

Effects of citizen engagement strategies on the legislative process of the Finance Bill, 2024, in the National Assembly of Kenya

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Abstract

Citizen engagement, which is a key element of participatory communication, is the pillar of participation by members of the public in the legislative process. It is the principle measure of what defines a democracy (Mburu, 2020). It is a two-way involvement of citizens in their government's activities and decision-making processes, fostering transparency, accountability, and collaboration to improve public policies and community well-being. Consequently, it enables citizens to share their perspectives, contribute ideas, and hold officials accountable, leading to better-informed decisions that reflect the community's needs and values (Kiguta, 2020). Methods for engagement include public meetings and consultations, online platforms and participatory budgeting, all aiming to build trust and a stronger democratic society. This study therefore aimed at examining the role of citizen engagement in the legislative process of the Finance Bill, 2024, in Kenya's National Assembly. Guided by Participatory Communication and Deliberative Theories, the study employed a qualitative design. The target population included 349 Members of Parliament and 2,109,284 Generation Z citizens (aged 18–28) from Nairobi, Nakuru, Mombasa, and Kisumu. A purposive and quota sample of 60 respondents was drawn: 20 MPs (including committee members, liaison officers, and key informants) and 40 youth participants in four focus groups. Piloting was done with Senators and Machakos residents. Data was collected through interviews and FGDs and analysed using NVivo 9 with both content and thematic analysis. Findings revealed that citizen engagement, especially digital activism, raised awareness and improved debate quality but had little policy impact due to weak feedback loops, partisan dominance, and institutional capacity gaps. Public participation was therefore largely symbolic, undermining trust and weakening legislative legitimacy. The study concludes that citizen engagement in Kenya's legislative process remains superficial without neutrality, inclusivity, structured feedback, and institutional commitment. It recommends impartial facilitation, decentralized and inclusive engagement formats, and institutionalized feedback systems. Parliament should strengthen its capacity to process submissions, track amendments transparently, and demonstrate how citizen input shapes legislation. Embedding these reforms would enhance responsiveness, rebuild trust, and improve the democratic legitimacy of future bills.

Introduction

The implementation of participatory communication, which also involves citizen engagement, in the legislative process is anchored on four pillars: attributes of facilitators, diversity of stakeholders, methods of citizen engagement, and inclusivity of public views (L. Servaes & Servaes, 2021). Facilitators play a crucial role, where education, expertise, impartiality, communication, and cultural sensitivity are essential for mediating discussions (Mburu, 2020). Stakeholder diversity includes regional, religious, ethnic, gender, youth, minority, PWDs, and elderly groups (Haq et al., 2020; Martín-Cano et al., 2020). Citizen engagement methods now include digital and social media, alongside community visits, training, open days, and constituency offices (Secinaro et al., 2022; Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2021). Inclusivity is strengthened by responsiveness to input, diversified mechanisms, accessible information, and feedback systems (Devaney et al., 2020; MacLeod & Scott, 2021). These collectively make the process transparent, accountable, and reflective of society.

In Kenya, public participation is a constitutional requirement but it faces challenges such as limited awareness, poor publicity of hearings, logistical barriers, and lack of resources (Ireru, 2024; Kiguta, 2020). While the National Assembly and Senate use hearings, consultations, and memoranda, effectiveness is hampered by low turnout, mistrust, and perceptions of disregarded input (Adhiambo, 2018; Bwire, 2024; Gachuki, 2024; Wara, 2025).

These issues were evident in the Finance Bill 2024 process. Originating from the National Treasury, the Bill had minimal participatory communication at early stages. The committee phase invited public views but recommendations were largely excluded from amendments. Public forums were hurriedly organized, yet suggestions were not incorporated. Debate at second reading was restricted to MPs, while Presidential assent was

blocked by President William Ruto in response to public protests (Finance Bill, 2024; National Assembly of Kenya, 2024). Although participation was mandated, its influence remained limited.

Statement of the Problem

Participatory communication ensures citizens' voices in legislation, as required by Articles 1, 10, 118, and 232 of the Constitution. However, in Kenya, outreach is limited, information dissemination is insufficient, and public input inadequately considered (Adhiambo, 2018). Many citizens remain uninformed, forums are often inaccessible, and hurried consultations weaken trust. A 2020 survey found over 60% of respondents felt their input was rarely considered (Public Participation Assessment Report, 2020). Excluding public voices risks poor legislation, public unrest, erosion of trust, and exacerbation of inequality (Kariuki et al., 2023).

Research gaps remain. As far as this study is concerned, few studies focus on legislative processes by parliaments (Agu & Nwoke, 2024; Mwangi & Kubasu, 2022; Nzimakwe et al., 1994; Wara, 2021). The effects of facilitator attributes, citizen engagement methods, and participatory communication on legislative quality are not well established. No research has analysed citizen engagement as a participatory communication strategy in relation to the Finance Bill 2024. Existing studies emphasize participation but neglect communication structures. This study therefore examined the effects of citizen engagement strategies on the legislative process of the Finance Bill 2024 in Kenya's National Assembly.

Study Objective

The main objective of this study was to examine the effects of citizen engagement strategies on the legislative process of the Finance Bill, 2024, in the National Assembly of Kenya.

