

# Citizen Participation and Its Effect on the Quality of Local Government Decision Making

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## ABSTRACT

The active engagement of the citizens has long been viewed as one of the key pillars of the democratic policy and a significant requirement towards the enhancement of the quality of decision making regarding the citizens. In the context of decentralized governance, the local governments are supposed to develop institutional structures whereby citizens should contribute to planning, budgeting, implementation and control of the public programs. Nevertheless, despite the high level of promotion of participatory governance in policy circles, there is still some confusion on whether or not citizen involvement enhances the quality of local government decision making, in particular the situation in developing country environments where institutional and political barriers tend to undermine participation. In this study, the authors investigated the impact of citizen involvement in local government decision making on the quality of local government decision making through a qualitative design guided by secondary data. Peer reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, reports of policy, and legal and regulatory frameworks on decentralization and local governance were used to get the data. The research utilized the document review and the thematic analysis to make some of the most significant patterns connected to the participation mechanisms, governance outcomes, and identification of implementation challenges. The results reveal that while the process of citizen participation usually goes through the form of a public meeting, participatory budgeting, community consultation, local councils, and advisory platforms. When these mechanisms are actually practiced, local government decisions can be enhanced on transparency, accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and legitimacy. Nevertheless, political interference, a lack of civic awareness, institutional capacity, unequal power relations, and elite capture were also found to adversely affect the quality of participation in most of the studies. The research finds that citizen involvement can enhance the quality of the local government decisions, and the effect is contingent on the institutional structure, inclusiveness and integrity of the participation mechanisms. This study suggests that institutional frameworks of participation should be strengthened, increased civic education, enhanced administration capacity, and also protect forums of participation against manipulation to ensure better outcomes of participation and effective governance is achieved.

**Keywords:** citizen participation, local government, decision making, participatory governance, accountability, responsiveness

## INTRODUCTION

During the past thirty years, the role of citizen participation in discussions about the issues of democratic governance, decentralization, and the public administration has been growing (Fung, 2015; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Modern cases of governance reforms are very much on the understanding that government institutions are more justified and effective when citizens participate in the process of making decisions in the state at large than when they are simply considered as passive consumers of services (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012). This change represents a larger trend of hormonal government by participatory and participatory governance where citizens, civil society and state institutions traditionally influence the social priorities and policy outcomes together (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Fung, 2015; Torfing et al., 2012). Participation, in this view, is not simply an idealistic democratic formula but also a working process to enhance the quality of decisions reached by mass institutions (Fung, 2015; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

International governing and development structures have also enhanced the international significance of the citizen participation (Holum, 2023; United Nations, 2015). Sustainable development goal 16 aims at participatory, inclusive, and representative decision making at all levels to capture the notion that good institutions are having a voice of the people, accountability, and transparency (United Nations, 2015). In both developed and the developing world, the governments have proposed the use of participatory tools like public consultations, participatory budgeting, citizen forums, community discussions and computer feedback sites (Fung, 2015; Holum, 2023; Wampler et al., 2021). These changes are aimed at enhancing relevance of policies, building trust and aligning government decisions with the priorities and needs of the people (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). Available literature indicates that designed participatory mechanisms that are inclusive may strengthen legitimacy and effectiveness of the processes of governance (Fung, 2015; Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017).

The growth of citizen participation in Africa has been closely associated with decentralization reforms that have taken place in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s (Lambright, 2011; Smoke, 2015; Williams et al., 2012). By shifting the political, administrative and fiscal responsibility to the local governments, these reforms aimed at bringing the government near to the people (Lambright, 2011; Smoke, 2015). The logic was that the closer the citizens and government are, the more convenient it will be to have the communities impact decisions, hold accountability, and scrutinize the provision of public services (Fox, 2015; Smoke, 2015; Speer, 2012). Decentralization in counties like Uganda, Kenya and South Africa was promised to provide chances to the responsive and people centered government (Lambright, 2011; Smoke, 2015; Williams et al., 2012). However, despite the formalization of the role of decentralization creating a participatory space, the quality and effectiveness of citizen participation differ significantly depending on the context (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Mwesigwa et al., 2022).

