

THE EVOLUTION OF DEVOLUTION

Considerations for Scaling Local Participatory Planning in Kenya

RESEARCH OVERVIEW | MARCH 2023

Kenya's devolution, which was catalyzed by its 2010 referendum and came into full effect in 2013, has already produced a sea-change in Kenya's political structure. The creation of county-level governments has dramatically improved the dispersion of development funding from a national perspective, directly allocating fiscal resources to the county-level and allowing previously marginalized counties to accelerate investment in public services. However, these county-level governance structures suffer from many of the weaknesses that persist at the national level.

A common response to these limits of devolution in Kenya has been to introduce **participatory planning institutions**, which enable the direct and formal involvement of citizens in a public process to identify public policy problems and then propose projects to address these issues. While participatory planning models have become increasingly popular globally in the past two decades, rigorous evaluations on these interventions paint a mixed picture about whether these programs can achieve their stated aims of increased efficiency and democratic empowerment.

To disentangle the mixed evidence about participatory planning and provide guidance to policymakers and funders in Kenya and beyond, Mercy Corps has conducted qualitative research on a local-level participatory planning and

development intervention called Ward Development Planning (WDP).¹ The WDP program strengthens community capacities to assess their own needs, and to prioritize, plan and implement projects through an inclusive process. The program has been recognized by local county governments as a model for replication, with multiple counties in advanced stages of considering legislation which would enshrine the WDP process in law.



Figure 1. Summary of the WDP Process

This document summarizes the key findings and recommendations from a longer research report on the WDP process.

Key Findings: The Potential of Participatory Planning

[Previous program evaluations](#) by Mercy Corps suggest that the WDP model has increased the capacity of local communities to participate in

¹ The WDP Intervention is being implemented as part of a broader USAID-funded program called Livestock Market Systems (LMS). The LMS program is implemented in consortium with ACIDI-VOCA.

For the full WDP research brief, see Hakiman, K. and Sheely, R. 2022. The Evolution of Devolution. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps

resilience-oriented development planning and to prevent and manage conflicts related to natural resource use.

The Ward Development Planning intervention produced positive changes in local governance through the following:

- **Empowering communities** to directly engage in development planning through a systematic process of selection, training, and deliberation.
- **Limiting marginalization of communities** within the ward, and of wards within the wider county by creating a ward-level development plan and an inclusive and democratically legitimated committee structure to advocate for the ward-level plan.
- Providing **participatory representation** for the ward, via the creation of a Ward Planning Committee (WPC). Members of the WPC are distributed across villages and remain embedded in communities between selection cycles, allowing for ongoing accountability.
- Providing needed **‘ground-level’ information** for integration into County Integrated Development Plans and Annual Development Plans, helping counties prioritize funding towards the real needs and avoiding waste.

Recommendations for Scaling-up Participatory Planning

The success of WDP and other participatory planning interventions depends on strategically adapting design and implementation to:

- Avoid redundancy with existing participatory institutions and processes through **coordination and integration with county governments and NGOs.**
- **Shift away from asking ‘what works’, towards a more complex account of ‘best fit’ program design**, which adapts the institutional design of the WDP model to match contextual factors.
- Maintain a focus on the **quality, inclusion, and legitimacy of participation and**

representative selection, which sits at the heart of the participatory model.

- **Select staff members with high capacity and intrinsic motivation** by investing in fair and competitive hiring.
- **Devolve responsibility** to local implementers who are best positioned to judge whether true participation and empowerment is occurring **and to deploy discretionary adaptation at the local and community levels.**



Photo Credit: Patrick Meinhardt/Mercy Corps

About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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