



# The role of ICTs in enhancing citizens' involvement in decision-making in local governments in Tanzania

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## Abstract

This paper reflects on citizens' participation in local governments in Tanzania. Using documentary review, it ponders on the efforts being taken to ensure that the citizens effectively participate in decision-making in local governments. Attention is specifically directed at exploring the position of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in fostering participatory decision-making by drawing experience from various studies on citizens' participation in local government authorities. In examining the efficacy of the studies on participation that have been undertaken since Tanzania embarked on local government reforms, it observes that both the policy makers and researchers have accorded limited attention to the role of ICTs in facilitating inclusive decision-making at the grassroots. The paper shows that these actors have continued to focus on physical interactions rather than looking at other platforms for interactions such as e-participation and the extent to which ICTs are utilized or can be used to facilitate decision-making at lower levels. Against this backdrop, the paper underscores the need for local government stakeholders to accord more attention to the potential of ICTs in ensuring effective citizens' participation.

***Key words:*** *ICTs, local governance, participation, Tanzania, decision-making*

## Introduction

Innovations in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have opened various windows for easy exchange of information among stakeholders. Within the realm of public administration, ICTs have significantly challenged the conventional hierarchical mode of communication by serving as a breeding ground for various forms of networks that interact and influence decision-making. ICTs have significantly redefined the sources of information for decision-making by widely opening up the windows for vertical, horizontal and bottom-up communication. Within the context of governance paradigm, which among aspects, emphasises on inclusiveness and democratic decision-making, revolutions in information and communication technology have offered more options to decision-makers and public bureaucrats through which they can interact with the citizenry.

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The bottom-line of emphasizing on new forms of interactions rests on a growing global consensus that effective formulation and implementation of policies and decisions depend much on partnership among stakeholders within formal and informal networks.

In spite of the potentials of ICTs in improving the levels of citizens' engagement and facilitating decision-making, there are still cases where such opportunities offered by ICTs are not fully utilized. It is thus imperative to examine the extent to which online communication is prioritized by decision-makers in their efforts to ensure effective decision-making in local government authorities. Since 1990s to date, Tanzania has been implementing local government reforms with a view to ensuring effective delivery of public services (Pallangyo & Rees, 2010; REPOA, 2006). One of the aspects which have been underscored in the course of implementing these reforms is the need to ensure that citizens effectively participate in decision-making within their localities. Nevertheless, the extent to which this desire has been realized remains uncertain. On the basis of the foregoing, this paper reflects on the efforts being taken to use ICTs in promoting citizen's participation in local governments. Attention is paid to various ICT avenues by which citizens' participation in local governments could be improved. There are several ICT avenues through which citizens can participate in decision-making at the grassroots. Some of these include intranet (especially in urban areas), blogs, sms, social media such as facebook, Whatsapp, twitter etc. As the proceeding sections will show, the number of people who have access to mobile phones both in rural and urban Tanzania has increased significantly. Mobile phone users can thus communicate through phone calls, sms or internet. For instance, it is through access to internet that citizens have formed Whatsapp groups where they exchange various information. These media could serve as effective tools for effective exchange of information in local governments if given due attention. The paper is divided into seven sections namely: an introduction, local governance systems in Tanzania, the status of ICTs in Tanzania, the methodology and the role of ICTs in governance. Other sections include the studies on citizens' participation in local governance; followed by a brief conclusion and recommendations.

**Local Government System in Tanzania: A Synoptic Historical View**

Local government in Tanzania has evolved over several epochs that can be traced since pre-colonial days (URT, n.d; Liviga, 1992). However, formal systems of local government were established by the British colonial state in 1920s after Tanzania (Tanganyika) was transferred to Britain as a Mandatory territory in 1920. Its present form is a result of a series of reforms that have been adopted since independence in 1961. Following the attainment of independence, Tanzania inherited the colonial system of local government (Babeiya, 2016). The main feature of this system was centralization as local governments were subjected to strict controls of the central government (Liviga, 1992). It was on the basis of the spirit of control that local governments were later abolished in 1972 leading to the introduction of decentralization by deconcentration. Their abolition stemmed from the central government's dissatisfaction with their performance. They were nevertheless reintroduced in 1982 after the failure of deconcentration.