Related to Uganda, citizen participation follows the framework of decentralization and is embodied in the administrative systems as well as the local governmental legislation and laws that encourage the people in participating in the planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring (Kakumba, 2010; Lambright, 2011; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). Local governments are supposed to consult people and include local preferences in the process of making development decisions in principle (Kakumba, 2010; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the presence of official participatory mechanisms does not necessarily attain meaningful participation and improved decision making (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). In most local government environments, it can be sporadic, elite contrived, or limited information, civic apathy and institutional frailty (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012). Consequently, a significant difference exists between the fact of participation mechanisms and their reality in terms of decision-making quality in local governments (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

Despite numerous researchers recognizing that citizen participation in democratic governance is desirable, there is still an outstanding scholarly issue on how much citizen participation in any given capacity translates into enhanced decision making in practice (Fung, 2015; Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017). In the literature, there is much focus on the existence, the forms or the normative value of participation whereas little or rather insignificant focus is given to the effect of participation on the quality of decisions in regards to transparency, accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and effectiveness particularly in local government processes in the developing countries (Fox, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). Beyond that, past projects tend to target a small number of distinct processes including public meetings or participatory budgeting without giving enough consideration to the net governance consequences or the institutional drivers influencing whether participation is substantive or merely procedural (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Wampler et al., 2021).

It is this gap that legitimizes the current research. The study provides a contribution to the body of literature by analyzing the effect of citizen participation in the quality of decision making in the local government institutions in three ways. First, it goes beyond the importance of seeing participation as an end itself and evaluates its implication on the quality of decision making (Fung, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Second, it unites the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical viewpoints in a bid to explain how participation may enhance or undermine the governance outcomes (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Torfing et al., 2012). Third, it

gives special consideration to the settings of decentralized local governance in which the informal promise of participatory governance is most frequently high but most multiple issues of implementation are also the most evident (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Smoke, 2015). By so doing, the research paper enhances the knowledge on the institutionalization of participatory governance in a manner that enhances the quality of public governance (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012; Wampler et al., 2021).

## **Problem Statement**

Citizen engagement is generally advocated as the essential tenet of the democratic local government since it is projected to enhance the level of transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and legitimacy in the decisions made by the populace (Fox, 2015; Fung, 2015; Holum, 2023). Local governments in a decentralized system are postulated to be more in a better position to engage citizens in the need identification, setting priorities, and monitoring the execution of the public programs than in a centralized system (Lambright, 2011; Smoke, 2015; Speer, 2012). Practically, however, the response of citizens is also not even (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). Policies and legislation within the context of many developing countries have participatory mechanisms in place, only they are not enforced or used emergingly or by a few actors (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012).

In Uganda and other systems of decentralized governance, the local governments are formally under obligation to engage citizens in planning and budgeting as well as service delivery processes (Kakumba, 2010; Lambright, 2011; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). There is, however, evidence that the low level of civic awareness, poor institutional capacity, political interference, poor access to information, and elite capture tend to limit the citizen engagement (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012). In such circumstances, the processes of participation risk being tokenistic only instead of being transformative (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). This implies that, in spite of the presence of participatory forums, they might not have much impact on the content or quality of decisions that are made by the local government institutions (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

The result is that the decisions of local governments might be unable to represent the needs and priorities of the community appropriately (Fung, 2015; Speer, 2012; Wampler et al., 2021). In situations of weak participation, decision making can be opaque, less accountable and responsive to citizens (Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). This compromises democracy in governance and the success of local development interventions (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Speer, 2012). Despite the presentation of these difficulties in the literature, it is still lacking analytical clarity how and when citizen participation enhances the quality process of decision making in local government (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). This paper thus fills that gap by discussing the effect of citizen engagement on the quality of decisions made in local governments where special focus is on governance principles under which the effect of citizen engagement is conveyed.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how citizen participation influences the quality of decision making in local government institutions.

## **Objectives of the Study**

- i. To examine the forms and mechanisms of citizen participation in local government decision making.
- ii. To analyze how citizen participation influences the quality of decision making in terms of transparency, accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and effectiveness.
- iii. To identify the challenges that constrain meaningful citizen participation in local government institutions.
- iv. To draw implications for strengthening participatory governance in public administration.

## Research Questions

- i. How does citizen participation influence the quality of decision making in local governments?
- ii. How does citizen participation strengthen transparency and accountability in local governance?
- iii. What institutional and contextual factors constrain meaningful citizen participation in local government decision making?
- iv. What are the implications of these findings for public administration practice and reform?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Participatory Democracy Theory

Participatory Democracy Theory provides the first major foundation for this study. The theoretical basis of the theory is that democracy should be spread beyond voting and representation and be increased by the involvement of the citizens in the affairs of the government with directness and continuity (Pateman, 2012). Participation is thus perceived as a right as well as a process in which decisions are made in ways in which people participate in their lives (Pateman, 2012; Quick & Bryson, 2022). The theory in this research comes in handy owing to its explanations as to why citizen participation is central to democratic legitimacy and why an institution of local governance ought to develop channels in which communities can sway straightforwardly on populace decisions (Holum, 2023; Pateman, 2012; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

