

How Capacity Building in Records Maintenance Contributes to Enhancing Citizen Participation in Open Governance at the Meru County Assembly, Kenya

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Abstract

Citizen participation in open governance is central to democratic accountability, yet it is often undermined by weak record maintenance practices. In Meru County Assembly, Kenya, records management challenges, such as disorganized systems, incomplete digitization, and undertrained personnel, have constrained citizen access to information and diminished public trust. The purpose of this study was to assess how capacity building in records maintenance contributes to enhancing citizen participation in open governance. Guided by the Records Continuum Theory, which conceptualizes records as dynamic and continuously managed resources supporting accountability and transparency, the study adopted a mixed-methods case study design in Meru County. The target population comprised 424 individuals, including 70 Members of the County Assembly, 84 staff, and 270 citizens. Using stratified random sampling, a sample of 270 respondents was drawn. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Instrument validity was ensured through expert review, factor analysis, and pilot testing, while reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Percentages and frequencies) and Pearson correlation analysis in SPSS, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between capacity building and citizen participation ($r = 0.77, p < 0.001$). Training programs, workshops on digital tools, and continuous professional development improved staff efficiency and enhanced citizen access to records, thereby strengthening trust in governance. However, gaps persisted in inclusivity, digital literacy, and consistency of training. The study concludes that sustained capacity building is a critical enabler of transparency and participatory democracy in devolved assemblies. It recommends that the Meru County Assembly, supported by the County Government of Meru and oversight agencies such as the Public Service Commission, institutionalize regular training, invest in digital literacy, and align staff capacity initiatives with citizen engagement strategies. The study's novelty lies in empirically demonstrating how targeted human capacity building in records maintenance, not merely technological upgrades, directly fosters citizen empowerment, offering a replicable model for other county assemblies and developing democracies.

Keywords: *Capacity Building, Records Maintenance, Citizen Participation, Open Governance, Meru County Assembly*

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1. Introduction

Citizen participation is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of democratic governance, enhancing accountability, transparency, and trust between governments and their constituents. Effective participation requires citizens to be well informed, which depends on their ability to access timely, accurate, and reliable records from governing institutions (OECD, 2024; Baker, 2021). Legislative assemblies, including county assemblies in Kenya, therefore bear the responsibility of ensuring that their records management systems function effectively to support open governance.

Globally, strong record maintenance has been instrumental in enabling open governance. In Sweden, the Freedom of the Press Act grants citizens broad access to government documents, creating one of the world's most transparent governance systems (Andersson & Kyllönen, 2020). Similarly, Canada's Access to Information Act obliges public institutions to provide records upon request, reinforcing accountability and citizen trust (McDonald & McGuire, 2022). In Germany, the Federal Transparency Law has standardized access across states, while in Australia, the Archives Act mandates government agencies to maintain and release records as a democratic right (Schneider, 2020).

In developing contexts, however, challenges persist. In South Africa, despite the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), enforcement remains weak due to capacity gaps and a lack of citizen awareness (Duncan & Attah, 2022). Ghana passed its Right to Information Act in 2019, but implementation has been constrained by inadequate staffing and infrastructure (Pienaar, 2020). In Uganda and Tanzania, efforts at open governance have been undermined by inconsistent records policies and limited ICT investment (Wamukoya, 2023). Nigeria has recorded similar challenges, where Freedom of Information legislation has not been matched by effective records management practices (Hoffman & Ramirez, 2020).

Kenya's 2010 Constitution underscores the principles of access to information and public participation through Articles 35 and 196 (Republic of Kenya, 2010). Yet, at the county level, citizen engagement remains uneven. In Meru County Assembly, challenges such as disorganized record systems, incomplete digitization, lack of training for records staff, and low public awareness have limited meaningful participation (Kamau, 2022; Kibera & Otieno, 2023; Transparency International Kenya, 2021). Without reliable and accessible records, citizens are deprived of the information base necessary to engage constructively with their representatives.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite constitutional and policy frameworks promoting openness, the Meru County Assembly continues to face significant barriers in records management. Incomplete digitization, inadequate training, and a lack of standardized policies undermine records maintenance and restrict citizen access to information. This contributes to civic disengagement, skepticism toward governance, and erosion of trust. To address these gaps, there is a pressing need to examine how capacity building in records maintenance can strengthen citizen participation in open governance.