Tanzanian's current local government system is based on decentralization by devolution in which functional responsibilities, powers, and resources are supposed to be under the control of the people at the grassroots (URT, 1998). Local government's regulatory framework consists of several laws whereby the primary instrument is the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania of 1977. Articles 145 and 146 of this constitution provide for the existence and functioning of local government in Tanzania. Specifically, Article 145 (1) institutes the establishment of LGAs and Article 145 (2) empowers the Parliament or the House of Representatives, to enact a law providing for the establishment of local government authorities, their structures and composition, source of revenue and procedures for the conduct of their business. On the other hand, Article 146 (1) states the purpose as well as rights and power of LGAs such as transferring authority, rights and power to the people so that they can participate in the planning and implementation of development programmes within their respective areas. Article 146 (2) stipulates the functions of LGAs such as ensuring the enforcement of law and public safety as well as consolidating democracy within their areas and applying it to accelerate the development of the people. Besides the constitution, Tanzania's local government legislation includes several Acts namely: the Local Government (District Authorities) Act No. 7

of 1982; the Local Government (Urban Authorities) Act No. 8 of 1982; the Local Government Finances Act No. 9 of 1982; the Local Government Service Act No. 10 of 1982; and the Local Government Negotiating Machinery Act No. 11 of 1982. There are several levels of LGAs such as districts, towns, municipalities, city council's wards, neighborhoods, villages, and hamlets. Generally, LGAs in Tanzania are categorized into two namely urban and rural authorities. Urban authorities comprise of cities, municipals and town councils while rural councils comprise of district councils, and sub-district levels, including the township authorities. With such structure, LGAs can be "*viewed in three perspectives: geographical divisions or levels (rural and urban), the administrative (the executive part) and the governance (the oversight part)*" (REPOA, 2008:25).
Since 1990s, local government authorities have been under reforms whose genesis can be traced since 1996 when the Local Government Reform Agenda was published. It was later followed by the formulation of the Policy Paper on Local Government Reform in 1998 (REPOA, 2008).

As per the policy paper on local government reform, the raison d'être for devolution was to increase the capacity of local government authorities in delivering services to the people. The policy also envisioned the local government that is free in making policy and operational decisions without interference by the central government. The role of the central government was to be limited to facilitating local government authorities in undertaking their responsibilities and monitoring their accountability; auditing financial performance of local government and the provision of adequate grants.

The policy paper on local government reforms further maintained that local government authorities would effectively discharge their responsibilities if they possessed resources and authority. It also insisted on having the leadership of the local authorities that is democratically elected. The new local governments were also expected to facilitate the participation of the people in deciding on matters affecting their lives, planning and executing their development programmes, and fostering partnerships with other actors.

According to the Policy Paper on Local Government Reforms, the envisioned Decentralization by Devolution covered four main aspects. The first one is political decentralization which deals with devolving powers and the setting of the rules for councils and committees, etc. The second aspect is financial decentralization in which councils get financial discretionary powers, including budgeting, and powers to levy local taxes and in which the obligation of the central government is to supply local governments with various forms of grants.

The third aspect is administrative decentralization which mainly involves de-linking local authority staff from their respective ministries thereby making local government staff accountable to local councils. The last aspect is the changed central-local relations with an emphasis on inter-governmental relations (URT, 1998; Green, 2009).

**The Status of ICT in Tanzania**

The history of ICT in Tanzania can be traced since 1960s. However, during this period, ICT tools such as computers were very few and limited to some government institutions such as the ministry of finance and its agencies. It was during 1980s that the role of ICT in the country expanded especially following an increased importation of microcomputers (Mgaya, n.d). Since then, ICT has become crucial to both public and private sectors. Several initiatives for promoting ICT have been devised, the most notable ones being the formulation of the national information and communications technologies policy of 2003 which was repealed by the national information and communications technology policy of 2016,the deployment of the National ICT broadband Backbone (NICTBB) and the landing of two submarine cables namely: the East Africa Submarine Cable System (EASSy) and the Southern and Eastern Africa Communication Network (SEACOM) (URT, 2016; Esselaar & Adam, 2013). In addition, in 2012 Tanzania embarked on the Analogue Switch-off (ASO) so as to migrate from analogue to digital broadband and this exercise was completed in 2015. Likewise, in order to coordinate and enforce e-Government standards across public institutions, the government established the e-Government Agency in 2010. Since late 1990s todate, Tanzania has made a significant step in ICT development as marked by several aspects such as increased access to and use of mobile phones both in rural and urban areas, increased number of internet users, mobile money, just to mention some. For

instance, the country's telecommunication subscriber base has expanded from 2.96 million in 2005 to 32 million in December 2014. By the end of 2013, mobile penetration stood at 61% and population coverage by mobile networks stood at 89%. Tanzania's tele-density has increased from 1.22 subscribers per 100 people in 2002 to 67 subscribers per 100 people in 2014. As per TCRA there were 9, 312, 272 users of internet in the country by the end of 2013 and this number increased to 17,263,523 by 2016. Mobile network operators have contributed to this increase through their internet services following the introduction of mobile data and broadband services (Esselaar & Adam, 2013)

