



# Is government closer to the people? Kenyan views on devolution

## 1. Introduction

Kenyans are heading back to the polls after the 8 August election results were overturned. Once again, millions of Kenyans will choose candidates to represent them in a number of positions, from President to Members of County Assemblies. Since March 2013, Kenyans have been living under a devolved governance structure which offers them, among other things, a diverse group of actors to select as representatives, from local to national level. One of the main aims of devolution was to increase citizen participation in decisions that affect their lives.

This research brief presents data on citizens' opinions on devolution in Kenya. After four years under the new arrangements, how well do Kenyans feel things are working? How much do they think national and county governments pay attention to them? And how much are they taking advantage of the new opportunities to engage in decision-making processes?

Data for this brief comes from Twaweza's flagship *Sauti za Wananchi*, which is a nationally-representative, high-frequency mobile phone panel survey. Information on the overall methodology is available at [www.twaweza.org/sauti](http://www.twaweza.org/sauti). For this brief, data were collected from 1,704 respondents from Kenya's *Sauti za Wananchi* panel. This was the twelfth round of calls to the panel, conducted between 27 April and 23 May 2017. This is supplemented with data from 1,830 respondents from the first round of calls, conducted between December 2015 and January 2016.

The key findings are:

- Nine out of ten citizens support devolution
- The majority of citizens feel disconnected from information, leaders and decisions at county level
- One in four citizens have ever participated in a meeting organised by the county government

This brief was written and produced by Twaweza East Africa. Released June 2017

P. O. Box 13784-00800, Nairobi, Kenya  
t: +254 715 563720, +254 786 563722  
e: [info@twaweza.org](mailto:info@twaweza.org) | [www.twaweza.org/sauti](http://www.twaweza.org/sauti)

Sauti za Wananchi



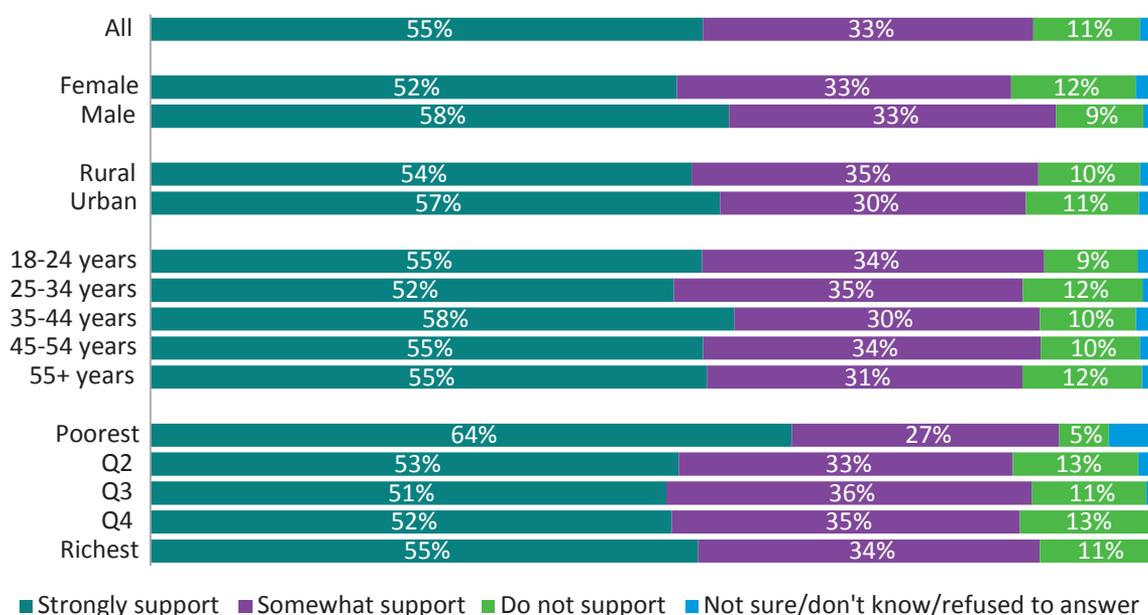
- Among those who attended meetings, active participation is higher among men than among women
- Citizens prefer meetings to be held on Saturdays, mid-morning / afternoon, for two to three hours
- Kenyans are divided on whether health services should be run by national or county governments
- The majority of citizens are unhappy with county revenue collection

## 2. Nine facts about citizens' views on devolution

### Fact 1: Nine in ten citizens support devolution

A clear majority of citizens (88%) support the existence of county governments. Specifically, 55% strongly support and 33% somewhat support devolution. This is consistent across demographic groups.

