



Power to the people?

Kenyan citizens' experiences and opinions on ten years of devolution in practice

1. Introduction

As Kenya marks the tenth anniversary of the introduction of devolution as a system of governance, it is a natural time to take stock and listen to citizens' views on how well the system is working thus far. The goals of devolution are many, but they all revolve around the idea that devolution brings government decision making closer to the people. By doing so, citizens can be given opportunities to participate in processes that affect their lives, decisions can be made that better reflect local realities and priorities, and government can more easily and effectively be held accountable for its performance.

This brief presents data on citizens' experience and opinions on devolution as it has been working in practice in Kenya. Do citizens have a good understanding of what the term "devolution" means? Do they feel like it is

working? Specifically in the health sector, do they feel like devolution is doing a better job at managing health services than was the case before 2013? And how do citizens perceive the opportunities they have to participate in decisions that affect their lives? How has this changed over time?

Data for the brief come from Twaweza's *Sauti za Wananchi* mobile-phone panel survey. The panel was created randomly sampling from an existing database of over 250,000 contacts to establish a nationally representative panel of 3,746 respondents. This nationally representative sample also consists of representative samples of : Nairobi, Mombasa, Makueni, Elgeyo Marakwet and Vihiga Counties as well as two additional groups of counties: Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana and Garissa, Wajir and Mandera¹. For

1 Specifically, the sample is representative in the counties of Nairobi, Mombasa, Makueni, Elgeyo Marakwet and Vihiga, and in two additional groups of counties: Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana (labelled "TR-Mar-Tur" in charts); and Garissa, Wajir and Mandera (labelled "Gar-Waj-Mand").

this brief, data were collected from 3,746 respondents in the tenth round of the special *Sauti za Wananchi* panel, conducted between 19th and 27th July, 2023.

Key findings include:

- Most citizens have some understanding of devolution in Kenya
- Most citizens say devolution is being implemented well
- Support for devolution in Kenya is strong
- 3 out of 4 citizens say devolution has led to better services
- Citizens' biggest concern around devolution is corruption
- Citizens are divided on how government functions should be allocated between the county and national government
- 2 out of 3 citizens say devolution has helped improve health services in their county
- Citizens are more likely to say the budget allocated to counties is insufficient than sufficient
- Citizens are largely unhappy with their county's revenue collection
- Overall, many citizens are uncertain about the impact of devolution in Kenya
- Participation is understood primarily as taking part in public meetings
- Citizens report increasing participation in county decision making
- Most citizens think leaders take little account of citizens' opinions when making decisions either at national or county level
- While more citizens now say it is easy to engage with county government compared to 2018, but most still say it is hard

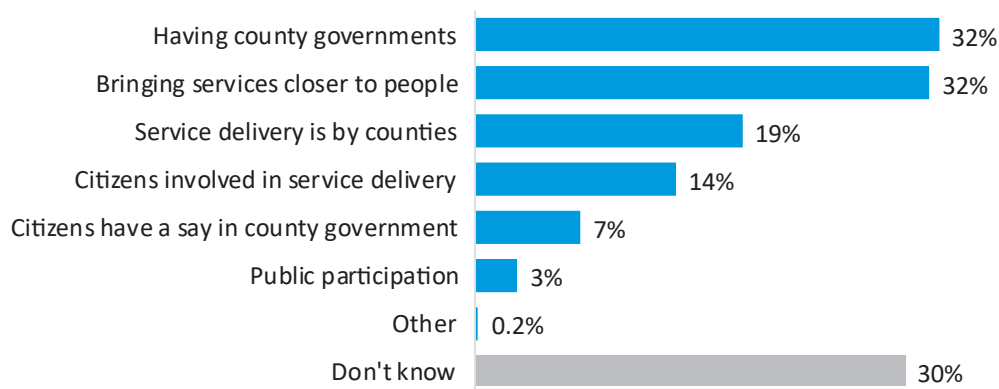
2. Kenyan citizens' opinions on devolution in practice

Insight 1: Seven out of ten Kenyans have some understanding of devolution

Seven out of ten citizens (70%) have some understanding of the term devolution in the Kenyan context. Most point either to the presence of county governments (32%) and/or to the intention to bring responsibility for public service delivery closer to the people (32%). Others point to greater participation of citizens in service delivery and/or in decisions made by the county government.

All these responses represent a reasonable description of how devolution is intended to work in Kenya. However, a significant number of citizens (30%) admit that they do not really know what devolution means.

Figure 1: What would you say is the meaning of devolution in Kenya?
(multiple responses permitted)²



Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

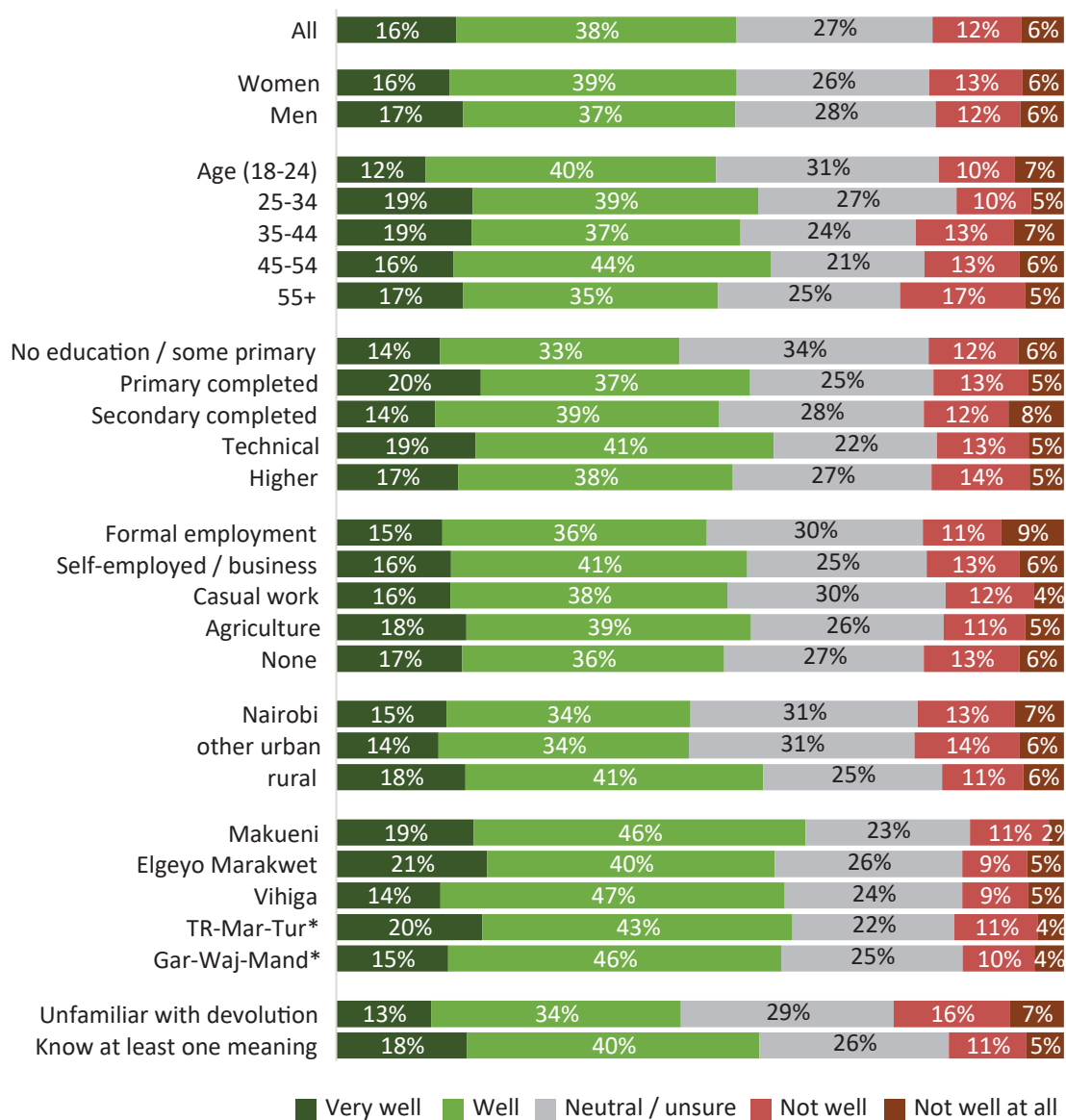
Insight 2: More than half of citizens say devolution is being implemented well

More citizens say devolution is being implemented well than badly. A little over half (54%) say devolution is being implemented either very well (16%) or well (38%) in Kenya, which is three times as many as say devolution is being implemented badly (18%). The remainder (27%) are unsure.

