

# Local champions: towards transparent, accountable governance in Embakasi, Kenya

# 13

by EDWINE OCHIENG and CYNTHIA OCHOLA ANYANGO

## Introduction

Effective community participation can contribute to generating practical ideas and developing these ideas into high quality sustainable action plans. Resisting social injustice is easier when you have strength in numbers, the right information and appropriate tools for engagement.

In Kenya, the limited progress in governance and development is related to citizen's minimal participation in shaping them. Our political arena is not responsive to the needs of the majority, who include the youth, women, children and marginalised groups, such as persons with disabilities and those living with HIV/AIDS. Strong civic activism among them is rare, capacity for engagement is low and awareness of ongoing governance agendas is scant. Even given strong publicity about current affairs, they may be unable to participate in governance if decision-making processes are closed to them. Young citizens particularly, emergent and vibrant as they seem, engage little with State organs. This limits their voice, choice

and consequently their fundamental human freedom.

This article is about a counter example. Embakasi is a district in Kenya with a population of 619,390 (KNBS, 2009). It was one of the districts severely hurt by the post election violence of 2008. Youths were involved in crimes such as rape, killings and property destruction in the slum areas. Embakasi is characterised by low levels of political awareness, apathy, high unemployment rates, poor sanitation, numerous informal settlements and high prevalence rates of HIV/ AIDS. The district is home to many illegal gangs which extort money from the transport industry and create havoc when confronted by the police. Since many youths are jobless, they are attracted into these gangs by the prospect of quick money.

In November 2009, a governance programme was introduced by Plan Kenya. This article illustrates how this responded to the governance and exclusion problems outlined above. The article is co-authored by Edwine Ochieng, a government official

from the district office for gender and social development and Cynthia Ochola, a member of the Embakasi Youth Organisation and secretary of Jipange Youth Organisation.

We will show via the Embakasi experience that young people's organisations engaging in social accountability around service provision and other governance issues need to collaborate instead of competing.<sup>1</sup> The capacity of these organisations needs to be promoted and strengthened, via training in leadership, governance and monitoring and evaluation. In these ways, coalitions of youth organisations can be enabled to play a role in implementing a coordinated response through a participatory governance process.

We each wrote different sections from our distinct viewpoints. We first describe the establishment of the governance programme, and go on to discuss in more detail aspects of the programme related to engagement with government, accountability, networking, social auditing, transparency and information and communication technologies (ICTs). We then reflect on the challenges we have faced, and draw out lessons from our experience.

## The governance programme

### Training events

**EDWINE:** Through the district gender and social development office in Embakasi, Plan Kenya mobilised a group of 22 (9 male and 13 female) young citizens drawn from registered youth organisations for training on governance. This was to help the youth develop an understanding of how to engage with the local administration. My role as a government official in the training was to help them understand the operations, policies and programmes undertaken by the government, so as to



Photo: Peter Nderitu

**Edwine Ochieng facilitating during a governance workshop.**

enable their informed and constructive engagement. My experience as a project and development consultant was useful in guiding them to programme their initiatives in areas of constitution-making and strategic planning.

**CYNTHIA:** During our third training workshop other participants and I decided to form a coalition of youth groups to provide a platform for engaging in the governance programme. We came up with the name *Jipange*, a Swahili word meaning 'self-plan'. The Jipange Youth Organisation consists of sixteen youth groups involved in various projects within the community in areas such as reproductive health, rubbish collection, construction, theatre and HIV/AIDS awareness. Many resources have been allocated to institutions and committees at grassroots level and our concern was whether they are used for the intended beneficiaries, mainly the vulnerable people

<sup>1</sup>For a definition of social accountability, see the glossary (this issue).

**Box 1: Jipange Youth Organisation**

Our vision as a coalition youth group: a well-governed society and an empowered youth participating in decision-making processes.

Our aims: improved development and democratic outcomes, through the active engagement of young citizens in policy, planning, resource mobilisation and programme implementation in sectors including youth and governance, reproductive health and life skills, economic empowerment, environmental management and information and communication technology (ICTs).

in the community. We identified and started to engage with governance processes, institutions and structures that manage devolved funds in areas such as education, health and the environment.

Once Plan Kenya had organised the capacity building workshop, we young people took the lead. Government officials attending the trainings shared with us their concerns and the activities undertaken by their various offices. The constituency development committee quizzed us on how information given to us would help the community. We explained to them how we intended to increase accountability and transparency in grassroots governance and development processes.

The organisation later became a household name in the district. The district commissioner, attending a ceremony for the youth enterprise development fund, advised the youth in attendance to ‘emulate the Jipange Youth Organisation in their consistent approach in demanding transparency and accountability from grassroots development committees’.

