stages, sporting environments, and other communal spaces that "provide exposure to political stimuli" (p. 307). The significance of these sites lies in the possibility that civic learning may occur not through formal instruction, but through routine interaction, observation, and discussion.

Research on such informal sites of civic learning remains limited, particularly in the Kenyan context. One important exception is Finkel et al.'s (2012) study of the National Civic Education Programme II (NCEP II), a nationwide Kenyan initiative that ran from April 2006 to September 2007. A structured, donor-supported programme, it was implemented by 43 Kenyan civil society and religious institutions that "conducted a wide

variety of activities, including workshops, village theater performances, informal meetings in churches and mosques, cultural gatherings, and other public events" (p.54). Finkel et al. (2012) define civic education programmes as those that "seek to provide citizens with knowledge about how the political process works, to encourage active participation, and to instill values such as tolerance and support for individual liberties" (p.53). Although this study was conducted based on 2008 data, predating the rise of more digitally mediated forms of participation that now characterise much Kenyan youth engagement, it remains relevant in showing that civic learning can occur beyond formal schooling and in varied community-based settings.

Finkel et al. (2012) critique the diffuse and short-term nature of many of the civic education activities evaluated, some lasting only a few hours, arguing that meaningful "value change" requires more intensive methods. Their findings support "an emerging pattern in civic education evaluation research, that donor-sponsored education programs can be relatively effective agents of political empowerment, but are typically much less effective agents of value change" (p.63). This critique is valuable as it directs attention towards more sustained, relational, and socially embedded sites of civic learning, including peer-led and everyday settings that fall outside formal programme structures.

More directly, Finkel et al. conclude that their findings "suggest a complex relationship between political context and civic education impact that future research needs to explore more fully" (2012, p. 64). This observation is especially relevant to contexts such as Elgeyo-Marakwet, where the effects of civic learning are likely to be shaped by local political dynamics which present both opportunities and constraints. The key question therefore not only how and where young people learn about civic and political participation, but also the extent to which the surrounding political environment facilitates or frustrates the agency such learning may generate.

2.3.7 Youth studies

The field of post-colonial youth studies offers valuable insights into the structural and symbolic exclusions faced by African youth, including in Kenya. Abbink (2005)

characterises many young Africans as trapped in a condition of social marginality and institutional invisibility, exacerbated by the collapse of traditional structures and the failure of post-independence regimes to create new pathways for meaningful integration. He writes, “most of Africa’s young people are no longer growing up in the relatively well-integrated societies” and instead face precarious futures in fractured urban and rural landscapes where “only faint traces of social order and cultural integrity still exist” (Abbink, 2005, p. 2). In such contexts, youth experience a “lack of constructive social incentives” (ibid.) and often struggle to find stable economic, political, or civic roles. As a result, a generational cohort that is numerically dominant becomes politically marginal, while government and society fail to address their exclusion or treat them as full citizens. This broader diagnosis resonates with concerns explored in Elgeyo-Marakwet, where youth are frequently present in political discourse yet remain only partially included in decision-making processes.

While acknowledging this marginalisation, Abbink (2005) insists it would be a mistake to deny “African youth intentionality of action and agency” (p.2). He advocates a view of youth agency that is attentive to both their actions and the structural conditions that shape them. Youth, he argues, “are neither universally manipulated nor passive actors in a world designed by others but individuals who are trying to chart their own course” (p. 9). This insistence on agency is valuable because it invites analysis of how young people participate beyond formal institutions, navigate patronage pressures, and pursue civic and political action in ways that may be improvised, strategic, or only partially visible within official participatory spaces.

A further strength of Abbink’s analysis lies in his treatment of generational tension as a political phenomenon. He suggests that in many post-colonial African states, youth exclusion is bound up with the continued dominance of older elites and with political systems that restrict entry into formal power:

> youth, while forming a numerical majority, are in a situation of dependency, economically marginalized, and feel excluded from formal power and prestige, even when the time has come for them to become part of established society (p.11).

This helps situate youth marginalisation not simply as a matter of failed service provision or unemployment, but as part of a wider system of authority. His discussion of neo-patrimonial governance is especially relevant here, since it points to the deeper structures through which access and belonging is organised. For a critical realist study, this is helpful because it directs attention beyond observable patterns of participation to the underlying mechanisms and historically negotiated relations that shape what forms of action become possible.

Abbink's thinking is especially useful to this study in combining three responses to 'the problem of youth', that is, the agency-oriented, the interventionist, and the "descriptive-analytic" (p. 10) - which together support this study's critical realist approach. Rather than focusing exclusively on youth "voice" or formal inclusion, this research seeks to uncover how young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet assert autonomy, resist co-optation, and creatively navigate a political landscape defined by what Abbink calls "rigid, conservative, and often vertically organized" patronage networks (p. 11). Their actions are set within broader historical and structural forces - what Abbink describes as the "the crisis or decline of 'neo-patrimonial' state governance itself, with its zero-sum game politics, its exclusivist nature, its 'extraversion', its educational failure, and its repressive policies" (p.24) and the "overproduction of youth" in a state with limited absorptive capacity (p.16).

Although Abbink's continental framing remains broad, and requires supplementation by more localised and differentiated analysis attentive to context, gender, and the specific practices through which youth agency is enacted, his contribution remains highly pertinent. His nuanced account of African youth as structurally constrained yet agentic, and his insistence on embedding youth experience within broader political and historical realities, align closely with this study's critical realist commitment to understanding both what is observable and what lies beneath. His attention to both deep-rooted patterns of governance and the lived realities of marginalised youth helps guide this research beyond policy prescriptions or participation metrics, toward a more grounded understanding of how young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet actively navigate, reinterpret, and occasionally disrupt the political order they have inherited. For these reasons, Abbink's work is indispensable to this study's aim of connecting structure, agency, and meaning in the

analysis of youth civic and political participation in Kenya. I also take seriously his assertion that "[r]esearch and writing on youth in Africa must also inform public debate and policy formation, and thus contribute to providing youth with the social space and agency that they need" (pp. 25–26). While mindful of the limitations and constraints of research in effecting structural change, I nonetheless hold the hope that the work undertaken in this study might contribute to enlarging the space available to young people, and to affirm their rightful place as agents within Kenya's civic and political life.

Donal Cruise O'Brien's (1996) *A Lost Generation? Youth Identity and State Decay in West Africa* contains several highly relevant themes that resonate with my study of youth civic and political participation in Kenya - particularly with respect to the intersections of inter-generational tensions, political exclusion, education, and resistance. Even though the focus is West Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, many of the dynamics he discusses have strong contemporary parallels in Kenya. His argument, for example, that African youth are caught in a condition of post-school marginalisation - economically dependent, politically disenfranchised, and culturally alienated - mirrors contemporary Kenyan narratives. The notion of a "lost generation" (Cruise-O'Brien, 1996, p. 56) captures the sense of prolonged "waithood" (Honwana, 2012, p.4) experienced by many young Kenyans: out of school, out of formal employment, and struggling for recognition as full social and political actors. This framing is helpful in signalling that an understanding of youth experiences of powerlessness requires consideration of the postcolonial context of state decay and elite disconnection.

Reflective of much of the scholarship on youth in a postcolonial African context, Cruise-O'Brien contrasts the context in which a post-independence generation were socialised with that of their successors, speaking directly both to earlier points raised here about the inter-generational tensions created as a result of socialisation under contrasting political norms, and the "distinct predicament" that the youth of today find themselves in:

> A generational contrast can thus be made between those who grew to adulthood in the first two decades of African independence (1960-80), and their successors who see their 'youth' as something which is at risk of becoming indefinitely

> prolonged. This contrast has its material definition: economic independence, to have enough resources to marry and set up one's own family, is the fundamental aspiration of youth in West Africa as elsewhere in the world. In contemporary West Africa, however, for most young people the realisation of this aspiration (which many in their parents' generation could take for granted) seems to be a near impossibility. Youth continues to aspire to adulthood, to an escape from the dependence of a junior status (Cruise-O'Brien, 1996, pp.57-58).

Cruise-O'Brien's observations align with the interest in this research in how older political elites socialised under hegemonic regimes struggle to relate to today's youth, who face very different structural conditions. As with Abbink (2005, above), he does not reduce youth to passive victims. He draws attention to the "ambivalence" of youth politics (p. 56), where resistance often emerges not through organised ideological movements but through uncoordinated and sometimes contradictory forms of action - including protest, looting, or alignment with populist figures. He notes, for example, that youth engage in "the politics of the powerless" (ibid.) - a phrase that captures the informal, tactical, and digital modes of engagement evident in Kenya's recent Gen Z mobilisation (see references to Omweri (2024) and Okibe (2024) below). His work also illuminates the frequently noted intergenerational tension at the heart of African political cultures, where youth are symbolically central but substantively peripheral. These insights complement Abbink's (2005) critique of rigid generational hierarchies and reinforce this study's attention to how young people negotiate participation within political structures that are formally open but culturally and structurally exclusionary. Cruise-O'Brien's focus on youth as both products and critics of postcolonial state formation thus remains an important analytical contribution in understanding how Kenyan youth articulate agency in contexts shaped by elite domination, cultural norms and economic challenges.

To supplement the broader African focus of Abbink and Cruise O'Brien, several Kenya-focused sources offer original insights into structural and symbolic exclusions. Kimari et al. (2020), introducing a series of articles on 'Youth, the Kenyan state and a politics of contestation', highlight the Kenyan state's central role in the deliberate construction and politicisation of youth as "criminals" or "radicals" (p.691) with the aim of delegitimising their grievances. Kimari et al. present research demonstrating how youth navigate

structural violence through creative "politics-from-below" (2020, p.692), inhabiting spaces beyond formal institutions like parties, legislatures, official civic forums, or recognised leadership structures. The “modes and nodes not often considered” (ibid.) include popular urban songs, poems, jokes, comedy sketches, plays, everyday Sheng[12] conversations, and social media posts. By treating such discursive, cultural, relational, and locally improvised spaces as political, Kimari et al. expand the parameters of what counts as politics in ways “often ignored in conventional analyses of African politics” and thereby “provide for a more diverse understanding of youth politics” (2020, p. 699). This perspective is valuable in highlighting the need to take seriously everyday spaces of interaction as arenas of political learning and expression, including settings such as tea shops, pool halls, and sports grounds. It also raises the question of how these dynamics may present differently in rural and devolved contexts, rather than in the predominantly urban settings that frame much of the series of articles they refer to.

Omweri (2024) and Okibe (2024) both explore the June 2024 ‘Gen Z’ protests in Kenya and interpret them as evidence of the growing strength and influence of ‘youth activism’ across the country’s socio-political landscape. Omweri argues that Gen Z activism is “reshaping the political landscape, giving rise to a more dynamic, diverse, and citizen-driven democratic system that promises greater inclusivity and participation in policy process” (2024, p.10). Okibe is even more optimistic, suggesting that the emergence of the Gen Z movement marks a “potential shift in the balance of power between the government and civil society, with youth activism emerging as a critical force in shaping policy” (2024, p.150). While their contributions may risk “over-celebrating youth agency” as cautioned by Kimari et al. (2020, p.693), these accounts are a useful counterweight to accounts that emphasise youth powerlessness, such as Cruise-O’Brien (1996) (see above).

Omweri (2024) and Okibe (2024) highlight the role of online, digital and technology-enhanced activism in promoting young people’s engagement. They suggest the use of social media, online platforms and apps can amplify marginalised voices, increase political engagement and promote transparency, accountability, and citizen

[12] Sheng is an acronym for Swahili and English slang, used primarily among urban youths.

participation. As Omweri argues, Gen Z's mobilisation demonstrates the potential for technology to expand the reach of political voice, while Okibe similarly finds that online campaigns "were complemented by physical protests, creating a hybrid model of activism that maximized impact" (p.149). These studies draw attention to the possibility that online mobilisation may extend into real world participation, rather than remaining confined to the digital sphere alone.

These studies are, however, largely episodic, focusing on the high-profile 'Gen Z' protests triggered by the Finance Bill 2024. This leaves unexamined how such dynamics may unfold over time or how digitally mediated forms of engagement intersect with the routine management of public affairs beyond moments of national protest. Their relatively narrow empirical base also limits what can be said about the longer-term implications of digital activism for governance and participation in everyday settings. As such, the literature points to the importance of more sustained qualitative enquiry into how youth activism is translated, or not translated, into ongoing forms of civic and political participation at the local level.

The British Council's *Next Generation Kenya* (2018) survey offers valuable large-scale empirical evidence on the conditions facing young people in Kenya and documents wider patterns of structural and symbolic exclusion. Among other findings, it identifies a profound sense of "voicelessness", with 60% of youth aged 19 to 24 "convinced that they are not listened to" (British Council, 2018, p. 46). This figure rises to 74% in Nairobi, while in focus group discussions, not a single participant reported feeling that they personally had a voice. The report also suggests that youth participation is often confined to symbolic or ceremonial roles rather than meaningful involvement in decision-making: "it appears that while young people are invited to and expected to attend ceremonial activities…they are often excluded from more responsible roles involving decision-making and implementing development plans" (p. 48). These findings provide important empirical evidence of youth marginalisation in Kenya, while leaving less explored the deeper mechanisms through which such voicelessness is produced and sustained.

The study further reports that 75% of young respondents agreed that "knowing people in high places is critical to getting a job" (British Council, 2018, p. 41). It characterises wider

structures as marked by “blockages” and as “rigged” (p. 11), with many young people perceiving the system as “stacked against youth” (p. 40). The report links these experiences of economic exclusion and unequal access to livelihoods to young people’s limited access to civic and political decision-making, suggesting that exclusion operates not only through material disadvantage but also through the shaping of expectations. It also identifies a clear gendered dimension, noting that 49% of young women were neither in school nor employed, compared to 37% of young men, and linking this disparity to factors such as early pregnancy and marriage. Young women were described as likely to “bear the brunt” (p. 25) of domestic and child-rearing duties, to face discrimination in seeking employment, and to encounter insecurity across homes, schools, workplaces, and public spaces. Some described office work as a “boys’ club” (p. 41), while others reported sexual coercion in hiring and harassment at work. These findings offer a valuable empirical map of youth dissatisfaction and constraint in Kenya, but leave less explored the deeper social and cultural mechanisms through which exclusion is normalised, internalised, and differently experienced across gender.

2.4 Conclusion

Together, the bodies of literature reviewed - spanning deliberative democracy, polyarchy, participation, education, and youth studies - highlight the complexity of understanding youth civic and political participation in contemporary Kenya. The literature reveals persistent tensions between formal guarantees and lived experience, symbolic inclusion and real influence, and older elite political cultures and emerging youth practices.

This review also exposes significant limitations in the existing scholarship. Empirical participation studies frequently catalogue behaviours or barriers without probing the underlying mechanisms that generate them. They profile the differentiated experiences of male and female participants in open, deliberative spaces, without seeking to understand the dispositional forces at play that motivate certain behaviour and experiences. Digitally-mediated spaces are similarly described, without probing the reasons why certain situations manifest in particular contexts. These limitations point to an explanatory gap: while we know a great deal about the visible forms of youth

participation, and about the formal structures that condition them, we know far less about the deeper generative processes - structural, cultural, and dispositional - that shape how young people negotiate political authority and enact participation in practice. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to document participation, but to explain how it becomes possible, meaningful, or constrained within a particular political context. This review thus underscores the need to go beyond visible structures and events to engage with the deeper mechanisms, meanings, and dispositions that shape how young people relate to the state, to political authority, and to each other.

It is precisely this need that calls for a critical realist framework. Critical realism offers an ontological and methodological orientation that provides an organising framework capable of responding. By distinguishing between observable events and the deeper mechanisms that generate them, it provides a means of moving beyond surface descriptions toward a layered account of how youth civic and political participation is enabled or inhibited. The next chapter therefore introduces critical realism as the philosophical grounding for the study, establishing the conceptual foundations necessary to investigate the generative mechanisms underlying youth participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County.

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Foundations for Understanding Youth Participation in Kenya

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter demonstrates that existing scholarship on youth civic and political participation in Kenya provides valuable but incomplete insights. Deliberative democratic theory clarifies the ideals and procedural aspirations of inclusive participation; the literature on public participation examines the institutional architectures and procedural realities through which such participation is organised; work on formal, non-formal, and informal civic learning sheds light on the processes through which young people acquire political knowledge, dispositions, and capacities for engagement; and youth studies foregrounds the structural, generational, and symbolic exclusions that shape young people's position within political and civic life. Yet, taken together, this literature remains analytically fragmented. It tends either to prescribe what participation ought to look like, describe where and how it occurs, or identify barriers to youth inclusion, without adequately explaining the root causes that see participation differentially enabled or constrained in lived contexts. The central challenge, therefore, is not only to document youth participation, but to explain how particular configurations of structure, power, and agency produce it. Addressing this challenge requires a clear articulation of the philosophical grounding of the study.

Theory permeates every stage of the research process, not only shaping the questions asked but also orienting enquiry toward the deeper structures and mechanisms that give rise to what is observable. In this project, I have endeavoured to ensure that my research questions remain in continual dialogue with my overarching theoretical orientation and with the background assumptions that accompany it. In what follows, I make explicit the ontological and epistemological commitments that constitute the theoretical orientation for this study, recognising their influence on both interpretation and explanation. While perspectives on post-coloniality and youth agency also inform my orientation, the analysis is first grounded within the broader research paradigm - or meta-theory - of critical realism, within which the study is situated.

3.2 Critical Realism (CR)

The critical realist paradigm is, for me, deeply compelling - particularly in its rejection of scientistic positivism as inadequate for understanding the social world. This resonates strongly with my own doubts about surface-level policy or programmatic accounts of youth participation in Kenya, which often seek measurable "impact" while ignoring the complex, layered structures that shape civic and political engagement.

Roy Bhaskar (2008) describes the aim of (social) scientific research in terms that align with my approach to this project:

> Science is concerned neither with the incessant accumulation of confirming facts (or the incessant search for falsifying ones), nor even with its own growth and development, but rather with the understanding of the different mechanisms of the production of phenomena in nature (Bhaskar, 2008, p.163).

This insight is central to how I approach youth civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County - not as a set of isolated events (attending forums, meeting in youth groups, engaging on WhatsApp), but as outcomes of deeper social, political, and cultural mechanisms. CR, as an over-arching meta-theory, provides a valuable framework for exploring these layered realities. It helps me move beyond describing what youth do, to investigating why and under what conditions they act - or are constrained from acting.

From a critical realist perspective, the goal of social scientific research is not to predict behaviour or outcomes but to explain the generative mechanisms that underlie observable phenomena. Bhaskar (2008) describes the researcher's objective as seeking to "identify and describe...some interesting and significant object of inquiry, without supposing that this will enable [them] to make deductively successful predictions" (p.142). This is particularly relevant in the context of Elgeyo-Marakwet County, where patterns of participation are shaped by complex, often opaque structures: cultural issues, issues of livelihoods and well-being, county-level political dynamics, and histories of marginalisation or exclusion.

CR sees the social world as fundamentally open in nature, one which cannot be analysed or fully understood using methods like those of a natural scientist in a controlled laboratory. In Elgeyo-Marakwet, this openness is manifest in the unpredictability of youth organising, for example, informal X Space mobilisation may lead to coordinated protest - or fizzle out entirely, depending on wider political dynamics. A critical realist lens helps me consider these variables and still aim for explanatory depth.

3.2.1 'Closed' v 'Open' Systems

Bhaskar (2008) defines a 'closed system' "as one in which a constant conjunction of events obtains; i.e. in which an event of type a is invariably accompanied by an event of type b" (p.70) but, he states, "it is only under conditions that are experimentally produced and controlled that a closure, and hence a constant conjunction of events, is possible" (p.65). He says, "closure thus depends upon either the actual isolation of a system from external influences or the constancy of those influences" (p.74).

The inappropriateness of assuming such closure in social research is self-evident. Social systems - particularly those involving political behaviour, aspirations, and identity - are inherently open. In Elgeyo-Marakwet County, youth engagement is shaped by fluctuating conditions: local events, education or work commitments, shifting political loyalties, the emergence of new digital platforms or even developments on the national political scene. These influences cannot be isolated or held constant. Bhaskar's observation of "the non-availability of universal closures" (p.104) therefore feels not just theoretically sound but is reflected in the everyday realities I observe.

In the context of youth political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet, it is not possible to isolate single interventions or factors - such as civic education efforts - as "treatments" that produce predictable outcomes. Participation is always mediated by a constellation of contextual conditions, for example, the extent of support for local leaders, economic issues, gender norms, or historical marginalisation. A critical realist perspective helps me resist the temptation to seek constant conjunctions or universally applicable results. Instead, I focus on uncovering the generative mechanisms - many of them hidden or

obscured - that might help explain when, why, and how youth engage or disengage from civic and political life.

CR thus allows me to accept Deaton's assertion that "there is nothing invalid about a study whose result does not apply elsewhere" (2019, p.9). In fact, it encourages me to embrace the uniqueness of the Elgeyo-Marakwet context while still seeking transferrable insights from the experience of structure, agency, and culture in youth civic and political participation in this context.

3.2.2 Depth Ontology

CR presents a clear ontological and epistemological standpoint from which the world and our knowledge of it are explained. The world consists of, on the one hand, a reality of which we are part, but which we do not determine by virtue of our knowledge of it. In other words, reality exists beyond our knowing. This seems perfectly plausible, and is a useful, if simplified, way of understanding CR's 'deep' ontology. The critical realist perspective on social reality is that it is stratified, i.e. that there is the empirical: experiences we can capture through our senses and perceptions, the actual: the events that happen but are not necessarily observable, and the real: the "generative mechanisms" (Bhaskar, 2008, p.14) or causal powers that are responsible for the outcome that is observed. CR aims to uncover these underlying structures and mechanisms through empirical investigation while recognising the limitations of human knowledge and the influence of social context on our understandings. This research assumes that youth political behaviour in Elgeyo-Marakwet County cannot be fully explained by surface-level observations alone, nor by participants' accounts in isolation. Rather, underlying structures - some of which may be unobservable - must be inferred to explain patterns of civic and political engagement.

CR is accommodative rather than reductive in its view of what constitutes reality, society, and the ways in which we may seek to understand these. It rejects the "flat ontology" (Bhaskar, 2008, p.67) of empiricism, which collapses all dimensions of reality into the empirical - where knowledge is limited to what can be observed and measured. In such a paradigm, causation is often conceived narrowly as a regular succession of events: the same cause yielding the same effect. This view, still dominant in some strands of

research, struggles to account for contingent or generative social processes (*see* Finkel et al. (2012); Mutwiri (2016); Omanga (2019); Kipoech (2023); Ooko (2023); Malusha and Njoroge (2023) - *above*). Bhaskar's realist ontology, by contrast, supports a tradition of enquiry that "is willing to move beyond what is visible or observable in order to make bold theoretical claims about unobservable causal mechanisms, dynamics, and structures" (Rutzou, 2018, pp.4–5).

CR's ontology is stratified, positing three above-mentioned dimensions of reality. As Collier explains, "the domain of the empirical (what we experience) is only part of the domain of the actual (what happens), which is in turn only part of the domain of the real" (Collier, 2011, p.4). This layering of reality offers a more appropriately complex view of the social world. It allows me to consider youth participation in my context not just as an observable outcome (e.g., turnout at public forums or posts in a WhatsApp group), but as the tip of an ontological iceberg - beneath which lie institutional structures, social and political cultures, identity formations, and generational power dynamics that shape what becomes visible.

CR also maintains a clarifying distinction between ontology and epistemology. The ontological dimension - or "intransitive dimension" (Bhaskar, 2017, p.18) - refers to real-world entities and structures that exist independently of our knowledge of them. In my study, these include formal institutions (like County Government structures), informal power relations (such as clan/ethnic community-based patronage), and broader structural forces (like age- and gender-based hierarchies). The epistemological or "transitive dimension" (p.19), on the other hand, consists of our theories, interpretations, and knowledge claims about these structures. CR helps me maintain this distinction, acknowledging that while my understanding of youth civic and political life is always mediated, it still refers to real mechanisms with real effects.

Margaret Archer (2002) points out

> how the world is has a regulatory effect upon what we make of it and, in turn, what it makes of us. These effects are independent of our full discursive penetration, just as gravity influenced us, and the projects we could entertain, long before we conceptualised it (Archer, 2002, p.12).

This insight underscores the realist claim that structural forces shape human action without necessarily being fully understood or even identified. In the case of youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, political agency is both enabled and constrained by such deep, often unarticulated forces - including histories of marginalisation, patronage systems, and culturally embedded understandings about the place of women, age and authority. This is consistent with what Collier describes as the recognition that "things can exist and events can occur unperceived by us" (Collier, 1994, p.36). Youth exclusion from decision-making, for example, may be widely normalised and thus go unnoticed even by those it disadvantages (a notion discussed earlier in Section 2.3.2 in the review of the work of Robert Dahl (1971), and further elaborated in the analytical framework in Section 4.3.8.1 below). The researcher's task, then, is not merely to report what participants say but to uncover what may be structuring their possibilities of thought and action. Collier further notes that "the nature of the work we must do in order to find out about the world shows us both that the world is not transparent to us but needs to be discovered, and that it can be made to yield up its secrets" (1994, p.22). This captures the ethos of my research: explanation is an uncovering process. Through careful empirical work and theoretically informed analysis, I aim to reveal the generative mechanisms that explain the patterns and contradictions I observe in youth civic and political engagement in Elgeyo-Marakwet County.

CR thus encourages an explanatory orientation - one that probes beneath appearances. In my research, I try to dig beneath the visible or observable surface of youth civic and political engagement by conducting in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion and situating participants' accounts within a broader socio-political and historical context. This methodological strategy aligns with CR's call to uncover generative mechanisms - those hidden, often historically-embedded forces that condition what youth can or cannot do, and how they see themselves as political agents.

3.2.3 The "Epistemic fallacy" and fallibilism

Bhaskar identifies as the 'epistemic fallacy' the tendency in positivism to conflate ontology and epistemology, "that statements about being can always be transposed into

statements about our knowledge of being" (Bhaskar, 2008, p.14). He asserts that "ontology cannot in fact be reduced to epistemology" (p.40) and the basis for this assertion is in an ontology that holds that there is more to reality or the world, than what we know about it. He cautions about avoiding "confusing the ontological order with the epistemic order" and clarifies questions of being, or independent existence, as ontological questions compared to "deciding claims", "statements", or "knowing that something is capable of independent existence" which are epistemological questions (p.250). Bhaskar (2017) believes that it is in Descartes' famous saying, "I think, therefore I am" that "we can see many of the characteristic errors and distortions of the discourse of modernity [whereby]…[t]hought is prior to being which means epistemology is prior to ontology" (p.139). He also finds that this idea is expressive of "a very wrong individualism", conceptualising "the world in which there is man, and it is a tacitly gendered man, and the object of his manipulations" (p.140). This critique resonates with the kinds of knowledge hierarchies I encounter in youth participation research and policy in Kenya - where expert or behavioural-statistical data is often given greater epistemic weight than young people's own accounts of the socio-political structures that support or hinder participation. At the same time, avoiding the epistemic fallacy means resisting the temptation to treat participants' accounts - or my own observations - as the full story. While interviews with youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet may reveal frustrations with local leaders or enthusiasm for online engagement, these experiences cannot be taken at face value as explanations. They must be situated within - and explained by - the deeper structural and cultural mechanisms that produce them. This includes historical patterns of age-based authority, the influence of patronage networks, and the performative nature of civic engagement in government-led or donor-funded spaces.

Fallibilism is an important feature of critical realist epistemology, acknowledging the inherent limitations and potential errors in human knowledge and understanding. CR recognises that our interpretations of reality are imperfect due to cognitive biases, cultural factors, and our limited perspectives. Bhaskar (1998) insists that "transcendental realism is fallible, as corrigible as the outcome of any other piece of human argument" (p.188). Collier (1994) holds that the social scientist's "claims are always open to refutation by further information" (p.6). There is notable humility in the

critical realist standpoint which recognises the provisional nature of the researcher's knowledge and understanding, and that it is always open to refinement. Fallibilism in CR emphasises the importance of being open to revising our understandings in light of new evidence and insights, while still maintaining a commitment to seeking knowledge about the underlying structures and mechanisms that shape reality. It encourages critical reflection and continuous questioning of our assumptions and interpretations. These understandings are critical to my approach. While I strive to uncover the causal mechanisms shaping youth engagement in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, I do so with the awareness that my interpretations are necessarily partial, historically situated, and open to revision. My positionality, theoretical framing, and choice of methods all shape what I can and cannot see. In the context of fieldwork, this means remaining alert to inconsistencies, silences, and contradictions in the data. It also means engaging critically with my own analytical categories, and being willing to refine them in light of what I encounter in practice. The development of the *Conceptual Model of Categories of Influence on Youth Civic and Political Participation* (*see* 4.3.8.3 below) is an example of such a refinement, where emerging understandings merited the elaboration of an alternative typology, more responsive to the data.

Linked to epistemic fallibility is the notion in CR of "the social character of science" (Bhaskar, 2008, p.24) and that coming to know is "dependent upon antecedent knowledge and the efficient activity of men" (ibid.). Bhaskar contrasts the "epistemological individualism" (p.187) of the empiricist paradigm with the "[e]pistemological relativism" (p.249) of the critical realist paradigm. He holds that

> whenever we speak of things or of events etc. in science, we must always speak of them and know them under particular descriptions, descriptions which will always be to a greater or lesser extent theoretically determined, which are not neutral reflections of a given world (ibid.)

In my research, this understanding reinforces the need to interpret data not as neutral facts but as situated narratives - shaped by how youth make sense of their world, and how I, as a researcher, interpret this sense-making through a theoretical lens. Ultimately,

CR's embrace of fallibilism provides me with guidance for navigating complexity with humility and theoretical depth.

3.2.4 Positionality

Much evidence is placed in the philosophy of science put forward by CR of the non-neutral, *active* stance of the researcher. According to Bhaskar, people "are not passive spectators of a given world, but active agents in a complex one" (Bhaskar, 2008, p.117). Pointedly, he contrasts the "empiricist conception of science" (ibid.) with that of CR where we see the "active *intervention*...in the world of things in an endeavour to grasp the principles of their behaviour" (ibid., *my emphasis*). This invokes an image of the research not as an observer - or even a participant-observer - of phenomena, but as "a causal agent among others" (ibid.). In this study of youth civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, this understanding is both grounding and humbling. I cannot pretend that my presence, relationships, questions, or theoretical framework are external to the research setting - they are embedded within it.

The connection is made in CR between this unavoidable effect of the presence of the social scientist within the reality which is the object of study, and the possibilities this presents for explanatory critique. This is the process of going beyond mere description (of experiences in the 'empirical' domain of reality) to uncover the deeper causal mechanisms and processes that drive phenomena (found in the 'actual' and 'real' domains). It involves scrutinising the assumptions, concepts, and methodologies employed in explanatory frameworks to assess their adequacy in capturing the complexity of the phenomena under study. Explanatory critique involves considering that the value of explanation lies in the *intervention* of the researcher within the context. Collier jokes, "a Martian sociologist could report back on the state of the modern world without it having any effect on the world at all" (Collier, 1994, p.198) but to have *possibilities*, following Bhaskar, he insists "critique must be made from within" (ibid.). This resonates with my own positionality (developed in Section 1.6 above). I have lived in Kenya for nearly three decades and have longstanding personal and professional ties to Elgeyo-Marakwet County. What I know is shaped by experience, relationships, and an

evolving understanding of the Kenyan civic and political landscape. These embedded perspectives give me access to rich empirical material but also require ongoing reflexivity. The critical realist view of positionality embraces this tension. As a researcher, I am located within the same social world I seek to explain. My interpretations are shaped by my values, assumptions, and theoretical commitments - but this does not render them invalid. Rather, it demands what Collier (1994) calls a "readiness for self-critique, and consequent self-revision" (p.198).

Recognising that my own frameworks are fallible and subject to revision underpins my approach to this project. Ultimately, CR challenges me not only to acknowledge my positionality but to work with it consciously and ethically in an effort to make visible the mechanisms that constrain or enable youth participation in this context, in ways that might inform more inclusive political practice.

3.2.5 Bhaskar's "theory of human emancipation" [13]

CR emphasises the importance of science not only as a means of describing and explaining the world but also as a tool for emancipation. This word was "almost always favoured" by Bhaskar over 'empowerment' or 'liberation' (Collier, 1994, p.191) and is a fundamental concern for him in the development of his critical realist philosophy of science. Bhaskar's "theory of human emancipation" summarised by Collier (1994, pp.190-191) has both the aspect of a cognitive process (i.e. "explanatory knowledge" can replace "false belief" and lead to liberation) and a non-cognitive process (i.e. meeting "unsatisfied needs"). Collier says that Bhaskar would see it as a misreading of his theory of emancipation to assume the prominence of cognitive processes, when, in fact "the main part of the work of emancipation is not cognitive, but consists in toil and trouble, conflict, changes in power relations, the breaking up of some social structures and the building up of others" (ibid., p.191). This emphasis on material transformation over mere

[13] This use of Bhaskar's theory of human emancipation is not meant to imply a paternalistic or deficit view of youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet. Rather, it provides an analytical lens to explore how structural constraints shape participation. Emancipation is understood here as a process grounded in the transformation of underlying mechanisms - not a judgment about capacity or agency, which this study recognises as active and situated.

intellectual insight is critical to any analysis of youth engagement in this context. While better understanding is important, emancipation ultimately demands a change in the conditions that reproduce exclusion.

Bhaskar holds that emancipation "depends upon the transformation of structures, not the alteration or amelioration of states of affairs" (Bhaskar, 1986 *cited in* Collier, 1994, p.192). The link with CR's ontological domains is clear. Structures operate at the 'real', while states of affairs are likely easily perceivable at the 'empirical' (experiences, observations, measurements), or 'actual' levels (events, things, products, basis of our experiences). Contenting ourselves with states of affairs is not an *emancipatory* endeavour. And the ontological distinction in CR between the 'real', 'actual' and 'empirical' helps us appreciate that needs occasioned by inadequate or unjust structures will never be met by changes brought about at the 'actual' or 'empirical' levels. These concepts hold particular relevance to my study of youth civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet, where patterns of exclusion and marginalisation persist despite a rhetoric of inclusion. While conscious of the limitations of the current research, centring a theory of human emancipation in any overarching framework for social research is helpful. Understanding why youth are excluded is not simply an intellectual exercise; it is a step toward identifying how such exclusion might be challenged.

3.2.6 Structure and agency

Finally, CR provides a usefully accommodative framework for understanding the relationship between structure and agency, that is, between society and people. While other conceptions of social explanation differ on whether social structure or human agency is preeminent, CR finds a middle ground between the two sides recognising that social reality consists of both objective structures and the subjective actions of individuals. With a kind of circular dependency, Collier sees "[s]ociety as the condition of [human] action and society as its outcome" (Collier, 1994, p.146) while Archer sees "the human being as both 'child' and 'parent' of society" (Archer, 2002, p.11). The role of structure and agency is defined in CR's *Transformational Model of Social Activity* which describes "the pre-existence of structure and the necessary continuity of structure

through being reproduced or transformed in agency" (Bhaskar, 2017, p.33). Structure and agency are thus interrelated and mutually constitutive aspects of reality. CR suggests that structures, such as social norms, institutions, and power relations, both shape and constrain human agency, but individuals also have the capacity to act creatively within those structures, influencing and transforming them over time.

This conceptualisation speaks directly to the dynamics I seek to explore in Elgeyo-Marakwet. Youth participation is not simply a matter of individual motivation or initiative. It is structured by a complex interplay of historical marginalisation, age-based hierarchies, informal patronage networks, top-down government and donor-driven programming, and evolving digital engagement opportunities. At the same time, young people are not merely passive recipients of these structures. As my fieldwork reveals, they act with creativity and resistance - using WhatsApp groups or X Spaces to mobilise, developing alternative on and offline forums for engagement, and challenging elders' authority within certain bounded spaces. Their agency is not unlimited, but neither is it negligible. A critical realist lens enables me to take seriously the ways in which youth reconfigure existing political and civic arrangements, even as they operate within - and sometimes reproduce - the very structures they seek to challenge.

On the related dualism of *personal* as against *social* identities, Archer (2002) also acknowledges the mutually constitutive aspects of both identities. There is a dignity centred in the concept of the person in CR, without the anthropocentrism which Bhaskar and other adherents of CR as a philosophy of science reject (discussed earlier), whereby individuals are acknowledged with autonomous personal power which they exercise in the expression of their personal identities. While Archer insists "our personal identities are not reducible to being gifts of society" (Archer, 2002, p.19), she does recognise the dialectical nature of the relationship between the domains by the fact of "our involuntary placement as social agents and how this affects the social actors which some of us can voluntarily become" (p.17). This distinction is especially relevant to my research, where the identities of youth participants - as 'leaders of tomorrow', as marginalised citizens, as 'tech-savvy youth', as dependants within family or ethnic structures - are not simply inherited but actively negotiated. These identities are, as Rutzou puts it, mediated through "often unconscious, background assumptions" (Rutzou, 2018, p.14). Part of my

task is to surface these assumptions - both in my participants' accounts and in my own. In doing so, I aim to show how identity and action are produced within structure but are never fully reducible to it.