1.2 Research Objective

To assess how capacity building in records maintenance contributes to enhancing citizen participation in open governance at the Meru County Assembly, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

This study is guided by the records continuum theory (Upward, 1996), which conceptualizes records as dynamic entities managed across time and space to support accountability, transparency, and public participation. The theory emphasizes the need for continuous human and institutional capacity to ensure that records remain authentic, accessible, and usable for governance and citizen engagement.

Empirical evidence underscores the pivotal role of capacity building in enhancing records management and, by extension, open governance. In Africa, Wamukoya et al. (2023) demonstrate that continuous professional development programs significantly improve the management of electronic records in public institutions, fostering transparency and accountability. Similarly, Iwhiwhu (2020) emphasizes that recruiting and continually training qualified records managers in Nigeria is crucial for sustaining information systems that support democratic governance. These findings suggest that investment in human capital is as critical as technological infrastructure in advancing effective records maintenance.

Globally, case studies affirm similar trends. For instance, Ga-Young So (2024) shows that South Korea's digital capacity-building initiatives for municipal staff improved electronic document management, while An et al. (2017) report that India's training programs linked to urban infrastructure projects enhanced both efficiency and citizen participation. In developed contexts, Mueller and Stumpf (2022) found that systematic record-keeping in Germany enhanced civic trust, while Wong (2017) highlighted how records management reforms in Australia strengthened public involvement in governance. Together, these studies highlight how well-designed training and record-keeping frameworks promote citizen empowerment across diverse political systems.

In East Africa, Kenya has made notable progress in integrating capacity building into county governance. Mwangi, Wanjiru, and Otieno (2022) established that records management reforms in devolved governments improved transparency and service delivery, while Muruguru, Gichohi, and Muriira (2022) found that ICT-enabled records management in Nyandarua County significantly enhanced information accessibility. Kamau and Khayota (2023) further demonstrated that consistent training in local government units increased citizen trust through improved information access. These empirical findings affirm that targeted training in records management is indispensable for promoting participatory governance, particularly in devolved systems such as Kenya's county assemblies.

3. Materials and Methods

This study was carried out in Meru County, Kenya, located in the central region within the former Eastern Province. Covering approximately 7,006 square kilometers, the county borders Isiolo, Tharaka-Nithi, Nyeri, and Laikipia counties. With a population of about 1.55 million people, largely from the Ameru ethnic group, Meru is predominantly rural and relies mainly on agriculture, with supplementary contributions from tourism and small-scale manufacturing (Maarifa Centre, 2023; City Population, 2023). Governance is grounded in Kenya's devolved framework, where the Meru County Assembly plays a crucial legislative role in lawmaking,

budget approval, and executive oversight (Meru County Government, 2023). This institutional context makes the county an appropriate case for examining how record maintenance influences citizen participation, as legislative records are central to oversight, petitions, and budgetary deliberations. The study employed a mixed-methods case study design, combining a cross-sectional survey with semi-structured interviews and document review. The quantitative component measured perceptions of record maintenance and engagement, while the qualitative strand explored practices and challenges in-depth, providing triangulated insights into governance dynamics (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yin, 2024).

