



Active and engaged?

Kenyans' views and experiences on citizen participation

1. Introduction

Active and engaged citizens form the bedrock of democracy. They can take steps to find out what their government is doing in their name and can organise themselves to hold the government to account – making it more difficult for corruption or wasteful spending to take place and more likely that it will be challenged when it does.

There are challenges to this, of course. The reality is that most people are busy with their work, family and social lives and may not always be able to spend time following up on government. Social constraints – age and gender norms, for example – can affect who is willing to engage. In some cases, there are citizens who have excluded themselves from political matters due to distrust of political institutions and politicians. It is not surprising

that there are many in government who would prefer to be able to get on with their work without worrying about citizen participation, either because they have something to hide or just because participation takes time and can slow things down.

This research brief presents data on Kenyan citizens' views on participation and their experiences of engaging with the government. How do they define citizen participation? How many participate in public meetings, and what stops them from doing more? In what other ways do citizens make their voices heard, and do they think leaders listen?

Data for this brief comes from Twaweza's flagship Sauti za Wananchi, which is a nationally representative, high-frequency

- 1 For example, see <http://www.imf.org/en/publications/fm/issues/2017/10/05/fiscal-monitor-october-2017>
- 2 See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=KE-TZ-UG>

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Sauti za Wananchi



mobile phone panel survey. Information on the overall methodology is available at www.twaweza.org/sauti. For this brief, data were collected from 1,680 respondents from Kenya's Sauti za Wananchi panel in the twenty-second round of calls to the panel, conducted between July 14 and August 8, 2018. The poll has +/-2.4% margin of error at 95% confidence level.

The key insights are:

- Citizens see citizen participation in government mainly as attending meetings and contributing to decision-making
- 4 out of 10 citizens attended at least one public meeting in the past 12 months
- The most commonly discussed topic at public meetings is water
- Getting together with others to discuss or raise issues are the two most common forms of citizen action
- 1 out of 8 citizens have ever participated in a demonstration or protest, and twice as many are likely to do so at some point
- Most citizens say it is not easy meet their county leaders or influence county decision making
- Most citizens say those in authority at national level do not take the opinion of ordinary Kenyans into account when making decisions
- 7 out of 8 citizens say political problems in the country can only be solved by working together with others

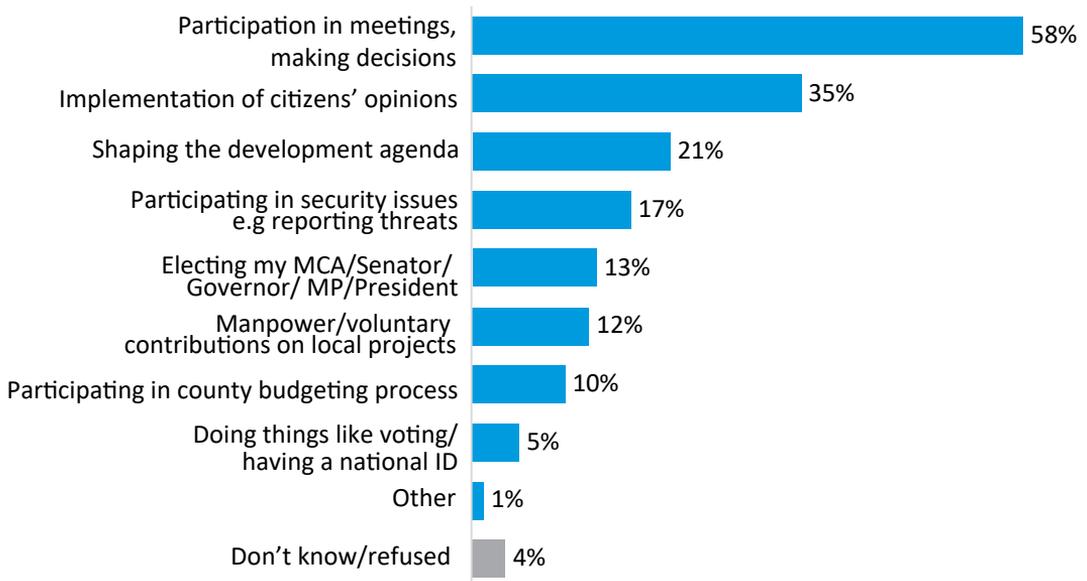
2. Seven Insights about citizen participation in Kenya