Taken together, these defining features of CR - its depth ontology, its account of fallible knowledge, its positioning of the researcher within the social world, its theory of human emancipation, and its transformational model of social activity - provide the philosophical grounding for this work. They orient me not only toward what to study, but also how to study it. In adopting CR, I locate this study within a tradition that values explanatory depth, epistemic humility, and a commitment - however modest - to human emancipation.

3.3 Other Theories

While CR provides the overarching philosophical grounding for this research, it does not prescribe a single explanatory framework for understanding specific social phenomena. As Maxwell (2012) observes, "no theory or model can be a complete picture of what exists; it may be desirable to have multiple theories, each helping you to understand some aspect of the phenomena you're studying" (Maxwell, 2012, p.86). In this spirit, the study draws on several other theories that are both ontologically compatible with CR and explanatorily useful for analysing youth civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet. These theories act as conceptual tools that help illuminate distinct aspects of the social world - particularly the mechanisms, structures, and cultural influences that shape youth participation. The following subsections briefly present key theoretical resources - drawn from postcolonial thought and youth agency frameworks - that complement the critical realist focus on uncovering the generative mechanisms underlying observed outcomes.

3.3.1 Postcolonial theory and globalisation

Postcolonial theory and critical perspectives on globalisation offer important theoretical resources for explaining the structural and cultural contradictions that shape youth civic and political participation in Kenya today. These approaches do not function here as

competing paradigms to CR, but as conceptual tools to identify deeper-level causal mechanisms. Colonial legacies, elite capture, and global cultural domination effect young people's lives - and their political agency. There is a tension between their lived realities and the kinds of lifestyles they are exposed to through various mainstream and social media channels. This tension recalls Nyerere's critique of colonial education, which left the majority "hankering after something they will never obtain" (Nyerere, 1967, p.389). Following more recent, post-colonial critique of this phenomenon, this socialisation process is seen to devalue the lived realities of young people in their context and as an "imposition of Western ways of seeing the world" (Barongo-Muweke, 2016, p. 41). The consequences of the displacement of non-western perceptions of the world are potentially profound. The postcolonial stance invites us to consider the impact of globalisation on political practice in the Kenyan context.

The politics of Africa continues to bear the hallmarks of the period of colonisation under which the sole purpose of the system of governance was to protect the resources of the State for appropriation by a small number of political and business elites. This is what de Sousa Santos calls "internal colonialism" which, he posits, "has continued to exist after independence until today" (de Sousa Santos 2016, p.48). It is a widely held view that the process of decolonisation at independence was imperfect, and that, on the one hand, summarising the view of Kwame Nkurumah (1965), "control and power over the state and economies of ex-colonies [was] retained by the former colonising power" (Rao, 2000, p.168) and, on the other, authority was now in the hands of a local political elite with "cultural and economic interests [aligned] with those of the colonizing group rather than with those of their own society" (Smith, 2009, p.64). While the influence of the 'global North' over the politics and economies of the 'global South' may be directly attributable to deliberate systemic imperfections in the process of decolonisation, the alignment of the effects of colonisation, 'internal colonialism' or 'neo-colonialism' with the modern-day process of globalisation is clear. Globalisation in its current "hegemonic" form maintains the domination of the North and the subservience of the South and represents a type of modern-day cultural imperialism. De Sousa Santos defines "hegemonic globalization" as

> the process by which a given local phenomenon – be it the English language, Hollywood, fast food, and so on – succeeds in extending its reach over the globe and, by doing so, develops the capacity to designate a rival social phenomenon as local (De Sousa Santos, 2016, p.147).

The impact of this process is reminiscent of the "inferiority complex" Franz Fanon argued was created among colonised peoples "by the death and burial of [their] local cultural originality" (Fanon, 1994, p.18). Globalisation in its current form represents continuity in processes of cultural oppression including the privileging of Eurocentric, neo-liberal, capitalistic, economistic priorities, and the de-centring of more contextually appropriate values and priorities in the African context.

In 1961, Fanon wrote that "underdeveloped countries ought to do their utmost to find their own particular values and methods and a style which shall be peculiar to them" (Fanon, 2002, p.78). While colonialism and the forces of hegemonic globalism militate against harnessing "situated and contextualised knowledge" (de Sousa Santos, 2016, p.111), proponents of decolonialism have recognised examples of "transformative constitutionalism" in the global South "that began with the 1988 Constitution of Brazil and [were] followed by many other constitutions in the 1990s and 2000s" (p. 61). The emphasis on devolved power, public participation, and deliberative local governance in Kenya's new constitution similarly offers a structural framework that challenges inherited models of elite domination and represents, in my view, the fruits of a "counterhegemonic" process (ibid., p.9). However, these spaces remain contested and vulnerable to elite co-option, as seen in the growing hostility of the Executive in Kenya towards independent institutions and public dissent (*see* KHRC[14] 2025).

Education is a particularly powerful site of contestation in Africa. Fanon argued that "political education means opening [the people's] minds, awakening them, and allowing the birth of their intelligence" (Fanon, 2002, p.159). Yet colonial and neoliberal education

[14] Kenya Human Rights Commission

systems alike have discouraged critical citizenship (*see* 1.2 *above*). Nyerere cautioned that central to the process of decolonisation was the displacement of colonial education

> based on the assumptions of a colonialist and capitalist society [which] emphasized and encouraged the individualistic instincts of mankind, instead of his co-operative instincts [and] led to the possession of individual material wealth being the major criterion of social merit and worth (Nyerere, 1967, p.384).

In the current context, these attitudes seem to persist. bell hooks (1994) identifies schooling that demands "obedience to authority" (p.4) while Smith (2009) critiques education for producing "uncritical consumption" (p.65). Fanon describes this process succinctly: "the educational system…served to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission…which lightens the task of policing considerably" (Fannon, 2002, p.29). These critiques align with Freire's well-known attack on the "banking concept of education," used by dominant elites to "encourage passivity in the oppressed" (Freire, 1996, p.76). Together, these insights offer powerful explanatory resources for understanding how structural and ideological mechanisms suppress youth participation, even when it is formally guaranteed.

By drawing on these postcolonial and globalisation theories within a critical realist framework, I aim to identify the cultural and historical structures that underlie observed patterns of exclusion. These theories help explain why voice and power remain elusive for many youth - not because of individual deficiencies, but because generative mechanisms of alienation, domination, and cultural displacement continue to shape the conditions of participation.

3.3.2 Youth Agency

Youth agency offers a theoretical lens that is compatible with critical realist ontology and helpful for understanding the contingent and context-specific ways in which young people engage with civic and political life in Elgeyo-Marakwet. As discussed in detail above, Bhaskar maintains human action is "causally efficacious" but always

“conditioned by pre-existing social structures” (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 36). These structures “make certain courses of action possible” while “constraining others” (p. 39). Agency is thus theorised in CR as a conditioned capacity to act, emerging through the interplay of structure and practice.

Thurlby-Campbell and Bell (2017) make a convincing argument for considering Bandura’s (2001) articulation of social cognitive theory as a useful account of agency for research involving youth in transition on the grounds of its clarity, usefulness, and relevance:

> it may be difficult to identify the genuine exercise of agency in dialectically complex scenarios, where the same behaviours and outcomes may be variously attributed to agentic or structural causes. Any analysis of this topic, therefore, requires the use of a clear and operationalizable conceptualization of agency, and a complementary conceptualization of structure, by which the roles of each might be made empirically distinct (Thurlby-Campbell & Bell, 2017, p.41)

They argue that many sociological approaches to agency suffer from “abstraction, politicization and polarization” (p. 42), often relying on notions of agency as resistance that obscure the causal role of structure or exclude forms of agency not aligned with “political empowerment” (p. 43). This insight has been instructive in shaping my own analytical approach. I recognise that, prior to engaging with their critique, I might have been inclined to privilege political definitions of agency - equating it primarily with the ability to challenge authority. Their insights prompt me to remain attentive to forms of agency that may be more subtle, situational, or embedded in everyday practices, and to avoid overlooking these in favour of overtly political acts.

In contrast to those ‘sociological approaches’, Bandura’s typology thus provides a more pragmatic and accessible framework. He defines agency as the capacity “to intentionally make things happen by one’s actions” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2), emphasising that this capacity does not reside in a discrete internal mechanism but is distributed across personal, cognitive, and environmental processes. His conceptualisation rests on four

core features of human agency - intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness - through which individuals construct goals, plan, motivate, evaluate, and regulate their own actions. Bandura's framework aligns with CR in rejecting the conventional dualism between agency and structure. Human functioning, he argues, is best explained through a three-way model, where "internal personal factors, behavioural patterns, and environmental influences all operate as interacting determinants" (2001, p. 14). This conceptualisation aligns closely with CR's emphasis on the interaction between structure and agency, and on the existence of causal mechanisms that are neither entirely influenced by structural forces nor by individual choice. While Bandura's work is grounded in psychology, it supports a stratified view of agency: individuals act purposefully, yet within socio-structural constraints that both enable and limit the scope of their actions. His notion of perceived self-efficacy - the belief in one's capability to produce desired outcomes - is fundamental to understanding youth civic and political participation, where internalised beliefs about power and influence shape both engagement and passivity. Thus, Bandura's agentic perspective provides a psychologically-grounded tool for theorising youth agency, consistent with critical realist commitments to explanatory depth.

3.4 Conclusion

CR provides a meta-theoretical foundation that enables the study of youth participation in ways that move beyond surface events to underlying mechanisms. By distinguishing between the empirical, the actual, and the real, it establishes an ontological depth that enables more meaningful analysis and the unearthing of generative mechanisms that lie beneath observable practice. Within this framework, the other theories discussed provide additional conceptual tools to interrogate the interaction of structure and agency, visibility and invisibility, and participation and exclusion. These lenses illuminate how young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet navigate civic life in formal and informal spaces. Taken together, these theories support an enquiry that is sensitive to both context and causality and open to multiple forms of reasoning (deductive, inductive, abductive, and retroductive). This grounding provides the basis for the next chapter, which outlines the research methodology and design. There, I show how the explanatory depth CR proposes

is operationalised in qualitative enquiry, and how the theoretical commitments elaborated here are translated into an approach to and methods of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 – Methodology, Methods, and Framework for Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In seeking to operationalise the philosophical commitments of CR in this research, I draw on Sayer (1992) and Maxwell (2012), whose work offers a valuable bridge between critical realist meta-theory and qualitative research practice. Their realist perspectives inform the design, data collection, and analysis strategies adopted in this study.

4.2 Methodology

CR combines ontological realism - the belief that a reality exists independently of our understanding - with epistemological relativism, the view that all knowledge is partial, perspectival, and open to revision. This dual commitment is well-suited to studying the layered, contested realities of youth civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet, where observed behaviours often mask deeper historical, institutional, and ideological mechanisms. As Bhaskar (2008) notes, "the aim of science is the production of the knowledge of the mechanisms of the production of phenomena in nature [which] endure and act quite independently of men" (Bhaskar, 2008, p.17). CR adopts a mechanistic view of causality, in which the goal is to identify underlying processes - what Mohr (1982) calls "process theory" (*cited in* Maxwell, 2012, p.36) - that explains how and why things happen in particular contexts. This implies that causal explanation in qualitative research is essential and does not require formal comparisons or control groups. Instead, this approach involves detailed process-tracing and uses "mechanism + context = outcome" configurations (Pawson & Tilley, 1997 *cited in* Maxwell, 2012, p.40). The mechanisms shaping youth participation in this study - such as intergenerational authority, political patronage, or digital activism - do not operate uniformly, but only under certain conditions.

To uncover such mechanisms, this research adopts an "intensive research design" (Sayer, 1992, p.247) using interviews, focus group discussion, participant observation (and reported observation) and document analysis to explore youth experiences,

navigate formal and informal spaces of participation, and the policy and legislative frameworks that often shape those spaces. Data collection is informed by Maxwell's emphasis on "rich" data (Maxwell, 2012, p.43), which provide detailed, context-sensitive insight into processes and perspectives. Rich data are crucial for understanding not only observable behaviours, but also the thinking and external influences that shape them. In this way, interviews are not only accounts of experience, but they also reveal the generative mechanisms behind those experiences.

CR also insists that explanation in social science must grapple with "the double hermeneutic of social science" (Sayer, 1992, p.65), the fact that social actors are meaning-makers whose actions are shaped by their interpretations. Researchers, in turn, interpret these interpretations. Thus, knowledge production is inherently reflexive. As Maxwell (2012) puts it, "the attempt to exclude subjective and personal concerns is not only impossible in practice, but is actually harmful to good research" (Maxwell, 2012, p.82). I approach this research with an awareness that my own position - as a long-term resident in Kenya and an outsider to the youth I study - shapes how I ask questions, hear answers, and draw conclusions. This reflexivity extends to research design itself, which is not linear but interactive. Maxwell (2012, p.76) proposes an "ongoing, interactive process" in which research questions, theory, methods, and goals are continually revised in light of new data and insights. This was reflected in the evolution of my fieldwork strategy, where initial interviews led to new participants, revised questions, and even refinements in chosen methods.

A realist methodology also demands a careful approach to validity. A valid explanation is credible, contextually grounded, and responsive to plausible alternatives. Following Maxwell (2012), "validity threats", such as researcher bias or selective interpretation, are addressed not through procedural checklists but through triangulation and constant testing of assumptions:

> there can be no generic criteria for definitively assessing validity, no checklist of characteristics or procedures that can be used to adequately evaluate a study in terms of the credibility or trustworthiness of its conclusions. As with qualitative

> research in general, “it depends” - on the actual use of these procedures, in the context of this particular study, to address the validity threats that are most salient for these conclusions, and the evidence that these generate regarding these threats (Maxwell, 2012, p.132).

This is especially important in the study of youth participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet, where a valid explanation in this context must account for both the visible features of youth participation (e.g., attendance at public forums, membership of an online chat group) and the less visible structures that influence them - such as historical exclusion, informal power dynamics, and cultural expectations tied to age, gender, or social status. Reflecting the core feature of epistemic fallibilism, there are better and worse explanations, but these can often be identified by their explanatory power, coherence, and relation to evidence. In this study, this means assessing whether my interpretations of youth civic action - or inaction - are consistent with both participants’ own reasoning and with the broader socio-political structures they inhabit. This includes examining the limitations of my own position as a researcher, and ensuring that claims are not merely convenient interpretations, but are supported by rich, triangulated, and contextually situated data.

Maxwell (2012) proposes a typology of validity that distinguishes between three key types of validity, namely, descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical. These align with a realist concern for explaining *what* is happening (empirical domain), *how* it is understood (actual domain), and *why* it occurs (real domain). Descriptive validity refers to the “factual accuracy” (Maxwell, 2012, p.134) of what is reported and is the “primary aspect of validity” (p.135). In this study, ensuring descriptive validity involves detailed, contextually rich accounts of youth participation practices as observed in interviews, physical and online spaces, and through relevant documentation. This includes cross-checking factual claims and timelines, using field notes, and remaining attentive to contradictions within and across accounts. Maxwell helpfully cautions that

> a “verbatim” interview transcript might be descriptively invalid in omitting features of the informant’s speech, such as stress and pitch, that are essential to

> understanding the interview. The omission of things that participants in the discussion *feel* are significant to the account (for the purposes at issue) threatens the descriptive validity of that account (2012, p.137).

Although extensive use is made of transcripts for coding of interview data in this research, audio recordings and interview notes are essential triangulation methods of data collection to ensure descriptive validity is achieved.

Interpretive validity concerns what "objects, events, and behaviors mean to the people engaged in and with them" (ibid.). This study aims to understand how youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet perceive and experience civic space, representation, exclusion, or tokenism. These interpretations are not seen as self-explanatory but as embedded in and shaped by broader structural and cultural mechanisms. What distinguishes 'interpretive' validity tests is "not simply that they aren't descriptive, in the sense of being potentially verifiable with adequate observational data, but that they are framed in mental rather than physical terms" (Maxwell, 2012, p.139).

In this study, interpretive validity is pursued through careful attention to participants' own language and meanings during interviews and FGDs. Comparison of interpretations across respondents in also an important strategy - where meanings and interpretations can be probed as either shared or contested. Interview questions specifically requesting participants to clarify terms like "public participation" are included in the Interview Protocol (see Annex 1). The triangulation of interview accounts with field observations and documentary sources is also proposed. These strategies help ensure that the analysis reflects participants' understandings rather than categories imposed by the researcher.

Finally, theoretical validity addresses the extent to which the concepts and explanations constructed by the researcher adequately account for the phenomena under investigation. This understanding "goes beyond concrete description and interpretation...and explicitly addresses the theoretical constructions that the researcher brings to, or develops during, the study" (p.140). In this study, theoretical

validity is pursued through an iterative process of moving between empirical observations, participants' interpretations, and broader theoretical frameworks. Explanations are compared across sources of evidence in order to assess their explanatory adequacy and to consider plausible alternative interpretations. This approach aligns with CR's emphasis on retroduction and the identification of generative mechanisms that lie beneath observable events. The use of perspectives such as postcolonial critique functions as a conceptual resource that helps situate participants' experiences within wider historical and structural processes, allowing patterns of civic engagement or disengagement to be explained rather than merely described.

Maxwell notes that "generalizability", while often treated as part of validity in other paradigms, should instead be considered a distinct concern. In this study, the goal is not systematic generalisation but to develop conceptual insights into mechanisms of exclusion, resistance, and adaptation that *may* apply to similar contexts. Maxwell (2012) calls this drawing "inferences from the actual persons, events, or activities observed, to other persons, events, or situations, or to these at other times than the ones when the observation was done" (p.141). He says that qualitative research "almost always involves some of this sort of inference, because it is impossible to observe everything even in one small setting" (pp.141-142). Sayer (1992) distinguishes 'intensive' research from 'extensive' research projects where that latter "are oriented towards providing descriptive generalizations" (Sayer, 1992, p.249). As previously stated, this study adopts an 'intensive' research design, with the focus on uncovering the causal mechanisms and contextual conditions that generate observed events. The goal is not to produce general laws or frequency-based claims, but to understand how particular mechanisms operate *in a particular context* - in this case, the interplay of political, cultural, and institutional forces shaping youth civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County. Mechanisms uncovered - such as exclusion through patriarchal norms, informal domination within devolved spaces, or youth adaptation via informal civic strategies - may recur in similar settings with respect to history, power, and governance, even if they manifest differently. This reflects what Sayer describes as "generality…[which is] quite different from that implicit in the concept of generalization" (1992, p.239): identifying tendencies that *may* be transferable to other contexts without claiming empirical

uniformity. Ultimately, the contribution of this study lies not in generating statistically representative data, but in offering contextually grounded, theoretically robust explanations that illuminate how and why youth participation unfolds as it does - explanations that may hold insight for similar contexts across Kenya and potentially more widely in the postcolonial and global South.

Finally, the ethical and emancipatory dimension of CR informs my methodology. While this study does not aim to "engineer transformation", it recognises that all social research has implications for how people understand their world and imagine change. Maxwell acknowledges the potential for "personal and social transformation" (Maxwell, 2012, *citing* Tolman & Brydon-Miller (2001), p.101) in the co-generation of knowledge in the collaborative research project, while cautioning against presenting claims as objective truth. I take seriously my obligation both to foster genuine collaboration with local partners in this research project and not make any claim of neutrality in my findings - but to engage critically and humbly with the realities I seek to understand. In sum, this study is grounded in a critical realist methodological orientation that values explanation over description and reflexive engagement over detached observation. It seeks not only to understand youth participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, but to do so in a way that surfaces the mechanisms, meanings, and structural conditions that shape and constrain it.

4.3 Research Design and Methods

Stemming from CR's accommodative and pluralistic stance on methodology, and the distaste within the critical research methodology more broadly for "methodic monopoly" or "method-led research" (Harvey, 1990, p.8), I have selected a range of methods, techniques, and tools that are best suited to investigating the questions posed by this research, taking into account the realities of time, access, and available resources. The main research question was introduced in Section 1.3 above and provides the overarching explanatory focus of the study:

Main Research Question

What supportive structures and inhibiting factors facilitate or frustrate young people's civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County?

Sub-question 1

How do young people understand and define civic and political participation in their context?

Sub-question 2

How and through what formal, informal, and alternative forums do young people seek to participate in or influence public affairs?

Sub-question 3

What role do learning, information, and civic education play in shaping participation?

Three sub-questions examine the interpretive, contextual and formative dimensions through which enabling and constraining mechanisms become visible. The sub-questions thus function as complementary avenues of enquiry that together make it possible to answer the main question.

4.3.1 The case context: Elgeyo-Marakwet County

Iten town is the County Headquarters and the geographical centre of Elgeyo-Maraket County, the site for this research. Elgeyo-Marakwet County is one of the 47 counties of Kenya, established under the 2010 constitution (and operationalised following the 2013 elections). The county boundaries are based on the 1992 'Districts' of the previous Provincial Administration and the former colonial government prior to that. Established in the 1920s, Elgeyo-Marakwet has existed for most of recent history as a combined administrative unit. It brings together the two Kalenjin sub-tribes of the Keiyo and the Marakwet. The County is in Kenya's Rift Valley, approximately 260km northwest of Nairobi

and around 100km east of the border with Uganda. According to the 2019 census, the County has a population of 454,480[15]. As a devolved unit with well-established formal public participation structures and a mix of rural, peri-urban, and digitally mediated civic spaces, Elgeyo-Marakwet provided a useful setting in which to examine how young people encountered participatory institutions in practice.

4.3.2 Case selection and justification

Elgeyo-Marakwet County was selected not solely because field access could be facilitated through an existing local partner, but because it offered an analytically valuable site for examining youth civic and political participation under Kenya's devolved system of governance. Since this study is concerned with how young people encounter, interpret, and navigate participatory spaces, it was important to select a case in which public participation was not merely a constitutional abstraction, but had visible institutional and political salience. Elgeyo-Marakwet presented such a case.

First, available public perception data suggested that the county was relatively well regarded by residents in developmental terms. In the 2023 CountyTrak Performance Index, 83% of respondents in Elgeyo-Marakwet stated that their county was "better than before" devolution (Infotrak, 2023, p.8), compared with a national average of 70%. The county is consistently one of the strongest-performing counties nationally in the index - especially in Agriculture, Education, Culture & Sports, Social Services, Environment, and Planning. It ranks among the very top in the Rift Valley region across almost every devolved function. The 2023 survey placed Elgeyo-Marakwet joint first place in the CountyTrak Customer Satisfaction Index at 63% (p.79). This made Elgeyo-Marakwet a useful case because it appeared to be a county where devolution and county governance were widely perceived to have had tangible effects.

Second, and more significantly for the purposes of this research, Elgeyo-Marakwet appeared in national survey evidence as a leading county specifically with respect to public participation. In the 2023 CountyTrak report, the county ranked first nationally on

[15] https://www.knbs.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2019-Kenya-population-and-Housing-Census-Volume-1-Population-By-County-And-Sub-County.pdf [accessed 23 August 2025]

the Public Participation Index with a score of 54% - above the national average of 45% (p.74). The report attributes this performance to the fact that the county had "incorporated policies and laws to guide equitable governance" and had "instituted various forums to enable stakeholders to engage with the government" (p.73). This made the county especially relevant to a study concerned not only with whether participation is formally provided for, but with how such participatory arrangements are experienced and navigated in practice, particularly by young people.

Third, this survey evidence was consistent with the county's formal legal and institutional architecture for participation alluded to above. The IGRTC[16] report (2016) on *The Status of Public Participation in National and County Governments* identifies Elgeyo-Marakwet among the counties that had enacted public participation laws. It further notes that the Elgeyo-Marakwet County Public Participation Act, 2014 provides for an Office of Public Participation, citizens' participation forums extending from county to village level, and affirmative action measures intended to support the inclusion of minorities and marginalised groups (IGRTC, 2016, p.31). These features made Elgeyo-Marakwet a particularly revealing case through which to examine the relationship between formal participatory design and lived civic experience.

Elgeyo-Marakwet was therefore a compelling case for investigating the central concern of this study: not simply whether structures for participation existed, but how far they translated into meaningful participation for young people, and through what mechanisms participation was enabled or constrained. Access through the local partner organisation, IIEC, was therefore important in practical terms, but it enabled an in-depth study of a case selected on substantive as well as logistical grounds.

4.3.3 Defining the case and unit of analysis

The case study design, then, as presented by Yin (2018), is an appropriate method to deploy in pursuit of my research questions concerning youth participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County. Yin describes the "niche" for this method "when a 'how' or 'why'

[16] Intergovernmental Relations Technical Committee

question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which a researcher has little or no control" (Yin, 2018, p.13). In this research, I ask how and why young people participate - or do not - in contemporary civic offline and online spaces, over which I have no control. Case design method, according to Yin, "relies heavily on two sources of evidence…direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons…involved in those events" (p.12). As an organising method for my research then, the case study can "deal with a full variety of evidence" (ibid.), thus allowing simultaneously for data gathering and analysis using direct observation, interviews, together with policy and other document analysis, all of which will be described in greater detail below. In following Yin (2018) on the design of case study research, I will begin with "defining the case and bounding the case" (p.28).

My case is defined as youth civic and political participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, with particular attention to the factors, relationships, and mechanisms that encourage, shape, or hinder such participation. More specifically, the unit of analysis is not individual young people as such, but the practices, processes, and mechanisms through which youth participation is enabled or constrained in this setting. Individual youth respondents, non-youth key informants, public participation forums, digital interactions, and relevant documents constitute the principal units of observation through which this broader phenomenon is investigated. This distinction is important because the study does not seek merely to describe the views of respondents, but to explain how youth participation is shaped through the interaction of agency, institutions, cultural norms, and wider relations of power.

Youth is defined under the Kenyan Constitution (Art. 260) as persons aged 18 to 35 years, with the upper age limit according to this definition considerably higher than other definitions. The United Nations notes "There is no universally agreed international definition of the youth age group. For statistical purposes, however, the United Nations…defines 'youth' as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years" (United Nations, 2025). While I accept the importance of defining the term 'young people', my approach is also attentive to how respondents identify themselves.

With respect to bounding the case, Yin (2018) suggests that "the persons to be included within the group…must be distinguished from those who are outside of it" (Yin, 2018, p.31) and that this "will help to determine the scope of your data collection and, in particular, how you will distinguish data about the subject of your case study (the "phenomenon") from data external to the case (the "context")" (ibid.). While acknowledging the importance of clarity around what youth and where are the focus of interest, this research follows the approach of what Sayer describes as "intensive studies" (Sayer, 1992, p.244). He suggests that individuals in the case study "may be selected one by one as the research proceeds and as an understanding of the membership of a causal group is built up…." (ibid.). This approach allows for the development of diversity among the respondents (beyond, for example, gender and home area), as particular features of background and experience may not have been known either to me or IIEC in advance. The primary youth participants interviewed were all below 35 years of age and came from Elgeyo-Marakwet County, reflecting the study's substantive focus on young people within this bounded setting.

4.3.4 Access, Partnership, and Field Relations

As mentioned in Section 1.2 above, in this research access to the field was facilitated through partnership with Iten Integrated Environmental Conservation (IIEC), a youth-involving community-based organisation based in Iten. The partnership supported understanding of the local context, identification of deliberative forums suitable for observation, and identification of youth and other key informants for interview. The Board of IIEC provided guidance during project planning and facilitated introductions to County Government officials, including support for securing county-level authorisation for fieldwork. The partnership enhanced access and rapport, but also required reflexive awareness of how existing local relationships - or gatekeeping - may have shaped who became visible within the study and how participants engaged with the research.

4.3.5 Ethical Approval, Oversight and Research Permissions

Before turning to the specific methods used for data generation, it is important to outline the ethical approval process and the different levels of institutional oversight and permission through which the research was authorised and conducted.

Ethical approval and authorisation for this research were secured through more than one process. At university level, the project was subject to iterative academic and administrative ethics review following the submission of the ethical approval application to the College of Social Sciences in the University of Glasgow in March 2024. Across several rounds of feedback between March and June 2024, reviewers required clarification and revision in relation to confidentiality and data protection, consent and withdrawal procedures, participant observation in public and semi-public forums, the role of the local partner organisation, permissions required for access to county-level sites, and the ethical treatment of online and social media data. In response, I revised the participant information and consent materials, clarified data management and access arrangements, strengthened the justification and mitigation measures for participant observation, specified the role of IIEC more clearly, and refined the conditions under which online material could be observed or quoted. The process therefore shaped not only the formal approval of the study but also the final boundaries and conduct of the research itself. A summary of this review process is provided in Appendix 3.

Alongside the university ethical approval process, the research also required authorisation through Kenya's national research licensing framework. Under NACOSTI guidelines, all persons intending to undertake research in Kenya are required to obtain a research licence, and, where the research involves human participants, ethical approval from an accredited Institutional Ethics Review Committee is required prior to application for that licence. For Kenya-based researchers studying with a non-Kenyan university, local institutional affiliation is also required, and the affiliating institution must have the capacity to host, monitor, evaluate, and report on the research. In this case, the parallel national process required both local affiliation and licensing: affiliate status at the University of Nairobi was secured on 20 May 2024, and the NACOSTI research licence was issued on 1 August 2024 (copies of both are attached in Annex 3).

The requirement for local affiliation meant that the project had to be hosted within a recognised Kenyan institution with relevant disciplinary capacity and with responsibility for monitoring and supporting the research. University of Nairobi affiliation carried specific obligations associated with research affiliation, including compliance with institutional policies governing research conduct and intellectual property, engagement with the host unit, in my case - the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and reporting to them on research progress and outputs. The national licensing process therefore complemented the university ethics process by situating the study within Kenyan regulatory and institutional structures of oversight.

A further issue concerned permissions and oversight at sub-national level. Reviewers at the university explicitly asked whether, in addition to national research licensing, formal permission would be needed from County Government authorities for observation in deliberative forums organised at county level, and made clear that fieldwork could not begin until the relevant permissions had been secured and forwarded to the Ethics Office. This concern mirrored the conditions attached to NACOSTI licensing, which require the licensee to inform the relevant County authorities before commencement of the research. In keeping with these requirements, and prior to beginning fieldwork, I introduced the project to the Elgeyo-Marakwet County Commissioner on 2 October 2024 and obtained his permission through a letter explicitly granting research authorisation (see Annex 3).

The approvals process therefore shaped not only the final ethical boundaries of the research itself but also clarified the wider framework of oversight within which the study was conducted, spanning university ethics review, national licensing, local institutional affiliation, and county-level authorisation. With these approvals and permissions in place, the study proceeded through the following qualitative methods.

4.3.6 Research Methods

4.3.6.1 In-depth Interviews

The face-to-face, in-depth interview is an appropriate research method with a view to understanding the individual participants' thoughts and experiences, and to allow coverage of all relevant issues. Yin (2018) suggests such interviews are "one of the most important sources of case study evidence" (Yin, 2018, p. 118) and "can especially help by suggesting explanations (i.e., the "hows" and "whys") of key events, as well as the insights reflecting participants' relativist perspectives" (ibid.). Following Yin, interviews for this project resembled "guided conversations rather than structured queries", although to ensure consistency in the line of enquiry pursued, an Interview Protocol (*see* Annex I) was followed to guide the conversations. Although questions were not sensitive, seeking personal opinions from respondents is ideally done face-to-face, where a rapport can be built with the interviewee. Sayer (1992) sees value in "a less formal, less standardized and more interactive kind of interview", where "the researcher has a much better chance of learning from the respondents what the different significances of circumstances are for them" (Sayer, 1992, p.245).

Young people known to be active in civil society, sport, or politics were proposed by the youth volunteers from IIEC. Gender balance, and the desire to obtain perspectives from different areas around the County determined an initial short list. The three volunteers contacted the young people they knew by phone or text, introduced the research project, and asked if the prospective participants would be willing and were available to take part in an interview. Additional prospective interviewees were identified using referrals from these participants to other youth in their networks. Depending on the interviewee, one of the IIEC volunteers remained with me during interviews. This ensured the link was maintained with the initial contact, and the youth known to the interviewee could introduce me and allow me to elaborate on the project as presented in the initial contact. In this way, rapport was more easily developed between me and the interviewee. Interviews with youth respondents were held in the office of IIEC, centrally located in Iten town.

The initial interview sessions took up to one hour, with some interviews requiring a 30 minute to one-hour follow-up session where clarifications were necessary. Sessions were recorded with the consent of the interviewee. Interviews were transcribed for analysis using MS Word and coded in Atlas.ti. Twenty-two in-depth interviews took place (13 youth (5 female), 9 non-youth (4 female) key informants) between November 2024 and February 2025.

4.3.6.2 Focus Group Discussion

Following a number of in-depth interviews by the end of 2024, and as I continued to "build up a picture of the structures and causal groups" which constituted my case study (Sayer, 1992, p.244), it became clear to me that the female youth (n=5) with whom I had discussed my research questions were an homogenous group, more so than the male interviewees. Through the outcome of the snowball approach to the participant selection process, they were tending to be very well educated, very articulate in the English language, and active in local non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross or World Vision or in community-based organisations. While the perspective of these civic activists was extremely valuable, I yearned to interact with young women not involved on a professional or voluntary basis in civic activism but for whom civic and political participation was nonetheless of interest. Several challenges presented with the plan of approaching young women operating more 'on the periphery' of civil society, not least their willingness to share personal opinions, their confidence in expressing themselves, and their desire to discuss overtly political issues with an outsider. The situation called for "a permissive, nonthreatening environment [...] that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus" (Krueger et al., 2015, p.26). Following discussion with IIEC, the focus group discussion (FGD) presented itself as the solution, which, appropriately constituted and managed, promised to bring young women together, largely disconnected from youth activism, working at home or in their businesses, but who, nevertheless, take part in community meetings when convened in their local areas. Krueger et al., (2015) provide guidance:

> Focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected, and free to give their opinions without being judged. The intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants. We want to know what people really think and feel. For some individuals, self-disclosure comes easily - it is natural and comfortable. But for others, it is difficult and requires trust, effort, and courage (p.30)

Following Yin (2018) then, the "focus group procedure" (Yin, 2018, p.120) was followed whereby a small group of women (n=10) was recruited and convened. Selection partially followed Krueger et al.'s "piggyback" approach whereby "participants are gathered for another purpose" (Krueger et al., 2015., p.204), but the group was added to through additional outreach to locally-based contacts of the research partner, IIEC. The discussion was guided following the same open-ended questions used during in-depth interviews (*see* Annex 1) and with the same informal, conversational approach "deliberately trying to surface the views of each person in the group" (Yin, 2018, p.120). I co-moderated the session with a counterpart from IIEC. The session took one hour thirty minutes and was recorded by consent. Later a transcription was made for analysis and also coded in Atlas.ti. The session took place on 13 January 2025 in a meeting hall of Kipsoen Technical and Vocational College, Elgeyo-Marakwet County.

4.3.6.3 Participant Observation and Reported Observation

An important method for evidence gathering employed in this research is participant observation, both by myself and a small team from IIEC (Nafasi, Tabari, Balozi and Furaha). This team were chosen from the areas or neighbouring areas where they conducted their observations. They were youth who were identified by the core team of research assistants (which included Nafasi) who were approached and asked if they would be interested in joining the research team for the specific purposes of participant observation. They received lunch, mobile phone credit and a travel allowance to facilitate their transport to Iten for the in-person debriefing sessions.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that in participant observation we "will notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things that may lead to

understanding the context" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.139). My observations indeed allowed me to use my "own knowledge and expertise in interpreting what is observed rather than relying on once-removed accounts from interviews" (ibid.). Yin (2018) is of the view that participant observation positions the researcher as "not merely a passive observer" and may involve having "casual social interactions with various residents" or indeed "being an actual resident" (Yin, 2018, p.123). This describes my situation and that of the participant observation team. Deliberative forums intended to bring citizens together with local government officials at a local level in Elgeyo-Marakwet County were observed, a series of which took place throughout February 2025 (*see Table 2*, below). Ten out of the twenty forums which took place were observed for this study.

Recognising that to become "a careful, systematic observer" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.138) requires training and practice, the most important factor for the team was to take part in a virtual preparatory session to review, discuss and tweak the observation protocol (developed in advance for ethical approval- *see* Annex II) and to co-create a template to assist in note taking. Focus was on planning for and attending the forums of interest, with the subsequent requirement to take part in a follow-up de-briefing session to discuss observations together. The observation protocol focused observations on how the sessions were led, the time given for contributions, how contributions were taken (i.e. was there a visible process for recording individual contributions, and did they lead to further probing by the session leads etc.). Direct observation casts light on the basics about what is going on - who is in attendance, are young people, women etc. contributing, encouraged to contribute, etc. While the observers made use of their notes in the interviews, interview transcripts from these post-observation sessions were the primary record of observations by the team (i.e. reported observation). My notes of the session which I took part in are drawn on in the findings and subsequent discussion below.

Observation is challenging (not least because deliberations oscillate between three languages[17]), and for many other reasons elaborated in the literature such as researcher

[17] English was the main language of interviews, while Swahili was used by several X Space contributors (though most used English). Swahili predominated in the FGD. Quotes used for contributions in Swahili appear in their original, with my translations. The local language (Kalenjin) was used occasionally in the X Space meeting, and frequently in observed public forums. As a participant-observer in a public forum, I relied on a research assistant from IIEC to provide informal translation from Kalenjin.

bias, or the need to retain critical distance (Yin, 2018; Bratich, 2024), but my first-hand observations and the reported observation of the team provided rich triangulating data with respect to evidence from interviews already conducted, and also provided material for discussion in subsequent interviews.

