



Mombasa Opportunity Youth present a policy memorandum with priority proposals to realize improved youth outcomes in strategic sectors.

YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT MOMENT

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Introduction

The [Global Opportunity Youth Network](#) (GOYN) is a multi-stakeholder partnership committed to catalyzing place-based systems shifts in communities – cities and rural districts – around the world through the creation of sustainable economic opportunities for “Opportunity Youth,” (OY) aged 15-29 (15-35 in Kenya) who are out of school, unemployed or underemployed. Created in 2018, GOYN's current network is comprised of 16 communities in India, Africa and Latin America, with plans to expand to 14 more by the end of 2025.

GOYN Mombasa was launched in 2019 and is currently led by Swahilipot Hub Foundation, a leading local non-profit focused on youth empowerment, creative arts, and heritage. Mombasa has been a vibrant trading center since the 12th century and is often referred to as the ‘gateway to East Africa’. It is the smallest county in Kenya, but the fourth largest contributor to national GDP. Despite its strategic location and colorful history, Mombasa has historically experienced economic, political, and social marginalization. Youth – who make up 44% of the

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Country: Kenya

Community: Mombasa

Opportunity Youth population: 373,000

GOYN start date: 2019

GOYN Anchor Partner: Swahilipot Hub Foundation

Opportunity Youth reached by GOYN since 2019: 55,000+

Main barriers to youth economic opportunities: lack of formal employment opportunities, skills-jobs mismatch, unfavorable OY policies

population – continue to perform dismally in education in terms of access, retention and performance. GOYN estimates that 373,000 Mombasa youth are either not in education, employment, or training; or are underemployed or employed in the informal sector.

Working closely with GOYN Global Partner Global Development Incubator (GDI), GOYN Mombasa spearheaded a youth-led mapping exercise of the youth employment ecosystem in the city. This research highlighted ambiguous OY-related policies that lacked impactful and sustainable strategies to improve outcomes for youth in Mombasa. Furthermore, the prevailing attitudes among policymakers towards young people, coupled with the lack of transparency in participation processes, have alienated young people and hindered their ability to meaningfully contribute to a more inclusive and enabling policy environment. This negative environment exacerbates high levels of youth unemployment and underemployment, limits access to vocational training, stifles youth voices in the civic space, and discourages young people from challenging authority, leading to widespread apathy. This situation tends to reduce youth participation in decision-making processes to mere tokenism.

This case study details the approach taken by GOYN Mombasa to address this challenge and increase youth civic engagement – i.e. active youth participation in the political, social, and community activities that influence public policies and governance – to create a more favorable policy environment for youth economic opportunity.

The context

In 2010, Kenya promulgated a new constitution that devolved several national government functions to 47 newly formed regional governments. Despite the localization of government delivery, newly devolved units continue to struggle to prioritize key issues, design impactful strategies, and allocate and mobilize resources. Year after year, youth-related activities remain largely unchanged in the government's annual workplan, suggesting a lack of input or due consideration of new or alternative approaches to addressing systemic issues affecting youth in the community.

The Constitution of Kenya guarantees public participation as part of the governance process, but a full definition and practical framework to guide meaningful participation is still lacking. Public participation notices are published in physical newspapers, a medium that most young people do not use; and the documents to be discussed are typically only available on the day of the meeting. In addition, the meetings locations are usually inaccessible to OYs and held during working hours when OYs are typically involved in casual labour work. When English is used for deliberations, this can also constitute an additional barrier for OYs. Most OYs are unfamiliar with formal meeting procedures, feel intimidated and assume that their inputs will not be taken seriously. Cultural expectations also inhibit young women from speaking. Finally, some OYs have safety concerns related to raising sensitive issues that may involve political leaders. All these barriers reduce the opportunity for public scrutiny and consensus-building.

Both the national and local government have taken steps to include young people in decision-making processes. The national government created the position of Chief Administrative Secretary, a liaison role between various branches of government. In Mombasa, several members of the local assembly – the representative arm of government responsible for oversight and legislation – are young people. However, these locally elected officials are not represented in strategic decision-making positions, for example as members in the standing committees on budget and policy-making, and finance.



