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Assessing the Effectiveness of Youth Participation in Ward Development Committees: A Case Study of Matero Constituency in Lusaka District

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Abstract
This study assessed the effectiveness of youth participation in Ward Development Committees (WDCs) within Matero Constituency, Lusaka District. Despite robust international, regional, and national policy frameworks advocating for youth inclusion in governance, a significant gap persists between policy intent and practical implementation. The problem is characterized by minimal and often tokenistic youth engagement in local decision-making processes, exacerbated by systemic barriers such as cultural attitudes, lack of information, and insufficient institutional support, which collectively undermine the potential for sustainable and inclusive community development.

The research was guided by three specific objectives: to identify the enabling factors influencing youth engagement; to analyse the effects of institutional support mechanisms on youth participation; and to assess the relationship between youth participation and the effectiveness of community development decision-making. A mixed-methods approach was employed, utilizing a descriptive survey design and a case study of Matero Constituency. Data was collected from a purposive sample of 50 respondents, including youth and key informants, through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

The findings reveal a significant disparity between nominal membership and meaningful engagement. While 80% of respondents were WDC members, their participation was inconsistent and primarily motivated by short-term allowances (40%) rather than sustained civic duty. Critical barriers identified include a profound lack of information (40%) and exclusionary cultural attitudes (30%). Institutional support was found to be largely ineffective, with youth systematically excluded from pivotal processes; 72% reported no inclusion in Constituency Development Fund (CDF) planning, and 60% were not represented in WDC subcommittees. Consequently, the relationship between youth participation and decision-making is weak. A plurality of respondents (48%) felt the WDCs do not act on their issues, and a majority (66%) reported no involvement in project monitoring and evaluation, leading to a cycle of symbolic participation with limited impact on community development outcomes.

The study concludes that youth participation in Matero's WDCs is largely ineffective and symbolic. It recommends the institutionalization of transparent information sharing, mandatory youth representation in all committee structures, formal inclusion in the CDF cycle, and the establishment of dedicated ward-level youth officers to facilitate a fundamental shift from tokenism to substantive empowerment.

1. Introduction
1.1 Background
Youth participation in governance has become an increasingly prioritized objective in global development policy, premised on the demographic significance of youth populations and their potential as agents of change. Globally, young people aged 15 to 24 constitute approximately 16% of the world's population, totalling around 1.2 billion individuals (UN DESA, 2023) [31]. The United Nations has recognized youth engagement as critical to achieving sustainable development, enshrined most notably in Sustainable Development Goal 16, which promotes inclusive societies and responsive institutions. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) also stresses that children and young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect

them, laying the foundation for youth involvement in governance systems (UNICEF, 2017) [36]. Despite these normative advancements, meaningful youth participation remains unevenly implemented, especially in political and decision-making structures where adultism and exclusionary norms persist (Checkoway, 2011) [6].

Regionally, African Union instruments such as the African Youth Charter (2006) and Agenda 2063 have articulated the right and responsibility of youth to participate in the social, economic, and political life of their nations. Sub-Saharan Africa has the youngest population in the world, with nearly 60% of its people under the age of 25 (World Bank, 2022). This demographic reality presents both opportunities and challenges for governance. Countries like Rwanda and Kenya have institutionalized youth councils and quotas to foster inclusion, yet the translation of youth-friendly policies into practice remains inconsistent across the continent. In many African states, structural barriers such as lack of civic education, poverty, political patronage, and cultural perceptions continue to marginalize youth voices (AU, 2015; Gyampo, 2012 [18]). For instance, in Kenya, despite constitutional mandates for youth representation in devolved units, studies have shown that youth still occupy tokenistic roles with limited decision-making power (Wanyama and McCord, 2017) [38].

In Zambia, youth aged between 15 and 35 represent more than 65% of the population (CSO, 2022) [5], making them the largest demographic group. Recognizing their significance, Zambia has adopted several policy instruments aimed at mainstreaming youth participation. The National Youth Policy (2015) emphasizes empowerment, engagement in development, and leadership. Similarly, the Decentralization Policy (2013) aims to bring governance closer to citizens by establishing Ward Development Committees (WDCs) as grassroots structures for participatory decision-making. These policies collectively mandate the inclusion of youth in local governance structures. However, there remains a significant gap between policy intention and practice. According to the Ministry of Local Government (2022) [25], fewer than 25% of youth participate meaningfully in WDCs, despite making up the majority of the population in urban constituencies such as Matero in Lusaka District.

From a historical perspective, youth participation in Zambia has evolved significantly. During the pre-independence and early post-independence periods, youth engagement was largely confined to political mobilization within party structures and national service. It wasn't until the democratization era of the 1990s that the concept of civic engagement and decentralization gained momentum, paving the way for broader participatory frameworks. The 1996 Constitution recognized the need for devolution, and this was further developed with the 2013 Decentralization Implementation Plan, which established WDCs as critical participatory bodies. Despite this progress, youths have often remained sidelined in local governance due to entrenched socio-cultural attitudes that view leadership as a domain reserved for elders, combined with systemic underinvestment in civic education and youth capacity development (Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2018) [8].

