



Active Citizens Forum: Reflecting on what it takes to build active citizenship beyond participation



On the 19th and 20th of August, Busara convened government, civil society organizations, research institutions, community-based organizations, and citizens for the Active Citizens Forum and the Launch of the Behavioral Science for Governance Lab (BeGov Lab). This was a momentous moment for Busara, one that will be defining as we move forward with our new strategy of practice partnerships. The story of active citizenship began ten years ago when then nascent Busara set out to research citizen participation across East Africa. In our initial conversations with civil society organizations, one challenge was consistently pointed out; that citizens remained complacent even on issues that directly affected them and their communities. This led us to ask a fundamental question: what motivates citizens to engage in governance?

Over the last decade, we have applied behavioral science to understand citizen agency and, through strategic partnerships with civil society organizations and government agencies across the region, have sought to understand the incentives and barriers that drive citizen engagement. We have applied experimentation, behavioral science, and capacity strengthening while also developing evidence and a range of toolkits to support CSOs with the tools they need to build active citizenship.

For us then, the Active Citizens Forum was more than a convening. It was a space to reflect on a fundamental question: what does it take to move from citizen participation as an event to active citizenship as an ongoing practice?



From left to right: Busara's Gideon Too, Salim Kombo and Brenda Ogutu in conversation with James Kengah from BBC Media Action on a decade of applying behavioral science in civic engagement.

Over two days, the Forum brought together government, civil society, researchers, practitioners, and partners to exchange ideas, challenge assumptions, and showcase practical approaches to strengthening citizen agency. Across plenaries, keynotes, hands-on workshops,

and breakout sessions, one message came through clearly: active citizenship cannot be built by citizens alone. It requires institutions that listen, systems that respond, useful evidence, and partnerships that place communities at the center.



Busara's David Muruaru giving directions to participants during the Active Citizens Forum

The Forum also reflected Busara's journey over the past decade, from supporting civic participation initiatives to increasingly asking deeper questions about behavior, systems, institutions, and the conditions that enable citizens to act. One of the ways we did that was through behavioral tools specifically curated to support civil society organizations and government agencies with social and behavior change communication strategies, message testing, social network analysis and participatory action research. For this reason, we had different sessions to show our partners how they could use these tools. For instance, in a session on the Low Cost Message Testing (LCMT), participants got a first hand experience in message testing and the use of behavioral science to test advocacy, civic engagement, and social and behavior change campaigns before launching them—all without needing a massive budget. This toolkit has been tested and validated by policy actors across

East Africa and beyond with ongoing updates to make the resource even more useful through live testing of advocacy and policy messages. To access this toolkit, please use this [link](#).

In a different session, participants experienced Busara's behavioral systems [map](#) through an interactive session that demonstrated how systems mapping can identify key actors and dynamics, uncover leverage points, and inform more effective governance interventions and civic engagement in East Africa. Closely related to this session was the Social Network Analysis (SNA) session where participants got to see how they can investigate social structures using social networks, examining relationships and connections among entities such as social institutions, communities, groups, and systems. You can access Busara's playbook which details how to do social network analysis [here](#).



George Gitau, Senior Analyst Busara, taking participants through Busara's Behavioral Systems Map

Participants also got to see how they can apply different Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods by involving community members as active participants in identifying problems, generating new ideas, and working together to develop solutions that affect their lives. Specifically, our staff used the Story Completion method, where participants completed story stems leading to a narrative to understand a certain issue. You can learn more about this and

other methods by checking out the PAR toolkit [here](#). Busara's journey in developing these toolkits, applying experimentation, behavioral science and capacity strengthening culminated in the launch of the Behavioral Science for Governance Lab (BeGov Lab), a space designed to bring together applied behavioral science, embedded partnerships, and real-time learning to address governance challenges. More about this later.



Participants during a session on Busara's behavioral systems map



Busara's Ruth Wambua taking participants through a session on participatory action research

Listening is the starting point of active citizenship

One of the strongest reflections from the Forum was the importance of genuinely listening to citizens. The conversations repeatedly challenged the idea that public participation is simply about organizing a forum, collecting views, or meeting a constitutional requirement. Instead, meaningful engagement requires understanding people's lived realities, creating accessible channels for participation, and, most importantly, demonstrating that citizens' voices can lead to action, as noted by Frankline Mukwanja, the Executive Director of the Center for Multiparty Democracy Kenya, who was one of the keynote speakers. In his words "democracy needs institutions that respond to the needs of citizens, leaders who act on citizens' interests and citizens who can raise their voices on policy issues."