Lastly, despite considerable gains in revenue generation, the Department of Youth is allocated the least amount of funding of all departments from the Mombasa County treasury. The government budgeted ~191 million Kenyan shillings (~US\$1.4 million) for youth activities in the financial year 2022/2023, but less than 50% of the budget was spent, a reflection of poor planning, insufficient capacity, and deprioritization of youth-related activities.

The challenge

GOYN Mombasa identified three key issues that prevent young people from engaging in and positively influencing the policy planning process:

1. **Opportunity Youth in Mombasa do not see the value of civic engagement in policy and planning processes.** Past efforts by Opportunity Youth to influence policy have resulted in no tangible outcomes for young people, who feel their invitation to participate is merely 'tokenism,' and not driven by a genuine desire by the government to seek input and co-develop solutions with young people. Similarly, policymakers perceive young people to be overly critical and incapable of providing constructive input. These experiences have pushed young people away from government-led participatory processes altogether.
2. **Young people have been conditioned not to speak up against authority.** The act of questioning and/or offering dissenting views - irrespective of the approach and tone - is generally perceived as disrespectful in the local culture and custom.
3. **Young people are not able to structure and present their requests during the planning process** because they lack the experience, knowledge, and skills required for impactful civic engagement. Young advocates are poorly organized and do not commit to a collective approach. As a result, youth-related issues lack broad consensus and are quickly dismissed by policymakers during the policy and planning participation processes.

The approach

GOYN Mombasa initially designed an OY civic engagement strategy centered on data and evidence-building, youth engagement, policy development, government engagement, and policy ecosystem coordination. The workstream was launched in 2021 - midway through the government's political term, and at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal then was to enable OYs to participate and influence the county government planning processes.

The county government budget cycle comprises of the enactment of the following policy frameworks: (a) County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP); (b) Annual Development Plan (ADP); (c) Sector Working Groups; (d) County Fiscal Strategy Paper (CFSP) and (e) Program Based Budget. GOYN aimed to influence the County Fiscal Strategy Paper (CFSP), an annual policy that sets broad strategic priorities and policy goals to guide the County Government in preparing the next annual budget. GOYN Mombasa trained 30 policy champions, and presented fully defined, sector-specific reform proposals to spur OY economic opportunities in the creative



Harith Mohammed, GOYN Youth Advisory Group Member and budget champion, articulates a point during a public participation meeting for the Mombasa County Finance Bill.

industries and in micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME)¹. Despite a well-informed and laid-out strategy - in the form of two Memoranda and a policy brief on youth entrepreneurship - GOYN Mombasa ultimately did not manage to influence significant changes in the CFSP. However, GOYN Mombasa learned key lessons during this process that informed the next iteration of the program, namely:

- The importance of helping young champions **understand the policy cycle**, and identifying key moments and policy instruments to influence;
- The need to work with policy advocates and policymakers, and specifically to **map out budget-making stages and plan engagement** with decision-makers ahead of public participation;
- The difference between presenting solutions and **co-developing solutions**.

Based on these learnings, in 2022, GOYN Mombasa successfully designed and launched a new strategy, which had a two-pronged approach:

1. **Shift mindsets and practices of government** through capacity-strengthening support in policy development; and
2. Strengthen youth participation through the **identification and capacity-building of policy champions** to lead grassroots data and evidence building efforts, and coordinate young people's inputs and engagement.

This strategy focused on influencing a different policy instrument: the Government's five-year Strategic plan - the County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) - which translates the government's political manifesto into policies and programs, and forms the basis of all subsequent policies, workplans, and budgets over the political term. Specifically, GOYN Mombasa aimed to integrate OY strategies for youth employment in key economic sectors, promote an asset-based OY narrative (emphasizing the strengths and skills of Opportunity Youth as opposed to their vulnerabilities), and review existing levies and license requirements to create an enabling business environment for OY entrepreneurs.