**Figure 1: To what extent do you support devolution i.e. having county governments in Kenya?**



**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)

**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

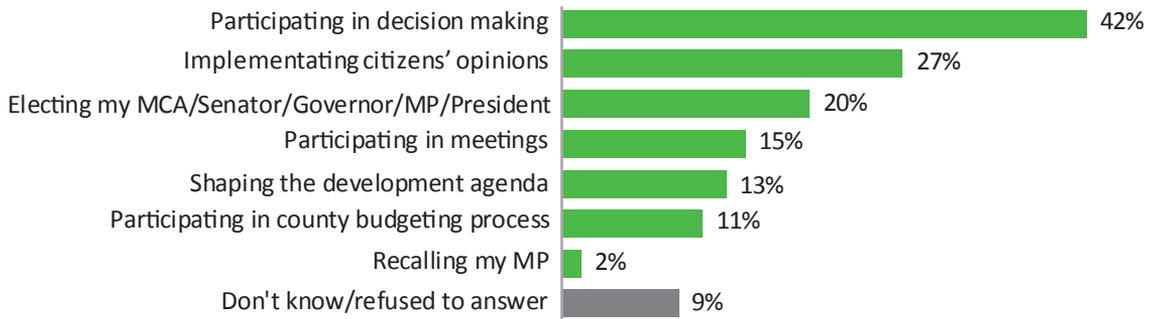
In a previous survey round, conducted with the same respondents between 14 December 2015 and 6 January 2016, eight out of ten citizens (82%) agreed with the statement “I support devolution in Kenya”. While the difference in phrasing means this is not directly comparable with the figures shown above, the new data confirms that support for devolution remains high.

This finding is supported by another: when asked what they like most about Kenya’s new constitution, the largest proportion of citizens (44%) cite devolution (not shown in chart).

## Fact 2: For citizens, participation is about being involved in making decisions

When asked to define citizen participation in government, the largest share of citizens (42%) reference participation in decision-making. Other popular responses include ensuring government plans reflect citizen views (27%), or even just participating in meetings (15%). One in five (20%) think elections are the bedrock of citizen participation while fewer think of participation revolving around budgeting (11%) or shaping the development agenda (13%).

**Figure 2: What does citizen participation in government mean to you?**

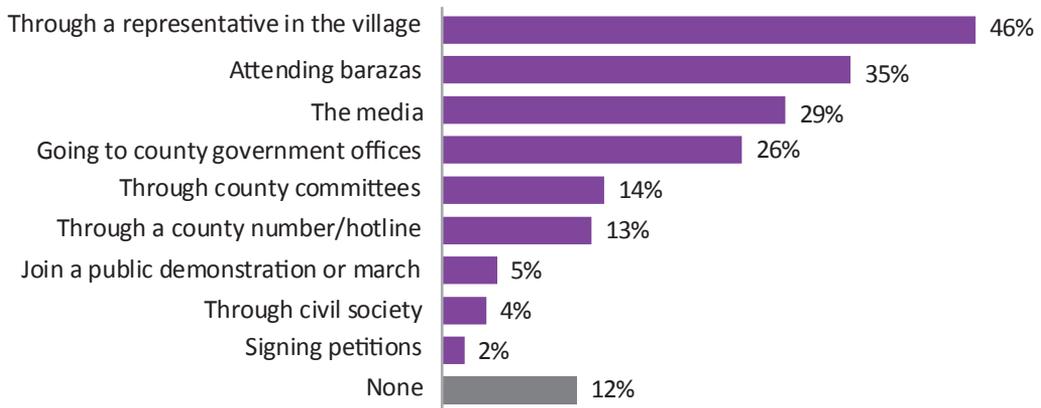


**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)

**Base:** All respondents; n=1704, multiple responses allowed

Citizens use simple ways to express their needs to county governments, choosing village representatives (46%), barazas (35%) and the media (29%) as one of three channels of communication available to them. More adversarial approaches (demonstrations, petitions) are less widely cited.

**Figure 3: Can you tell me up to three ways available to you as a citizen to express your needs to the county government?**



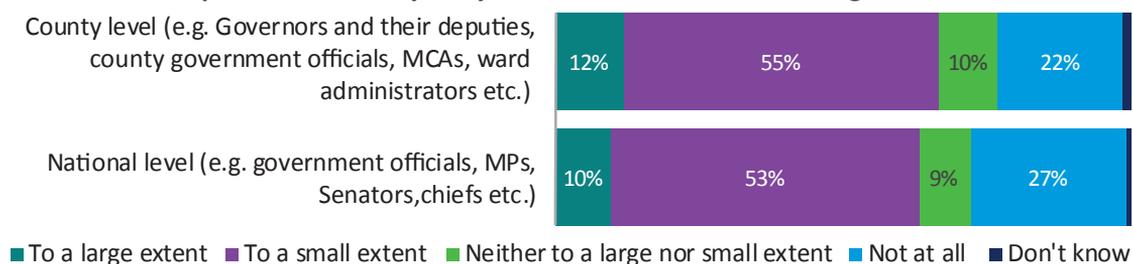
**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)

**Base:** All respondents; n=1704, up to three responses allowed

### Fact 3: Nine out of ten citizens do not think their opinions are taken into account in government decisions

One in ten citizens (12%) say county level authorities take ordinary Kenyans’ opinions into account to a large extent when making decisions. One in ten citizens (10%) express similar sentiments about national government. In both cases, more citizens feel their governments do not take account of their opinions at all (22-27%) than feel their opinions are heard (10-12%) to a large extent.