Joining us on day one was Mr. Godfrey Akumali, the Acting County Secretary at the Nairobi City County Government, who shared that, historically, governments have been closed, bureaucratic systems that must now change with time and listen to citizens. He emphasized that governments must learn about what people need, rather than making assumptions about what people want. Given the vast amounts of data generated by citizens, he mentioned that governments must invest in analyzing what this information coming from different citizens says. He also mentioned that governments must work with academics and researchers to inform policy and legislation and gave the example of how the County created two departments to make

this possible. Specifically, the Departments of Research and Policy and the Department of Public Participation. Representatives of these two directorates at the County Government, namely Dr. Daniel Jabuya, the Deputy Director of Research and Policy, and Patrick Ang'asa of the Department of Public Participation held a fireside chat to elaborate further on their respective Departments' mandates. The two highlighted challenges in citizen participation and pointed out the efforts the County was taking to make citizen participation meaningful, specifically by creating new systems that allow citizen feedback to be collected, analyzed, and disseminated. The discussions highlighted the importance of evidence, public participation, feedback, and direct engagement between government and communities.

A recurring question throughout the Forum was therefore: where does the citizen's voice go after it has been heard? This question would emerge again several times through the work showcased by our partners.



Godfrey Akumali, Ag. County Secretary at the Nairobi City County Government giving his remarks on the role of government in building active citizens

Evidence matters, but only when it travels

Another significant reflection from the Forum was that evidence alone does not create change.

Anna Bwana of [Twaweza East Africa](#) reminded us that evidence is one bridge between citizens and institutions, but it must be accompanied by trust, relationships, timing, and an understanding of where decisions are actually made. Evidence is more likely to influence change when governments and other decision-makers are

engaged throughout the journey rather than simply receiving research findings at the end. This reflection was echoed throughout the Forum: research must be rigorous, but it must also be relevant, timely, accessible, and connected to the people and institutions with the power to act. In her words, beyond producing evidence, we must appeal to the hearts and minds of decision-makers.



Anna Bwana, Executive Director at Twaweza East Africa giving her remarks during the forum

From dialogue to democratic practice

Closing out day one was a conversation about dialogue that challenged us to think critically about it, and to see dialogue as essential to bringing different actors together, reducing polarization, and creating understanding. But, as participants reflected, dialogue on its own is not enough. It must create a pathway to influence and institutional action. This was a key discussion point during a plenary session by the [Center for Multiparty Democracy in Kenya](#). Participants pointed out that for dialogue to happen, different parties must agree to listen to each other.

Day two of the forum started with a keynote address from Frankline Mukwanja of the Centre for Multiparty Democracy–Kenya, who emphasized the need to move beyond dialogue as an end in itself and towards institutions that behave differently because citizens have spoken. This was an important challenge for all of us working in governance: how do we design institutions and systems that make citizen voices consequential?



Frankline Mukwanja, Executive Director of the Center for Multiparty Democracy–Kenya giving his remarks during the forum.

Learning from the interventions showcased by our partners

We had sessions led by organizations working directly with citizens. These included research institutions, community-based and civil society organizations, funders, and other practitioners. A key strength of the Active Citizens Forum was the opportunity to learn directly from organizations that are testing and implementing different approaches to strengthening citizen agency.

Through a keynote address, Leonard Okello from [The Uhuru Institute for Social Development](#), reflected on a decade-long journey and

partnership with Busara, sharing lessons on citizen identity, organization, advocacy, and accountability. The session emphasized that active citizenship is closely connected to how citizens understand their collective power and their ability to organize around shared interests and demands. The Uhuru Institute later on, joined Busara in presenting the [Cooperative Resilience Measurement Index \(CRMI\)](#), demonstrating how evidence can help member-owned organizations understand, measure, and strengthen their resilience beyond purely financial performance.



Leonard Okello, CEO of the Uhuru Institute giving his remarks during the forum

[Twaweza East Africa](#) shared powerful lessons on the relationship between evidence and influence. Through its work, the organization demonstrated the importance of working with governments, understanding where decisions are made, and recognizing that evidence is embedded within wider systems of power and relationships. They also held an engaging session on building tomorrow's agency today, reflecting on what policy actors need to do to build and sustain citizen agency. Twaweza also partnered with Busara to launch a Community of Practice on Youth Engagement, creating a

space for organizations to continue learning, share evidence, and collectively identify priorities to strengthen youth participation. Ultimately, through this community of practice, we ask a fundamental question: how can we better understand and strengthen young people's agency to participate meaningfully in Kenya's civic and political life?