From a developmental perspective, youth participation in governance is not only a democratic imperative but also a strategic necessity for sustainable development. Engaging young people in decision-making enhances the responsiveness, inclusiveness, and innovation of governance systems. Research shows that communities where youth are meaningfully involved in local planning and development processes are more likely to design programs that address contemporary challenges such as unemployment, digital inequality, and climate change (UNDP, 2016). In Zambia, youth-led initiatives have shown promise in areas such as public health awareness, environmental stewardship, and social entrepreneurship. However, the lack of institutionalized pathways for youth to influence public decisions continues to constrain their developmental impact (ActionAid Zambia, 2021) [1].

Although international, regional, and national policy frameworks promote youth participation, significant challenges remain in practice. In Zambia, the demographic dominance of youth and the formal recognition of their governance role through policies such as the National Youth Policy (2015) and the Decentralization Policy (2013) offer a strong foundation. Yet, local-level implementation, particularly through structures like Ward Development Committees, is hindered by systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers. Therefore, assessing the actual extent and quality of youth participation particularly in high-density urban areas such as Matero Constituency is essential for informing more effective, inclusive, and responsive governance reforms.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the presence of robust international, regional, and national policy frameworks advocating for youth participation in governance, practical engagement remains minimal, particularly at local levels (UNDP, 2016; Checkoway, 2011 [6]). Global instruments like the SDGs emphasize inclusivity, yet grassroots implementation often suffers from adult-centric governance models (UN DESA, 2023; UNICEF, 2017) [31, 36]. In Africa, although the African Youth Charter and Agenda 2063 promote youth agency, structural challenges such as political tokenism and limited civic education persist (AU, 2015; Gyampo, 2012 [18]). In Zambia, the National Youth Policy (2015) and the Decentralization Policy (2013) formally recognize youth roles in governance, but meaningful involvement remains elusive (CSO, 2022) [5]. The Ministry of Local Government (2022) [25] reports that fewer than 25% of youths participate actively in Ward Development Committees (WDCs), despite forming over 60% of the population. In Matero Constituency, youth inclusion in WDCs often reflects policy compliance rather than genuine empowerment (ActionAid Zambia, 2021) [1]. Cultural perceptions that prioritize elder leadership, coupled with insufficient civic awareness and institutional support, exacerbate youth marginalization (Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2018) [8]. Moreover, many youths lack access to training, information, and resources necessary to navigate governance structures effectively (Wanyama & McCord, 2017) [38]. These gaps undermine efforts to localize participatory development, weaken policy credibility, and threaten long-term governance sustainability. Therefore, assessing the real extent of youth participation in Matero's WDCs is critical to inform inclusive reform strategies.

1.3 Objectives
1.3.1 General Objective
To assess the effectiveness of youth participation in Ward Development Committees in Matero Constituency, Lusaka District.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives
1. To identify the enabling factors influencing the effectiveness of youth engagement in Ward Development Committees in Matero Constituency.
2. To analyse the effects of institutional support mechanisms on the active participation of youth in Ward Development Committees in Matero Constituency (WDCs).
3. To assess the Relationship between the level of youth participation in WDCs and the effectiveness of community development decisions – making in Matero Constituency.

1.4 Research Questions
1. What are the enabling and constraining factors that influence the effectiveness of youth engagement in Ward Development Committees in Matero Constituency?
2. To what extent do institutional support mechanisms affect the active participation of youth in Ward Development Committees in Matero Constituency?
3. What is the relationship between the level of youth participation in WDCs and the perceived effectiveness of community development decision-making in Matero Constituency?

1.5 Theoretical Framework
To understand the persistent gap between youth policy frameworks and actual participation in local governance, this study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical models: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) [4] and the Youth Empowerment Theory (Holden *et al.*, 2005) [20]. Arnstein's model is particularly useful in diagnosing the nature and depth of youth engagement in Ward Development Committees (WDCs), conceptualizing participation as a hierarchical structure ranging from non-participation to full citizen power. This framework allows the study to assess whether youth involvement in WDCs in Matero is genuine or merely tokenistic especially given findings that many youths are included to fulfill policy quotas rather than to wield real decision-making influence. Meanwhile, the Youth Empowerment Theory emphasizes the psychological, social, and structural dimensions necessary for genuine youth engagement. It focuses on creating enabling environments where youth can develop skills, exercise agency, and influence outcomes that affect their lives. Applying these frameworks allows the study to examine both the external structures (such as policies and committee structures) and the internal capacities (such as confidence, skills, and civic awareness) that either support or hinder youth participation. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing the effectiveness of youth inclusion in local governance within the context of Matero Constituency.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Enabling Factors Influencing Youth Engagement in Ward Development Committees
Globally, effective youth engagement in governance structures like Ward Development Committees (WDCs) is enabled by multiple factors including civic education, digital inclusion, and institutional openness. Civic education provides youth with essential knowledge and skills for participation (UNESCO, 2019) [34], while digital tools lower barriers to access and mobilization (World Bank, 2021) [39]. Furthermore, institutional mechanisms such as youth councils and supportive legal frameworks are critical for moving beyond tokenism, though their success depends on genuine political will (Checkoway, 2011) [6]. These global insights reveal that meaningful participation requires an ecosystem of support rather than isolated policies.