4.3.6.4 Document analysis

An analysis of documentary resources is also an important research strategy. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe documents as "a valuable resource for confirming insights gained through interviews and observations" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p.xiii). Key documents I have identified to be analysed at the outset include the national and county-level policies, legislation governing issues of youth and, more generally, public participation, and several judgements of the Kenyan courts on these matters. However, as Yin (2018) cautions, in the development of the case study protocol, researchers need to plan and prepare for the fact that "case study data collection frequently results in the accumulation of numerous documents" (Yin, 2018, p.99). I "keep an open mind", as Merriam and Tisdell advise (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.175), when it comes to identifying useful documents for analysis in the discussion below, while following the advice of Yin (2018) on indexing to facilitate documents later retrieval or referencing in interviews and/or analysis (Yin, 2018, p.133).

4.3.7 Data Collection Procedures in Practice

In qualitative research, reliability is sometimes framed in terms of whether another researcher, following the same procedures, would arrive at similar findings. Yin (2018) emphasises the importance of making procedures explicit and well documented so that "an auditor could in principle repeat the procedures and hopefully arrive at the same results" (p.46). However, within an interpretive qualitative study informed by critical realism, this cannot mean that social research should yield identical accounts across different researchers, relationships, and moments in time. As Maxwell (2012) argues, differences in description or interpretation do not automatically invalidate a study - they

may reflect "differences in the perspectives, situations, and purposes of the researchers" and still be "descriptively valid given those perspectives, situations, and purposes" (p.137). In this study, reliability is therefore understood not as mechanical reproducibility but as procedural transparency: documenting clearly how data were generated, recorded, clarified, and interpreted so that readers can assess the credibility of the chain of evidence from field work to analysis.

This study drew on 22 interviews, one focus group discussion, observation in 10 public participation forums and 2 informal social spaces, and approximately five hours of X-Space dialogue. Most fieldwork was conducted between October 2024 and March 2025. Written interview and observation protocols were developed in advance and used throughout the fieldwork process (see Annexes 1 and 2). The interview protocol covered background, political engagement, influence, public forums, and understandings of public participation. The observation protocol required recording of attendance patterns, issues raised, the extent and content of youth participation, reactions to contributions, comparative speaking time across social groups, and the moderation, management, and follow-up commitments of those facilitating the event. Observers completed the protocol and later discussed their observations with the researcher using common prompts.

The interview guide was used as a framework for discussion. It was present during all interviews and used to introduce topics, maintain focus, and ensure coverage of the main areas of enquiry. In practice, a smaller set of recurring questions became the principal points of comparison across interviews, particularly those concerning interest in public affairs, opportunities to express opinions, participation in online and offline forums, experience of influencing leaders, attendance at public forums, and the meaning of "public participation." The question on the meaning of public participation was asked of all interviewees. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher, with one exception: the interview with the County Attorney, which was documented through notes taken by both the researcher and accompanying research assistant. Most interviews were conducted in English, though some included a mixture of English and Swahili, and a small number of respondents answered in Swahili. Where necessary, research assistants helped with clarification of idiom, translation, or overlapping speech.

All transcripts were checked against the original audio and organised systematically by participant code, location, and date.

Three IIEC youth volunteers formed the core research assistant team, and additional local volunteers were engaged for observation of the six of the ten CIDP forums observed. The core research assistants team supported recruitment, introductions, note-taking, interview support, translation (where necessary) and post-interview clarification. They received orientation at the outset on ethics, note-taking and observation. Debrief discussions were held after interviews and observations, usually immediately after interviews and within a week of observed forums.

Clarification of meaning formed part of the data collection procedure. Key terms such as “participation” and “civic” and “political” participation were probed during interviews. Where uncertainty remained, clarification continued after interviews through discussion with research assistants and, where necessary, through follow-up contact with participants. The youth validation workshop provided an additional opportunity to test the fit between emerging findings and participants’ own understandings.

A documentary record of the fieldwork was maintained through transcripts, notes, and analytic memos. Each interview, focus group discussion, and observed event was accompanied by an analytic memo written by the researcher after the encounter. These memos recorded contextual notes, points requiring clarification, contradictions across accounts, and links to emerging concepts. They were linked directly to the relevant transcripts in Atlas.ti.

The procedures employed in this study were designed to ensure that data collection was undertaken in a manner that was thoroughly documented, systematic, and open to review. This approach provides transparency regarding the generation, verification, and retention of the material forming the basis of the research. Each step taken during data collection was accounted for, so that the reliability and credibility of the study could be assessed. These procedures establish how the subsequent analysis was firmly grounded in field evidence, thereby supporting the integrity of the research process and its findings.

4.3.8 Data analysis

The data for this research makes up over 150,000 words in transcribed interviews, FGDs, online meetings, and notes on interviews and observations. Following transcription, cleaning and organising of the data (i.e. naming, filing and ensuring accessibly), I needed a clear, systematic process for analysing this data to facilitate as comprehensive as possible an understanding of what I encountered in the field through the various interactions. This would enable clear connections to be drawn between the data, my interpretations, and my final conclusions.

The breadth of data collected during many hours of interviews, FGD and observations, demands a systematic process of analysis and interpretation that honours the situation, and the nature of the data collected. In keeping with the critical realist ontological and epistemological standpoint adopted in this research, my analysis recognises the depth, complexity and expanse of reality represented by the data, ensuring emotional data, embodied data, and cultural data as well as the spoken (and transcribed) word are taken into account. Given the fact that all participants are non-native English speakers and, in some cases, translations from Swahili (also not the first language of most participants) are used in the transcription, analysis also considers the constraint some participants face of limited linguistic competence in a non-native language.

Analysis of the transcriptions began by following the guidance of Ryan and Bernard (2003) for "discovering themes and subthemes in texts" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.85). They propose a number of "word- and scrutiny-based techniques" (ibid.), which I used to deduce themes across the interviews, focus group discussion and observations. I follow Creswell (2009), who calls on researchers "to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2009, p.26), while recognising that this "does not imply that social actors can always provide complete and accurate accounts of their activities, plans, projects and histories" (Scott, 2005, p.644). My analysis is ultimately guided by the need to privilege participants' utterances, and to try to understand them in their socio-historical context.

4.3.8.1 Data Analysis Framework

A form of reflexive thematic analysis is best suited to my efforts to make sense of my data. This is a method of qualitative data analysis where researchers actively engage with their data, identifying patterns and themes while simultaneously reflecting on how they reacted to the directions conversation may have taken, or the perspectives of participants, whether shocked, surprised, frustrated, confused, etc. A reflexive stance calls for continual consideration of the researcher's own biases and perspectives which might influence interpretation. This type of analysis combines a structured approach to thematic analysis with a deep level of self-awareness and critical reflection throughout the process. Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis are a useful resource, (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87) but, with help in the identification of themes from researchers who bring the critical realist methodological lens.

Several approaches to the identification of themes in critical realist methodology are relevant to my context and data set. There is the example of Fryer's use of "the three critical realist concepts of experiences, events and causes" (Fryer, 2021, p.375) to help think about data, codes, and themes. The is compelling in its focus on the causal mechanisms that bring about events, that is, the deeper ontological level in CR of "the real". I considered this, however, to be a somewhat narrow focus on purely theoretical themes. Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) propose that "the generation of themes from a realist approach could be structured around the three domains outlined in Bhaskar's conception of a stratified ontology" (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021, p.164). In giving room for broader considerations of themes for example "experiential themes, referring to subjective viewpoints such as intentions, hopes, concerns, beliefs, and feelings captured in the data" (ibid.), I determined that this approach is most appropriate for my data.

Bhaskar's stratified ontology in CR (i.e. empirical, actual, real) gives conceptual grounding to Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) framework for thematic analysis (i.e. experiential, inferential, dispositional themes). Additionally, there are several complementary frameworks for analysing power that are relevant to the themes

encountered. Gaventa's "continuum of spaces" (2006, p.26) is a useful arrangement of earlier work by Cornwall on “the spatial practices of participation” (Cornwall, 2002, p.17). In addition, the very clear alignment between two frameworks for power analysis and my overarching critical realist data analysis framework make them compelling resources to draw on in circumstances where an understanding of the power dynamics at play through their respective lenses offers additional illumination. Lukes’ Three-Dimensional Power framework (Lukes, 2021) and VeneKlasen and Miller’s Visible-Hidden-Invisible (2002) understanding of power each offer a stratified perspective that resonates with Bhaskar’s layered ontology, enabling deeper insight into how power operates not only in observable actions but also in structural constraints and internalised norms that shape youth agency and participation.

In Lukes’ first dimension, power is about winning visible contests - the analyst sees people struggling over decisions. This fits well into Bhaskar’s empirical domain (direct experiences) and matches Wiltshire and Ronkainen’s (2021) experiential themes (people's observable, described realities). In Lukes’ second dimension, power is more subtle: elites or dominant groups structure the agenda, so some issues never surface. Even though conflict may exist, it is hidden. This is referred to as “Hidden Power”, in VeneKlasen and Miller’s (2002) understanding, which involves dynamics that

> exclude and devalue the concerns and representation of other less powerful groups, such as women and the poor. Excluded groups often point out that they and their issues…are both invisible to the society at large and absent from the political agenda (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p.47).

Lukes and VeneKlasen and Miller’s concepts find parallels in Bhaskar’s actual domain (events occurring beyond direct observation) and Wiltshire and Ronkainen’s (2021) inferential themes (themes where researchers infer underlying patterns from partial visibility).

In Lukes’ third dimension, the deepest power is ideological: it shapes people's very desires, such that problems are not even perceived. This aligns with Bhaskar’s real

domain (deep, “generative mechanisms” shaping outcomes) and Wiltshire’s dispositional themes (the structured capacities and constraints shaping participants' experience, often without their full awareness). VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) refer to this dimension of power as “invisible power”, operating in the realm of “the minds and consciousness of the different players involved” (VeneKlasen & Miller’s, 2002, p.49).

Thus, overlaying of Lukes power analysis framework (with direct parallels in VeneKlasen and Miller’s descriptions) and Wiltshire and Ronkainen’s thematic framework is conceptually and methodologically appropriate for the current data. It supports the move from surface descriptions of power to deeper causal explanations grounded in critical realist thematic analysis.

4.3.8.2 Step-by-step approach

Based on the above, what follows is the step-by-step approach adopted for this analysis:

1. Data Preparation (Organising and Cleaning):
    - Name, file, and structure data for easy access.
    - Ensure accurate and consistent transcription, including managing translation nuances.

2. Data Familiarisation:
    - Conduct an initial, thorough reading of all data, as recommended by Ryan and Bernard (2003): “In the early stages of exploration, nothing beats a thorough reading and pawing through of the data…and is particularly good for identifying major themes” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.11).
    - Identify recurring themes informally observed (e.g., influence of money, cultural dynamics) and note emergent ones.

3. Systematic Thematic Analysis:

- Use an iterative coding framework to tag data for: Themes, sub-themes, overlaps and connections. Incorporate emotional, embodied, and cultural dimensions into coding.

4. Critical Realist layering:
    - Identify themes at three (ontological) levels (following Wiltshire & Ronkainen (2021)):
        - Empirical (observable): referring to subjective viewpoints such as intentions, hopes, concerns, beliefs, and feelings captured in the data, referred to as "experiential themes" (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021, p.164)
        - Actual (events): Interactions and contexts underpinning observed content. "inferences and conceptual redescriptions using more abstract language" (ibid.)
        - Real (mechanisms): Structural and cultural mechanisms driving patterns (e.g., systemic corruption, patriarchal norms): "Dispositional themes…referring to theories about the properties and powers that must exist in order to produce the phenomena being studied" (ibid.)

5. Cross-Theme Analysis:
    - Map relationships between themes (e.g., money and cultural).
    - Explore how power dynamics (e.g., elite manipulation) and cultural practices intersect to disadvantage specific groups (i.e. youth, women).
        - Where relevant use Lukes' (2021) and VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) to explore power dynamics.

6. Validation:
    - Return to the data to validate themes and mechanisms, ensuring alignment with participant voices.
    - Use research team debriefing to refine interpretations and minimise bias.

7. Output Development:
    - Development of abstract conceptual model[18] (*see* 4.3.5.3 below).
    - Develop a clear narrative linking data, interpretations, and conclusions.
    - Present findings in a way that honours the diversity and complexity of experiences shared.

4.3.8.3 Conceptual Model for Influences on Youth Participation

This study adopts a five-category conceptual model to analyse the complex and layered influences on youth civic and political participation. Moving beyond the dichotomy of "barriers" and "enablers," the model recognises the dynamic, relational, and often transitional ecosystem of influence on youth participation. It draws from CR and theories of power to situate youth engagement within a layered social framework of latent, explicit and sometimes contradictory forces. This conceptual framing has been refined over the course of my analysis, to better capture the fluidity and relational nature of the categories, the transitional potential between barriers and enablers, and the conditions under which "supportive infrastructure" becomes transformative - or fails to. While there are some linkages discernible across the categories proposed here and other well-established typologies of participation (for example Arnstein's (2019) 'Ladder of Participation' and White's (1996) four-part typology), this study adopts a critical realist perspective that seeks to explain the generative mechanisms shaping youth civic and political participation. Rather than categorising participation by its institutional expression, this research identifies categories derived from young people's own accounts and analysed through the different modes of reasoning. These categories are not merely static descriptors but relational and ontologically stratified, capturing the complexity of youth agency as it unfolds within real and sometimes invisible structures of constraint and potential. This model seeks to explain the conditions and mechanisms shaping participation based of the narratives of youth themselves. The five categories of

[18] Through iterative refinement and connections across the dataset, a conceptual model was developed (*see Figure 3*). This model emerged from the data rather than being imposed *a priori*. It serves as an organising framework to guide the presentation of findings in subsequent chapters.

influences are: 1) Latent Inhibitors, 2) Explicit Barriers, 3) Ambiguous Structures, 4) Latent/Emergent Enablers, and 5) Transformative Supports.

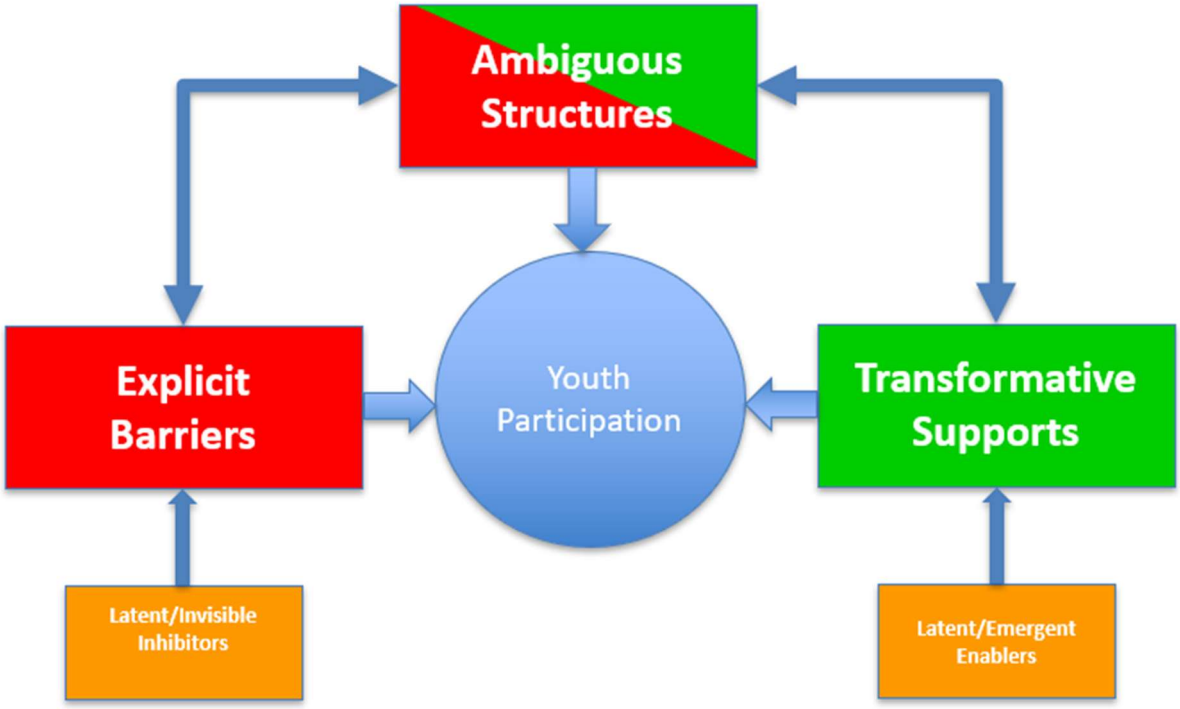

Figure 2: *Conceptual Model of Categories of Influence on Youth Civic and Political Participation.*

1) Latent Inhibitors (Invisible Power Structures)

This category captures those surreptitious, often unspoken forces that constrain youth participation without being formally recognised as barriers. These include the effects of VeneKlasen and Miller's, "invisible power" (2002, p. 49) – power which "shapes people's beliefs, sense of self, and acceptance of their own superiority or inferiority" (ibid.) It may operate through socialised consent, political manipulation, gatekeeping, or the strategic exclusion of youth from agenda-setting processes. Latent inhibitors demonstrate Lukes' third dimension of power which "works against people's interests by misleading them, thereby distorting their judgment" (Lukes, 2021, pp.17-18). He calls it

> the supreme and most insidious exercise of power [over people]...by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no

alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial (Lukes, 2021, p.33).

Latent inhibitors lie largely in the *real domain* and may "bleed into" explicit barriers depending on circumstances that may lead them to manifest visibly. Their significance lies in how they silently configure the landscape of possible action, often shaping what youth do not say, what structures never emerge, and which agendas are never pursued.

2) Explicit Barriers

These are visible, identifiable impediments to youth participation, such as cultural exclusion, elite gatekeeping, obvious political power dynamics or lack of access to resources. Operating within what Bhaskar (2008) refers to as the *empirical* ontological domain and revealing themselves in *experiential themes* following the Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) framework which I draw on to structure the data analysis, these barriers are directly observed, experienced, and expressed constraints on youth participation.

3) Ambiguous Structures

Ambiguous structures are those policies, institutions, or mechanisms that are nominally supportive of youth engagement - such as national or county policies, youth empowerment programmes, or donor-funded or private sector initiatives - but whose actual implementation, depth of influence, or political sincerity may be limited or even tokenistic. These structures exist within the *actual domain*, where mechanisms are active but not always seen, and may either foster participation or represent only symbolic inclusion without real power-sharing. Depending on context and conditions, ambiguous structures may evolve into either transformative supports or become co-opted into reinforcing exclusion (i.e. move up or down on Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation' between "levels of citizen power" and "levels of "tokenism"" (Arnstein, 2019, p.25)). They reveal themselves in Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) *inferential themes* and require conceptual interpretation.

4) Latent or Emergent Enablers

These refer to informal, bottom-up, or culturally grounded mechanisms that foster youth engagement outside the purview of formal institutions. Examples include digital networks (e.g. WhatsApp, X-Spaces), youth-led initiatives, and social gatherings and events. These exist largely in the *real domain* and represent the generative mechanisms that can lead to authentic participation, even if such potential is not always realised or institutionalised. These begin as *inferential* (e.g. WhatsApp activism, informal group solidarity), but may, depending on their transformative potential, be retroductively understood as *dispositional* structures e.g., digital affinity or communitarian impulses as underlying generative mechanisms.

5) Transformative Supports

This category captures the highest level of influence - those moments, mechanisms, or relationships that result in genuine, empowering, and impactful youth participation. Examples may include youth-led policy reforms, co-governance structures, or institutional partnerships in which youth exercise real influence. Transformative supports are not simply the opposite end of the spectrum to barriers; they represent a qualitative shift in the nature and impact of youth agency. It is in this category where the most obvious parallels with typologies mentioned above are seen with, for example, White's (1996) "Transformative participation", that is "[t]he idea of participation as empowerment". She says

> the practical experience of being involved in considering options, making decisions, and taking collective action to fight injustice is itself transformative. It leads on to greater consciousness of what makes and keeps people poor, and greater confidence in their ability to make a difference (White, 1996, pp.8-9).

This category also maps to the higher rungs on Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation' (2019), namely "levels of citizen power" (Arnsten, 2019, p.25): Partnership [e.g. shared decision-making with youth], Delegated Power [e.g. youth-led platforms influence budgets or policies], Citizen Control [e.g. autonomous youth-run institutions, movements, or mechanisms with real authority]. These are genuinely empowering levels

of participation enabled by *Transformative Supports* which are perhaps rare but crucial to showcase as aspirational or achievable youth empowerment.

Rather than conceiving of these categories as discrete or static, the model recognises that ambiguous structures, latent enablers, and transformative supports form a continuum of "supportive infrastructure" whose effectiveness depends on broader political will and cultural conditions. Conversely, potentially ambiguous structures, latent inhibitors and explicit barriers form a parallel continuum of "inhibiting factors", illustrating how deep, invisible power structures may generate or sustain surface-level exclusion and how, depending on context and conditions, ambiguous *actual* structures may develop into *real* barriers.

This relational model enables a more dynamic understanding of youth civic and political engagement. It foregrounds not only the presence or absence of formal support, but also the quality, depth, and consequences of support to participation in practice. The consideration of both latent enablers and latent inhibitors offers a nuanced analytical lens which can capture both emergent agency and enduring structural constraints.

4.4 Reflections on Fieldwork Implementation

The theories, methodology, methods and framework for analysis presented thus far have attempted to lay out in detail the approach undertaken in this research with respect to all aspects of the project including those of partnership, our engagement with the community, and my handling of the data and analysis. However, as with "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men", this neat, linear presentation does not reflect how the project implementation actually unfolded. What follows is a reflection on how the planned approach was implemented: how it worked in context, where it flowed smoothly, where it faltered, and how the research was shaped by the contingent realities of people's lives, relationships, and constraints.

4.4.1 Access, Trust, and the Conditions of Fieldwork

Access to young participants was facilitated by a cooperative youth group partner, IIEC, who were willing, interested, and enthusiastic throughout. They fulfilled their role not only

as participants but as facilitators: identifying young people to engage, organising meetings, securing spaces, and providing consistent logistical and moral support. The relationship was characterised by trust, openness and dialogue and was essential to the success of the research project. Access was made possible through IIEC's networks and volunteers, whose involvement lent legitimacy and reduced risks in initial interactions. However, access varied: active members of civic groups were easier to reach than those with fewer connections or greater responsibilities. My own identity as an adult and foreigner and - in some contexts - a figure already known locally as "Mwalimu"[19] - aided trust but limited what could be shared with me. Ultimately, while institutional partnerships were smooth, practical access was shaped by social dynamics, the partiality of networks, and everyday challenges, all of which influenced the study's findings.

4.4.2 Negotiating Gender Balance in the Research Team

The youth research team included three assistants - one male and two females - to balance perspectives and improve access to young women's experiences. Although the team's composition seemed suitable, it did not guarantee balanced input or access. One female researcher was quiet and less involved; the other was more confident and engaged when present, but inconsistently available due to various commitments. Despite planning for gender representation, practical realities like personalities, schedules, and obligations limited female participation and shaped the research more than methodological design could ensure. Ultimately, real-life factors - such as who showed up and who felt comfortable speaking - had as much an impact on the project than linear plans connecting theory, design, data collection, and analysis. These day-to-day contingencies influenced which voices were heard and which were harder to reach.

4.4.3 Observation and its Limitations

The original research plan anticipated that observing youth in informal social spaces - like pool halls, *boda boda* shades, tea shops, bars, and sports fields - would provide insights into youth civic or political engagement. However, I found that these settings were not neutral public arenas; they operated on familiarity and trust, making access to

[19] *Mwalimu* is the Swahili word for teacher.

deeper interactions challenging. Conversations were often fragmented or inaccessible, and my presence was constrained by my identity as a former teacher (or indeed, an outsider or a foreigner), limiting access to meaningful insights. Ultimately, I found myself relying less on direct observation and more on what young people *told me* about these spaces: how they functioned, who gathered there, what kinds of conversations or organising might occur, and how relationships formed within them. Observation confirmed that these were sites of connection and trust-building, but it did not provide the kind of granular insight into civic or political processes that I had initially imagined. Meaningful immersion would have required much more time and integration than this study allowed.

4.4.4 Reported Observation: Adapting Participant Observation in Practice

Participant observation of the CIDP public participation forums proved more challenging than anticipated. Although twenty forums were held countywide in early 2025, it was impractical for me to attend more than one due to my outsider status and concerns about disrupting the proceedings. I attended a single forum as a local resident, while three research assistants drawn from different parts of the county attended the forums in their own localities as participant observers themselves. Within what I had originally labelled a single method, I now found myself operating with two distinct forms: direct participant observation (my own attendance at one forum) and *reported* participant observation (the accounts of others observing in their communities). This distributed approach allowed us to cover ten forums in total, expanding geographic reach but introducing complexities.

Observers' accounts varied due to differences in experience and perspective, despite protocols and training. The forums themselves were inconsistent - youth and female participation fluctuated, and meetings ranged from open to tightly managed. No two forums were alike, making it difficult to construct a representative narrative. Instead of detailed ethnographic data, we gained comparative insight into how participation operated across the county, revealing uneven practices shaped by local history and administrative style.

Ultimately, the method shifted from individual observation to a collective, mediated process, offering structural rather than granular findings. The fieldwork's unpredictability transformed our approach, emphasising adaptation over fixed technique.

4.4.5 Interview Protocols and the Limits of Pre-Specification

Fieldwork revealed that my pre-designed data collection tools, especially the detailed interview protocol, needed to be adapted in practice. Although I began with a list of thirty-six questions covering both background variables and substantive themes, it quickly became clear that such structure was impractical. Interviews tended to focus on about ten core questions but rarely followed the set format. Participants preferred to discuss issues that mattered to them, like politics, exclusion, and community involvement - often sharing emotional, personal stories beyond the protocol's scope.

Standard background data (e.g., interviewee's age, educational attainment, employment status, education levels and occupations of parents, etc.) proved largely irrelevant; what mattered was participants' perspectives as young people in their communities. Over time, many standardised questions were dropped, and the protocol served mainly as a loose guide to return to essential themes. Reflecting back, I realised that the richest insights came from letting interviews flow naturally based on participants' priorities, not rigid pre-planning. Insights cannot be engineered in advance. They arise unpredictably and often in ways that go beyond pre-determined categories.

4.4.6 Reflections on Validity in Practice

During data gathering, validity did not fit neatly into categories set out in this methodology chapter; instead, it required constant attention through clarification, comparison, and reflection. The involvement of IIEC youth volunteers as research assistants in this process was crucial. They helped clarify interview responses and contextual nuances both during and after interviews, enhancing interpretive and descriptive validity. This ongoing process extended past transcription, with follow-up discussions among research assistants and, when necessary, interviewees - to clarify ambiguities. These efforts ensured interpretations were fair and nuanced, highlighting that transcription alone might flatten meaning.

A youth validation workshop allowed for constructive discussion of emerging analysis, revealing where interpretations resonated or needed adjustment. This reinforced interpretive and theoretical validity by inviting challenge and deeper insight. Engaging experienced, non-youth interlocutors served as an additional check, testing explanations against broader institutional and historical realities, and prompting reconsideration where needed. This prevented overly simplistic conclusions.

Overall, validity relied less on procedural standardisation and more on openness to correction, revisiting material, documenting uncertainties, and engaging in critical dialogue. Rather than being fixed at the design stage, validity was continually constructed throughout the research process.

4.4.7 Concluding Reflections: Method as Emergent Practice

The experiences reflected on here have led me to understand the research process less as the execution of a pre-specified design and more as an emergent, negotiated practice shaped by relationships, positionality, and context. On paper, the methodology appears linear and coherent. In practice, it was reshaped by the social realities of the field. What looked methodologically tidy in advance became contingent and adaptive in implementation. The field exerted its influence on the research process. While fieldwork did not deviate dramatically from the plan, neither did it unfold in the orderly manner implied by the methods narrative above. The data produced by this study were co-constructed through situated encounters rather than mechanically extracted through research techniques. Bringing the “messiness” back into the account here is thus an attempt to shed light on this process.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how the philosophical underpinnings of CR inform both the design and practical conduct of this research. By bridging meta-theoretical commitments with qualitative methodology, I have detailed an approach that emphasises causality, context, and reflexivity in the study of youth civic and political participation. The discussion has also addressed the methodological challenges and strategies for operationalising CR in empirical work, integrating both theoretical

perspectives and practical considerations. I have presented a conceptual model which is used in subsequent chapters to present the findings, framing the in-depth exploration of the evidence generated through the above-discussed methods, with the aim of shedding light on the complex realities encountered in the field. The chapter concluded with a reflection on how the planned approach was actually implemented in the field considering successes, challenges, and necessary adaptations.

Chapter 5 – Barriers to Youth Participation

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter and the next, findings and analysis are woven together rather than presented separately. This reflects both the qualitative and critical realist orientation of the study: participants' accounts are interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework, allowing the reader to trace the progression from lived experiences, through recurring patterns of practice, to the deeper mechanisms shaping participation. Following the logic of the conceptual model developed in the study, this first findings and analysis chapter explores the inhibiting side of the continuum, examining "ambiguous structures", "latent inhibitors", and "explicit barriers" through a number of descriptive themes that emerged from the data.

5.2 Managerialist mindsets

There is a recurring tendency among several non-youth respondents[20] in the context to assume that solutions need to be provided externally by the National or County Government, or by 'development partners' or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to facilitate or enhance youth civic and political participation. Heller (2001) calls this the "technocratic vision" (p.135), a view "informed by an unbounded faith in the ability of experts to apprehend and transform the world" (ibid.). Several structures have been formed in the last number of years with the aim of engaging young people such as the County Youth Forum, *Wezesha Vijana*, National Youth Council, Accountability Forums, Youth *Bunge*, etc. Several of these were described in interviews as having either fallen dormant or been discontinued. Many interviewees on the government side, however, recall these initiatives either giving the erroneous impression they are still running, or wishing to see them revived without any evidence of success:

> as the Youth Department, we focus on what we call youth representation. So, in public participation, we have delegates who are supported by the county to attend [public participation forums], and these delegates are elected locally [under the

[20] Government officials (past and present), NGO officials, and academics.

Wezesha Vijana initiative] (interview with official[21], Department of Youth, Sports and Culture).

These delegates were last elected in 2018, in alignment with the public participation guidelines drafted (and several other commitments made) under the Open Government Partnership (OGP). Structures proposed under the guidelines, including the selection of "delegates" referred to above, were piloted during the Annual Development Plan (ADP) public deliberations in January 2018, but, based on interviews and observations, dispensed with in subsequent public participation forums organised by the County. Several respondents, however, continued to speak of such structures as though their existence, reactivation, or reform would in itself resolve weak youth engagement.

This way of framing the problem is also evident in how some senior County officials described the obstacles to youth participation. Rather than focusing primarily on the responsiveness or design of participatory spaces themselves, one County Executive Committee Member (CECM)[22] placed responsibility on youth:

> the fact there are few youth oriented projects is because the youth themselves are not vocal enough or don't participate in large enough numbers or are not unified enough as a group, to be able to elaborate their priorities so that they could be funded. It's sometimes presented as the county are not prioritising youth or the county don't have youth priorities on the top of the agenda. But you see the problem is that youth themselves are not vocal enough or don't participate enough. They could be complaining but are not. They don't have the right strategy to address their problems (interview with Bakari, CECM).

Here, the underlying assumption is that if young people were better organised, more unified, or more strategic, the existing system would be able to respond to them. The problem is thus located less in the quality, credibility, or openness of participatory structures than in youth deficits. This is important because it reveals a framing in which

[21] According to the former Head of the Department of Youth, Sports and Culture, "The entire County does not have a Youth Officer. That means you have to use Sports Officers…to deal with youth issues that they are not trained for".

[22] The County Executive Committee (CEC) is the cabinet at the County Government level, and its members are referred to as CEC members (CECM) or "*Waziri"* (i.e. ministers). Although current members of the executive (CECMs) are not named, they gave consent to be interviewed in their official capacity.

participation is treated as something to be improved through better organisation, management, and alignment on the part of youth themselves.

In 2022, the then CECM in the Department of Youth attempted to establish a separate youth platform, which she described as a "multi-purpose vehicle", with important linkages to the County's public participation efforts. Despite only rolling out in 4 of the 20 Wards of Elgeyo-Marakwet, the CECM claims to have political support for the initiative and insists:

> I still believe that we can really maximise on the *Wezesha Vijana* forums as a County and they become our point of communication, our point of engagement, our point of mentorship, because these are platforms in their own right, but you can use [also] that platform to do anything (interview with Nyota, former CECM Youth, Sports and Culture).

She further elaborated:

> if we have these [youth] forums, we will have sustainability, because there will be a leadership, and then they are organised, so they can discuss and once in a while they can have a physical meeting. And as I said, with the youth, if we can have the forums alive, they can have their Ward meetings, and even plan and request for departments to attend their forums, so they can say maybe this week as youth, we wish to be addressed on these issues by these [County Government] departments, and for us, we can move to their Wards and even have a discussion with them.

On one level, such statements reflect a genuine desire to create more sustained channels of communication. Yet they also imply that youth participation becomes meaningful insofar as it is channelled through structured forums, recognised leadership, and organised interfaces with government. This managerial orientation becomes even clearer in the following account:

> if we have the youth groups that I proposed [i.e. *Wezesha Vijana*], they understand, we take them through our capacity building, maybe a whole week, they understand what the agenda of government wants to do. They go back to their

> community, engage the youth for them to understand why government wants to run this programme. By the time government comes to the community, who doesn't want to say yes when they see the product? (interview with Nyota, former CECM Youth, Sports and Culture).

This is particularly revealing. Participation here is imagined less as an open-ended democratic process in which youth shape priorities, contest decisions, or define problems on their own terms, than as a structured process through which selected youth are organised, trained, and equipped to communicate government agendas back to the community. The emphasis falls on transmission, coordination, and acceptance rather than deliberation in any strong sense.

Young people, by contrast, frequently described these initiatives and forums as short-lived, poorly explained, or lacking credibility. One youth said of the *Wezesha* forums, "they just started, and they ended immediately…we really wanted them to continue, but there was no clear organisation from the County, no good will, and no [proper] funding" (interview with Nafasi, local youth).

The problem, however, was not simply that such spaces did not last. Some youth also described them as insufficiently explained or insufficiently intelligible even when opportunities were formally present. As Nafasi put it elsewhere:

> But the County government have not done enough work on explaining. It's like giving somebody a bottle of liquid and you have not told him anything about what's inside the bottle or if he or she is supposed to drink or how they are supposed to use it. So that is one of the biggest problems that we the youth are facing in terms of public participation, the County Government have given us an opportunity. But they've not broken down to define what public participation is to us (interview with Nafasi, local youth).

Others pointed to more concrete procedural shortcomings. Amani, for example, emphasised the absence of timely communication and the weak responsiveness of the forums themselves:

> peoples' opinions are not always taken onboard. Not all opinions that they raise are being taken into account or into action. I can give an example. Like during the public participation forums on budget allocations, the County Government officials normally hold the forums with no prior communications on the same. And the issues that they come to discuss are not shared early enough for the community to raise or to react to the same (interview with Amani, local youth).

Similarly, Baraka questioned the very value of showing up when outcomes appeared already controlled:

> the leadership are interfering in the tenders. They are not fairly awarded. So there is no need of us being there…They will justify without taking on board the concerns of the public, even though we, as the representation, we are there as youth (interview with Baraka, local youth).

In another instance, the same respondent described participation as little more than procedural compliance:

> They are there because they have to be. It's a condition of the legislation. They are secretive and they're simply coming and listening to our views…we are coming there. We are together. But during the implementation we are left behind (interview with Baraka, local youth).

An X Space contributor made a related point about active control over voice within such spaces:

> when these politicians come, they never want to give other people the mic. They just want to make sure that no one speaks bad about them when they are there. They stage manage and make sure that you are not given a microphone (Contributor, X Space, 15th July 2024).

Young people frequently talked of their own initiatives to mobilise, and only expressed frustration with more tokenistic, top-down models:

> Forget them. We'll do our own thing. Definitely, they'll come for ours. We need our own ways of doing things. We'll just tell them this time round, you come to us! We'll just tell them – you are the ones to give us your own views – then we'll react! We

> are not the ones to give you ours. We have already fed you with information. We have decided this time you answer our questions! (interview with Baraka, local youth).

The continued prioritisation of government-led initiatives, despite many young people describing them as weak, short-lived, or lacking meaningful follow-through, suggests a degree of faith in familiar, administrative approaches. These may generate quantifiable outputs, such as the number of youth mobilised or forums convened, without necessarily producing meaningful engagement. Within the conceptual model developed in this study, such initiatives are best understood as ambiguous structures. To the extent that they create opportunities for youth presence or representation, they may appear supportive. Yet where they result only in symbolic or superficial inclusion — where youth are invited to forums but are not genuinely heard or involved in meaningful decision-making — they fall closer to the boundary between latent inhibitors and explicit barriers to *genuine* participation.

At the experiential level, what young people describe are more tokenistic engagements and dormant, discontinued or failed platforms, highlighting a dissonance between the rhetoric of formal inclusion efforts and their actual experience. At the inferential level, there is a pattern discernible of state-centric design and control which reveals "hidden power" dynamics in agenda-setting through the control of design, framing, and follow-through of participation: "Certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence by controlling who gets to the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda" (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p.47). Youth are *invited*, but under terms defined by the state - and thus, those terms could be said to serve state objectives, not youth empowerment. Invited spaces are described as

> those into which people (as users, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities…The key characteristic of these spaces is that external resource-bearing agents bring them into being and *provide a frame for participation within them* (Cornwall, 2002, p.17, *my emphasis*).