Another assumption of the theory is that the participation must be educative and transformative (Pateman, 2012). When the citizens take part in the activities of governance, they will acquire civic competence, political awareness, and ownership to the institutions of the people (Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Pateman, 2012). Meanwhile, government representatives are provided with the experience of the locals and the community tastes (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). In this regard, participation enhances the quality of decision making since it increases the information pool on which decisions are made and holds the government more accountable to the people it serves (Fox, 2015; Fung, 2015; Pateman, 2012). The theory, however, also suggests that with such participation being restricted to a form of symbolic consultation or an elite controlled discussion, its advantages will be undermined in both democratic and pragmatic ways (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Williams et al., 2012).

### Deliberative Democracy Theory

Deliberative Democracy Theory is an addition to the theory in participatory democracy as it focuses on the fact that the value of participation is not tied to the aspect of inclusion alone but also the quality of the dialogue (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017). During this theory, it is stated that the resultant products of a rational dialogue, listening and contemplation between citizens and government officials ought to be legitimacy in the way people decide on the issues of the day (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017). Democratic legitimacy thus gets enhanced when such decisions are influenced by the processes of deliberation where various opinions are taken and can be argued out publicly (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

The theory is specifically applicable to the local government since the local governance frequently entails the reality to face interactions over tangible community issues (Curato et al., 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Deliberation processes on similar terms can only take place in forms of public hearings, village meetings, budget conferences, and local consultations, when individuals can be able to speak, listen, and challenge ideas on a relatively equal basis (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). The Deliberative Democracy Theory thus allows one to understand that participation can lead to better quality in decision making when it promotes an informed conversation but can detract where the nature of participation is limited to one-way communication, ritual consultation or politically mediated mobilization (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Williams et al., 2012).

## Governance Theory

The governance theory further extends the discussion by viewing decision making as an activity that is comprised of more than just the government (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Torfing et al., 2012). In governance theory, interactions of interaction between the state institutions, the citizens, the civil society, and other stakeholders determine the shaping of the public outcomes (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Torfing et al., 2012). The principles that have been linked to good governance include transparency, accountability, responsiveness, participation and collaboration (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Fox, 2015; Torfing et al., 2012). This standpoint is quite applicable to the current study as the decisions of local authorities are seldom worked out in solitude. They come out as institutional structures, bureaucratic processes, social control, and stakeholder movements (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012).

Governance Theory is also important in justifying why the involvement of citizens is not considered as an isolated democratic ceremony but, as an inseparable element of management and the performance of policies in public (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Fung, 2015; Torfing et al., 2012). Participation is known to increase the quality of governance by enhancing the communication of information, lessening the secrecy, heightening supervision and socializing the decisions made (Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015; Torfing et al., 2012). Meanwhile, the theory focuses on institutional capacity, structures of coordination and accountability, which determine whether or not participation can lead to an improvement in the decision (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Holum, 2023; Torfing et al., 2012).

## Relevance of the Theories to the Study

Collected, these theories offer a robust analytical base to the issue of citizen involvement and quality of decisions in the local government. Participatory Democracy Theory describes the importance of direct participation of citizens (Pateman, 2012). Deliberative Democracy Theory makes it clear that the nature of interaction is equally vital to the presence of participation itself (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017). Governance Theory puts a context of participation in larger institutional regimes of accountability, transparency and collective public administration (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Torfing et al., 2012). Together the theories indicate that citizen participation enhances the decision-making process of local governments when it is inclusive, deliberative as well as entrenched within accountable structures of governance (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012).

## Conceptual Review

### Citizen Participation

By citizen participation, the term is used to refer to the engagement of common individuals in the procedures of the government whereby decisions are debated, formulated, executed or overseen (Fung, 2015; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Citizen participation in this study will be defined as the extent to which the citizens can contribution towards local governance using various means including meetings of the community, public hearings, participative budgetary processes, planning forums, consultation, and local oversight procedures (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). The participation levels can be as low as information sharing, consultation, joint decision making, collaboration and citizen oversight (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

Citizen participation has procedural and substantive aspects conceptually. Procedurally it revolves around the availability of institutional forums within which citizens interact with the officials of the government (Quick & Bryson, 2022). As a matter of substance, it has to do with the fact that citizens actually participate in decision-making and that it is transparent, extensive, and substantive (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). This difference is significant as certain local governments might have formal participation patterns but not provide citizens with actual control over the decisions of the people (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