**Figure 4: To what extent do you think those in authority at national/county level take the opinion of ordinary Kenyans into account when making decisions?**

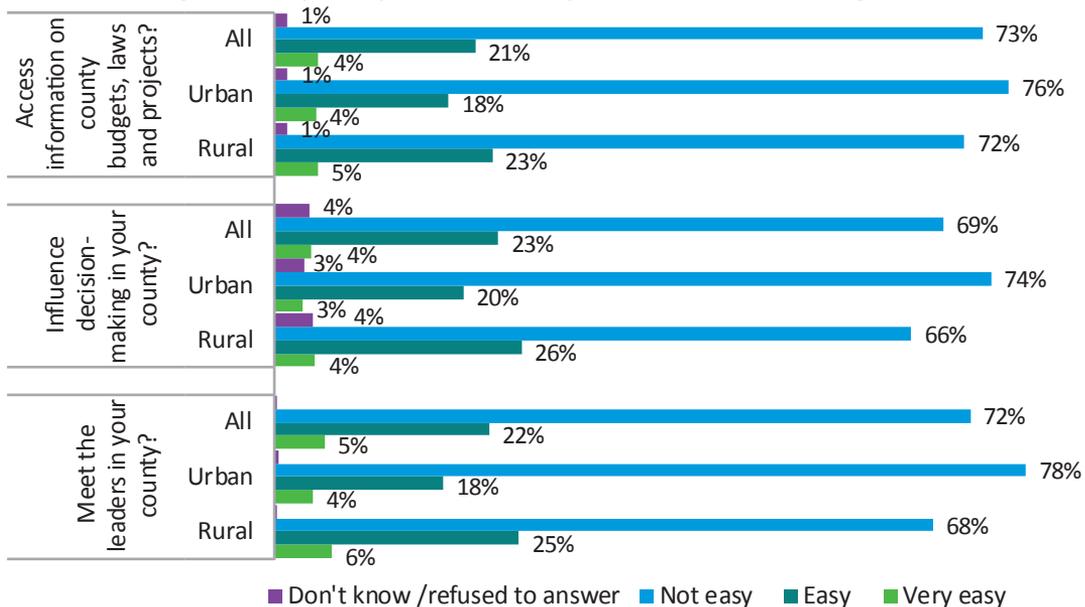


**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)

**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

This sense that government authorities do not pay attention to citizens may be linked to the fact that a clear majority of citizens see it as difficult to meet county leaders (72%), influence county decision-making (69%) and even to access information on county activities (73%). Urban residents appear to find all of these much more difficult than their rural peers.

**Figure 5: In your opinion how easy is it to do the following...**



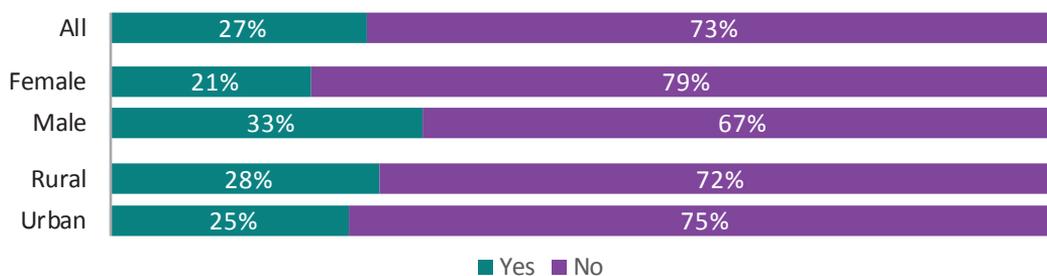
**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)

**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

#### Fact 4: One in four citizens has been to a county government meeting

About a quarter of Kenyans (27%) have ever participated in a meeting organised by the county government. This an increase from one in five (19%) who had done so by December 2015. Participation is substantially higher among men (33%) than women (21%), though not significantly different between residents of rural and urban areas.