With regard to mobile money, Tanzania has made significant achievements as it is one of the countries within Eastern and Southern Africa regions with most successful mobile money market (Waema & Ndung'u, 2012). The percentage of mobile money use in some countries in these regions are as follows: Kenya 60.3%, Tanzania 14.1%, Uganda 13.9%, Botswana 10.5% and South Africa 3.2 (Esselaar & Adam, 2013). Mobile money has offered many citizens especially in rural areas with new banking avenues as most of them had no access to banking services in commercial banks (URT, 2016).

Other achievements include the use of integrated Human Resource and payroll systems for public servants and the adoption of organizational web portal in the government (URT, 2016). The country has also successfully deployed e-government systems such as the National Payment System (NPS) which comprises of the Tanzania Interbank Settlement System (TISS), Electronic Clearing House (ECH), Integrated Financial management systems (IFMS) and Retail Payment System (RPS). Other successes include the establishment of the Central Admission System (CAS) for higher learning students' placement and the Online Loan Application System (OLAS) (URT, 2016).

While the country has made significant steps in ICT development, there are still several challenges constraining these efforts. One of these is the fact that most citizens, especially in rural areas cannot access broadband services. Limited access is partly due to poor development of communication infrastructure owing to several factors such as lack of effective mechanisms to facilitate broadband penetration agenda to all and high cost of rural telecommunication and unreliable or absence of power supply (URT, 2016). A related challenge is the inadequacy of skilled and competent human resource base as well as high ICT illiteracy amongst citizens. The development of ICT is further constrained by ineffective leadership framework at different levels to champion the integration of ICT in socio-economic development processes as well as lack of appropriate frameworks for the deployment and utilization of ICT infrastructures (URT, 2016). Citizens' preparedness for ICT adoption is also still low (Yonazi, et al, 2010; Dewa & Zlotnikova, 2014).

## Methodology

In gauging the roles of ICTs in enhancing citizens' participation in decision-making at the grassroots; this paper relies on secondary documentary sources. It purposively reviews studies that have been examining citizens' participation in local governance since the launch of local government reforms in Tanzania as well as those advocating for the use of ICTs to enhance citizens' participation. The selected documents contain first hand information from the respondents which were gathered by several researchers and published through various outlets. This review is undertaken with a view to establishing their recognition of ICTs (as compared to other avenues of participation) in enhancing citizens' participation. Against this backdrop, the selected studies are thematically examined in order to establish the aspects they covered during the exploration of participation. The review of these documentary sources is situated along the ICTs inclusion-exclusion continuum which facilitates the drawing of conclusions on the position of ICTs in enhancing citizens' participation at the grassroots.

## The role of ICTs and E-participation in local governance

Enhancing citizens' participation through the use of ICTs is currently dominating the debates among development theorists and information system researchers (Ghosh, 2014). Integrating ICTs is thus one of the major projects among developing countries as they struggle towards installing and institutionalizing

e-governance systems (Puri & Sahay, 2007). As Alonso (2009) correctly observes, the ICTs era has redefined the anatomy of participation among actors as traditional hierarchical structures are being substituted by a variety of networks comprised of individual and collective actors with different degrees of institutionalization. These new forms of participation have necessitated for a continuous search for consensus and group decision-making (Alonso, 2009). Civic participation processes at the local level have thus increased the degree of complexity in the governance of societies. This complexity has, inter alia, necessitated a redefinition of the dynamics between the citizens and political and administrative systems with a view to improving citizens' role in decision-making at lower levels.

Increased calls for the existence of avenues through which citizens at the grassroots can participate in decision-making seek to ensure that decisions that are made by local governments represent public interests. In order to achieve this, various efforts are being taken so as to adopt the criteria of social relevance that must include the process through which public decisions are made via the establishment of a communicative process on which the orientation of administrative actions depends (Alonso, 2009). ICTs systems are thus expected to provide a space to the public through which reflection and debate could be made possible (Alonso, 2009). Through this space, citizens are expected to play a major and active role during the formulation of public policies.