Insight 1: Citizens see participation as attending decision-making meetings

More than half of citizens (58%) define participation in government as attending meetings and making decisions at those meetings. This is the most popular definition of citizen participation by some way. Significant numbers also define participation as implementation of citizens' views by government (35%), citizens shaping the development agenda (21%), or assisting the authorities with security matters (17%).

One out of ten citizens (13%) see electing their MCA, Senator, Governor, Member of Parliament and President as a key aspect of citizen participation, and a similar number (12%) focus on citizens making contributions – financial or manpower – to local development projects.

Figure 1: What does citizen participation in government mean to you?¹
(multiple responses permitted)



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

Insight 2: 4 out of 10 citizens attended at least one public meeting in the past year

Four out of ten citizens (41%) attended at least one public meeting in the past 12 months, excluding meetings related to religious activities. On average citizens have attended one meeting in the past year.

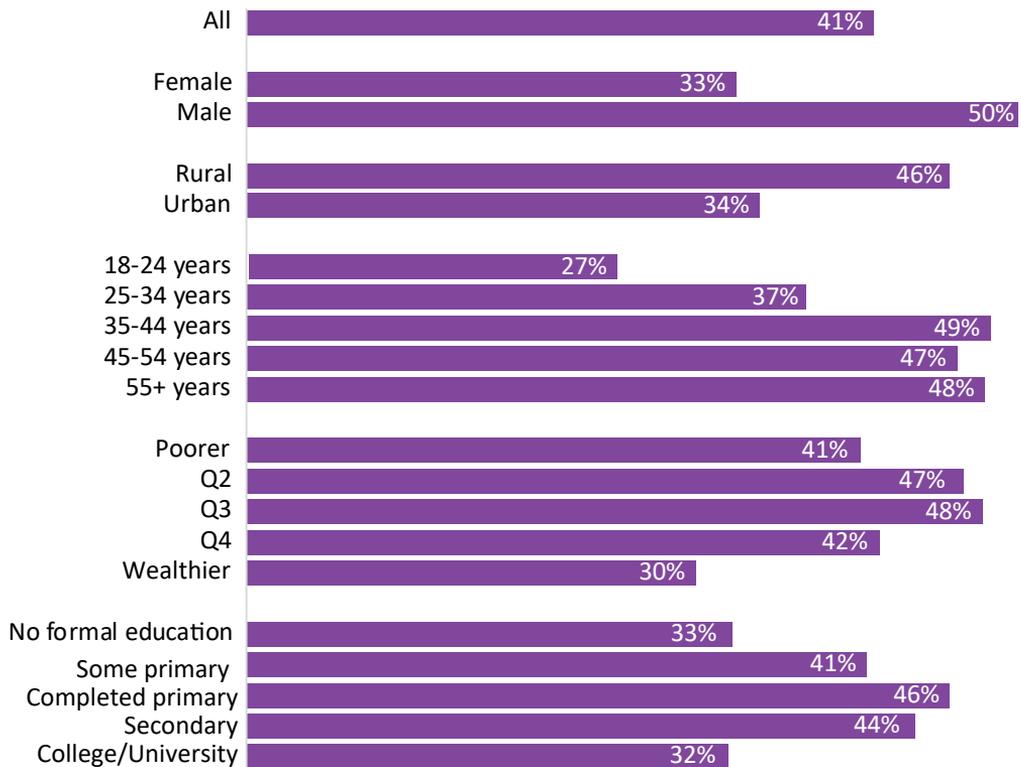
Men (50%) are more likely than women (33%) to have attended such a meeting. Those in rural areas (46%) are more likely than those in urban areas (34%) to have attended a public meeting, and older citizens (47-49%) are more likely than the young (27%) to have done so.

