

A stock of budget transparency advocacy journey in the Coastal counties using CBTS findings.

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Budget transparency is not just about governments providing timely budget information to citizens, but also ensuring that the information provided to citizens is understandable and encourages active participation in budget decisions. There is a growing demand among citizens for transparency and accountability in how the government utilizes public resources to provide services to citizens. The recent anti-finance bill protest in Kenya, led by the youthful population, is a testament to the increasing need for information and the desire to influence government decisions regarding taxation, revenue, and expenditure.

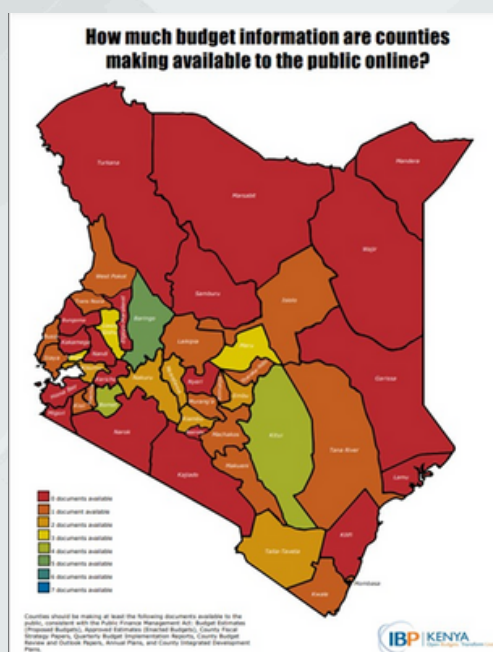


To this end, budget transparency is crucial to the public and oversight institutions and the government. It supports development and economic stability, promotes more efficient resource allocation, improves service delivery, and contributes to better governance. Since 2015, Bajeti Hub, formerly the International Budget Partnership Kenya, in collaboration with budget facilitators, has conducted a budget transparency study assessing how counties made statutory key budget documents available on their websites, including those from both the county executive and county assembly [Availability survey](#). This study remains the only sub-national assessment of budget transparency in the world. However, since 2020, the study has expanded to include a comprehensive analysis of the information provided by the government. This now covers revenue, expenditure, details on capital projects, non-financial information, county priorities, and public participation.

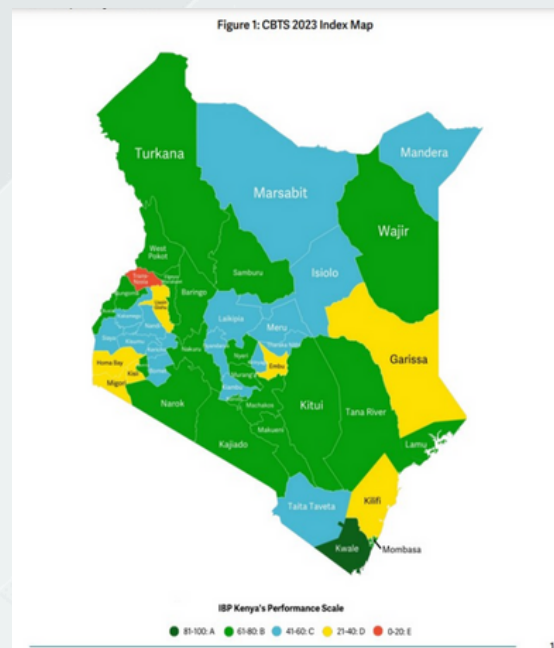
The findings of the County Budget Transparency Survey (CBTS) have become a valuable tool for use by budget facilitators and champions within regional hubs, enabling them to utilize the findings to engage effectively with county governments. Through this “Chronicle of change series”, we document the journey of budget transparency advocacy in the coastal counties, by utilizing the CBTS study findings. The journey of the Coast Regional Budget Hub (CRBH) engaging their county governments on budget transparency is truly a grass-to-grace story, showcasing how grassroots efforts coupled with strong partnerships have led to significant improvements and success in budget transparency.

Notable strides, but the journey to full budget transparency is still on the horizon!