Justification of the Study

The study lies in its potential to enhance democratic governance in Kenya. By evaluating citizen engagement strategies in the legislative process of the Finance Bill, 2024, it provides insights into how effectively the National Assembly engages citizens, ensuring legislation reflects public will and needs. Examining citizen engagement reveals the impact of public opinion on legislative outcomes, potentially leading to more responsive and representative policies. Analysing inclusivity highlights the extent to which diverse voices are heard, promoting equity and fairness. Finally, exploring the role of technology and social media offers strategies for modernizing the legislative process, making it more accessible and transparent.

Participatory Communication Theory

Participatory Communication Theory, rooted in Paulo Freire's dialogical pedagogy and UNESCO debates of the 1970s, emphasizes democratization and active involvement of communities in communication processes (Fernández-Aballí Altamirano, 2016, 2020). It assumes two-way communication, cultural respect, empowerment, and inclusivity, fostering mutual learning and viable solutions. Initially applied in literacy and community development programs, it later expanded to participatory media such as community radio and video (Reuter et al., 2019), and is now used in healthcare, environmental management, and governance (Letsie & Osunkule, 2024; Marsili et al., 2023; J. Servaes, 2022). Scholars such as Sen (1999) and Waisbord (2005) highlight its role in promoting democratic participation and social change. Despite critiques over rigor and operationalization (Jacobson, 2003; Linkoy, 2021), the theory remains relevant in legislative contexts by promoting transparency, inclusivity, and accountability (Kiguta, 2020). The theory is relevant in the current study as it emphasizes the need for citizen engagement, which is an aspect of participatory approach, in national development.

Deliberative Theory

Deliberative Theory, originating from Rawls (1971) and developed by Habermas (1984), argues that democratic legitimacy arises from inclusive, reasoned discourse rather than the aggregation of preferences. It emphasizes equality, transparency, rational debate, and consensus-seeking. Applied in parliamentary processes, it underscores the importance of the open discussion and informed decision-making (Dolný, 2011; Rinne, 2020). Although it is criticized for privileging articulate voices (Curato et al., 2022; Gaus et al., 2020), the theory serves as a normative framework encouraging diverse participation in law-making.

Methods of citizen engagement

Citizen participation refers to the systematic engagement methods of legislatures for involving citizens in governance and law-making. Citizen participation approaches help to improve transparency, accountability, and democratic engagement. Effective engagement methods create channels for diverse populations to contribute meaningfully to decisions. According to Thungo (2019), although there are channels such as public hearings and outreach programs, they do not cut very deeply and do not translate into policy influence due to poor feedback and low inclusivity. Jiru et al. (2020) observe that genuine public engagement enhances democratic accountability and strengthens public confidence. The success of how well an engagement is conducted is dependent on the method employed and its inclusivity level. This study is focused on three generic engagement approaches: social media and digital outreach, community visits (barazas and focus groups), and open communication forums.

Digital and social media outreach entails the use of media including social media, institutional websites, and mobile technology to establish a channel of communication between legislative bodies and the public. Such media enable extensive coverage of information and real-time interaction, especially between youth and urban populations. Campos-Domínguez and Ramos-Vielba (2022) state that parliaments in Europe have enhanced the transparency and access to legislative information for citizens through digitalization. However, they are also cautious to include that popular participation remains curtailed unless these platforms are incorporated effectively into overall participation efforts. Jiru et al. (2020) concur with the argument, adding that limited use of new communication technologies poses challenges to fruitful participation in Ethiopia. While online forums have great potential, challenges such as lack of digital literacy and one-language policies will need to be addressed to ensure maximum involvement.

Community visitations, barazas, and focus group familiarization are traditional, face-to-face engagement methods that ensure immediate contact between the public and legislators. These methods are particularly important in marginalized or rural communities where there is poor online access. Thungo (2019) observes that outreach programs are employed by the Gauteng Provincial Legislature in an attempt to enhance civic engagement, although this commonly ends up being ineffective due to underfunding and non-inclusivity. Similarly, Jiru et al. (2020) observe limited constituency visits and low institutional capacity as hindrances to effective citizen involvement in Ethiopia. Such measures, if planned well, demystify legislative processes and offer safe spaces for citizens' articulation. Nevertheless, unless supported by adequate follow-through and integration into formal legislative processes, their impact may remain symbolic.

Open communication forums like town hall meetings, public hearings, and legislative open days provide formal platforms for citizens to raise concerns and make legislation. Thungo (2019) observes that even with the availability of such forums in Gauteng, their potential is undermined by symbolic engagement and poor feedback mechanisms. Jiru et al. (2020) propose structured participation models to ensure open forums are translated into concrete legislative results. Rutere and Simiyu (2024) found that in Embu County, Kenya, ineffective communication strategies left a big disparity between public awareness and participation. Therefore, open forums must be recurrent, participatory, and followed by systematic follow-up procedures. If well handled, they are able to enhance legitimacy and foster trust between the public and legislators.

Legislative process (LP)

The legislative process refers to official procedures of legislatures to formulate, review, and enact legislation. The process involves agenda setting, bill drafting, multiple stages of review, and public engagement. An open and participatory process of legislation enhances accountability and public trust. Thungo (2019) found that although public hearings and petitions are mechanisms available in the Gauteng legislature, there is very little that public inputs contribute to final legislative decisions due to symbolic participation and weak feedback loops. Jiru et al. (2020) are also of the opinion that little constituency mobilization, rushed law-making, and weak institutional capacity forestall effective participation in the parliament of Ethiopia. The process must be participatory and inclusive at all levels to align legislation with citizen priorities and provide democratic legitimacy.