This positive view of devolution is broadly shared across different demographic groups and different parts of the country. Two differences are worth highlighting, however: those living in rural areas of the country are more positive about the way devolution is being implemented, and those with a more confident understanding of the term devolution are also more positive.

² Percentages in charts may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Figure 2: How well would you say devolution is being implemented in Kenya?



* Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana; Garissa, Wajir and Mandera

Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

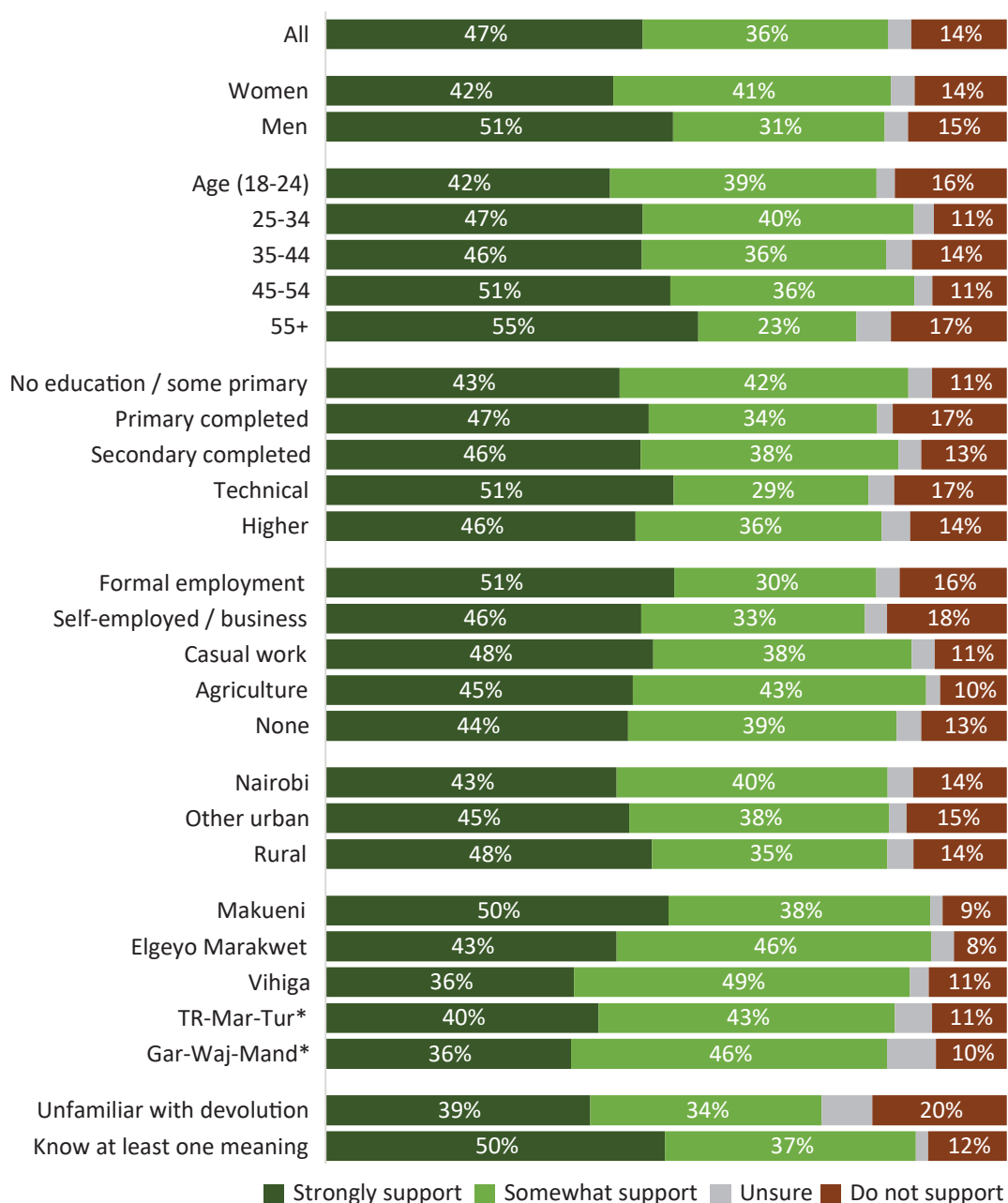
Insight 3: Citizens' support for devolution in Kenya is strong

Half of all citizens (47%) strongly support devolution in Kenya, and a further 36% say they somewhat support it. In combination, this means that more than eight out of ten citizens (83%) support devolution.

Support is strong across all major demographic groups, but is particularly strong among

men, older citizens and those with a stronger understanding of the term devolution. It is also particularly strong in the county of Makueni.

Figure 3: To what extent do you support devolution in Kenya?



* Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana; Garissa, Wajir and Mandera

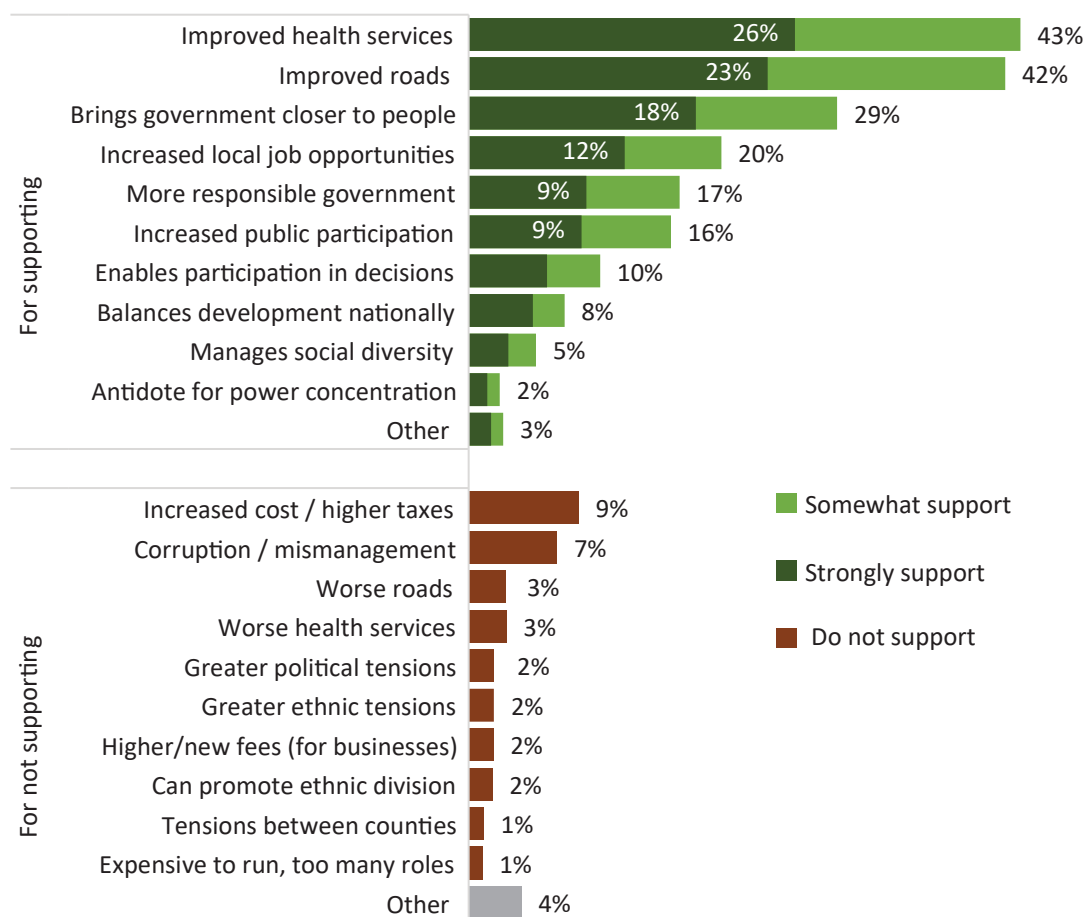
Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

The main reasons given for supporting devolution are that it has improved health services and road networks, and that it has brought the government closer to the people.