**Young citizen engagement with the local administration**

EDWINE: I became a key link person between the young people and the government officials, making it easier for a collaborative working relationship to develop between these two key parties. Initially neither found it easy to relate to each other. Gradually, this attitude changed

and government officials embraced the youth. Among other things, they openly provided the information they sought.

When Jipange participants decided to identify policy issues affecting young people in Embakasi, they visited various government offices to request information on how youth involvement was supported in programmes and policy areas such as environment, health, unemployment, ICTs and insecurity. Security issues in Kenya are considered sensitive by the police. However, in his willingness to support the efforts by Jipange, the officer commanding Kayole police division gave out statistics on the rate of crime in Embakasi. He challenged the youth to be proactive in advocating for community policing.

Similar interactions occurred in all government offices they visited. With this information they compiled a report called the ‘Embakasi youth agenda for governance and development’, and shared it with all who participated in the exercise through a forum presided over by the district commissioner.

**Holding local institutions accountable**

CYNTHIA: *Barazas* are grassroots policy meetings held at village levels and organised by chiefs, district officers and the local administration to explain government programmes and policies to the people. We attended several *barazas* to encourage young people to take up the opportunities offered by government, such as those in Box 2.

**Box 2: Key government programmes**

- Youth enterprise development fund – loans advanced to young people to promote their income generating activities.
- Constituency development fund (CDF) – funds for improving infrastructure at grassroots level.
- Local authority service delivery action plan (LASDAP) – means by which municipalities can initiate projects at grassroots levels.
- Local authority transfer fund (LATF) – to support street lighting and road repairs.

A public district forum was held in November 2010, attended by all district departmental heads and civil society organisations. At the forum, entitled 'Embakasi youth agenda for governance and development' we highlighted key policy issues that we wanted the local administration to address, revolving around our aims (see Box 1). In attendance was the district commissioner, who commended the youths and promised to work with his team to take up the concerns we raised. Discussion on how to make every duty bearer responsible ensued, and a consensus emerged that grassroots governance structures must be made transparent and accountable to the public.

The departmental heads committed to incorporating our concerns into their respective work plans. Months later, the Ministry of Agriculture invited the chairman of Jipange Youth Organisation to represent young people in the district agricultural stakeholders planning committee, responsible for organising farmer's field days in the district, among other agricultural activities.

#### Networking: shared learning

CYNTHIA: Jipange members, Plan governance staff and the district youth officer visited Plan Kenya governance programmes in Machakos, Kwale and Tharaka districts. The purpose of these visits was to share and reflect on achievements, experiences and challenges and to borrow from best practices elsewhere. In other districts, the young people had minimal ideas on how to engage with the local administration. In Tharaka, for instance, it transpired that the local administration had not shared with the youth information on LASDAP and its possible benefit to them. From these tours we learnt that there was value in a collaborative approach when working with the government and civil society. This prompted us to register a national youth and governance consortium in June 2010, with membership from seven

districts in Kenya, to provide a platform for advocating on policy issues and good governance at regional and national levels.

#### Youths monitor government performance: social audits

EDWINE: A social audit is a way of measuring, understanding, reporting and ultimately improving an organisation's social and ethical performance. It helps to narrow gaps between vision and reality, efficiency and effectiveness. It is a technique to understand, measure, verify, report on and improve the social performance of the organisation (FAO, 2003).

In February 2010, with support from Plan Kenya, the Embakasi youth conducted social audits on government-funded projects at grassroots level. The projects audited were those funded by the CDF and the local authority transfer fund (LATF). The aim of this exercise was as stated in Box 3.

In one school visited, worries were expressed about dubious contractors who use political connections to get tenders and later fail to fulfil them as specified. We generated a report on the outcome of the social audit, observing that projects were designed without community involvement, some were incomplete due to delays in government funds, and community members needed knowledge on project cycles and basic management skills. Completed projects were generating bene-

#### Box 3: The aims of the social audit

- Assessing the physical and financial gaps between needs and resources available for local development.
- Creating awareness among beneficiaries and providers of local social and productive services.
- Increasing efficacy and effectiveness of local development programmes.
- Scrutiny of various policy decisions, keeping in view stakeholder interests and priorities, particularly of marginalised groups.
- Estimating the opportunity costs to stakeholders when not getting timely access to public services.

fits, such as access to affordable social services. The report was shared with the district development officer, district commissioner and grassroots development committees.

### E-governance

**CYNTHIA:** Plan Kenya supported our organisation by installing an ICT resource centre. As members we established its purpose as providing the public with access to information, and promoting economic empowerment and e-governance.

E-governance refers to the use by government agencies of ICTs that can transform relations with citizens, businesses and other arms of government. These technologies can help improve the delivery of government services to citizens, their interactions with business and industry, their empowerment through access to information and more efficient government management. Ultimately they can help reduce corruption and costs and increase transparency and revenue. By narrowing the distance between service providers and clients, our resource centre has become central in helping community members access government services online.