Agenda setting is the initial stage where legislative priorities are determined and placed on the agenda to be acted upon. It dictates the direction of the national conversation and identifies what matters are tackled. Citizen issue

participation at this stage is critical for good representation. As Jiru et al. (2020) noted, public involvement tends to be undermined by participatory legislative agendas that ignore the voice of the people. Likewise, Thungo (2019) noted that public participation is underappreciated at initial stages, rendering participation symbolic in nature. Absent mechanisms for enabling citizens to shape what gets onto the legislative agenda, parliaments will pass legislation that will not have resonance among the people. Therefore, agenda setting has to be informed by participatory and inclusive processes to popularize the agenda and include it in the public's interests.

Bill drafting is the substantive process of translating policy proposals or public concerns into the law. This is an extremely critical process as it determines the future legal wording and enforceability of the law. Successful drafting must involve professional input and public consultation. Thungo (2019) noted that while processes have been established by the Gauteng legislature, public participation in drafting remains low. Jiru et al. (2020) further stated that inadequate parliamentary capacity and stiffness in institutions limit transparency in drafting in Ethiopia. Campos-Domínguez and Ramos-Vielba (2022) suggest that digital platforms can democratize this stage, though poorly used. Inclusive bill preparation not only improves content quality but also sanctifies the legislature by including various perspectives, particularly of marginalized sections.

All-stage control of a bill ensures legislative quality, transparency, and compliance with constitutional norms. It involves committee scrutiny, debates, public hearings, and amendments. Thungo (2019) observed that despite oversight systems existing in the Gauteng Provincial Legislature, marginalization of minority voices and substandard public education dilute accountability. Jiru et al. (2020) reaffirmed that poor institutional backing and unaffordable parliamentary systems discourage long-term public oversight. Rutere and Simiyu (2024) also proved that low public awareness of legislative oversight in Embu County exists due to ineffective communication strategies. Continuous monitoring of public scrutiny as well is essential to prevent elite capture, correct policy errors, and build trust in the law-making process.

Effective participation of citizens in the legislative process is such that it guarantees actual participation at every level agenda setting, formulation, monitoring, and implementation. It entails transparent communication, structured feedback, and participative machinery. Thungo (2019) argued that although outreach avenues exist in Gauteng, engagement by citizens is largely symbolic and lacks substantive impact on policy. Jiru et al. (2020) highlighted that participatory democracy would only be realized if citizens' inputs are attended to and integrated systematically. Rutere and Simiyu (2024) reported low rates of awareness and weak citizen participation due to a lack of proper public sensitization and communication breakdown. Effective citizen participation heightens public confidence, strengthens democracy, and ensures that the laws adequately respond to the needs and wishes of society.

Citizen Engagement Methods and Legislative Process

Thungo (2019) employed a phenomenological research approach of qualitative research design to explore the efficiency and effectiveness of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature (GPL) in involving citizens in legislative and policy-making processes in Gauteng, South Africa. The research is anchored in participatory governance theory, which emphasizes the democratic value of citizen involvement in legislative processes to strengthen accountability and improve service delivery. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study uses purposive sampling to select 43 key informants with direct experience and knowledge of public participation mechanisms within the Gauteng Provincial Legislature (GPL). The study finds that while the GPL has implemented mechanisms such as public hearings, petitions, and outreach programs to foster civic engagement. These efforts often lack depth and efficacy. Public participation was found to be largely symbolic, with limited influence on legislative outcomes. Key challenges include poor feedback loops, inadequate public awareness, and a prevailing perception that citizen input is undervalued. Thungo recommends strengthening public education, enhancing feedback systems, and institutionalizing more meaningful integration of public contributions into law-making processes. However, the study also identified shortcomings, such as insufficient inclusivity of the Coloured, Indian, and White populations, and a lack of political neutrality, which discouraged broader participation. Additionally, the feedback mechanism was found to be unsatisfactory, with delays and an absence of systematic processes, resulting in limited influence of public inputs on policy decisions. The study recommended increasing inclusivity, strengthening feedback mechanisms, and incorporating public input into the House committee

systems. This research, however, was based on provincial legislation and not on national legislation, which could provide different perspectives.

Jiru et al. (2020) conducted a study titled “Public Engagement for Improving the Relationship between the People and the Parliament” in Ethiopia. The research is anchored in participatory democracy theory, which underscores the role of citizen involvement in legislative processes to foster democratic accountability and build public trust. Using a qualitative case study design, the researchers employed purposive sampling to select 12 key informants and 22 stakeholders actively engaged in parliamentary public engagement initiatives. The study reveals that meaningful public engagement strengthens democratic governance by bridging the gap between the electorate and the Ethiopian House of People’s Representatives (HoPRs). The findings indicate that public engagement enhances participatory democracy and public trust by improving the relationship between citizens and parliament. The effectiveness of public engagement was determined by the strategy and policy employed. However, the study also highlighted significant challenges, such as the lack of institutional capacity and resources, parliamentary inaccessibility, a hasty law-making process, limited constituency visits, insufficient use of modern communication technologies, and a one-language policy. These were found to hinder effective parliamentary public engagement in Ethiopia. The researchers recommend a comprehensive engagement framework, increased institutional support, and inclusive communication strategies. The research was not clear on the broad aspects of participatory communication and was not specific to parliament.