The main reasons given for not supporting devolution are that it is more expensive, which means higher taxes, and that it leads to increased corruption and mismanagement.

Figure 4: What are your three main reasons for supporting / not supporting devolution?
(multiple responses permitted)



Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Insight 4: 3 out of 4 citizens say devolution has led to better public services

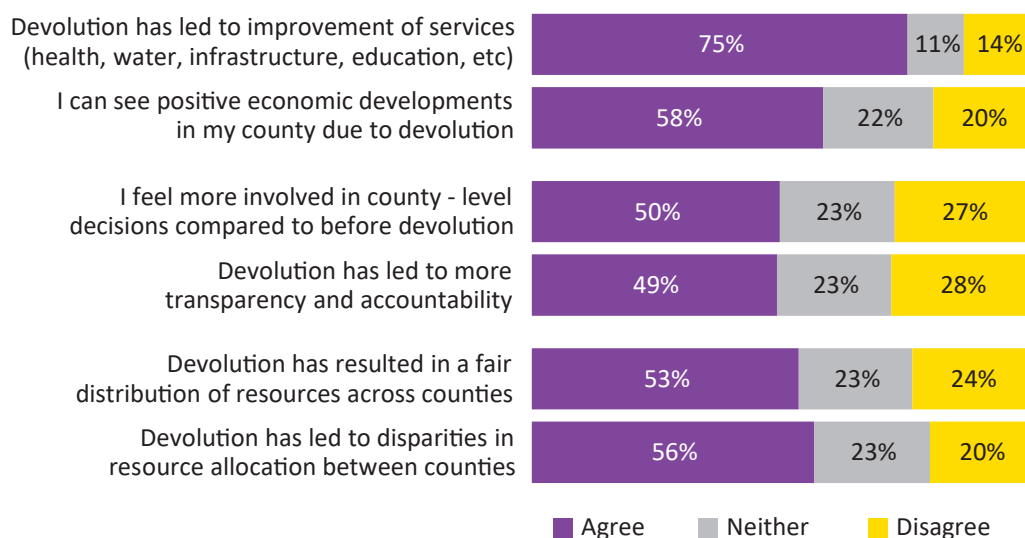
A clear majority of citizens (75%) say devolution has led to improvements in public services such as health, water, education and infrastructure. Just 14% disagree with this view.

Most citizens (58%) also agree with the view that devolution has led to visible economic development in their counties.

When it comes to citizens' engagement in governance, half say they feel more involved in county-level decisions than before devolution (50%) and that devolution has led to increased transparency and accountability (49%).

On inter-regional equality, most citizens (53%) agree with the statement that devolution has resulted in a fair distribution of resources across counties. However, a similar number (56%) say devolution has led to disparities in resource allocation between counties.

Figure 5: Do you agree or disagree with the following?

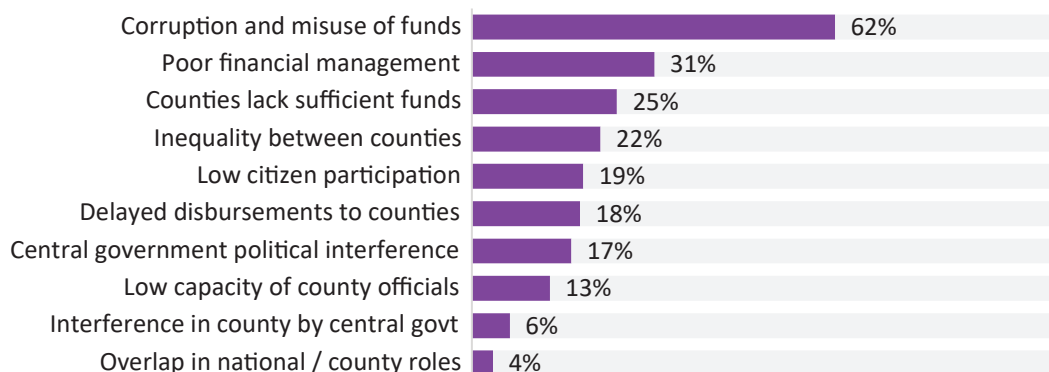


Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Insight 5: Citizens' biggest concern around devolution is corruption

Six out of ten citizens (62%) point to corruption and the misuse of funds as a concern they have about the implementation of devolution in Kenya. This is twice as many as those mentioning any other issue. This is followed by poor financial management (31%), lack of sufficient funds (25%) and inequality between counties. Others point to problems with disbursement of funds to counties or political interference by the national government.

Figure 6: Overall, what challenges or concerns do you see in the implementation of devolution in Kenya?
(multiple responses permitted)

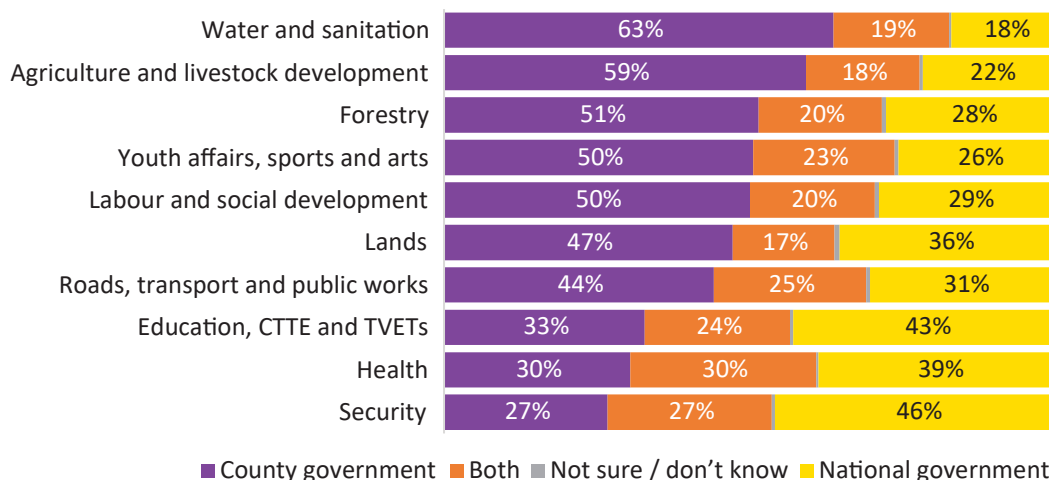


Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Insight 6: Citizens are divided on how government functions should be allocated between county and national government

Citizens are generally divided on which functions of government should be handled by county or national government. They are most likely to say water, agriculture, forestry, land and roads should be managed by counties, and that education, health and security should be done by the national government. However, Citizens largely have varying views on this topic.