**Figure 6: Have you ever participated in a meeting organised by the county government?**

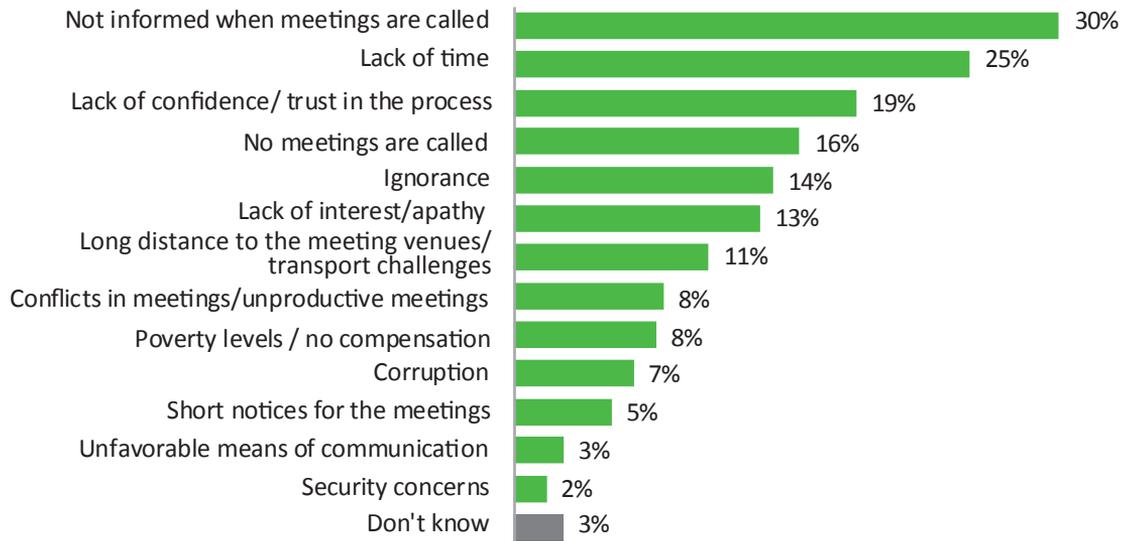


**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)

**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

Reasons provided for non-participation include not being informed about the meetings (30%), not having time (25%), and not trusting the process (19%).

**Figure 7: What stops people in this area from attending public participation forums organised by the county government?**

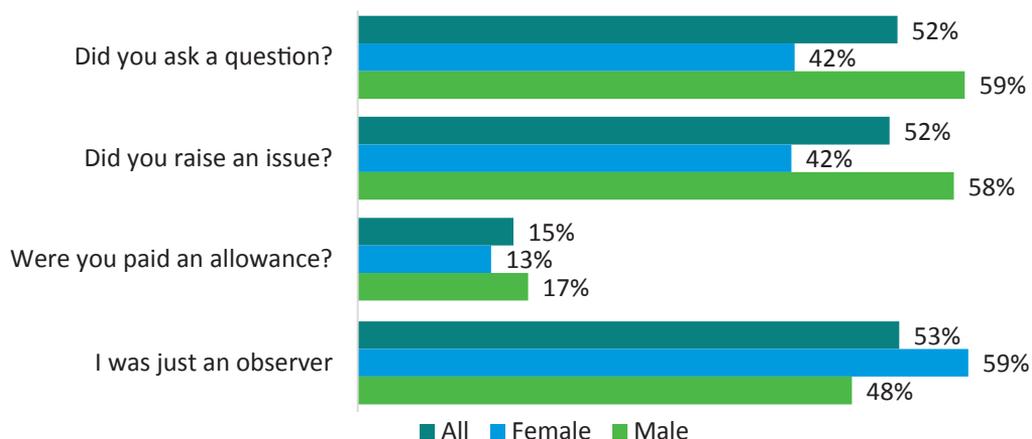


**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)  
**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

**Fact 5: Men participate more than women in meetings**

Half (52%) of those who have attended at least one meeting organised by the county government, say they asked a question at the most recent meeting they attended. This figure is significantly higher among men (59%) than women (52%), while women were more likely to describe themselves as being “just an observer” (59% compared to 48% of men).