At the dispositional level, these patterns suggest a deeper managerialist orientation that treats participation as a bureaucratic requirement rather than an inherently valuable democratic practice. They may also reflect deep, generative structures that shape both state behaviour and youth experience manifest in a mindset that seeks to maintain control and favours hierarchical relationships. As Heller (2001) noted, "Though top-down planning has lost much of its luster in the past decade, it remains a powerful organizational reflex" (p.135). Examining this managerialist mindset through a critical realist lens sheds light on one of the ideological forces shaping how participation is designed, implemented, and ultimately constrained.

5.3 The "Baraza" mentality

Some respondents spoke about the challenges faced by young people feeling accommodated in traditional meeting forums – the "*baraza*". As in other Swahili-speaking contexts, *baraza* is a term used to describe gatherings, councils, or meetings where people come together to discuss issues, make decisions, or engage in communal dialogue. The *baraza* has equivalents across Africa such as the *arbre à palabres* [literally 'the discussion tree'] in Francophone West Africa, which is a culturally important debate and decision-making organ within a community. Some of the issues discussed regarding *barazas* include:

> not everyone would like to be called to a *baraza*. You must make an effort to go look for young people. Ask them what [they believe] is to be done, the challenges they face [...] I think you have to find an appropriate mode of communication (interview with Neema, local youth).

This female youth discussed the need to prepare young people for more effective engagement in *barazas* by engaging in preparatory efforts to ensure topics for discussion are relevant and that some personal interaction between the organisers and young people takes place beforehand, rather than expecting young people, and in particular young women, to attend and voice their concerns in public. Other young women described *baraza*-style spaces as governed by age and gender hierarchies which made speech difficult or unlikely. As one female contributor in a focus group discussion put it,

> Every woman has a chance to speak at those functions, but there's a minimum age. They really value women who are professionals, or of a certain age. We're locked out in the belief that we couldn't have anything important to say, as our generation are seen as confused.

Another explained that in Chiefs' barazas, "the women have very few chances of speaking. This is because of gender bias. In many communities, they view men as the decision makers, so the women are supposed to remain silent and follow what is said". Others expressed the same point more tersely: "our way is blocked" and "*Sijawai ongea kwa baraza*" [I have never spoken in a baraza] (female contributors in FGD). One participant explained, "For me, I prefer to listen to what people have to say rather than talk myself. Because, the way I see it, they'll look at me negatively," while another added: "I have never spoken. I can have a point, but I'll be afraid to speak. I can put my point and then someone will come along and say no, that's wrong. So you can be afraid to say anything" (female contributors in FGD).

An official in the County Government opined:

> I think it has got to a level where you feel like *barazas* aren't meant for you. We go to school, we get employment…the *baraza* system is not for us. I think public participation came as the *baraza* system and youth felt like it's not for us. We just go to school, we get jobs, and we move on (interview with Director, Public Participation and Civic Engagement).

The cultural associations of the *baraza* in Kenya have in many ways been eclipsed by the political. In post-independence Kenya, the *baraza* signified, most notably, meetings called by the powerful Provincial Administration (the Chief, District Officer, District Commissioner etc.). These were more akin to the loudspeakers mounted in public spaces in villages and towns in Eastern Europe used to make official announcements, give news updates, and generally spread government propaganda. Like the Soviet-era loudspeakers, the *baraza* was a system of one-way communication. These were not participatory forums, and certainly not intended to be manifestations of 'direct

democracy'. The *baraza* was "not a forum for open debate about official economic or political philosophies and policies" (Haugerud, 1995, p.66). There was no accommodation of youth or women, and they were set up for people who had opportunity to attend during the working day. The *baraza* in Kenya was appropriated by the political class and carries with it the legacy of an era in Kenya well before participatory democratic ideals were enshrined in modern political institutions. Appropriated initially by the colonial administration, "the *baraza* became…a forum for monologues by colonial officers clad in khaki uniforms and pith helmets (ibid., p.73). Later, "in the independence period it was viewed as a forum…aimed at consensus rather than debate" (Murumba et al., 2022, p.13).

The notion that young people can be 'capacity built' to understand how to participate in *barazas* might suggest abiding patriarchal assumptions, or at least a failure to question the appropriateness of current consultative models for young Kenyans. One County official suggested "changing their mindset on that", and went on to argue:

> Communicating in WhatsApp is not the government way. Government does letters, reports, comes for *barazas*. But do the youth understand the government? There is a need to capacity build youth to understand how to engage and how to bring their agendas to government (interview with Nyota, former CECM Youth, Sports and Culture).

The data illustrates a "*baraza* mentality" in which inherited deliberative structures dominated by the state or elder authority, continue to marginalise youth and women in Kenya's civic processes. While officials may describe *barazas* as inclusive public spaces, young people - particularly women - experience them as alienating or irrelevant. Using a stratified analytical lens, supplemented by Lukes' Three-Dimensional Power framework, this theme suggests that youth disengagement is not simply the result of apathy, but is shaped by structural and ideological exclusions. At the experiential level, young people report feeling uninvited, unheard or unable to speak (corresponding to Lukes' "one-dimensional view of power" (Lukes, 2021, p.23). At the inferential level, the *baraza* is shown to be a legacy institution controlled by the powerful which fits within Bachrach

and Baratz's description of a "set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures ('rules of the game') that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others" (*cited in* ibid., p.25) and corresponds with what Lukes (2021) called the "two-dimensional view of power" (p.26). At the dispositional level, the analysis points to deep-seated cultural ideologies that define who can speak about what, when and where. Despite constitutional ideals of participation, the *baraza* continues to function more as a symbol of state control than a space for real participatory engagement. Adopting CR ontology, empirically, youth are absent (or present but silent). Actually, they are procedurally and culturally locked out. Really, they are governed by inherited norms of authority and a culture which is exclusionary, rigid, and hierarchical.

The findings related to the "*baraza* mentality" illustrate how the *baraza* functions in practice as both a latent inhibitor and an explicit barrier of youth engagement. While officials may continue to see *barazas* as open forums for public dialogue, youth narratives frame them as culturally alienating, irrelevant, and structurally exclusive. One youth complained of being "mistreated in a *baraza*" and another recounted how "you go to a *bazaza* and you're not heard" (contributions in the focus group discussion). Other respondents described more specific forms of exclusion. Amani, a female youth respondent, explained that

> going to the grassroots level is where a woman's voice is not taken into account because they say: 'this one, what is she saying?' A group of men rarely take into consideration a woman's voice. That is where they are. We still have retrogressive cultures that hinder [women's involvement]

Malaika similarly observed that in "most meetings I've attended, they tend to give one slot to a woman and one to a man. That's the fixed number. So, you cannot get that chance to express yourself or to air your views." She added that "The people who manage these forums are not youth. They don't understand youth issues. And they tend to keep information to themselves," and noted that "Youths will see more value in something that involves them only, but if there are older women and men, they cannot say anything" (interview with Malaika, female youth).

This was also borne out in observation. In a meeting with one of the female participant observers (Furaha) after the *baraza*-style CIDP forum in Chebororwa, she reflected: "if I were to stand up, maybe no one could listen to what I'm saying. My opinion may not be accepted, may not be taken into account." Asked whether young women had participated in the forum, she replied: "No. It was only boys and men." Asked again whether there had been any voice from young women, she answered: "*Sikusikia hata moja*" [I didn't hear even one].

The *baraza*, as analysed here, thus exemplifies both a visible exclusion (empirical domain) and an invisible structure of silencing (real domain), reinforcing its place in the *Conceptual Model of Categories of Influence* as both a latent inhibitor and an explicit barrier.

5.4 Youth political leadership

> Before I was MCA, 80% of the youths were using drugs. But now I've reduced it to 50%. It's because we always talk with them. I always interact with them (interview with Adamu, MCA[23] and a youth).

It is hardly surprising for politicians to engage in embellishment, though when it comes to those elected from - and representing - the next generation, it does beg the question, what is really going to change among the political class as a new generation assume the leadership mantle, if they are intent on emulating the behaviour of the current generation?

> I'm not focusing on being an MCA. I'm not focusing on being a Member of National Assembly…I'm focusing on the Presidency (ibid.).

This young politician's pronouncements about what he claimed to have achieved, his stated ambitions for higher office (in fact, the highest political office in the land!), his

[23] Member of the County Assembly, referred to as MCAs or often by the honorific title *Mheshimiwa* (Honourable).

frequent references to “my leadership” and “my people”, were, in many ways, typical of what you would expect from any politician. His attitude and presentation suggested less a break with established political culture than an ease within it. While this was only one case, it raised an important question about what, in practice, is likely to change if members of a younger generation enter political office but adopt the idioms and habits of the political class they were expected to disrupt. Despite my misgivings, I spoke to one CECM who was of the view that young political leaders are an important element in promoting young people’s priorities:

> it is very easy at the County Assembly to push an agenda touching on our youth because we have youthful members of the County Assembly, even the speaker himself is probably still around the age bracket of the youth (interview with CECM, Department of Lands, Physical Planning, Housing and Urban Development).

But this positive view of youth who enter elective politics contrasts sharply with the views put forward by young people themselves, who express a lot of disappointment when it comes to political leadership emanating from their own ranks. Although Adamu was only one interviewee, the concerns his case raised resonated with frustrations expressed by several other young respondents, many of whom viewed youth political leaders less as agents of generational change than as figures liable to reproduce familiar forms of self-interest, distance, and political opportunism. One contributor in an X Space commented: “These leaders forget that we voted for them*, waliomba kura* [they asked for our votes]. I wish we had humble leaders that can come to the ground and listen to us.” (Contributor, X Space, 15th July 2024). Sefu similarly argued that “The greatest blockage is when you have self-interest as a youth [and you let that] come before the interests of the majority.” He described how those who “have gotten the platform to be the leaders” may be “lured” by money or opportunities, “misuse the leadership responsibilities”, and “forget that there were young people looking up to them” (interview with Sefu, local youth). Another youth, sharing this sentiment said: “We have learned some lessons about these politicians. That once they get positions of power they forget” (interview with Baraka, local youth).

The development of the so-called “Gen Z movement” was also shaped by the strong feeling among many young people that political leadership, more especially from the ranks of the youth themselves, was not to be trusted. One of the defining characteristics of the movement during the 2024 anti-government protests[24] was that it was leaderless, with the catchphrase “leaderless, tribeless, fearless” effectively becoming the movement’s official slogan. As Sefu put it, “having been taken for granted for a long time makes you have other strategies and the strategies that you're having is that we are leaderless and we are tribeless” (interview with Sefu). Another youth I interviewed explained the importance of a movement without a leader, as not some sort of guerrilla tactic to avoid the identification of the movement’s leaders by the authorities. He explained rather “we were leaderless because we don't trust one another as young people.” He described a scenario which likely played out in the minds of many young people where “you'll be called to the negotiating table and you might end up shelving what we sent you for, and you [instead] get some cash or even job opportunities in order to fall in line” (interview with Nafasi, local youth).

The theme of “Youth Political Leadership” highlights a tension rather than a straightforward success story: while young leaders ascend to political office, their performance is often viewed by peers as mirroring the very behaviours they were meant to disrupt. Views of youth political leadership in Elgeyo-Marakwet suggest a contradiction between the symbolic inclusion of young people in elective office and the structural realities that constrain their transformative potential. At the experiential level, young politicians speak of achievements and aspirations in familiar political language, while their peers express frustration, disappointment, and mistrust. Inferentially, this suggests a pattern of co-optation and mimicry, where some elected youth are seen as mirroring elite behaviours and use their position to negotiate personal advantage. The “youth leader” is not a force for change in this scenario, but ends up reproducing the existing

[24] Demonstrations began in Nairobi on 18 June 2024 against proposed new taxes presented in the Finance Bill (2024). The protest movement became known as the “Gen Z” movement, evolving into a wider campaign by young people for equity and accountable government focussed on youth exclusion. On 25 June, when parliament passed the Bill, violence broke out that led to the eventual storming of the parliament building by protesters. The following day it was reported that 39 people had been killed by security forces in the protests.

political culture. At the dispositional level, this signals a broader problem of intra-generational mistrust and legitimacy: leadership itself is often seen as a compromised space, structured by postcolonial political norms that reward loyalty to the system and promote a culture of political patronage. The Gen Z-led rejection of formal leadership - exemplified by their embrace of a "leaderless" model - can thus be read not only as a criticism of existing leaders, but also as scepticism toward what leadership itself has come to represent. Youth political leadership therefore emerges here not automatically as supportive infrastructure for youth participation, but as a more ambiguous phenomenon, at times experienced as undermining rather than representing transformative leadership.

This positions youth leadership not straightforwardly as "supportive infrastructure" for youth participation but, in this case, closer to the continuum of "inhibiting factors". On the one hand, embedded ideological and systemic factors may act as latent inhibitors, mechanisms through which the political system sustains itself. At the same time, the roles these young leaders occupy appear as ambivalent structures, claimed as potentially transformative, but often experienced as unaccountable and extractive. The resulting disillusionment, manifest in experiential accounts of mistrust and betrayal, may also function as an explicit barrier to youth participation.

5.5 Exaggeration, misrepresentation and obfuscation

While exaggeration, misrepresentation and obfuscation are often noted as tendencies among the politicians, young and old, several officials in the County Executive also made claims which contradict the experiences shared and practice observed with respect to youth civic and political engagement. Exaggeration or misrepresentation of the situation on the ground is sometimes revealing of an awareness of the ideal situation or how officials would want an external audience to understand the reality of youth engagement and the County's efforts to support it. For example, an official in the Youth Department stated:

> when we are doing our community engagements, we sensitise our youth, who must be involved in the planning, because in the planning, you highlight the priority projects, and you develop the budgets, and decide which projects can be done and what the priorities for the youth are that need to be factored in... (interview with official, Department of Youth, Sports and Culture).

Despite this statement, in only 2 of 10 Wards where participation was observed in early 2025, were youth described as "active" or "engaged" in the discussions. Numbers were mostly described as "low", "very few" - or none at all - when it came to describing the youth who participated in deliberations. Disengagement was observed to be particularly acute among female youth. There was no evidence in any Ward observed of sensitisation having taken place with youth *prior* to public participation forums, nor were the team of participant observers for the study aware of such preparatory work ever having taken place. One participant observer noted:

> Some of the reasons [young people] gave me why they were so few, was the lack of interest in public participation. Some did not have any information concerning what was going on. There was no public awareness done by the County Government to ensure that people have information on what was to happen [in the meeting] (Tabari, participant observer, Sambirir Ward).

County officials making claims about levels of youth organisation for public participation which do not exist is tacit acknowledgement of the type of organisation that *should* be in place so that the priorities of youth are indeed "factored in". The observed reality of the public participation exercises conducted for the FY25/26 Annual Development Plan (ADP) in some cases saw "proposals being rejected because [youth] did not have any voice" (ibid.). This meant, in one case, that young people "did not get an allocation of anything...not even to sports" (ibid.). From another public participation forum in Kaptarakwa Ward, a participant observer noted a suggested allocation to digital literacy "among the things that many youths were supporting", but he said, "it was thrown out because the number of youths was small compared to older people...it just overpowered [the youth]" (Balozi, participant observer, Kaptarakwa Ward).

An official from the County Assembly believed that "the people who attend public participation are normally youths. Over 60% of them are youths, especially on matters of planning and the budgeting, [those attending] are normally youths". He said they are also "the ones presenting proposals for amendments of plans that have been brought to the ground for validation or for input" (interview with Mr. Bahati, Office of the Clerk of the County Assembly). In the observed public participation forums in February 2025, it was noted that in only Emso Ward was the number of youths reflective of this official's assessment. In all other Wards, the numbers were lower, in most cases, much lower. This official was also of the opinion that youth "are present and…their agitation is currently very strong, and they know what they want" (ibid.). Despite Emso Ward registering a singularly high attendance of youth, there is little evidence from the observations of youth successfully 'agitating' for their agenda. The youth participant observer in Emso Ward noted that, despite being present, youth failed to organise and argue effectively for their priorities: "the youth even rejected some of the issues that are affecting [youth] themselves. They rejected [to fund] sports which touches them directly…and the youth were in the majority" (interview with Nafasi, local youth).

The reasons for officials exaggerating the number of young people attending public participation forums may not be completely clear, but it could again be said to be reflective of the understanding that 18- to 35-year-olds make up the majority of Kenya's adult population (57% of the 18+ population, according to the last census), and therefore the number of youth in attendance *should* reflect this. An official in the County Executive framed it as "almost an equal playing field when it comes to youth participating in County politics, and more so public participation, when it comes to preparation of the development agenda for the county" (interview with CECM, Department of Lands, Physical Planning, Housing and Urban Development). These estimates of young people's attendance at public participation forums organised by the County are not borne out by observations or interview data.

While it is tempting to dismiss the claim that "if you look in our public participation attendance lists, the highest numbers are women" (interview with Director of Public

Participation and Civic Engagement), if true, this claim is probably one of the best examples of official obfuscation. The comments from participant observers with respect to female participation in the ADP Public Participation forums in February 2025 are summed up below:

Endo	Sambirir	Sengwer	Chebororwa	Kaptarakwa	Chepkorio	Emso	Kamariny	Kapchemutwo	Tambach
Few women participated cultural norms restricted female voice	More women than men in youth group, but **low overall engage-ment**	Adults more active, **men dominated debates**	**Few women spoke**, men dominated discussions	**Engagement mostly from older men**	**Minimal female participation**	**Moderate female participation but men dominated speaking roles**	**Men dominated few female voices**	**Moderate female engagement**	**Marginalized** Ward Administrator was soft-spoken and withdrew

Table 1: Summary of observations of ADP Public Participation Forums in February 2025 by female participation.

While it is doubtful that attendance lists show a majority female attendance (they are not made public), there is clearly an issue with the quality of female participation in public participation which renders the numbers referred to by the official above meaningless (more below).

Exaggeration, misrepresentation, and obfuscation in youth civic and political participation reflects multiple dimensions of power at play. While officials offer confident and sometimes inflated claims about youth participation, observational data reveals a markedly different reality: minimal youth involvement, lack of awareness, and no preparatory engagement. At an empirical or experiential level, power appears to operate in a distributed way through narratives framing deliberation as inclusive. At the actual ontological level, deeper control over agenda-setting and framing can be inferred which ensures that youth input remains limited or symbolic, even when youth are physically present. At the dispositional or real level, these practices suggest an ideological structure in which participation is reduced to measurable presence, and where the legitimacy of governance is maintained through bureaucratic truth-claims rather than deliberative inclusion. This creates a form of "invisible power" (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p.49) which is not only exclusionary but also helps create the impression that inclusion

has been achieved. The very meaning of “participation” has been redefined - reduced to attendance, emptied of deliberative content, and used to protect institutional legitimacy.

These less visible structures of narrative and ideological power that sustain the appearance of participation while limiting youth influence, operate as latent inhibitors. Although public participation forums are designed as inclusive spaces, they often function as ambiguous structures, claiming procedural openness but lacking the outreach, organisation, or responsiveness required for youth to participate meaningfully. At the empirical level, the lack of awareness, poor attendance, and rejection of youth proposals constitute explicit barriers to meaningful engagement.

5.6 De-obfuscating Female Participation

Numbers don’t lie? Perhaps. But in the case of female participation in deliberative forums in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, numbers which suggest reasonable or even equal female attendance at public gatherings only serve to reassure those with an interest in defending the legitimacy of the process. There were a number of issues which came up in interviews, discussions and observations where the barriers to female participation were explored, and the consequences of the near absence of female voices from deliberations on management of community affairs considered. A recurring theme when discussing the marginalisation of young women, was the influence of cultural norms.

Several aspects of culture in Elgeyo-Marakwet seem to militate against the participation of young women in public forums. A politically active youth herself, Penda, pointed out that some young women are “culturally constrained”. She said “Marakwet is still a culturally-bound community…there's still an aspect of culture that alters the engagement of young women” (interview with Penda, local youth). A participant observer of public participation in two Wards in Marakwet East sub-county noted explicit restrictions on female participation: “female youth need to be circumcised so that they can be given [an opportunity] to speak in public. They are [otherwise] not allowed to participate in most community functions” (interview with Tabari, local youth).

Reminiscent of the *baraza* system (discussed above), a culturally significant forum for community dialogue and dispute resolution among the Marakwet has been the *kok*[25], "in which all adult men participate, [and] elders are listened to with particular respect" (Moore, 1996, p.174). Women, however, "rarely attend *kok* unless they are past childbearing age…[they remain] outside decision making and the exercise of power. If women do attend, they sit apart and do not speak" (p.175). It is not difficult to see how behaviours learned in the *kok* have transferred to the public participation forums:

> …we had no female youth speaking at the event [in Endo Ward]. I really don't know why they didn't give [any female] the opportunity, but from my observation I could see that those men that were there they didn't want to give opportunity to the females. Some of them raised their hands, but you could just hear, "no, no, no, no"…there was an older lady who wanted an allocation for a cultural development project…but it was not considered by the crowd. The County [officials] insisted, let us give the [women] the opportunity. But now if you stand up, and they already start conversing a lot and showing they're not really interested in what you want to say, you'll just cut short what you're saying (interview with Nafasi, participant observer).

The male-dominated *kok* forums are themselves a manifestation of socialised gender roles, which, from an early age, assign girls responsibilities in the homestead, close to their mothers, (i.e., various household chores, taking care of younger siblings, helping tend crops etc.), while boys are given herding and other responsibilities which can take them away from the homestead, under the tutelage of their fathers. Certain negative characteristics associated with 'femaleness' are culturally embedded from childhood, such as preoccupation (and competence) limited to the homestead, while positively valued qualities like clan allegiance and social responsibility are associated with the male. Moore observed that "women are rarely consulted formally and their ability to

[25] The *kok* refers to the traditional administration of the equivalent of the parish or neighbourhood level in Kalenjin society (including among the Marakwet). Described as "the most significant political and juridical unit of the tribe" (Snell, 1954, p.10), it was through this institution that "the main work of civil control and administration" (ibid.) was carried out. The *kok* is therefore understood as a more formal, structured institution with an important, pre-colonial, cultural legacy - in contrast to the *baraza*.

influence major community decisions is restricted to their ability to influence individual men" (Moore, 1996, p.175).

Marriage eventually sees young women leave the home and community, whereas boys, with rights of inheritance, are distinguished "as permanent, social individuals who have a life-long allegiance to the clan and their male peers" (p.62). This distinction in the rights of women to inheritance in their ancestral homes inevitably has uniquely disadvantageous socio-economic outcomes for young women as the examples below illustrate:

> This is a paternal society...when it comes to employment, girls don't have the resources. Boys can say, "Hey Dad, sell a piece of land for me so that I can go and bribe and get a good job!" But do the girls get the same the same chance? Can a father sell land for a girl to advance? I don't think so (interview with Dr. Zuri, university lecturer).

> In our society, we women are discriminated against by the culture of inheritance. A boy can say to his Dad, "Give me this piece of land, I want to grow tomatoes or bell peppers or something, and make some money." But the girls will not get the same advantage (ibid.).

The following dialogue between the researcher and two local youth, a female and male, took place on the subject of whether young women, with their gender-assigned responsibilities in the homestead (and, by implication, young men having fewer such responsibilities), are really interested in politics.

Researcher: Would it be true to say young women are not interested in politics?
Amani: They are interested, but they have less time to talk about it. When do we find women sitting down and following WhatsApp chats? It's rare. Women in our community are busy, busy in their *shambas* [farms].
Nafasi: If you are interested in something you will find time to engage.

(Dialogue excerpt during interview with Amani, local youth)

The assessment of the young man (Nafasi) suggests he disagrees with his female peer and even sounds somewhat dismissive of her view. It did leave an impression, as I recall the moment vividly, and wondered what it says about young men in the context, and their understanding of the unique challenges young women face. I tried to explore the issue of empathy and understanding of the challenges of female participation speaking with both male and female youth in subsequent conversations. Later, Nafasi himself doubled down on his view that young women do not come forward to participate, despite, according to him, being afforded the opportunities:

> I'll give you an example of where we were three guys who started an initiative, but we had to incorporate women because we had approached several offices, and we were told we need to see a female who can speak for you. But getting those women was a problem. No one is willing to be taken to different offices and to speak. Women are not willing. But not because they don't have opportunities. Opportunities are there, but few are vocal (interview with Nafasi, local youth).

A young woman called Malaika, who was not particularly self-confident herself, in an interview described women as "not like men…they are a little bit shy". No doubt channelling her own discomfort at being in a one-to-one interview with me, she said most women tend to leave it to the men to give opinions on their behalf: "They're not interested. They prefer to hear from men rather than giving out their views". Malaika was later invited to attend an interview I had with a local university lecturer and advocate for educational opportunities for women, Dr. Zuri. During this conversation, I attempted on several occasions to involve Malaika with questions like "Is that your experience, Malaika?", to which she would reply: "Yes!". Towards the end of the interview, Dr. Zuri, expressing some disappointment (but not surprise) with the level of engagement from Malaika, said: "Malaika would just [wait to be asked]. That's typical of us. You'd be sitting and really respect the audience until someone says, do you have anything? That is where we can now talk [as women]" (interview with Dr. Zuri, university lecturer).

From my observation of an X Space held in July 2024 (lasting 5 hours 15 minutes), the first female contribution, came after 2 hours and 20 minutes of debate. She spoke for just under 5 minutes. Later a second female contributor was invited to speak (for the second time having declined the first as she was not ready) and spoke for just over 3 minutes. Finally, the first spoke again for 4 and a half minutes. In total the female contribution to the debate (from only 2 speakers) represented less than 7% of the total debate time. There were approximately 30 distinct contributions throughout the discussion, and only 2 female speakers (also representing 7% of contributions). The female speakers raised concerns about healthcare, government accountability, environmental concerns and the need for civic activism. While their contributions echoed those of the male participants, reflecting deep frustration with systemic failures and a strong call for action, accountability, and citizen empowerment, the lack of anything approaching balanced representation of female voices in the X Space debate is reflective of the near absence of female voices from the physical forums discussed so far. One contributing youth, whom I later interviewed, explained his view as to why young women "are not as active as men in terms of things to do with politics." He suggested: "Maybe because of cultural practices? Maybe they believe that politics is a 'man' thing? But the good thing is that some of them are coming to realise now that it is important. Let me not say they don't care, but they just feel that it doesn't concern them" (interview with Jabari, local youth).

Another perspective on the issue of female participation came from a local NGO worker who, in his experience, felt that young women "are not motivated". His take on this, however, was a little more nuanced than some of the male youth previously quoted. He felt the disinterest, or not showing as much concern as their male counterparts, was because ultimately "they know that the final decision [still] comes from men" (interview with Sadiki, local NGO official). Demotivating experiences, discouraging female participation were also mentioned by Dr. Zuri as a likely factor contributing to their lack of engagement in deliberative forums:

> When [women] go to a forum and they say: "I want to participate" and instead of pointing at a woman, [the organisers] point at the guy because they are more aggressive in terms of presenting themselves. So, the women feel, why would I go?

> I mean they come all this way and then they go back [home] without participating. So, they give up…voices are not enabled for the female, but voices are enabled for men because, from the family, they grow up knowing men are usually the more aggressive. The way we assign roles in our [families]. That affects female participation. And that is why women are missing in political circles. That's why they are missing in [these] forums. I've never seen a female in that *Bunge*[26]. They come to participate, to just be in the audience, but they don't say anything, and they are not given that chance to say what exactly they represent or what they would like to see represented on their behalf (interview with Dr. Zuri, university lecturer).

The question remains with respect to cultural norms as to what can be done to encourage more young women to participate actively in deliberative forums whether online or in person. Several respondents, including young women themselves, seem to think that things are changing for the better already, and that, more positive change is inevitable. Amani was of the view that "within towns and urban centres, people are empowered, and women's voices are heard, and their views are taken into consideration. I can't compare to many years ago. At least men can listen to us. Women can stand up in forums and talk" (interview with Amani, local youth). Her positive view linking urbanisation with a shift in culture and an opening up of space for women's participation was echoed by a CECM. He also equated urbanisation with the breaking down of cultural barriers to women's participation, but went further in his assessment:

> I would say that 50% of the County is urbanised. And because of that urbanisation, you find that the aspect of gender [divide] is no longer there. You can go to any engagement within the part of Elgeyo-Marakwet County which is urbanised and find women very vocal. You find young ladies who are very vocal […] I think in the next few years, not more than five, there will be a paradigm shift where the majority of the people giving views and those who will be contesting for political offices will be women…I'm seeing a change in this. No need to change the culture. The culture

[26] The *Bunge la Mwananchi* or 'people's parliament' discussed in 6.3.2 below.

> will change automatically. Fifteen or twenty years ago we used to circumcise women, but that has changed. Now we no longer do that...you don't have to fight culture. Culture has to change because of time, so it will just change...(interview with CECM, Department of Lands, Physical Planning, Housing and Urban Development).

Female participation in civic forums in Elgeyo-Marakwet is shaped by visible exclusions, procedural barriers, and deeply embedded cultural ideologies. Through a critical realist lens, this issue reveals how power is exercised not only through who is present or absent (empirical), but through who gets to shape agendas and rules (actual), and ultimately through how gender roles and public legitimacy are constructed (real).

Addressing female marginalisation in participation requires not only increasing numbers but transforming the social conditions and cultural scripts that define whose voice matters. Gendered exclusion operates through multiple, reinforcing dimensions of power. While women may be numerically present in public gatherings or online spaces, their contributions are minimal, often suppressed by overt male dominance or their own internalised deference. Using Lukes' three-dimensional view of power, reveals that women's marginalisation is not simply the result of silence or absence, but of deeper structures that define who is allowed to speak, what counts as political speech, and how legitimacy is assigned in public discourse. Bhaskar's stratified ontology supports this reading by helping us trace how observed exclusions infer patterns of controlled participation and ultimately reveal deep cultural and ideological mechanisms that shape voice and agency. These combined frameworks of analysis reveal that gendered participation is not a matter of individual will or interest, but the product of durable social structures and internalised norms. For young women especially, meaningful participation will not emerge through presence alone, but must be enabled through intentional, structural, and cultural transformation that addresses both visible and invisible dimensions of power.

The visible underrepresentation of women in both physical and online deliberative forums, constitutes an explicit barrier to participation. Structurally, these forums are

ambiguous - intended to be inclusive but failing to accommodate or challenge the deeply gendered dynamics that govern speaking rights and recognition. At a deeper level, the data points to latent inhibitors: enduring cultural ideologies, socialised silence, and dispositional mechanisms that suppress young women's voices before they even enter public discourse.

5.7 The influence of money in politics

Monetary influence in politics poses a significant barrier to young people seeking elective office: "Voter bribery has…presented formidable challenges in their bid for political office" (KAS, 2016, p.11). The disparity that exists between more socio-economically 'established' citizens (in terms of their business success, career progression, social networks and so on) represents an obvious disparity among the age demographics in terms of their access to resources (either their own, through financial supporters, or even lending institutions) which, given the political culture, effectively excludes young people from vying for political office.

> The political classes are so well resourced. Our elections are mostly about funding. Because people expect to be bribed. Running for office involves a lot of use of resources, which young people do not have. That is what limits their opportunities to get elected (Nafasi, speaking during interview with Amani).

The unofficial cost of running for political office varies enormously depending on the position, the field of political competitors, and the level of party-political support for candidates. In most parts of Kenya, including Elgeyo-Marakwet County, political competition is effectively over once the candidate of the dominant regional party is selected at the party primaries stage. With the exclusive backing of the dominant regional political outfit, he or she will invariably win a majority of votes in the election proper. So it is in the party primaries where the dog fight really occurs and where one of the most effective strategies for ensuring a successful campaign is to bribe voters. Cash is literally

distributed at political rallies. Although an illegal practice[27], not only is this condoned by the general public, it is expected, and subsequently rewarded by voters. One member of the County Government lamented the "perception that politics is for those who have money, for those who have resources, because they can play politics" (interview with CECM, Department of Lands, Physical Planning, Housing and Urban Development). Though framing this primarily as a perception, rather than a lived political reality, may reflect a reluctance to confront the depth of the problem. Just before the elections in 2022, a local newspaper ran the story of a candidate for Member of the National Assembly who attended a funeral in his constituency and was given a chance to address mourners:

> After he spoke, he walked out and was followed by a huge crowd of people. They went to a nearby field, where he held a short rally. He spoke a bit of what he intended to do if elected. Build roads, increase accessibility of bursaries. Then he said, "We are now heading to the segment you all love." The crowd cheered. "Maize flour is Sh200. So, if I decide to give each of you Sh200, is there a problem?" "NOO!" they responded in unison. Then they lined up to receive the money. (Samuel, 2022).

A survey report by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) found that in each of the counties where the survey was carried out, "all respondents indicated that vote[r] bribery was indeed a problem" (KAS, 2016, p.15). They reported that 56% of survey respondents had "received a bribe from a political aspirant/candidate" (p.16). The prevalence of the topic and attitudes encountered throughout this research suggest Elgeyo-Marakwet may be no different.

Even the most idealistic of youth expressing a personal interest in vying for elective office acknowledge the transactional nature of the relationship between voter and politician in

[27] The Election Offences Act (2016) (Sec. 9) states that a person who, during an election period – "directly or indirectly offers a bribe to influence a voter to…vote or refrain from voting for a particular candidate or political party…commits an offence". It also states that a person who "accepts or agrees to accept a bribe…commits an offence".

Kenya, beginning with the voter's expectation of a tangible return for their support. Undoubtedly also playing on the minds of voters is the judgement that if an aspirant to political office is generous in rewarding a voter for his or her vote, the future is bright with such an individual in office, with good prospects for their continued 'generosity'. This attitude is sometimes explained by a lack of education or information on the part of voters. The KAS survey report on voter bribery found that "[a]wareness levels of citizens about their…right to vote [for] a candidate of their choice without being induced, may be low in some parts of the country" (KAS, 2016, p.14). One youth who I spoke to expressed frustration with people succumbing to corrupt influence of money from politicians as "they may be influenced to vote against their best interests". Agreeing with the findings of the KAS survey, he said that people "need to be educated not to sell their vote" (interview with Jabari, local youth).

Another solution I heard to addressing the effective locking out of young people from elective office was, rather than questioning the culture itself, focussed on access to resources. It was suggested by several respondents that economic empowerment or improved "financial muscle" (interview with CECM) and was a prerequisite for participation. Efforts to support young people's employment or business endeavours were proposed as an indirect means of supporting their political ambitions. A youth MCA described economic opportunities for young people as a possible pathway to securing elective positions: "empower the youth…give them money…those who will need to enter politics will have something small[28] to give people" (interview with Adamu, MCA and a youth). Offering advice for politically active youth, with the elections two years away, the MCA cautioned that, "when the time comes…the youth will approach you and demand that you stand [but you] might not have the money to fight for the seat" (ibid.). One wonders what becomes of *youth* leadership given the implication that a career amassing resources must precede any successful attempt at securing election. No one I spoke to called for stricter enforcement of election laws, the attitude seemed to be more one of resignation to the situation.

[28] "Something small" is the literal translation of *kitu kidogo* in Swahili, widely used euphemistically in Kenya to refer to a bribe, *see* https://www.oed.com/dictionary/kitu-kidogo_n?tl=true

One respondent who also spoke of the inhibiting factors young people face when running for elective positions, asked rhetorically if politics is “an equal platform for all or it advantages one over the other?” Echoing the views of several other respondents, he described older people as potentially “more experienced politicians, more resourced politicians, better networked politicians…”, but he pointed to the corrupt influence of money in politics happening in a more targeted way. He described a process in some rural communities whereby elders sit down and decide “who should be leading this time around.” He said “you will find the leaders chosen through these forums are not youthful leaders. And these community elders…can be massaged by the better resourced politicians to sway opinion or to get themselves to be chosen rather than the youthful leaders” (interview with Hakimu, Department of Youth, Sports and Culture).

The influence of money in politics inhibits youth participation, operating across the three themes proposed by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) and simultaneously Lukes’ (2022) three dimensions of power. Experientially, young people observe and participate in a political culture where vote-buying is expected, and electoral viability is closely tied to financial resources. Given their limited access to such resources, this represents an explicit barrier to their engagement. Inferentially, control over candidate selection, party dominance, and voter expectations reflects hidden power structures that marginalise those without economic capital. Youth experience exclusion in immediate and visible ways, but their marginalisation is not just economic - it is also structural, reflected in how leadership is culturally constructed and legitimised. In this sense, money also operates as a latent inhibitor, shaping political legitimacy in ways that are largely invisible. Cultural expectations that equate leadership with wealth, as well as voter behaviour shaped by material benefit, help entrench a view of politics as a space more easily occupied by the economically powerful. These norms are seldom questioned and can serve to narrow young people’s political horizons before they might even consider contesting. Meanwhile, electoral and political structures - such as political parties and community endorsement mechanisms - function as ambiguous structures: open to youth participation in principle, but in practice often favouring incumbents and rewarding financial power over transformational potential.

Dispositionally, what emerges is the widespread acceptance of wealth as a prerequisite for leadership, and the normalisation of corruption as standard practice in politics. Rather than rejecting this system, many young people - including some of those already in office – appear to adapt to it, internalising the idea that you have to first accumulate resources before pursuing representative or leadership roles. This suggests that exclusion of young people is not just enforced, but normalised, making resistance more difficult and systemic transformation less likely.