Campos-Domínguez and Ramos-Vielba (2022) examined the evolution of digital communication within European parliaments over the past 30 years. Eva Campos-Dominguez and Irene Ramos-Vielba conducted the study titled “Parliaments and Key Transformations in Digital Communication”, focusing on various national parliaments across the European Union. The study is guided by theories of participatory democracy and digital transformation, aiming to understand how technological advancements influence parliamentary communication and citizen engagement. Utilizing a qualitative, analytical research design, the study is based on a comprehensive literature review and purposive sampling of 116 relevant case studies on parliamentary digital communication. The findings highlight how digital transformation has improved both internal procedures and public access to parliamentary information, fostering greater transparency and accountability. However, the study also notes challenges in achieving effective grassroots involvement through digital engagement with parliaments. This research focused on the broader institutional changes and societal interactions rather than specific public engagement strategies.

Rutere and Simiyu (2024) employed a descriptive research design to understand the effectiveness of public relations in legislative communication in Embu County in Kenya. The study targeted residents aged 18 and above, ensuring diverse socio-economic and demographic perspectives. It used a random and purposive sample of 400 respondents, including county officials and the general public, through questionnaires and interviews. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory, the study analysed the impact of social and traditional media on public communication efforts. Data from questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative insights were derived from content analysis of interviews. The findings revealed a significant awareness gap among stakeholders, with 58% indicating a lack of participation in the legislative processes and 55.5% reporting only moderate awareness. Contributing factors included inadequate communication from the county government and insufficient public sensitization efforts. The study focused on participatory communication that concerns county legislation. It did not examine citizen engagement in the national legislative process.

Research Gap

Despite advances in participatory governance, few empirical studies examine facilitator attributes, such as impartiality, cultural awareness, and communication skills in national legislatures. Most scholars focus on local governments or thematic areas like environment (Bynner et al., 2023; Wade et al., 2024), or devolved units such as counties (Mosonik, 2017; Kiguta, 2020). Moreover, while literature addresses stakeholder diversity (Shim, 2021; Murphy, 2020) and citizen engagement (Prior, 2022), little integrates these within a communication framework to assess their combined effect on legislative outcomes. Dynamic groups such as Generation Z, whose digital activism increasingly influences policy debates, remain underexplored. These gaps underscore the need for a theory-driven study of citizen engagement strategies in Kenya’s National Assembly, with the Finance Bill

2024 offering a timely and contested case for analysis.

Research Design

Research design refers to the overall strategy and structure that guides a research project, ensuring that data collection, measurement, and analysis effectively address the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study adopted a qualitative design, which seeks to understand human experiences, behaviours, and social phenomena through non-numerical data (Adedoyin, 2020). Qualitative methods provide in-depth insights into complex issues, offer flexibility during data collection, and center participants’ perspectives in shaping the research process (Creswell, 2024; Bryman, 2022; Denzin & Lincoln, 2021).

This design was particularly suitable as the study explored complex social processes underpinning participatory communication in Kenya’s legislative process. By examining the impact of citizen engagement on the Finance Bill 2024, qualitative methods enabled the analysis of opinions, experiences, and interactions in natural settings, capturing nuances and emergent themes often missed in quantitative approaches.

Target Population

The study targeted two groups. First, 349 Members of Parliament (MPs), comprising 290 constituency-elected members, 47 women representatives, 12 nominated members, and the Speaker. Second, members of the public aged 18–28 (Generation Z) drawn from Nairobi, Nakuru, Mombasa, and Kisumu counties.

Generation Z was included because they are digitally engaged, civically aware, and influential in policy discourse. During debates on the Finance Bill 2024, they played a critical role through online advocacy, hashtags, infographics, digital forums, and petitions (Arzani, 2025; Kirui, 2025). Their activism on platforms such as Twitter (X), TikTok, and Instagram amplified youth voices and shaped public opinion, influencing legislative discussions (Kang’ethe & Onyango, 2025). As emerging voters, taxpayers, and future leaders, their views on governance and fiscal responsibility were essential for evaluating citizen engagement in Kenya’s legislative process (Ingutia, 2025; Maina, 2025). The target population for MPs was 349, while the estimated Generation Z population across the four counties was 2,109,284.

Members of Parliament	Target population
Speaker and elected members of parliament	291
Women representatives	47
Nominated members	12
Total	349

Table 1: Target population of members of parliament/ Sample size. Source: The National Assembly of Kenya (2025)

County	Estimated Population Aged 18–28 Years
Nairobi City	1,146,567
Nakuru	470,530
Mombasa	282,361
Kisumu	209,826

Total	2,109,284
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Table 2: Target population of members of the public between 18-28 years old. Source: KNBS (2025)

Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive and quota sampling to select respondents from the National Assembly and the public across four counties. In the National Assembly, purposive sampling identified 20 members directly involved in the Finance Bill 2024 legislative process. These included 3 members from the Budget and Appropriation Committee, 3 from the Finance and Budget Committee, 1 MP from the Speaker’s Panel, 1 Parliamentary Liaison Officer from the Ministry of Finance, and 12 MPs and key informants engaged in public hearings, stakeholder forums, and debates. This approach follows Adhiambo (2018) and Bwire (2024), who recommend focusing on actors directly engaged in fiscal decision-making and participatory processes.