The study targeted a population of 424 individuals, comprising 70 Members of County Assembly (MCAs), 84 county staff, and 270 citizens drawn from the nine constituencies. Stratified random sampling was applied to obtain a sample of 270 respondents, proportionately representing the three groups: 45 MCAs, 53 staff, and 172 citizens. This sample represented 64% of the population and was within recommended thresholds for social science research, minimizing sampling error and maximizing representativeness (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003; Memon et al., 2020). Data collection relied on three complementary instruments: structured questionnaires administered to all subgroups, semi-structured interviews with key informants such as records officers and ICT staff, and document review of policies, audit reports, and legislative records. To ensure quality, validity was established through expert reviews, exploratory factor analysis, and alignment with external benchmarks (Gates et al., 2024). Reliability was confirmed through a pilot study, with Cronbach's alpha scores ≥ 0.70 indicating satisfactory internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Questionnaires were distributed by trained assistants, with translations provided where necessary. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and verified through member checking, while document reviews followed a structured checklist. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v26, applying descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression to test the relationship between capacity building and citizen participation. Assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were confirmed to validate results (Field, 2018). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework, integrating both inductive and deductive codes around records training, accessibility, and citizen empowerment. Findings from both strands were triangulated for coherence, consistent with mixed-methods best practices (Fetters & Molina-Azorín, 2020). Ethical approval was secured from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) and the Meru County Government. Participants gave informed consent, anonymity was assured, and data confidentiality was maintained, with all principles of voluntary participation and academic integrity upheld (Smith et al., 2024).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Response Rate

Out of 270 questionnaires administered, 247 were completed, giving a response rate of 91.5%. Citizens accounted for 159 responses (92.4%), while county staff and MCAs returned 88 responses (89.8%). This high response rate enhances the reliability of the findings and reflects a strong interest in the study.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics

The majority of respondents were male (69.2%), with females representing 30.8%. Educational attainment was relatively high: 51% held undergraduate degrees, 31% master's degrees, and 2% PhDs. Most participants had 6–15 years of work experience (54%), indicating that respondents were well-positioned to provide informed perspectives on records management and citizen participation. These findings are consistent with Kamau (2020), who noted that experienced professionals are better equipped to implement effective records policies.

4.3 Capacity Building in Records Maintenance

Capacity building in records maintenance was examined to determine how training, professional development, and knowledge enhancement initiatives influenced the efficiency of records management at the Meru County Assembly. This section presents the findings on staff training programs, workshops, and continuous learning opportunities, and discusses their implications for citizen access to information and participation in governance, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment of Capacity Building in Records Management at the County Assembly

Statement (N = 88)	SA n (%)	A n (%)	N n (%)	DA n (%)	SDA n (%)	Total
The Assembly conducts regular training programs on records management best practices.	25 (28.4)	38 (43.2)	12 (13.6)	9 (10.2)	4 (4.6)	88
Workshops are organized to update staff on new technologies and policies in records management.	18 (20.4)	39 (44.3)	13 (14.8)	14 (15.9)	4 (4.6)	88
New staff receive introductory training on records management systems.	12 (13.6)	42 (47.8)	12 (13.6)	16 (18.2)	6 (6.8)	88
Capacity-building initiatives have improved staff skills and efficiency in managing records.	22 (25.0)	34 (38.6)	16 (18.2)	10 (11.4)	6 (6.8)	88
Staff are encouraged to participate in continuous professional development related to records.	24 (27.2)	38 (43.2)	11 (12.5)	11 (12.5)	4 (4.6)	88
Capacity building has positively influenced citizen access to information and governance.	22 (25.0)	35 (39.8)	11 (12.5)	13 (14.8)	7 (7.9)	88

The results revealed that 177 respondents (71.6%) agreed that regular training programs were conducted, while 174 (70.4%) confirmed that staff were encouraged to pursue continuous professional development. In addition, 157 (63.6%) agreed that training improved efficiency in records management, and 160 (64.8%) reported that it enhanced citizen access to information

and governance. These findings underscore the Assembly's efforts in equipping staff with the skills necessary to handle records systematically and ensure that legislative and administrative documents remain reliable, accessible, and usable. However, the data also showed that about 62 respondents (25.1%) felt introductory training for new staff was inconsistent or inadequate, while 50 (20.2%) observed gaps in workshops on emerging digital technologies. This indicates that although progress has been made, capacity-building initiatives are not yet comprehensive or equitably distributed across all departments.