#### Box 4: Government online services

- Completing tax returns.
- Tracking applications for identity cards and passports.
- E-learning for Kenya certificate of primary education curriculum.
- Government advertised jobs.
- Applying for devolved funds.

### Will transparency lead to accountability in Embakasi?

**CYNTHIA:** Many questions have arisen on how transparent and accountable grassroots governance processes are to the community. Information on the use of public funds was never made available to the public before, making it difficult to know the status of the many government-initiated programmes. Plan Kenya



Photo: Peter Nderitu

**The Jipange Youth Organisation: a youth-friendly resource centre.**

proposed supporting the construction of public accountability boards – notice boards used to display information on community activities supported by the government for the benefit of the people. They are used to enhance transparency and accountability on resource use.

The district commissioner accepted the idea and proposed that they be put in key district offices including his own. Our role was to help coordinate the information posted on the boards and create awareness, leading to their use to promote transparency and accountability. However, it has not been easy to assess (yet) whether accessing this information is changing service delivery or access to government services.

#### Box 5: Information provided on public accountability boards

- Government departmental service charters.
- Devolved funds project details.
- Government tenders.
- Reports on use of public funds such as the youth fund.
- Women's enterprise development fund and emergency contacts.





Photo: Peter Nderitu

Public accountability boards: set up in a partnership between Jipange Youth Organisation and Plan Kenya.

### Challenges and lessons learnt

CYNTHIA AND EDWINE: Raising the voice and participation of young people in development and governance processes in Embakasi has had its challenges.

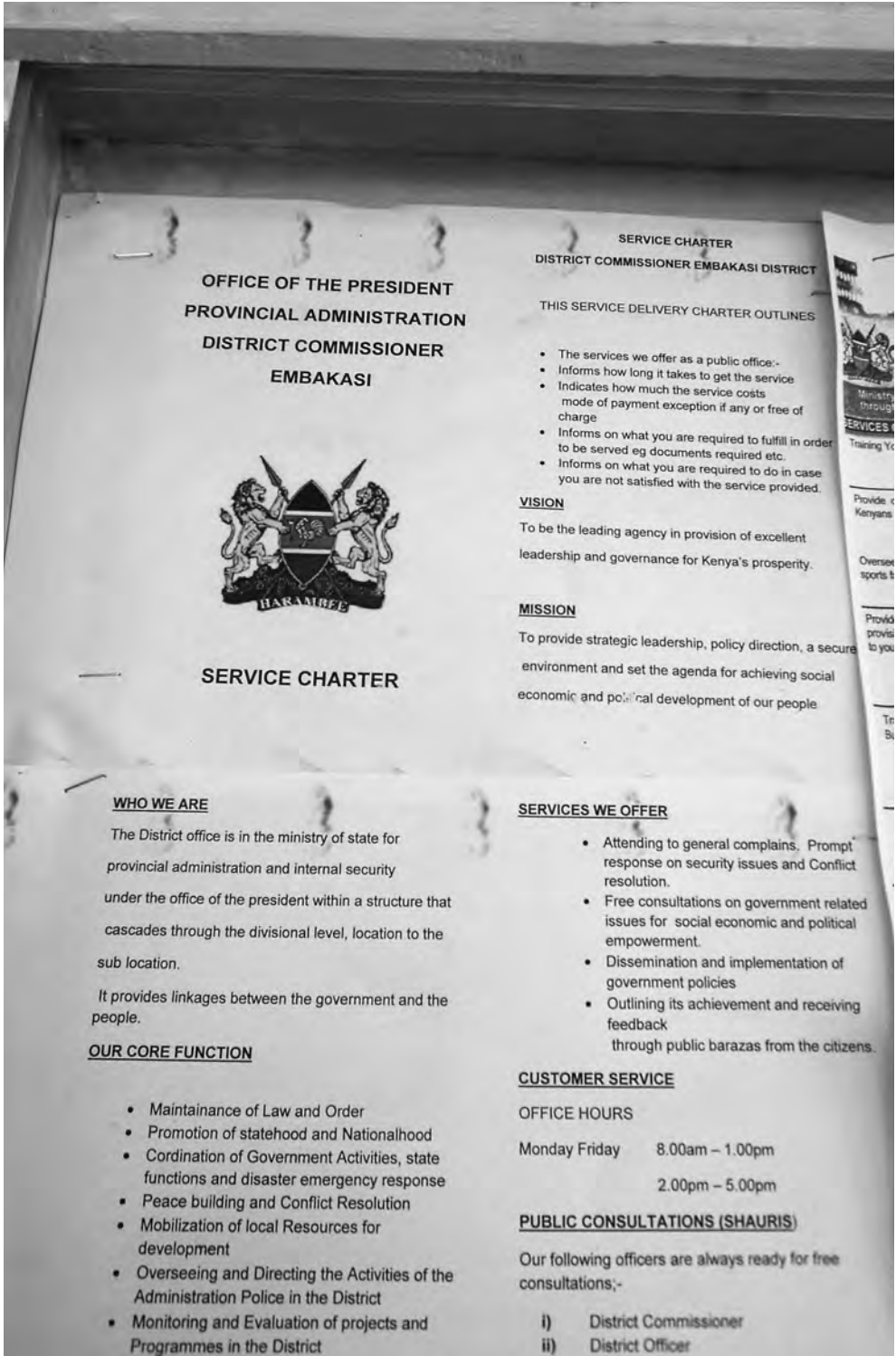
Awareness levels on accountability among most community people, including other youths, was very low. This meant limited understanding and take-up of our initiatives. Government officials themselves had no idea, for example, about the purpose of public accountability boards.