Owing to the growing influence of ICTs in decision-making, Millard (2006) predicts that most if not all activities which become 'routine', which manipulate, match, and mine data, and which require access to information and systematized intelligence, will become codified and automated by ICTs, resulting in the squeezing out of direct human presence. Also, Millard (2006) envisages the future in which human presence will focus even more than at present on activities which humans are innately better equipped to do than machines. It is on the basis of the foregoing that calls for electronic participation (e-participation) have been increasing.

Conceptually, e-participation entails several aspects as it could, for instance, refer to the use of ICTs by a government to enhance openness and transparency by the provision of information online. The same concept could also entail the use of ICTs by citizens to participate, collaborate or/and deliberate in decision-making processes (EU Parliament, 2016). As such, e-participation involves three interactions between governments and citizens namely: e-information, e-consultation, and e-decision-making. E-participation is potential in enhancing citizens' participation in policy-making, ensuring learning processes, collecting innovative ideas and increasing political legitimacy and trust (European Parliament, 2016). This concept is used concurrently with e-democracy, a concept entailing the use of ICTs to support democratic decision-making processes.

Through e-democracy, citizens are increasingly questioning traditional forms of representative democracy and expecting innovation in policy-making processes with possibilities of direct participation (EU parliament, 2016). The need for direct participation is said to be a result of citizens' political disengagement due the gap between the citizens and political elites. This gap for quite sometimes, has led to increased citizens' perceptions over the inability of public institutions to effectively address their demands. In that regard, there is a need to revive democratic societies and to enhance a more deliberative view of active citizenship through more direct engagement (EU Parliament, 2016).

E-participation is thus an innovation that is meant to improve interactions between citizens and their governments at lower levels by making these interactions more practical. In underscoring the practicability of this improved interaction, the OECD (2002) identified three practical ways through which these interactions could be bolstered namely: information which is a one-way relationship in which the government disseminates information on policy-making based on its own initiative – or citizens access information upon their demand; consultation, which is a two way relationship in which the government asks for and receives citizens' feedback on policy- making; and active participation where citizens engage in decision-making and policy-making (EU Parliament, 2016).

This framework was later modified by the United Nations by adding electronic element in order to make it cater for e-participation. According to the United Nations framework, government-citizens interactions could be strengthened through three ways, namely, e-information, which seeks to enable participation by providing citizens with public information and access to information without or upon demand; e-consultation which advocates for engaging citizens in contributions to and deliberation on public policies and service, and e-decision-making that deals with empowering citizens through co-designing of policy options and coproduction of service components and delivery modalities (EU Parliament, 2016).

Based on these frameworks, Macintosh (2004) identifies three levels through which citizens can be engaged when using online tools. The first level is e-enabling which focuses on supporting those who would not typically access the internet and take advantage of the large amount of information available. It concentrates on using technology to reach out to a wider public by providing citizens with more accessible and understandable information. The second level is e-engaging which advocates for consulting a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and to support deliberative debate on policy issues. It is thus a top-down approach to consultations initiated by a government or parliament. The third and last level is e-empowering which promotes active citizens' participation and facilitating bottom-up ideas to influence the political agenda. Through this level citizens are given an opportunity to influence and participate in the creation of policy. E-participation is thus a key platform through which citizens' participation in local governments could be improved. Experiences from the two selected cases in the next section attest to this observation.

**Success stories of E-participation**

Despite various challenges related to e-participation, countries that have invested much in this initiative have recorded significant achievements. Experiences from Finland and India are illustrative.

**Crowdsourcing in Finland**

The European Parliament (2016) cites Finland as one of the pioneers of providing access to digital tools and services. It shows that in July 2010, Finland was the first country in the world to make broadband connection a legal right for every citizen. This decision was based on the recognition that internet services are no longer just for entertainment but are a fundamental part of society (EU Parliament, 2016). This decision was followed by an undertaking of several initiatives in e-participation so as to enhance citizens' engagement with the government's decision-making processes. One of the landmark initiatives was the New Citizens' Initiative Act, 2012 that introduced an element of direct democracy into the Finnish political system by allowing Finnish citizens to submit an initiative to the Parliament.