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## Quality of Decision Making

Quality of decision making has been used as a measure of how transparent and accountable the local government decision making is, responsive, inclusive, informed and effective (Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). The quality of the decision made is not restricted to technical efficiency only in this study. It contains the quality of decisions which are democratic and the degree to which the decisions are responsive of people and are determined by lawful regulations (Fung, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). An effective decision is thus high-quality decision; open decision is made, supported by relevant information, taking into consideration the views of the citizen and publicly has to explain why the decision was made and also probable that will yield results that respond to the priorities of the community (Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

## Transparency

Transparency is described as the admission of the decision-making procedures and the availability of information in the area of the government activities, plans, budgets and policies (Bertot et al., 2010; Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015). Clear local governance will enable citizens to understand the decision-making process, the decision-making processes, and the decision-making process (Bertot et al., 2010; Fox, 2015). The conceptual significance of transparency is that we cannot have participation in the case where information is concealed, disguised or shared selectively (Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015). These two concepts, citizen participation and transparency therefore fortify each other (Holum, 2023; Meijer, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

## Accountability

Accountability can be defined as the responsibility that is assigned to the government in its officials to defend or explain their actions and also be held accountable to their actions (Fox, 2015). People are considered to have accountability in the context of local government, it can be formal administrative accountability as well as social accountability in the form of questioning, monitoring, and publicly scrutinizing (Fox, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Citizen participation enhances accountability by allowing the citizens to insist on explanations, scrutinise the utilisation of resources and question poor performance or discrimination of certain decision-making processes (Fox, 2015; Fung, 2015; Holum, 2023).

## Responsiveness

Responsiveness is the capacity of institutions of local government in identifying and responding to demands and concerns and priorities of the citizens (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Fung, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). A responsive local government does not simply absorb the input of the populace, instead it translates the input into action, policy change or service enhancement (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Speer, 2012). The participation also increases responsiveness whereby the officials can hear the concerns of the citizens and include them in the development agendas and decisions of the governance (Holum, 2023; Speer, 2012; Wampler et al., 2021).

## Inclusiveness

Inclusiveness is the degree to which participation systems can be used to represent various social groupings such as women, youth, people with disabilities, poor households and marginalized communities (Holum, 2023; Williams et al., 2012). Inclusive participation increases the social base of decision making and governance is not carried out based on the preference of vocalized or powerful elites (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Williams et al., 2012). In this research, the concept of inclusiveness is taken as a prerequisite of the democratic legitimacy and high-quality decision outcomes (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

## Conceptual Linkage

The theoretical rationale of the study is that the quality of decisions depends on citizen involvement in a number of governance routes. It enhances transparency when the citizens are engaged and informed through deliberative

forums since government processes will be more transparent (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015). Responsibility is enhanced as citizens are allowed to question and challenge leaders (Fox, 2015; Fung, 2015). There is enhanced responsiveness as the decisions are informed by locals needs and lived experiences (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Speer, 2012; Wampler et al., 2021). When participation platforms are not elite dominated but broad based, then inclusiveness is enhanced (Holum, 2023; Williams et al., 2012). Finally, the effectiveness of decision-making is increased when the relevance of the policies and local development decisions to the interests of the communities is improved (Fung, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). But, these encouraging results have to be optimal depending on the quality of participatory processes and based on institutional environment where the processes take place (Holum, 2023; Torfing et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2012).

## Empirical Review

Empirical research on citizen participation tends to demonstrate that participation may enhance governance, although they also show significant differences in effect in different contexts (Fung, 2015; Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017). Studies in the developed democracies tend to reveal that, under good resource provision and institutional support, structured participatory practices like deliberative forums, citizen panels, and participatory budgeting are likely to increase the levels of legitimacy, citizen trust, and responsiveness of policies (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017; Wampler et al., 2021). These researches indicate that the most effective areas of participation include governments that are ready to share data, take into consideration the views of citizens and incorporate participation in the day to day running of the administrative system (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021).

A second literature stream dwells on the nature of participatory governance within a decentralized model and concludes that participation of people at a local level can enhance the service delivery, accountability, and trust when it renders communities to have direct communication with the decision makers (Holum, 2023; Speer, 2012; Wampler et al., 2021). The research on the participatory budgeting also indicates similar results, whereby citizen participation in budget means may enhance the transparency of the budget and enable allocation of its means to accommodate the local concerns (Fung, 2015; Wampler et al., 2021). There is, however, not such a uniformly positive empirical evidence. In other settings, participatory budgeting has expanded voice and had little impact on the ultimate expenditure priorities, particularly in those where political or bureaucratic players can still enjoy the decisive authority (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Wampler et al., 2021).