In Zambia, despite a robust policy framework including the National Youth Policy (2015) and Local Government Act (2019), the enabling environment remains weak in practice. Significant barriers include limited access to information, cultural attitudes marginalizing youth voices, and inadequate ward-level youth structures (ActionAid Zambia, 2021) [1]. For participation to become substantive, strategic interventions are needed such as amending the CDF Act for explicit youth representation, establishing youth coordinating committees, and leveraging digital platforms for information dissemination.

2.2 Institutional Support Mechanisms and Their Effect on Youth Participation in WDCs
Institutional support mechanisms—including youth councils, participatory budgeting, and digital platforms—are vital for transforming youth participation from symbolic to substantive. Global examples demonstrate that structured, well-resourced institutions can successfully channel youth input into policy and resource allocation (Wampler, 2012; UNESCO, 2020) [37, 35]. However, these mechanisms commonly face challenges of underfunding, tokenism, and exclusion of marginalized groups, which undermine their effectiveness (Milner, 2017; Lall *et al.*, 2019) [24, 21].

In Zambia, institutional support is formally established through the Decentralization Implementation Plan and National Youth Policy, yet a significant implementation gap persists. Research shows youth representatives often lack training and resources, while district youth offices remain underfunded and poorly coordinated with local structures (Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2018) [8]. Strengthening these mechanisms requires increased budgetary allocations, continuous capacity-building, and reforms ensuring youth integration into all local governance levels, particularly in CDF management.

2.3 Relationship Between Youth Participation and Community Development Decision-Making
Global evidence confirms that meaningful youth participation enhances the relevance and effectiveness of community development decisions. When authentically engaged, youth inject innovation and ensure projects address contemporary challenges (Lester & Russell, 2010) [22].

Mechanisms like participatory budgeting show youth involvement leads to more responsive resource allocation (Wampler, 2012) [37], though participation must be substantive as tokenistic inclusion erodes trust and produces poorer outcomes (Zeldin *et al*., 2013) [42].

In Zambia, the relationship between youth participation in WDCs and effective decision-making remains weak. Despite policy frameworks advocating inclusion, systemic barriers including limited information access, economic constraints, and marginalizing cultural norms prevent meaningful input (ActionAid Zambia, 2021) [1]. Consequently, many youth feel their contributions don't influence WDC actions. Strengthening this relationship requires involving youth throughout the project cycle, especially in monitoring and evaluation, creating environments where their input is actively implemented.

2.4 Personal Critique of Literature Review
While the reviewed literature provides a solid foundation on youth participation in governance, significant limitations persist. The literature often fails to distinguish between tokenistic and genuine decision-making power, particularly in Sub-Saharan African contexts (Okafor, 2018) [27]. There is insufficient analysis of how intersecting factors like gender and socioeconomic status affect engagement, and a predominant urban focus limits applicability to rural contexts (ActionAid Zambia, 2021) [1]. Furthermore, the absence of longitudinal studies and robust impact assessments makes it difficult to evaluate the sustainability of youth initiatives (World Vision Zambia, 2023) [40], highlighting the need for more nuanced and holistic research approaches.

2.5 Establishment of Research Gaps
Three critical research gaps emerge from the literature. First, there is limited focused analysis on youth engagement specifically within Zambian WDCs, with existing studies offering general overviews rather than in-depth examination of these structures (CSO, 2022; Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2018) [5, 8]. Second, the literature lacks investigation into gendered dimensions and intersectional factors affecting participation, treating youth as a homogeneous group (UNDP, 2016). Finally, there is insufficient empirical evidence on policy effectiveness and practical, context-specific recommendations for enhancing youth participation in Zambia's local governance (Ministry of Local Government, 2022) [25].

3. Methods and Procedures
3.1 Research Design
A A research design is the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data that maximizes control over factors that could interfere with the validity of the findings. This study adopted a descriptive survey design combined with qualitative case study methods to assess the effectiveness of youth participation in Ward Development Committees (WDCs) in Matero Constituency. The descriptive survey was suitable because it systematically explores the characteristics, levels, and influencing factors of youth participation (Rowley, 2013) [29]. The case study approach provided deep contextual understanding of youth involvement specifically within Matero's WDCs. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used to enrich the findings, allowing for the capture of measurable patterns alongside nuanced personal experiences (Neuman, 1997) [26].

