

Research Summary

Understanding Accountability in Kenya

Summary

- *Sema Kenya* (Speak Kenya) is a BBC Media Action TV and radio programme that aims to provide a constructive platform for Kenyans both to voice their concerns about issues that affect them and to directly address their politicians and public officials. The programme is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the Global Grant.
- Although the new 2010 Kenyan constitution emphasises the importance of accountability in governance, BBC Media Action research shows there is much more to be done if expectations around the constitution are to be met.
- Our research identified the following as barriers to accountability: lack of political will, inaccessibility of Kenya's politicians, tribalism, lack of in-depth citizen knowledge of the constitution, political apathy and the fear of politically motivated violence.

Context

Although there has been some improvement in levels of accountability in Kenya in the last two decades, it is widely accepted that these levels were far from desirable or indeed what is expected under the new constitution, ratified in 2010. It is generally perceived that the political elite and wealthy are immune to prosecution and that justice is rarely served. A lack of accountability seems to persist not only among those in high profile public positions, but also among low profile and unelected positions. While there is a national consciousness that impunity is wrong, the lack of accountability appears to have trickled down from the upper echelons of society to the grass roots. The constitution contains clear stipulations on accountability, such as the role of independent commissions put in place to ensure horizontal accountability. Generally, people are becoming more aware of their rights and are seeking interpretation of the rights and laws that concern them. However, much still remains to be done to raise standards of accountability in Kenya to match those indicated in the constitution.

The project

Sema Kenya is a weekly factual discussion programme broadcast on national TV and radio in the Kiswahili language. The programme provides opportunities for Kenyans all over the country to engage their leaders in dialogue by directly questioning them on important issues that affect their lives. Season one of *Sema Kenya* launched in October 2012 and ran until the end of March 2013. The show will return later in 2013 for a second season. The programme travels around the country with each episode shot in a different location, enabling maximum engagement with diverse audiences. BBC Media Action has established partnerships with selected radio stations to improve each station's overall staff capacity to deliver governance programming.



Research Methodology

In the second half of 2012, BBC Media Action conducted baseline research for the *Sema Kenya* project consisting of a nationally representative quantitative survey of 3,000 Kenyan adults aged 15+ and in-depth interviews with a panel of 14 media and governance experts in Kenya. The research explored governance and accountability in the Kenyan context. Over the life of the project, further research will be conducted to explore the impact of the broadcast TV and radio programmes.

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Findings

Most Kenyans believe the government is too detached from ordinary citizens and want greater levels of accountability; 68% of Kenyans agree they are entitled to hold their leaders to account; 79% report they would exercise the right to do so, given the opportunity. At the same time, only 36% of respondents are satisfied with the account that government officials currently give of their decisions, while only 41% feel the national government responds to the needs of ordinary people.



“Politicians in Kenya, past and present, have been spectacularly impervious to the opinions of the people who elected them.” – Media and Governance Expert

Governance experts also report that weak institutions, those unwilling or unable to implement the constitution, are a key reason that accountability has yet to reach levels laid out in the 2010 constitution. They highlight those commissions mandated by the constitution to ensure accountability. The issue of weak institutions is reflected in the low level of trust Kenyans attribute to various institutions: only 30% report trusting government officials.

Meanwhile, political apathy and inaction may impair citizen-led accountability among wealthier segments of the Kenyan population.

“Kenya has become the ultimate ‘Plan B nation’. If my tanks are dry I will go and buy water and fill them, if my road has potholes then I will buy a four wheel drive. So the middle class thrive in the existing conditions rather than trying to change them for the better.” – Social Media Expert and Blogger

A lack of in-depth knowledge around the constitution and what it means for citizens may also prevent Kenyans from understanding their rights in terms of holding their leaders to account. Expectations of the positive impact of the new constitution are high and 64% of Kenyans report knowing a “great deal” or “fair amount” about key constitutional revisions. However, less than half (47%) of those claiming an understanding of the new constitution could identify that one of the main objectives of devolution (an element of the new constitution around which expectations are especially high) is to ensure equitable sharing of national and local resources. A more nuanced understanding of the new constitution may be required to support Kenyan’s ability to demand accountability fully.

Implications

The demand for increased accountability from the majority of Kenyans and the lack of sufficient mechanisms for them to hold leaders to account highlights that there is a role for programming which can enable citizens to engage directly with their leaders. Programming needs to be sensitive to the contexts in which citizens can and want to hold their leaders to account and the issues that matter to them most. Providing safe and local ways to enable Kenyans to demand the accountability from their leaders that they feel entitled to is crucial to the long term success of the project. Programming can improve accountability both by informing people about the constitution and by inspiring participation. For more information about our research in Kenya, please see “Promoting Accountability through a National Conversation in Kenya” and “Media’s Role in Accountability in Kenya.”

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April 2013