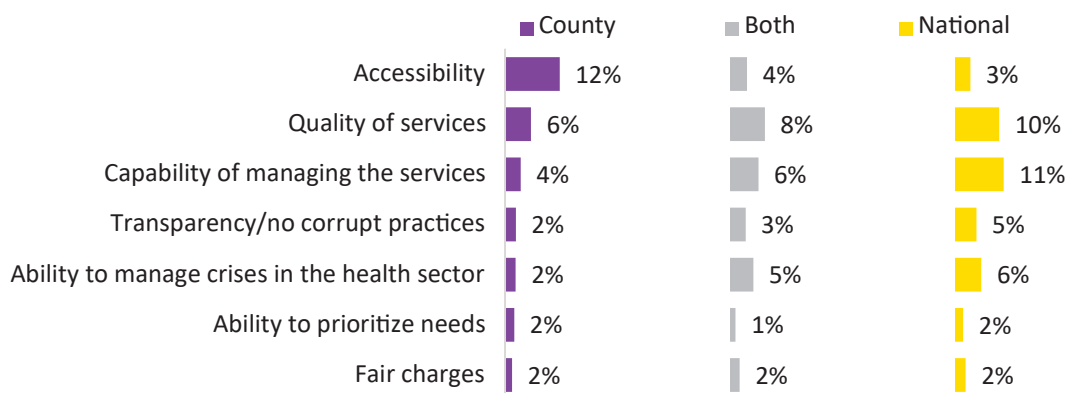
Figure 7: Who should be in charge of the following?



Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

On health services in particular, three out of ten (30%) prefer management by county governments and four out of ten (39%) prefer national government to be in charge. The main reason given in favour of county governments is accessibility, while the main arguments in favour of national government are quality and capacity.

Figure 8: What is the main reason you say health services should be managed by counties / national government?
(single response)



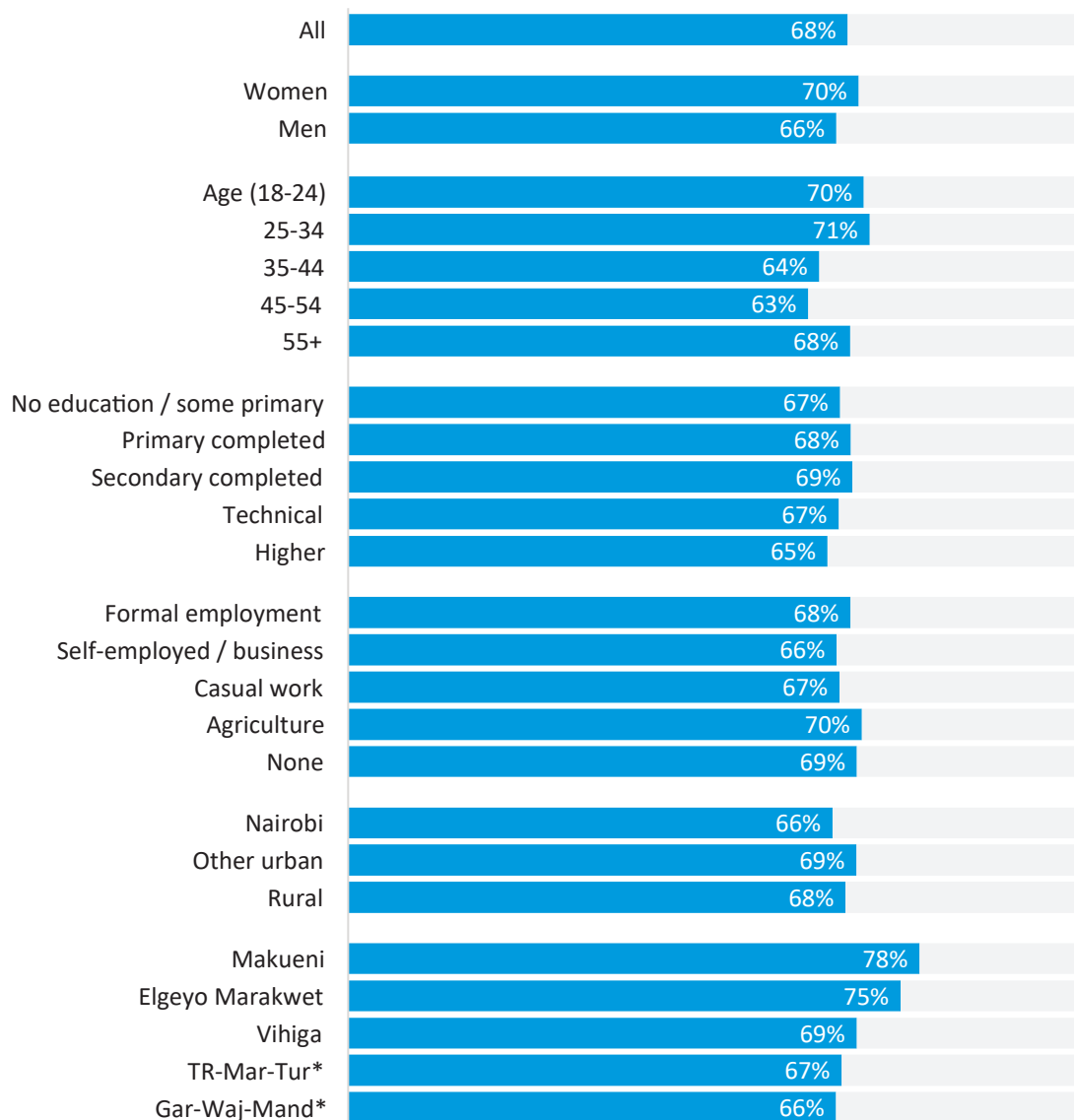
Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Insight 7: 2 out of 3 citizens say devolution has helped improve health services in their county

A clear majority of citizens (68%) say that devolution has helped to improve health services in their county. This is broadly consistent across all major demographic groups, though residents of Makueni county and Elgeyo Marakwet are particularly positive³.

³ It could appear that this represents a contradiction with a previous insight – that more citizens say health services should be managed by central government than by counties. However, it is not unusual for people to hold two different views that exist in tension with each other; this is part of human nature. Further, it is understandable that the perception that health services require a high level of technical expertise leads to some citizens stating a preference for centrally-run health services, even while their actual experience of locally-run services has been positive.

Figure 9: Do you think devolution helped improve health services in your county, from what it used to be before 2013?
(percentage answering yes)



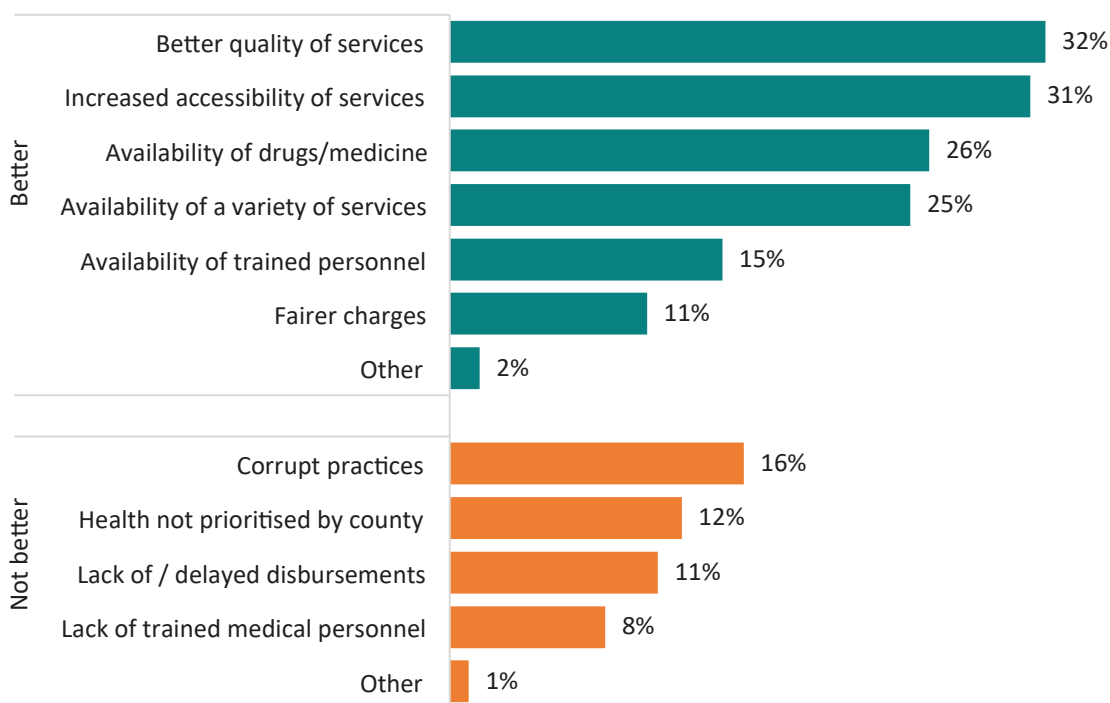
* Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana; Garissa, Wajir and Mandera

Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Specifically, citizens point to an improvement in the quality of health services, accessibility, improved availability of medicines and a greater variety of services.