3.2 Sampling Technique
Sampling is the procedure a researcher uses to gather places or things to study. It is a process of selecting individuals from a population such that the selected group contains elements representative of the characteristics found in the entire group. This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who were especially knowledgeable about or experienced with youth participation in WDCs (Palinkas *et al*., 2015) [28]. Participants were deliberately selected based on their direct involvement or eligibility to participate in WDC activities in Matero Constituency. This included youth who were formally elected or co-opted into WDCs, those who had attended WDC meetings, and even youths who had chosen not to participate. WDC leaders, Ward Councillors, and Community Development Officers were also included to provide broader perspectives.

3.3 Sample Size
A sample is a finite part of a statistical population whose properties are studied to gain information about the whole (Webster, 1985). When dealing with people, it can be defined as a set of respondents selected from a larger population for the purpose of the study. Using Taro Yamane's formula (1967) [41] with a 95% confidence level, a minimum sample size of 392 was determined from the youth population of approximately 20,000 in Matero Constituency. However, considering the qualitative and exploratory nature of this research, which emphasizes depth over generalizability (Creswell, 2014) [10], a purposive sub-sample of 50 participants was selected to allow for in-depth data collection and practical feasibility. The final sample included 30 youth participants, 10 WDC leaders, 5 Ward Councillors, and 5 Community Development Officers and NGO representatives.

3.4 Techniques for Data Collection
The study utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of youth participation in WDCs. Quantitative data were collected through the administration of structured questionnaires to selected participants, allowing for the measurement of opinions and perceptions in numerical form. Qualitative data, on the other hand, were gathered through semi-structured interviews that provided detailed insights into individual experiences and views on youth participation processes. The combination of these techniques enabled triangulation, which enhanced the accuracy, validity, and reliability of the research findings by capturing both statistical trends and in-depth perspectives.

3.5 Instruments for Data Collection
Research instruments are mechanisms that the researcher uses to capture data. In this study, the primary instruments included questionnaires, interview schedules, and document analysis guides. The researcher also served as a human instrument in collecting and interpreting qualitative data. These instruments were chosen to comprehensively address the research objectives and ensure the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from diverse sources.

3.6 Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a research instrument used for systematically collecting data by asking respondents to answer a set of structured or semi-structured questions. In this study, questionnaires were used as the primary instrument for gathering quantitative data from youth participants and other stakeholders. Although questionnaires may have certain limitations—such as variations in understanding and possible response bias—they were chosen because their advantages outweigh these challenges. Questionnaires are cost-effective, practical, easy to administer, and allow for the collection of data from multiple respondents within a short time. They also ensure respondent anonymity, which encourages honesty and openness. The questionnaire was designed to cover all key aspects of youth participation, including demographic information, attendance patterns, motivations, challenges, and perceived effectiveness.

3.7 Document Review

Document review was employed to supplement primary data by examining existing records and written materials relevant to youth participation in governance. Documents reviewed included WDC meeting minutes, National Youth Policy documents, Decentralization Implementation Plans, Constituency Development Fund reports, and relevant academic literature. This method provided an unobtrusive way of gathering accurate and verifiable information without directly involving respondents. Document analysis helped the researcher validate questionnaire and interview findings, identify trends in youth participation, and assess compliance with youth inclusion policies. Although document review may be limited by accessibility, it proved useful in providing background information, supporting data triangulation, and enhancing the credibility of the study findings.

3.8 Human Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher often serves as the primary data collection instrument because human judgment and interpretation are essential in contextual analysis. In this study, the researcher acted as the human instrument in collecting and interpreting qualitative data. The role included conducting interviews, analyzing documents, and ensuring ethical standards were upheld throughout the process. As a human instrument, the researcher was able to adapt to different contexts, clarify ambiguous responses, and interpret meanings within the institutional environment. This adaptability was crucial in accurately understanding participants' experiences with youth participation in WDCs.

3.9 Procedure of Data Collection

Data collection followed a systematic procedure to ensure accuracy, completeness, and reliability. The researcher first obtained authorization from relevant academic and local government authorities to conduct the study. After securing permission, questionnaires were distributed to selected respondents, who were given adequate time to complete them. The researcher then conducted follow-up interviews with key informants including WDC leaders, Ward Councillors, and selected youth participants. Document review was carried out concurrently to examine relevant policy documents and committee records. Both primary and secondary data were used, ensuring that the study captured both current and historical perspectives on youth participation in WDCs.

3.10 Data Analysis Techniques

After gathering data, there was need to process the data before analysis. This involved data organization in line with the themes set to capture the research's specific objectives. Data organization in this study involved multiple stages including pre-processing to correct problems identified in the raw data, development of coding schemes to create codes and scales from responses, and deciding on data storage methods. Both electronic and non-electronic storage methods were used to ensure data security and accessibility.