Attendance at meetings is also less common among both wealthier citizens (30%) and poorer citizens (41%) compared to those with an average income (48%). Similarly, those with no education (33%) and those with higher education (32%) are less likely to have attended a public meeting than those who have completed primary education (46%).

Several factors may be at play in these findings. Wealthier and better-educated citizens may have other ways of making their voice heard, and/or may lack the time to attend public meetings. Poorer citizens and less well-educated citizens may be more disengaged and disaffected or may be face pressures of time and distance that make it more difficult for them to attend.

¹ Percentages in charts may not add up to 100% due to rounding

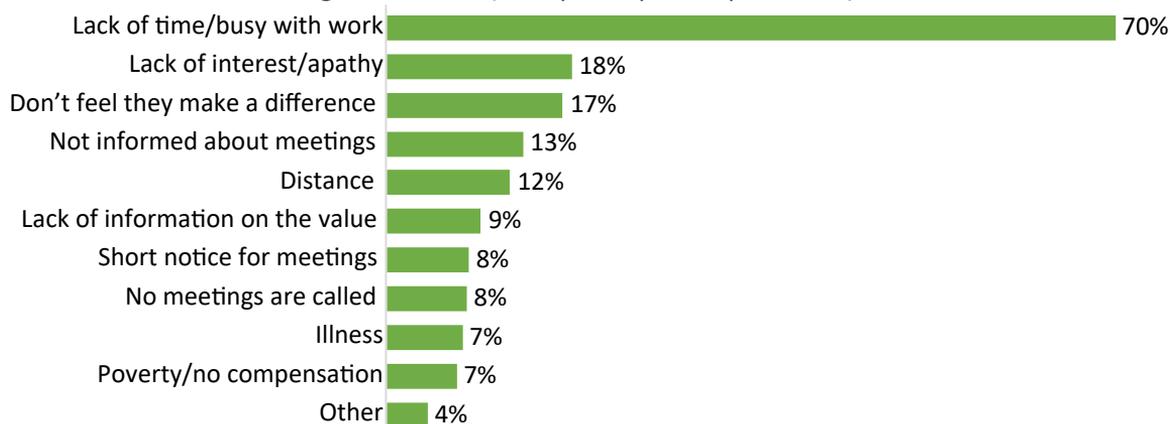
Figure 2: In the last 12 months, did you attend any public meeting, a meeting that was open to all citizens in the area but not related to religious activities?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

The main reasons given for not attending public meetings are time constraints (39%), and work responsibilities (31%). This is followed by two related issues: lack of interest (18%) and a feeling that attending would not achieve anything (17%).

Figure 3: What stops people in your area from attending public participation forums organized by the county government? (multiple responses permitted)

