THREE OFFICES, ONE BROKEN CHAIN

Public participation in Murang'a doesn't fail from neglect — it fails from fragmentation

Ask three different Murang'a County offices who is responsible for public participation, and — before the CSTT's formation meeting — you might have received three different, equally defensible answers. That, precisely, was the problem.

Murang'a's CSTT, facilitated by Regina Mwangi, focused on public participation, examining both the "System of the Present" and the "System of the Future" through structured discussion of citizen engagement, accountability and inclusive governance.

The Challenge

The county has no enacted Public Participation Act or Civic Education Policy, leaving budgeting and implementation of citizen engagement without a legal or policy anchor. Where budget allocations for participation do exist, they are inconsistent and lack transparent, dedicated lines for civic education, feedback mechanisms and the inclusion of women, youth and persons with disabilities.



Looking Beneath the Surface

The CSTT's most consequential finding was structural: public participation functions are fragmented across three separate departments — Devolution, Planning, and Coordination — with no single office holding end-to-end accountability. This fragmentation, the Think-Tank concluded, is precisely why public participation has never accumulated the institutional weight or budget clarity that a single, clearly mandated office could command.

The Systems Mapping Journey

Sessions assessed existing mechanisms and traced how citizen engagement is meant to flow from ward to village level, examining the potential of tools like the My Murang'a App to decentralise participation. The County Executive and County Assembly both engaged directly, each making explicit commitments captured in the report — a rare instance of both arms of county government publicly committing to the same reform agenda in the same document.

Voices from the Room

The County Executive committed to "decentralizing public participation to ward and village levels and supporting the use of digital platforms such as the My Murang'a App," while the County Assembly committed to "improving coordination between the County Executive and the Assembly on public participation forums."

The Future System

Murang'a's Think-Tank envisions an enacted, comprehensive Public Participation Act; harmonised forums between the executive and legislative arms rather than parallel, uncoordinated processes; and a My Murang'a App enhanced with accessibility features for visually and hearing-impaired citizens.

> "Successful governance frameworks from other sectors can be adapted to strengthen public participation systems." — Murang'a CSTT, lessons learnt

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: harmonising forums currently run separately by the Executive and Assembly.

Medium-term: a baseline survey establishing current participation benchmarks, and drafting of the Public Participation Act by 2027.

Long-term: full enactment and institutionalisation of the Act alongside a functioning digital feedback channel.