3.11 Data Analysis

The researcher executed two types of data analysis: one during the data collection process and one following the completion of data collection. Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS software, focusing on descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and percentages. These statistics provided a clear picture of patterns related to participation levels, perceived effectiveness, and demographic influences (Field, 2013) [12]. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed. Interview transcripts and documents were analyzed multiple times to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and themes. The coding process involved categorizing responses into themes such as "motivators for participation," "barriers to engagement," and "impact on decision-making."

3.12 Triangulation

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the research findings, methodological triangulation was applied. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources, methods, or theories to cross-verify the results (Denzin, 2012) [11]. In this study, triangulation was achieved by combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The quantitative findings provided broad patterns and trends regarding youth participation, while the qualitative insights explained the reasons and deeper experiences behind those patterns. Theory triangulation was also employed using Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation and Youth Empowerment Theory to interpret and support the data from different theoretical perspectives.

4. Presentation of Findings

4.1 Presentation of results on background characteristics of the respondents

Table 4.1 summarizes their demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=50)

Demographic Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	60.0%
	Female	40.0%
Age Group	18-21 years	14.0%
	21-25 years	42.0%
	26-30 years	36.0%
	31-35 years	8.0%
Marital Status	Single	60.0%
	Married	20.0%
	Divorced	10.0%
	Widowed	10.0%
Occupation	Unemployed	40.0%
	Employed	30.0%
	Student	20.0%
	Self-Employed	10.0%
Education Level	Secondary	40.0%
	Tertiary	30.0%
	Primary	20.0%
	None	10.0%
WDC Membership	Member	80.0%
	Non-Member	20.0%

4.2 The enabling factors influencing the effectiveness of youth engagement

Fig 7: Frequency of Attendance at WDC Meetings

Occasionally	30%
Rarely	30%
Never	20%
Regulary	20%

Source: Primary data

Attendance was: Occasionally (30.0%), Rarely (30.0%), Never (20.0%), and Regularly (20.0%).
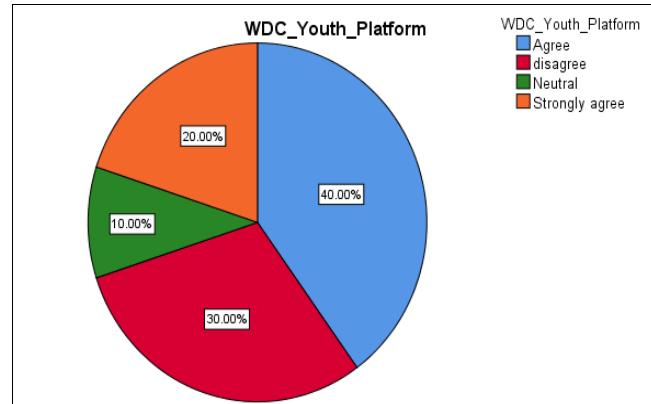
Source: Primary data

Fig 8: Perception of WDCs as a Platform for Youth Views

Perceptions were: Agree (40.0%), Disagree (30.0%), Strongly Agree (20.0%), and Neutral (10.0%).
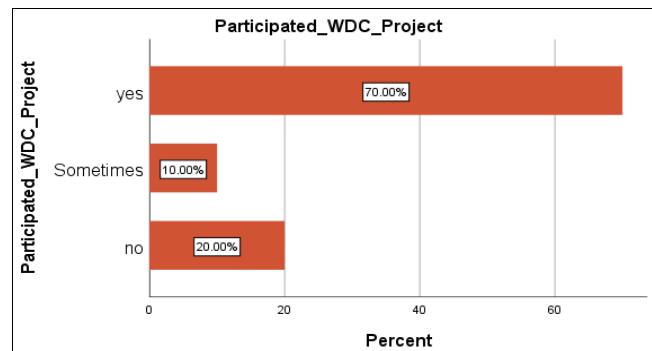
Source: Primary data

**Fig 9:** Participation in WDC Project Implementation

Most respondents had participated in a project (70.0%), while 20.0% had not, and 10.0% participated sometimes.
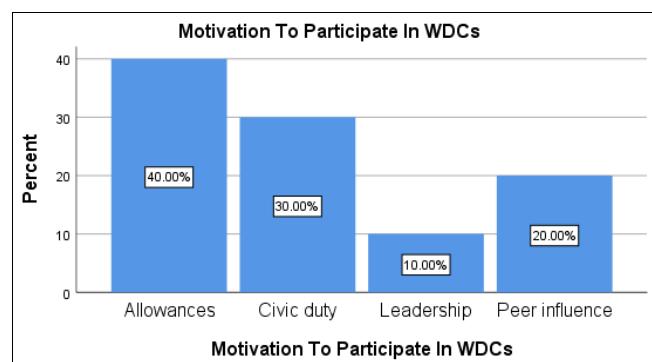
Source: Primary data