Quota sampling was used to select 40 Generation Z respondents (10 per county: Nairobi, Nakuru, Mombasa, and Kisumu). Each county contributed one focus group of 10 participants, consistent with Krueger and Casey’s (2015) recommended range of 6–12 members. Participants were purposively drawn from youth organizations, civic tech groups, university networks, and online platforms active in Finance Bill 2024 debates. Gender and civic engagement balance were ensured, capturing diverse but informed perspectives from digitally active and civically aware youth.

3.5 Sample Size

The total sample size was 60 respondents: 20 from the National Assembly and 40 from the public. Parliamentary participants included committee members, a Speaker’s Panel MP, a Finance Liaison Officer, and 12 MPs active in public participation. Generation Z voices were gathered through four focus groups (10 participants per county). This size was chosen to balance representativeness and manageability, providing rich insights while maintaining interactive discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The distribution is as shown in Table 3.2.

Category	Sample Size
Generation Z (Ten per county)	40
Budget and Appropriation Committee	3
Finance and Budget Committee	3
Speaker’s Panel	1
Parliamentary Liaison Officer from the Ministry of Finance	1
Members of the National Assembly (3 per county)	12
Total	60

Table 3: Sample Size. Source: Researcher (2025)

Data Collection Techniques

Given the qualitative nature of the study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured interviews, guided by a flexible interview guide, ensured consistency while allowing probing of emerging themes (Bryman, 2016; Kallio et al., 2016). Twenty Members of Parliament were interviewed, selected for their active participation in public hearings, debates, and stakeholder engagements on the Finance Bill 2024.

For Generation Z participants (aged 18–28), four FGDs were conducted, one in each of Nairobi, Nakuru, Mombasa, and Kisumu counties, with 10 participants per group. Participants were purposively drawn from youth organizations, university networks, and civic tech groups engaged in Finance Bill 2024 debates. FGDs were held in accessible venues such as community centres and university auditoriums, moderated by trained facilitators using semi-structured discussion guides. Sessions encouraged inclusive participation, bilingual facilitation where necessary, and safe spaces for open dialogue. All FGDs were audio-recorded with informed consent, supplemented by detailed field notes, and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative data were analysed using narrative and thematic approaches to capture participants' perceptions and experiences of citizen engagement in the legislative process (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis began with data condensation, followed by deductive coding based on the conceptual framework and inductive coding to allow new insights to emerge (Neale, 2016). Codes were grouped into broader themes and subthemes, exploring relationships across variables (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

To enhance rigor, a coding matrix was developed and Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) employed, with Python used for text processing and keyword analysis (Niedbalski & Ślęzak, 2017). Data were organized into nodes aligned with major themes, enabling systematic categorization and pattern detection (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). Findings were presented in narrative and thematic formats, supported by direct quotes, and mapped against research questions and conceptual variables to ensure coherent interpretation.

Validity of the Research Instruments

Validity refers to how well a test measures what it is intended to measure, or the accuracy and meaningfulness of the inferences drawn from the research results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To assess the validity of the instruments used, the results from the pilot study was utilized for pretesting. Content validity was reviewed and confirmed with supervisors to ensure they capture the necessary information.

Reliability of the Research Instruments

Triangulation and intercoder reliability were applied by splitting the completed questionnaires from the pilot study. The researcher and his research assistants analysed the same data to compare interpretations. Multiple sources, methods, and assistants cross-checked findings (Kite & Whitley, 2018).

Analysis: Citizen Engagement Techniques in Legislative Processes

High Effectiveness in Awareness and Mobilization, but Low in Direct Influence

A key theme in the Finance Bill 2024 process was the gap between high mobilization and low legislative influence. Digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and online petitions generated widespread awareness, particularly among youth. As one participant observed, *"The digital protests made people feel united even if we were in different counties"* (FGD – Nairobi). Yet, despite strong civic action, many felt their input had little effect on the Bill's clauses. *"We protested, submitted memoranda, commented online... but nothing changed in the actual finance bill"* (FGD – Nakuru). Interviews with MPs confirmed that Parliament lacked mechanisms to systematically process feedback. As one insider noted, *"The system wasn't prepared to absorb or process the volume of feedback"* (Interviewee R9).

These findings echo Participatory Communication Theory (Freire, 1970; Servaes, 2022), which emphasizes empowerment through inclusive dialogue, and Deliberative Theory (Habermas, 1984), which stresses legitimacy through reasoned debate. Yet in Kenya, participation often stopped at awareness-raising, without meaningful integration into deliberations. This parallels Thungo's (2019) findings in South Africa and Jiru et al.'s (2020) study in Ethiopia, where engagement was visible but substantively limited.