Government engagement

To increase the receptivity of the government to the advocacy efforts of young people, GOYN Mombasa focused on government capacity-building, targeting both the policy-making (executive) and legislative arms of the local government. Government officials - including the county economist and policy formulation officers - were trained on how to integrate strategies for youth employment in sectors like climate change, renewable energy, finance and economic planning, and health services. Select government officials also received training on data-driven and public-centered decision-making. Through this process, GOYN Mombasa disseminated the findings from its youth-led ecosystem mapping process, sharing insights on OY challenges and aspirations. The trainings also advanced an asset-based framing of OY to counter the prevailing negative perceptions of Opportunity Youth in Mombasa.



GOYN Youth Advisory Group members and budget champions prepare to participate in the Public Participation Forum for the Mombasa County Finance Bill in Nyali Sub-county (2024).

¹ The strategy involved building policy advocacy and budget-making capacity among OY, through the YAG Policy sub-committee; building strategic partnerships and bringing senior government officials into the GOYN Collaborative; and presenting targeted sector-specific solutions.

In addition to structured training, GOYN Mombasa facilitated internal meetings with key decision-makers to share key data and insights and align on youth priorities for the CIDP. These meetings were held with the government's Finance and Planning department, and led by OY policy champions.

Finally, GOYN Mombasa worked closely with the Planning department to support the CIDP drafting process, bringing in required technical capacity to translate all lessons learned into policy, ensuring alignment with national and regional standards.

Building youth capacity

In preparation for subsequent engagements in the planning cycles, 40 OY policy champions were identified through a recruitment process to support grassroots youth involvement in the development of the CIDP. They underwent a comprehensive 3-day training on the budget cycle, how to analyze key policy documents, and the development of strategies for the meaningful contribution of young people. The training emphasized key aspects of civic engagement such as drafting Memorandums of Understanding, visiting the County Assembly public gallery, and creating awareness among peers.

The OY policy champions hosted segments on local radio stations and social media and leveraged GOYN's Youth Hub Network of over 15 youth-led community-based organizations. Through these platforms, Opportunity Youth were able to gather feedback on key issues, develop proposals, and mobilize young people to attend public participation forums. Collectively, OY policy champions were able to mobilize over 600 Opportunity Youth to participate and give input in public participation forums across Mombasa County.

A key output of this process was the development of a Memorandum with priority proposals to realize improved youth outcomes in strategic sectors. Opportunity Youth presented the memorandum in writing, and used public forums with government officials to achieve the greatest impact.

MAKING THEMSELVES HEARD

OY employed several meeting tactics to deliver the proposals outlined in the Memorandum: they arrived early (and in large numbers); they occupied the first bench to ensure their voices were heard; and they coordinated the delivery of their proposals by dividing their Memorandum among several OY to demonstrate unity and ensure the entire memo was received.

The impact

This approach directly contributed to several positive outcomes for Opportunity Youth in Mombasa:

- The five-year development blueprint for the County Government adopted a number of **OY-specific programs and strategies** proposed by Opportunity Youth. The wins include the implementation of a County Revolving Fund and Youth Enterprise Fund targeting 2,500 youth who aspire to start and operationalize micro and small enterprises; the establishment of a County Business Innovation and Incubation Hub and 6 ICT Hubs with free Wi-Fi at a hyper-local level; and the creation of a job placement database to provide companies with local talent working with the Ease of Business Directorate.

"It has been a transformative journey that has completely changed my perspective on government. Initially, I used to attend public participation meetings but felt like I needed something to contribute. I was just a runner, helping distribute microphones and arrange seats. But now, I find myself sitting in the front row, actively participating in discussions. The exposure motivated me to step up and become a leader, and I was selected to join the Mombasa Youth Shadow cabinet, which discusses progress and makes recommendations to the Government. I never would have thought I'd be here. I am so excited about my progress and excited to see where this journey takes me next!"