A disparity between formal involvement and real influence is common in studies in the context of African and other developing countries (Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012). Participatory formats have frequently been instituted as decentralization reforms, including village meetings, consultative planning, and community committees, but such participatory formations lack any real engagement due to unequal distribution of power, lack of information access, low literacy, inadequacy of the administrative system, and political patronage (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012). Accordingly, as has been suggested in some studies in Uganda, the local government structures promote citizen engagement but participation is rather shallow and uneven in most instances (Ishii, 2017; Kakumba, 2010; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). Their citizens can attend conferences and their opinions are not necessarily considered. This is an indication of the fact that high quality decision making does not necessarily occur due to the presence of participatory institutions (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

Another finding about participation and accountability is contradictory through the use of empirical research. It is observed that by participating, some studies indicate that social accountability is enhanced through enabling the citizens to question leaders and monitor projects (Fox, 2015; Fung, 2015). Other researches indicate that participation is co-optable, particularly in instances whereby the local elites control the meetings or in instances where the citizens do not have the knowledge and confidence to stand up against the authorities (Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012). In such situations, participation can create the seeming accountability without altering behavior in governance in any significant way (Fox, 2015; Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017). The same inconsistency is in the case of responsiveness. Although there are studies that advocate that citizen participation enhances reality of local development plans, studies also indicate that the priorities put across by

the communities are either filtered through political interest, administrative demands or resource restriction (Speer, 2012; Wampler et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2012).

Such gaps reveal an obvious gap in research. The available literature has failed to incorporate adequately the conceptual nexus between citizen involvement and quality of decision making in local governments especially in the context of transparency, accountability and responsiveness, inclusiveness and effectiveness (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). A significant proportion of the existing studies have concentrated either on mechanisms of participation or on the outcome of governance but have not concentrated on the relationships between the two in a causal and an institutional manner (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). This research addresses this need through synthesizing the evidence quartering the impacts of participation on the quality of decisions and the conditions that enhance or lessen the same relationship in decentralized local government.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The research design that was adopted was the qualitative research design that involved analysis of secondary data (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Flick, 2018). This was a suitable design since the research aimed at creating a depth analytic insight into the impact of citizen participation in the quality of local government decision making and not to obtain statistical approximations (Bryman, 2016; Flick, 2018; Silverman, 2017). Qualitative inquiry is particularly effective when analyzing complex, context-specific, and layered conceptual processes of governance, institutionalization and policy relations (Bryman, 2016; Flick, 2018; Silverman, 2017).

### **Research Methodology and Rationale**

The document based qualitative approach was chosen since the present study concentrated on conceptual and theoretical, policy and empirical evidence that was already present on scholarly and institutional sources (Bowen, 2009; Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). This methodology allowed generating knowledge across settings and comparing views, and being able to find areas of agreement and disagreement across the literature sources (Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). Given that the research was a governance problem of high policy and conceptual level, secondary analysis fitted well to develop a comprehensive insight into the phenomenon (Bowen, 2009; Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019).

### **Data Sources**

There were four major types of secondary sources used in the study. The former category included peer reviewed journal articles and academic books on citizen participation, participatory governance, decentralization, democratic theory and the local government (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). Such sources included the conceptual and empirical evidence. The second group was composed of the policy papers and the laws that are concerned with the local government, decentralization and participation of the people (Kakumba, 2010; Lambright, 2011; United Nations, 2015). These were the sources that were utilized in the comprehension of the institutional basis of participation. The third group entailed governance reports written by development organizations, state agencies, and non-governmental organizations, and provided practical and situational information (Fox, 2015; United Nations, 2015). The fourth was of rules and official papers in the local government decision making (Kakumba, 2010; Lambright, 2011).

### **Data Selection Criteria**

The choice of the documents complied with the clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, to enhance the methodological rigor (Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). Documents were also included in case they directly covered at least one of the following issues: citizen engagement in the independent governance, local government decision making, participatory structures, decentralization, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, or

reform of public administration (Fox, 2015; Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Preference was considered to those sources that were evidently related to local governance and democratic participation (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

The academic sources were chosen according to academic validity, theoretical applicability and usefulness (Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). Weighing was done in favor of peer reviewed publications and big scholarly texts that are used heavily in the analysis of governance (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012). Policy and legal documents were picked up in cases that explained formal participations and procedures in which citizen participation has been institutionalized (Kakumba, 2010; Lambright, 2011; United Nations, 2015). Where they had contextual evidence on implementation experiences, administrative realities or practical challenges that affected participation, governance reports were provided (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; United Nations, 2015).

