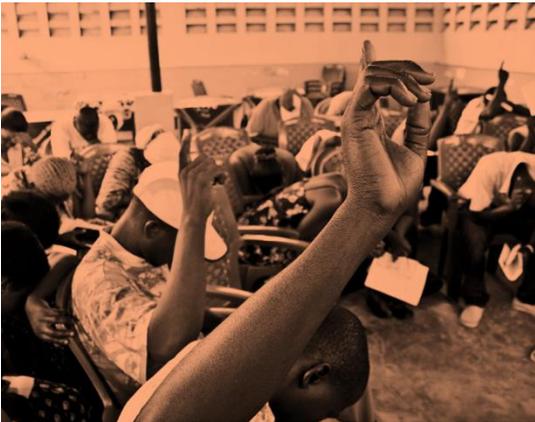


***Sauti za Wananchi* formative study:**
Understanding the Kenyan public opinion polling landscape





Context

Rationale and objectives of the study

Kenya has a long history of opinion polling dating back to the first decade of independence when a 261-sample survey of voters in Central Nyanza produced a result reasonably similar in overall terms to the result of the election that followed (Kiage and Owino, 2010). Since then, opinion polling has grown as an industry, while also adapting and responding to the changing political climate in the country. As a result, issues around the veracity, credibility, objectivity, funding, timing, usefulness and objectivity of opinion polls have been the subject of intense public debates, drawing in the media, politicians, experts and citizens. In this context, Twaweza East Africa planned to launch the *Sauti za Wananchi* survey in Kenya, as an independent, rigorous and regular poll that provides citizen feedback on critical emerging issues. It was modelled on three years of conducting the same in Tanzania. *Sauti za Wananchi* in Kenya also aims to provide data that communicates the ‘pulse of the nation’ to policy makers, media, and other opinion-leaders, on issues that are important and close to the hearts of the citizens.

Prior to the launch of *Sauti za Wananchi* in Kenya, Twaweza carried out a study to examine the Kenyan polling market, and to establish the potential of *Sauti za Wananchi* as a platform for regular citizen feedback on critical emerging issues in Kenya. This report highlights the key findings of this formative study.

The overarching study objectives were to:

1. Map out the key players, information and knowledge brokers and intermediaries that are critical in terms of influencing the use of opinion poll data in decision making.
2. Explore the perceptions and views of opinion makers, data intermediaries and policy makers on citizen opinion polls, including
3. Are there any policies, guidelines and procedures especially within government (National and County) that seek to mainstream opinion polls into decision making.
4. To what extent do opinion polls contribute to public dialogue, and policy and decision making in Kenya currently.
5. Investigate the current practices, beliefs, barriers, and motivations in regards to the use of opinion polls data in governance, policy and decision making.

In the longer run – over a period of two years – we want to understand whether *Sauti za Wananchi*, as a representation of the voices of Kenyan citizens, injects evidence into public (media) debate and/or policy planning, as well as promotes the government’s own use of independent data as an assessment of its own performance.

Methods

Qualitative methods were used in this study, starting with desk review of existing literature and policies on the Kenyan polling environment. Second, a stakeholder mapping exercise was conducted, to identify the critical actors and intermediaries that may have a strong influence on the use of data in governance and policy making. Third, in-depth interviews (IDIs) were carried out with carefully selected representatives of the groups of relevant key actors in the opinion polling landscape. Interviews were based on a thematic guide, allowing for open-ended discussion. A total of 21 key informants were interviewed in this study, between December 2015 and January 2016. Data were analysed through thematic analysis, based on the identified themes of inquiry.

Main results

1) Description of the opinion polling environment in Kenya

- a) There is no legislation or policy that explicitly addresses the set up or conduct of opinion polls or research in general in Kenya. However, the publication of all opinion polls related to elections are regulated by the *Publication of Electoral Opinion Polls Act of 2012*, which mostly focuses on three key areas:
 - **Publication of polls:** The Act regulate or control the conduct of opinion polls at all rather, it targets those who publish or cause the publication of results of an electoral opinion poll during an electoral period.
 - **The essential disclosures:** It outlines the facts that must be public made by any person who publishes the results of an electoral opinion poll during an electoral period and any other person who transmits those results to the public within twenty-four hours after they are first published.
 - **Timing of opinion polls release:** The act prohibits publication of the results of any electoral opinion poll on the day of the election or during the five days immediately preceding an election.
- b) Two companies best known for releasing regular opinion polls are Ipsos and Infotrak. These polling firms carry out polls on key governance issues (including political opinion polls), and on matters of social interest.
- c) Media are identified as the primary intermediary between opinion polls producers and consumers; they are the major channel through which ordinary citizens and those in authority receive information about and from opinion polls. Where the internet is widely accessible, social media channels are also increasingly seen as important and visible ways of sharing poll information.

