

**Article: Information is power: the urgent need for information in remote drylands
communities in the Horn of Africa¹
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Introduction

Despite increased investments in Northern Kenya since devolution, there is still a huge vacuum of information at community level about critical policy and development processes. This inevitably leads to misinformation and manipulation often resulting in disillusionment and tensions within communities and inability to hold stakeholders to account.

DLCI with support from USAID/AHADI recently implemented a 6 month project to identify and address the critical information needs of remote communities in Isiolo, Marsabit and Turkana counties. DLCI has been synthesizing and disseminating information to policy makers and development practitioners for over 8 years through studies, briefs, leaflets, journal, websites and interactive events. Through experience, its communications have become more and more succinct and focused on the primary stakeholders of development: communities themselves, with posters and text messages replacing briefs. However this was the first funding DLCI secured to pilot information dissemination directly to the communities and many lessons were learnt which are being shared widely.

Following consultations with a range of stakeholders in each of the counties, it was found that there were huge information gaps on a range of issues. Even information on weather and marketing information was said to be lacking, which both government and NGOs have been supporting in these counties for years. In other parts of the country there has been huge resources put into civic education on the 2010 Constitution and devolution, however, confusions and gaps on this basic information abound in the ASALs. Even information about basic services such as health provision and how to secure IDs was lacking. How can governance be improved and citizens assert their rights when so little information is provided to them?

How best to provide information?

It was found that although information is provided sporadically on some of these issues, it is often not sustained as it is dependent on short term donor funding. There is also a huge lack of coordination and reach of information provision, with different NGOs and UN agencies repeatedly providing the same information in some areas, yet other remote areas getting very little. Information is often not provided in ways that people understand – it is often generic and does not speak to the realities of communities in the drylands.

Ideally a combination of methods should be used to provide information to communities as different mechanisms are better to reach different groups of people, and a combination of mechanisms reinforces the messages. FM radio was initially suggested as the easiest and cheapest way of reaching many people, however some parts of the counties are still not reached by FM stations and it is not always in the local vernacular. It was also found that most stations have a very specific target audience and remote communities are rarely serviced. In practice it was found that although village barazaas are only attended by people from the

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immediate vicinity, the information shared at such events is disseminated through local and traditional channels and reaches a wide audience, and is the best method to reach remote communities.

Although for audio dissemination, local vernaculars were preferred, it was felt that technical information was better compiled in English due to the challenges of translation of policies and regulations. Comprehensive information strategies should be developed by county and national governments in collaboration with development actors that use evidence based approaches and innovative approaches to engage people on their priority information needs.

Another huge constraint in information dissemination is the culture of paying people to attend meetings. In Turkana, the county government staff in the wards and sub county offices insisted that is policy of county government to pay even community members for attending meetings, but senior county government officials in Lodwar denied knowledge of such policy. How can development happen if people demand to be paid at every juncture? Something that government has to take in hand and all donors, NGOs and UN agencies should strictly work together to stamp out as it perpetrates dependency and distorts engagement.

Most of County Government websites are not regularly updated (the one for Isiolo County has not being updated since they were launched in 2013) and they don't have space for public information. Information on the county government policy and practice is not regularly shared. For example, in Isiolo even though the public participation bill was passed, the civic education department did not have a copy. In Marsabit many people had not seen the draft public participation bill, even though it had been finalised almost 2 years ago. Similar the draft of the Turkana bill has not been widely shared.

It was also found that information from county governments was often not trusted as it was regularly politicised. An issue that urgently needs addressing for the future, perhaps by increased autonomy of civic education and public participation departments and increased collaboration with CSOs and others.

Priority information needs

The following issues were prioritized by the three counties for community information provision and require further emphasis in the future:

1. **Community land law and community benefit sharing legislation:** Many people expressed confusion on the state of the community land bill (now Act), and concern that it would lead to grabbing of community land. Concern was also expressed around losing land rights and benefits from mega national projects like LAPSET. People were also not clear on the status or implications of the mining and the natural resource sharing bills.
2. **County planning and budgeting processes:** There was very limited information about county planning and budgeting processes, particularly opportunities for public engagement. Very few people, other than those directly involved, had seen the county public participation bills or knew how the public could engage in county processes, particularly in remote areas would be achieved. Opportunities for collaboration between the county governments and CSOs were being missed.
3. **Climate/weather and livestock information:** Although early warning bulletins and weather forecasts were being produced by NDMA and other agencies, it was felt that information was not reaching communities and was not understood clearly. Information was also lacking on livestock diseases and market prices despite a number of initiatives by various agencies.
4. **Basic services:** Many people lack information about basic government services and programs including: health outreach services, safety nets, youth, women's credit programs, employment opportunities and

recruitment procedures, how to get IDs etc. Nationally the GOK has prided itself on open data accessible information about services online and through Huduma centres, yet this is not accessible to rural communities in the ASALs.