5.8 The influence of politics in participation

There were many instances where respondents expressed the feeling that deliberate efforts are being made by those in authority to exclude young people from effective participation. Amani pointed to manipulation by administrators ('admins') of WhatsApp discussion groups who tightly control who is admitted: "they add people according to their own preference." This is a particularly significant barrier to young women's engagement, given that all WhatsApp group admins encountered during this study were male, with likely male-dominated social circles, and attendant predispositions towards admitting mostly male contacts into groups.

Group admins were also seen to resort to removing members from groups in exercising their gatekeeping role. In the X Space discussion I observed, one youth pointed to WhatsApp admins: "I think we should start with them, because they are holding us hostage" (Contributor, X Space, 15th July 2024). Beyond control by admins of who is admitted and forced out of groups, there is also the suggestion that manipulation and intimidation take place within groups in response to postings which may be critical of certain development projects or political leaders. One youth contributor claimed there are those within WhatsApp discussion groups "that have been hired by several leaders…hired goons…a person can't even express himself" (ibid.):

> You are a voter…your job is to ask [about] this project, because we pay taxes…what's going on? Before you talk, almost 10 people come to your inbox. Others remove you from WhatsApp. I think guys, this is a point of concern… [we

need to] start with them, so that we liberate ourselves (Contributor, X Space, 15th July 2024).

Digital gatekeeping points to power hierarchies within supposedly open youth networks, which are often gendered and political in nature. It can be said to constitute a latent Inhibitor to youth engagement, steeped as it is in deep, dispositional power that operates beneath the surface. At the empirical level, intimidation and removal from WhatsApp groups is a clear, experienced exclusion and constitutes an explicit barrier to engagement. These empirical-level barriers reinforce the sense of marginalisation. But these sorts of efforts to deliberately interfere in spaces where young people convene to express themselves are not restricted to the social media platforms. Many people I spoke to agreed that interference in discussion and debate in order to manipulate the outcome is a common feature of public deliberation. Whether in formally convened public participation forums or in less formal venues, such as the *Bunge la Mwananchi* [29], many young people confidently cited examples of where interference changes the outcome.

The *Bunge la Mwananchi* is a regularly held public meeting in Iten town that attracts almost exclusively men, many of them young men, who meet to talk about matters politics. Young people are apparently especially active during holiday periods when schools and colleges are closed. A particular strength is that the *Bunge* does genuinely appear to be a forum where people try to convince others of their way of thinking, in a friendly, respectful and sober manner. There is a good chance someone will walk away having refined their thinking about an issue or changed their mind altogether. A local youth described the process: “You get information by listening. You get information by having people talk and you listening to people talking, not necessarily you being listened to when you're talking” (interview with Sefu, local youth).

The *Bunge* is also a forum that the political leadership are said to consider a bell weather, where vocal locals find their views are either supported or rejected by the “members” in discussions and debates that make their way back to the leadership. However, to the extent the same leadership want to influence opinion on the streets, there is a reported

[29] Literal translation is “parliament of the people”, a self-styled ‘parallel’ government. “Founded in the early 1990s as a social movement during [the period of the] one-party state, [the] Bunge la Mwananchi aims to keep the…government in check” *from* Daily Nation, 9th December, 2023.

surreptitious channel of influence from political leaders to the *Bunge* whereby, not only are leaders said to have their "spies" or "informers" reporting back, they sometimes use these individuals to promote their own view of things, to test opinion locally – or, indeed, to sway it. Sefu described a situation where "a topic is brought up for discussion, but that topic has an objective, and the objective maybe is to find out the opinion of people".

The view that opinions expressed in such forums may be manipulated by effectively being paid for, is ultimately very damaging, when considering the value of ostensibly open forums where any member of the public is welcome to speak his (or, on rare occasions, her) mind, uninhibited. Previous research found that members of a *bunge* in Nairobi encountered "powerful individuals who want to suppress the talk…on a particular issue" and that they "hand out cash to spoil the debates, [or] introduce alternative issues, or attract people away from the sittings with offers of short-term employment" (Otieno et al., 2016, p.104). One politically active youth in Iten described the following situation:

> because somebody is getting something from that leader or a favour from that leader, he now comes to debate according to that leader's opinion. Not according to his own standing or principles […] It's not that what you're saying is your [opinion], but what you're saying is somebody else's (interview with Sefu, local youth).

The 'hostage' metaphor resurfaces in this youth contributor's view of political manipulation of the *Bunge* during an X Space discussion:

> Another thing the Governor has taken hostage, the *Bunge la Mwananchi* in Iten because the majority of the people controlling it are his sycophants. And these politicians are using sycophants to make sure that they survive in the streets, which is a very bad thing. We are suffering from a political syndrome in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, whereby we praise a lot of things that are not done…we are doing a lot of PR without doing the work (contributor, X Space, 15th July 2024).

Surveillance and sycophancy in *Bunge* forums, "paid-for opinions", and "spies" reporting to politicians are examples of informal but influential mechanisms used to control discourse while preserving an appearance of openness. Youth references to political actors having "taken hostage" public forums are a metaphor that reflects the perceived

structural capture of the public sphere. Aligning with Lukes' third dimension of power and Bhaskar's real domain, these mechanisms constitute "latent inhibitors" to youth civic and political participation because they do not appear as formal exclusions, but shape what can be said, by whom, and what it will achieve.

One youth I spoke to who attended a public participation exercise organised by the National Assembly in October 2024 described it as follows:

> They came for public participation[30]. There were some people who ate a lot of money[31] to come and represent us. The leadership, the political class pay their people whom we term as "goons". So, they were told to give their views…leaving no space for the people who had different opinions. And they were the views they took as the official views of the residents of this area […] Some of us who had different views were left out. They made a report on the participation of the public, and anonymous views are said to have been given. But they were the ones they wanted. And it was not our voice at all (interview with Baraka, local youth).

The implication of Baraka's assessment of the flawed public participation exercise he witnessed is clearly that if the process had not been manipulated, the public would not have agreed with the Special Motion to censure the Deputy President. There would be serious political fallout of a failure by the public in the President's political back yard not to support the motion brought by his supporters in the National Assembly. Whether or not this youth's assessment that "our voice" was not taken into account, and that a majority would not, in fact, have supported the Special Motion in a free and open discussion, is hard to ascertain objectively. What is clear is that he felt there was "no space" for his views, and that financial inducements had been used to ensure the outcome went in a certain way.

Taking a motion of censure against the Deputy President, which was debated in Parliament, to the public does, on the face of it, look like the National Assembly taking

[30] The National Assembly undertook a Public Participation Programme in the 290 constituencies of Kenya on a "Special Motion" for the proposed impeachment (and removal from office) of the Deputy President. Public hearings were advertised to be held on 4th October 2024 (and subsequently extended to 5th October) in each constituency.

[31] "To eat money" (more commonly *kukula pesa* in Swahili) euphemistically refers to the enjoyment of the proceeds of bribery or corruption.

seriously its obligations under the Constitution to "facilitate public participation and involvement in the legislative and other business of Parliament and its committees" (GoK, 2022, p. 55). As an *ad hoc* consultation with the people on a matter before Parliament, these public hearings could be said to be an example of the people exercising their sovereign power directly, as envisaged by Article 1.(2) of the Constitution (GoK, 2022, p.14). However, a ruling of the High Court on the day before the programme was to be rolled out, found that the planned process did not meet the constitutional threshold for public participation and judged it flawed on a number of grounds. Drawing on previous court rulings on what meets the threshold for public participation, the court referenced judgements on "reasonableness of notice" and "opportunity for participation", and also cited the "principles for public participation" as outlined by the Supreme Court. The High Court ordered the National Assembly to

> organize similar public hearings [to those planned] closer to the citizens at least at constituency level on *(sic)* each constituency in Kenya to enable the constituents of Members of Parliament responsible for the impeachment process nationally to engage with and participate on *(sic)* hearings and/or any other suitable modes by which citizens at that level can participate and offer their representations (GoK, 2024, p. 1).

Ultimately the National Assembly was deemed to have complied with these orders by extending the programme by another day and holding meetings at the Constituency level. The point here is that the National Assembly needed to be ordered by the court to address flaws in their rushed plan to involve the public in deliberations on the Special Motion. This, and the broader context within which the impeachment process took place, calls into question the sincerity of the effort, and, taken together with the view of the youth interviewed, reinforces perceptions of political interference in public participation. While the political stakes were very high in regard to the public participation around the impeachment of the (now 'former') Deputy President, talk of interference in locally focussed processes, both informal and formal, also featured prominently in interviews.

Political interference in formal public participation forums was a major focus for youth in conversation. Examples encountered were many, both given by youth themselves, and

witnessed in observations of deliberative forums organised by the County. The objective is clear, to ensure that predetermined results are achieved. Methods vary, but at a very fundamental level, undermining faith in ostensibly participatory processes has an extremely deleterious effect on young people's motivation to participate.

Every County Government has its development objectives and its plans for achieving those on a county level. However, planning processes for counties are very clearly defined in Kenya in The County Governments Act (2012). This legislation requires counties to develop certain plans, namely 1) county integrated development plans (known as CIDPs, developed on a 5-year basis), 2) county sectoral plans, 3) county spatial plans and 4) cities and urban areas plans. These plans are to be "the basis for all budgeting and spending in a county" (GoK, 2012, p. 53). CIDPs are required to be "based on annual development priorities and objectives…and the performance targets set by the county" (pp.57-58). How counties come up with "annual development priorities" is itself a process governed by legislation, both national and local. The County Governments Act stipulates that "Public participation in county planning processes shall be mandatory" and requires each County Assembly to "develop laws and regulations giving effect to the requirement for effective citizen participation in development planning" (GoK, 2012, p. 58).

Legislation for Annual Development Plans (ADPs) is rooted Section 126 of the Public Finance Management Act (2012) requiring counties to develop annual plans based on their 5-year CIDPs. In Elgeyo-Marakwet County, the County Equitable Development Act (2015), further requires that the County "involve the communities, organizations and the people to be affected by any development project or activity in the county, sub-county, ward and all other units established under the County Government Act, in all stages of decision making process of the project or activity" (GoK, 2015, p.7). This local legislation (discussed in detail in 6.2 below) also requires that "the communities, organizations and the people shall…be involved in the development of a Plan *for their wards* and the prioritization of projects" (ibid., *my italics*). It is through this County legislation that

Elgeyo-Marakwet's planning processes are deliberately centred on the ward-level[32], the level at which "public participation forums" for ADPs takes place.

Elgeyo-Marakwet County is one of the counties of Kenya which has tried, at least in legislation, and certainly in rhetoric - if not entirely in practice - to give effect to the Constitutional requirement that every county government "decentralise its functions and the provision of its services to the extent that it is efficient and practicable to do so" (GoK, 2022, p.82). The application of the aforementioned County Equitable Development Act (2015) - or "EDA Act" as it is often referred to - differentiates Elgeyo-Marakwet from other counties, including close neighbours. As one youth pointed out:

> ...in our county we have the EDA Act. This was an act introduced during the early years of devolution, and it is what makes Elgeyo-Marakwet slightly different from counties like [neighbouring] Baringo, where public participation is never totally done. It is consolidated in the Governor, and he decides [...] That is what is making a difference in our County (interview with Nafasi, local youth).

So decentralising decision making to the ward level is operationalised through public participation forums where the development plan (the ADP) is in theory interrogated, priorities agreed upon (in the form of specific projects) and budget allocations endorsed, amended or rejected. In 2025, the process involved the County Executive calling the public for input on the ADP FY25/26 in January/February 2025 (*see Table 2*). They then submitted the ADP to the legislative branch for debate, adoption and approval. The County Assembly (through its Finance and Budget Committees) held its own public hearings to review the Executive's proposals and allow citizens to give further input before approval in late March 2025.

[32] The "ward" in Kenya is an electoral and administrative sub-division of a County. The Constitution of Kenya establishes the ward as the electoral unit for the Member of the County Assembly (MCA). The County Governments Act (2012) establishes the Office of the Ward Administrator under the executive branch of the County Government for administrative purposes. There are 20 wards in Elgeyo Marakwet County with populations averaging 20,000 people per ward (according to the 2009 census) and an average size of 133km^2.

Elgeyo Marakwet County - Department of Finance & Economic Planning
Public participation forums for the 2025/2026 Annual Development Plan (ADP).

Date	Time	Ward	Venue
27/1/2025	10:00 AM	Emsoo	Kabulwo Assistant Chief's Office
27/1/2025	10:00 AM	Moiben/Kuserwo	Cheptongei Ward Office
27/1/2025	10:00 AM	Kaptarakwa	Kaptarakwa Resource Centre
28/1/2025	10:00 AM	Kabiemit	HZ Resource Centre
28/1/2025	10:00 AM	Chepkorio	Nyaru Social Hall
28/1/2025	10:00 AM	Kamariny	Kamagut Ward Office
29/1/2025	10:00 AM	Embobut/Embolot	St. Michaels Ward Office
29/1/2025	10:00 AM	Arror	Arror Ward Office
29/1/2025	10:00 AM	Metkei	Metkei Community Hall
30/1/2025	10:00 AM	Kapsowar	Kapsowar AIC School of Theology
30/1/2025	10:00 AM	Lelan	Labot Ward Office
30/1/2025	10:00 AM	Endo	Tot AIC Church
30/1/2025	10:00 AM	Cherangany/Cheborora	Kuitugum Ward Office
30/1/2025	10:00 AM	Kapchemutwo	Bugar Ward Office
03/2/2025	10:00 AM	Sengwer	Chesubet AIC Church
03/2/2025	10:00 AM	Sambirir	Chesoi Centre 1 (Market)
03/2/2025	10:00 AM	Soy South	Chepsirei Ward Office
04/2/2025	10:00 AM	Tambach	Kessup Primary School
04/2/2025	10:00 AM	Soy North	Emsea Ward Office
04/2/2025	10:00 AM	Kapyego	St. Augustine Catholic Church

Table 2: Schedule for public participation forums in Elgeyo Marakwet County for the 2025/2026 Financial Year Annual Development Plan (ADP).

Together with a team of three participant observers, we observed 10 (of the 20) ward-level forums held with the objective of involving local communities in identifying, prioritising and approving budget allocations for development projects proposed for each ward (*see Table 2*). Although there was a diversity in organisation, approach, and decision-making processes depending on the facilitation (and in some case, the express wishes of the community), there were some common threads.

Evident in all forums was the county strategy to exert control over proceedings in an effort to ensure that their desired outcome was achieved. The key question for participant observers was whether there was an appropriate balance maintained by County officials between providing the necessary guidance, direction and structure to proceedings, and imposing their will and depriving communities of meaningful input into development

planning and funding allocations. The participant observer team including myself ultimately found these exercises in direct democracy flawed.

In analysing Balozi's observations regarding the role of County officials in the two public participation forums he observed, it becomes evident that the effectiveness of community engagement is intricately linked to local leadership dynamics. In Kaptarakwa, Balozi noted a robust sense of ownership among community members, who actively prioritised their needs and engaged in meaningful discussions among themselves. Conversely, in Chepkorio, the community's engagement was characterised by a passive acceptance of the County officials' agenda:

> It was very positive for Kaptarakwa because they owned the whole discussion, and they chose to use the opportunity to discuss their own issues, which are directly affecting them. You can't compare it with Chepkorio because there they were given the entire document and they just kept on responding in chorus answers: "we are supporting this…we are supporting this…we are not supporting that…" but in Kaptarakwa they chose to own the entire public participation [process], and they discussed their own issues which are affected them directly (interview with Balozi, participant observer).

However, in both Kaptarakwa and Chepkorio, the interactions between County officials and the community reveal a fundamental dysfunction that undermines the potential for a healthy collaborative relationship. In Kaptarakwa, community members explicitly requested that County officials step aside to facilitate their own discussions, indicating a desire for autonomy in addressing local issues: "the County officials were given a break, they were excused from the meeting. Though they were not happy about that, but they had no choice because they were given option of either leaving the venue or the public themselves would leave, but they gave in." This request underscores a clear rejection of external imposition and highlights the community's need for space to articulate their priorities without interference. Conversely, in Chepkorio, the community's passive acceptance of County officials' dominance reflects a troubling dynamic where the officials imposed their agenda, stifling genuine dialogue and participation: "in Chepkorio

they were more compliant. They went along with the County Officials programme. They took on the county's recommendations" (interview with Balozi, participant observer).

In both scenarios, though, the absence of a constructive relationship between the County Government and the community is evident; the Kaptarakwa community's exclusion of officials contrasts sharply with the Chepkorio community's acquiescence to domination. This dichotomy illustrates a broader pattern of engagement characterised by either mistrust or dominant imposition, ultimately hindering the development of a collaborative framework that could foster meaningful community involvement in planning and decision-making processes. The lack of a balanced partnership between County officials and the communities in both contexts suggests a critical need for re-evaluating engagement strategies to promote inclusivity and mutual respect.

The report of the observations of Tabari of two further public participation events which he attended also indicates that the effectiveness of public participation in development planning is heavily influenced by the approach taken by County officials to the organisation of events. In Endo Ward, a collaborative and inclusive environment fostered meaningful community input, while in Sambirir Ward, a more authoritarian approach led to disengagement and dissatisfaction among participants, particularly the youth:

> Endo was a more successful event. Those people were just organised, and each and every participant was given an opportunity to speak, to raise an issue, to give a comment. Compared to Sambirir, where the area MCA was just running the programme. And the youths were not even involved (interview with Tabari, participant observer).

In Endo, community members were able to propose new projects, such as the employment of ECD[33] teachers and improvements to road networks, indicating a level of agency and involvement in the decision-making process. The youth were engaged and had representation in discussions, contributing to the overall success of the event. According to Tabari, the participant observer and youth himself, "each and every youth from the sub-location was given an opportunity to speak. All of them touched on issues like insecurity, emergency funds, and sports". And the public were sensitive to the need

[33] Early Childhood Development (ECD). This level of education is financed by the County Government.

to hear female voices: “Almost 5 young women were given an opportunity to speak due to public demand. Some vocal young women were given an opportunity to speak to the whole group.” However, in Sambirir, youth funding proposals were outright rejected, and the youth felt they had no voice in the discussions. The rejection of youth-related projects was often met with a lack of organised opposition, as many youths were either shy or disengaged. This highlights the importance of proactive engagement and the need for youth to be organised and informed to effectively participate in such forums:

> In Sambirir, where the area MCA was just running the programme, the youths were not even involved. There had been no awareness. In Endo, there was awareness because…we have a WhatsApp group for the entire Ward. People who have smartphones, when they attend a public function like funerals, they just give [others] information, that on certain day we will have a public participation in a certain place, and this is what we will discuss for the betterment of our Ward (interview with Tabari, participant observer).

Both Tabari’s and Balozi’s observations reflect structural ambiguity: participatory forums are constitutionally and legislatively mandated, yet their practical enactment is uneven and often co-opted. Structures like public forums for the ADP can support youth engagement, but often default to rubber-stamping exercises, shout-and-approve mechanisms, or performative consultation. In some cases (e.g. Endo and Kaptarakwa) participation is meaningful; in others (Chepkorio and Sambirir), it is tokenistic or manipulated. These are classic ambiguous structures: they hold formal potential, but are highly contingent on implementation, local dynamics, and political will.

Furaha was a participant observer of two neighbouring Ward-level deliberative forums on the ADP (in Sengwer and Cheborорwa Wards, *see Table 2*). Her assessment of the forums she attended reveals important insights regarding the dynamics of public participation in development planning and funding allocations, particularly in relation to the guidance and influence of County officials. In Sengwer Ward, she noted that the community ultimately accepted the proposals from the County without much resistance, stating, "They had to agree!" This suggests a lack of meaningful input from the community, as they felt compelled to accept the funding allocations presented to them – and aligns with the

concern that County officials may impose their will, depriving communities of meaningful input. In Chebororwa, she observed that the public had more opportunities to discuss and engage with the proposals, leading to a more participatory atmosphere. However, she indicated that even here, the discussions were still largely confined to the County's agenda, with limited scope for community-driven initiatives.

The presence of senior County officials, including CECMs[34] and COs[35], was noted as a strategy to ensure compliance and acceptance of proposals. Furaha mentioned that in Sengwer, the County officials were effective in pushing their agenda, which led to a more subdued public response. This raises questions about the balance of power in these forums and whether the presence of officials stifles genuine community engagement. She said of the public: “They agreed to rubber stamp the proposals from the County. Even in Chebororwa, were there was some debates, in the end, they just agreed with the County proposals”.

Furaha's assessment underscores the complexities of public participation in development planning, particularly the influence of County officials and the structural dynamics of the forums. While some opportunities for community input exist, the overarching control by County officials and the lack of encouragement for diverse voices - especially from women and youth - suggest that these forums may not fully empower communities to engage meaningfully in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. This aligns with the key question of whether County officials respect a clear line in providing guidance while allowing for genuine community input. In conclusion, the quality of public participation is influenced by factors such as organisation, inclusivity, the nature of discussions, and the dynamics of decision-making. Both events Furaha observed, clearly illustrate the need for continuous improvement in these areas to enhance the effectiveness of public participation initiatives.

At the public participation event in Tambach Ward which took place on 4th February 2025 in the grounds of Kessup Primary School (*see Table 2*), at which I was a participant

[34] The County Executive Committee Member (CECM) is appointed by the Governor to lead specific departments.
[35] The Chief Officer (CO) is a senior officer within a county department, responsible to the CECM for the administration of that department.

observer, while there was a strong turnout and engagement from (especially older, male) residents, the process revealed several tensions and structural weaknesses.

The forum began with formalities and speeches from county officials and political leaders, many of whom emphasised that the priorities should come from the people: "*Mko na sauti kuliko sisi wote*" [you have a stronger voice than all of us here] and "*Sauti yenu ni ya maana* [your voice is important]" (MCA, Tambach Ward). The County Secretary assured those present "*vile mnataka itafuatwa*" [we will follow the way you want things to be]. Despite this rhetoric, the reality of the forum was that virtually the only "voices" we heard were those of officials and leaders – with the actual public decision-making degenerating into a shout-and-approve system as recounted in other forums observed.

Initial discussions focused on "rollover projects" (initiatives that had been allocated funding the previous financial year but were not completed). This discussion was led by the CECM for Lands who called up the Ward Development Committee Chair, who in turn called upon Project Management Committee (PMC) chairs from each sublocation[36], to list the rollover projects with updates on progress and planned completion timelines. Foregrounding the unfinished projects from the previous ADP was clearly a strategy to pre-empt any concerns about transparency being raised or potential accusations of mismanagement.

Although the session featured moments of strategic orchestration (such as ECD teachers presenting pre-approved proposals), there was little substantive debate or access to key documents. Marginalised voices - particularly women, youth, and persons with disabilities - were notably absent, and the dynamic was male-dominated and largely performative. There was a strong undercurrent of scepticism towards the County Executive's proposals, with residents appearing more interested in rejecting enough items to free up funds that could then be reallocated at the sublocation level. Despite moments of humour and spontaneous public commentary, the exercise exposed gaps in the participatory framework and raised several issues with respect to the authenticity and effectiveness of citizen engagement in development planning:

[36] Administrative subdivision of Ward. In Tambach Ward, there are 9 sub-locations

- There was a lack of substantive argument presented for or against any proposal – proposals were approved or rejected without any clear rationale;
- No directly affected/concerned residents were called upon to argue the case for certain proposals, e.g. when the Ward Sports Tournament was rejected, the MCA suggested a youth could speak on the issue. Two youths raised their hands near me, but as the proposal was rejected by the shouting crowd and there was pressure to move on to the next proposal (the only exception was when MCA successfully engaged the ECD teachers earlier);
- As very few people had a copy[37] of the 30 plus proposals from the County, no one could know the tally of approved or rejected proposals, and what proposals would be allocated the remaining uncommitted money;
- There was no serious, structured opportunity to discuss other proposals – beyond those listed on the document provided by the County;
- Women, youth, PWDs – were marginalised in this process. Men, with their male friends egging them on, dominated proceedings;
- The proposals included recurrent or non-development expenditures such as payment for ECD teachers full salaries and benefits, equipping of Ward offices, Ward offices operational costs, purchase of vehicles, etc. It is unclear why the County allocates amounts to Wards for development activities and effectively takes it back through such proposals;
- The motivation of the people seemed to be to reject enough of the proposals to leave a substantial amount remaining (in this case, KES 37m out of KES 54m) which would then be allocated to the 7 sublocations (giving each sublocation over KES 5m each). The sublocations then had their own meetings at which proposals for the KES 5m would be agreed on. The motivation of the County Officials (despite nearly more than two hours of preparatory rhetoric) seemed only to be to secure as much of the Ward's allocation of KES 54m as possible for those projects which the County had proposed (listed on their document).

[37] The failure of the County to provide information is frequently cited as a deliberate tactic to control or limit debate: "the County Government cannot give you the documents themselves…because they think that you are going to expose them. But nowadays we can access these things online" (interview with Rafiki, local youth).

What is clear from the reports of both the youth participant observers, and my own observations of 10 of the consultative forums convened by the County Government on the ADP across all Wards in 2025, is the inescapable influence of politics in public participation. The extent to which political agendas pervade nominally consultative forums varies from overt examples of manipulation of the agenda, organisation and accessibility of speaking opportunities to more subtle manoeuvrings around control and access to information. Socio-cultural and political differences, even across a relatively small County like Elgeyo-Marakwet, resulted in diverse experiences for County officials and the public from Ward to Ward with respect to the make-up of attendance and experience of public participation. Representation of youth, women, other marginalised groups, and the extent of – and space for – a diversity of public opinion varied widely, and itself had an impact on the objective quality of public participation from location to location. One constant, however, seemed to be the blurring of the line between the objectively necessary facilitative role for County officials in deliberative engagements with the public, and the tendency to impose a pre-determined agenda reducing public deliberation to a rubber-stamping exercise. The assessment of youth participants is telling:

> They found a way in which they could counterattack without the public realising, but we realised. We saw [the management of] the different Wards. They have already sat down, discussed the challenges they faced and the way they are going to approach the forums [...] They think there is a way in which they can manipulate the public without the public knowing (interview with Nafasi, participant observer).

Balozi spoke of the manner in which County officials planned to "counteract" the situation that saw them asked to remove themselves from an earlier forum he attended. He noted:

> The CECMs, the COs started [the session] by organising themselves, briefing the people on the document that they'd come with, telling them about the previous financial year and trying to convince people even before presenting the

> documents. They were just trying to manipulate, trying to put some information to the public so that the moment they hand over the document you already feel like, 'you know what this guy is saying really makes sense!' (interview with Balozi)

The County Government strategy was adapted in the course of the roll out of the ADP consultative forums to more carefully manage the agenda. According to Nafasi, technical teams from the County, led by CECMs "realised that if we continue this way, to open up like this, then we will not meet the objective". He noted that the CECM

> who takes charge of the programme, would normally come from that place...so him being there is most likely going to convince the people of [that area]. The same with the CO. [...] So, you bring the local officials to convince the people. Someone who comes from there and the people will listen because it's their own person. They'll not reject things they are proposing (interview with Nafasi).

Observations of political influence in participatory forums thus offer rich empirical data and clear insights into mechanisms shaping youth (and broader community) engagement. They reflect a multi-layered interplay across several categories on the spectrum of "inhibiting factors" in the *Conceptual Model of Influences on Youth Civic and Political Participation*. In addition to the ambiguous structures already alluded to, latent inhibitors appear to be deeply embedded throughout the consultative processes around the ADP, operating beneath the surface of formal processes. County officials are described as pre-framing discussions through speeches and orchestrated briefings before participation begins - shaping decisions before deliberation starts. The use of local officials to sway community sentiment shows the use of trust and familiarity as tools of manipulation. The planning strategy to "counteract" earlier resistance and adapt facilitation styles for subtle control indicates a system designed to neutralise dissent invisibly. The youth participant observers, and perhaps even the public more generally, recognise manipulation yet often feel unable to confront or resist it directly - demonstrating the normalisation of strategic control in public life. These are mechanisms of discursive capture and symbolic control, deeply rooted in institutional and political culture which exemplify both Lukes' third dimension of power and operate in Bhaskar's real domain.

At the level of observable, experiential themes, numerous explicit barriers to youth participation are also evident. In several Wards, youth and women are not given space to speak, youth-related proposals are rejected outright, access to documents is limited, and control of the agenda rests with officials. Public forums are often seen to be poorly facilitated, are male-dominated, and offer limited opportunity for deliberation or alternative views. These are barriers located in the empirical domain, consistent with Wiltshire and Ronkainen's experiential themes and Lukes' first dimension of power. In applying Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) stratified analysis, we uncover how experiences of exclusion point to structural orchestration, and how these, in turn, are sustained by deeply rooted norms that render public input symbolic rather than truly meaningful. For youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet, the effect is clear: participation is formally promised but structurally weak – leaving young people not just unheard, but increasingly uncertain whether their voice was ever meant to matter.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of explicit obstacles, latent inhibitors, and ambiguous structures that negatively impact youth engagement, with a particular focus on public participation forums, political influence, gender disparities, and youth leadership dynamics. The integrated presentation of findings and analysis highlights the multifaceted and deeply rooted barriers to youth participation. Structural manipulations, political interference, gendered exclusion, and legacy cultural norms are shown collectively to inhibit meaningful youth engagement. Local administrators, politicians and traditional leaders largely expect young people to acquiesce to well-established, yet limited forms of civic organisation characterised by gendered, exclusionary and undemocratic practices, while most youth leaders themselves seem to be unable or unwilling to challenge these forms and offer alternative proposals for meaningful engagement. While there is hope that ongoing cultural shifts positively affecting attitudes towards female participation will lead to demonstrably greater civic and political engagement of young women in the future, evidence suggests political forces are aligned against any immediate transformational change. The following chapter will look at possible avenues through which such change may be achieved, and youth inclusion and empowerment advanced.

Chapter 6 – Support to Youth Participation

6.1 Introduction

This second of two thematic findings chapters examines support for youth engagement along a continuum of "ambiguous structures", "latent enablers", and "transformative supports", while integrating analysis throughout.

6.2 National and County government policies and initiatives

6.2.1 Youth Development Policy (2019)

A stated objective of the national government's Youth Development Policy (2019) is "[e]ffective civic participation and representation among the youth" (GoK, 2019, p.23). The desired outcome of the policy is "Youth who are adequately empowered…[and] effectively participating in decision making spaces" (ibid.) The policy states that "measures shall involve both National and County governments" (p.25) along with other stakeholders. It elaborates certain commitments that the government will undertake in order to achieve the above outcomes, including a commitment to organising "periodic forums at national, county and ward levels to receive views and strategies on youth matters" and initiating "a training program to enhance leadership skills among youth in elective positions which involves student leaders/councils in tertiary institutions and universities" (p.38). The policy further states as an objective: "[a]wareness raising, listening and supporting the voice of the youth" and recognises the "need to create initiatives and opportunities that enhance youths social and political awareness that enable their voices to be heard while impacting lives of their fellow young people" (p.38). To this end, the government will "hold annual social dialogue[s] with youth at community, ward, county, sub-county, national level to address youth issues [and] increase political awareness among youth and their constitutional rights" (p.56). The policy also defines youth participation substantively as youth having "influence on and shared responsibility for decisions and actions that affect the lives of the youth" (p.xiii).

Despite clear rhetorical support to youth civic and political participation, the focus on civic and political participation receives less detailed attention and fewer specific programmes relative to other policy areas (such as such as employment, skills training, health, and drug abuse). Further, the mechanisms for actual political influence by youth do not appear to be robustly defined or guaranteed in this policy in the same way as some of the more programmatic socio-economic priorities. While it appears to provide a legal framework for supportive structures for youth participation, the practical pathways remain comparatively weak.

At the same time, although a *national* government policy, reflecting the shared responsibility for "youth" across all levels of government, the structures envisaged to oversee coordination and implementation of the policy draw officials from both national *and* county government (e.g. both the proposed Steering Committee and Technical Committee comprise of officials from national and county government). There are also explicit recommendations made for the domestication of the policy through County-level policy and legislation. The policy provides for coordination and implementation, monitoring and evaluation, resource mobilisation, and annual action plans at national and county levels. The implementation mechanism is to be operationalised through integrated implementation plans and annual action plans detailing priorities, actions, indicators, timelines, and responsibilities of relevant stakeholders (pp. 69-71). This is significant because it shows that the policy was intended not simply as a national statement of principle, but as a framework capable, at least on paper, of being translated into lower-level institutional arrangements.

Despite this relatively well-developed policy and implementation architecture on paper, the Youth Development Policy did not feature prominently in respondents' accounts in Elgeyo-Marakwet, nor was there clear evidence in fieldwork of its active operationalisation in relation to youth civic and political participation. It is therefore best understood not as absent or irrelevant, but as an under-realised support whose enabling potential remains largely latent. The national Youth Development Policy therefore appears best understood as rhetorically strong and institutionally ambitious, but weakly evidenced in local practice on the ground. It does not appear to function as a transformative support in practice, but neither is it purely symbolic. Rather, it occupies

an intermediate position: one that signals support, creates some institutional possibility, and offers a reference point for advocacy, future policy development, and county-level domestication, but remains highly dependent on political will, legislative follow-through, resourcing, and actual implementation.

When assessed using the five-category *Conceptual Model for Influences on Youth Civic and Political Engagement*, it can be positioned primarily along the "enabler" spectrum - but with qualifications that reflect its current under-realisation and potential to operate ambiguously. While it clearly positions youth participation as a policy priority, and contains implementation and coordination provisions, it allocates less specific attention and fewer programmes to civic and political participation compared to other policy areas. Its legal force and mechanisms for political influence are weak, meaning it appears supportive but may produce only tokenistic or symbolic outcomes. Without clearer enforcement or stronger accompanying legislation, and visible implementation at the county level, it risks operating more as a marker of commitment than as a driver of transformative action.

On balance, however, the most appropriate fit for the policy in its current form is as a "latent enabler" of youth engagement. The policy contains promising commitments - periodic youth forums, leadership training, social dialogues at multiple administrative levels, county-level implementation arrangements, and a framework for monitoring and coordination. It recognises the importance of youth voice, civic awareness, representation, and influence in decisions affecting young people. It therefore contains real enabling possibilities. Yet that enabling potential remains latent because these commitments were not strongly visible in field-level practice in Elgeyo-Marakwet, and because the mechanisms for realising youth civic and political participation remain underutilised in practice. These qualities make it a latent or emergent enabler, in line with Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) inferential to dispositional transition, where the potential exists but is context-dependent and unrealised.

6.2.2 National Youth Council of Kenya (NYC)

Established under the National Youth Council Act (2009) and operationalised in 2012, the National Youth Council (NYC) is the national government's principal institutional mechanism for coordinating youth affairs and enabling youth participation in governance. The Act assigns the Council a broad set of functions, including regulating and coordinating youth-related initiatives, promoting and popularising national youth policy, lobbying for legislation on youth issues, acting as "a voice and bridge" (GoK, 2014, p.6) between government and youth, promoting inclusion of youth agenda in public policy, promoting inclusion of youth in decision-making bodies, and creating branches from sub-location to national level. On paper, therefore, the NYC appears to offer a potentially significant institutional platform for youth civic and political participation. It operates under the State Department for Youth Affairs and Creative Economy.

This statutory design is reinforced by the composition envisaged in the Act. In addition to state officials, the Council is to include "eight youths elected by the youth" and up to "eight other youths…nominated by the National Youth Congress", with minimum representation for women and youth with disability (ibid. p.23). The structure therefore suggests an institutional attempt to combine state coordination with youth representation and to anchor participation countrywide through devolved branches.

Despite this strong policy framing, interviews conducted for this study suggest that the NYC has not fulfilled its intended function in Elgeyo-Marakwet as a visible platform for civic and political engagement. A former CECM for Youth admitted, "none of us knew any youth in the NYC" (interview with Asante), while a National Ministry official acknowledged that the NYC structures are "weak", "poorly coordinated", and "lack meaningful direction" (interview with Azizi). Critically, the Council did not emerge spontaneously in youth respondents' accounts as a meaningful channel of participation, no elections had been held, and it was unclear whether the county had an active representative on the Council.

This gap between mandate and field-level visibility is revealing. The NYC is not absent in legal or institutional terms. Rather, it appears as a formal structure whose representational and participatory potential remains weakly operationalised in practice.

The absence of county-level visibility or engagement further undermines its potential as a bottom-up democratic platform. As such, it is difficult to treat it as a transformative support to youth civic engagement in the present context. The NYC, nonetheless, retains latent potential: with appropriate resourcing, decentralisation, and political support, it could still become a meaningful channel for youth civic agency.

The NYC exemplifies an ambiguous structure within the architecture of youth civic and political participation. Established by statute and endowed with a strong participatory mandate, it appears to offer an institutionalised platform for youth voice and civic agency. Yet evidence from this study suggests that, at the county level, the Council lacks visibility, coordination, and operational legitimacy. At most, it may be said to retain latent enabling potential: with effective elections, decentralised presence, resourcing, and political support, it could become a meaningful channel for youth civic agency. In its current form, however, it remains better characterised as a dormant or weak institutional support than as an effective mechanism of youth participation.