**Figure 8: During the last meeting that you attended, did you:**  
 (% answering yes)



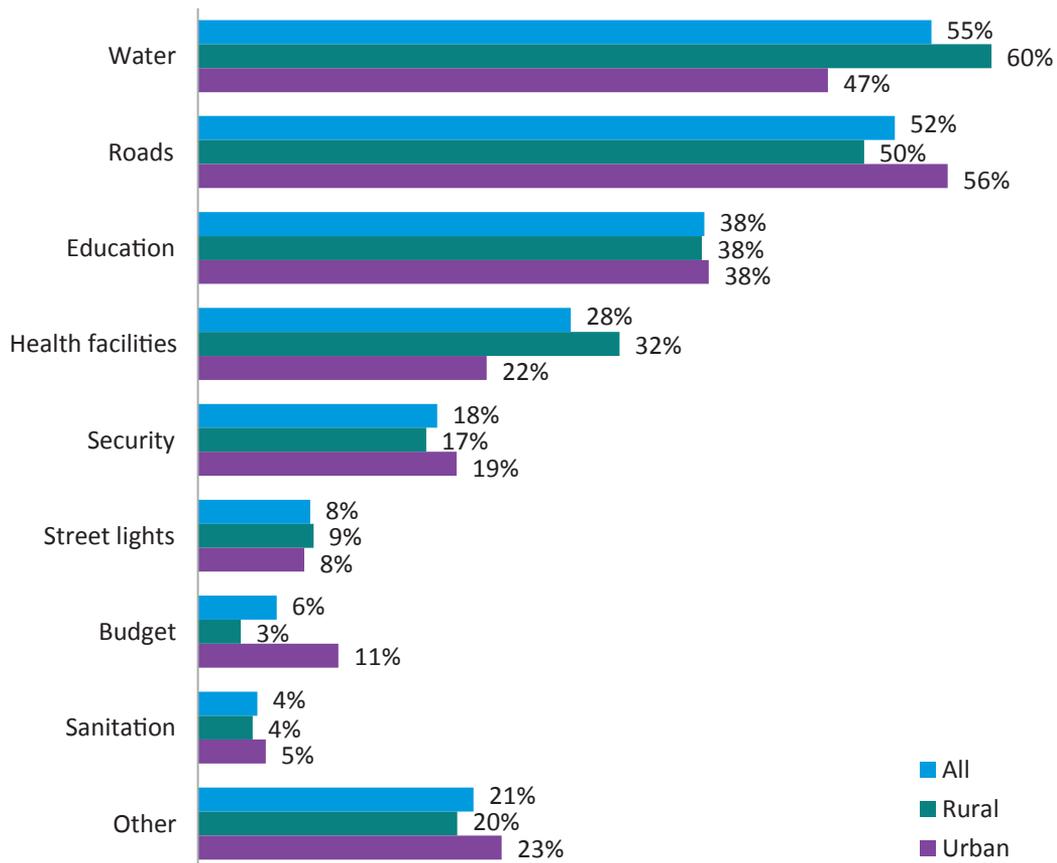
**Sources of data:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)  
**Base:** Those who have attended at least one county meeting; n=462

In December 2015, four in ten (41%) reported having asked a question at the most recent meeting they had attended. (Not shown in charts). As with attendance at these meetings, active participation is on the rise.

**Fact 6: Water, roads, education, health are are discussed most in meetings**

Among those who have attended at least one meeting organised by county governments, over half (55%) say that water projects were discussed at their most recent meeting. This figure was higher in rural than urban areas. Road projects were also discussed at most meetings (52%), this time higher in urban areas than rural. Education and health projects were also widely discussed while less than one in five citizens report discussing topics such as security, street lights, budgets and sanitation.

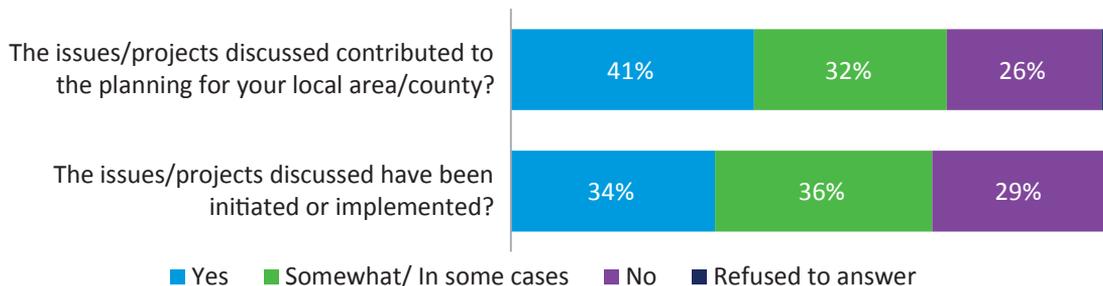
**Figure 9: During the last meeting that you attended, what development projects were discussed?**



**Sources of data:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)  
**Base:** Those who have attended at least one county meeting; n=462

Four in ten (41%) of those who have attended a county meeting say the issues discussed contributed to local planning processes, and one in three (34%) say the projects discussed have been initiated or implemented. This last figure is slightly higher than in December 2015, when 25% said projects discussed had begun implementation.

