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## The Relevance of the National Youth Policy in Promoting Gen Z's Participation in Decision-Making in Kenya: A Case of Turkana County.

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### Abstract

*This study explored the impact of Kenya's National Youth Policy on Generation Z's involvement in decision-making processes in Kenya, focusing specifically on Turkana County. The research sought to understand Gen Z's familiarity with the policy, gauge how well it has created avenues for youth engagement, and pinpoint obstacles hindering their participation. The findings indicate that many young people in Turkana County are unaware of the National Youth Policy and what it entails. Moreover, the policy has not been effectively put into practice, with government bodies often seen as lacking the ability and dedication to encourage youth participation. Young people's involvement in decision-making is often merely symbolic, offering little genuine influence. Numerous factors impede Gen Z's engagement, including issues related to system structures, societal norms, and political landscapes. These challenges encompass poor policy execution, bureaucratic obstacles, entrenched power structures, gender biases, inadequate access to learning and information, a lack of guidance, corruption, and insufficient political commitment. To boost Gen Z's participation, the study suggests improving policy implementation, empowering young people, fostering inclusive governance, backing youth leadership initiatives, and utilizing digital tools. Overcoming these hurdles could enable Kenya to harness the capabilities of its youth, paving the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future.*

**Keywords:** National Youth Policy, Generation Z, Participation in Decision-Making

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Generation Z in Kenya's political landscape marks a pivotal shift, underscored by their energy, technological proficiency, and commitment to societal transformation. Having grown up amid rapid digital advancements and heightened global connectivity, Gen Z brings distinct perspectives and values to political engagement (Twenge, 2017). Born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, this cohort is increasingly influential in shaping societal dynamics both locally and internationally. In the Kenyan context, Gen Z is distinguished by its fluency in digital platforms, heightened social awareness, and a drive for innovation. Unlike previous generations, they adeptly leverage technology to organize, campaign, and disseminate ideas. Their activism is rooted in a deep demand for transparency, accountability, and equity in governance. They challenge the status quo and demand a more inclusive political system that addresses their needs. However, their participation in decision-making processes, particularly at the national level, remains limited (Ochieng, 2023).

The concept of "youth" is defined differently across various settings, often influenced by demographic, cultural, economic, and social considerations. For global statistical and developmental purposes, the United Nations categorizes youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 (United Nations, n.d.). However, national and regional frameworks offer alternative age ranges. For instance, Kenya's Constitution, under Article 260, recognizes youth as those aged 18 to 34 years. Similarly, the African Youth Charter identifies youth as individuals aged 15 to 35. According to the Kenya Youth Development Policy (2019), youth are primarily defined as persons between the ages of 18 and 34. Nonetheless, the policy also acknowledges the importance of addressing the needs of adolescents aged 15 to 17, suggesting interventions for this group as well. The policy makes a distinction between chronological age and the broader experience of youth-hood. While the former refers to individuals aged 18 to 34, the latter is viewed as a transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, during which individuals face evolving personal, economic, and cultural challenges as they strive to become self-reliant and socially responsible members of society.

In recent decades, youth activism has gained significant momentum, with young people increasingly seeking a voice in global and national decision-making arenas. Generation Z, known for its digital fluency, global awareness, and strong sense of social responsibility, has become a key driver of change in both discourse and policymaking. Across the world, there is heightened acknowledgment of the transformative role youth can play in advancing sustainable development. Institutions such as the United Nations continue to highlight the critical importance of involving young people in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since the launch of the World Programme of Action for Youth in 1995 (United Nations, 1995), numerous countries have taken steps to support youth engagement by formulating comprehensive youth policies (UN, 2023) and establishing platforms to facilitate their involvement in governance. In many countries, youth councils have been established to ensure young people have a formal role in influencing decisions that impact their lives. These bodies differ in form some are legally constituted and serve as official advisory entities, while others function as independent organizations within civil society but are nonetheless acknowledged by government institutions as important contributors to policy dialogue. Additionally, national youth parliaments serve

as platforms through which young people can engage in policy discussions, express their views on issues affecting them, and raise matters of national importance from a youth perspective.

Africa holds the distinction of being the continent with the youngest population, with a large share of its citizens under the age of 35 (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2017). This youthful demographic offers immense potential for driving economic development, enhancing social progress, and promoting political stability (African Union, 2021). Realizing these benefits, however, depends heavily on the meaningful inclusion of young people in governance and policy-making (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2016). Historically, youth involvement in African political processes has been minimal, often restricted to symbolic participation or suppressed entirely. Colonial histories, repressive political systems, and entrenched patriarchal norms have long obstructed genuine youth engagement (Resnick & Casale, 2011). Nonetheless, recent years have seen increased global advocacy for youth empowerment and greater recognition of their rights (United Nations, 2015).