6.2.3 Elgeyo Marakwet County Equitable Development Act (2015)

Mentioned earlier, the Equitable Development Act or "EDA" as it is commonly referred to, is a piece of local legislation the objective of which is

> to provide for the realization of equal and equitable allocation of resources for development projects within wards; to provide for the establishment of a ward development and project implementation committees giving them powers, functions and responsibilities to deliver services and for connected purposes (GoK, 2015, p.3).

I have already discussed the Act as being the legislative framework for directing significant resource allocations from the County Government to the Ward level for local decision making and distribution (participation in Ward-level decision-making forums is discussed throughout this analysis). But it is also the Act which establishes participatory management infrastructure at the local level to oversee project implementation. One

youth respondent described it as “an act that gives the public an upper hand to give out their issues or have their voice heard” (interview with Baraka).

Counties in Kenya have approached their obligations to institute mechanisms for the participation of the public in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of government projects in different ways. One youth described EDA as “an act that was introduced…during the early years of devolution and it is what makes Elgeyo-Marakwet County slightly different from counties like Baringo where public participation is never totally done […] This is what is making a difference in our county” (Nafasi, local youth). The participatory management structures established in Elgeyo-Marakwet are the Ward Development Committee (WDC) and the Project Management Committee (PMC). Their mandate is to “ensure direct, continuous public participation in project identification, prioritisation, implementation and oversight” (GoK, 2015, p.4). With representation elected at the local level, these committees are mandated by law to include representation of youth, women, PWDs[38] and other community representatives from the local area. Though the selection process appeared somewhat opaque in practice, several youth PMC members were encountered in the course of data gathering for this project. The PMC operates at a sub-Ward level with a lower threshold for authority to award contracts (i.e. KES 5 million or around US$40,000). The Chair of each sub-Ward level PMC sits on the WDC. One youth respondent, however, described the structure as problematic as he experienced interference in the functioning of the PMC:

> Despite us [youth] having representation [on the PMC], it's only a name or a formality. When you see the hierarchy we have: we have the Ward Development Committee which comprises of 14 members and then we have the Project Management Committee, which comprises of 7 […] they're simply coming and listening to our views…but during the implementation we are left behind…it's so hard to enforce your decisions like the contract awarding […] They come through the Ward Development Committee to interfere….even though we are there (interview with Baraka, youth respondent and PMC member).

[38] People Living with Disabilities (PWDs)

Baraka further suggested that an additional problem with the participatory project management structure is corruption on the part of County leadership:

> The reason why I'm saying it's not working is because, sure, we are the ones to oversight the project at Ward level or sublocation level, but the leadership are interfering in the tenders. They are not fairly awarded. So, there is no need of us being there…they will oversight what we are doing. They will justify without taking on board the concerns of the public, even though we are there representing youth.

Another youth member of a PMC corroborated the bleak assessment of Baraka:

> I served in a PMC for three years. And the main problem or a challenge that leads to shoddy work in our County is that most of the PMC members are being led by their own stomachs. They have been given handouts by the contractors so that they can approve a project for them (interview with Tabari).

Although there was an effort by the County Executive underway during the time of data collection to reform the structure and replace PMCs with another structure, it has since been clarified that the County Assembly has rejected any changes to legislation in favour of maintaining the current set up. This is despite what one member of the County Assembly clerk's office called a "lacuna" in terms of oversight, because, he maintains, the current oversight committees "do not have the expertise to manage those projects, and they are subject to manipulation. In terms of the accountability for public projects, something has to be done…there are issues with matters concerning implementation" (interview with Mr. Bahati, official from the County Assembly).

Nonetheless, youth PMC members interviewed could see that the structure has merit, if PMC members could "stand firm" and provide the oversight envisaged by the EDA:

> we can tell them that it is not done as per the bill of quantities. This thing is not supposed to be like that. We should tell it as it is. We need to show them that we can oversight our own projects because we are the end users (interview with Baraka).

Tabari, for his part, feels that "PMC members need to be educated on what matters" as he believes they have a "key role". These accounts suggest that the expectations placed

on PMCs have not been matched with the levels of support and information needed for members to carry out their mandate successfully. It is worth noting that the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Report drew attention to shortcomings in support for PMCs back in 2017: "CSOs[39] also noted that Project Management Committees were formed, but without sufficient information to carry out their mandate. Information such as the project costs, the bill of quantities and contractor details were not availed (sic) for their use" (OGP, 2017, p.29).

The EDA is best understood as an ambiguous policy instrument: a legally robust, procedurally rich framework for decentralised development and participatory governance, frequently alluded to by youth themselves as offering scope for engagement and accountability (often referred to by the familiar name "EDA") that nonetheless operates unevenly in practice. While youth are formally included in PMCs, their actual influence is often limited by political interference, weak oversight capacity, lack of information, and informal hierarchies, resulting in inclusion that is frequently more symbolic than substantive. The presence of youth in implementation structures does not necessarily equate to power, particularly when access to key decisions or documents is denied. Despite this, the EDA contains important latent enabling features: statutory representation of youth and women, locally-rooted oversight structures, and a framework that - if politically protected and administratively supported - could evolve into a genuinely empowering mechanism. Yet, in its current state, EDA appears less as a transformative support than as a partially realised structure whose empowering potential remains constrained. While there is no indication from the data that EDA local management structures have resulted in genuine systemic transformation or empowered youth to reshape political dynamics or development priorities, the potential for these local structures to act as "transformative supports" should be noted.

6.2.4 County Youth Forum

In examining the landscape of youth civic and political engagement in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, the County Youth Forum (CYF) appears to be an important example of a formal structure designed to strengthen youth voices in governance. Though no longer

[39] Civil Society Organisation

operational, the CYF was, during its brief existence (2019/20), a relatively rare institutional mechanism that sought to enable inclusive and multilevel youth participation in county decision-making. Its origin, operational design, and eventual discontinuation offer useful insights on how supportive infrastructures for youth engagement can be conceptualised, embedded, and, critically, sustained.

According to a former County official involved in its development (Asante), the CYF was established under the previous administration of Governor Tolgos (2013-2022) as part of Elgeyo-Marakwet's participation in Kenya's Open Government Partnership. This initiative, mentioned earlier, aimed to make governance more participatory, accountable, and transparent, with a particular focus on citizen inclusion in budgeting and planning processes. The same respondent recalled that youth were consistently underrepresented in formal public participation forums. When they did attend, they often did so in a disorganised fashion and without a clear articulation of their priorities, unlike older generations who typically presented cohesive and specific demands.

To address this structural exclusion, the county's Youth Department designed the CYF as a bottom-up platform. According to Asante, youth elected their representatives from the sub-location level up to the ward level, with each of the 20 wards in Elgeyo-Marakwet County sending delegates to the county-level forum. This multi-tiered structure ensured that youth voices from even the most remote rural areas could be aggregated and brought to the attention of county decision-makers. With the intention to embed youth perspectives directly into development planning and resource allocation, Asante explained that "the mandate of the CYF spanned economic, social, and political domains". Economically, the forum served as a space where youth could collectively articulate their needs - such as access to vocational training, bursaries for technical education, or investment in sports and recreation. Indeed, according to one respondent, the now-prominent Governor *Wa Raia* Cup [soccer tournament] traces its origins to the CYF's proposal for structured youth sports competitions. Socially, the forum was described as helping "organise sensitisation campaigns encouraging youth participation in public forums" (interview with Asante). Politically, though less strongly pursued in practice, the CYF was also conceived as a platform for civic education and the promotion

of democratic values, with potential to build youth capacity around electoral processes and political accountability.

One of the forum's intended strengths, according to Asante, was its capacity to prepare youth to engage meaningfully in formal county public participation forums. Rather than arriving at public participation events without any plan for structured engagement, youth would convene beforehand through the CYF, deliberate on their shared priorities, and present a unified front. This level of organisation had the potential to transform youth from avoiding attending or, at best, passive observers, into serious stakeholders in county governance. That said, the evidence available here is stronger on the forum's design and stated purpose than on its longer-term outcomes in practice.

Despite these strengths, however, the CYF was short-lived. Several factors contributed to its decline. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted its momentum, as public gatherings were restricted. In addition, the absence of consistent budgetary support from the County Assembly meant that the forum was unable to maintain activities, training cycles, or representative continuity. As Asante explained, "most of the members being young, are very mobile" - youth would leave for college or employment - and without regular training and induction, institutional knowledge dissipated quickly. She recounted that initial support for training came from the World Bank, but this was not sustained through County structures.

Notably, the CYF was enshrined in the County Youth Policy, a legal document theoretically still in effect[40]. This policy formalised the structure and function of the forum and called for annual training and sustainable financing. The forum's dormancy, then, is not due to the absence of a legal basis, but to the lack of political will, budgetary support and inter-administration continuity. As the respondent explained, "It just takes goodwill from the leaders because they know that the policy is there" (interview with former CECM, Asante). The transition from Governor Tolgos to Governor Rotich appears to have

[40] It was not possible to obtain a copy of the County Youth Policy. While the former CECM claimed the policy was developed and put in place under the former administration (2013-2022), and *should* still be in effect, the current CECM and County Executive make no formal reference to the document.

marked a discontinuity, as the new administration opted not to support or revive initiatives from the previous administration in this area.

Contrary to suggestions that the CYF conflicted with the National Youth Council (NYC), Asante made clear that the two bodies operated at different levels. In her account, the NYC, by its design, functions at national and sub-county levels and does not reach the grassroots where the CYF was most active. While some officials claimed a "duplication" issue, the evidence presented here suggests that the CYF was intended to fulfil a more grassroots and locally grounded function than the NYC. In this account, "duplication" may have been used partly as a rationale for non-support.

The story of the CYF illustrates both the promise and fragility of supportive structures for youth civic and political engagement. When supported by policy, funding, and inclusive design, structures of this kind may help amplify youth voice, promote political literacy, and enable youth-led development agendas. Yet, without political commitment, institutional memory, or continuity mechanisms across administrations, these structures can quickly fade, even where policy provisions remain in place. As the former County official put it, "The information is there. Not necessarily the people - but the information is there" (interview with Asante).

Within the conceptual model used in this study, the CYF is best understood not as a fully realised transformative support, but as a promising and partly institutionalised enabling structure whose potential remained fragile and under-protected. Its multilevel, bottom-up design and its embedding in County policy suggest strong enabling potential. At the same time, its brief existence, dependence on political goodwill, weak continuity, and eventual dormancy show how vulnerable such structures are when they are not institutionally protected or resourced. In this sense, the CYF can be seen primarily as a latent enabler with important but unrealised transformative potential. The arguments used to justify its neglect - particularly claims of duplication with the NYC – may also be understood as reflecting a latent inhibitor dynamic, in which transformative youth agency is subtly undermined by shifting political interests. The CYF's brief life may offer less of a proven blueprint than a suggestive example of what more grounded and sustained youth participation infrastructure might look like in practice.

6.2.5 Other County youth-focussed initiatives

6.2.5.1 The PEPEA (Program for Empowerment and Progress through Education Abroad)

The PEPEA programme is a flagship educational programme launched by the Elgeyo-Marakwet County Government under the current Governor. Its stated primary objective is to provide local youth with opportunities to pursue higher education abroad, thereby enhancing their academic and professional prospects.

The county has established Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with several foreign universities, notably in Finland, and in the United States. These partnerships facilitate the admission of qualified students from Elgeyo-Marakwet to various academic programmes abroad. Candidates undergo a selection process that may include entry examinations administered by partner institutions. Successful applicants are then supported in securing partial scholarships, with the County Government assisting in aspects such as visa processing and travel logistics.

The PEPEA programme was presented as a strategic effort by the Elgeyo-Marakwet County Government to invest in human capital development. By facilitating access by young people to international education, the programme aims to empower youth and contribute to the county's socio-economic growth. On his inauguration day, the Governor of Elgeyo-Marakwet County, Wesley Rotich, reportedly said "he will open up [an office for] for Higher Education promotion under his PEPEA program which...will address youth unemployment through a students' airlifting[41] program" (Siele, 2022, para. 9). The coordinator of the programme, Samwel Kipchumba, subsequently called on the youth "to join the students' airlifting bandwagon" (Siele, 2023, para. 12).

According to an official interviewed in the County Government Department of Youth, Sports and Culture, "we discovered that people yearn for scholarships to do overseas

[41] The origin of the term "airlifting" to describe support for facilitating educational opportunities for Kenyans overseas seems to be from the "Airlift to America" (see book of the same name by Tom Shachtman (2009)) later referred to as "The Kennedy Airlift" which was launched in 1959 by Kenyan nationalist, Tom Mboya. This programme enabled hundreds of East African students to study in the U.S. and Canada between 1959 and 1963 at a time just before Kenyan independence when opportunities for higher educations for Africans were virtually non-existent. Against this historical backdrop, the use of the term to label a present-day "youth empowerment" programme in Elgeyo-Marakwet seems inappropriate - and a distortion of the term's profound legacy.

studies, so we vouch for them, we step in as the guarantors, so that the institution [they wish to apply to] can allow them to access scholarships" (interview with Hakimu). He also explained "once there are job opportunities available, whether in the country or elsewhere, we are the contact persons to help our youth to accept these job opportunities. For example, within the seafaring industry, or maybe in Dubai. So we are there for the youth" (ibid.).

The PEPEA programme and similar initiatives are often framed by County officials, and widely understood by youth, as 'youth empowerment' strategies centred on educational mobility and future employment opportunities. The risks of debt, cultural displacement, homesickness, and possible exploitation did not feature prominently in the material reviewed here; conversations about the programme, both with County officials and with youth themselves, were almost entirely positive.

In an article from an online news platform serving the Kenyan community in the US, the departure of a number of young people to US universities under the programme was featured in which the Governor "urged parents to exercise patience regarding expectations of remittances" (Olage, 2024, para. 4). He wanted them "to allow their children time to acclimate to the American system [and allow] them to focus on their studies without undue financial stress" (para. 5). This language hints at the economic aspect that sits alongside the programme's educational framing. At a minimum, it suggests that PEPEA is understood not only as an educational opportunity, but also as a possible pathway to future economic mobility beyond the county.

In interviews, PEPEA was frequently celebrated - by both youth and County officials - as a flagship empowerment initiative. For example, one youth respondent said:

> I need to commend the County Government. There are a lot of things that they have done that personally, as a youth, I feel that their policies are good…One I can mention is the county introduced the PEPEA programme. And it has helped a number of youth…I believe that is a long-term investment for the future generation (interview with Jabari, local youth).

The overwhelming positivity of these assessments helps explain why the programme may initially appear on the spectrum of *supportive infrastructure* for youth civic and political

participation. PEPEA is understood as opening opportunities for education and employment, and as a source of hope in an environment of limited educational opportunities. The framing of the programme as contributing to the county's socio-economic growth and the rhetoric of “airlifts” presents PEPEA as a simple alternative to an education at home, where youth will return better positioned to take up employment or business opportunities locally, and by extension, equally better positioned to become more active in the civic and political life of the community. At the same time, access to the programme was not experienced as straightforward by all respondents. Rafiki pointed to the financial demands associated with overseas study, observing that “people feel like they don’t have finances and…if you want to go to a university in England, you need a lot of money.” This suggests that even where PEPEA is viewed positively, its benefits may remain selective and unevenly accessible.

When considered specifically in relation to youth civic and political participation, PEPEA appears even more ambiguous. Its benefits are framed overwhelmingly in terms of individual mobility, educational advancement, and future employment rather than in terms of strengthening young people’s role as civic actors within Elgeyo-Marakwet itself. In this sense, the programme does not directly address the barriers to local participation identified elsewhere in this study, such as weak participatory forums, lack of youth-sensitive civic infrastructure, or limited meaningful avenues for youth influence in county governance. If anything, it redirects aspiration outward, toward educational and professional opportunity elsewhere, rather than inward toward engagement with local structures of reform and accountability. Read in this way, PEPEA is better understood not as supportive infrastructure for youth civic and political participation in any direct sense, but as an educational and mobility initiative whose empowering effects are individualised rather than civic. Its relevance to this chapter lies precisely in the contrast between what is widely narrated as ‘youth empowerment’ and what actually constitutes support for youth voice, influence, and participation in public affairs.

While PEPEA functions in the minds of youth and officials interviewed as enabling infrastructure, it is more accurately positioned here as an ambiguous form of youth support: one that may expand educational opportunity for some young people, but

whose contribution to local civic and political participation is limited, indirect, and potentially displacement-oriented.

6.2.5.2 *Tujiajiri* Programme

The *Tujiajiri* Programme in Elgeyo-Marakwet County is a collaborative youth empowerment initiative between the County Government and the KCB Foundation[42], aimed at addressing youth unemployment through vocational training and entrepreneurship support. Launched with an initial investment of KES 30 million (approx. US$230,000) - equally funded by both partners - the programme enrols youth into various Vocational Training Centres (VTCs) across the county. Courses offered include plumbing, electrical installation, motor vehicle mechanics, hairdressing, tailoring, welding, and food technology, among others. Beyond tuition support, the programme equips successful trainees with toolkits relevant to their trade, facilitating immediate entry into self-employment or the job market. In its third phase now, the programme expanded to sponsor over 1,000 students. Nyota, a county official with responsibility for the programme, claimed it reflects "the county's commitment to youth development" and that by integrating support for vocational training with practical support, the *Tujiajiri* Programme "serves as a model for sustainable youth empowerment", fostering economic self-reliance and contributing to the county's socio-economic growth:

> The beauty with *Tujiajiri* is it is a very short-term programme. The target is youth that are already working. Like you are a [practising] plumber, but you have never gone into training. And it doesn't really require a Form 4 certificate [school leaving certificate]. You can be a Class 8 [primary school] dropout. It's not necessary that you should have completed formal training. As long as you are youth. So the fact that it is a short programme, women, or youth who are already married at a younger age, can go for that because you can go into class for six months and come back and take care of your child. You can be a family man already, but you can sacrifice six months. Not, like these [other courses] that you have to go on for

[42] The KCB Foundation implements the Corporate Social Responsibility programmes of the Kenya Commercial Bank (KCB).

> a whole year or three years for you to get a certificate. And the beauty again is the "toolkit"... you are given a toolkit, for example if you are a welder, they give you a very good welding machine. A three phase one. So you just need space where to plug in your welding machine and start working! (interview with Nyota, CECM, Education and Technical Training).

The responsiveness of the *Tujiajiri* programme to the realities of many young people's social situation appears to be its strength. Youth are catered for who find themselves with family responsibilities perhaps at an early age, and unable to rejoin more formal training, or having dropped out of school before completing either their post-primary or even primary schooling, or simply working in a trade without any formal qualifications, much less the equipment necessary (or the means available to obtain it) in order to establish themselves independently in a trade. The programme's rootedness in the local socio-economic situation youth find themselves in and the effort to meet youth where they are through community-based, locally relevant and accessible responses, contrasts with the PEPEA programme critiqued above. While PEPEA offers opportunities for select youth to pursue education abroad, *Tujiajiri* values lived experience and informal labour, providing immediate, practical tools for economic self-reliance. As such, it arguably serves as a more inclusive and contextually appropriate model of youth empowerment - particularly for those whose trajectories have already been shaped by early school leaving, domestic responsibilities, or economic insecurity. Because *Tujiajiri* is locally delivered, through community-based VTCs, and trades supported are carried out locally, it has the potential to strengthen youth visibility in local development spaces. As youth become productive, tool-equipped contributors to their local economies, their social legitimacy may also increase. This may, in turn support higher rates of participation in community forums, the higher likelihood of being consulted or represented in youth-led or county initiatives, and increased interaction with local government actors (e.g., for licensing, SACCO[43] membership etc.).

The *Tujiajiri* programme's relevance to civic and political participation lies in these indirect but powerful ways through which economic inclusion can reshape youth agency

[43] Savings and Credit Cooperative

and engagement. From a critical realist perspective, we can look at how changes in the material and relational conditions of young people create or constrain the generative mechanisms that underpin political action. Youth who gain skills, recognition, and income are often better positioned psychologically and socially to act, both in the economy and civic spaces. *Tujiajiri* may contribute to self-efficacy - a core determinant of political engagement - by affirming young people's capacity to shape their future. Participants may become more confident, less marginalised, and more entitled to engage with decision-making processes that affect their lives. A young person without the means to sustain themselves is less likely to demand accountability and assert their voice in governance processes and more likely to be susceptible to manipulation:

> You find that youths are marginalised, and their participation is very low. You find that these youths are really facing economic issues like unemployment...So sometimes even to engage them is very difficult. Because they feel like they are left out of the society [...] There is also another challenge with youth in that because youth are jobless - they don't have that income - so there are government officials who can use that as a way to lure them. They can give them something like incentives so that they don't speak out about something which they feel will threaten their positions. They use manipulation. You realise even somebody who was speaking very loudly now goes silent and they don't actually speak out anymore (interview with Sadiki, local NGO official).

One youth expressed it this way:

> The most important thing is to reduce the rate of unemployment. When we reduce the rate of unemployment, every youth is employed, or is active and doing something, so that they are not idle so that they won't be a target of big fish politicians who will come and use them (interview with Sefu, local youth).

Another respondent was of the view that the relative absence of female participants from civic spaces (and their more limited broader societal participation) is closely linked to their relative lack of economic empowerment. So long as young girls do not have the same access to economic opportunities, their voices are going to be less audible:

> we are going out of our way to get to the women. In an open a forum, there would be so many men present. So the majority of people to be trained should be women. We have to make such deliberate attempts in favour of the inclusion of women (interview with Dr. Zuri, university lecturer).

The *Jiinue* Growth Program (JGP), a donor/private sector initiative, is an example of a programme in youth economic empowerment particularly focused on young women entrepreneurs and female-led businesses. The training observed in the course of this research was attended by 25 people of whom 20 were female trainees. The organisers spoke of a very deliberate attempt to target young females. The programme is discussed in greater detail below.

Tujiajiri can be mapped onto the proposed five-category conceptual model as a clear "latent enabler" with credible potential to evolve into a transformative support. Through its responsive, accessible, and locally-embedded design, the programme addresses critical barriers linked to economic insecurity - offering vocational skills, equipment, and recognition to youth traditionally marginalised from formal economic and educational systems. In doing so, it may help foster self-efficacy, an essential precondition of youth agency (discussed in Section 3.3.3 above). While it does not engage directly with governance mechanisms, the social legitimacy conferred on youth through economic productivity may strengthen their capacity to engage in community forums and other participatory governance structures. The programme also shows signs of transformative potential, particularly in how it may reduce youth susceptibility to political manipulation. If further institutionalised and linked to civic decision-making spaces, *Tujiajiri* could evolve into a transformative catalyst, bridging economic and political empowerment. Its indirect yet significant effect on youth agency affirms the critical realist insight that participation is shaped not only by visible institutional arrangements, but also by deeper structural conditions that can either constrain or enable meaningful engagement.

6.3 Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organisations

6.3.1 Citizen Voice and Action

Citizen Voice and Action (CVA) is an approach to local level advocacy developed by World Vision. It is described as a project model that "brings together citizens, service providers, local government and partners in a collaborative, facilitated group process designed to improve the quality of services at the local level" (World Vision, 2012, p.8). The process involved in the approach is first to inform citizens about their rights and then equip them with a set of tools "designed to empower them to engage in local advocacy to protect and enforce those rights" (World Vision, 2016, p.1). It is focused on encouraging dialogue between ordinary citizens and those with responsibility to provide services to the public. "It also aims to improve accountability from the administrative and political sections of government" (World Vision, 2009, p.1).

The extent to which CVA is "planned and initiated within the local context" and that "citizens take the lead" (World Vision, 2016, p.2) was brought home to me in the comments of some young people, one of whom referred to it as "*my* organisation, the local organisation, that is based in my Ward" (interview with Amani, *my emphasis*). Another called it "a community-based organisation" and said, "the community members are there, leading the organisation with representation from each and every sublocation in the Ward" (interview with Nafasi, local youth). In a case where the community in Tambach Ward met to review and prepare their inputs on revisions to a contentious piece of local legislation (the Charcoal Act, 2017), one youth described the CVA process as follows:

> We did public participation first as a community. Then it reached a point we had to invite some of the partners like World Vision. They facilitated lunch in one of the resorts…Then we called the [political] representatives. Then we had a round table meeting to discuss and draft a few things. Then we wrote a memorandum

addressing the County Assembly, the County Secretary[44] and the County Commissioner[45] (ibid.).

The CVA approach was even described by this youth as existing *before* World Vision came to support it: "During the coming in of World Vision, CVAs had already existed for some time, but World Vision were the partners that were most interested, especially that we could access them as young people. World Vision was the only partner that we could access in terms of funding some of the activities that we have in the CVA" (ibid.).

CVA is probably best understood as the layering of a structured approach to local advocacy efforts on the pre-existing, informal initiatives of communities to engage the political leadership in discussions around service delivery. A local NGO official admitted: "Youth are very strong. They can champion, they can advocate, they can go for public participation…and they really speak out about the community needs without fear. They are very courageous…[they] ensure that the government are held to account" (interview with Sadiki, local NGO official).

Through the framework of CVA, World Vision attempted to harness the desire of local youth to engage: "we wanted them to participate directly in our project" said the NGO official, and from 2022, they used the CVA approach to facilitate this. Environmental issues were of particular focus for both World Vision and the community, with the degradation of forest cover[46], the threat of landslides, and the depletion of water sources:

> We trained them on Citizen Voice and Action. And after this training, we introduced "scorecards", and through community scorecards we measured those areas [of particular environmental degradation] that really affect the community. After doing that, they went back to hear from the community about their priorities [for action] (interview with Sadiki, local NGO official).

[44] The County Secretary is a function of the executive of the County Government, serving as the Head of the County Public Service and Secretary to the County Executive Committee.
[45] The County Commissioner is tasked with coordinating national government functions at the County level including coordination of security management and other national government functions and services.
[46] https://nation.africa/kenya/counties/elgeyo-marakwet/-governor-bans-charcoal-burning-in-elgeyo-marakwet-4135442

The term ‘CVA’ is thus used to describe the formal approach of a local development actor, privileging participation, inclusion and ownership, and (albeit erroneously) the pre-existing, less-structured advocacy efforts of the local community, particularly those of young people. It has come to be understood more of an organisation than an approach, and as such, individual CVA groups form part of the umbrella ‘County CSO Network’. According to a local NGO official, “a network is stronger than the representatives from just one Ward. When you speak from [the network] it's more convincing that this is actually an issue.” With this organisation and network affiliation, youth have found in CVA a uniquely important channel for their civic and political engagement. Thanks largely to NGO support, CVA has also provided a useful opportunity for young people to understand better local government structures and appropriate mechanisms for effective engagement between citizens and responsibility bearers. In this sense, we can infer that CVA operates as a formalised gateway to structured engagement - a channel that organises participation, filters issues, and amplifies community voice in ways that are palatable to state (and donor) actors. Youth advocacy becomes legible to power-holders by using the tools and processes endorsed by development agencies (e.g. scorecards, roundtables, memoranda), rather than disruptive or informal tactics. This reflects Lukes’ second dimension of power: youth participation is made possible, but within parameters set by intermediary structures. While CVA avoids the exclusion seen in more state-centric forums (e.g. *barazas*), it still subtly defines what participation should look like, privileging constructive, technical, and development-aligned forms of voice.

Yet youth political imagination in the county was not limited to these structured and collaborative forms of action. In X Space discussions observed earlier in 2024, some young people expressed a clear preference for more confrontational tactics, especially street protest, as a necessary means of demanding accountability. One youth insisted: “They will not arrest all of us. The cells will not be enough for all of us…We need people to be accountable. We will not retreat until we have the power with us.” Another emphasised that “it is your constitutional right to demonstrate due to bad governance,” while a third stressed the need to “get organised,” inform others, and use placards so that public action is visible and politically legible. Read alongside the CVA-mediated response to the Charcoal Act, which centred on facilitated meetings and memorandum-writing,

this contrast suggests that CVA promotes participation through forms of engagement that are more dialogue and institutionally based than more openly contentious channels.

The affiliation of CVA groups into the County CSO Network strengthens advocacy efforts but also channels youth into more institutionally recognised forms of engagement. Participation becomes more powerful when it is collective - but also more containable within existing governance frameworks. In other words, youth voice is strengthened, but simultaneously shaped. Applying further Wiltshire and Ronkainen's (2021) thematic analysis, at the dispositional level, CVA may be understood as reflecting a form of developmental citizenship: youth are invited to engage - not as political disruptors - but as community contributors within the norms of partnership, civility, and shared responsibility. This reflects Lukes' third dimension of power: shaping not only what youth do, but what they think civic action should be.

The CVA model privileges dialogue, collaboration, and structured problem-solving. While empowering in many ways, it may also softly depoliticise youth engagement - redirecting potentially confrontational energy into formalised, donor-aligned processes. It enables voice, but not always contestation in a stronger sense. While young people feel heard, they are simultaneously being socialised into modes of engagement that favour consensus over challenge, and administrative responses over structural transformation.

Youth claim CVA as 'ours', but the programme remains ideologically rooted in development NGO thinking – which tends to frame government accountability as a service delivery issue rather than a political one. This does not undermine CVA's achievements, but it does suggest limits to the forms of politics it most readily accommodates. It is therefore best understood as an ambiguous structure - one that combines genuine enabling practices with institutionally bounded forms of participation.

CVA contains clear enabling elements, especially when viewed from the experiential perspective of youth. Youth claim ownership over the initiative and describe it as locally embedded and responsive. It facilitates learning, awareness of rights, and effective interaction with government structures. It aggregates youth voice into a county-wide advocacy network, strengthening strategic influence. It mobilises youth energy and initiative in ways that have led to real outcomes, like legislative memoranda and

environmental scorecards. Despite its boundaries, CVA equips youth with tools for civic action and creates early-stage enabling conditions for future empowerment. These should not be undervalued.

6.3.2 *Bunge la Mwananchi* (The People's Parliament)

The *Bunge la Mwananchi* (BLM), as already mentioned, is an informal, grassroots, social movement which offers an alternative space for political participation. Often described as "organic", *bunges* (as they are known) are only very loosely connected across the country, but trace their origins to an earlier opposition political movement in the capital city: "…having gathered in Jeevanjee Gardens [in Nairobi] since the 1990s, *Bunge la Mwananchi* gained its name in 2003, when the movement held its first elections as a mockery of [i.e. satirical response to] the parliamentary elections that were held in December 2002" (Kimari et al., 2010, p.139). The *Bunge* in Iten has no apparent connection to the national movement despite sometimes discussing similar issues to those of the Nairobi (Jeevanjee Gardens) *bunge* which are sometimes covered in the media. It was noted by one respondent that there was no representation from Iten at the *Bunge la Mwananchi* 'National Leadership Training Workshop' held in Naivasha in March 2025. This may be attributable to the fact that the *bunges* often stand in opposition to the national government, and opposition is relatively muted in a county like Elgeyo-Marakwet which, as previously mentioned, is a political stronghold of the sitting president. While there may be a deliberate effort not to associate the Iten *bunge* with others more vocally opposed to policies of the national government, it has, in any case, been noted that "[e]ach of these *bunges* has a different unwritten rule about its way of operating, different capabilities for action and different powers to resist dissolution or co-option (Otieno et al., 2016, p.103). Previous research also noted that "each *bunge*…finds its own ways of solving problems and they rarely involve one another" (p.108).

Of particular interest to the subject of youth participation is the open nature of the *bunge* in that, anyone, young or old, male or female, is welcome to participate: "There is no formal membership required, and the movement is made up of whoever chooses to be

part of it" (Kimari et al., 2010, p.132). Equally, members are free to attend as regularly as they choose, which has no bearing on their eligibility to participate in discussions. As a vehicle for "broad public participation in political affairs" (Otieno et al., 2016, p.101) the *bunge* is a valuable alternative forum for youth engagement.

Another strength of the *Bunge* is that it acts as a kind of training ground for young people to 'cut their teeth' in public speaking and putting forward an argument:

> It's a good training ground. The youths get to see how to tackle issues because how you tackle one issue is different than how you tackle another issue. But when we sit together and you give your own ideas, I give my ideas, we come up with better ideas as we tackle problems together (interview with Sefu, local youth).

This view from a local youth is supported by earlier research on the origins of the BLM movement in Nairobi, centred on Jivanjee Gardens: "The daily meetings in the park have become an institution in Nairobi and have established an alternative political space in the city. They have become a public training ground for both political debate and agitation and a space for creative political practice" (Kimari et al., 2010, pp.139-140). A youth in Iten described his engagement with the *bunge* as follows:

> I joined the *bunge* two years ago, after the 2022 elections. It provided a platform for discussion and debate of major political decisions especially for politics of Keiyo North[47]. With a growing interest in politics, I decided to join the *bunge* to sharpen my political sword and, over time, I built more confidence (interview with Nafasi, local youth).

Kimari et al. (2010) in their analysis of the *bunge* movement in Nairobi concluded that

> members of *Bunge* are mobilizing others to become political. While mobilizing people to participate in political debates and while creating political awareness, they train people to argue and agitate for their political viewpoints (Kimari et al., 2010, p.150).

[47] One of the four constituencies that make up Elgeyo Marakwet County. Iten is the main town, as well as being the County Headquarters.

Despite the challenges alluded to above of the potential for manipulation by the powerful, and the extremely limited engagement of women, at an experiential level, the *Bunge* structure is described as one of the few avenues open to young people to express their views, and, in the process, strengthen their skills in argumentation and debate. The neutral, open space it offers, with no consideration taken of members' political party, ethnic, or other affiliations, has been credited by young people for building their profiles locally, improving their self-confidence and strengthening their autonomy. The experience of public speaking at the *Bunge* has encouraged several young people to run for political office in elections, with several members vying for seats in 2022, the current leader of the majority in the Elgeyo-Marakwet County Assembly reportedly among them.

At the same time, respondents also pointed to important limits in the forum's influence. Sefu noted that "sometimes the ideas [discussed at the *bunge*] do not reach the leaders [...] Maybe the ideas you've discussed today will be taken in three to four months to the Governor". This suggests that while the *Bunge* may generate discussion and political confidence, the translation of ideas into decision-making is often delayed, mediated, and uncertain.

While it appears informal and inclusive, *Bunge la Mwananchi* is not entirely unstructured. Each forum develops its own rules and power dynamics. This fits with Lukes' second dimension of power: participation is enabled, but within structural boundaries that also shape the conditions under which influence is exercised. The *Bunge* empowers youth to speak - but not necessarily to change systems. Forums are typically male-dominated, with very limited female engagement. This gendered limitation was noted by Dr. Zuri, who observed that

> Women are missing in political circles. They are missing in forums like *Bunge la mwananchi*. I've never seen a female in that *Bunge*. They come...to just be in the audience, but they don't say anything and they are not given that chance to say what exactly they want to say. This is still a challenge. (interview with Dr. Zuri).

This reinforces the point that the openness of the *Bunge* in principle does not necessarily translate into equal participation in practice.

Some youth reported covert political influence, with local power-holders using proxies to sway opinion subtly. BLM also functions as a contained form of participation - encouraging voice within a controlled arena, but not necessarily translating debate into decision-making influence. While the space is open, it exists alongside, not within, state planning processes - creating a parallel public sphere. Youth political literacy grows, but how their energies channel into the political arena remains informal and unpredictable.

At the deepest level, the *Bunge* reflects a grassroots civic culture that resists formal constraints, but also accommodates itself to political realities. The absence of official recognition allows autonomy - but may also isolate the forum from institutional influence. This reflects Lukes' third dimension of power: power shapes what is imaginable, not just what is expressible. The *Bunge* operates within non-disruptive, discursive boundaries. The fact that several young men involved in *Bunge* sought elective office suggests that the space nurtures ambition. Yet it may also reproduce male dominance and tends to reward the most vocal and charismatic - marginalising women and quieter voices. The neutral posture of the forum may, paradoxically, mask power asymmetries within it - creating a sense of openness while replicating exclusionary patterns. Finally, the *Bunge's* decentralised structure and informality make it resilient to co-optation, but also vulnerable to fragmentation and elite capture. Participants report "spies," influences, and manipulation. Thus, the *Bunge* enables voice, but not always voice that challenges power.

Youth describe the *Bunge* as an inclusive, empowering training ground, offering a rare space for political expression, learning, and confidence-building. In experiential terms, this gives the *Bunge* some of the qualities of a transformative support. Youth see the *Bunge* as nurturing leadership and mobilisation, with the *potential* for structural political transformation. Yet the evidence presented here also suggests caution in moving too quickly to that categorisation. There is little evidence that the *Bunge* directly influences county policy, budget decisions, or legislative outcomes, and respondents themselves point to delays, mediation, and uncertain transmission of ideas into formal decision-making. In this sense, the *Bunge* may be better understood as pre-transformative: rich in enabling and mobilising potential, but still largely external to formal power.

Although the *Bunge* is widely experienced by youth as empowering, applying the adopted analytical lens suggests it may, in fact, best be characterised as an ambiguous structure – admittedly rich in experiential value, but operating within bounded parameters of influence. It enables voice and agency but lacks institutional integration with decision-making processes, limiting its impact. Power is present in structural and symbolic forms: the forum appears neutral, but gender exclusion, informal hierarchies, and subtle elite manipulation (e.g. "spies," co-optation) constrain its democratic potential. BLM empowers - but within boundaries. The *Bunge* may therefore be described as a useful but politically bounded space - a discursive arena where youth agency is experienced, and in some respect deepened, but where transformation is possible but not guaranteed.