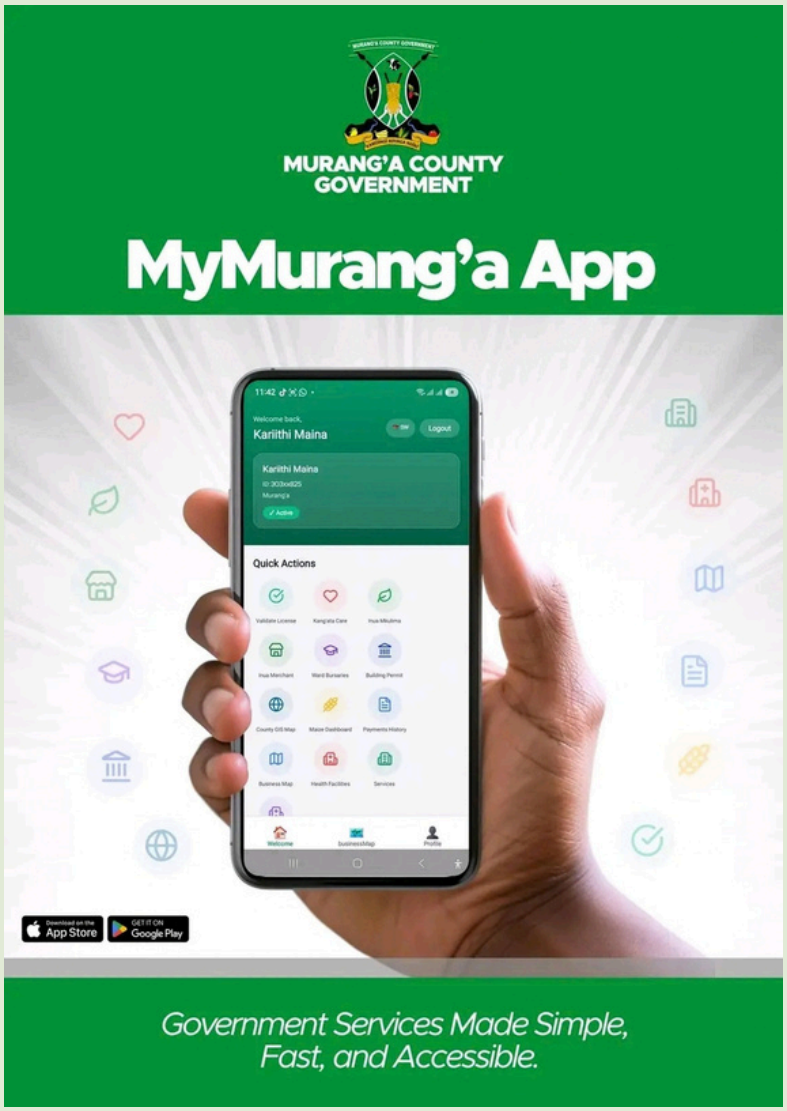
Innovation Spotlight

The explicit use of a digital civic platform — the My Murang'a App — as a systems lever for decentralisation, rather than treating technology as a separate, siloed initiative, distinguishes Murang'a's approach.

Lessons for Other Counties

A public participation mandate split across multiple departments without a single accountable owner will underperform regardless of how many forums are held; and securing simultaneous, documented commitments from both the Executive and the Assembly creates leverage neither arm can easily walk back alone.

FEATURE STORY:
DIGITIZATION AT THE SUB-NATIONAL LEVEL



The County That Went Cashless

How Murang'a turned a leaking revenue system into a national model, and what the My Murang'a App reveals about the next frontier of devolved governance.

For years, the fastest way to lose money in Murang'a County was to collect it. A parking attendant in Murang'a town, a market fee collector in Maragua, a quarry levy officer in Kandundu, each handled cash directly, wrote receipts by hand, and walked the proceeds back to an office where no one could easily verify how much had actually changed hands that day. In the 2021/2022 financial year, the county's own-source revenue collection totalled just KSh 520 million, against a monthly average of roughly KSh 50 million, a figure county officials attributed less to a small economy than to a leaking one: poor monitoring, revenue leakages and weak accountability at every point cash touched a human hand.

Three years later, that same county is being cited in national forums as a model for what devolved digital governance can look like, and its flagship citizen-facing product, the My Murang'a App, has become a live test case for a question every county in this magazine is, in some form, also asking: can a smartphone genuinely close the distance between a government and the people it serves, or does digitization simply move the same old exclusions onto a new platform?

A County Rewires Itself

The transformation began narrowly. In September 2022, Murang'a piloted a digital revenue-collection system in a handful of high-traffic sites, parking bays in Murang'a town, the county referral hospital, the Mukuyu and Maragua markets, and the Kandundu quarry, moving payments from cash-in-hand to mobile money transfers that landed directly in the county's bank account. By January 2023, the system had gone countywide, with residents dialling a short code to register and pay for services ranging from parking to veterinary fees. Governor Irungu Kang'ata framed the move plainly at the time: digitization was not primarily about convenience, but about sealing the loopholes that had let public resources disappear at the point of collection.

The early results were dramatic enough to reshape the county's own budget conversation. Daily parking revenue in Murang'a town rose from roughly KSh 37,000 to KSh 50,000. Quarry levies at Kandundu climbed from KSh 20,000 to KSh 50,000 a day. Collections at the county's Level Five Hospital rose from KSh 70,000 to KSh 150,000 daily. By the 2022/2023 financial year, annual own-source revenue had climbed to KSh 682 million; a year later it had doubled again, past the KSh 1 billion mark, a trajectory the Controller of Budget's own reporting recognised as the sharpest revenue increase in Kenya's central region, achieved, notably, without a single increase to the county's tax and levy rates since 2018.

Encouraged by the revenue side's success, the county turned the same logic inward. Human resource management, staff attendance, fleet tracking, financial dashboards and even meeting attendance were progressively digitized, closing off smaller, subtler leakages: unauthorised vehicle use, unrecorded absenteeism, budget lines no single dashboard had ever shown in one place. Officials have since described being able to remotely disable a county vehicle found idling at a bar during working hours and to generate speeding reports automatically, a level of operational visibility that simply did not exist under the county's pre-2022 systems.