To join this community of practice, you can provide your details through [this form](#), and we will get in touch with the next steps.



Participants during a session facilitated by Twaweza East Africa

Another session on youth participation was moderated by Muema Action Post, who shared insights from their research on youth voting behavior, highlighting the influence of socioeconomic conditions, social networks, trust in institutions, voter registration barriers, and vote buying. The discussion challenged participants to look beyond stated intentions to vote and to better understand the realities that shape whether young people ultimately participate.

Through Mic Yetu, [Shujaaz Inc](#) demonstrated how youth-led research, storytelling, digital platforms, and community networks can create more relevant spaces for young people to engage. The session highlighted an important distinction: young people are not necessarily disengaged; many are engaging in ways that traditional civic participation systems may fail to recognize or measure. Fear, distrust, information gaps, and inaccessible institutions remain significant barriers, but youth-led conversations and trusted networks can help bridge these

gaps. In a different session, the [Africa Youth Leadership Forum \(AYLF\)](#) shared its approach to creating spaces where young people can belong, exchange ideas, and develop leadership. Through an interactive exercise focused on political aspirants, the session explored how citizens can move towards more issue-based politics and more inclusive democratic participation. This session closely mirrored one hosted by [Futurelect](#), where young people aspiring to political leadership shared the realities of pursuing public office, from navigating campaign financing to overcoming barriers related to knowledge, networks, and visibility. Featuring Futurelect fellows who have previously run for office or are preparing for the 2027 elections, the session explored the opportunities and challenges young people face in seeking political leadership in Kenya. It offered practical insights into navigating political systems and highlighted how leadership development programs can help equip and support the next generation of political leaders.



A panel discussion by Futurelect's fellows on navigating political leadership

Art was also explored as another form of building agency. Kenya-based [Pawa254](#) showcased the power of activism to make complex political and governance issues more accessible, emotional,

and engaging. The session demonstrated how art can serve as a form of civic education while also raising important questions about inclusion, representation, and artists' safety.



Marion Ngayi from Pawa254 taking participants through a session on activism.

Throughout the Forum, issues of public finance management were raised. Specifically, can citizens influence budgets? [Bajeti Hub](#) demonstrated how citizen engagement can be strengthened within public finance and budgeting processes. Through its regional

budget hubs, coordinators, facilitators, and champions, the organization is helping create connections between national and sub-national governance processes while equipping citizens with evidence to engage more effectively.



Participants closely follow a session by Bajeti Hub

Returning to the question of citizen data, [Afrobarometer](#) demonstrated the value of citizen-generated data for understanding public service delivery and governance challenges across Africa. Participants in this session worked through how to break down evidence

into specific behaviors, underlying barriers, and potential interventions. The discussion reinforced a key lesson from the Forum: data becomes more powerful when it helps actors diagnose problems and co-create practical solutions.



Participants closely following a session by Afrobarometer

A closely related session by [Population Council Kenya](#) explored findings from a longitudinal study examining how policy actors can work with communities to translate research evidence into effective policies, programs, and impact. Drawing on Population Council Kenya's experience, the session highlighted the importance of collaboration, community

engagement, and co-creation in strengthening evidence uptake, accountability, and responsiveness to citizens' needs. It underscored that government, researchers, and other policy actors need to work closely with communities throughout the research and policy process to ensure that interventions are relevant, trusted, and ultimately taken up and sustained.



Hilda Malowa from Population Council Kenya takes participants through a session on translating data into evidence

In another session, [Global Rights Alert](#) demonstrated the importance of working with existing community structures rather than imposing external solutions. Its community-based monitoring approach focuses on identifying trusted actors, understanding local power dynamics, and supporting communities to

engage directly with formal governance systems. The approach reinforced a simple but powerful lesson: communities are not empty vessels waiting to be organized; they already possess relationships, structures, and knowledge that can be strengthened.



Winfred Ngabiirwe, Executive Director at Global Rights Alert taking participants through a session on community based monitoring

Using technology to close the feedback loop

Technology was also highlighted as a support for governance and accountability mechanisms. [Nuru Trust Network](#) invited participants to consider what happens after citizens leave a public participation forum. Through its Sauti Stack approach, the organization explored how technology and existing communication systems

can help citizens track issues, provide feedback, and understand whether their contributions have been acted upon. The central challenge was clear: participation loses meaning when citizens never hear what happened next. Artificial Intelligence (AI) was also pointed out as an enabler of citizen accountability.