However, significant numbers of citizens also express concerns, particularly around corruption, a lack of prioritisation of health services by their county government, and problems with disbursements to counties for health service spending.

Figure 10: Why are things better / not better [in terms of health services]?
(multiple responses permitted)



Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

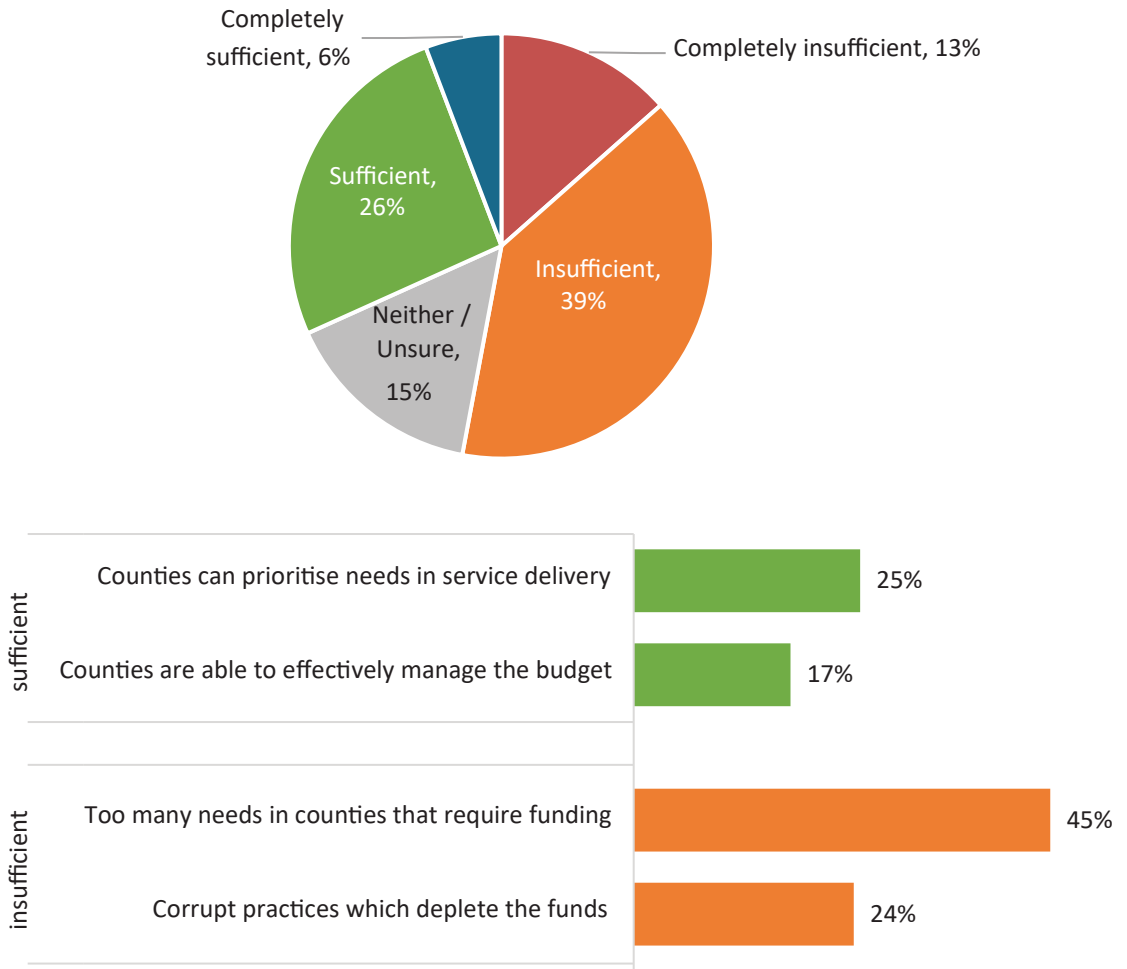
Insight 8: Half of the citizens say the budget allocated to counties is insufficient in ensuring delivery of services

Half of citizens (52%) say that the budget allocation to counties is either insufficient (39%) or completely insufficient (13%), compared to 32% who say it is either sufficient (26%) or completely sufficient (6%).

The main reasons given for saying the allocation is sufficient are that there is enough for counties to be able to prioritise local needs in service delivery (25%) and that counties are able to effectively manage the budget (17%).

The main reasons given for saying the allocation is insufficient are that counties have too many needs that require funding (45%) and that corruption depletes the allocation (24%).

Figure 11: Would you say the budget allocated to counties is sufficient or insufficient in ensuring the delivery of services? Why do you say so? (multiple responses permitted)



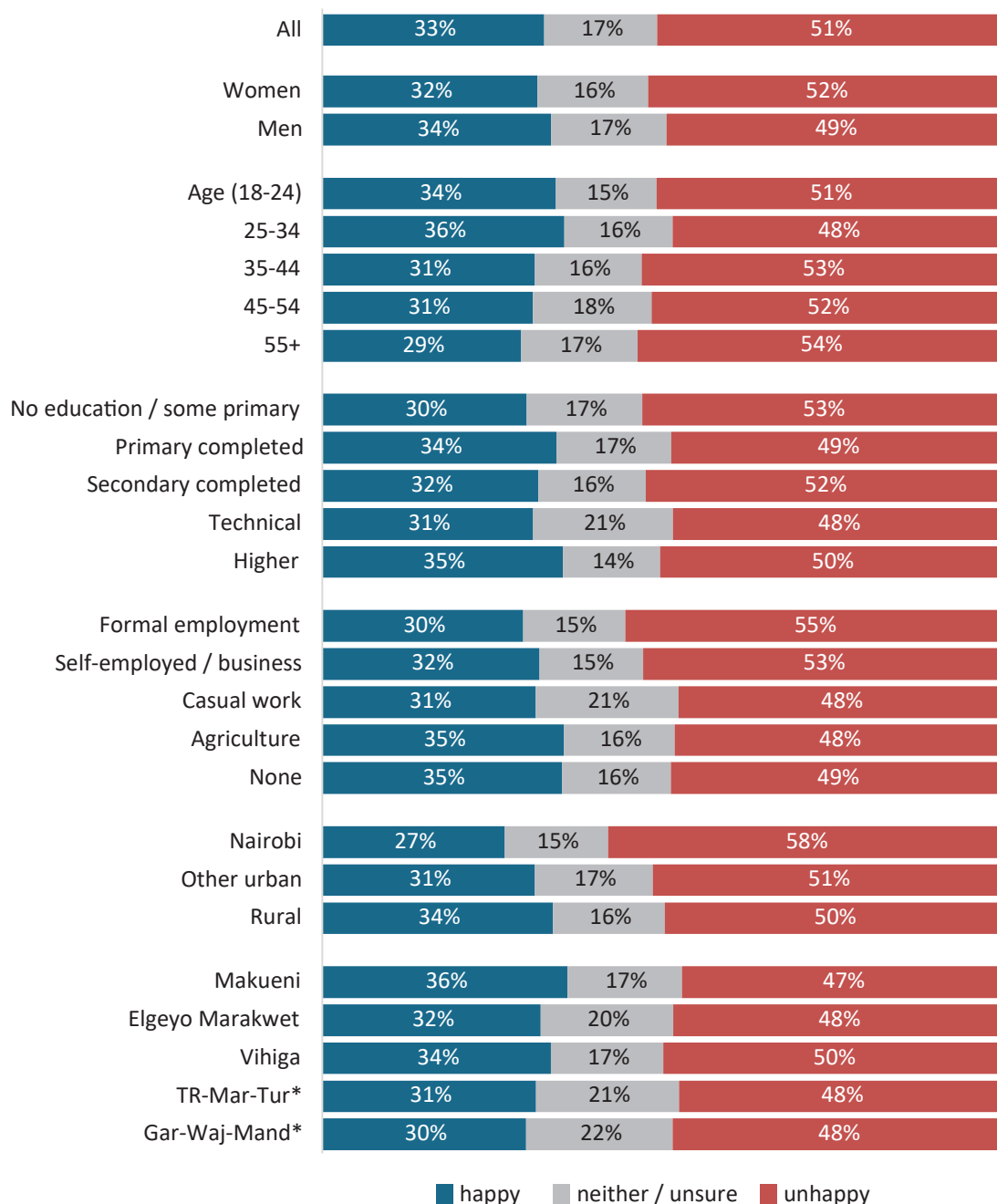
Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Insight 9: Half of citizens are unhappy with their county’s revenue collection

Half of citizens (51%) are unhappy with revenue collection in their county, compared to one out of three (33%) who are happy.