Perception of Tokenism and Lack of Genuine Incorporation

A second theme was the perception that public participation was symbolic rather than substantive. Many participants described forums as “box-ticking” exercises: *“They asked for our views, but you could tell the decisions had already been made”* (FGD, Kisumu). Parliamentary officials admitted submissions were collected but rarely synthesized for debate. The absence of transparent feedback loops created disillusionment: *“We were heard, but not listened to”* (FGD, Nakuru).

This sense of tokenism undermined trust in both Parliament and facilitators, aligning with earlier studies in Kenya (Rutere & Simiyu, 2024) and South Africa (Thungo, 2019). Theoretical frameworks suggest that when citizens perceive participation as performative, democratic legitimacy is weakened (Habermas, 1984). Without structures that trace citizen feedback into legislative revisions, participation risks legitimizing predetermined outcomes rather than co-producing laws.

Variable Accessibility and Reach across Demographics

The third theme was uneven accessibility across demographics. Digital platforms amplified urban, educated youth voices, *“Without social media, I wouldn’t have known anything about the Bill”* (FGD – Nairobi), but excluded rural and elderly populations lacking connectivity, literacy, or timely information. Barazas were sometimes poorly advertised or dominated by elites, limiting inclusivity. Language barriers also restricted participation: *“Most sessions were in English or Kiswahili. What about the elderly who only speak local languages?”* (FGD, Kisumu).

These disparities reinforce Participatory Communication Theory’s call for context-sensitive inclusivity (Servaes, 2022). Similar challenges were documented in Ethiopia, where a one-language policy excluded rural groups (Jiru et al., 2020), and in South Africa, where outreach failed to reach minorities (Thungo, 2019). Even in Europe, digital reforms improved transparency but often sidelined non-digital populations (Campos-Domínguez & Ramos-Vielba, 2022). In Kenya, without hybrid approaches, blending online platforms with localized outreach and translation, citizen engagement risks reproducing inequalities rather than correcting them.

Impact of specific methods (digital outreach, barazas, forums)

Complementary Strengths and Weaknesses of Digital vs. Traditional Methods

The Finance Bill 2024 deliberations highlighted the complementary strengths of digital and traditional engagement. Digital platforms such as Twitter and Instagram mobilized large numbers quickly, especially urban youth: *“Digital outreach enabled real-time feedback, especially from younger populations in urban centers”* (Interviewee R9). Yet participants noted that awareness rarely translated into meaningful dialogue: *“We became aware of the Bill through Twitter and Instagram, but it was hard to translate that into real participation”* (FGD, Kisumu). By contrast, community barazas allowed face-to-face trust-building and localized input: *“Trust was easier to build in physical meetings”* (Interviewee R13). However, many were “rushed and poorly documented,” limiting their effectiveness. This duality shows that while digital outreach excelled in breadth, barazas provided depth, suggesting hybrid models are necessary.

Challenge of Translating All Input into Policy Impact

Across methods, participants consistently felt their feedback was acknowledged but not integrated into the Bill. *“We tweeted, commented, and signed petitions, but none of our concerns were captured in the final draft”* (FGD, Nairobi). Others described barazas as *“a box-ticking exercise”* (FGD, Mombasa). Parliamentary officials admitted submissions were recorded but not synthesized for debate. The absence of clear feedback loops fostered perceptions of tokenism and eroded trust. This reflects findings from Thungo (2019) in South Africa and Jiru et al. (2020) in Ethiopia, where participation mechanisms raised visibility but had limited legislative impact.

Varying Inclusivity and Deliberation Depth across Methods

Engagement methods varied in inclusivity. Digital platforms amplified Gen Z and urban professionals but excluded rural and elderly populations, lacking connectivity or literacy. *“Digital outreach is fine, but what happens to people in rural Molo without smartphones or coverage?”* (FGD, Nakuru). Barazas offered rural participation but were inconsistently organized and often dominated by elites. Open forums provided technical input from professional associations but intimidated ordinary citizens with formal language. As one participant observed, *“We could tweet and comment, but there was no room for deep, structured dialogue”* (FGD, Nairobi).

These findings echo Participatory Communication Theory’s call for context-sensitive, inclusive strategies (Freire, 1970; Servaes, 2022) and Deliberative Theory’s emphasis on equality of voice (Habermas, 1984). Yet, like Rutere and Simiyu (2024) in Embu and Campos-Domínguez and Ramos-Vielba (2022) in Europe, Kenya’s experience shows that digital and traditional methods each privilege some groups while marginalizing others. True inclusivity requires hybrid approaches, multilingual facilitation, localized barazas, simplified digital portals, and deliberate outreach to vulnerable groups. Without such integration, participatory processes risk reinforcing inequality rather than enhancing democratic legitimacy.

Contribution of engagement methods to legislative quality and inclusivity

Enhanced Awareness in Debates but Limited Impact on Final Decisions

Citizen engagement methods improved the quality of debates but had little impact on final outcomes. Digital platforms enabled MPs to gauge public sentiment: *“Digital platforms helped us capture the mood of the country. I could walk into the chamber better informed about citizen pain points”* (Interviewee R3). Youth voices from Twitter and WhatsApp were cited in plenary sessions, and MPs acknowledged that forums broadened their perspectives. Yet, as one participant noted, *“They debated our points well, but at the end, nothing changed in the final version of the Bill”* (FGD, Kisumu). Party loyalty and the whip system ultimately outweighed public input. This echoes Thungo’s (2019) findings in South Africa and Jiru et al.’s (2020) study in Ethiopia, where engagement shaped rhetoric but rarely decisions. Participatory Communication Theory stresses empowerment through inclusion (Freire, 1970; Servaes, 2022), while Deliberative Theory emphasizes reasoned discourse guiding decisions (Habermas, 1984). In Kenya, debates reflected citizen voices symbolically but not substantively.