**Figure 10: Would you say that:**



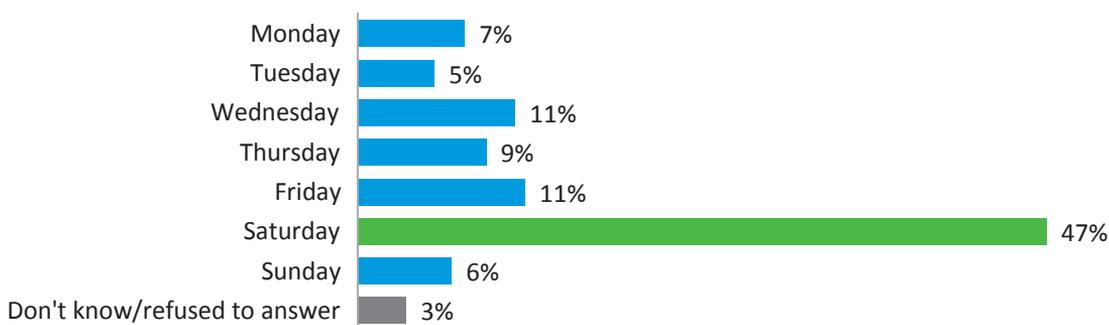
**Sources of data:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)  
**Base:** Those who have attended at least one county meeting; n=462

**Fact 7: Citizens want meetings on Saturdays, mid-morning, for 2-3 hours**

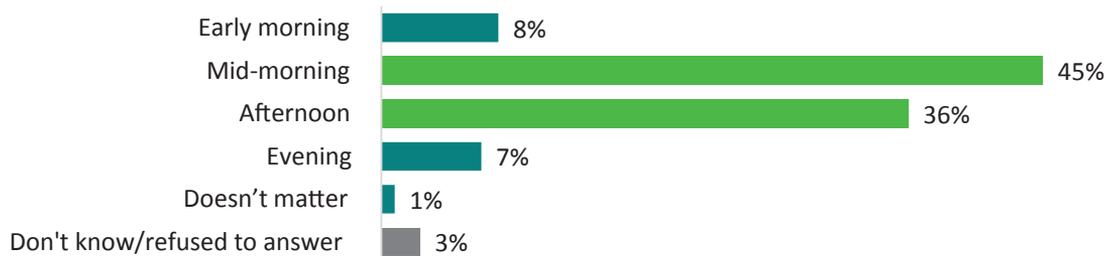
Around half of citizens (47%) say Saturdays are the best day for county governments to convene meetings, though a similar number (43%) named one of the five working days. The best time for meetings, according to citizens, would either be mid-morning (45%) or early afternoon (36%). And the ideal length for meetings is 2-3 hours according to four in ten (41%) Kenyans.

**If your county government convened a meeting to discuss development projects and budget**

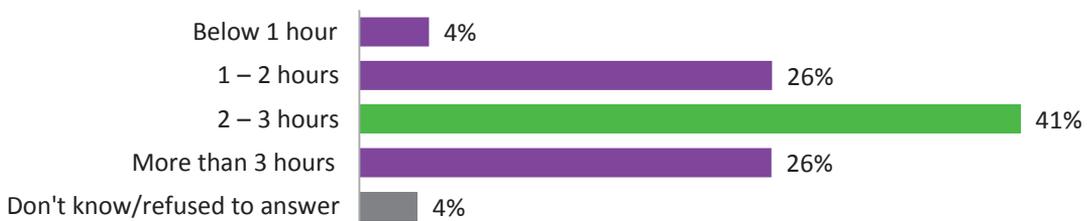
**Figure 11: What day of the week should the meeting take place?**



**Figure 12: What time should the meeting take place?**



**Figure 13: How long should the meeting take?**



**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)

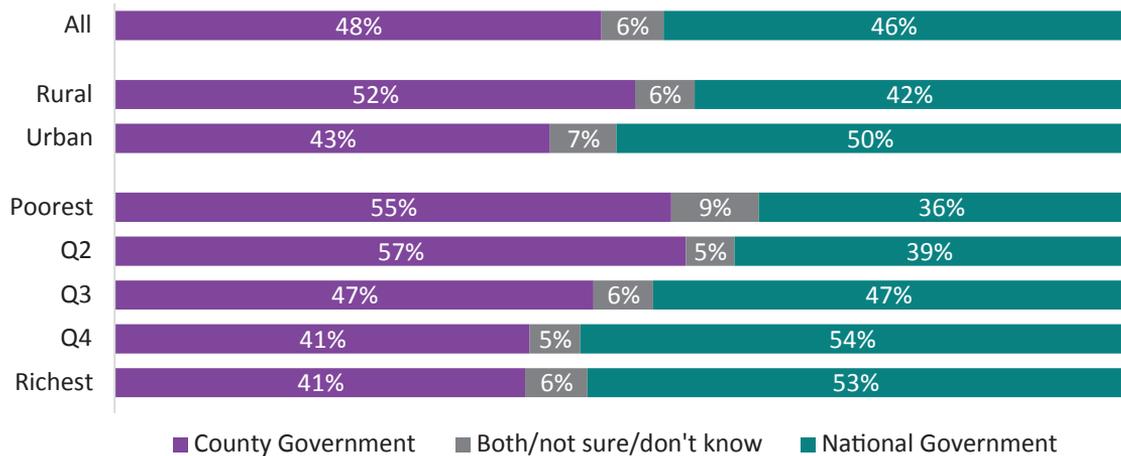
**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

