County governments are becoming more transparent; does this automatically translate into a more informed citizenry?

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Introduction

A report recently launched by the International Budget Partnership Kenya (IBPK) on County Budget Transparency reveals that county governments are becoming more transparent.¹ The County Budget Transparency Survey is a subnational survey collaboratively undertaken by the International Budget Partnership Kenya with more than 24 budget facilitators spread across 36 counties in Kenya. The survey assesses the budget information publicly available on the official county Executive and Assembly websites and the level of comprehensiveness of specific information contained in the published budget documents. According to the report, the average county transparency index (score) was 41 out of 100 points, an improvement from 33 and 35 out of 100 points in CBTS 2020 and 2021, respectively.

Even as the county governments show efforts to publish more budget information as required by the Public Finance Management Act, 2012 and the subsequent legislation, the question remains, is this translating to a more informed citizenry and better services?

Budget transparency for who?

Delivering a more citizen-focused governmental service requires county and national governments to engage the public in the decisions regarding the allocation of resources, taxation and on what services are availed and delivered from the taxes collected. There is a growing demand for inclusion by citizens and the quality of the information the government provides for engagement. As such, the county governments need to consistently and timely publish budget information which is accurate and understandable by the citizens. On the government side, transparency is important for accountability and demonstrating how resources are spent to avail services that meet the developmental needs of the people. Oversight and audit institutions, such as the county assemblies and the public, also need the information to play their key role effectively.

According to CBTS 2022, 33 out of 47 counties improved their transparency score compared to 24 out of 47 counties that improved budget transparency in 2021. Remarkably, three Counties (Kwale, Lamu and Taita Taveta) in Jumuiya ya Kaunti za Pwani (JKP) Economic bloc were among the most improved counties compared to 2021. On average, the region scored 52 out of 100 points on the transparency score in CBTS 2022, an improvement from 23 out of 100 points in CBTS 2021.

¹ County Budget Transparency Survey 2022 Report
Despite this improvement in the Coastal counties, the report further reveals that 40 percent of budget documents remain unpublished, while across the 47 counties, 49 percent remain unpublished. This is to show that, despite the efforts by counties to publish budget information, citizens still find challenges in engaging in some decisions at some point in the budget cycle. Evidence shows that citizens are more likely to engage in the budget’s formulation and approval stages than the implementation and audit stages. The public needs to access budget implementation reports to track service delivery. However, quarterly implementation reports remain the least published budget documents.

At this point, we want to ask the question, what information does the public need and at what stage? Financial results or performance/non-financial information? Can citizens link how funds allocated relate to the services they receive? Can citizens locate and connect the priorities they suggested during formulation in the implementation stage?

Is Budget transparency improving the level of citizen engagement?

The contents of the information provided by counties remain essential in helping the citizens engage in key decisions. Availing of the information itself is not enough, and there is a need to go the extra mile to ensure that the information provided makes sense to the citizens and that they can engage. For instance, why would a citizen need information on revenue, expenditure, non-financial targets and performance, capital projects, priorities, and public participation?

Suppose you have ever attended a public participation forum on budgets in government-led spaces. In that case, you must have noticed more emphasis on reading the billions and millions allocated to a particular department but less discussion on what those billions and millions will translate into in terms of services. The huge figures and digits might not make sense to most of us who have not handled billions. Still, it would make more sense to say that we have allocated, for instance, x shillings to the health department, and part of the money will pay for salaries, maintenance of health facilities, purchase of drugs, fuel ambulances, pay electricity and equip maternity wards. Notably, it is valuable to tell the same citizens that out of Kshs during implementation. X shillings allocated, we could not equip a maternity wing because of challenges that necessitated changes in the budget. This makes citizens understand some complex processes and challenges impeding or delaying expected services. Providing such information not only sparks public deliberation but also makes the citizen understand the government processes. Too much to ask?

CBTS 2022 has revealed that county governments avail 68 points of information on priorities, 59 points on revenue, 38 points on capital projects, 41 points on non-financial information and 10 points out of 100 points on feedback on public participation.'

Documenting feedback on public participation is still a glaring challenge that the counties must address. We must ask whether the governments are dedicating any resources towards public participation and investing in the capacity of the citizens to engage in policy discussions. According to the constitution of Kenya, the fourth schedule, part two, citizen engagement, is one of the key
functions of county governments. Intentional capacity building of public members to engage and influence the decision has remained at the periphery of the government’s agenda. Besides focusing on transparency, data integrity and accounting standards, the county governments need to bridge the missing link of collaboration and proactive engagement.

Conclusion

Budget transparency is particularly important, but it does not necessarily result in citizen engagement or a more informed citizenry. County governments are making efforts, and that is good. Still, there is more room for improvement and for striking a good balance between availing comprehensive information, on time, building the citizen’s capacity and documenting how public inputs influence the priorities and final decisions.

On whether it is possible, yes, it is because there are peer counties which have demonstrated best practices on the same, and they can exchange notes for improvement. Finally, no one has ever harvested where they have never invested, and counties need to invest more resources in public engagement and capacity building!
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