6.4 Informal interactions, "passive networks", and self-help groups

Young people discussed several different ways of meeting in a range of forums and places reflecting their social engagements and interests. Several young people mentioned their interest in sports, either participating in football or hockey games, or watching games together at sports grounds or on TV in public venues. Sport is often seen by conscientious young people as an informal opportunity to meet and engage with their fellow youth on topics of interest. Drawing on Asef Bayat's (2013) concept of "passive networks" (p.23), through which "solidarities are forged" (ibid.) in the informal interactions of young people, forms of latent collective agency are discernible. These passive networks of individuals may not be formally organised, but their shared practices, habits, and interests may gradually reshape public space and social norms - often without central coordination or overt political claims. In this sense, when young people in Iten gather for football matches or to watch TV together, they are not only building social capital but also creating opportunities for informal political discourse and mobilisation. One participant observed, "That is now the time that I take the opportunity and pass the message that I want to pass them" (interview with Jabari, local youth), highlighting how even casual or recreational gatherings may host implicit civic intent. Passive networks, while not

immediately visible within formal participatory frameworks, serve as entry points for youth civic learning and political socialisation.

Although sport is predominantly a fulcrum for the engagement of young men, one young woman saw the value of engagement among men in these venues: “young men converge during football matches. That is where you can find them and if we can seize the opportunity, we can have talk shows or talk events with them before they start playing their games” (interview with Amani, female youth). She gave the example of how talking to youth at these events, young people could be encouraged to attend formal public participation gatherings (such as those on the ADP and budget allocations to Wards) and “be able to take their concerns to the concerned parties…let's say funding to the youth” (ibid.). I was able to observe, however, that young people were largely absent from the County-led public participation forum held in Tambach to make decisions on allocations at the Ward level including “funding to the youth”, suggesting the opportunity was missed on this occasion.

Several young people confirmed the existence of more formal “youth groups” distinguishable from informal gatherings or passive networks through a formal process of registration with the Directorate of Social Development, whose mandate it is to offer community group registration. Such youth groups were spoken of in very positive terms by youth participants in this study, as places where “youth can participate…according to their own decisions that they've made as youth”, and as places where “they can share amongst themselves and have a common agenda because there is no interference by anyone else who can influence” (Baraka, local youth). Another youth said:

> I put most faith in where we engage as youth ourselves… those are the only forums - the Youth Initiatives, Youth forums, the CBOs - because they can share together without any interference…by political leaders. It's not influenced by the money that flows in those other forums (interview with Jabari, local youth).

One such registered local youth group is the *Tumaini La Vijana* [Young People’s Hope]. On the initiative of one of the female youth members, and with support she and other members managed to raise from the local Kenya Red Cross office, *Tumaini La Vijana* put on a talk one evening on young people’s mental wellbeing:

> We had group discussions on stress management, suicide prevention, on drug and alcohol addiction. And then we also did a session on post traumatic depression and disorders, PTSD. We employed an approach where we're not going to facilitate these young people [but rather] we would create a safe space for them to share their experience, their thoughts…so at to learn from one another […] No one was going to come out of the discussion feeling judged […] If you are battling with depression, if you are battling with drug abuse and substance abuse, if you have had suicidal thoughts…everyone gets to speak out and be heard, without being judged - because that is the space that has been missing in our society. People don't even want to talk to the young. And even if you talk to someone, they will judge you. So that is what we were trying to really minimise. Then we watched a movie on mental health issues. We picked out some learnings from the movie and then we were able to analyse those with the group. In between we had some breaks for refreshments, breaks for music to release stress. And that was that (interview with Penda, local youth).

Penda's example of youth self-organisation, through the *Tumaini La Vijana* initiative, powerfully illustrates how youth themselves are responding to issues of concern for young people. She explicitly references the "financial crisis… cultural, and other social crises" that many youth navigate, often without adequate coping mechanisms. The initiative's peer-led, non-judgmental space foregrounds an empathic model of youth engagement - one that privileges listening, connection, and mutual validation over interventions seeking to "organise" youth or "solve" their problems. This approach stands in marked contrast to managerialist approaches (above), which often conceive participation as procedural, externally defined, and outcome-driven. Instead, this example reveals the potential of youth agency to redefine both the content and form of civic and political participation. In doing so, it challenges dominant paradigms of youth engagement that overlook the emotional and relational dimensions.

These informal and semi-formal spaces operate in the margins of institutional frameworks, yet they are often experienced by youth as more trusted and empowering than official structures. Such forums allow independent agenda-setting and create a sense of political authorship. This reveals the operation of Lukes' (2021) second

dimension of power - that of agenda control and institutional framing. The absence of young people in formal Ward-level public participation (as observed in Tambach in February 2025) contrasts sharply with the vibrancy of peer-led forums. This suggests that institutional designs fail to reflect youth realities, thereby excluding them not overtly, but structurally. The *Tumaini La Vijana* initiative offers an alternative design: youth-initiated, emotional, and relationally driven.

It could be said that the very informality that enables autonomy also limits influence. It is noteworthy that these forums often lack legal recognition, visibility, or access to sufficient budgetary resources to sustain themselves. Asked whether youth regularly come together themselves to address their needs, Penda responded: “It would be if we didn’t have financial constraints. It would. But it has been rare”. This points to an important limitation of youth-led initiatives: they are often materially precarious and difficult to sustain without external support. There is also the question about the capacity of informal interactions to translate civic learning into policy influence. However, there is a fine line between the need to build bridges between these and more formal systems, and the need to protect them from co-optation. When informal, self-organised youth spaces are pulled into the architecture of state or NGO programming, their fluidity, openness, and relational culture can be compromised. Bridging must therefore be approached carefully, with a commitment to safeguarding the integrity, spontaneity, and youth-led nature of these spaces. It should mean recognising informal civic life as equally valid, supporting its growth on its own terms, and allowing it to inform - and even transform - formal systems from below.

At the dispositional level, these informal and self-organised spaces challenge the managerialist paradigm of youth participation. They are not oriented around bureaucratic procedures or donor frameworks. Instead, they prioritise dignity, empathy, and collective care. This is where Lukes’ third dimension of power is most relevant. Formal participation structures often operate with narrow conceptions of what counts as political - budgeting, legislation, policy proposals. Informal interactions expand the domain of the political to include mental health, emotional well-being, and relational issues. By asserting the right to name and address issues that formal structures marginalise - such as PTSD, substance abuse, or suicide - these youth-led spaces claim the power to define what

matters. They resist the internalised sense that youth participation must be mediated or invited, asserting instead that participation is already happening - just not where the state, donors (and researchers) are necessarily looking.

Among the array of participatory mechanisms examined in this study, informal interactions and youth-led initiatives represent some of the clearest instances of transformative supports for youth civic and political engagement. Whether through passive networks centred around sport or structured self-help groups like the *Tumaini La Vijana* initiative, these spaces provide youth with the opportunity to define their priorities, shape their own political subjectivities, and establish norms of care, solidarity, and autonomy. Their informal character may offer some protection from elite co-optation, while their relational depth and emotional nature challenge the technocratic and procedural models of youth participation that dominate formal governance structures. These spaces expand the meaning of civic and political engagement, suggesting trauma, marginality, and lived experience as legitimate civic and political concerns. Youth here are not waiting for invitations to participate - they are generating participation from below. While vulnerable to the lack of resources and formal invisibility, their strength lies in their authenticity, responsiveness, and trustworthiness. These youth-led spaces are not simply complements to institutional participation - they reframe what participation can be and what it can do.

6.5 Social media

In the context of constrained formal participation, digital platforms like WhatsApp have emerged as alternative civic arenas, enabling young people and citizens in general to engage directly with political actors, voice concerns, and demand accountability. Due to the nature of the platform, contributors mostly tend to be from the younger generation. Observations and interview data suggest that, as with offline platforms, they also tend to have mostly male participants. Amani complained about WhatsApp that “women's voices are not being heard and supported. It’s male dominated!”, while a young man, Jabari, felt that, while young women “are trying”, they are “in the background”.

One notable example observed, involved a WhatsApp conversation between a group of citizens and the County Governor, centred around the availability of medicine in the local public hospital. Below is an excerpt of a conversation which took place on WhatsApp on 10th November 2024 concerning what are claimed to be corrupt practices in the Iten County Referral Hospital. The conversation illustrates how WhatsApp forums have become instrumental in facilitating people's direct access to those in positions of authority, and how digital and social media platforms can lower the barriers to youth political engagement, particularly in contexts where formal participation structures are limited, exclusionary, or slow to respond:

Contributor 1: Every time you are prescribed any drug, you'll have to purchase it outside [the hospital]. If possible, scrap the pharmacy!

Contributor 2: The pharmacist needs to be paid based on productivity and numbers handled.

Contributor 3: There is business seeking going on.

Governor: When was this?

Contributor 1: Always, Sir! Normally there is that issue of [lack of drugs in] the pharmacy. Do some private enquiry.

Governor: Do you have any details of the drugs? Please let me know, including the dates. I will follow up. The digital report we have is that the hospital is stocked well with KEMSA[48] and MEDS[49]. Looks like we have we may be having a rogue person at the Pharmacy, we need to zero in.

Contributor 1: OK, I will send to you the prescription in the evening so that you can [follow up]

Governor: Anybody with any prescription for any drug that he has been referred to outside, they should let me know.

[48] KEMSA - Kenya Medical Supplies Authority
[49] MEDS - Mission for Essential Drugs and Supplies

Contributor 4: *Hushikangi simu!* [you don't take calls]

Governor: Even when I'm not able you can always text the information to me.

WhatsApp groups exist for every Ward in the County and often for smaller administrative units. The Governor's active participation (and that of other County officials) suggests an emerging model of accountability brought about by these virtual groups, whereby public officers are held accountable not only through more formal, more involving and more time-consuming processes, but via immediate, digitally-mediated interaction. This case underscores how WhatsApp and other digital tools offer accessible, low-cost entry points for civic participation, especially for young people who may be alienated from traditional spaces of political deliberation.

In the course of fieldwork, what emerged was not merely a pattern of WhatsApp usage, but a dense infrastructure of digital participation. Across the County, a proliferation of WhatsApp groups - operating at County, Ward, Sub-location and even village level - has produced a vibrant, if chaotic[50], landscape of hyper-localised civic engagement. It is not unusual for a single individual - especially a politically active youth, an administrator or a political leader - to be a member of ten or more such groups simultaneously. When I described it as a "network" in conversation with some youth, I was struck by the inadequacy of the descriptor for this phenomenon. What becomes visible is a kind of 'digital ecosystem', a self-sustaining circuit of information, mobilisation, and accountability discourse. These groups serve multiple functions simultaneously: they relay government updates, provide a forum for public critique, coordinate development projects, share details of local events, and offer an immediate line of communication with elected officials. The informality and ubiquity of WhatsApp groups allow users - especially young people - to engage in everyday acts of citizenship without the bureaucratic barriers of formal spaces.

[50] "Maybe somebody was talking about a water issue, and before even you finish, somebody else has thrown up a picture of a wedding. Or someone has posted an employment opportunity, and an accident has happened, and so they send [information]. So all that communication also stops" (interview with Nyota, CECM).

It was clarified that Ward groups generally have two 'admins', those who invite people to join, and also eject people from the group. "The local administration [i.e. the Chief] and a youth from the community" are generally said to act in the role of admins, with the local youth, in reality, the one who adds people, more so than the Chief. One female youth recognised this as problematic:

> I think there's a challenge. I think they add people according to their own preference. Like they could [instead] have a link which they could share somewhere and if you're interested, you can join. So, I think that is a barrier. Not all people are accessing the groups...[and] they'll normally add men more than women (interview with Amani, local youth).

Amani's concerns are echoed in the literature on the subject of Whatsapp as a space for public participation in Kenya. In addition to the challenge of heterogeneity and the privileging of male voices as a result of the gatekeeping described, Ooko points out the basic concern that "the enrolment method...means that others who...do not know of the existence of the online community or are not connected to already existing members are also excluded, impeding their participation" (Ooko, 2023, p. 522). At the experiential level, several additional challenges with Whatsapp - and social media more generally - were noted.

One of the youth respondents in the study, Jabari, remarked that, in his experience, "there are some youth who are in the villages who are not active on social media", a sentiment which Sefu agreed with:

> It's important to meet people physically because not everyone has access [to the internet]. And not everyone is into social media. You'll find that maybe in Embobut, among 100 youth, it's only about 10 that are on X - or maybe 20 - despite people having modern phones, or technology being available, there are still many that have not embraced the technology the way the government or the other people think that the majority of people have embraced these technologies (interview with Sefu, local youth).

In her work supporting youth with well-being issues through a local self-help group (discussed in more detail above), Penda came to preference physical meetings as "not

everyone was able to take part [virtually] considering the network coverage, and all the challenges out there. Not all of them were able to talk. But with physical meetings, at least, we're able to talk face-to-face, and you're able to observe reactions" (interview with Penda, local youth).

Concerns related to access have been highlighted in a report from the UK's Information Commissioner's Office (2022), which drew attention to "the risks and issues around the security of information and managing transparency obligations" (p.4). While these risks and issues are touched on by the doubts raised above, the potential of social media-enabled civic and political participation is, nevertheless, clear at the empirical level. Several youth respondents detailed their experiences exploiting social media for information sharing, in advocacy efforts, seeking accountability, and in the pursuit of good governance:

> I use my Facebook page at times to post things that are educative. So these young people, who are my followers, get to know what is happening (interview with Jabari, local youth).
>
> when you visit [county] departments, they give you reports. You see these do not match with what we were expecting. So we do publicise this kind of thing on social media (interview with Baraka, local youth).
>
> anyone who knows of any irregularity going on within the Executive of the County raise your hand and say something (contributor, X Space, 15th July 2024).
>
> There is a lot that is being produced in the social media that is affecting the public. What is being discussed on X or what is taken to Tiktok is what is happening on the ground. The content that somebody is posting is what he or she sees the ground, and that's why they want to make it public to make sure people consume it. It's a kind of information [sharing] whereby you pick information and instead of sitting with the information you make sure that it reaches diverse people through the social media. [Social media] plays a big role in influencing the community and influencing the youth (interview with Sefu, local youth).

Two County Government officials interviewed also had a broadly positive assessment of the role of social media in facilitating young people's political engagement and complementing traditional modes of communication and outreach:

> When a document is due for public participation, whether it's a bill, whether it is a budget estimate, whether it's a plan [...] access to newspapers is limited [so] we normally send notifications in paper form to the Ward level and the sub county level [...] and we also do the social media kind of circulation...to have the catchment of youth who are in social media - to get to know that we are planning to do a public participation (interview with Mr. Bahati, official from the County Assembly).

> One of the biggest challenges, sometimes I find is having youth attend these [public participation] forums and speak. The majority of those who write in WhatsApp don't speak when it comes to public engagements. But they are very good in terms of engaging in online forums...so we can tap into that and have virtual meetings. We can even say it's a monthly thing so that we have Wards discussing their issues virtually and then raise them at the county level virtually (interview with current CECM, Mr. Bakari).

One notable impact of social media-enabled public participation is awareness among elected County officials of the availability of information, its widespread and instant accessibility and how impossible it is to control: "this has made a lot of the leaders, all the way from MP to the MCA, get down to work because they know that you have the information and information is power. That is what they actually fear" (interview with Sefu, local youth).

In the course of interviews, there were many examples cited by young people of where virtual deliberations led to impact in real world decision making. One youth interviewed, Baraka, described online forums "which are operating in parallel to meeting face-to-face. They're not replacing them. We discuss in the forums and sometimes we discuss those things that came up online during our face-to-face interactions". Another youth, Sefu, describing a WhatsApp extension of the *Bunge la Mwananchi* (above) explained how "residents of Elgeyo-Marakwet in Nairobi...would want to know what is being discussed

at home. So, you find that there are those who will meet physically, and then maybe bring the topic to the WhatsApp forum". A look at some examples cited will give a sense of the positive connection young people make between informal online engagements and formal governance structures:

> There was an example recently. We engaged the area MCA in the WhatsApp Forum and…making sure that the information we're giving is factual, we made the MCA come and have a physical meeting with the public…and through the engagement the 3 million [Kenya Shillings] for renovation [was changed] to building a new lab. The WhatsApp engagement led to the MCA coming for a public meeting (interview with Sefu, local youth)

Several examples cited emanate from interaction on the X platform, in "X Spaces". Young people who engaged the Governor through an X Space meeting in July 2024, reported successfully influencing political decisions:

> We gave him all our grievances, and he requested us to give him time to make some changes…one of them was the setting up of the Office of the County Attorney…which was not even functional. A few weeks ago, the office was made functional with a youth advocate appointed, and we are very sure, she will deliver (interview with Rafiki, local youth).

In discussion with the County Attorney herself, she did acknowledge that it was, at least in part, advocacy from young people that brought about the setting up of her office, which had been delayed for political reasons. She explained that the role supports both the County Executive and the Assembly in ensuring "legally compliant processes [and] decision making that conforms with the law". She believes that this aspect of the role is of particular interest to conscientious youth. A young person herself, she is keen that the office is "open to youth" and claimed that she is ready to meet with them whenever they request her to make time.

There were several other "grievances" discussed with the Governor in this X Space which Rafiki claimed were also addressed through subsequent actions taken by the County Executive. The impact of seeing their participation and engagement lead to tangible process or policy improvements was, according to Rafiki, very significant: "the youth felt

this is the way we can talk with the leadership. In other forums, it's so difficult for the youth to engage, but that day was better because they felt they are closer". He said:

> Youth just need to be heard. Youth need to be engaged to know they can be self-empowered, not necessary "to be empowered", but they can be allowed to empower themselves and, in the long run, they can manage their own affairs [...] When they talks to us, we feel we have been represented because there are youth in villages who've never even seen the government. But when they speak in an X Space, or any other online platform, they'll feel like they're close to the government (interview with Rafiki, local youth).

Picking up on the idea presented here by Rafiki of the proximity to power facilitated by social media-enabled participation, and notwithstanding the access issues mentioned earlier, one women's advocate considers social media among the tools that young women can use to find their voice in a male-dominated society. She says young women in particular "have to be very courageous to stand up...but I've seen, of late, they really participate especially the social [media channels]. The social [media] forums have given them a voice. So this is how I'm seeing young women coming up" (interview with Dr. Zuri).

This sentiment was echoed by a group of young women themselves who took part in a focus group discussion (FGD) in Kipsoen, just outside Iten. One young women said "if you use the phone, you can be more courageous. But face to face, it's different. So it's ok to express yourself on the phone [i.e. through social media] and you can say what happened. It is more advantageous than public speaking" (Wema, local youth, speaking in an FGD). Another mentioned being "mistreated in a *baraza*" and, seemingly resigned to established hierarchies and the cultural influences at play in how *barazas* are organised, said: "you can always air your views on social media...that's how you get heard" (Rehema, local youth, speaking in an FGD). A local politically active young women described social media as "a great weapon right now [...] we borrow ideas from different places" (interview with Penda). Although quick to clarify she meant weapon "positively, not destructively" – her intention was to illustrate the power of social media to yield results, as many of the examples of impact from youth themselves illustrate. Neema was

even more profound in her assessment: “I think social media is now everything to the youth” (interview with Neema, local youth).

Despite serious challenges related to digital access and inclusion, the findings from this study reveal that social media is not merely a supplementary channel for youth participation - it is, in many cases, a transformative catalyst for civic and political action. At the surface level of experience, social media - particularly WhatsApp and X Spaces - emerges as a vital space for everyday youth civic expression in Elgeyo-Marakwet County. Young people use social media to monitor government activities, challenge budget decisions, share information, and demand accountability. In multiple cases, online deliberations were shown to translate into offline impact. Youth, especially young women, also report feeling more able to speak out via social media than in face-to-face public forums. Social media, in these accounts, does more than amplify youth voice - it reshapes civic space, challenges power asymmetries, and creates a sense of proximity between young people and political actors. It enables horizontal mobilisation and facilitates the formation of new “civic publics” outside elite-controlled arenas. These examples underscore that when access is secured and equal participation is assured, social media can serve as a genuinely transformative support, redefining both the form and function of youth civic and political engagement in Elgeyo-Marakwet.

It is worth noting however, some contrasting views on the social media from certain quarters. A currently serving County Executive Committee Member (CECM) remarked “social media is not a government way of communicating”, and was of the view that

> it's not really reliable...somebody could just be having issues with you. So, they will just talk and talk and talk, and you are not really engaging on anything. You're not really getting anything from what they are discussing. You would be better off coming to the ground and having a face-to-face to discuss issues (interview with Nyota, CECM).

She clearly speaks from the perspective of the duty bearer, perhaps seeing the downside of the ‘proximity to power’ of social media-enabled participation, the expectations it raises, and the issue connecting informal online interactions with formal governance processes:

> it becomes a battle ground and most of the time you will find we do not end up a happy lot. We end up quarrelling…and not finding solutions. And you cannot track the solutions anyway. There is no follow up (interview with Nyota, CECM).

There is also the suggestion that social media is monitored. In the observed X Space meeting, which took place in July 2024, one youth remarked:

> I know a few individuals inside this space are here to spy on what we're saying and they're going to take it to the Governor…It is very good that you go and tell Governor that we are not doing this against him, but we want accountability and transparency of officers (X Space contributor, 15th July 2024).

Some of the youth interviewed suggested that open criticism in online forums may have consequences: "Once you publish something which does not concur with what the government is doing, you'll definitely be followed and you don't know what will take place after that" (interview with Baraka, local youth). Indeed, one youth interviewed was detained by the police following an X Space meeting in July 2024 during which youth resolved to protest outside the offices of the County Government. He claimed:

> the day before [demonstration] day, I was arrested. They said I'm the leader of youth, I'm mobilising them. We were not going to destroy anything like criminals. We just wanted the government to do this, this and this - for the benefit of our people. So those are challenges when we are doing this kind of thing online…I was in custody from six in the morning, up to six in the evening (interview with Rafiki, local youth).

Others used defiant language, "I don't fear", "I'm a courageous man", "we are no longer having fears about anything. *Kama mbaya mbaya* [come what may]*"* and "we are trying to be apart from the County Government, so that we are not silenced". Youth seem to be under no illusion that the potential positive impacts of online activism in the political realm carry with them the threats associated with surveillance and containment. While social media has empowered youth to challenge governance failures and articulate demands for transparency, its role as a transformative tool is clearly not uncontested. The findings of this study reveal that social media-enabled participation is often viewed with suspicion by duty bearers, some of whom reject it as untrustworthy, antagonistic, or

incapable of producing solutions. The presence of online surveillance, fears of reprisal, and even police detention resulting from youth digital advocacy reveal the latent authoritarian reflexes that persist beneath the surface of participatory governance: these function to discipline digital activism and contain its transformative potential. While many youth remain defiant, they are keenly aware that speaking out online is not without risk. These accounts highlight that while social media can function as a transformative support, it is also embedded in an ecosystem marked by latent inhibitors, which could serve to curb the very agency it enables.

6.6 Donor/private sector initiatives

6.6.1 Yes! Youth Can (YYC)

Although the data revealed little evidence of donor initiatives directly supporting youth civic and political participation - or significant private sector engagement in this domain - one former programme, USAID's "Yes! Youth Can" (YYC), stands out as a notable exception. Designed explicitly to foster "a voice for youth that increases political empowerment and engagement and improves relations between youths and others in the community" (Linkow et al., 2014, p. 3), YYC provides a valuable, if partial, model for donor-supported youth engagement. The programme ran from 2010-2015 reportedly reaching nearly 1 million youth proposing a "youth *bunge*" structure with the objective of addressing "the feeling of exclusion from political process and powerlessness to influence political actors…by creating opportunities for youths to exercise autonomy and leadership through the *bunge* system" (ibid.). The youth *bunge* structure was also the means through which USAID channelled funding in support of youth initiatives at the county level, where SACCOs were formed such as the *Elgeyo Marakwet Youth Bunge Sacco* - which continues to operate today with the mission of "the economic empowerment of youths in the North Rift region"[51]. The following field encounter describes how I came to learn about the SACCO and the status of the youth *bunge* structure:

> *During fieldwork in Iten, I became aware of the Elgeyo Marakwet Youth Bunge SACCO through proximity. The SACCO office is located next door to my research*

[51] From https://elgeyomarakwetcountyyouthbunge.co.ke [accessed 22 September 2025]

partner, IIEC. Following several encounters with staff in the stairs and corridor of the office building, I was formally introduced to members of the SACCO team by IIEC colleagues one morning, when we were discussing the broad theme of precarious livelihoods evident from the interviews and observations, and indeed, experienced by the youth members of IIEC themselves. We sat together in the SACCO offices, around the table of the Manager. He also introduced a bookkeeper, seated at another table. In the conversation with the SACCO staff which followed, they began by describing the origins of the institution in the earlier USAID-funded "Yes! Youth Can" programme. They explained how the youth bunge structures had once functioned as spaces for youth leadership, dialogue, and collective action, and how the SACCO had been created as a financial mechanism to support youth initiatives and economic empowerment.

While the conversation demonstrated that the SACCO remains operational providing savings and loan services to youth in the North Rift region - no active youth bunge forums or civic deliberative structures were described as continuing in parallel. When asked about the bunge system itself, staff referred to it in the past tense.

The physical and institutional residue of the programme appeared to be concentrated in the SACCO, whose name preserves the "youth *bunge*" identity, but whose current function is primarily economic rather than civic. The absence of visible civic deliberative spaces or ongoing structured youth engagement activities was notable, particularly given the programme's original objective of fostering sustained political voice and leadership.

This field encounter corroborates evaluation findings (Linkow et al., 2014) regarding both the strengths and the limitations of YYC. Its strengths lay in its youth-led design, fostering a sense of ownership, confidence, and building social capital. Leadership, organisational learning, and civic participation reportedly increased measurably among youth participants. But YYC's limitations also reveal critical insights into the constraints that undermine the sustainability of donor-funded youth engagement programmes. While youth exercised voice and agency within the programme's space, the lack of integration into formal governance systems curtailed the programme's transformative potential. The

withdrawal of donor support exposed the fragility of the structures created, and the absence of transition pathways meant that the empowerment achieved was not embedded systemically.

Ultimately, YYC illustrates both the promise and the limitations of youth participation models that operate in parallel to, rather than through, established social and political institutions. When mapped against the five-category *Conceptual Model for Youth Participation*, YYC emerges as a strong latent/emergent enabler with transformative intent, but with ambiguous outcomes - and limited resilience to structural and institutional pressures once donor support is ended.

6.6.2 The *Jiinue* Growth Program (JGP)

The *Jiinue* Growth Program (JGP), funded by the Mastercard Foundation, represents a significant private sector initiative aimed at economically empowering Kenyan youth, particularly female youth, as mentioned above. Running from 2022-2027, its primary focus is on enhancing the capabilities of youth-led micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) through financial support and technical assistance, while also contributing to broader socio-economic development goals. JGP targets entrepreneurs aged 18–35, offering a combination of concessional financing and support services, including mentorship, business training, and capacity-building programmes such as the training observed during data gathering referenced below.

JGP places a significant emphasis on supporting young women and women-led businesses. This focus is evident in several facets of the programme's design and implementation with JGP explicitly aiming to bridge the funding gap for MSMEs with a particular emphasis on those led by young women. The programme offers tailored financial support and technical assistance to these enterprises, recognising the unique challenges they face in accessing capital and business development services. The partnership with GROOTS Kenya, a national movement of grassroots, women-led community-based organisation, ensures that the programme is attuned to the needs of women entrepreneurs, providing mentorship, community support, and facilitating access to finance opportunities. JGP's training workshops and capacity-building initiatives are designed to be inclusive, encouraging participation from women

entrepreneurs across various sectors, as observed in a training observed in Kipsoen in November 2024, where over 80% of the trainees were female. The following observation notes briefly describe the field encounter:

> *Accompanied by my research assistant from IIEC, I attended a training session at Kipsoen Technical and Vocational College (KTVC) on the outskirts of Iten. The training room was arranged in a U-shaped formation, with participants seated closely around tables. Flip charts lined the wall, outlining steps in business planning and financial projection. Post-its and other papers pinned to the walls showed outputs from working sessions on various the themes. As noted, most attendees were young women, many of whom in brief conversations described themselves as running small retail, agricultural, or tailoring businesses – or with ambitions to set those up. During the session on developing a business growth plan, which we joined, participants were encouraged to articulate how grant capital might help establish or expand their enterprises. Three females spoke, while we observed the session - with notable confidence in their business development ideas. It appeared likely that the prospect of grant funding to their business was a major motivating factor for the obvious attentiveness, seriousness, and commitment to the training that was evident among all the participants - who listened carefully and took notes on the pitches presented by their peers using their note pads and pens.*
>
> *During the lunch break, in a separate discussion with a programme officer from DT Global (the lead implementing partner of the project), I was told that the intention of the session was not simply to disburse capital but to "build confidence and capability" so that youth - especially young women - could navigate business development challenges independently. The emphasis, both in formal instruction and informal conversation, was on business planning and viability. While the training focused squarely on economic skills, the language of confidence and autonomy recurred throughout the session.*

Although JGP and YYC operate in distinct domains - economic empowerment and civic engagement respectively - they both address the overarching goal of youth

empowerment. Economic empowerment initiatives like JGP (and the *Tujiajiri* programme mentioned earlier) may indirectly influence civic participation by increasing youth's confidence, autonomy, and motivation to play a more active role in community affairs. However, the direct impact of such economic programmes on political engagement remains an area requiring further empirical research. Nonetheless, JGP stands out as a prominent private sector-funded programme targeting youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet County. Its approach to addressing financial and technical barriers faced by young entrepreneurs positions it as an important component in the broader ecosystem of youth development initiatives - and a potentially significant latent or emergent enabler of youth civic and political participation (through the lens of economic empowerment). By providing concessional financing, business training, and mentorship to youth-led enterprises (especially those headed by young women) JGP addresses structural inequalities in access to capital and skills. Its grassroots partnerships further enhance its responsiveness and inclusivity, as demonstrated in observed training workshops mentioned above. While JGP does not explicitly target political participation, its apparent contribution to youth confidence and autonomy suggests a possible role in fostering preconditions for civic engagement. However, the transformative potential of JGP remains conditional in the absence of deliberate pathways linking economic success to political voice or decision-making power. Combining economic empowerment programs like JGP with rejuvenating civic initiatives such as CYF, *Wezesha Vijana*, or NYC could help youth influence development agendas by engaging them as both economic and political actors.

6.7 Conclusion

Building on the previous chapter, continuing the examination of the issues affecting youth participation, Chapter 6 presents those that could be categorised broadly along a continuum of ‘supportive infrastructure’ according to the proposed conceptual model. Various aspects of civic, social and political life in Elgeyo-Marakwet are discussed, in the search for positive influences on youth engagement. Aspects primarily surfaced by young people themselves are of focus, with their perspectives foregrounded and

contextualised. Government and donor supported initiatives, including policy, legislation and directly-funded programmes of support are considered, as well as non-governmental economic empowerment, civic education, voluntary and digital participation initiatives. The chapter examines these efforts, highlighting the strengths, challenges, and transformative potential of different programmes and structures ostensibly developed to support youth participation. While the 'inhibiting factors' discussed in the previous chapter highlight significant challenges to youth participation, the efforts presented in this chapter reveal a cautious yet promising potential for transformative change. National government frameworks for youth inclusion signal tentative openings for youth engagement and also promise to inspire county level policy and practice. Empowerment programmes are profiled, the importance of linking livelihoods and civic or governance initiatives is unpacked, and the possibilities of enabling youth to transition from economic actors to political agents shaping development agendas are explored. Social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp and X Spaces, are shown to have become vital for youth civic expression and political engagement. These platforms reshape civic spaces by challenging power hierarchies and fostering horizontal mobilisation outside elite-controlled arenas.

As we transition from the detailed exploration of barriers and supports to youth participation, the next step will be to synthesise these insights into a coherent summary. The chapter which follows will distil the key findings, consider the implications and take note of some of the limitations of the current study. Additionally, avenues for further research in the area of youth civic and political participation are suggested, with some final personal reflections rounding out the study.

Chapter 7 – Summary and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter provides a synthesis of the research journey undertaken in this project. It begins by going back to the original research problem and the aim of the study, presenting an overview of the key findings and evidence, attempting to provide succinct answers to the research question. The chapter then unpacks the significance of this contribution, discussing its implications. The study's limitations are acknowledged, some of which suggest avenues for future research. Finally, the chapter closes with a brief personal reflection on my professional learning and development journey while undertaking this research.

7.2 Revisiting the Problem

This research set out to explore young people's civic and political activity in Elgeyo-Marakwet County in Kenya. Since the promulgation of the Kenya's new basic law in 2010, many citizens have developed a keen awareness of the theoretical workings of deliberative democracy insofar as they are elaborated in the Country's constitution and enacted through legislation and policy. This awareness is thanks, in part, to the advocacy efforts of civil society and, by dint of those efforts, high profile judgements by the Courts of Kenya affirming the constitution's intent. All arms and levels of government are required to make provisions for the people's direct participation in the management of public affairs. The constitution also places emphasis on the requirement of inclusiveness with respect to participation.

These exacting constitutional provisions are not accidental. They have come about following rounds of consultations among stakeholders, including an impressive degree of consultations directly with the people of Kenya themselves, taking several years and more than one attempt to come up with an acceptable document. People saw in the constitutional review process an opportunity to bring about change to the old political order, marked by single party, authoritarian rule, the domination of certain ethnic groups and the accumulation of wealth by those in government. Self-aggrandisement and

corruption – sustained through networks of political patronage, recognisably neo-patrimonial and neo-colonial, were so entrenched among the political class that nothing short of root and branch reform of the political system could bring change. However, old habits die hard, and politicians schooled under the old order, naturally found their way into leadership positions under the new constitution. At the same time, a younger generation of politicians came through the swollen ranks – to be part of the complex governance infrastructure developed for a revamped executive and bi-cameral parliament, replicated at a local level in 47 county governments. It soon became clear that the heralding of a new order in 2010 may have been premature and that constitutional provisions, however important, could not on their own bring about the kind of change in the country's politics that people, particularly young people, were yearning for.

Empirically, people are consulted, frequent public forums take place both for County and National Government planning purposes. Laws, policies, budgetary plans, and so on, are put to the people for discussion, inputs and consent. Sometimes the courts are required to judge whether consultative processes meet the constitutional and legal standards. These machinations would, however, appear to be on the surface. Despite the optics and rhetoric, young people's feelings of disconnectedness and marginalisation from political decision making remain strong and seem to be growing. This research sought to engage young people on the issue of civic and political participation, to find out what their experiences are of formal and non-formal, top down and bottom up, government-led and "grass roots" processes of public participation. It attempted to move beyond the rhetoric of participation, journeying with young people to explore their lived experiences, their interpretations, and listening to what they say about what is working for them and what is not.

Findings and analysis are prefaced by a review of a wide variety of literature which provided a foundation for the exploration of the complex issues which collectively influence young people and determine their capacity, willingness and motivation for engagement in civic and political affairs in Elgeyo-Marakwet County.

The literature review explores how theories relating to democracy, deliberation, participation, education and youth might illuminate practice in the Kenya context. It examines what these ideas say about the challenges and opportunities relating to young people's civic and political engagement. Academic literature and Kenyan-specific scholarship are central and provide theoretical and historical insights. Policy documents and NGO reports add important practical and further contextual perspectives on youth engagement, while select digital sources highlight emerging forms of youth engagement and mobilisation.

A theoretical framework is proposed to enable a process of digging beneath the surface and to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the ecosystem of influences on young people's ability and motivations to participate civically and politically. Critical Realism (Bhaskar 1998; 2008; 2017) as a meta-theory provides a philosophy of understanding with the ontological and epistemological depth that suits a study committed to digging down and finding the causal mechanisms at play when one considers the influences – be they overt barriers or assumed supports – on young people's participation.

Research methods, guided by Yin's (2018) case study design, are employed to gather evidence, including in-depth, face-to-face interviews and focus group discussion. These are deemed most fitting to operationalise the critical realist theoretical and methodological commitments. Special attention is paid to including young women less involved in formal civic activism. A critical realist-inspired analytical framework incorporates considerations of power, and a conceptual framework is developed to account for the emerging complexity in the thematic analysis.

7.3 Recap of Key Findings and Evidence

Below is a discussion of findings with the objective of showing how the different strands of evidence come together into an integrated picture. For clarity, the findings are grouped under several overarching propositions, each of which speaks either directly to the main research question or indirectly to it (through one of the sub questions). The propositions cut across the "barriers" and "supports" as presented in the findings chapters and emphasise the patterns or contradictions that emerged in the study.

1) Institutional and Structural Arrangements

The evidence demonstrates that formal structures for youth participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet are characterised by a contradiction between rhetorical commitment and actual practice. Formal mechanisms for youth participation (e.g., the *Wezesha Vijana* Forum, the County Youth Forum, the National Youth Council (NYC), Ward/Project Development Committees (WDCs/PDCs), *barazas* etc.) represent institutional spaces that, in principle, provide avenues for young people to participate and shape decision-making. Yet these arrangements are frequently under-resourced, poorly coordinated, or co-opted by political elites. For example, youth representatives on PDCs describe being invited to meetings only to discover that decisions had already been taken. Young people find their contributions in public meetings are limited to specific topics considered relevant to youth or are only noted for the purposes of achieving pre-ordained outcomes. This suggests that the existence of formal frameworks does not equate to meaningful youth participation. The structures often serve to legitimise existing power relations rather than transform them.