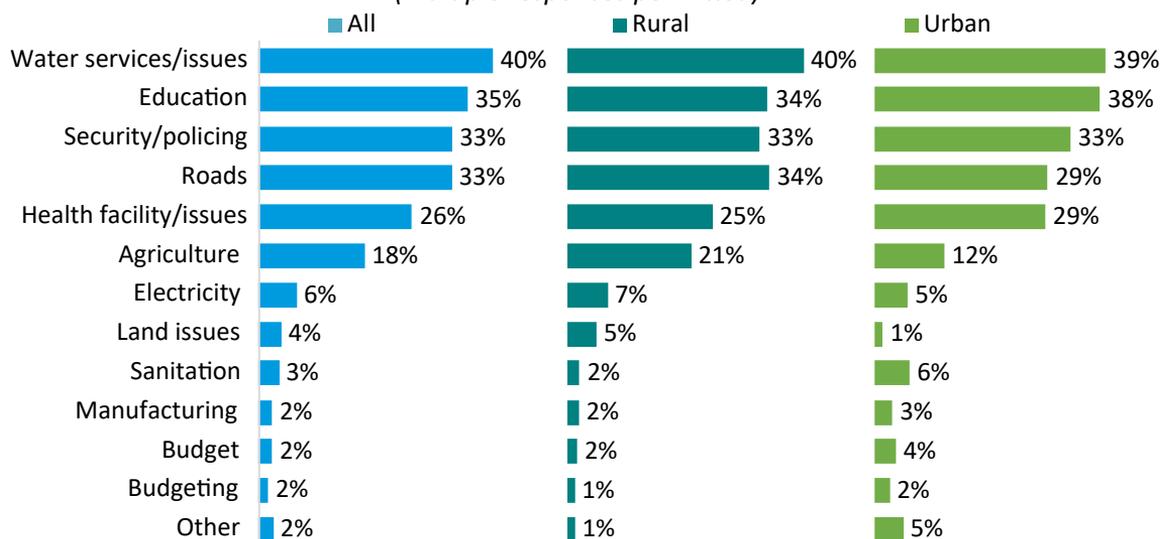


Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

Insight 3: The most commonly discussed topic at public meetings is water

Four out of ten citizens (40%) who attended at least one meeting in the past 12 months report that water services or other water issues were discussed at the meeting, more than any other topic. Other topics discussed include education (35%), security and policing (33%), roads (33%), health facilities and issues (26%) and agriculture (18%). The issues discussed are very similar in urban and rural areas.

Figure 4: During those public meetings, which development projects or issues were discussed? (multiple responses permitted)



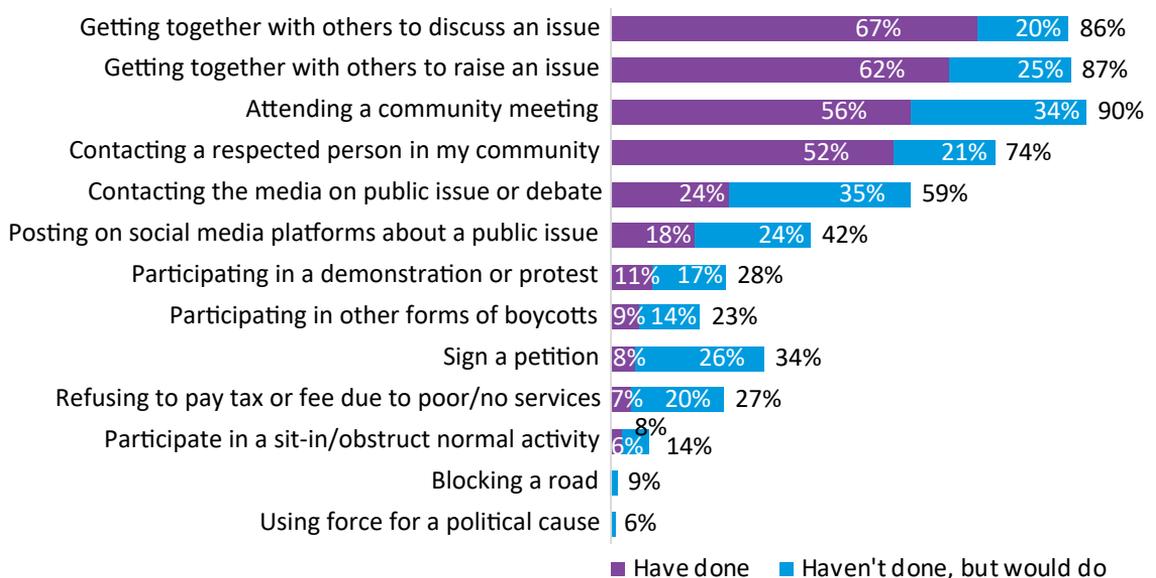
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018);
Base: those who attended at least one meeting in past 12 months (n=690)

Insight 4: Getting together with others to discuss or raise issues are the two most common forms of citizen action

Two out of three citizens (67%) have got together with others to discuss an issue in the past year, and almost as many (62%) have joined with others to bring an issue to the attention of the authorities, more than any other actions. More than half have attended community meetings (56%) or contacted a respected person in their community (52%).