### **Fact 8: Citizens are divided on who should run health services**

There is a very even split between those citizens who feel health services would be most effectively run by county government (48%) and those who feel national government would do a better job (46%). When the same question was asked in December 2015, 45% backed county governments and 43% backed national government provision.

There are clear demographic differences on this point, however, with residents of rural areas more likely to back county-provided health services (county: 52%, national: 42%), and urban residents more inclined to give the responsibility to national government (national: 50%, county: 43%). Similarly, poorer citizens prefer county government to manage health services (county: 55%, national: 36%), while wealthier citizens prefer the national government (national: 53%, county: 41%) to take this task.

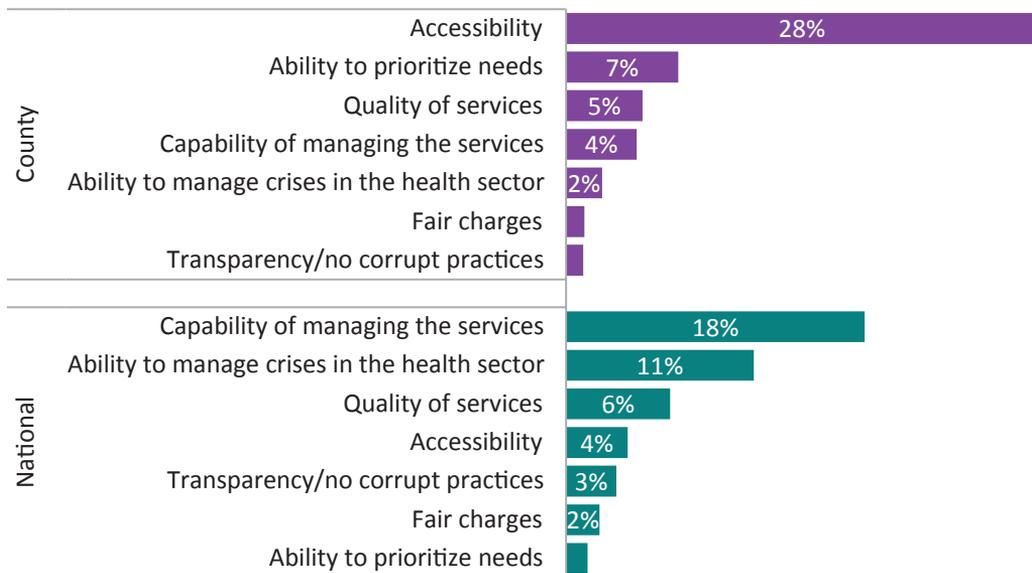
**Figure 14: In your opinion, who should be in charge of health/medical services?**



**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)  
**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

The most common reason for backing county-provision of health services was greater accessibility of services, cited by one in four citizens (28%). The most common reasons for backing national government were greater capacity to manage services (18%) and crises (11%).

**Figure 15: What is the main reason why county/national government should be in charge of health services?**

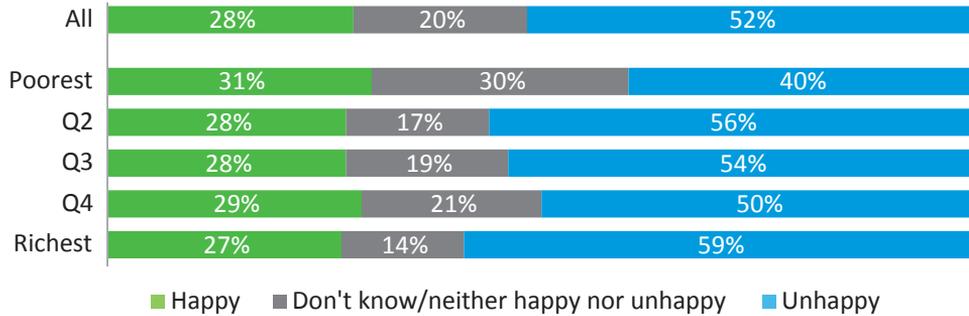


**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)  
**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

**Fact 9: Half of citizens are unhappy with county revenue collection**

Half of citizens (52%) are unhappy with their county governments’ revenue collection, compared to 28% who are happy. Wealthier citizens are more likely to be unhappy (59%) than poorer citizens (40%).