2) Policy makers' and actors' knowledge and attitudes on opinion polls

- a) Knowledge of opinion polls is varied; actors in civil society, development organizations and academia are more conversant with the science of opinion polling than those in government and media.
- b) There is consensus that opinion polls are important. This is however premised on the condition that the polls are carried out professionally and objectively.
- c) Polls on social issues are considered more trustworthy than those on political personality and party popularity.
- d) International development organisations, civil society organisations and private sector players purchase opinion polling more frequently than the government. However, due to concerns about the credibility of existing polls, many prefer commissioning their own studies where they have control/oversight of the methodological veracity.

3) Concerns about opinion polling in Kenya

Credibility concerns abound within the opinion polling landscape, especially when polls touch on political and electoral issues.

- a) Polling companies and their individual heads are associated with different politicians. There are those that are considered pro-government or pro-opposition and most stakeholders think political opinion polls generally are politically and financially controlled and compromised. This perception has dented the credibility of all polls.
- a) There are concerns about the capacity and the level of expertise within the private companies that conduct opinion polls, translating into concerns about the methodological parameters and over the integrity of institutions conducting the polls. This has led to a loss of trust in the findings.
- b) The fact that most known polls are about political popularity has created a strong association of polls with elections and this appears to have a negative impact on how people perceive polls and polling companies, even when the polls relate to important policy or governance issues.

4) Opinion polls and public participation in governance and public policy making

- a) The methods through which citizens can participate in governance remain unclear generally in Kenya and public opinion polls are not considered a platform for public participation by those in governance and policy circles.
- b) There are generally no guidelines that compel policy makers to use public opinion in their decisions. However, there is some evidence that public opinion has influence (mostly indirectly) on internal decisions within government and in policy making. Policy makers are often interested in knowing what citizens are saying about the policies they are making or implementing. This assertion is further supported by pollsters themselves who said government and policy makers have commissioned some polls in the past when there was an important policy discussion in the country.

5) Key limitations to the use of opinion polls in policymaking.

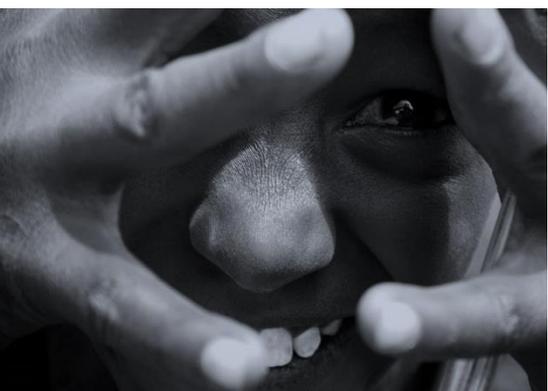
Informants in government agencies reported that though they were required constitutionally to incorporate public opinion into policy-making and planning, they face barriers to doing so.

- Government respondents consider the general population to be a largely uninformed, therefore lacking in capacity to address or articulate issues related to policy appropriately. Thus, the feedback on policy issues obtained from citizens is not considered to be particularly useful or relevant.
- There is no clarity on what public participation platforms currently exist. Even when there have been opportunities for public participation such as through the 'budget participation day' at County level, these events have no measurement framework and are ineffective in reaching the targeted stakeholders including ordinary citizens.
- The constitution mandates facilitating public feedback and involvement in policy planning, but is vague on the mechanisms for this, so it is unclear whether opinion polls fit the bill.
- Government officials believe that some policies should not be open to public debate due to their sensitive nature, e.g. national security and financial or economic policies.
- Some officials also admitted that political and commercial interests at times influence the policy planning processes; this leaves no room for due process or incorporation of public views.
- The cost of collecting public opinion data is prohibitive as pollsters charge exorbitantly for data collection and analysis.