As a group, we lacked adequate support for tracking our impact. There were instances where Plan Kenya was slow in responding to our needs, leading to activities falling behind the scheduled timeframe. For example, the public accountability boards, which may have a significant impact on local accountability, were put in place almost towards the end of the project in October 2010, so we didn't have a way to systematically track that impact over time.

For Plan this was a development process in which beneficiaries made their contributions through participation and needed only transport costs. Out-of-pocket allowances were not refunded. But many youth felt they should be granted allowances for time spent in the workshops, since many Jipange members were jobless and faced other economic challenges. As a result, many deserted and stopped engaging in our activities.

The most challenging aspect of this programme was the perception held by a few government officials and community members that our involvement in the governance programme was motivated by money sub-granted to us by Plan Kenya, which was not the case. This obstructed our efforts to convince government officials to participate in certain activities and embrace us as young people and provide the support we needed. Their failure to do so did not deter us from implementing our activities, and working closely with them as partners.

Photo: Peter Nderitu



Public accountability boards. The Embakasi district service charter outlining the office's role and core functions as well as its vision, mission and services.



**A public accountability board displaying information on community activities supported by the government. They are used to enhance transparency and accountability.**

Creating a broader collaborative network among key champions is necessary for governance programmes to succeed. So too is communities' involvement in creating organisations which will shape and effectively implement the governance agendas. The Jipange governance initiative succeeded due to the involvement of sixteen individual youth groups that were beginning to gain a voice in the community. Through our joint collaboration, we were able to boldly undertake the governance programme and increase our

participation in decision-making processes.

**EDWINE:** Building a partnership with young people is not an easy or obvious task. Governments and youths rarely find common working ground and even when they do, there is normally suspicion to be overcome. The collaborative working relationship between the Jipange Youth Organisation and me was helped by the fact that when Plan Kenya first introduced the programme in Embakasi, they did so through my office, which also registered the organisation. This was the beginning of an



Photo: Peter Nderitu



The Jipange Youth Organisation and visitors at the Plan regional youth and governance forum held at the Panafric Hotel.

interesting journey. Throughout the programme I facilitated almost all the capacity building workshops and forums organised by the youth group. In all the activities undertaken by the group, we consulted extensively and refined our approaches before implementation with technical assistance from the Plan Kenya Nairobi Urban Development Programme. The youths proved to be very organised and dedicated to the governance programme, which encouraged government officials to see them as partners in their daily activities.

Communication and information sharing was also key in strengthening the partnership and enhancing the quality of decisions taken to promote governance at the grassroots.

We found that with success, communities' expectations are raised and the demand for scaling up increases. Therefore, 'supply' has to be ready to meet 'demand' and an inclusive approach is

needed, bringing key stakeholders on board and linking programme monitoring to eventual policy-influencing.

### Conclusion

Perhaps our most important conclusion relates to which actors were involved and how. We understood from the start that governance and development processes cannot be delinked from the political processes that exist at the grassroots level. Nor can they survive without the good will of both the political players and opinion leaders who hold sway in decision-making. Plan Kenya took a risk in giving the youth such a lead role, which proved well justified. The partnership between us – Edwine and Cynthia – and other Jipange members was crucial. Edwine opened the door to local government and held it open, and Cynthia and her peers came in and made things start happening in a way that is more accountable to youth and other citizens.

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## CONTACT DETAILS



Edwine Ochieng  
Gender and Social Development Officer  
Embakasi District Office  
Government of Kenya  
PO Box 20430-00100  
Nairobi  
Kenya  
Tel: + 254 0720455120  
Email: [moveonafrika@yahoo.com](mailto:moveonafrika@yahoo.com)



Cynthia Anyango Ochola  
Secretary  
Jipange Youth Organisation  
Embakasi District  
PO Box 174-0518  
Kayole  
Nairobi County  
Kenya  
Tel: +254 0726243700  
Email: [jipangeyo@yahoo.com](mailto:jipangeyo@yahoo.com)

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