Documents were filtered out where they were merely vaguely related to participation, where the information was solely centered on politics at the national level without being relevant to local government and where such documents were inadequate made in the analysis (Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). In cases where several sources raised the same arguments, the research give precedence to those that had a broader analytic value or were those that had stronger empirical evidence (Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). This criterion was useful in making sure that the data corpus was focused and credible (Bowen, 2009; Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019).

### **Data Collection Method**

The data were gathered using document review and structured analysis of the literature (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019). The researcher used the identified documents, reread them, and determined information that was related to definitions, theoretical explanations, participation mechanisms, governance outcomes, and implementation issues, as well as the issues concerning public administration implications (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019). Analytical coherence was ensured as the notes were arranged based on the research questions, and the objectives of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis involved the thematic interpretation of the material obtained in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2018; Silverman, 2017). The first stage of analysis was familiarity where the researcher read the chosen materials thoroughly and came up with common ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was then done where the text segments were annotated based on the following concepts participated in participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, inclusion, and the quality of decisions, political interference, civic awareness, and institutional capacity (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2018). The codes were subsequently coded into bigger analytical themes that described the correlation between quality and citizen participation in making decisions in local government (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Silverman, 2017).

### **Reliability of the Study**

Triangulation of the sources, conceptual coherence, and open selection criteria enhanced the credibility of the study (Bowen, 2009; Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). Triangulation was attained through comparing of policy documents, academic studies, legal frameworks, and the governance reports (Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). The conceptual consistency was also ensured by interpreting the evidence in terms of theoretical and conceptual categories defined previously in the paper (Flick, 2018; Silverman, 2017). The level of transparency was also boosted by the description of the selection of documents and the appearance of themes based on the data (Bowen, 2009; Johnston, 2014).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research did not make use of human subjects as the research was purely on the review of secondary sources. A sense of ethical responsibility was upheld by means of not giving false representation of the authors that are

already in place, giving proper reference to the sources and remaining loyal to the published materials (Bowen, 2009; Johnston, 2014).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Local government citizen participation manifold**

The analysed literature indicates that the participation of citizens in local government is rather often in the form of community meetings, consultations with the population and the participatory budgeting process, planning and development forums, the structure of local authorities and the participation of the community in the work of the local council and its reference body (Fung, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021). These mechanisms can be differentiated by the level of openness and impact but in combination, they become the institutional avenues that the local governments attempt to use to engage citizens in government (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021).

According to the Participatory Democracy Theory, such mechanisms are important since they make democracies go beyond elections and open chances to the citizens to influence decisions that impact their communities (Pateman, 2012). The results, however, also indicate that the democratic worth of such mechanisms would be determined by their ability to produce actual involvement, or simply formal access (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). An informative meeting with citizens after there have been already decisions is weakly participatory. The stronger participation is observed in comparison with a planning forum where budgets, and local plans are shaped by the community priorities (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021).

The results hence justify a more critical connotation of participation. Recording the fact that participatory forums exist is not enough; what is important is to ensure that forums have a significant influence on choices of the populace (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). This substantiates the conceptual argument in the study that participation has a procedural and substantive level.

### **Participation of the Citizens and Openness**

The analysis shows how transparency may be enhanced through the involvement of citizens by making the process of decision making transparent and increasing the access of people to the information on policies, budgets and development priorities (Bertot et al., 2010; Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015). Citizens are in a better position to learn directly on what the government is up to as they attend open meetings, budget hearings, consultations, etc. This increases open access to information between officials and communities and renders governance more transparent (Fox, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021).

This outcome can be explained by the Governance Theory. Transparency is not merely technical in nature as it pertains to publication of information but it is also a relationship issue (Bertot et al., 2010; Meijer, 2015; Torfing et al., 2012). Involvement generates contact between the authorities and citizens and the contact demands transparency, expression, and publicity. In this regard, participation enhances transparency as it makes decisions more public (Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015; Torfing et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, the results indicate that the benefits of transparency are not balanced. In other instances, the citizens can also be invited to forums and they may not be provided with adequate information to participate (Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015). In the event of accessibility to documents, the technical language is applied, or the agendas are highly controlled, transparency is minimised (Fox, 2015; Holum, 2023; Meijer, 2015). This implies that the participation will enhance transparency when timely information is available, can be understood and shared truly (Bertot et al., 2010; Holum, 2023; Meijer, 2015).