Through this Act, any citizen of voting age can initiate a petition to propose to the government either a change to an existing legislation, or a completely new bill, formulated through crowdsourcing methods (Aitamurto, 2012). The condition is that each petition has to obtain 50,000 signatures within a period of six months, either through paper form or online using online bank user identification, in order for the Parliament to discuss it. The adoption of this law led to the formation of an NGO called Open Ministry that focused on supporting this initiative by campaigning for a more open government and democracy. This NGO opened the website through which citizens' initiatives could be discussed, promoted, and officially voted for in order to facilitate the process of collecting the 50,000 signatures. Through this platform, nine (9) successful initiatives reached the parliament and one was turned into law.

This initiative resulted into various positive achievements. One of these is enhanced citizens' participation in policy-making. For instance, the initiative on equal marriage rights gathered more than 120,000 supporters within 24 hours of being launched. In addition, this initiative increased youth engagement as most participants in the Open Ministry platform were from the 21-40 age groups. The initiative also provided a learning opportunity for both citizens and decision-makers and encouraged fresh ideas for shaping policies. Thus, by accelerating levels of citizens' engagement, this initiative increased the legitimacy of the policies which were made. The main challenge posed by the implementation of this initiative is that it mostly attracts the age group 21-40 as compared to the rest of the population (Nurminen et al., 2013)

**The Gyandoot Intranet in India**

This initiative was conceptualized in 1999 and launched in January 2000, aimed at using ICTs to empower local communities in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh state (Puri & Sahay, 2007). The villages in the Dhar district, where Gyandoot was based were characterized by extremely poor physical and communication infrastructure and most of the residents in these villages were under abject poverty, and were computer illiterate. While the district was estimated to have a population of 1.7 million, 60% percent of these people lived below poverty line (Mansuri, 2009). This project thus sought to reap the benefits of ICTs by redefining the means of engagement between the citizenry and government officials through information kiosks (Bhatnagar, et al 2003).

The main objective of the Gyandoot project was to establish a distributed computer network in the district so as to provide online information to the local people on subjects and problems that are part and parcel of their everyday rural life, as well as to facilitate communication among communities/individuals and government departments (Puri & Sahay, 2007). Among other considerations, this initiative aimed at reducing communication cost (Ceccichini & Raina, 2005). It was expected that through this network pertinent issues/ problems affecting citizens' daily lives such as obtaining certificates (like of birth and death) frequently required from the administration or copies of individuals' land holdings for which, in the past, they had to travel long distances to the district headquarters (Puri & Sahay, 2007).

The implementation of this initiative (first phase) was in 2000 and through this project 38 kiosks were established, with each kiosk serving about 38 villages in its vicinity. Each kiosk was equipped with ICTs tools such as a computer, a modem, and printer (Bhatnagar, et al, 2003). These kiosks were expected to enable the citizens to apply for government services or file complaints by sending emails to district headquarters. Citizens were to also receive responses through the same mode of communication. Received communication would then be channeled to respective departments. It is worth noting that before the installation of the Gyandoot intranet, the interaction between the citizens and government officials was based on physical contacts and in most cases it was very difficult for citizens to directly interact with government institutions (Puri & Sahay, 2007). So often these contacts were made through middlemen and middle women.

The implementation of this project, however, has been facing several challenges. Some of these include irregular electricity supply due to frequent power breakdowns, unreliable telephone connectivity, high costs in computerizing the public systems and lack of commitment among some government officials in ensuring its effective implementation (Mansuri, 2009; Bhatnagar, et al(n.d); Ceccichini & Raina, 2005). Despite these challenges, a lot of positive changes have been noted. For instance, this project significantly reduced the use of middlemen in interacting with government officials. The Gyandoot project provided an opportunity for the citizens to proactively and independently articulate their demands and significantly boosted the citizens-government interactions (Puri & Sahay, 2007). It also reduced the rate of citizens' harassment by government officials (Bhatnagar, et al, 2003).

The two experiences above provide several revelations regarding the potential of e-participation in local governments. As the Citizen initiative in Finland has shown, investing in online communication is no longer an option if a country wants to improve the level of interactions between the citizenry and the government. Besides the recognition of the potential of ICTs, the initiative in Finland shows that relying on online communication provides avenues for more involvement of citizens in decision making. As regards the Gyandoot project in India, the main lesson that could be drawn is that dedication can overcome contextual barriers thereby enabling effective undertaking of a project even in context where the implementation of such projects looks quite unlikely. Despite being underdeveloped, the Dhar district managed to successfully install and operate that intranet which eventually redefined the nature of interactions between the citizens and their local government.