5. **Conservancies:** There was considerable concern and confusion around the push from county governments to promote conservancies as a vehicle for wildlife protection, particularly in Marsabit County, as communities view conservancies as a way to protect pasture, while promoting wildlife and tourism. Concern was also expressed over rights in relation to human-wildlife conflict particularly the location of wildlife corridors and accessing compensation.

DLCI focused on the first two issues. It developed a brief on the community land act and a poster on county budgeting and planning and a Swahili guide, and conducted two pilot barazaas in each county as well as FM radio call in shows in local languages. The intention was that other longer term, better funded organisations would be trained alongside the county governments so that they could disseminate the information in their areas, however without perdiems and support, not all county government officials nor CSOs attended the workshops and barazaas and were not able to disseminate materials to remote areas.

The Community Land Act, 2016

Community land registration is a hugely emotive and potentially conflictual issue, and although people appreciated the fact that the Act had been passed and the information provided on it, there are many concerns and clarifications needed. Communities want help and support in the process of registering their land and want to be consulted in the development of the regulations that will detail the registration process and the adjudication program development. The regulations will need to be gazetted by Parliament and should address the many gaps and confusions that exist in the land policy. In addition community land registrars need to be appointed in each county and a land adjudication program needs to be established before registration can take place.

Although the communities appreciated the intent of the legislation in protecting community land and interests, they were very concerned about many issues including the likely hidden control of the process by both national and county governments, the likely misuse of County government role on unregistered land and how the community land registrars could use their ability to reference to other land laws which are contradictory e.g. the Land Registration Act, the Physical Planning and Adjudication Acts. They were also concerned about the government taking community land for public use, without consultation or compensation as well confusions over county boundaries and the definition of community.

Public participation in county budgeting and planning

People are disillusioned with public participation in county budgeting and planning as they don't see how their engagement has influenced the county plans. The communities said that public participation was carried out purely to fulfill auditors' requirements and the government manipulated the process to ensure that their input had no effect. People were invited to consultations off the streets to participate in workshops, get their photos taken and sign the attendance sheets. The meetings on planning were never carried out in the same villages as those on budgeting so there was never any follow on the process.

Communities in the three counties said they had never seen any material on the approved budget published by CEC Finance in a form that is easily understood and accessible to the members of public as required by law within 30 days. In Turkana no one even knew the total county budget and the County administrator became

anxious when it was shared at the meeting, even though this is public information. When the participants were told, they expressed incredulity.

It is felt that there was the need for an independent mediator to bring county government and communities together and to develop a process of trust and a system for genuine participation.

Conclusions and recommendations

Accurate, trusted and comprehensive information is essential for promoting public participation, particularly in remote areas of the ASALs where information access is low. None of the counties visited had a comprehensive strategy on information provision to communities on development issues and policy processes nor adequate coordination by county government and CSOs. Information was not easily accessible and often politicized. Several CSOs had promoted community awareness on specific issues but this was not done not comprehensively nor consistently and the impact of such initiatives had not been evaluated. Community information is rarely funded by donors and where it is, it lacks sustained support, impact assessment, learning and coordination.

Remote communities require much more information on these and other issues. There is a serious distrust between communities and government which needs to be urgently bridged. Both the Community Land Act 2016 and public participation in county planning and budgeting are seen sensitive and contentious issues and require careful handling. Illiteracy and the culture of per diems that is perpetrated by NGOs, UN, donors and governments are major obstacles to public participation and information dissemination.

It is strongly recommended that:

1. There is a third party mediation process to bring reconciliation between communities and county government and support constructive models of engagement. This is a long term process that needs to be carried out by a skilled and sensitive individuals and organisations.
2. There is an urgent need for community interests to be protected in the development of the regulations on the registration of community land and in depth consultations. Coordinated and technically competent support for communities to understand the content of the Act and productively support the process of community land registration is required.
3. Per diems should be banned by NGOs, UN and Government for meetings in the community interest and for government to carry out their jobs. Workshops and meetings should be carried out in communities under trees rather than in towns to avoid professional workshopppers.
4. With female literacy as low as 6% in some ASAL counties and primary school enrolment around 40%, adult literacy and improved education should be urgently addressed in these areas to enable people to access information and understand critical policy and practice issues.