Fig 10: Motivations for Participating in WDCs

The primary motivations were: Allowances (40.0%), Civic Duty (30.0%), Peer Influence (20.0%), and Leadership (10.0%).
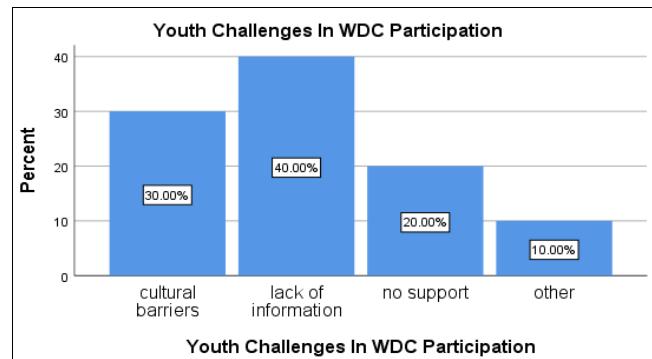

Source: Primary data

Fig 11: Challenges to Youth Participation in WDCs

The main challenges were: Lack of Information (40.0%), Cultural Barriers (30.0%), No Support (20.0%), and Other (10.0%).

4.3 The effects of institutional support mechanisms
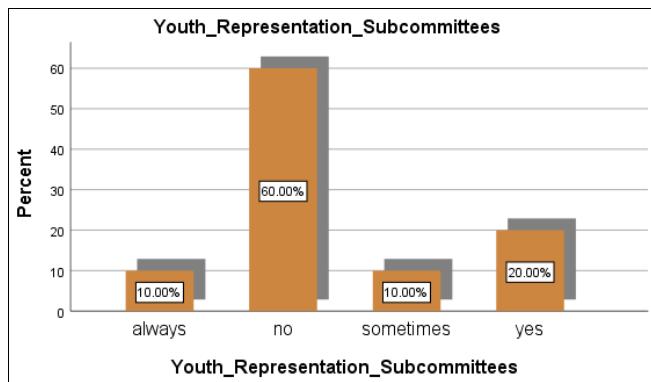
Source: Primary data

**Fig 12:** Youth Representation in WDC Subcommittees

Youth are not represented in all subcommittees (60.0%), with 20.0% reporting yes, 10.0% sometimes, and 10.0% always.
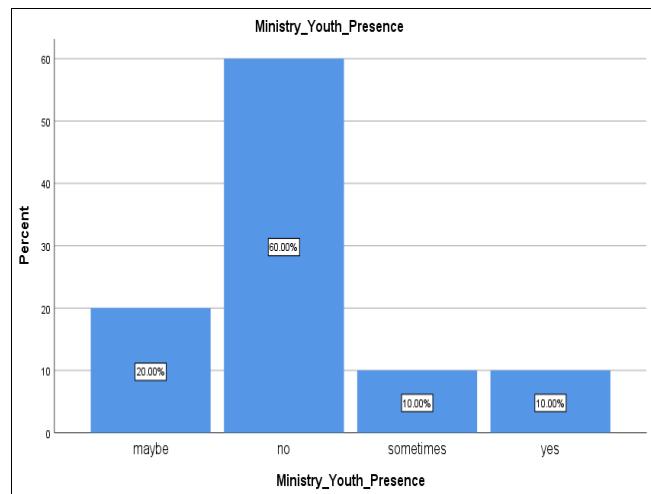
Source: Primary data

**Fig 13:** Ministry of Youth Presence in the Ward

Most respondents reported no Ministry presence (60.0%), while 20.0% said maybe, 10.0% yes, and 10.0% sometimes.
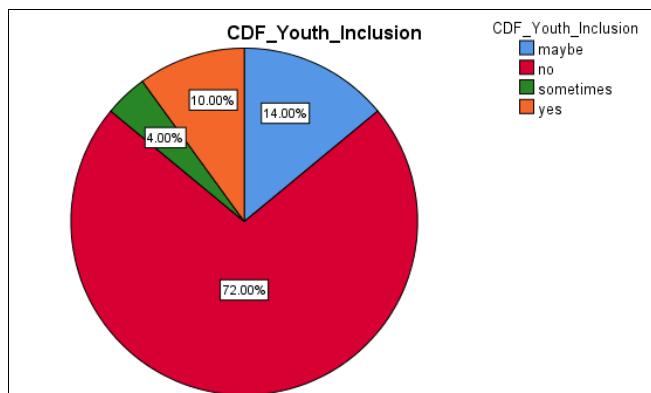
Source: Primary data