In African elections, young people have traditionally been seen as a key voter base. Today, as the continent experiences a demographic surge of young people many of whom face high levels of unemployment and underemployment engaging this group politically has become more crucial than ever (Honwana, 2013). Despite their demographic weight and the role of generational identity in African politics, there remains limited understanding of how youth, particularly in Africa, participate politically (Resnick & Thurlow, 2015).

In Kenya, the Kenya National Youth Policy (2019) was introduced as a strategic tool to promote youth inclusion in the country's development agenda. This policy framework is particularly relevant for Generation Z; a cohort that is digitally connected and increasingly eager to influence national discourse (Twenge, 2017). While the policy outlines ambitious goals for youth empowerment, its actual impact has been hindered by a range of obstacles. Key among these are low public awareness, inadequate funding and institutional capacity, structural impediments, and cultural attitudes that limit youth agency (Kenya National Youth Policy, 2019; African Union, 2021). This study seeks to assess how effectively the National Youth Policy has shaped the participation of Generation Z in decision-making processes in Kenya. By analyzing the policy's execution, evaluating its influence on youth engagement, and identifying both barriers and prospects, the research aims to offer actionable recommendations for strengthening youth involvement and promoting more inclusive governance.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Youth involvement in decision-making is essential for inclusive governance and sustainable development. Kenya's National Youth Policy is a framework designed to empower young people and encourage their participation in national affairs (Kenya national Youth Policy, 2019). However, while Generation Z (Gen Z) is a significant part of the Kenyan population, their participation in decision-making remains limited. Gen Z, with their digital skills, progressive views, and demand for inclusivity, are a valuable asset for the country's future. Yet, there seems to be a disconnect between their aspirations and the opportunities provided by the National Youth Policy for meaningful participation.

This gap might be due to various factors, including ineffective policy implementation, lack of awareness among Gen Z about participation avenues, or structural barriers like tokenism and inadequate representation. Gen Z's limited involvement not only hinders their contribution to societal development but also jeopardizes achieving inclusive governance and the policy's goals. This study aims to investigate the relevance of the National Youth Policy in promoting Gen Z's participation in Kenyan decision-making. By analyzing the policy's strengths, weaknesses, and impact, the research seeks to identify practical strategies to enhance Gen Z's engagement in governance and national discourse.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate the significance of Kenya's National Youth Policy in facilitating the engagement of Generation Z in decision-making and governance processes.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

- i. To determine the extent to which Generation Z is informed about the National Youth Policy and its provisions concerning youth engagement in decision-making.
- ii. To analyze the policy's effectiveness in fostering meaningful participation of Generation Z in governance and policy formulation.
- iii. To explore the key challenges that hinder Generation Z's involvement in decision-making processes, despite the presence of the National Youth Policy.
- iv. To recommend practical approaches for improving the responsiveness of the National Youth Policy to the aspirations and participation needs of Generation Z.

## RATIONALE AND JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY

Youth participation in decision-making is a critical component of inclusive governance and sustainable development. Kenya's National Youth Policy (NYP) aims to empower young people to actively contribute to national development through increased involvement in civic and political processes. However, in Turkana County, one of Kenya's most marginalized regions, socio-economic disparities, cultural barriers, and limited access to education and technology have historically hindered youth engagement.

The study aims to identify gaps and suggest actionable improvements to enhance the NYP's relevance and effectiveness in promoting Gen Z's decision-making roles in Turkana. The findings will provide a foundation for further studies on youth policy implementation in other marginalized regions of Kenya. Furthermore, by highlighting challenges and opportunities, the study can inspire initiatives that directly support Turkana's youth in civic and political spheres. It is hoped that the research will fill a gap in the existing literature on the intersection of youth policy, regional disparities, and generational engagement in governance. Policymakers, NGOs, and development partners can use the findings to design interventions that are better aligned with Gen Z's needs in Turkana and similar contexts and by focusing on enhancing youth participation, the study supports Kenya's Vision 2030 and the global agenda for youth inclusion in decision-making.

## SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

### Generation Z's Awareness of the National Youth Policy

Understanding policy awareness is essential for fostering active youth involvement in governance. Although youth participation and the role of national youth policies are gaining more attention globally, there is a noticeable gap in research specifically focusing on how well Generation Z understands Kenya's National Youth Policy (2019). To bridge this gap, the present study draws from general literature on youth engagement, awareness levels, and generational communication preferences. Existing research indicates that insufficient dissemination efforts and the absence of youth-focused communication approaches frequently result in low awareness levels among young populations regarding initiatives designed for their benefit (UNESCO, 2018). In Kenya, although the National Youth Policy aims to enhance youth inclusion, many Gen Z individuals remain unfamiliar with its contents. This disconnect is largely attributed to minimal outreach and limited use of digital platforms Gen Z's primary source of information and engagement (Ndung'u & Wamuyu, 2020).