## The studies on the status of citizens' participation in Tanzanian local governments

As shown in preceding sections, the adoption of local government reforms sought to address various local government challenges that hampered their ability to effectively undertake their responsibilities. Besides other targets, these reforms aimed at increasing the level of citizens' participation in local governance. Since the adoption of these reforms, some progress regarding citizens' participation in decision-making has been made. This is, for instance, revealed by Lufunyo's (2013) study which was conducted at Dar es Salaam City Council which indicates that most of the respondents (92.5%) were of the opinion that public sector reforms have improved citizens' participation in decision making. The percentage of those who did not see the impact of these reforms was 2.5% while those who were indifferent were 7%. Despite shedding light on the impact of these reforms, this study provides a general experience of public sector reforms and can thus not be sufficiently used to generalize the status of citizens' participation in local governments. It is on this basis that looking at some studies that are specifically focusing on local governments becomes imperative.

A review of studies on participation in decision-making across local governments since the adoption of local government reforms shows limited level of citizens' participation. Generally these studies show that despite some improvements which have been made, including the adoption of various inclusive approaches such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Community Initiative Support (CIS), Opportunities & Obstacles to Development (O&OD) and the establishment of the national e-Government agency, the level of citizens' participation remains relatively low.

For instance, a study by Research for Poverty Alleviation (REPOA) evaluating six local government councils in Tanzania conducted in 2003 and published in 2007 revealed the existence of variations in the level of citizens' participation in decision-making in local governments. The findings indicated that 67% of the people were attending community meetings in Mwanza City Council whereas in Iringa District Council it was (59%). Similarly, the percentage of people attending community meetings in Bagamoyo District Council was (55%) while in Kilosa District Council and Ilala Municipal Council it was 54% and 53% respectively while in Moshi it was 51% (REPOA, 2007). A related study looking at community involvement in planning processes which was conducted by Massoi and Norman (2009) in Kizota Ward in Dodoma municipality indicated that 52% of the respondents were of the opinion that there was no involvement in planning processes whereas 35.3% of the respondents indicated that there was inadequate involvement. This position was also held by 80% of Mitaa executive officers.

Likewise, a study by Kessy and McCourt (2010) in Moshi and Mwanza, found the level of citizens' involvement in council activities to be low. As table 1 below shows, respondents' views on the question regarding their attendance in public meetings about council matters in their areas suggested low level of citizens' involvement. The table shows that on average 78.7% of the respondents in Mwanza and Moshi had not participated in these meetings. The average of those who had participated once or twice was 2.6% whereas those who had participated three or four times were 0.9%. The table also shows that the percentage of those who participated once in a month was 6.8% whereas those who participated once in every 1 or 2 weeks were 4.7%. The main reason attributed to limited citizens' attendance was structural relations between the central government and local governments that have continued to subject the latter to the control of the former thus not creating a conducive atmosphere for more participation.

**Table 1: Citizens' attendance in Public Meetings about council matters in their areas for the past 12 Months.**

| | Mwanza | Moshi | Total average |
|---|---|---|---|
| No response | 5.0 | 1.7 | 3.4 |
| No | 76.5 | 81.0 | 78.7 |
| Once or twice | 1.7 | 3.4 | 2.6 |
| Three or four times | 0.7 | 0.9 | 0.9 |
| More than once a month | 4.2 | 9.5 | 6.8 |
| Once every 1 or 2 weeks | 6.7 | 2.6 | 4.7 |
| Not sure | 5.0 | 0.9 | 3.0 |

Source: Kessy & McCourt (2010)

Similarly, a comparative study published by REPOA in 2014 indicated that since 2003 to 2013 the level of participation has remained low. The study noted the existence of limited involvement of local elite and the elders as it was the youth and people with primary education or lower who were found to be participating in these meetings. The findings in table 2 indicate that the percentage of people's participation in village/ ward leadership was 17% in 2006 and in 2013 it was 22.3%. During the same period, participation in council meetings was 24%, 28%, and 22% respectively. Likewise, on average participation in school, water management, public works and TASAF (Tanzania Social Action Fund) project committees was less than 30% during the period in question. The same was the case with participation in primary cooperative societies/ farmers associations and agricultural and livestock extension groups which was less than 15 percent.