### **Participation and Accountability of the Citizens**

There is a strong indication that citizen involvement can enhance accountability by offering the citizen the means to challenge the government officials, keep track of projects and demand that the officials explain their decisions (Fox, 2015; Fung, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). One way through which citizen behaviour is questioned in

regard to leadership is through community meetings, consultations, and participatory budgeting forums (Fox, 2015; Wampler et al., 2021). This would be in line with Governance Theory that views accountability as a key element of good governance and Participatory Democracy Theory, which presupposes citizen voice as limiting its power (Fox, 2015; Pateman, 2012; Torfing et al., 2012).

Never before, the results also indicate that the results of accountability is relative to the power balance within the participatory spaces. The citizens have low levels of information, are intimidated, or socially marginalized, and hence, they cannot check up on the officials (Fox, 2015; Williams et al., 2012). On the same note, where local elites or political favors control participation, there may be selective rather than extensive public scrutiny (Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012). This makes it difficult to assume that accountability will automatically be created by participation. It is more precise to say that participation establishes the chance of accountability, although that chance has to be backed by access to information, civic capacity and institutional transparency (Fox, 2015; Holum, 2023; Meijer, 2015).

### **Participation and Responsiveness of the citizens**

The review also notes that the responsiveness of the local government can be enhanced by the involvement of citizens whereby the officials apply citizen input to the planning, priorities, and service-making decisions (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Speer, 2012; Wampler et al., 2021). Local governments are able to acquire information on local needs that might otherwise be missed on administrative routines through consultations and community dialogues (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Speer, 2012; Wampler et al., 2021). This validates the hypothesis that being involved improves the quality of decisions by basing the policy decisions on experienced realities (Fung, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021).

The theory of deliberative Democracy is most applicable in this instance since we are likely to be participative when the involvement is that of a genuine discussion rather than monologue (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017). Deliberation enhances the quality of decisions made where officials listen, reflect, and revise decisions in response to the concerns of the citizens (Curato et al., 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). In cases where participation is only formal, responsiveness is poor (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). The results hence imply that responsiveness is not just a matter of whether citizens communicate or not, but also whether institutions are ready and capable of adjust (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

The contribution this finding makes to the study is that it demonstrates that the relationship between institutional behaviour, participation, and quality of decisions is mediated. Participation will not automatically enhance responsiveness; it enhances responsiveness when the involvement is viewed as policy learning by the public officials and not as a statutory managerial necessity (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Speer, 2012).

### **Participation and Inclusion of Citizens**

The significant outcome is that inclusiveness is one of the weakest aspects of participatory forms of governance in action (Holum, 2023; Williams et al., 2012). In much of the local government forum, formal constituencies though many exist are often biased towards more vocal, educated, connected or more powerful participants (Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012). The marginalized group can also lack representation due to poverty, sex, disability or a lack of literacy, or being so shy to address fora (Holum, 2023; Williams et al., 2012).

This is a theoretically important finding. Both participatory and deliberative theories presuppose wide inclusion, but the fact remains local realities do not always match the ideal (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017; Pateman, 2012). Where decision-making is socially skewed, it is likely to reproduce pre-existing inequalities instead of redressing them (Holum, 2023; Williams et al., 2012). It implies that any decision quality requires inclusiveness and not an option of democracy (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Williams et al., 2012). The decision would be seen as lacking complete justification or responsiveness when the major groups were excluded in a successful manner out of the process to come up with it (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

## Problems Impacting The functional involvement

Some of the endemic problems highlighted in the analysis were the problem of political interference, low civic awareness, lack of institutional capacity, access to information and elite capture (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012). These problems underlie why such participation may not always result in benefits that are usually linked with the concept of participatory governance (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

The aspects of interference of politics are distorting participation, mobilization of attendance by leaders with symbolic intentions, by silencing of opposition, or manipulating the outcome (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). Weak civic awareness hinders the capability of the citizens to comprehend the procedures, rights, and policy issues (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). It is weak institutional capacity that diminishes the capability of the local government to assemble inclusive forums, transparency of the local government in receiving citizen input and follow-through on participatory promises (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). Elite capture is a situation in which a small group of people prevails over the participatory spaces and manipulates that to make decisions favoring their own objectives (Fox, 2015; Williams et al., 2012).

These results are in tandem with the Governance Theory, where institutional arrangements are highlighted to govern governance outcomes (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Torfing et al., 2012). They also strengthen the Participatory Democracy Theory by demonstrating that there is no participation without enabling conditions (Holum, 2023; Pateman, 2012; Williams et al., 2012). The implication in a real-world sense is that reform projects must be aimed not just at establishing participatory spaces but also at enhancing the quality, equity and integrity of those spaces (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012).