Fig 14: Youth Inclusion in CDF Planning Processes

A large majority reported no inclusion in CDF planning (72.0%), with 14.0% maybe, 10.0% yes, and 4.0% sometimes.
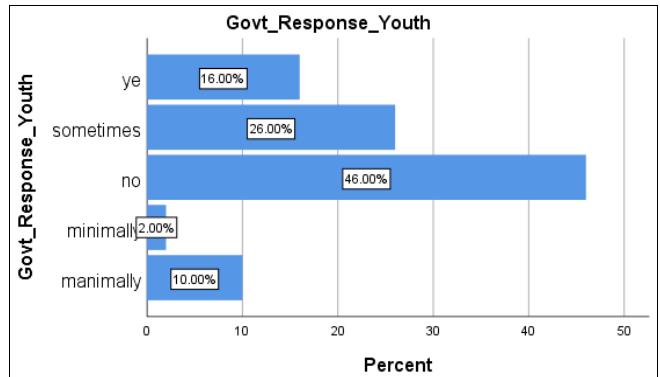
Source: Primary data

Fig 15: Government Responsiveness to Youth Concerns

Responses were: No (46.0%), Sometimes (26.0%), Yes (16.0%), Minimally (10.0%), and Manimally (2.0%).
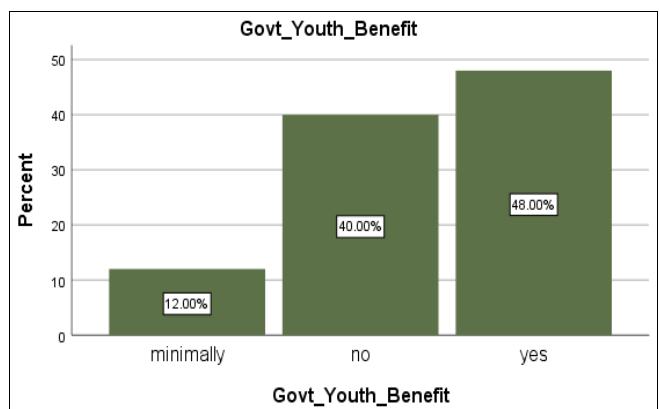
Source: Primary data

Fig 16: Personal Benefit from Government Youth Programs

Responses were nearly split: Yes (48.0%), No (40.0%), and Minimally (12.0%).

4.4 The Relationship between youth participation and decision-making
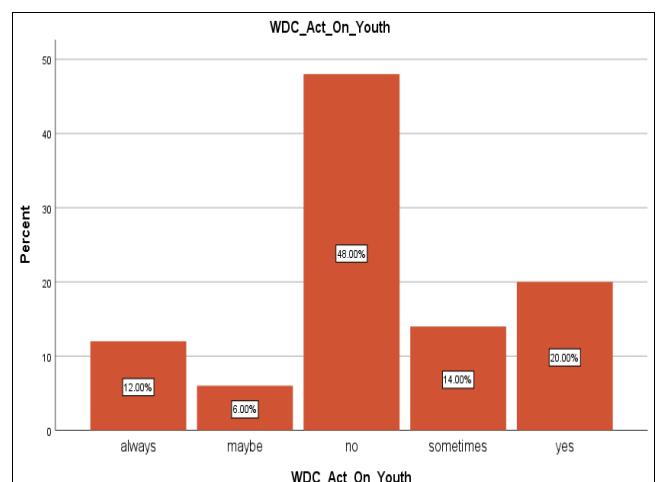
Source: Primary data

**Fig 17:** WDC Action on Issues Raised by Youth

A plurality felt the WDC does not act (48.0%), while 20.0% said yes, 14.0% sometimes, 12.0% always, and 6.0% maybe.
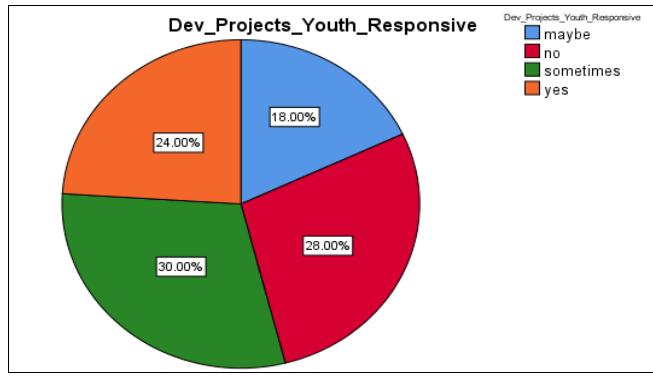
Source: Primary data