This figure is broadly consistent across major demographic groups, though dissatisfaction is higher in Nairobi than elsewhere in the country.

Figure 12: Thinking about your county's revenue collection, would you say you are happy or unhappy?



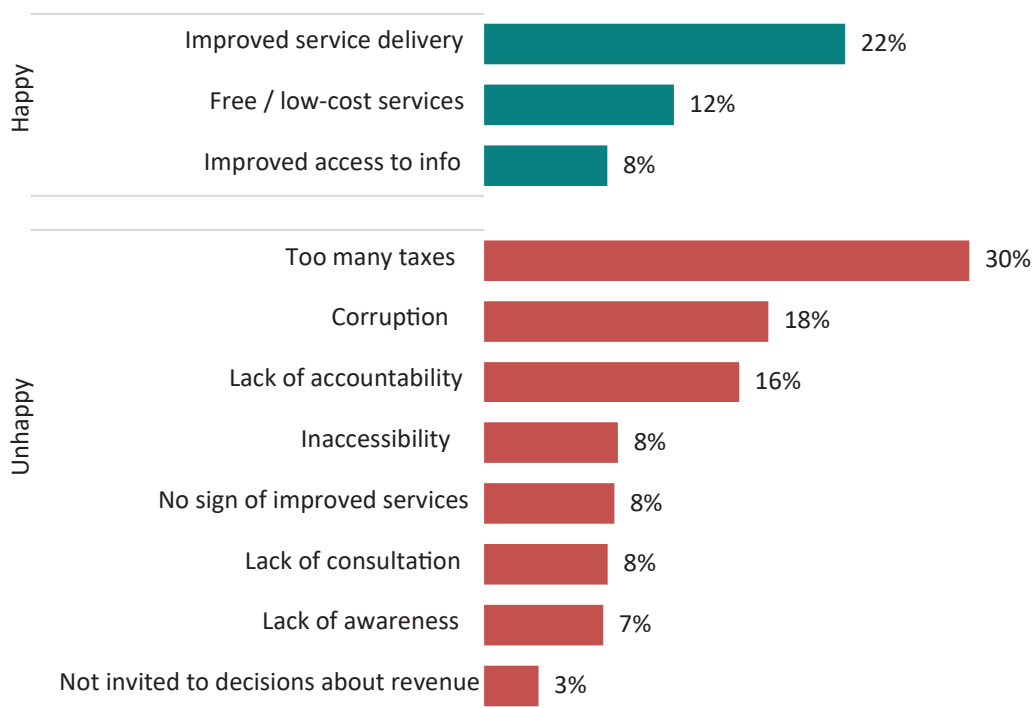
* Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana; Garissa, Wajir and Mandera

Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

The main reason given for satisfaction with county revenue collection is that it has led to improvements in public services (22%). The main reasons given for dissatisfaction are that there are too many taxes (30%), corruption (18%) and a lack of accountability (16%).

Figure 13: Why are you happy / unhappy?
(multiple responses permitted)



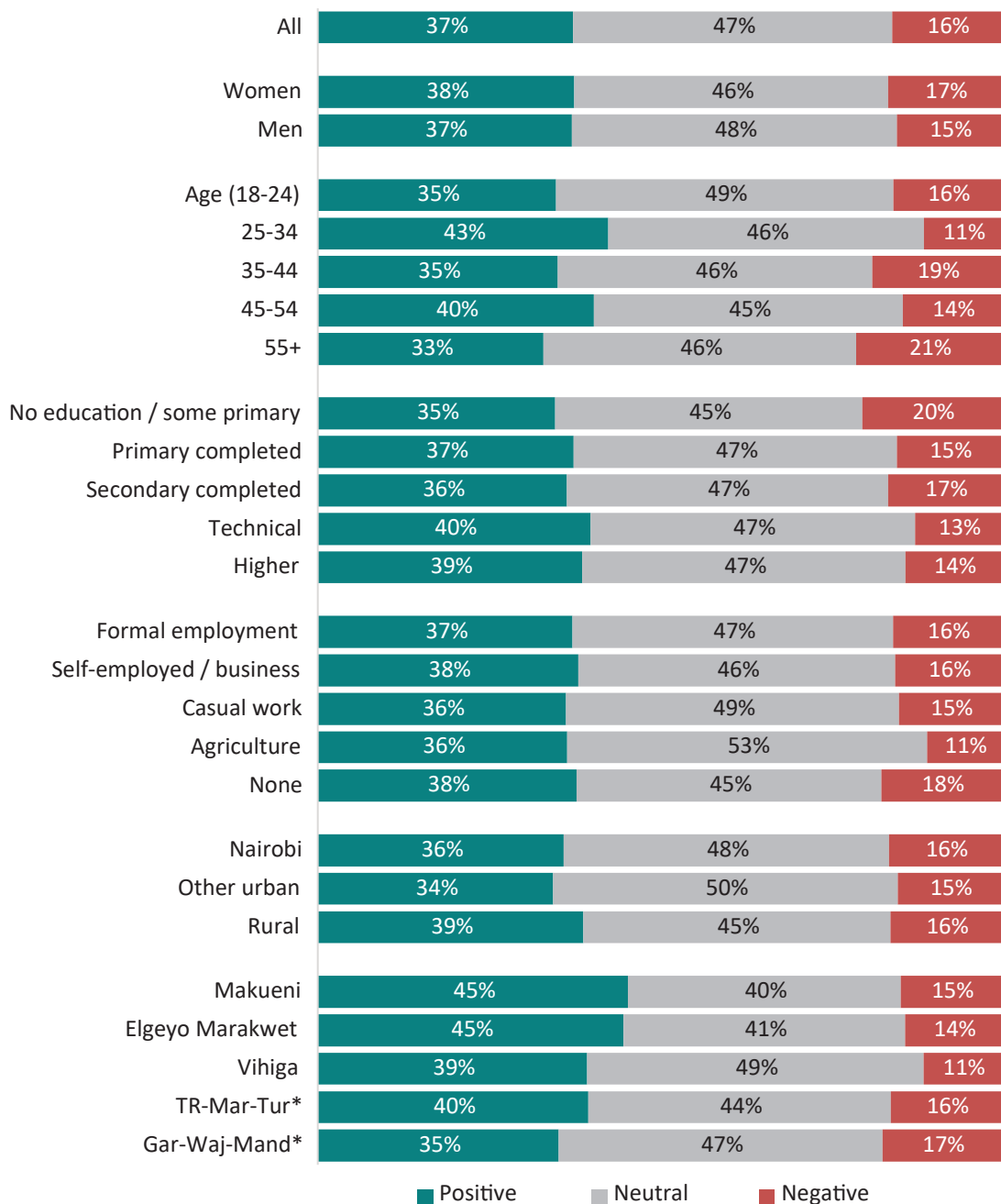
Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Insight 10: Overall, almost half of citizens are uncertain about the impact of devolution in Kenya

Citizens are more likely to say the overall impact of devolution in Kenya has been positive (37%) than negative (16%), but around half (47%) are uncertain on this matter.