Participants following closely during a session by Nuru Trust Network

[Mzalendo Trust](#), showcased BungeMeter, an AI-powered platform that demonstrates how AI can support parliamentary accountability and make information about representatives and their work more accessible to citizens. The session formed part of a wider conversation at the Forum on how digital tools can expand access to information while strengthening citizens' ability to monitor institutions. Closely related was Sema's session, which demonstrated how feedback systems can

improve how public institutions listen to and respond to citizens. Using technology-enabled tools for collecting anonymous feedback, the session explored the behavioral barriers that prevent people from speaking up, including fear and the belief that nothing will change. A key insight was that citizens are more likely to provide honest and useful feedback when they believe it will lead to action.



Loise Mwakamba from Mzalendo Trust takes participants through a session on BungeMeter, an AI-powered platform that monitors parliamentary proceedings

Co-designing cities with citizens

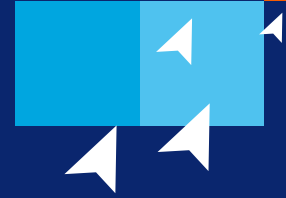
We also explored lived spaces and how citizens interact with their environment. [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung](#) in Kenya showcased an interactive, community-driven urban planning platform that enables citizens to explore their city, share structured feedback, and track government responses. This session demonstrated how

digital tools can make urban planning more participatory while helping institutions synthesize citizen input and close the feedback loop. That was an important insight, going back to the County Secretary's observations on how governments can synthesize citizen data for evidence-informed decision-making.



Participants following closely a session by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kenya

What we are taking forward



Across these diverse interventions, several common lessons emerged. Firstly, citizens must be treated as partners, not passive recipients. Whether through community monitoring, participatory research, youth-led storytelling, or public finance engagement, the strongest interventions start by recognizing that knowledge and agency already exist within communities. Second, feedback must lead somewhere. Citizens need to understand how their voices are received, considered, and acted upon. Closing the feedback loop is essential to building trust and sustaining participation. Third, we need to meet people where they are. This means recognizing that participation does not happen only in formal forums. Young people may engage through digital spaces, storytelling, social networks, art, and collective action. Fourth, technology is a tool, not the solution by itself. AI, digital platforms, dashboards, and feedback systems can expand access and improve accountability, but they must be designed around people's realities, including unequal access to technology. Finally, collaboration is essential. No single organization or institution can solve the complex challenges surrounding citizen agency. The Forum demonstrated the value of bringing government, civil society, researchers, communities, funders, and innovators into the same conversation.

Looking ahead: The BeGov Lab

Building on a decade of civic engagement across East Africa, Busara's new strategy marks a shift from research to evidence informed policy and practice, grounded in the understanding that human behavior is dynamic and that meaningful innovations take time to become embedded within complex systems. Governance systems, in particular, are interconnected and shaped by relationships, norms, rules, and feedback loops that continuously influence how actors interact and how change occurs (Diaz Del Valle et al., 2024; Wright & Meadows, 2012). This complexity underscores the need for closer collaboration among policymakers, researchers, funders, government, civil society, and citizens. Creating spaces where these actors can build relationships, exchange knowledge, test ideas, and learn from one another is essential to strengthening feedback loops and enabling lasting change.

In this context, Busara launched the Behavioral Science for Governance Lab (BeGov Lab). Building on the lessons and momentum of the Active Citizens Forum, the Lab represents the next phase of Busara's work—bringing together scholars, researchers, funders, government, and civil society leaders from across East Africa to reflect on what it takes to build citizen agency, identify persistent gaps in citizen engagement, and advance the application of behavioral insights to governance. The BeGov Lab will serve as a space for collaboration, experimentation, capacity strengthening, and shared learning.

It will convene partners to better understand complex governance challenges, showcase promising innovations, test behavioral solutions, learn what works and what does not work, and identify pathways to scale effective approaches. In doing so, the Lab brings Busara's work on behavioral science, collaboration, and capacity strengthening full circle while opening a new chapter focused on incubating, testing, and scaling innovations that strengthen civic participation and improve governance outcomes. The launch of the Lab was therefore not simply the conclusion of the Forum, but an invitation to continue the work. The Active Citizens Forum reminded us that building active citizenship is not a linear journey. It requires experimentation. It requires listening. It requires institutions that are willing to learn and change. It also requires humility to recognize that some of the most important solutions may already exist within the communities we seek to serve.

