SUCCESS STORY · ACCESS TO INFORMATION & PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

# From Obscurity to Excellence

*How the Service Charters for Access to Information and Public Participation Helped Propel Homa Bay County into the Top 10 of the CBTS*

> In 2023, Homa Bay County found itself at position 44 out of 47 counties in the Kenya County Budget Transparency Survey (CBTS) — a disheartening ranking that reflected limited access to budget information and weak citizen engagement in public finance processes. The initiative to co-develop service charters for access to information and public participation contributed to the initialisation of open governance in Homa Bay, enhancing citizen engagement, responsiveness of county institutions, and transparency in public finance management — leading to legislative milestones and national recognition.

**44** → **7**

2023 RANK — 2024 RANK

Position out of 47 counties, Kenya County Budget Transparency Survey (CBTS)

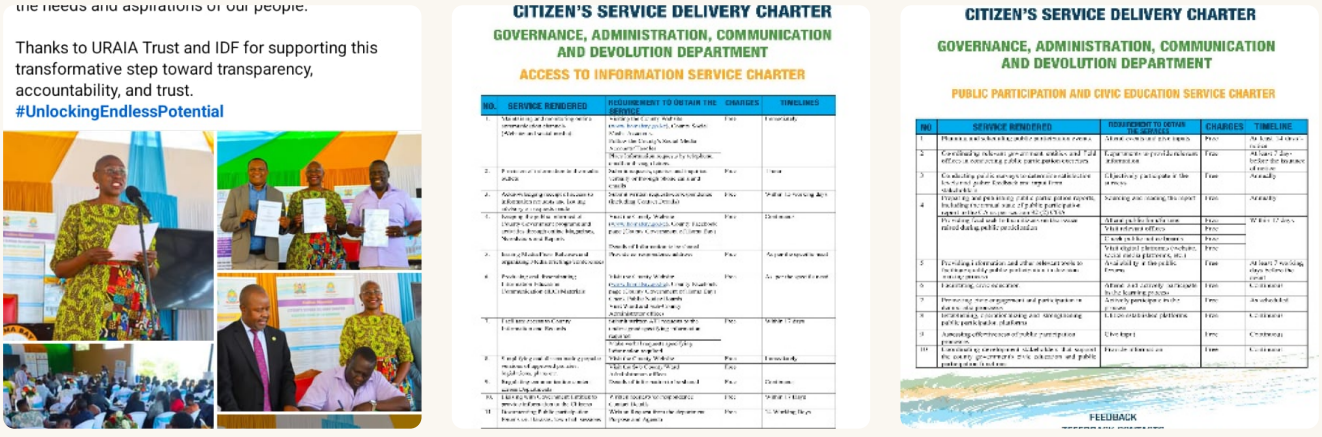



*Figure 1: Media coverage of the Service Charters Launch.*

## A Rights-Based Framework for Participation

The service charters simplified and communicated public rights to access information and participate in governance processes, enhancing citizen awareness and expectations. The county government adopted a more structured, transparent, and rights-based framework for citizen participation and information sharing, anchored in the newly signed **Public Participation and Civic Education Act, 2024** — a law that establishes a framework for civic education and public participation within the county.

The Act aims to promote responsible citizenship, civic engagement, and democratic values by involving citizens in decision-making processes related to county development and governance. It repeals and replaces the previous Homa Bay County Civic Education and Public Participation Act, 2019. The County has since gone further, formulating an **Access to Information Bill, 2024**, currently subject to public participation.

The County Enterprise Development and Affirmative Action Fund Act,2024 establishes a comprehensive statutory framework for the implementation of affirmative action policies designed to promote the economic empowerment of youth, women, and other marginalized groups within Homa Bay County.

The Homa Bay County Civic Education and Public Participation (repeal) Act, 2024 codifies and institutionalizes consultative processes we have implemented since we assumed office as it now legally entreches the village as the primary unit for stakeholder consultation and participatory decision-making in county development affairs.

The Homa Bay County supplementary Appropriation, Act 2024 grants the county government the legal authority to appropriate and expend public funds for the delivery of essential public services and the



*Figure 2: The Official Launch and Institutionalization of the Public Participation and Civic Education Act, 2024 by H.E. Gov. Gladys Wanga.*

## The Partnership and the Model

Determined to change this trajectory, the **Integrated Development Facility (IDF)** partnered with **Homa Bay County Government** to implement an innovative Public Participation and Access to Information Charters. This was grounded in the principles of inclusivity, accessibility, and accountability, and was designed to ensure that citizens — especially women, youth, and persons with disabilities — had meaningful input in the county's planning and budgeting cycles.

Nationally, it is recognised as a best practice in Re-engaging Citizens in the Development and Service Delivery Agenda. The Charters aim to involve citizens in project planning and decision-making processes to accelerate inclusive growth, addressing SDG targets.

### How Public Participation Flows

Public Participation spans the entire county and operates through a structured forum system, with each level electing representatives to the next:

**1. Village Forums**
All members participate directly and elect representatives to the next tier.

**2. Sub-Location Forums**
Elected village representatives convene and elect representatives upward.

**3. Higher-Level Forums**
Representatives continue upward through the structure, each with roles in project initiation, prioritisation, negotiation, and approval.