From Back Office to Citizen's Pocket

If the revenue and internal-systems work was largely invisible to ordinary residents, the My Murang'a App was designed to be the opposite: a single, visible front door to county government. Positioned as a one-stop platform, the app lets residents renew business permits, pay market and parking fees, track land records and, in its most closely watched feature, report emergencies and civic issues directly to county government. At its public launch, county leadership framed the app explicitly around reducing bureaucracy and shortening the distance between a citizen's problem and a government response, with emergency response singled out as one of the platform's central promises.

That promise has already been tested in public. **Ambulex,** a private emergency-response operator active in the county, has positioned itself alongside the app as a delivery partner for faster ambulance dispatch, and local media covering the launch pressed exactly the question this magazine's own contributors would recognise: does a well-designed app change outcomes on the ground, in a county where long distances, patchy connectivity and thin healthcare infrastructure have historically been the real bottleneck, not the absence of a reporting channel? The honest answer, reported alongside the launch itself, is that the platform is promising but unproven, genuinely useful only if awareness, infrastructure and access catch up with the technology built to sit on top of them.

Beyond emergencies, the app has quietly become infrastructure for sectors well outside its original revenue-focused mandate. A recent academic study of digital agricultural extension in the county found that the **My Murang'a App**, alongside vernacular radio programming, has become one of the dominant channels through which smallholder farmers now access county agricultural services and advisories, evidence that a platform built to close a revenue gap has organically grown into something closer to general-purpose civic infrastructure.

The Regional Pattern Behind One County's Story

Murang'a's experience is a sharp, well-documented instance of a wider shift now underway across devolved Kenya. Telecommunications operator Safaricom has been rolling out a shared **"myCounty" platform**, explicitly modelled on the national eCitizen system, designed to let any of Kenya's 47 counties plug in digital services on common infrastructure rather than building bespoke systems from scratch.

Makueni became the platform's first county integration in 2023, with services spanning revenue payments, citizen reporting and sector-specific tools for agriculture, health and utilities; Nairobi followed with its own "My Nairobi" application built on the same architecture. The pattern across these rollouts is consistent: county governments are converging, largely independently, on the same conclusion Murang'a reached first, that a smartphone-based, mobile-money-integrated front door can do simultaneously what years of paper-based public participation forums and manual audit trails struggled to do separately: increase revenue, increase transparency and increase the legibility of government to the citizens funding it.

What the Numbers Don't Show

None of this is a story of an unblemished digital rollout, and the county's own internal presentation on the transformation is candid about what remains unresolved. Digital literacy gaps persist, particularly among older residents and in areas where smartphone penetration lags.

Rural connectivity remains inconsistent enough to undercut an app's usefulness precisely in the areas furthest from existing services, the same populations, notably, that budget advocacy Think-Tanks across this magazine have repeatedly flagged as underserved by conventional public participation channels too.

Some county staff have resisted the shift, understandably, given that digitization directly closed off informal income streams built into the old manual system. And a fully cashless, fully networked county government is, by definition, a larger cybersecurity target than the paper-based system it replaced.

These are not footnotes to the Murang'a story; they are its unfinished chapters. A revenue system that has more than tripled in three years is a genuine institutional achievement. Whether that same digital infrastructure can be extended, deliberately and with the same rigour applied to closing financial leakages, to close participation gaps for residents without smartphones, reliable data bundles or basic digital literacy, is the test this magazine's broader Systems Thinking lens would insist on asking next.

Murang'a's own County Systems Think-Tank, profiled elsewhere in this edition, has already flagged this directly: the My Murang'a App's next frontier, in the CSTT's own words, is accessibility, sign language integration, features usable by visually impaired residents and a deliberate push to reach citizens the current rollout has not yet touched.

Why This Belongs in a Magazine About Systems, Not Just Success

It would be easy to tell Murang'a's digitization story as a straightforward technology-solves-governance narrative, an app replaces a leaking cash system, revenue triples, everyone wins. The more useful version and the one consistent with everything else in this edition, treats the App and its underlying platform as exactly what Systems Thinking asks readers to look for: a genuine leverage point, activated at real cost and real institutional friction, that has demonstrably shifted one part of a complex system, while leaving open, honestly, whether the same shift will reach the residents least equipped to benefit from it without deliberate, continued investment.

Murang'a did not treat a symptom. It rebuilt the plumbing beneath a system that had been leaking for years. The question this magazine leaves with its readers is the same one Murang'a's own CSTT is now asking of itself: now that the pipes carry more, who still isn't connected to them?



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