**Table 2. Direct citizen participation in local governance Affairs**

| Participation in: | Total % in 2003 | Total % in 2006 | Total % in 2013 | Percentage point change 2003–2013 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Village leadership/ward councilor | 17 | 23 | 22.3 | +5.3 |
| Council meetings | 24 | 28 | 22 | -2 |
| School committee | 28 | 36 | 15 | -13 |
| Water management committee | 13 | 23 | 9.5 | -3.5 |
| Public works project committee | 9 | 19 | 9.7 | +7 |
| Preparation of the village/ward plan | 20 | 35 | 16.1 | -3.9 |
| TASAF project committee | 1.9 | 14 | 6.3 | +4.4 |
| Primary cooperative society/ farmers' association | 9 | 12 | 11.8 | +2.8 |
| Agricultural/livestock extension contact group | 2.9 | 6 | 6.4 | +3.5 |

Source: REPOA (2014)

However, while citizens' direct participation was low, the study revealed high level of indirect participation in local government elections as over 80% of the respondents indicated to have taken part in these elections since 2003 to 2013.

## Discussion

As shown in the foregoing, various studies on citizens' participation in local governments have been conducted. While there are mixed observations regarding the status of participation, it is clear that across all these studies, the role of ICTs in promoting participation is not addressed. While all these studies provide a wide range of information regarding the categories of participants and their participation frequencies, nothing is said on mobilization strategies. This shows that despite increased enthusiasm among stakeholders for citizens' involvement in decision making, very little is thought of in terms of devising alternative strategies that can open-up more avenues for citizens at the grassroots to take part in local governance. There is a disposition among stakeholders that the best approach for citizens' engagement is the use of meetings. The studies that we have highlighted above only focused on meetings as the measure of citizens' level of participation without exploring the role of other possibilities such as the use of ICTs. It is worth noting that while meetings provide an opportunity for citizens to exercise direct democracy, contemporary use of information and communication technology offers various and simple options through which citizens can effectively participate in local governance. On this basis, tendencies that only focus on physical participation fall short of recognizing the potential of ICTs in enhancing citizens' engagement.

It is imperative to note that for many years there have been contextual variations between urban and rural local governments. While the former has enjoyed a relatively good environment for the functioning of local government such as the presence of many avenues for information exchange such as radio and TV stations due to access to electricity, the latter's situation has been dire. Rural local governments have been characterized by poor physical infrastructure, very limited access to electricity and limited media coverage. Nevertheless, for the past 10 years there has been a significant improvement in the environment within which rural local governments function. This is for instance marked by governments' effort to connect all villages to the national electricity grid, a task that is coordinated by Rural Energy Agency (REA).

Similar efforts are directed at connecting the entire country to the national Fiber Optical Cable for increased internet connectivity across the country. With all these efforts, ignoring the potential of ICTs in local governance is a serious omission that requires urgent attention. There has been an open bias from the government in the use of ICTs in local governments. While many efforts have been directed at other aspects such as financial and human resource management, there is still limited commitment in using ICTs to improve citizens' engagement in local governments. This weakness is attributed to three main factors namely: the absence of effective strategies for ICT institutionalization at the grassroots, the existence of poor accountability mechanisms in local governments, and limited definition of the scope of ICT in local governments.

The absence of effective strategies for ICT institutionalization in local governments is explained by two scenarios. The first one is the failure of the central government to champion the use of ICTs in local governments. As pointed out earlier, the functioning of local governments in Tanzania is highly influenced by the central government and therefore the failure of the latter to champion ICT creates a vacuum that cannot be easily filled by local governments themselves. This weakness is particularly explained by the absence of government's commitment in championing the ICT agenda. For instance, following the formulation of the country's first ICT policy in 2003, expectations were high that the use of ICTs will be improved especially given that this policy aimed at, among other targets, encouraging and supporting ICT training for political decision makers, the community and civil society. This policy also underscored the need to promote ICT literacy at the grassroots. However, thirteen (13) years since the formulation of this policy very little has been achieved. This position is testified by the country's ICT policy of 2016 which states:

" *…participation of civil society organizations in awareness is limited due to lack of an appropriate collaborative system that incentivizes various groups. As a result, awareness creation efforts have been left to the government only. This has led to high illiteracy ratio in ICT among citizens that hinders fruitful exploitation of ICT in daily life*" (URT, 2016).

The above testimony shows the absence of partnership in promoting the ICTs agenda which implies that any government failure as the sole actor significantly affects the envisaged role of information and communications technology.

The second scenario is the profile of local government. Local governments consist of elected and appointed staff. While the latter deal mostly with technical issues, the former is expected to play much of an advocacy role as they are the ones who often and frequently interact with the citizenry. However, in terms of knowledge base, the political side of local government staff is very weak. Most of local government councilors have low levels of education and some have no education at all (REPOA, 2008). It is only a handful of them who are ICT literate. As a result, most of them are incognizant of the potential of using ICTs for improved citizens' participation.