More adversarial forms of raising voices are less popular, including participating in a demonstration or protest (11%), other forms of boycott (9%), refusing to pay a tax or fee (7%), or sit-ins (6%).

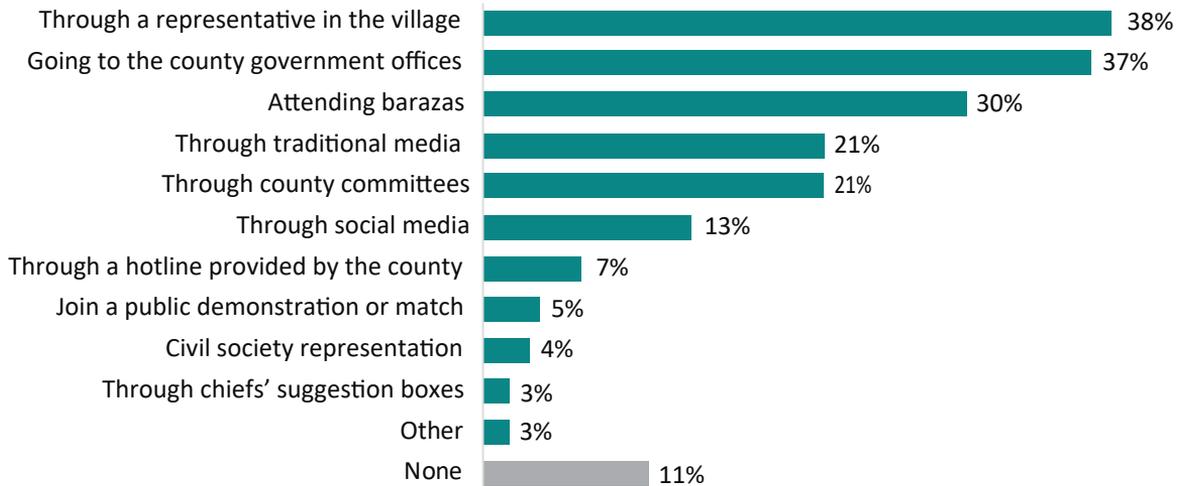
Figure 5: Have you done any of these things during the past year? Or would you, if you had the chance?



Source: Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

Citizens appear to be unclear as to the best way to express their needs to government; no single channel is cited by more than four out of ten citizens. The most widely cited methods are going through a representative at village level (38%) and going through county government offices (37%), followed by attending barazas (meetings called by chiefs/assistant chiefs) (30%).

Figure 6: Can you tell me up to three ways available to you, as a citizen, to express your needs to the county government?
(multiple responses permitted)