Creation of Public Frustration and Erosion of Trust

The limited influence of citizen input fostered public frustration and declining trust in parliamentary processes. Many described forums as “a waste of time” (FGD, Kisumu) and “a box-ticking exercise” (FGD, Mombasa). MPs admitted quoting public submissions during debates but following party caucus lines when voting: *“The whip’s instruction took over. It’s disheartening”* (Interviewee R5). Citizens further complained of absent feedback loops: *“We submitted our feedback online, and that was it. No updates, no follow-up, nothing”* (FGD, Nairobi). This perception of tokenism mirrors findings in Ethiopia (Jiru et al., 2020), South Africa (Thungo, 2019), and Kenya’s Embu County (Rutere & Simiyu, 2024), where weak feedback systems eroded confidence. Both Participatory Communication and Deliberative Theories emphasize reciprocity and transparency, yet Kenyan engagement lacked mechanisms to trace input into legislative revisions, undermining legitimacy.

Performative Debates vs. Substantive Change

A recurring theme was the perception of “performative debates.” Citizens’ views were quoted in plenary for optics but rarely shaped legislation: *“The debates were colorful and full of public references, but ultimately, the final clauses hardly changed”* (Interviewee R2). This created disillusionment: *“When people see their ideas enter Parliament but never show up in the final law, it kills motivation”* (FGD, Kisumu). MPs themselves admitted that party caucuses predetermined decisions, leaving participatory forums symbolic. Similar patterns appear in Europe, where digital engagement improved visibility but not outcomes (Campos-Domínguez & Ramos-Vielba, 2022). As in South Africa and Ethiopia, citizen voices enriched rhetoric but not law. From a deliberative perspective, this illustrates a failure of inclusive reasoning: debates acknowledged voices but outcomes reflected

institutional agendas.

Overall, the Finance Bill 2024 case shows that engagement methods enhanced discursive quality but failed to alter legislative substance. Citizens experienced participation as symbolic, eroding trust and discouraging future involvement. This disconnect risks transforming participatory communication into ritual rather than empowerment. For Kenya, institutional reforms, such as binding committee mechanisms to integrate submissions and transparent feedback systems, are essential. Without these, participatory forums may amplify frustration, reinforce inequality, and weaken the democratic legitimacy they are designed to uphold.

Recommendations for improved citizen engagement methods in future bills

Enhanced Digital Platforms with Transparency and Feedback Loops

Participants called for interactive, transparent digital platforms to replace fragmented systems used in the Finance Bill 2024. Suggestions included a centralized online portal or mobile app where citizens could track submissions, view amendments, and access lawmakers' explanations: *"We need a dedicated app where we can see the Bill, comment on sections, and see if our comments actually lead to changes"* (FGD, Nairobi). Gen Z participant's also proposed AI-driven tools for processing large volumes of feedback efficiently.

These recommendations align with Participatory Communication Theory, which stresses reciprocity and meaningful acknowledgment of citizen input (Freire, 1970; Servaes, 2022), and Deliberative Theory, which emphasizes transparent reasoning in decision-making (Habermas, 1984). Global studies show that digital tools expand transparency but often lack mechanisms for influence (Campos-Domínguez & Ramos-Vielba, 2022). Kenyan participants highlighted the need for mobile-friendly, simplified platforms to ensure rural accessibility. Without structured feedback loops, however, digital tools risk remaining performative rather than transformative.

Deeper, Decentralized, and Facilitated Local Engagements

Respondents emphasized decentralizing public participation beyond county-level barazas into wards and villages to capture grassroots realities: *"We need more local meetings in our own villages, not just big towns"* (FGD, Nakuru). Smaller, demographic-specific focus groups were seen as better suited for candid discussions, while independent facilitators were recommended to build trust and avoid political manipulation.

This approach reflects Participatory Communication Theory's insistence on empowering marginalized voices (Fernández-Aballí Altamirano, 2020) and Deliberative Theory's emphasis on inclusivity in discourse (Habermas, 1984). Comparative studies show that centralization in South Africa (Thungo, 2019) and Ethiopia (Jiru et al., 2020) weakened inclusivity, while Kenyan counties also struggled with elite capture and rushed barazas (Rutere & Simiyu, 2024). Institutionalizing smaller, independently moderated forums could counteract tokenism, foster trust, and enhance representation.

Proactive Civic Education and Early Intervention

Participants stressed that meaningful participation requires informed citizens and earlier involvement in the legislative cycle. As one noted: *"Most people don't even know how the Finance Bill works, so they come to meetings but don't know what to say"* (Interviewee R9). Calls included civic education from schools, simplified materials in multiple languages, and public sensitization before participation forums. Early engagement during policy formulation, not after drafting, was seen as key: *"Starting engagement much earlier... would significantly improve the chances of shaping the actual content"* (Interviewee R12).