**Fig 18:** Responsiveness of Projects to Youth Needs

Perceptions were: Sometimes (30.0%), No (28.0%), Yes (24.0%), and Maybe (18.0%).
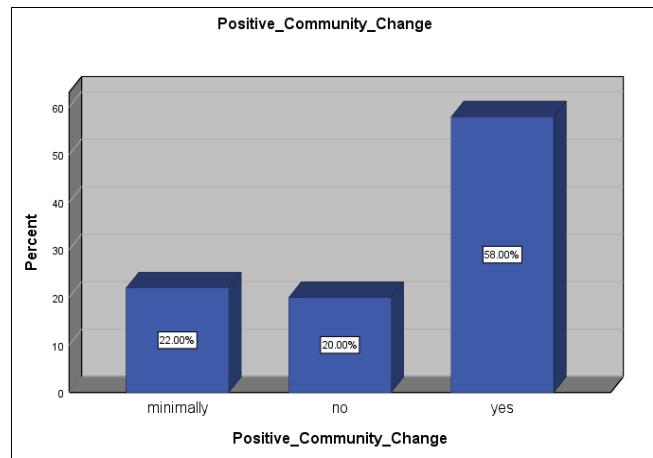
Source: Primary data

Fig 19: Belief that Youth Participation Leads to Positive Change

A majority believed it has led to positive change (58.0%), while 22.0% said minimally and 20.0% said no.
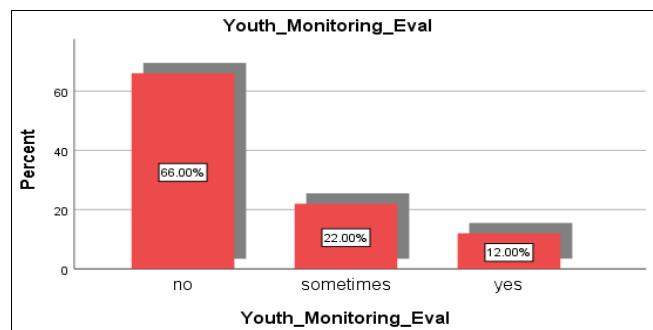
Source: Primary data

Fig 20: Youth Involvement in Project Monitoring and Evaluation

Most respondents reported no involvement in M&E (66.0%), while 22.0% said sometimes and 12.0% said yes

4.5 Discussion of Research Findings
The analysis of enabling factors reveals a significant gap between nominal membership and meaningful youth engagement in Matero's WDCs. While 80% of respondents are registered members, only 20% attend meetings regularly, indicating that membership alone does not guarantee active participation. The primary motivation for involvement was allowances (40%), aligning with Chiguta's (2017) [7]

concern about transactional incentives undermining sustained civic commitment. Furthermore, a critical lack of information (40%) and cultural barriers (30%) substantially limit participation, consistent with Gaventa and Barrett's (2012) [13] emphasis on institutional transparency and voice opportunities. Despite some civic motivation (30%), the enabling environment remains tenuous due to these systemic barriers.

Institutional support mechanisms demonstrate systemic failures in integrating youth into local governance. Youth face exclusion from pivotal decision-making forums, with 72% reporting no inclusion in CDF planning and 60% lacking representation in WDC subcommittees, reflecting Hart's (1992) [19] concept of tokenism. This marginalization is compounded by poor governmental responsiveness, as 46% feel their concerns are ignored, supporting Lister's (2007) [23] argument about eroded social contracts. While 48% benefit from government programs, these initiatives fail to translate into meaningful political agency, indicating that existing institutional frameworks are insufficient for fostering substantive youth participation.

The relationship between youth participation and decision-making effectiveness remains fragile, characterized by limited influence and exclusion from accountability mechanisms. A plurality (48%) believes WDCs do not act on youth issues, and only 24% find projects responsive to youth needs, resonating with Cornwall's (2008) [9] concept of "empty" participation. Despite this, 58% maintain that participation leads to positive change, reflecting Checkoway's (2011) [6] observation that small-scale successes sustain engagement. However, the systematic exclusion from monitoring and evaluation (66%) critically undermines accountability and transparency, perpetuating a cycle of non-influential participation and limiting the potential for substantive community impact.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations
5.1 Conclusions
This study concludes that youth participation in Matero's Ward Development Committees remains largely symbolic and ineffective, characterized by a significant gap between high nominal membership and low meaningful engagement. Youth involvement is driven primarily by short-term incentives rather than genuine civic engagement, undermined by critical barriers including inadequate information flow, exclusionary cultural attitudes, and systematic exclusion from pivotal decision-making forums like CDF planning and project monitoring. The current model fosters disillusionment by reinforcing youth marginalization rather than empowerment, necessitating a fundamental shift from tokenistic inclusion to substantive participation in community development processes.

5.2 Recommendations
To enhance youth participation effectiveness, strategic interventions are recommended across institutional, structural, and capacity-building dimensions. These include institutionalizing transparent information sharing through multiple platforms, mandating youth representation in all WDC sub-committees and CDF processes, and establishing ward-level Youth Development Officers. Additionally, implementing structured capacity-building programs, developing clear policy guidelines for youth quotas, and fostering youth collective action through a non-partisan

Youth Caucus are essential. Civil society should complement these efforts through mentorship and training programs that equip youth with skills for civic engagement and independent project monitoring.

6. Acknowledgements

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7. References

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