**4. County Validation Forum**
The final tier, ensuring public participation is embedded at every level of decision-making.

The problem addressed was the exclusion of citizens from decision-making processes, leading to a lack of ownership and safeguarding of county projects. Implementation involved dividing sub-locations into village clusters, identifying projects based on need, and involving the public, ward administrators, representatives, and technical experts.

1.1Mresidents
Beneficiaries of the Charters, disaggregated by sex and age
44→7
CBTS rank improvement in a single year
The Charters resulted in increased optimism among citizens, enhanced involvement in project implementation, and improved quality control. Challenges included disputes over project distribution and addressing equality and equity concerns; mitigation measures included ensuring an equal number of projects per location and prioritising projects collectively. A key lesson learned was the importance of involving Ward Representatives and NG representatives for mobilisation — and the Charters' sustainability is attributed to their cost-effectiveness and reliance on voluntary participation.

## What the Charters Did Differently

**1. Community Resource Hubs**

IDF supported the establishment of local information hubs where residents could access simplified budget documents and policy briefs in plain language.

**2. Ward-Level Budget Forums**

Shifting participation from the sub-county to the ward level, making meetings more localised, inclusive, and relevant to community needs.

**3. Capacity Building for Citizens and Officials**

IDF, in partnership with HBCG, trained both county officials and community representatives on the Public Finance Management Act, the role of public participation, and how to interpret and use budget information.

**4. Digital Innovations**

IDF piloted the use of SMS alerts and WhatsApp forums to share budget timelines, call for participation, and circulate key documents.

**5. Social Accountability Mechanisms**

Through a "Community Scorecard" approach, citizens tracked service delivery and provided structured feedback on budget implementation.

## The Impact

In just one year, these Charters created a culture of openness and mutual accountability between the county government and its citizens. The 2024 CBTS reflected this dramatic transformation: Homa Bay County surged from position 44 to position 7, becoming one of the most transparent counties in Kenya.

This achievement was attributed to:

- The timely publication of all key budget documents (e.g., County Budget Review and Outlook Paper, County Fiscal Strategy Paper, and Approved Budget Estimates).
- Improved quality and accessibility of budget information.
- Evidence of structured public engagement and responsiveness to citizen inputs.

### Voices from the Community

> *"Before, we didn't know how the county was spending money. Now, we sit with officials and give our views. I saw a road built because we asked for it in a budget forum.*

**Millicent Achieng'**
Youth Representative, Ndhiwa Ward

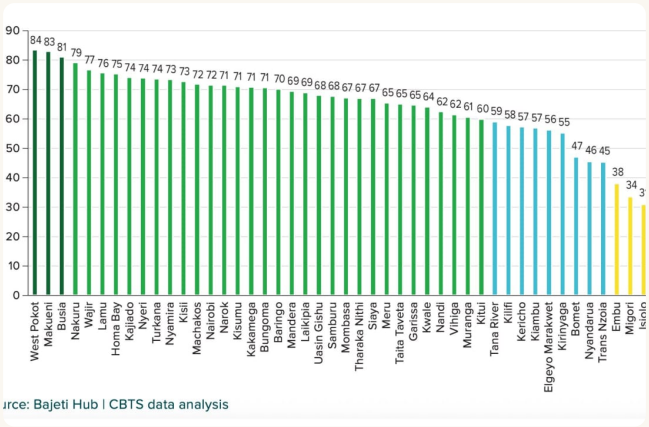
> *"The ward forums and training helped us understand what to look for in the budget. The government is now more accountable because we are watching.*

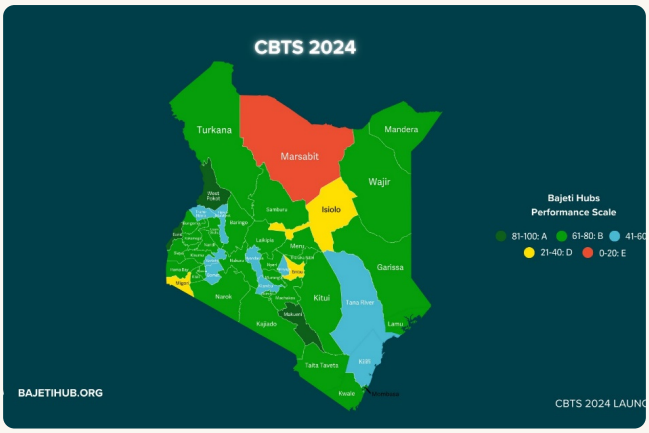
**Tom Odhiambo**
Community Elder, Rangwe

## Conclusion

The leap from position 44 to 7 in the CBTS is not just a number — it's a symbol of what happens when citizen voice is amplified and government becomes a listening partner. IDF's public participation model proved that transparency and accountability are achievable when communities are empowered to take part in governance processes.

Now a case study for other counties, Homa Bay's success story is a testament to the transformative power of inclusive public participation — and a reminder that leaving no one behind begins with ensuring everyone is heard.




*Figures 3 & 4: Screengrabs from the CBTS indicating Homa Bay's improvement from #44 to #7 because of a transparent budget process in HBC.*