



May 18, 2026

## **Beyond Symbolic Consultation: Youth Capability, Democratic Practice and Real-Time Inclusion in Devolved Governance**

By Christopher Mwambingu

**Abstract:** Public participation has become a standard feature of democratic governance reforms, particularly under devolved systems. However, participation alone does not automatically produce influence, accountability, or trust. Citizens may be consulted while remaining distant from the real centres of decision-making where budgets are negotiated, priorities set, and implementation controlled. This article argues that the next phase of democratic deepening depends less on expanding consultation spaces and more on strengthening citizen capability: the practical ability of citizens - especially young people - to understand, access, and engage governance systems effectively. Drawing on the IMPACT360 – Budget Power Lab™ initiative in Kenya, the article shows how structured civic learning, mentorship, and institutional exposure can transform youth from passive participants into active democratic actors. It further explores how such grounded experiences can inform reforms at national and global levels.

### **Why Participation Alone Is Not Enough: Evidence from Devolved Kenya**

Kenya's 2010 Constitution established a devolved governance system intended to bring services, resources, and decision-making closer to citizens. County governments were assigned key development functions, while public participation was entrenched as a constitutional requirement.

In practice, however, several structural gaps have emerged.

First, public participation forums are often consultative rather than decisive. Citizens may contribute views, but final decisions are frequently made in executive planning processes or assembly negotiations that occur later and with limited public visibility.

Second, technical complexity limits meaningful engagement. Budget documents, policy frameworks, and planning instruments are often inaccessible to ordinary citizens, particularly young people without prior civic training.



Citation: Mwambingu, *Beyond Symbolic Consultation*  
NSM Blog May 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

Third, engagement is episodic. Participation peaks during planning or political moments but declines during implementation, when accountability gaps are most visible.

Fourth, budget decisions are treated as administrative processes rather than democratic choices. Yet these allocations determine whether youth programmes are funded, whether health facilities are equipped, whether infrastructure is completed, and whether local economies function effectively.

Finally, weak follow-up mechanisms mean that citizens are often absent during implementation, when procurement quality, delays, and incomplete projects emerge.

These realities point to a central limitation: participation without capability produces visibility without influence.

### **Mentorship and Civic Capability as a Missing Link in Democratic Reform**

One of the most overlooked elements in governance reform is civic mentorship. While institutions and laws are necessary, they are insufficient without citizens who understand how to operate within them.

Many young people are willing to engage in governance but lack structured guidance on how institutions function in practice - how budgets are developed, how committees operate, how decisions are negotiated, and how oversight is exercised.

Mentorship fills this gap by building:

- Practical understanding of governance processes
- Confidence to engage formal institutions
- Ability to interpret public finance information
- Discipline in evidence-based advocacy
- Credibility in interactions with officials and communities

Without these capabilities, participation risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

### **The Kenyan Project Experience: IMPACT360 – Budget Power Lab™**

The IMPACT360 – Budget Power Lab™ initiative in Taita Taveta County was developed in response to these practical governance challenges. It focuses on strengthening youth capability to engage meaningfully within devolved institutions.



The programme brings together 35 Youth Legislative Budget Fellows drawn from diverse wards and backgrounds. It combines civic education, mentorship, and direct engagement with governance structures.

**1. Understanding how government actually works**

Participants are introduced to the roles of county assemblies, executive departments, committees, and oversight bodies. This shifts understanding from abstract political narratives to institutional reality.

**2. Interpreting the budget as a democratic instrument**

Fellows are trained to analyze key documents such as the Annual Development Plan, County Fiscal Strategy Paper, Budget Estimates, and supplementary budgets. They learn to track how priorities move from policy statements into actual allocations.

This enables them to ask practical questions:

- Which youth programmes are funded?
- Which ward projects are prioritized?
- What was promised versus what is financed?

**3. Structured engagement with leaders and institutions**

Participants learn how to engage MCAs, administrators, and committees through structured briefs, petitions, and follow-up engagement. The emphasis is on clarity, evidence, and continuity rather than confrontation.

**4. Monitoring implementation on the ground**

A key component is project verification. Participants visit project sites to assess whether approved projects are implemented, functional, and consistent with allocated resources.

This shifts civic engagement from discussion to verification.

**5. Building community-level leadership**

Fellows are encouraged to convene community dialogues, gather local priorities, and act as connectors between citizens and institutions. Several participants have begun taking visible leadership roles in ward-level governance processes.

The initiative therefore functions as both a civic education programme and a practical training ground for democratic leadership.



## From Local Practice to National Reform in Kenya

The experience from IMPACT360 suggests several areas for strengthening Kenya's devolved governance system:

### 1. Structured civic fellowships

Institutionalized youth civic programmes linked to county governments can build sustained civic capability across all 47 counties.

### 2. Simplification of public finance information

Budgets and planning documents should be translated into accessible formats to enable wider understanding and scrutiny.

### 3. Formal citizen oversight mechanisms

Structured systems for tracking project implementation and reporting service delivery gaps can strengthen accountability.

### 4. Continuous participation frameworks

Engagement should extend beyond planning cycles into implementation and evaluation phases.

### 5. Youth leadership pathways

Clear pathways should exist for trained civic actors to transition into advisory roles, committees, or elective leadership.

Together, these reforms would shift participation from consultation to influence.

## From National Reform to Global Democratic Practice

Across many democracies, there is growing concern about declining trust, weak institutional legitimacy, and citizen disengagement. Much of the reform discourse focuses on institutional design and efficiency. The Kenyan experience highlights an additional dimension: democratic capability at the citizen level.

Where citizens understand institutions, can interpret budgets, and can follow implementation, participation becomes more meaningful and trust becomes more grounded. This suggests that democratic resilience is not only an institutional outcome, but also a civic capacity outcome.

Local initiatives that combine civic education, mentorship, and accountability practice may therefore offer transferable lessons for broader governance reform debates globally.



Citation: Mwambingu, *Beyond Symbolic Consultation*  
NSM Blog May 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

## Conclusion

Public participation remains an essential pillar of democratic governance, but it is not sufficient on its own. Democratic systems become more effective when citizens - especially young people - are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and institutional access required to engage continuously and constructively.

The experience from Kenya demonstrates that when youth understand budgets, engage leaders, monitor projects, and organize communities, they move from symbolic participation to active democratic agency.

The future of governance reform may depend not only on strengthening institutions, but also on systematically building citizen capability from the ground up.

## References

International Labour Organization (2024). *Global Employment Trends for Youth: Investing in the Future*. Geneva: ILO.

OECD (2023). *Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

World Bank (2024). *Africa Pulse: Fiscal Policy for Equity and Growth*. Washington DC: World Bank.



**Christopher Mwambingu** is Founder and President of the *Economic Justice Forum (EJF)* in Kenya and leads the *IMPACT360 – Budget Power Lab™*. His work focuses on devolved governance, fiscal justice, and youth civic capability, with emphasis on linking public finance to accountability and citizen participation.



Dive into the blog:

<https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog/>