At the same time, evidence from specific deliberative forums - where youth representatives are given space to air their views - indicates that institutions retain occasional practical value. Young people can recognise the potential of these openings and sometimes engage with them strategically, despite their limitations. This theme addresses the main research question *what are the supportive structures and inhibiting factors facilitating or frustrating young people's participation*. This aspect looks particularly as the extent to which institutional frameworks support transformative youth engagement. It would appear that even though participatory structures are in place, they can operate as barriers while using language of inclusiveness. While occasional opportunities for engagement are evidenced, so too is frustration and even disillusionment.

2) Cultural and Generational Norms

The findings highlight the cultural issues that impact both the quality and 'quantity' of participation. Traditional practices and established hierarchies of authority disadvantage women, restrict their engagement in civic forums, and limit or sometimes discourage their participation. Young people describe the expectation to defer to chiefs, elders, or

older (usually male) members of the public. The effects of this generational hierarchy are also borne out in the family, where parents often emphasise ever-higher levels of educational attainment, employment, or even migration, over local civic or political involvement. Such norms have the powerful dispositional effect of devaluing civic engagement.

This cultural landscape is also profoundly gendered. Female underrepresentation in civic forums in Elgeyo-Marakwet is not merely a question of numbers but also of deeper structural exclusions. Women's marginalisation is shown as operating at multiple levels: empirically, through visible absence in physical and digital forums; actually, through procedural dynamics and agenda-setting that suppress or devalue women's contributions; and at the real level, through the cultural practices that define whose voice is legitimate in public life.

Yet evidence also points to generational change. Some young people actively resist these expectations, demanding accountability from leaders. For instance, the Governor of Elgeyo-Marakwet was directly challenged in a WhatsApp group on his invitation to "let me know" about any evidence of the lack of availability of medicines in the local referral hospital – where a young contributor told him: "you don't take calls!" Amani said she felt "in towns and urban centres…women's voices are heard, and their views are taken into consideration". Rehema who felt devalued in a *baraza*, took to her phone to express herself: "that's how you get heard". These examples suggest that cultural norms are not static; they are being reinterpreted and, at times, contested. The significance here is that youth participation is not simply blocked by culture but can be enabled through gradual change – and sometimes challenge. This theme therefore contributes to the central research question around *factors either facilitating or frustrating young people's participation*.

It is also in the cultural domain where we can categorise findings which help us to draw conclusions about sub-question 1, i.e. *how young people understand and define civic and political participation in their context*. In contrast to Ekeh's (2012) claim of amorality which he sees manifest among citizens in their dealings with the state in Africa, youth in Elgeyo-Marakwet perceive participation as a distinctly moral endeavour, with the clear

objective of community betterment through calling our corrupt, marginalising practices, incomplete projects, or policies and practices considered detrimental to the general well-being. A perception of participation as enabling a form of moral citizenship permeates the interview data, where the behaviours and motivations young people clearly point to a desire to effect positive change - potentially frustrated through formal avenues, but most evident in the expressions of participatory practice young people demonstrate in the spaces they control.

3) Informal and Digital Spaces

One of the most striking findings in this study is the breadth of informal and digital spaces as arenas of participation. WhatsApp groups, X Spaces, sports events, 'hotels' (i.e. tea rooms) and informal (youth) group convenings are repeatedly identified as the primary sites where youth engage civically and politically. These spaces function as sites of participation in their own right, enabling the passing on of information, the testing of ideas, and the coordination of collective action. They are also spaces where older youth spoke about mentoring younger counterparts, living out their ethical and relational interpretation of participation. There are many examples of participatory action enabled through informal and digital spaces. Young people were able to address critical mental health issues in a self-organised forum; a ward-level WhatsApp group formed to discuss local development issues pressured local officials to respond to allegations of funds misappropriation; conversations at the *Bunge la Mwananchi* help shape young members' dispositions towards electoral participation.

These informal sites, although outside of the official infrastructure of participation, often carry more legitimacy for young people. Unlike in formal spaces, where contributions can be unwelcome or ignored, informal spaces allow participants to set the agenda, have their issues dealt with, and generate solidarity. This theme thus responds directly to the main research question and indirectly through the sub-questions. At once, informal and digital spaces form part of the *supportive infrastructure facilitating participation*. They also illuminate the *role of learning, information, and civic education in shaping participation*. These spaces demonstrate how civic and political action on the part of young people is not dependant on the opportunities afforded them, but it is dynamic, organic and personal. It responds to young people's interpersonal needs, and appears as

much social activity as civic. By situating these practices alongside the weaknesses of formal institutions, the findings reveal that what might appear marginal is, in fact, central to the youth definition of participation bringing more clarity to *how young people understand and define civic and political participation in their context*.

4) Youth Leadership and Agency

Youth leadership emerged as a somewhat contradictory topic. On the one hand, young leaders who access formal positions are seen to adopt some of the practices they would previously have abhorred, like patronage and self-promotion. In interviews, several young people (some with political ambitions) admitted that aligning with older politicians was a strategy to secure resources or visibility if they wanted to advance to political leadership. This was identified as a pattern of reproduction, where youth agency is absorbed into the existing political culture rather than challenging it – or, indeed, generating its own. This tendency to mimic older leaders reflects both structural constraints and accepted ideas about what leadership 'looks like'. On the other hand, there was also evidence of young people choosing a different path. There are those who supported young people's civic and political engagement within youth groups, resisted co-optation, or built networks across villages through informal meetings, WhatsApp and X Spaces. These practices demonstrated that an alternative 'political culture' is possible. This theme therefore contributes indirectly to the main research question by illuminating *how young people understand and define civic and political participation in their context*. It reveals change happening as a result of young people's engagement, but that young people will continue to need to challenge their peers who take on roles of responsibility and demand their sustained commitment to an agenda of transformation.

5) Economic Insecurity and Livelihood Pressures

Economic realities have a huge influence on youth participation. High unemployment rates, insecure livelihoods and the daily struggles of life significantly limit the time and resources available for civic and political engagement. Several young respondents noted the resource challenges associated with being civically and politically active and engaged, such as not having enough money to buy refreshments at 'hotels' (tea-rooms), or certainly for larger youth convenings, and the lack of resources to stage sporting events – which was a frequently cited valuable social avenue for youth engagement. This reflects

the tension between economic realities and participatory ideals. This finding presents another angle on the influence of money in the politics of participation: economic insecurity can lead to disengagement by making participation a luxury young people cannot afford.

At the same time, some economic initiatives, such as the county and donor-supported enterprise programmes or micro-finance schemes profiled, are creating possible entry points for participation. There is promise for youth who access small grants not only to use the support for income generation but also to engage county officials, and to take a more active part in civic affairs. The significance of this theme is that it suggests it may be necessary to address economic insecurity in order to enhance engagement. This contributes to answering the research question around *supportive structures facilitating participation*. Participation is more than the willingness to engage, it can be limited by issues of economic survival.

6) Donors, NGOs, and the Private Sector

External actors are also shown to shape youth participation. Programmes such as Yes! Youth Can and the *Jiinue* Growth Program have mobilised large numbers of young people, contributed to building social capital, and increased young people's confidence. Young people reported positive experiences of being involved in youth *bunges* or training sessions through the support of these programmes, where a sense of ownership and empowerment was promoted. These examples illustrate that donor initiatives can constitute an important part of the supportive infrastructure for youth participation. However, the findings also reveal the limits of this type of intervention. Programmes that are short-lived, poorly integrated into local social and governance structures, or overly focused on economic empowerment at the expense integrating the civic and political aspect have limited promise. Once donor funding ends, youth groups often collapse due to the dependency developed, and disillusionment and frustration can set in. Youth could thus find themselves socially and materially worse off following these programmes. This points to the contradiction of externally-driven participation. While it can generate temporary enthusiasm, it may fail to embed sustainable change. It points to the risks of associated with participation models that rely on external resources and the need for the concepts of sustainability and local ownership to be front a centre in the development of

supportive infrastructure for youth engagement. Otherwise, what may appear as enablers of participation in the short term can turn out to have longer term damaging consequences. This theme again illuminates the question of *supportive structures and inhibiting factors either facilitating or frustrating young people's participation*.

7) Civic Learning and Education

Finally, the findings reflect the importance of formal and informal education in shaping participation. The new Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) does not prioritise the promotion of democratic capacities, and, as has been noted, school-based practises tend not to socialise young Kenyans in participatory behaviours. So, while formal schooling may be said to contribute to reproducing passivity and disengagement among young people, informal and non-formal learning emerge as impactful. Youth describe gaining civic capacities through peer networks, WhatsApp debates, NGO trainings (e.g. CVA) and the *Bunge la Mwananchi*. These settings encourage critical engagement and skills for collective action. Education remains crucial to the question of young people's resources for participation. But while the formal system may be failing to equip youth for democratic engagement, informal learning is demonstrated as filling the gap albeit in partial and uneven ways. This theme directly addresses the research sub-question concerning the *role of learning, information, and civic education play in shaping participation*. In placing informal opportunities for learning across several of the themes encountered in the findings, they emerge as between latent enablers and transformative supports acknowledging the limitations of existing efforts but also and the potential for enhanced forms of civic learning.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that youth participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet is neither wholly absent nor fully realised. Instead, it is constituted by layered mechanisms operating at multiple levels, e.g. structural, cultural, and economic. Formal institutions exist but are unsatisfactory; cultural norms both constrain but can also inspire; informal spaces support vibrant practices which engage young people in new, more responsive ways; leadership is seen to move between practices of reproduction and transformation; economic issues have an important bearing on engagement; external actors create opportunities though their sustainability may be limited; and different forms of education represent both sites of reproduction and a potential source of transformation. The

findings reveal that participation is best understood as a dynamic process shaped by interacting mechanisms. This synthesis therefore provides a coherent answer to the research questions, while laying the foundation for a discussion of implications.

7.4 Implications

Below I seek to explore the wider consequences of the research findings, and for whom. This study demonstrates that youth participation in Elgeyo-Marakwet is shaped not simply by "barriers" or "supports", but by interacting mechanisms operating at multiple levels. The implications of the findings are therefore best understood in layered terms, spanning structural, cultural, economic, educational, and external domains.

1) Structural domain

In the structural domain, the evidence points to a disconnect between rhetoric and reality. While a wide array of formal institutions and frameworks for youth inclusion were found to exist, some were dormant, but many are in operation. The findings however point to poor management, an inconsistency in implementation and sometimes the instrumentalisation of the same formal institutions and frameworks. This has created feelings of disillusionment and mistrust among young people and limits the potential of these institutions to fulfil their mandates in supporting participatory democracy. The implication is that required institutional reform must ensure that existing structures operate transparently, consistently, and responsively. This requires not only investment in those institutions, but the need for appropriate guidance and management to be in place to ensure that institutions perform as intended, and that deliberate efforts to frustrate implementation are called out and corrected.

The Elgeyo-Marakwet County Youth Policy is a helpful case in point to illustrate the broader implications of this study. Although this policy was drafted several years ago, it has been effectively shelved due to change in government at the County level. This is reflective of a pattern seen in this study, in which institutional frameworks for youth engagement are created but then not adhered to. A County Youth Policy is an institutional necessity. Among other things, it provides a formal mechanism through which young people can hold duty-bearers to account. It should be in place, irrespective of the

political priorities of the administration in power. Policies may (and probably should) be revised and updated to reflect shifting political agendas, but the continued existence of policy is a prerequisite for systematic support from government for youth participation and the maintenance of formal channels of communication between young people and the administration. In the absence of this, young people are left navigating informal or *ad hoc* arrangements, which, as this study has shown, can generate vibrant forms of participation but rarely are as effective in demanding accountability or obtaining material support. The presence of a County Youth Policy, therefore, would not only formalise the County Government's rhetorical commitments to youth engagement and development, but also ensure mechanisms are in place for formal youth engagement.

2) Cultural domain

Culturally, the findings demonstrate that generational hierarchies and traditional practices are very influential when it comes to opportunities for meaningful participation for young people. Young women, in particular, experience traditions of deference to elders, and socialised gender roles as inhibitors of their civic and political engagement. Addressing the marginalisation of women – and their near absence from the sites of participation – requires increasing the numbers of women visible *and heard* in these sites. Women's voices matter, and there was a clear appreciation of this across the forums observed and interviews conducted, not least among male participants. What seems to be less well appreciated, however, is that for women to be *heard,* more will be required than just their attendance at physical or online forums. It will also take more than recording their numbers and demonstrating that they are close to, or even surpass, their male counterparts in terms of attendance. Women recount that these numbers are meaningless when the 'rules of the game' are stacked against them. Exclusion is enacted procedurally. Women are often sidelined through those who set the agenda, decide who has the right to speak, or engage in the habit of privileging male voices. Interventions must go beyond headcounts and be supplemented by inclusive facilitation and gender-sensitive agenda setting to ensuring women are given adequate opportunity to voice their concerns. Women's contributions must be required at public participation, and not in a tokenistic way. Records of meetings should show substantive talking time, and issues

recorded emanating from women - as an evaluative account of public forums, rather than a mere headcount.

The broader tendency for families to devalue young people's participation has a dampening effect on the enthusiasm of young people for political and civic action. Cultural factors have been shown to be central to how participation is supported or inhibited. The evidence in this study reveals, however, that culture is not static. Generational hierarchies and traditional practices are evolving, being negotiated and, at times, challenged. There is an important opportunity for both policy and practice in all of this: participation need not be seen in conflict with culture. Instead, participation can be framed in contextually appropriate terms, which can draw for its understanding both from (the best of) pre-colonial consensus-based and decision-making practices, and the collectivist tendencies developed in communitarian philosophies of *ubuntu* ("I am because we are") and *harambee* ("pulling together"). The behaviours and motivations of young people observed in this study - forming WhatsApp groups, self-help groups, mobilising on X Spaces - show the relevance of these cultural phenomena to young Kenyans today. Meaningful youth inclusion may therefore be more effectively fostered and supported across the community by drawing on these indigenous resources. Culturally sensitive approaches to participation which understand civic and political engagement as local practices of solidarity and consensus building may be more effective than externally derived, technocratic approaches.

3) Economic domain

Economic uncertainly has been shown as potential inhibitor of participation, which may be seen as a luxury in circumstances where 'putting food on the table' is the priority. At the same time, economic initiatives that provide resources for young people can also spur civic engagement and collective mobilisation. The implication is that economic empowerment programmes should be combined with support for civic and political participation. The expectation for young people to skill up, find paid employment and contribute to their community should go hand in hand with the expectation for them to participate in the civic and political life of the community.

The findings also highlight a need for further research. While the initiatives discussed in the findings above suggest that economic empowerment may indirectly foster greater willingness to engage in community affairs, the direct pathways between economic programmes and political participation remain unclear. Future research should examine whether, and under what conditions, livelihood interventions translate into durable forms of civic and political engagement. Embedding such investigation in the local context would provide important insights into the links between economic security and democratic participation.

4) Educational domain

As discussed above, formal schooling was not a site for field work in this research, however, in the broader context, Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reforms have been on-going. Criticism from the literature suggests little hope that school will be a site where critical thinking and participatory skills are learned, despite the expectation that young adults will take part in the opportunities direct democracy offers them under the current political dispensation. By contrast, WhatsApp groups, X Spaces, peer networks, and NGO trainings, and so, on are providing a type of informal civic education – one that reportedly not only prepares young people for engagement with government but even hones their political skills for potential leadership roles. The implication here is that informal learning should be supported. The opportunities to support young people's own efforts to mentor and support their fellow youth abound. The other implication, however, is that the new CBC curriculum should be oriented towards preparing active citizens with the skills required for civic and political participation.

5) External domain

Externally, donor and private sector programmes have been shown to have potential but they also bring risk. They may mobilise youth and build capacities in the short term, but long term, that may generate disillusionment and frustration as programmes wind down, leaving people dependant. The implication is that donor, NGO and private sector support must prioritise sustainability, embedding initiatives in local social and government structures

Spanning several interconnected domains, these implications incorporate young people's own interpretations, the results of observations and the critical realist interpretive lens to present a summary of the most important implications of the study.

7.5 Limitations

The study employed snowball sampling, a method consistent with critical realist methodology (Sayer, 1992). While the weakness in this approach was partially mitigated by holding an FGD with randomly selected women from a rural area, the focus nevertheless remained heavily skewed towards politically active young people. Respondents tended, naturally, to be those predisposed to taking part in a study on young people's engagement, confident in expressing themselves, and knowledgeable about civic and political matters. This study makes no claim to be representative of young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet, however, given participants often spoke of the problems of youth turning to drink and drugs, gang violence, and even suicide as a result of the challenges they face, it is important to acknowledge that young addicts, those engaging in criminal activity, or those perhaps simply maladjusted in a host of other ways to life in or immediately after formal education, may be particularly poorly represented by the youth respondents in this study.

The geographical scope of the study was confined to Elgeyo-Marakwet County with its very particular experience of the roll out of devolved government since 2013. Although the County is geographically diverse, the people of Elgeyo-Marakwet are culturally, relatively homogenous. Elgeyo-Marakwet also has a particular relationship with the National Government, and the Presidency, of which they have, by-and-large, felt they are part – at least since 2013. The idiosyncrasies of Elgeyo-Marakwet might only allow for direct comparisons with neighbouring socio-culturally and politically similar entities. This necessarily limits the transferability of findings. Youth engagement practices vary across Kenyan counties, and the insights presented here should therefore be read as illustrative rather than representative of the national picture. However, this suggests a potential direction for further research: a comparative analysis of how counties differ with respect to the influences on young people's participation. This could provide

additional rich evidence for best practices by government, civil society and citizens in supporting young people's engagement.

Time constraints and logistical challenges limited observation of deliberative forums. Although twenty County meetings were held in February and March 2025, the research team was able to cover only ten, dividing attendance among members. While these meetings provided a rich source of data, the reliance on different observers made direct comparisons difficult, given the inherently subjective nature of observation. An alternative strategy could have been to agree with County officials in advance that the researcher attend in the capacity of observer - rather than participant observer. This would have enabled attendance at a greater number of meetings, allowed for a more consistent observational stance, and strengthened the basis for comparing the conduct and dynamics of the different forums.

Beyond the publicly accessible X Space discussions, which were open to all, my research faced clear constraints in drawing extensively on social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp. The closed nature of these groups, combined with the practical and ethical difficulty of securing informed consent from all contributors, meant that only limited reported conversations could be included in this analysis. While the significance of WhatsApp groups as a site of youth engagement has been discussed in detail above, the evidence presented here could not fully capture the dynamics within them. Future research might therefore draw more systematically on these groups, to explore both the real-world impacts of information sharing and the distinctive forms of dialogue and debate that take place within them.

7.6 Final Thoughts and Reflections

This project originated in my desire to bring together my experiences as a teacher and later as a programme manager working on donor initiatives in support of youth, civil society, and democracy. The effort to connect questions of education with broader civic and political concerns was not a new departure, but rather a continuation of long-standing interests. My engagement with the literature drew me back to academic encounters earlier in my career, when I sought to 'skill up' for a transition from the

classroom into development programme management. Revisiting thinkers who had been influential during that period has proved both illuminating and grounding, even if this might appear predictable to more seasoned scholars.

With respect to the substantive subject of this enquiry - one of the most significant areas of learning has been the extent of young people's engagement outside the formal structures established to facilitate participation. The density of these networks - through WhatsApp, social media, X Spaces, and through informal interaction in hotels, on the sidelines of sports events, or while gathering to watch TV - has been striking. These informal, relational, and digitally enabled channels work in ways that are highly responsive to the rhythms of young people's lives, their habits of social interaction, and their attraction to online engagement. They are powerful spaces in which opinions are expressed, shaped by others, and used to make sense of community and wider public issues.

At the same time, this learning has sharpened an important tension in my own thinking. While these informal, relational, and digitally-enabled channels are vibrant, responsive, and clearly meaningful to young people, their relationship to formal decision-making remains uncertain. Yet I am cautious about treating this simply as a problem of "disconnection" that ought to be bridged. To do so risks assuming that formal structures are necessarily the most valuable or desirable sites of participation. What the study suggests, rather, is that many young people have developed forms of engagement that are better aligned with their lifestyles, their preferences, and their experiences of public life. The challenge is therefore not to presume that these spaces must be drawn back into conventional structures, but to take seriously what their vitality reveals about the limits of formal participatory channels and the changing character of civic and political engagement.

Another important aspect of this project has been the extent to which it has required me to reflect not only on the issue of youth participation, but on my own habits of enquiry and writing. At an early stage in the project, my supervisor observed that she felt my writing was "sanitised", demonstrating a certain detachment which had the effect of smoothing out the human complexity of the research. That observation has stayed with me. In many

respects, it reflects the professional worlds from which I came into this study. Much of my working life has involved writing donor reports, programme assessments, updates, thematic studies, and "deep dives" into specific areas of programme implementation. These are forms of writing that value clarity, neutrality, and usefulness. They are designed to communicate impact across multiple audiences, to demonstrate the results of investments, and to distil lessons in a form that is strategic, accessible, and often necessarily impersonal. The process of enquiry itself, and the positionality of the person carrying it out, are deliberately blanked out. What matters is the result: what was found, what was achieved, what can be learned, and what should be done next.

This professional discipline has shaped not only how I write, but what I have tended to recognise as "good" analysis: orderly, evidence-based, carefully structured, and restrained in tone. The Ed.D. has shown me the limits to these habits when transferred too directly into interpretive social research. In my effort to privilege youth voices, and to explore the deeper meanings and generative mechanisms underlying participation, I sometimes found myself producing prose that was controlled and precise - not reflective of the "messiness" and relational character of the fieldwork.

In that sense, this study has marked a gradual movement in my orientation from practitioner to researcher, or perhaps more accurately, from one understanding of enquiry to another. It has required me to loosen some of the habits of detachment acquired through years of professional reporting and to recognise that, in this kind of research, neutrality can sometimes flatten rather than clarify. The challenge has not been to abandon rigour or discipline, but to allow greater space for uncertainty, reflexivity, and the lived reality of the research process itself. Part of my learning through this doctorate has therefore been to see that research of this nature is not strengthened by removing the researcher and tidying away the process. On the contrary, it often becomes more credible when the relationships, limitations, and interpretive efforts through which knowledge was produced are made more visible.

The learning involved in this project has also allowed me to draw together strands of academic and professional pursuits in a research endeavour which, I hope, is not entirely personal. The people I encountered along the way became important partners in this

research and without their participation, it would have been an entirely different piece of work. Their involvement allowed me to overcome tension-ridden relationships of researcher/researched, outsider/insider, and European/African. Together, we grappled with the challenges of trying to get to the bottom of the questions which youth participation in this context poses. The directions taken, and much of the insight presented in this research, are a result of trying to figure complex issues out together.

Another aspiration in conceiving of this Ed.D study was to produce work of practical value. I am, of course, not the first doctoral student to hope that their research might inform policy or practice, but, from the outset, I have sought to ensure that my findings extend beyond the academic domain. In partnership with IIEC, the local group involved in this research, I have developed a plan to present the findings within the community, and an explicit set of recommendations in a separate policy brief. These initiatives aim to inform relevant policies and programmes focused on youth empowerment, while encouraging administrators to consider new perspectives and actively involve young people more actively in these processes.

Appendices

Annex 1 – Interview Protocol

1. Overview	
Researcher name	Mark Lawler
Supervisor name	Professor Mia Perry
Project title	Young people's political participation in Kenya: inhibiting and encouraging factors.
Project Summary	This project seeks to explore what it means to young people in Kenya to be politically active - the current forms this takes - and what young people believe they achieve through political activity. The project will present case studies of politically active young people in Elgeyo-Marakwet County in the Rift Valley, in the western part of Kenya. Through an in-depth study of the background, experiences, and political activity of these individuals, it will examine the factors that encourage political activity among young people and those that hinder it. In doing so, the study will examine the enabling factors in the wider socio-political environment and the critical blockages to what young people consider meaningful political engagement.
Name of interviewee DOB M/F	
Type of interview	Case Study Participant ☐ Expert (describe) ☐ _____ _____ _____ Other (describe) ☐ _____ _____ _____
Name of location/Google Maps pin	
Date of interview	

Questions

Family:

1. Mother/father
    a. Whereabouts of homestead (rural/urban, distance from nearest village or town, distance from county HQ, distance from primary school/high school attended)
    b. Level of education attained – Mother/Father
    c. Occupation – Mother/Father
2. Siblings
    a. Number/M/F/ages/education levels attained/work experiences

School and work:

3. High School Education
    i. Form 4/KCSE
        a. Subjects/Grade
        b. Extra-curricular activities
            i. Name of activity/club/group
            ii. Frequency of engagement
    ii. Post High School
        a. Course(s) pursued/Level(s) attained:
        b. Extra-curricular activities
4. Work experience
    a. Where have you worked/for how long

Social circle:

5. Hobbies/pastimes/leisure activities
6. Where do you meet your friends?
7. How many friends do you have?
8. How do you know your friends? Neighbours or through school/work/wider community/leisure activities

Political Engagement/Activity/Participation:

9. Are you interested in local (development/governance) issues? Which ones?

10. Do you know the Governor/CEC/MCA/Area MP/Senator/Women's Rep?

11. Do you know what roles each (any?) local leader has/have? Is it important for you to know their respective roles? Why/not?

12. Have you ever engaged with any local leader?

    a. If so, why/on what issue? Was your engagement successful? Why was it successful or unsuccessful?

    b. If you have not, why not?

13. Are you interested in local/national and/or international news? If so, where do you get your local/national/international news? If not, why are you not interested?

14. Are you interested in how local/national leaders manage the ward/sub-county/county/country? If yes, in which level are you most interested/engaged and why? If not interested, why not?

15. Do you have opinions about how local and national leadership should manage the ward/sub-county/county/country? If yes, how do you share your opinions?

16. Are you interested in your opinions influencing others?

17. Are you interested in your opinions being taken into account by leadership?

18. Do have the opportunity to express your opinion? Where? When? How often? As often as you would like?

19. Do you think it is possible for you to influence others with your opinion? If yes, where would this be most likely to happen?

20. Do you express your opinions on political maters on social media?

21. Do you interact with others (other youth) with different opinions on social media?

22. Do you discuss political issues with young people in other (in person) forums?

23. Do you think it is possible for you to influence local and/or national leadership? If yes, where and how could this happen?

24. Have you ever been effective/successful in influencing others (peers)?

25. Have you ever been effective/successful in influencing those in leadership?

26. Have you ever attended an in-person (or virtual) public forum for deliberation organised by a local leader? If so, which one(s)? If not, why not?

27. Do you plan to attend any future public forums organised by local leaders? If yes, why? If no, why not?

28. Have you ever attempted to contribute to a public policy debate/discussion? How?

29. Have you ever made a submission in writing to express your opinion to.local leadership?

30. Do you think it's important that local leaders listen to young people? Why? Why not?

31. Do you think local leaders are open to opinions from/influence of youth? What makes you say they are/aren't?

32. Do you know of (a) case(s) where youth have been successful in influencing local leaders? If yes, why do you think youth were successful in this/those case(s)? If no, why do you think youth have never successfully influenced local leaders?

33. What do youth need to do to be more successful at influencing local leaders?

34. What do local leaders need to do to be more attentive to young people's priorities/reflect the priorities/needs of young people in their actions?

35. What, in your opinion, are the most important provisions of the 2010 Constitution?

36. What do you think "public participation" means?

Annex 2 – Observation Protocol

Project title: Event:	Young people's political participation in Kenya: inhibiting and encouraging factors. Public Participation Forums for FY25/26 ADP

Name of person observing: _____

Name of Ward/location: _____ Date of Event: _____

A. Total number in attendance (**approximately**)? ___ Male? ___ Female? ___ Under 35s? ___ Over 35? ___ Females under 35? ___ PWDs? ___

B. Content of contributions/young people's involvement

Please give as many examples as possible of **issues raised** and whether **young people were involved** in discussing those issues? What did young people **suggest/contribute**? What was the **reaction** from others?

1. Issues raised?
2. Involvement of youth and their suggestions/contributions (what did they say?)
3. Reactions/were people in attendance respecting each other's views (what were reactions to youth in particular)?
4. How many/how long (in time talking) were contributions (by males compared to females and old compared to young etc.):

C. Moderation/management of the event

1. Does it appear that the moderators were organised? Taking notes/recording the session? Were they listening/reacting to contributions? Did they provide clear information and guidance to people on subjects for discussion
2. Were youth, women being given equal time to speak compared to men/older men?
3. Did they promise follow-up/provide feedback? How are the outcomes of the sessions going to be communicated? Have they promised any actions based on the input received?

Annex 3 – Ethics Approval and Research Permissions

1) Summary of University of Glasgow Research Ethics Committee Review process

Date	Stage of review	Main issues raised	Revisions made
04-Mar-24	Initial submission	Submission of ethics application and supporting documents	Application entered academic and administrative review process
02-May-24	First academic and administrative review	Confidentiality and personal data; risks in participant observation; role of local partner organisation; adequacy of participant information and consent materials; data storage, disposal and sharing; treatment of social media data; local permissions before fieldwork	Clarified confidentiality, storage, retention and access arrangements; revised PIS and consent forms; clarified withdrawal procedures; expanded explanation of IIEC's role; aligned DMP and consent provisions; removed routine retention of screenshots of social media posts; clarified supervisor access; completed information security training
31-May-24	Second review	Need to justify county-level permission in addition to national licence; further clarification on anonymisation, verbatim quotation, group-admin consent, and unit of observation/analysis for online data	Clarified that relevant county authorities would be informed and approval sought for observation in county-organised forums; confirmed that consent would be sought from both group admin and individual author where verbatim quotation was proposed; clarified treatment of online group observation
27-Jun-24	Third review	Remaining confidentiality issues concerning verbatim quotation from private groups; need for tailored PIS for social media authors/admins; correction of public-domain assumption regarding private groups	Produced separate participant information sheet for social media contexts; clarified need for notification at group level and consent at individual level; corrected treatment of private groups; added warning regarding traceability of verbatim posts through search tools

2) University of Glasgow Research Ethics Committee Approval

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

16 July 2024

Dear Mark Lawler

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Project Title: Young people's political participation in Kenya: inhibiting and encouraging factors.

Application Number: 400230180

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: 16/07/2024
- Project end date: 30/09/2025
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences: socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: (https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf)
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The **Request for Amendments to an Approved Application** form should be used: https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/

Provided on behalf of: College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
The University of Glasgow
socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk

College of Social Sciences
University of Glasgow
Glasgow G12 8QF

3) Appointment as Affiliate to University of Nairobi

UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

OFFICE OF DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR

(RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND ENTERPRISE)

P.O. Box 30197-00100, G.P.O.
Nairobi, Kenya
Website: https://uonresearch.uonbi.ac.ke

Telephone: 020 491 3164
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Our Ref: UON/CA/RIE/1/13/Vol.VII

May 20, 2024

Mr. Mark Lawler
Faculty of Education
University of Glasgow
SCOTLAND
Email: m.lawler.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Dear Mr. Lawler

APPOINTMENT AS A RESEARCH AFFILIATE

I am pleased to inform you that your request for appointment as a Research Affiliate under the project **"Young people's political participation in Kenya: inhibiting and encouraging factors"** to be undertaken in the Department of Economics and Development Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Nairobi has been approved. This appointment is tenable for a period of **twelve (12) months** with effect from May 17, 2024 upto May 16, 2025.

Please note that the approval is given on the following conditions:

1. That you undertake to deposit two copies of your research findings with the Director, Library and Information Services and Department of Department of Economics and Development Studies before your departure;

2. That the appointment is offered on the understanding that you have made your own arrangements regarding clearance from the National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation (NACOSTI) to conduct research in Kenya. Obtain more details and apply for the research permit on the NACOSTI website (http://www.nacosti.go.ke/);

3. That you will abide by the University of Nairobi Intellectual Property Policy Acceptance Agreement;

4. That you pay to this University affiliation fees of KES 20,000/= (Twenty Department of Economics and Development Studies, Thousand Shillings Only), before the appointment becomes effective. The University charges affiliation fee as indicated below:
   0 – 3 months KES 5,000/=
   3 – 6 months KES 10,000/=
   6 – 12 months KES 20,000/=

5. That you will meet your medical and housing needs;

6. That you fulfill any other conditions and requirements that the Faculty may impose on you as their Research Affiliate including participation in staff seminars;

If you accept the appointment on these terms, please sign and return the following documents to the undersigned:

a) Signed copy of this letter and payment of receipt
b) The Intellectual Property Policy Acceptance Agreement (IPPAA)

PROF. M. JESANG HUTCHINSON
DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR
(RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND ENTERPRISE)
AND
PROFESSOR OF HORTICULTURE

I *(Name of Research Affiliate)* Mark Lawler **accept the appointment on the terms of this letter**

Signature: _____ **Date:** 20/05/2024
Research Affiliate

Copy To: Vice-Chancellor
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic Affairs)
Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Chairman, Department of Economics and Development Studies
Director, Library and Information Services

SKB/cg

4) Research License from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI)

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Ref No: **335645**

Date of Issue: **01/August/2024**

RESEARCH LICENSE

This is to Certify that Mr.. Mark Lawler of University of Glasgow, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Elgeyo-Marakwet on the topic: Young people's political participation in Kenya: inhibiting and encouraging factors. for the period ending : 01/August/2025.

License No: **NACOSTI/P/24/38628**

Applicant Identification Number

Director General
NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Verification QR Code

NOTE: This is a computer generated License. To verify the authenticity of this document, Scan the QR Code using QR scanner application.

See overleaf for conditions

THE SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION ACT, 2013 (Rev. 2014)

Legal Notice No. 108: The Science, Technology and Innovation (Research Licensing) Regulations, 2014

The National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation, hereafter referred to as the Commission, was the established under the Science, Technology and Innovation Act 2013 (Revised 2014) herein after referred to as the Act. The objective of the Commission shall be to regulate and assure quality in the science, technology and innovation sector and advise the Government in matters related thereto.

CONDITIONS OF THE RESEARCH LICENSE

1. The License is granted subject to provisions of the Constitution of Kenya, the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, and other relevant laws, policies and regulations. Accordingly, the licensee shall adhere to such procedures, standards, code of ethics and guidelines as may be prescribed by regulations made under the Act, or prescribed by provisions of International treaties of which Kenya is a signatory to
2. The research and its related activities as well as outcomes shall be beneficial to the country and shall not in any way;
    i. Endanger national security
    ii. Adversely affect the lives of Kenyans
    iii. Be in contravention of Kenya's international obligations including Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN).
    iv. Result in exploitation of intellectual property rights of communities in Kenya
    v. Adversely affect the environment
    vi. Adversely affect the rights of communities
    vii. Endanger public safety and national cohesion
    viii. Plagiarize someone else's work
3. The License is valid for the proposed research, location and specified period.
4. The license any rights thereunder are non-transferable
5. The Commission reserves the right to cancel the research at any time during the research period if in the opinion of the Commission the research is not implemented in conformity with the provisions of the Act or any other written law.
6. The Licensee shall inform the relevant County Director of Education, County Commissioner and County Governor before commencement of the research.
7. Excavation, filming, movement, and collection of specimens are subject to further necessary clearance from relevant Government Agencies.
8. The License does not give authority to transfer research materials.
9. The Commission may monitor and evaluate the licensed research project for the purpose of assessing and evaluating compliance with the conditions of the License.
10. The Licensee shall submit one hard copy, and upload a soft copy of their final report (thesis) onto a platform designated by the Commission within one year of completion of the research.
11. The Commission reserves the right to modify the conditions of the License including cancellation without prior notice.
12. Research, findings and information regarding research systems shall be stored or disseminated, utilized or applied in such a manner as may be prescribed by the Commission from time to time.
13. The Licensee shall disclose to the Commission, the relevant Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee, and the relevant national agencies any inventions and discoveries that are of National strategic importance.
14. The Commission shall have powers to acquire from any person the right in, or to, any scientific innovation, invention or patent of strategic importance to the country.
15. Relevant Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee shall monitor and evaluate the research periodically, and make a report of its findings to the Commission for necessary action.

National Commission for Science, Technology and
Innovation(NACOSTI),
Off Waiyaki Way, Upper Kabete,
P. O. Box 30623 - 00100 Nairobi, KENYA
Telephone: 020 4007000, 0713788787, 0735404245
E-mail: dg@nacosti.go.ke
Website: www.nacosti.go.ke

5) Letter from County Commissioner, Elgeyo-Marakwet County

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
MINISTRY OF INTERIOR AND NATIONAL ADMINISTRATION
State Department for Internal Security and National Administration

Telephone: (053) 42007
Fax : (053) 42289
E-mail: ccelgeyomarakwet@yahoo.com
ccelgeyomarakwet@gmail.com
When replying please quote

COUNTY COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE,
ELGEYO-MARAKWET COUNTY,
P.O. BOX 200-30700
ITEN

PUB/CC/ 24/2 VOL.IV/06

2nd October, 2024

Ref.....

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION

MR. MARK LAWLER

This is to confirm that the above named person has been authorized to carry out research on ***"Young people's political participation in Kenya: inhibiting and encouraging factors in Elgeyo Marakwet County "****for the period ending 1st August, 2025*

Please accord him the necessary assistance.

COUNTY COMMISSIONER
ELGEYO MARAKWET COUNTY

John Korir,
COUNTY COMMISSIONER
ELGEYO MARAKWET COUNTY.

CC

All Deputy County Commissioners,
ELGEYO MARAKWET COUNTY.

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