Source: Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

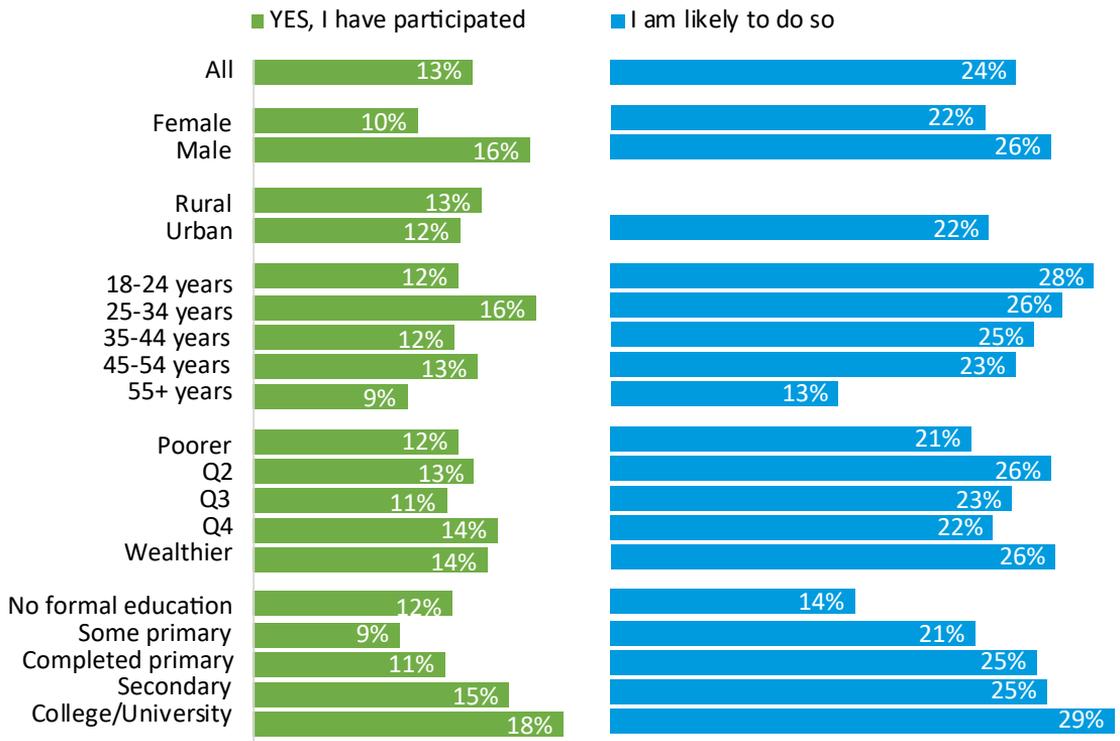
Insight 5: 1 out of 8 citizens have ever participated in a demonstration or protest, and twice as many are likely to do so at some point

One out of eight citizens (14%) say they have ever participated in a demonstration or protest, but a higher number (24%) say they are likely to do so in the future.

Men (16%) are more likely than women (10%) to have participated in a demonstration, and those with higher levels of education (18%) are more likely to have done so than those with lower levels (9-12%). There is no difference between those in urban and rural areas, or between the rich and the poor.

When it comes to willingness to protest in the future, the young (28%) and the well-educated (29%) are more likely to say they will do so than older citizens (13%) or those with no formal education (14%). Differences between men and women, different income groups and residents of rural and urban areas are very small.

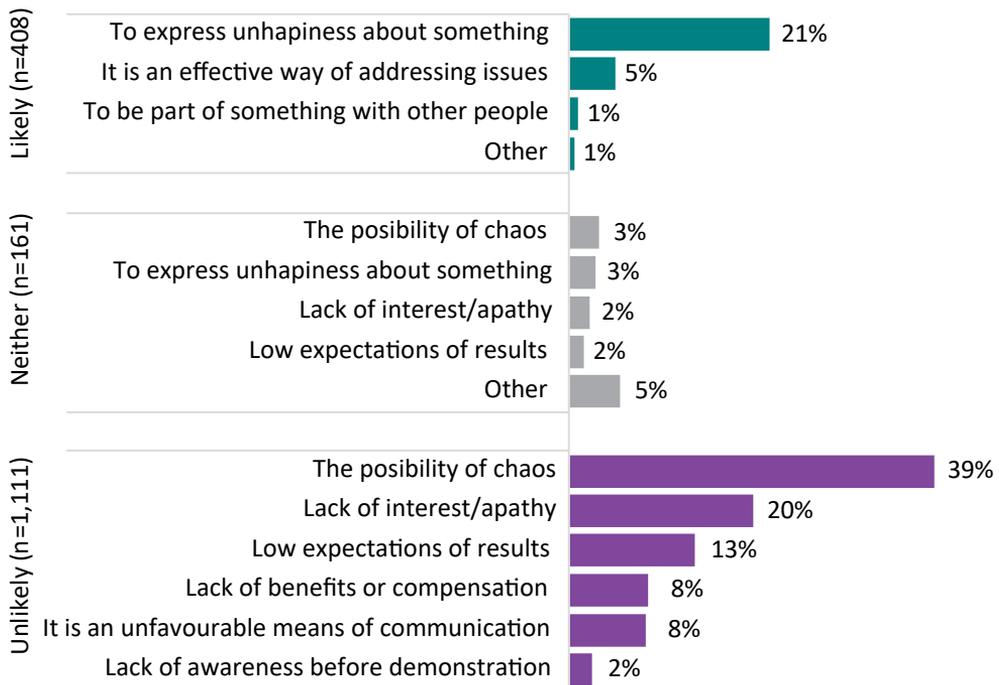
**Figure 7: Have you ever participated in a demonstration/protest?
How likely are you to do so, on an issue that does not please you?**