In general, the results indicate that citizen involvement has the potential to enhance the level of decision making by local governments, but not automatically (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and legitimacy are facilitated in the most significant way by inclusive, informed, deliberative, and institutionally supported participation (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Fox, 2015; Holum, 2023). In areas with weak participatory mechanisms, or where they are used politically, their impact on the quality of decisions is low (Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012).

This reading enhances the scientific impact that the study has had as it goes beyond a purely festive perception of participation. Instead of taking the premise that participation is generally positive, the study demonstrates that the key aspect is the form, the content, and the context of participation (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022). This way, the findings provide support as well as qualify existing theory. They espouse the democratic argument that citizens participation counts, but they also bring to the fore that democratic payoffs are conditional on the design of institutions and the balance of power (Pateman, 2012; Torfing et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2012).

## Public Administration Implications

The research has significant implications to the public administration. First, it demonstrates how the citizen participation must be viewed as a part and parcel of the governance role rather than a democratic rite (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012). The participation mechanisms designed by the public administrators must be frequent, inclusive, and must be connected to the real decision points (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022). There would have to be an early engagement with policy and budgeting to make changes, not when significant decisions have already been made (Wampler et al., 2021).

Second, the results imply that to enhance the quality of decisions, the administration needs to invest in the civic engagement systems (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Participation should be meaningful to the local governments through properly staffed, facilitated, and information-system-provided and communication platform-provided platforms (Bertot et al., 2010; Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Holum, 2023). Democratic government thus revolves around administrative capacity (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Torfing et al., 2012).

Third, there should be systems of accountability in collaboration with participation. Public administrators must not just gather the opinions of citizens but should also give the feedback on the manner in which the opinions have been employed (Fox, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). With such a loop closed, it might increase the trust, enhance transparency, and show responsiveness (Holum, 2023; Meijer, 2015; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Lastly, local governance changes ought to provide solutions to risks of exclusion and elite capture through the intentional expansion of the marginalized groups and guarding against political manipulation of participatory spaces (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012).

## CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the impact of citizen involvement on quality local government decision making based on the quality analysis of secondary materials (Bowen, 2009; Johnston, 2014; Snyder, 2019). The research discovered that participation by citizens will enhance the quality of the decision as it enhances transparency, accountability, responsiveness, inclusivity, and legitimacy (Fox, 2015; Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022). Some of these mechanisms include community meetings, participatory budgeting, consultations with the citizens, and local planning forums that allow citizens to contribute to the governance process and help in giving localized information that might enhance the decision that the citizens make (Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021).

The study has however also established that the advantages of participation are not self-evident. The impact and quality of such participation lies in the institutional structure of the participation machinery, the goodwill of the officials in responding to this citizen participation, access to information and the general political and administrative atmosphere (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Holum, 2023; Torfing et al., 2012). These include political interference, low civic awareness, lack of institutional capability and elite capture, which normally diminish the processes of participation to the symbolic level (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012).

The study thus concludes that citizens has great potential of enhancing the local government decision making, but it must be meaningful, inclusive and institutionalized through responsible management structures (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012). This conclusion both builds up current areas of knowledge by underscoring that it is not the presence of participation that must be considered, but its impact on the democratic and practical quality of decisions made by the populace (Holum, 2023; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Quick & Bryson, 2022).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Local government must make citizen participation a part and parcel of planning and decision making by making public consultations, participatory budgeting and community dialogue part of the routine planning and decision making (Holum, 2023; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wampler et al., 2021).
2. Transparency should be enhanced by government administrators; giving citizens access to information regarding budgets, priorities in developments and choice of policies in a timely, clear, and accessible way before they are taken to participatory meetings (Bertot et al., 2010; Fox, 2015; Meijer, 2015).
3. Governments and civil society bodies need to increase civic education to make the citizens more knowledgeable about their rights, procedures involving participation and the issues of policy being discussed (Holum, 2023; Mwesigwa et al., 2022).
4. Local governments need to establish administrative capacity to achieve participatory governance by training, facilitation support, record keeping systems and feedback mechanisms that demonstrate how the input of citizens has been able to guide decisions (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Quick & Bryson, 2022).
5. Marginalized groups should be enabled through special measures to bring them on board such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and poorer households to make participatory spaces more inclusive and representative (Holum, 2023; Williams et al., 2012).
6. There should be safeguard to prevent elite entrapment and political cynicism of participatory procedures, such as the independent facilitating, do-not-hide-the-ballot procedures, and public chooses, and public responses (Fox, 2015; Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2012).

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