- ATHAMAN HASSA, GOYN BUDGET CHAMPION

- Through GOYN Mombasa's efforts, the County government **increased its budgetary allocation** towards areas such as youth empowerment, gender, and sports development. Budgetary allocation for youth affairs increased from US\$12.3 million to US\$18.5 million - an **increase of over 50%** in the CIDP 2023-2028. Gender-related development budget allocation also doubled to 164 million Kenyan shillings or US\$1.2 million in 2023/2027. Similarly, the allocation for sports development also increased considerably by over 50%, indicative of a recognition of the importance of sports in community development, health, and overall well-being of Opportunity Youth.
- Opportunity Youth policy champions demonstrated significant **growth in agency and capabilities** as a result of GOYN Mombasa's intervention. The training increased their capacity in policy advocacy, enhanced their skills as peer-educators, and helped uplift youth voices in their communities in discussions on policy formulation and implementation. **Over 100,000 Opportunity Youth were reached with information about the CIDP**, its importance, and how to participate in its development, laying the foundation for continued and successful civic engagement going forward.
- **23 County champions and writers of the CIDP have developed knowledge and skill sets** to deliver an evidence-based and data-driven policy document. OY reported being warmly welcomed in latter public participations, with public officials - including senior government representatives - adopting the term "Opportunity Youth". Notably, Opportunity Youth successfully requested that a youth-targeted government program be suspended and audited to streamline its processes and enable its full value to be realized for Opportunity Youth in Mombasa. This demonstrates **improved relations between Opportunity Youth and policymakers**, which eventually led to the redesign of the program and its operations, and an increased budget allocation of 3 million Kenyan shillings (~US\$23,000).

"I know Swahilipot [GOYN Mombasa Anchor Partner] is here and I know [they] have brought a memorandum, so let us listen to the others first because we know yours will be long and comprehensive."

- GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL DURING A SUB-COUNTY PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FORUM

SYSTEMIC IMPACT

GOYN defines systems change as a change in the barriers and underlying drivers of youth economic opportunity that leads to **long-term, sustainable change at scale in the community**.

Through its OY civic engagement strategy, GOYN Mombasa seeks to address the **lack of participation of Opportunity Youth in community decision-making**, and to influence the design, implementation and funding of youth-friendly policies at the county level. Because changes in policies and budget allocations are structural and long-lasting, GOYN's impact will endure well beyond GOYN's involvement with any single policy process and has the potential to **benefit all Opportunity Youth in the community** - not just those reached by GOYN.

Looking forward

In the one year since the CIDP's enactment, GOYN Mombasa has been tracking the implementation of new OY programs, and the spend-down of budgets they were able to successfully influence. In doing so, they have seen the need to build on the foundation laid by supporting continued OY civic engagement throughout the annual budget cycle. This process - which runs from August to June - includes the development of an Annual Development plan, a Finance bill, a County Fiscal Strategic Paper and a County Project Based Budget that operationalize the strategies and plans included in the CIDP.

GOYN Mombasa will support Opportunity Youth to track alignment of annual policy and budgets to the CIDP, and ensure OY programs are not deprioritized. This includes reviewing the priorities outlined in the CIDP for the forthcoming year, assessing progress through Quarterly Progress Reports and Annual Progress Reports, and triangulating this with real-time evidence gathered by OY policy champions.

In addition, over the course of 2023, young people from Mombasa played a crucial role in the GOYN Equity Leadership Program (ELP) design process. The ELP is designed to build young leaders' capacities to make a meaningful difference in their communities by equipping them with skills, knowledge, and a sense of agency to drive systemic change and promote equity in their communities.

Previous exposure, engagement, and success in local civic engagement efforts positioned Mombasa young leaders to bring their confidence, knowledge, and strong sense of agency to the ELP. Their contributions extended beyond the design of the program to its piloting, contextualization, documentation, and dissemination of learnings. This active involvement strengthened youth advocacy and civic engagement efforts in Mombasa while yielding valuable insights that are now being integrated into a global GOYN Youth Civic Engagement Toolkit. This knowledge-sharing will benefit the entire network of GOYN communities, demonstrating how local practices and innovations can inform global initiatives - in line with the place-based, bottom-up approach championed by GOYN.

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