Source: Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

The common explanation given for those who are likely to participate in a future public demonstration is simply to express unhappiness about something (21%). The most common reason for not wanting to join a demonstration is the possibility of chaos (39%), followed by a lack of interest (20%) and low expectations of success (13%).

Figure 8: Why are you likely/unlikely to participate in a public demonstration?
(multiple responses permitted)



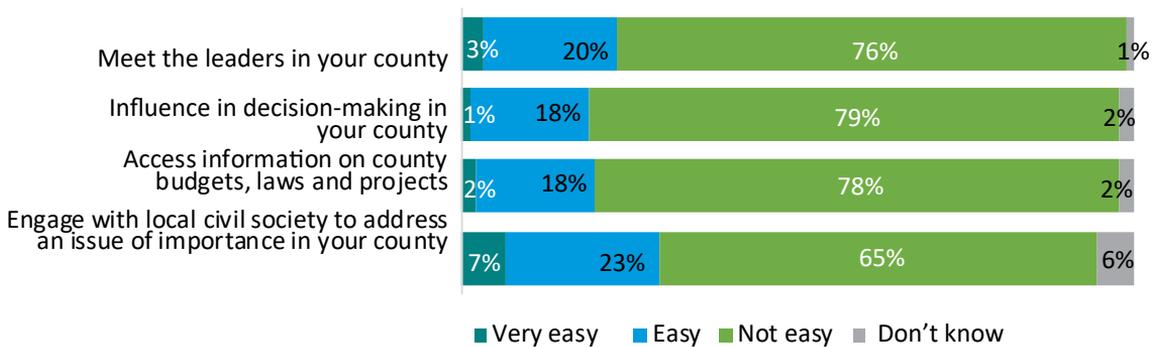
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

Insight 6: Most citizens say it is not easy meet their county leaders or influence county decision making

Three out of four citizens (76%) say it is not easy to meet the leaders of their county, and a similar number (79%) say it is not easy to influence decision-making in their county.

Most citizens also say that it is not easy to access information on county budgets, laws and projects (78%) or to engage with local civil society (65%).

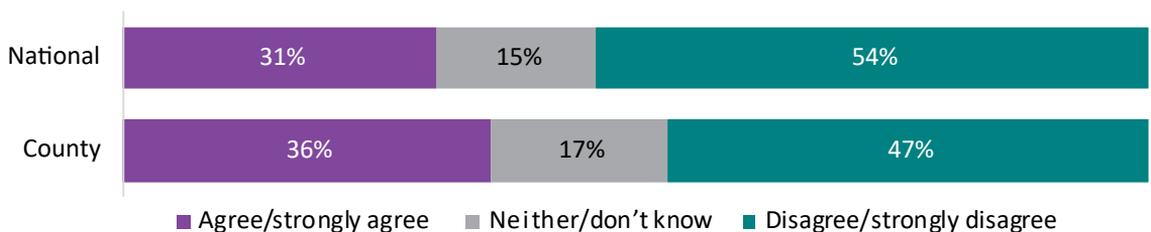
Figure 9: How easy is it to...?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

Over half of citizens (54%) say those in authority at national level do not take the opinion of ordinary Kenyans into account when making decisions. Citizens are a little more confident in county leaders: slightly fewer (47%) say those in authority at county level do not take the opinion of ordinary Kenyans into account in decision making.

Figure 10: Do you agree or disagree that those in authority at national/county level take the opinion of ordinary Kenyans into account when making decisions?