These recommendations reflect Participatory Communication Theory's focus on equipping communities for empowered dialogue (Freire, 1970; Servaes, 2022) and Deliberative Theory's requirement for informed reasoning (Habermas, 1984). Empirical studies in Ethiopia, South Africa, and Kenya confirm that lack of civic knowledge weakens participation and produces tokenism (Jiru et al., 2020; Thungo, 2019; Rutere & Simiyu, 2024). Embedding civic education and introducing early-stage engagement would transform forums from reactive protest spaces into proactive co-governance mechanisms.

Discussions of the Findings

One of the key findings from the Finance Bill 2024 legislative process was that digital outreach and social media platforms significantly enhanced public awareness and mobilization, particularly among urban youth. Citizens used platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp to understand, discuss, and protest aspects of the Bill in real time. Focus group participants noted that these platforms created a sense of unity and visibility across counties. However, despite this success in awareness creation, the input collected through digital methods rarely influenced the final content of the Bill. This finding aligns with Thungo's (2019) observation that while modern participatory tools can enhance visibility and civic interest, they often fall short in generating policy impact due to their weak institutional anchorage and lack of formal integration into legislative workflows.

Similarly, the use of barazas and public forums revealed a dual effect. On one hand, they allowed for face-to-face engagement with citizens in rural and peri-urban areas, facilitating trust and cultural contextualization of fiscal content. On the other hand, many of these forums were rushed, poorly facilitated, or inconsistently documented. Participants from Kisumu and Nakuru noted that announcements were made late, limiting preparedness, and that facilitators often failed to capture or follow up on community input. This outcome closely reflects the concerns raised by Jiru et al. (2020), who argue that the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms depends not just on presence but on planning, facilitation quality, and post-engagement action. Their study emphasized that poorly structured forums contribute to tokenism, with citizens speaking but not shaping the agenda, a dynamic repeatedly observed in the Finance Bill 2024 engagements.

Another major finding was the widespread perception of tokenism and performative participation. Despite the structured collection of views through written submissions, barazas, and online portals, citizens frequently reported that their input was ignored or lacked a traceable impact. This disconnection led to frustration and a loss of trust in the participatory process. Several MPs acknowledged this challenge, citing the dominance of party loyalty and executive-aligned positions over citizen feedback during final voting. Campos-Domínguez and Ramos-Vielba (2022) highlight that for participatory communication to be authentic, it must be embedded in deliberative institutions that can absorb, debate, and act on diverse inputs. When citizen engagement exists outside such frameworks, it is easily dismissed as consultative noise, regardless of its intensity.

A further finding was that while citizen voices improved the *quality* of parliamentary debates, they did not influence *decisions*. MPs referenced citizen feedback during plenary sessions, often quoting youth comments or concerns from digital spaces but ultimately followed party whips during voting. This confirms Rutere and Simiyu's (2024) argument that unless participatory tools are matched with institutional willingness and procedural safeguards, they will remain symbolic gestures rather than instruments of co-governance. Jiru et al. (2020) further argue that the absence of feedback loops and transparent tracking mechanisms weakens the democratic value of participation. This was evident in the Finance Bill process, where participants reported a lack of updates, explanations, or acknowledgement after submitting their views, making them feel excluded and ignored.

The findings highlight a tension within both Participatory Communication Theory and Deliberative Theory. Participatory Communication Theory assumes that inclusivity, dialogue, and feedback produce legitimacy, yet the Finance Bill experience showed that even structured engagement fails when institutions lack willingness to act on input. Similarly, Deliberative Theory's reliance on rational discourse falters when party loyalty overrides reasoned argumentation. Theories must therefore account for structural and political barriers that distort participatory ideals. Digital activism further extends these theories, revealing that dialogue now transcends traditional forums but requires hybrid integration to influence formal institutions. Theoretically, the results imply that participatory and deliberative models remain vital but incomplete without institutional safeguards that convert citizen engagement into substantive legislative outcomes.

Conclusions

The citizen engagement techniques used in the Finance Bill 2024 process demonstrated strong capacity for awareness creation but limited effectiveness in influencing legislative outcomes. Digital platforms successfully mobilized youth and urban populations, while traditional forums like barazas enabled localized interaction.

However, both methods lacked structured feedback loops and integration into decision-making, leading to widespread perceptions of tokenism. As supported by literature, participatory tools must be embedded within accountable, responsive, and well-facilitated legislative systems to be meaningful. Without institutional commitment to process feedback and reflect it in final decisions, public participation remains symbolic. Therefore, genuine engagement demands not only open forums but also political will, structured mechanisms, and clear feedback pathways to ensure citizen voices shape policy outcomes.

Recommendations

To improve the effectiveness of citizen engagement in future legislative processes, two key recommendations are proposed. First, the National Assembly should develop an integrated digital platform with real-time feedback capabilities. This platform should allow citizens to track their submissions, view proposed amendments, and receive official explanations on whether and how their input influenced final decisions. Such transparency would close the current feedback gap and enhance trust in the participatory process. Second, public participation should be decentralized and deepened through well-facilitated local forums led by independent moderators. These forums must be adequately resourced, linguistically inclusive, and held early in the legislative cycle. Together, these measures will ensure participation is not only accessible but also meaningful, shaping legislation in substantive, transparent, and inclusive ways.

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