Effectiveness of the National Youth Policy in Creating Opportunities for Youth Engagement. The National Youth Policy is a framework designed to promote youth engagement through programs like capacity-building workshops, leadership training, and civic education. However, the effectiveness of such policies is often undermined by weak implementation mechanisms and limited resource allocation (World Bank, 2017). Research indicates that although structures such as youth councils and forums exist, their reach and inclusivity often fail to adequately capture the diversity and aspirations of Gen Z, especially in rural areas (Mutuku, 2020).

### Barriers Limiting Generation Z's Participation in Decision-Making

Research highlights that the obstacles preventing Generation Z from actively participating in governance are complex and interrelated. Overcoming these issues calls for a blend of policy adjustments, empowerment initiatives, and shifts in societal attitudes to ensure that young people are genuinely included in decision-making spaces. A number of factors contribute to the limited engagement of Gen Z, such as symbolic or superficial youth representation, entrenched cultural beliefs that diminish the influence of young people, and institutional barriers like exclusionary political systems (Youth Policy Labs, 2016). Within the Kenyan context, additional constraints include limited access to financial resources, a shortage of mentorship opportunities, and insufficient political commitment to youth empowerment (Chege & Waiganjo, 2019). Moreover, poor governance practices such as corruption and opacity in the execution of youth-focused initiatives further dissuade youth from engaging meaningfully in leadership or policy development processes.

### Strategies to Enhance Policy Alignment with Generation Z's Needs

Generation Z comprising individuals born between the late 1990s and early 2010s forms a demographic group with distinct preferences, expectations, and engagement styles compared to earlier generations. Research on aligning policy frameworks with Gen Z's evolving needs offers valuable recommendations for more responsive and effective youth policies. Scholars stress the importance of designing policies that reflect the digital fluency and participatory inclinations of this generation (Twenge, 2017). To better connect the National Youth Policy with Gen Z, suggested



strategies include using online and social media platforms for wider policy outreach, initiating mentorship and leadership development programs tailored for youth, and fostering inclusive spaces where young voices can be heard and influence decision-making (Kamau et al., 2021). Additionally, enhancing accountability through robust monitoring and evaluation systems is vital to track policy effectiveness and guide future improvements.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to explore the relevance of the National Youth Policy in influencing Generation Z's participation in decision-making processes within Turkana County. By combining diverse methods such as stratified sampling, focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and direct observation, the research provided a comprehensive understanding of both the challenges and enabling factors affecting youth involvement in governance and development.

The target population comprised youth aged between 18 and 34 years residing in Turkana County, estimated at 47,359 individuals. The study also engaged key stakeholders, including 14 public officials, 16 development program officers, and 60 youth affiliated with registered community-based groups. A stratified sampling strategy was used to select 381 youth participants, with the sample size determined using the Krejcie and Morgan formula to ensure statistical validity.

Quantitative data were gathered using a semi-structured questionnaire based on a Likert scale format. The tool was divided into six thematic areas: background characteristics, levels of youth participation, educational attainment, access to economic resources, cultural influences, and the impact of policy frameworks.

Qualitative data were obtained through structured focus group discussions, which explored youth engagement, economic conditions, and perceptions of community development initiatives. Additionally, key informant interviews were held with officials from both county and national government agencies, as well as leaders of local NGOs and development projects, to collect detailed perspectives on youth policy implementation and participation.

The researcher also conducted observational fieldwork during community events, such as public forums and awareness campaigns, to capture real-time youth involvement in local governance. Supplementary data were drawn from official documents, including the National Youth Policy, the Kenya National Youth and Human Development Report (2010), and Turkana County's annual development plans, to analyze the policy environment and its effect on youth engagement.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### Limited Awareness of Youth Policy Among Gen Z

A core objective was to gauge Generation Z's familiarity with the National Youth Policy and its provisions for youth involvement in decision-making. The findings revealed a significant knowledge gap, with 63% of rural youth unaware of government directives and policies designed to promote their participation in community development. While a majority (56.5%) acknowledged that government policies generally influence youth engagement, overall comprehension of the National Youth Policy and its specific tenets was notably low. This lack of awareness emerged as a significant

hurdle, limiting young people's ability to engage with government initiatives.

