



SNAPSHOT

A Democratic Facelift for Tharaka Nithi County

“The project has been of great benefit to the residents of Tharaka Nithi.”

Lacton Mugambi, Community Trainer, Mugwe Ward

In 2019, the Tharaka Nithi County Government commenced the beautification of the county. They planted trees along two major highways in the county and the markets. Most residents observed the activities and lauded the government efforts.

But some residents, like Lacton Mugambi, saw something was wrong with the beautification process. Earlier in 2019, Mugambi was part of 44 residents in the county selected by Act Change Transform (ACT!), a national non-governmental organization, to train as community trainers. They were educated on citizen engagement in county service delivery and governance. This training was made possible through USAID technical and financial support through the Agile Harmonized Assistance for Devolved Institutions (AHADI) program.

As community trainer representing the Mugwe Ward, Mugambi and his fellow trainees would educate their respective communities across 15 wards in Tharaka Nithi, on various aspects of the governance cycle and direct community participation in the governance process. This ranged from Public Expenditure Management (PEM) cycle, i.e. county budget cycle, budget formulation and monitoring of budget execution; public participation in the county development processes; social accountability techniques; the right to access to information; policy analysis and advocacy; and devolution and the functions of national and county governments.

Through Mugambi and his fellow community trainers, civic education and dialogue forums; over 15,000 community members were reached directly. And thousands more through community radio stations in the county.

“The project has been of great benefit to the residents of Tharaka Nithi. Initially, we were not aware of our right to participate in the affairs of the county (government), our right to engage the leadership, and our role of oversight in the development of the county.” Mugambi points out.

Chabari Zaverio, another community trainer from Chiakariga Ward emphasizes the same; “Before, residents were not involving themselves in what was happening in the county. They thought it was purely the role of the county government and donors. They would not question whatever was brought to them.”

Mugambi and his fellow community trainers in partnership with ACT! conducted 35 social audits of county projects across 11 wards in Tharaka Nithi. One of which was the audit of the beautification process which was quite revealing; the beautification process had not been factored in the County Annual Development Plan (CADP). This automatically made the process illegal.

The community protested this illegality, the lack of public participation in the prioritization of the process, the contracting process, the high cost estimated to be KES 150 million (USD 1.5 million), the use of non-indigenous trees and the procurement of those trees outside the county.

“There were also concerns that such a project should have involved local youth to create employment as opposed to awarding the contract to an outsider who had brought in own manpower,” states Mugambi.

With sustained community action and liaison with the respective county government departments, the beautification was halted. The county government through its department of economic planning conducted sector forums inviting stakeholders including all civil society organizations in the county to review the CADP to prioritize key projects based on community needs.