6) Appraisal of *Sauti za Wananchi* approach and sample products

The methodological approach and the communication strategy, including the main product (the policy brief) as developed for Tanzania were presented to the respondents in this study for their review and reaction. The *Sauti za Wananchi* approach and idea garnered positive feedback and wide approval from key actors in the Kenyan polling space, who see it adding substantial value in an environment where there is a lot of distrust of commercial polls. In particular, the planned frequency of *Sauti za Wananchi* polls and the idea of public opinion being collected specifically to provide input into policy-relevant areas received positive reactions from all stakeholders. There were several recommendations on the ideal characteristics of such a poll.



- **Topics:** Must be relevant and on current issues affecting the public; issues that would empower citizens to demand more from leaders as well as enhance accountability of these leaders. There seems to be appetite for polls that are of interest to both citizens and government, so that the information facilitates discussion and debate on thematic issues such as education, the economy, corruption, security, and health.
- **Timing:** The idea of a monthly poll is welcomed, although the issues to be polled (as per above) do not change very fast and as such opinions may not necessarily shift quickly. Participants suggest focusing on different issues every month.
- **Qualifications and non-partisanship:** Given the credibility concerns with existing polls, the caliber and qualification of staff running the poll is considered critical; stakeholders need to be reassured about this frequently. Additionally, there is great interest in knowing the source of funding for the polls.
- **Methodology:** Sampling is to be representative, and should be clearly explained and open for scrutiny by the target consumers of the poll. Data collection integrity needs to be ensured and conveyed when releasing findings from polls.
- **Involvement of key stakeholders:** Public institutions and government should be involved in planning polls that examine public perceptions about them or their performance. This would result in greater buy-in so that the information might be more likely to be used in the planning processes.
- **Sensitization and capacity strengthening:** Stakeholders in the private sector, civil society and development organizations stated that there is a need to educate and sensitize the public on how opinion polls work to build understanding, trust and acceptance of the science of polling. There is also a need to train the media on how to interpret and report opinion poll results.
- **Dissemination:** Since media are the key channel to ensure wide reach of poll results and drive public discourse, good contacts/relationships with media houses were recommended.

Applying insights to *Sauti za Wananchi* in Kenya

These findings were instrumental in shaping the positioning of *Sauti za Wananchi* in Kenya in the following ways

- Transparency about our methodology, openness of data and sharing of the questionnaires was paramount from the start, and communicated widely. We understood from the Tanzanian experience that the use of mobile phones is often misunderstood to compromise the integrity of the sample and the results; therefore early and pro-active communication around the scientific basis for the methodology was an essential component of the launch strategy.
- Reaching out early and liaising with critical opinion leaders, particularly in the media space, was essential at the time of the launch of *Sauti za Wananchi*. We worked hard to garner spaces in very popular slots, such as breakfast discussion shows on nationally-reaching television channels.
- We ensure that staff who represent Twaweza and discuss *Sauti za Wananchi* are fully conversant with the methodology and results.
- The choice of topics for the first ten rounds of *Sauti za Wananchi* were informed by the list of proposed thematic areas that arose from the formative study. We intentionally avoided political polls in the first year, to build the reputation of the platform and demonstrate that it was not driven by the whims of politicians, but concerned with sourcing citizens' opinions and experiences with public services and other issues of national importance.
- From the start our communication strategy around *Sauti za Wananchi* focused on the expressed desire of all government stakeholders to have access to validly measured opinions and views of citizens; in other words, we positioned *Sauti za Wananchi* as filling a felt gap for policy makers and leaders.
- The creation and distribution of various *Sauti za Wananchi* products (e.g. research briefs, press briefings, etc.) was tailored according to feedback received. In disseminating the findings, we intended to use a mix of press briefings to be held at our own offices with more public launch events depending on the topic and target audience.

As we continue to implement *Sauti za Wananchi* in Kenya, we shall also continue to monitor and track it, as well as conduct independent assessments of its effects. Overall, we want to understand whether *Sauti za Wananchi*, representing the voices of Kenyan citizens, injects evidence into public (media) debate and into the government's policy-making and planning processes, as well as promotes the government's use of independent data as an assessment of its own performance. To do so, we will employ several strategies over the next two years:

- Monitoring the quantity and quality of *Sauti za Wananchi* mentions in the media over time.
- Comparing the quality of media coverage which includes *Sauti za Wananchi* with media coverage of similar issues which does not.
- Tracking references to *Sauti za Wananchi* data in specific policy platforms (such as Hansard recordings of parliamentary discussions) and events (such as the annual education sector review)
- Repeating interviews with selected key stakeholders for an independent opinion of *Sauti za Wananchi*'s positioning and perception among opinion leaders as well as policy makers