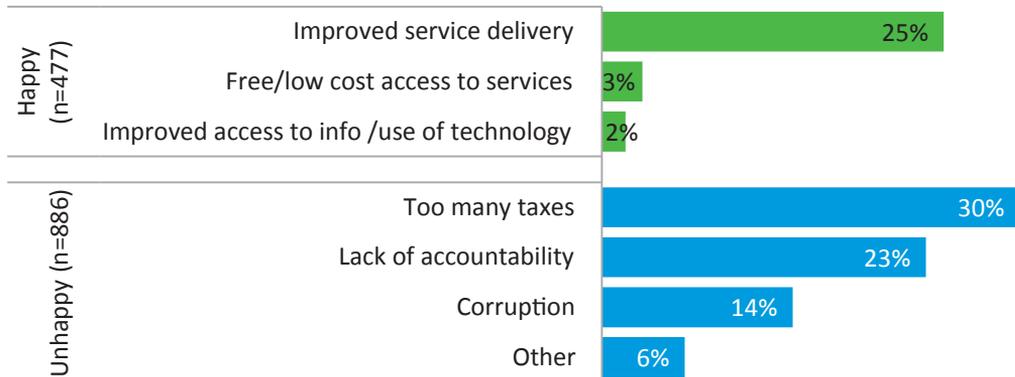
**Figure 16: Are you happy or unhappy about your County’s revenue collection?**



**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)  
**Base:** All respondents; n=1704

Citizens who are happy with the local tax regimes mostly attribute this to improvements in service delivery (25%). A similar number were unhappy at the high number of taxes (30%) or at the lack of accountability of county governments (23%).

**Figure 17: Why are you happy/unhappy about your County’s revenue collection?**



**Source:** Sauti za Wananchi Mobile Phone Survey Round 12 (27 April – 23 May 2017)  
**Base:** Those saying that they are happy; n=477 and those saying that they are unhappy, n=886

**3. Conclusion**

This brief presents findings on citizens’ views on the devolved system of government introduced by the 2010 Kenya Constitution. The main conclusion is that citizens remain very positive in general terms about devolution: 88% support devolution and 44% see it as their favourite element in the constitution.



However, there are two sides to their story. On the one hand we are seeing a rise in the number of citizens who have attended county government meetings. The meetings cover projects in health, water, education and roads – all previously identified as priority sectors for citizens. Further, one out of three citizens say the projects discussed are already being implemented, and another one out of three say that some of these projects have been initiated. Again this number has grown since December 2015.

On the other hand, citizens still feel largely disconnected from leaders, decisions and information at the county level. Future *Sauti za Wananchi* rounds can compare these figures for county level to national figures to interpret them better. But if the aim of devolution was to bring government and citizens closer together, we still have some hard work to do. And it seems that men are much more likely to be active in local governance forums than women, suggesting that special consideration might have to be provided for them.

One question these data unearth is around the difference between perceptions and reality. They show that participation from citizens is rising - people attend meetings more and the projects discussed at these meetings are more likely to have been initiated. Yet citizens continue to feel this huge disconnect between themselves and their leaders and the decisions made on their behalf. So what would it take for citizens to feel that they did truly have ownership and control over their governments? Or put differently, is there a time gap between changes in practice and changes in reality? Are we so jaded by business as usual that it takes time to notice that business has changed?

That some citizens see a relationship that between local revenue collection and services is positive. This is the basis of the social contract between people and government so when citizens are making these types of linkages, the cornerstone of an accountability posture is in place.

But perhaps the most fascinating insight thrown up by these data is the division of views between rural and urban, and rich and poor on whether national or county governments should manage health services. Is it plausible that the wealthy and urban residents are more concerned about the quality of services and feel national government is better capacity to maintain or improve standards, while the poor and rural dwellers are more concerned with accessibility and feel that county governments are better able to address this challenge? And what are the implications of this for governance in Kenya?

At Twaweza, we have long argued that the focus on access to education to the detriment of consideration of quality is essentially an error. Trying to expand services among populations without strong standards in place can create even larger problems. At the same time, poor rural citizens have spoken strongly; they prefer the accessibility offered by county management of health services. Since they represent the majority, and in many ways the groups whose challenges the constitution was designed to address, it seems sensible to hear these voices. Perhaps what is needed overall is a boost in county government capacity to deliver access and quality together. In general, support for devolved government in Kenya is broad and strong. But that does not mean citizens are universally satisfied and participate in governance. County governments need to find more effective ways of engaging citizens, listening to their views – including those who are most marginalised – and addressing the problems they raise.