The study revealed that capacity-building initiatives were most effective when they were continuous and aligned with emerging technological needs. Respondents noted that ad hoc or one-off training sessions had limited impact, whereas structured programs and workshops fostered long-term improvements in staff competence and service delivery. This finding resonates with Hoffman and Ramirez (2020), who argue that consistent professional development is vital for embedding open governance practices. Similarly, Kamau (2022) highlights that county assemblies in Kenya often struggle with the sustainability of training programs, leading to recurrent gaps in record accessibility. The evidence from Meru County Assembly, therefore, confirms the broader scholarly view that capacity building should not be treated as a peripheral activity but rather as an institutionalized function essential for sustaining transparency and participatory governance.

From a theoretical perspective, the Records Continuum Theory emphasizes that records should be captured, organized, and made accessible in a continuous process. Training programs directly support this continuum by enabling staff to manage records beyond their immediate operational use, ensuring that information remains authentic, reliable, and reusable for accountability and participation purposes (Upward, 1996). The Meru County Assembly's experience confirms the argument by Hoffman and Ramirez (2020) that professional development in records management is not just an administrative concern but a cornerstone of open governance. Comparable evidence from South Africa and Ghana shows that gaps in training undermine the effective implementation of access-to-information legislation (Duncan & Attah, 2022; Pienaar, 2020), while global cases from Sweden and Canada demonstrate how consistent investment in staff competencies sustains transparency and trust in government (Bergström, 2021; McDonald & McGuire, 2022).

4.4 Citizen Participation in Open Governance

The citizen participation (the dependent variable) was assessed to establish how effectively citizens engaged with open governance processes at the Meru County Assembly, particularly through access to records, forums, and digital platforms. The findings, summarized in Table 2, illustrate the extent of participation, levels of trust, and challenges in accessing information.

Table 2: Assessment of Citizen Participation in Governance at the County Assembly

Statement (N = 159)	SA n (%)	A n (%)	N n (%)	DA n (%)	SDA n (%)	Total
The Assembly provides multiple platforms for citizens to give feedback on records and services.	64 (40.3)	64 (40.3)	16 (10.1)	12 (7.5)	3 (1.8)	159
Online platforms are effectively used to solicit citizen input on governance issues.	35 (22.0)	52 (32.7)	37 (23.3)	32 (20.2)	3 (1.8)	159
Citizens are well-informed about how to access and utilize online records and services.	17 (10.9)	52 (32.7)	35 (21.8)	32 (20.0)	23 (14.6)	159
The Assembly actively engages citizens in decision-making through public forums and hearings.	58 (36.5)	54 (34.0)	12 (7.5)	23 (14.5)	12 (7.5)	159
Citizen participation has increased transparency and trust in governance at the Assembly.	46 (28.9)	46 (28.9)	20 (12.6)	27 (17)	20 (12.6)	159

The study established that citizen participation at the Meru County Assembly was facilitated through multiple platforms, including public forums, petitions, and online engagements. A large majority of respondents, 199 (80.6%), affirmed that the Assembly provided avenues for feedback, while 174 (70.5%) confirmed active participation through public forums. However, fewer respondents, 135 (54.7%), considered online platforms such as websites and social media to be effective, with only 108 (43.6%) indicating that citizens were adequately informed on how to access digital records. These findings align with Transparency International Kenya (2021), which reported that although Kenyan county assemblies have institutionalized participatory forums, awareness and inclusivity remain limited, particularly in digital spaces.