As we look ahead, the task is to keep the conversations going, deepen partnerships, and translate the ideas shared at the Forum into action. From participation to agency. From dialogue to action. From evidence to change. That is the journey ahead. We invite different partners to walk with us on this journey. If you are interested in collaborating with the BeGov Lab, visit [our website](#) to learn more about our work and how you can partner with us.

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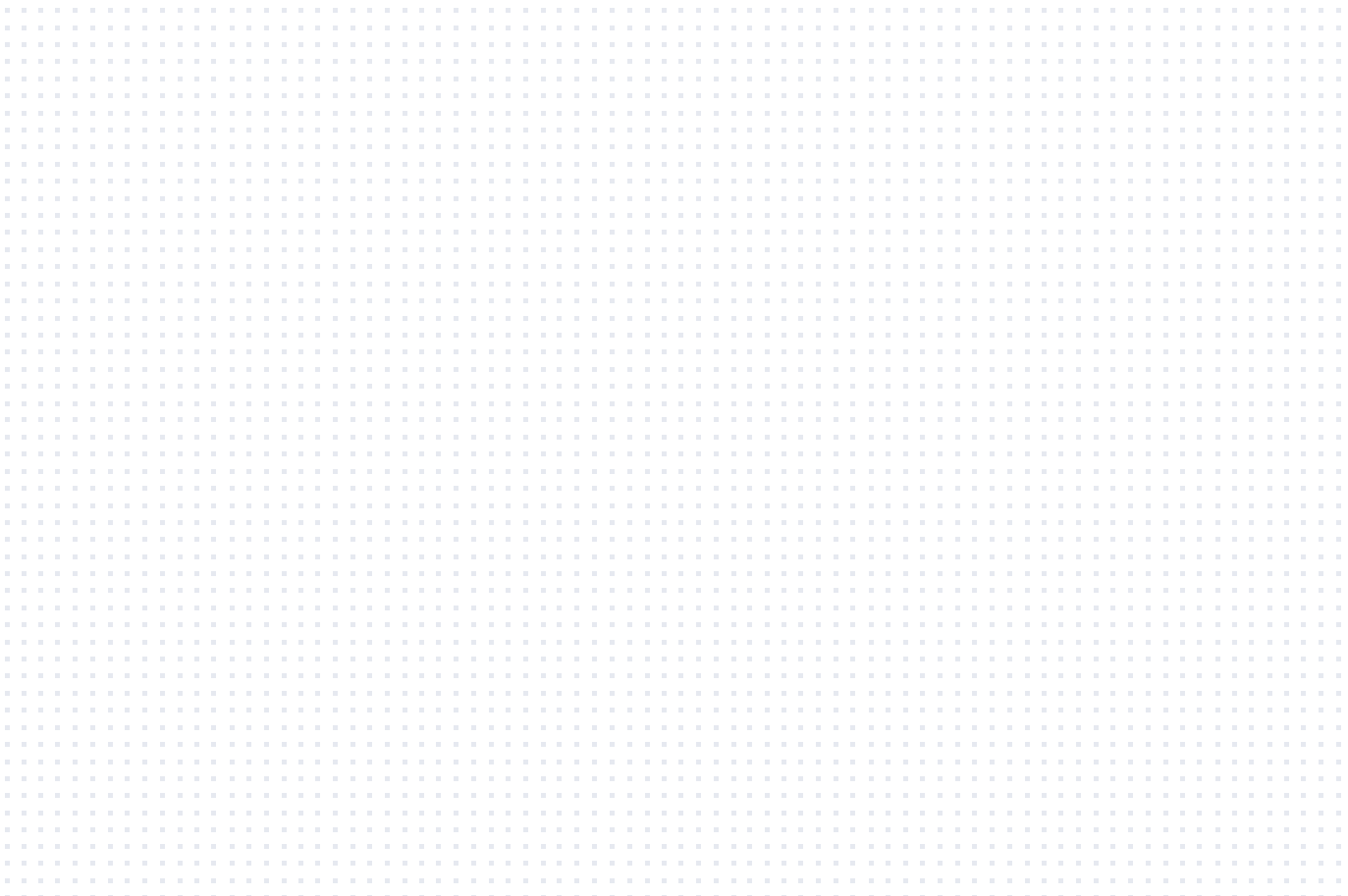
Brenda Ogutu, Engagement Director at Busara, introduces the team behind the BeGov Lab



Salim Kombo, Engagement Director at Busara, introducing the team behind the BeGov Lab



There is no celebration without a cake



Further reading

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