In explaining this weakness, Bamwenda et al (2014) maintain that in most local governments there are insufficient knowledge, skills and coping mechanisms among councilors and some technical staff in dealing with ongoing local government reforms which eventually leads them to confusion and resistance to change.

The second factor for limited role of ICT is the existence of poor accountability mechanisms in local governments. This is especially due to the weaknesses on the demands side. It is imperative to note that the level of accountability and transparency in most local governments in Tanzania is low. It is for instance on this basis that some of local government authorities are implicated in the mismanagement of public finance as often revealed by the Controller and Auditor General (CAG). For instance, as per the CAG local governments' audit report for the 2015/ 2016 financial year, several local government authorities have received audit queries for the past four (4) financial years. The report indicates that for the 2015/2016 financial year 29 district councils received qualified audit opinion whereas those with unqualified opinion were 103. For the 2014/2015 financial year 94 district councils were issued with qualified opinion whereas 33 councils received unqualified opinion. The number of councils with qualified opinion for the 2913/2014 financial year was 11 while the unqualified ones were 118; and for the 2012/2013 financial year the councils with qualified opinion were 21 whereas those with unqualified ones were 86. As a result of poor accountability, there is limited enthusiasm among local government leaders on the need to improve communication channels with the citizenry. Citizens' inability to hold local government officials accountable is partly due to the absence of clear procedures and instruments for undertaking this exercise (REPOA, 2006).There is therefore no concern from these officials on thinking of the ways through which participation might be improved. The weakness on the demand side is also exacerbated by a limited presence of civil society organizations that are advocating for governance especially in rural areas. It is worth-noting that the ability of the civil society to push for accountability is generally limited and as REPOA (2008) correctly observes, Tanzania's civil society is yet to be a source of societal accountability. The civil society in Tanzania is highly donor-dependent and thus most civil society organizations focus much on fulfilling the demands of their financers than developing their own independent initiatives for addressing various challenges facing the country (Hearn & Mapunda, 2012).

The third factor is limited definition of ICT scope as the use of ICTs, as pointed out earlier, is still confined to official transactions. Attention is mainly directed at official matters such as Human Resources and Staff remuneration and thus the actions for ensuring that ICTs serve as mechanisms for fostering participation are still missing. Consequently, capacity building in ICT is generally directed at technical and administrative staff so as to enable them effectively carry their routine obligations without paying attention to the citizenry.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has reflected on the status of citizens' participation in decision-making at the grassroots. Based on reviewed documents, it has shown that since the adoption of local government reforms in 1990s to date, the level of citizen participation in local governments remains low. This is despite the adoption of various inclusive approaches such as PRA, CIS, and O&OD that sought to enhance interactions between citizens and local government officials.

Notwithstanding the status of participation in local governments, a review of the literature has revealed the existence of limited acknowledgment of the role of ICTs in facilitating participation as most of the time attention is directed at physical interactions. This is contrary to reiterated commitments by policy makers to move towards e- governance as Tanzania strives to become a knowledge-based society. This neglect includes policy makers and implementers on the one hand, and researchers on the other. As a result, there is very little push from the former for adopting and institutionalizing ICTs as well as limited attention among the latter in researching on the position and role of ICTs in decision-making at the grassroots. This situation points to the failure of governance stakeholders to change their mindset and consider ICTs as one of relevant avenues through which participation at the grassroots can be bolstered.

Against this backdrop, several recommendations are made. First, studies on local governance participation need to feature ICTs as a reflection of ongoing commitments to institutionalize e-governance in Tanzania. Conducting research that only focuses on physical interactions produces a gap that needs to be filled. Research uptake thus needs to go hand in hand with contextual analysis, including an overview on the preparedness of local government leaders to champion the use of ICTs. Secondly, getting a comprehensive picture of the anatomy and status of participation would require exploring all possible avenues for participation. As the

review of literature has shown, e-participation is still not given adequate attention by researchers. This leaves a question whether the application of ICTs would make a difference or not unanswered. Third, in order to ensure effective implementation of local government reforms, it is important that key aspects and especially those which for decades have not been conventional in the public sector such as ICTs to be given due priority. This is especially so as the implementation of local government reform seems to have ignored to a great extent the potential of ICTs in promoting participatory decision-making at the grassroots.

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