This is broadly consistent across demographic groups, though residents of Makueni and Elgeyo Marakwet are more likely than others to say the overall impact has been positive.

Figure 14: How would you rate the overall impact of devolution in Kenya?



* Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana; Garissa, Wajir and Mandera

Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

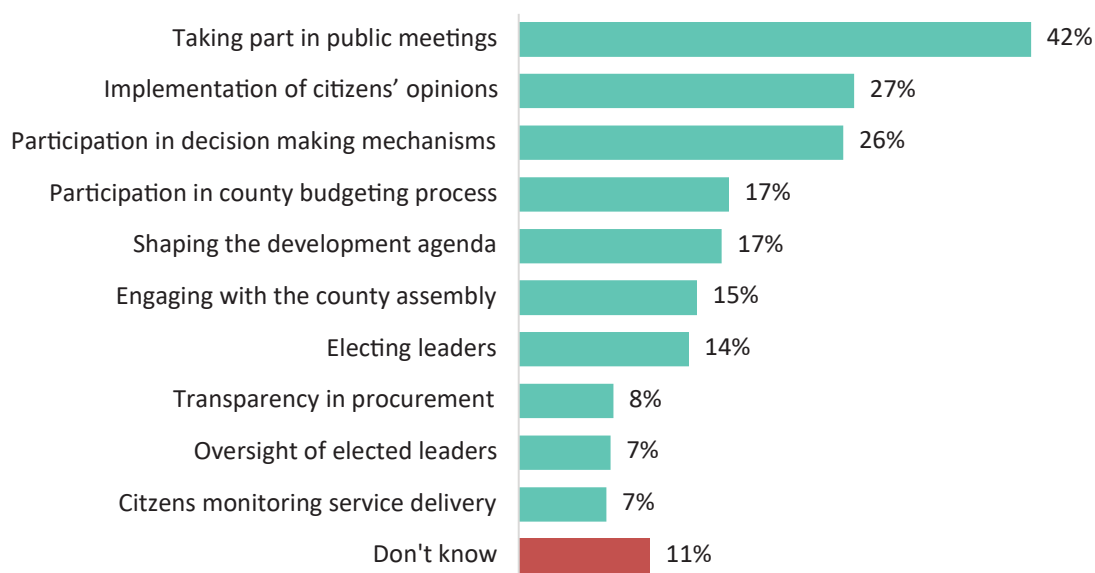
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Insight 11: Participation is understood mainly as taking part in public meetings

Asked to explain what citizen (or public) participation in governance means to them, the leading response from citizens is taking part in public meetings (42%). Substantial numbers also point to the similar but broader idea of taking part in decision making processes (26%) and the similar but narrower idea of taking part in county budgeting (17%).

Others point to implementation of decisions made by citizens (27%), citizens shaping the development agenda (17%), engaging with the county assembly (15%) or electing leaders (14%).

Figure 15: What does citizen/public participation in governance mean to you?
(multiple responses permitted)



Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

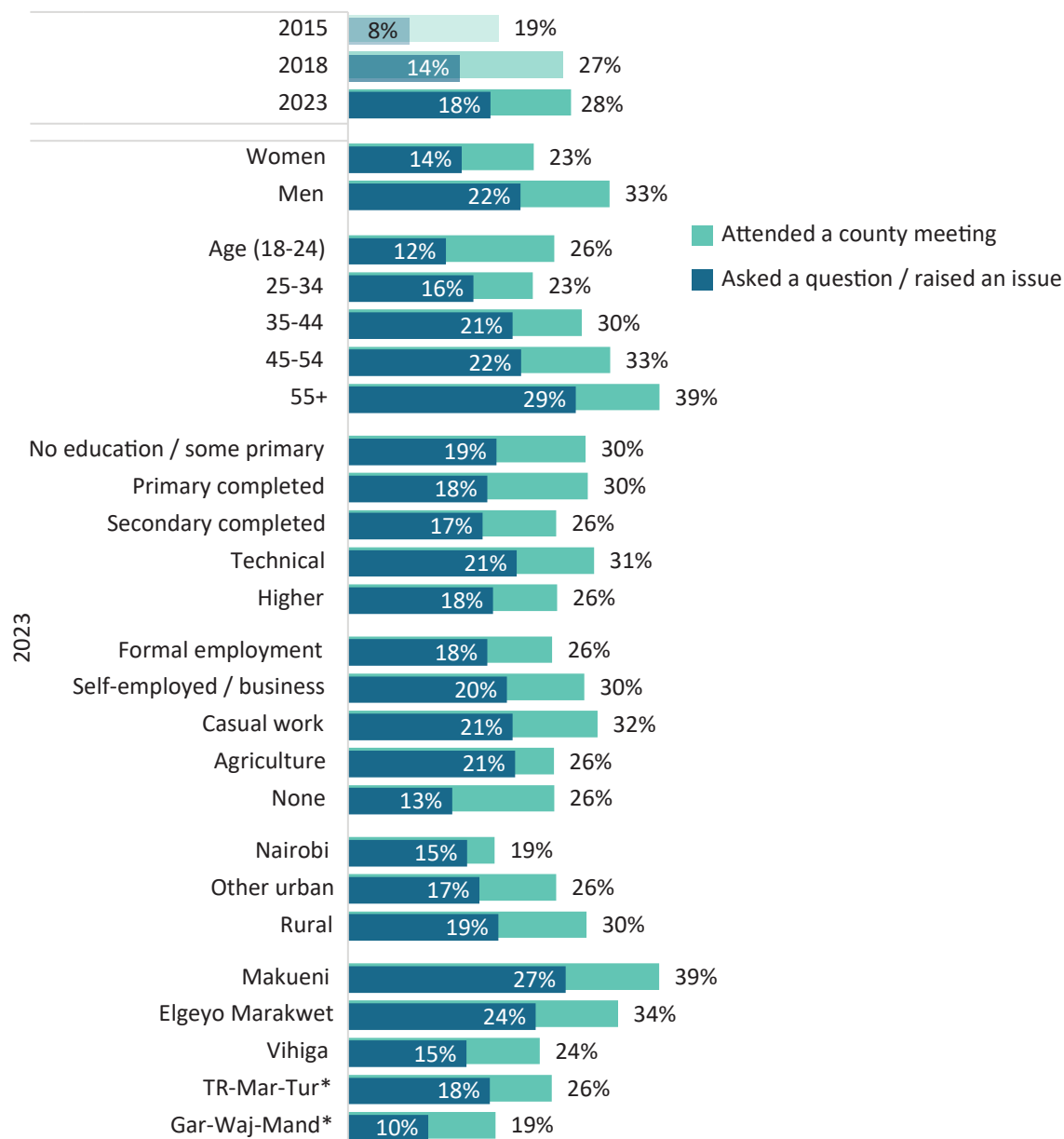
Insight 12: Citizens report that they now participate more in county decision making

Citizens' feedback indicates that they are now more likely to attend meetings run by their county government than was the case in the early years of devolution in Kenya, and more likely to participate actively at such meetings. In 2015, two out of ten citizens (19%) had attended a county meeting, which by 2023 has risen to three out of ten (28%). Similarly, in 2015, one out of ten citizens (8%) said they asked a question or raised an issue at such a meeting, which by 2023 has risen to two out of ten (18%).

There are considerable demographic differences in self-reported attendance and participation at meetings organised by the county government. Men, older citizens and those in rural areas are substantially more likely than women to say they attend and actively participate in

such meetings. Specifically in the counties of Makueni and Elgeyo Marakwet, the figures are particularly high. There is limited variation between citizens with different levels of education in terms of meeting attendance and participation.

Figure 16: Have you ever participated in a meeting organised by the county government? If so, did you ask a question / raise an issue?



* Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana; Garissa, Wajir and Mandera

Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

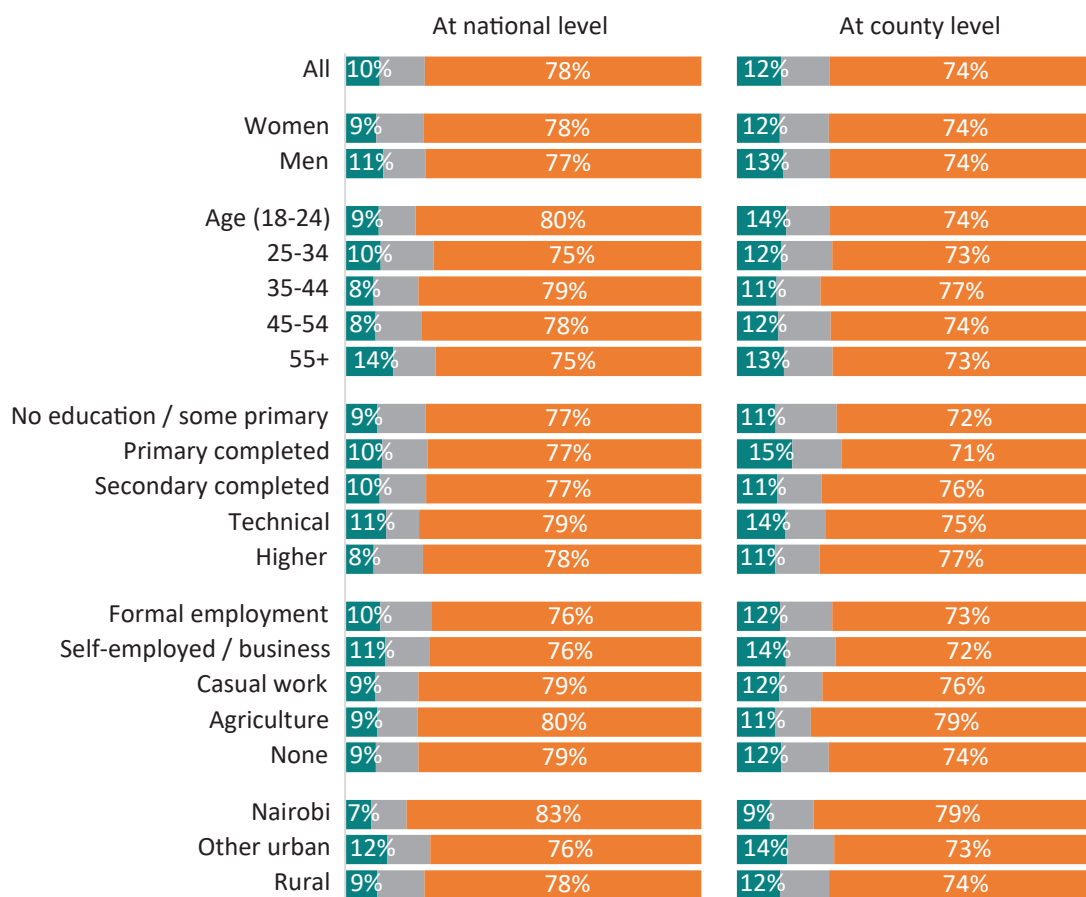
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

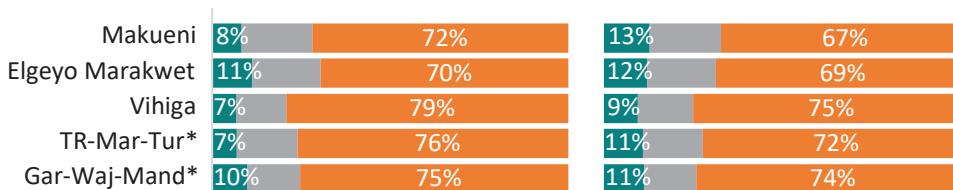
Insight 13: Most citizens think leaders take little account of citizens opinions when making decisions either at national or county level

Most citizens (74-78%) think that those in authority at both national level and county level do not take much account of citizens' opinions when making decisions on important issues. Just one out of ten citizens (10%) think national level leaders take citizens' opinions into account to a large extent, and a similar number (12%) say the same about county leaders.

These figures are broadly consistent across major demographic groups.

Figure 17: To what extent do you think those in authority at a national /county level take the opinion of ordinary Kenyans into account when making decisions on issues that affect all Kenyans / issues of local importance?





■ To a large extent ■ Neither / unsure ■ To a small extent / not at all

* Tana River, Marsabit and Turkana; Garissa, Wajir and Mandera

Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

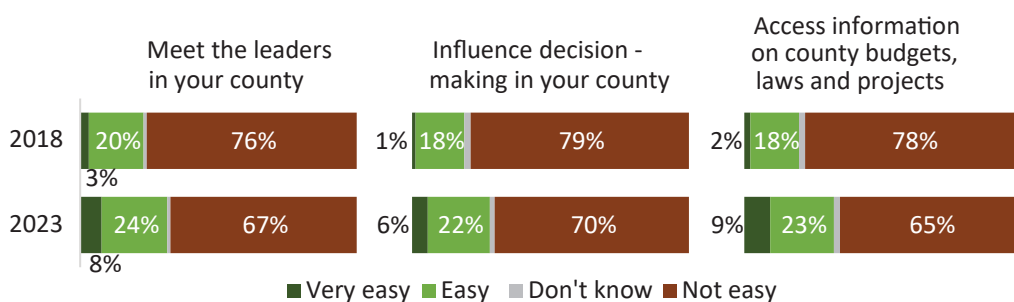
Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

Insight 14: Compared to 2018, more citizens now say it is easy to engage with county governance, but most still say it is hard

Compared to 2018, more citizens now say that in their experience it is easy to engage with county governance matters, though the majority still say it is hard to do so.

Specifically, three out of ten (32%, up from 23% in 2018) now say it is easy or very easy to meet the leaders of their county, three out of ten (28%, up from 19%) say it is easy or very easy to influence county decision making, and slightly more (32%, up from 20%) say it is easy or very easy to access information on county budgets, laws and projects.

Figure 18: In your experience, how easy is it to ...?



■ Very easy ■ Easy ■ Don't know ■ Not easy

Source: Sauti za Wananchi mobile phone survey, special r10 (July 2023)

Base: all respondents (n=3,746)

3. Conclusions

This brief presents evidence of citizens' experiences and opinions of devolution in Kenya, ten years since its rollout. Overall, it presents a largely positive picture. Most citizens say devolution is being implemented well, that they support devolution, and that it has led to better services. There is also evidence that citizens are finding it easier to engage with county governance matters, and that they are doing so in greater numbers. These are all highly positive findings that represent a clear endorsement by citizens of devolution.

However, the positive headlines should not distract us from some problems that citizens are also raising. Two in particular stand out.

First, citizens clearly have concerns around corruption in county governments. This is listed as the biggest challenge facing devolution and is cited by those who do not support devolution as a major reason for their concern. It may be the case that devolution has increased opportunities for corruption, or it may simply be that corruption at county level is more visible than corruption at national level. However, whatever the case, even the perception of corruption is important – it can have a major impact on trust and citizen engagement, as well as on support for devolution overall.

Second, citizens report that they continue to face many of the challenges that devolution should be helping to solve in terms of the accessibility and responsiveness of county government to their particular needs. It is worrying that the vast majority of citizens think that county government leaders are no more likely than national leaders to take ordinary citizens' opinions into account when making decisions, and that neither county nor national leaders are likely to do this. And while self-reported participation in county governance matters has increased over the past ten years, it remains well below half (28%, up from 19% in 2015) and still well below the 75% who report attending local government meetings in Tanzania⁴.

As such, while citizens' overall report card for the first decade of devolution is positive, there is still significant room for improvement. It is noteworthy that two counties – Makueni and Elgeyo Marakwet – score consistently higher in citizens' experiences of devolution, as well as in levels of citizen participation. Both are formal members of the Open Government Partnership (OGP). There are positive lessons in their examples that other counties could learn from.

4 Tanzania data from 2021 (Sauti za Wananchi special panel round 6).