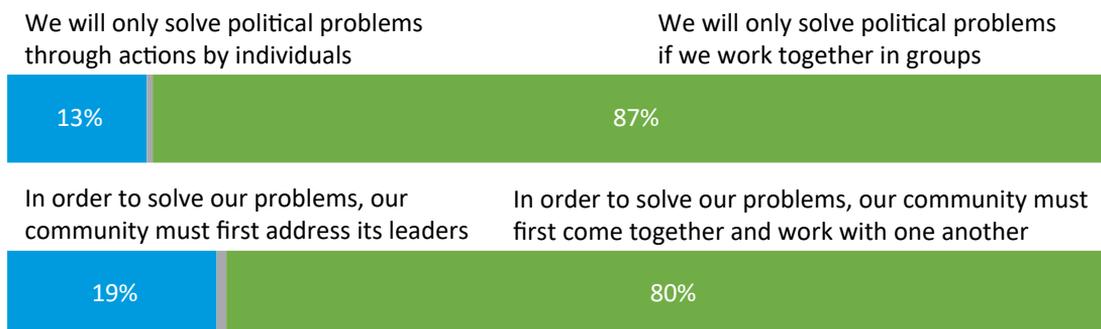
Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

Insight 7: 7 out of 8 citizens say we will only solve political problems by working together with others

A clear majority of Kenyans (87%) say we will only solve political problems if we work together in groups, preferring this statement to the alternative, that we will only solve political problems through the actions of individuals (13%).

Similarly, a minority of citizens (19%) say that in order to solve problems, communities must first address their leaders. The majority (80%) prefer the alternative, that in order to solve problems, the community must first come together and work with one another.

Figure 11: Of each pair of statements, which comes closest to your opinion?



Source: *Sauti za Wananchi* Mobile Phone Survey, Round 22 (July 14 to August 8, 2018; n=1,680)

3. Conclusions

Anyone who follows Kenyan social media would agree that many citizens do not hold back when it comes to expressing their opinions online. But those who engage on social media are only a small and unrepresentative group. And this brief finds that for the majority of citizens, speaking out on social media is something they do rarely or never: just one out of five has done so in the past year.

In some ways, Kenyans do make their voices heard: a majority have, in the past year, gotten together with others to bring an issue to wider attention or to discuss issues, which can be a first step towards raising an issue further. But they shy away from more actively adversarial approaches: only small numbers have participated in a demonstration or boycott, or even signed a petition.

When it comes to protests, three very different reasons for this disinclination are given. First, some fear the potential chaos that may result. Second, some just don't feel strongly enough about any issues to make them want to protest. And third, some don't think demonstrating makes any difference. This final reason perhaps relates to some other findings of this brief – that those in authority at both national and county level don't take ordinary Kenyans' views into account, and that it is not easy to meet county leaders or to influence their decisions.

This brief also has interesting findings about a much less confrontational way of making your voice heard – attending meetings - which citizens say is key to their conceptualisation of citizen participation. Fewer than half of citizens have attended a public meeting in the past year, with two main sets of reasons for not doing so. Many are too busy and others are uninterested or think attending the meeting would not achieve anything.

This has important implications for how the public is involved in government decision making. Citizens see public meetings as the main form of participation, but also as one that they either



don't have the time for or can't see the point of engaging with.

Either such meetings need to be made more meaningful – giving citizens real opportunities to influence important decisions to an extent that they don't currently feel is the case. Or a different mechanism, other than public meetings, for enabling citizens to influence decisions will need to be found. Technology may be able to provide some parts of the solution to this issue, though care would be needed to ensure that it doesn't further exclude those who are most disadvantaged.

Providing citizens with meaningful opportunities to influence government is key to making citizen participation more common and more substantive. This won't happen without those in government being willing to give away some of their power. But power is not often conceded voluntarily. Kenyan leaders would do well to satisfy citizens' desires to participate so that they reduce the risk of excluding citizens to the extent that more confrontational approaches begin to seem like the only option for citizens to make their voices heard.