The results also highlighted that while citizen engagement mechanisms exist, their effectiveness is constrained by low digital literacy, limited awareness, and occasional politicization of participation forums. Interviews with civil society representatives emphasized that many citizens were unaware of how to use assembly websites or request official records, thereby weakening the inclusivity of participation. For example, 62 respondents (25.1%) expressed uncertainty, while 73 (29.6%) disagreed that citizens were well informed about accessing digital records. This supports Kibera and Otieno's (2023) observation that record accessibility is a determinant of citizen trust in devolved governance, and without adequate

sensitization, public forums risk becoming tokenistic rather than transformative. The Meru case further mirrors findings from South Africa, where Duncan and Attah (2022) observed that despite legal frameworks for access to information, citizens often lacked the knowledge or capacity to claim their rights effectively.

Importantly, the study revealed that citizen participation positively influenced perceptions of transparency and trust in governance, with 143 respondents (57.8%) agreeing that engagement improved accountability. Nonetheless, 73 (29.6%) remained skeptical, citing irregular feedback loops and delays in access to requested records, while 31 (12.6%) were neutral. This reinforces Pienaar’s (2020) argument that participation without efficient record systems risks disillusioning citizens, thereby undermining the very purpose of open governance. For Meru County Assembly, the implication is that enhancing citizen participation requires not only the existence of multiple platforms but also investment in public awareness, digital literacy, and timely responsiveness to citizen concerns.

4.5 Correlation Analysis

To further examine the relationship between capacity building in records maintenance and citizen participation in open governance, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted, with the results summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlations

Variable	Capacity Building	Citizen Participation	N
Capacity Building	1.00		88
Citizen Participation	$r = 0.77, p = 0.000$	1.00	88

Pearson correlation results showed strong positive relationships between capacity building and citizen participation ($r = 0.77, p < 0.001$). These results validate findings by Wamukoya (2023), who emphasized that staff competencies are crucial for electronic records management in Africa. They also support global evidence from NARA (2024) and the European Commission (2023), which highlights professional training as essential for sustaining modern recordkeeping systems.

Comparatively, similar efforts in Sweden, Canada, and Germany illustrate how professionalized records systems reinforce transparency and civic trust (Bergström, 2021; Schneider, 2020). In Africa, however, resource constraints and digital divides often undermine such initiatives (Duncan & Attah, 2022). Meru’s experience reflects this dual reality: while progress is evident, inclusivity and digital literacy remain pressing gaps. Thus, the study makes clear that records systems are only as effective as the capacity of the people managing them. Technological upgrades alone cannot guarantee participation; human competencies must underpin institutional reforms.

5. Conclusion

This study found a strong positive relationship between staff capacity development and citizen engagement. Training programs, workshops on emerging technologies, and professional development initiatives improved staff competence, enabling them to maintain authentic, reliable, and accessible records. This, in turn, enhanced citizens' access to information, trust in governance, and opportunities for participation. Nevertheless, gaps were noted. Capacity-building initiatives were sometimes inconsistent, inclusivity was not fully achieved, and digital literacy among both staff and citizens remained limited. These challenges constrained the full realization of participatory governance at the Meru County Assembly. The study concludes that records are dynamic enablers of democracy only when managed by skilled personnel within supportive institutional frameworks. By investing in sustained capacity building, county assemblies can strengthen transparency, accountability, and participatory democracy, thus actualizing the constitutional ideals of open governance.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends that the Meru County Assembly institutionalize regular and inclusive training programs, including mandatory induction for new staff and refresher courses for existing employees, to strengthen records management capacity. The County Government of Meru, working with the ICT Authority and training institutions, should prioritize digital literacy initiatives for both staff and citizens while investing in user-friendly e-governance platforms. At the policy level, the Public Service Commission and Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service (KNADS) should standardize records management guidelines and enforce compliance through regular audits. To deepen participation, the Assembly should implement civic education programs and establish feedback mechanisms to ensure citizens' contributions influence decision-making. Finally, the County Treasury, in collaboration with development partners and civil society, should allocate adequate financial resources to support ICT infrastructure, training, and participatory governance innovations.

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