### Ineffective Implementation of the National Youth Policy

The study also aimed to evaluate how effectively the National Youth Policy creates opportunities for Generation Z's involvement in governance and policy-making. Despite stated government intentions, actual youth participation in these processes remained minimal. A striking 81.8% of respondents rated government agencies as "less effective" or "not effective" in carrying out youth policies, pointing to substantial challenges in generating meaningful engagement opportunities. Furthermore, a very low 21.2% youth participation rate in government projects, coupled with 84.6% dissatisfaction with these projects, strongly suggested that the policy has not been successful in establishing significant avenues for youth in decision-making. The policy's implementation was perceived as inadequate, with government bodies often seen as lacking the capacity and commitment needed to genuinely empower youth. This led to youth involvement often being tokenistic, with their influence confined to symbolic gestures rather than real impact. Critically, the policy appeared to overlook the distinct needs of rural youth, contributing to their marginalization.

### Persistent Barriers to Youth Participation

The third objective of the study focused on uncovering the key challenges that continue to impede Generation Z's involvement in decision-making processes, despite the existence of the National Youth Policy. The findings revealed a number of critical barriers. At the institutional level, inefficient policy implementation and overly complex bureaucratic procedures were found to limit meaningful youth engagement. Cultural dynamics also played a role, as traditional leadership structures and deeply rooted gender roles often excluded young people particularly women and those from marginalized backgrounds from participating in governance. Politically, widespread corruption and the absence of genuine commitment from leaders further restricted opportunities for youth to be actively involved. Additionally, limited awareness and inadequate access to information remained major concerns.

A significant proportion of youth over 58% felt that they were not afforded equal chances to contribute to decision-making or development planning, while 63.3% indicated they had never taken part in monitoring and evaluation activities. These challenges were especially pronounced among rural youth, who also faced limited educational opportunities and a lack of mentorship, making it difficult for them to benefit from the policy's intended provisions.

To overcome these challenges, it is imperative to enhance policy implementation, strengthen youth capabilities, foster inclusive governance, bolster youth leadership, and harness digital technologies. By empowering young individuals and cultivating supportive environments, Kenya can tap into the full potential of its youth population, paving the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores the considerable obstacles and shortcomings in how effectively Kenya's National Youth Policy supports Generation Z's involvement in decision-making, particularly within Turkana County. While the policy aims to empower young people and create avenues for their participation in governance, our findings indicate a significant lack of awareness among Gen Z members regarding the policy itself. Furthermore, its implementation has proven largely ineffective. Instead of

meaningful engagement, opportunities for youth input in decision-making have been scarce, often reduced to symbolic gestures with little genuine impact.

The factors hindering Gen Z's participation in governance are complex and varied. They include systemic issues such as the poor execution of policies, sociocultural elements like ingrained traditional power dynamics and gender norms, and political hurdles such as corruption and a clear deficit of political will. These challenges are exacerbated by insufficient access to crucial resources like information, education, and mentorship, especially prevalent in rural regions like Turkana. As a result, Gen Z's considerable potential to contribute to sustainable development and foster inclusive governance remains largely untapped.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the effectiveness of the National Youth Policy and genuinely involve Generation Z, several key areas need immediate attention.

### Strengthening Policy Implementation and Awareness

It's vital to enhance the capabilities of government bodies responsible for the policy. This means allocating enough resources, thoroughly training staff, and setting up robust systems for monitoring and evaluation. These steps will help ensure the policy's goals are actually met at the local level. Additionally, we need to close the knowledge gap among Gen Z. This calls for focused digital outreach campaigns that inform young people about the policy and the opportunities it offers for participation. These campaigns should use platforms that Gen Z prefers and frequently uses.

### Fostering Inclusive Governance

The government must prioritize inclusive governance by ensuring youth are involved at every phase of decision-making from planning to implementation and review. This can be achieved by boosting youth representation in official bodies and making sure their perspectives are genuinely heard and acted upon. Furthermore, establishing mentorship programs, leadership training, and initiatives to build capacity are crucial. These will equip Gen Z with the necessary skills and knowledge to take on leadership roles and effectively participate in governance.

### Addressing Social Barriers and Leveraging Digital Tools

Efforts should also be directed at dismantling traditional gender norms that often restrict young women's participation in decision-making. This can involve implementing specific policies and programs designed to empower young women, ensuring their voices are actively heard in the political sphere. Finally, digital platforms aren't just for awareness; they should be actively used to facilitate greater youth involvement in governance. Creating online spaces for dialogue, feedback, and direct interaction with policymakers would encourage a more inclusive and dynamic form of engagement.

By tackling these obstacles and better aligning the National Youth Policy with the aspirations of Generation Z, Kenya can fully harness the potential of its young population. This will, in turn, lead to more inclusive, democratic governance and sustainable national development.

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