Over the past few years, Kenya's counties have made significant strides in improving budget transparency. In 2020, only 32% of key budget information was publicly available, but this figure steadily increased to 73% in CBTS 2023. Similarly, the overall transparency index rose from 33 in 2020 to 56 in 2023, reflecting a growing commitment to openness. The maps below reveal the progress in budget transparency, showcasing the findings from the 2015 study alongside the current status as of CBTS 2023. The journey of this transition is best captured through these maps, nine (9) years down the line.



Caption: The budget information availability map in ,2015, by Bajeti Hub(formerly IBPK).



Caption: The budget transparency map, in CBTS 2023 by Bajeti Hub (formerly IBPK)

Most counties within the Jumuiya ya Kaunti Za Pwani (JKP) economic bloc have shown significant improvement in budget transparency compared to previous surveys. In 2020 and 2021, the average transparency score was 23 percent, rising to 52 percent in 2022, and reaching 63 percent in 2023. At the regional level, coastal counties have made remarkable progress by publishing more documents and making more information accessible to the public. However, the journey hasn't been without its challenges. Despite these gains, not all counties have moved at the same pace. For instance, Kilifi County has faced setbacks, experiencing a decline in transparency efforts even as other counties in the region have advanced. As with any journey, there are still miles to go. The progress has been significant, yet it's clear that the destination, that is, full budget transparency is still on the horizon.

“The necessary nuisance”: Mass Access to information campaigns

Attending the CBTS 2020 and 2021 launches was discouraging. Coastal counties ranked low not only geographically but also in transparency, with an average score of just 23 out of 100 points. This lack of transparency signaled a critical gap in public accountability, particularly in the availability of budget information. Armed with credible evidence of CBTS findings, budget facilitators and champions at the Coast, recognized the need for a bold, if not an unconventional, strategy, the necessary nuisance- *mass ATI Campaigns*. The campaign involved bombarding the counties' ICT departments and treasury offices with repeated requests for the same budget information, creating a constant demand that was impossible to ignore. While this might not have been the ideal strategy, the team deliberately chose to be a 'nuisance,' believing that mass requests would create demand and pressure the relevant officials to publish the necessary information. It's important to note that 'publicly available information' refers specifically to budget information published on the county's official websites, not just shared through other internet sources or with individuals.

The mass access to information campaign was such a nuisance that an official from one county called and asked, "Mtu mmoja akiomba stakabadhi za Bajeti hamtapata, mbona napata barua pepe hadi kutoka TanaRiver?" translated 'If one person requests budget documents, won't you all receive them? Why am I receiving requests as far as from TanaRiver?' Despite the frustration, the strategy worked. Further, efforts were made by most coastal counties, including Taita Taveta, Tana River, and Kwale, to publish their quarterly implementation reports, which were one of the least published budget documents, according to the CBTS findings.



CBTS 2021 engagements with champions in Tana-River county

Request Form Number001/02/2022.....

**Access to Information
Request for information form**
Art. 35 Constitution of Kenya; s.4 -12 Access to Information Act, 2016
(This form should be filled in triplicate)

SECTION A (to be filled by the applicant)	
Date of request	04 February 2022 DD MM YYYY
Name of the applicant(s) <small>(If institution, name of citizen in control of the organization)</small>	Dahir Daud Ahmed
If institution, name of organization making application	Coast Regional Budget Hub
If institution, designation of the applicant	Budget facilitator
Applicant(s)' national ID card number	[REDACTED]
Applicant(s)' contacts	Email [REDACTED]
	Mobile number [REDACTED]
Name of the public or private entity (PE) <small>(from whom information is being requested)</small>	Kilifi County Government
Chief Executive Officer/designate/the head of entity / information access officer (if known)	County Department of ICT, Department of Finance and Economic Planning
Information needed	The County annual Development Plan, 2022/23 The County Budget Review and Outlook Paper 2021 County Quarterly Implementation Reports Quarter 1 2021/22, Quarter 2 2021/22
Relevant period of information	From July 2021 To 31 st January 2022

Caption: Sample filled ATI form

Key lessons learnt

- Increased demand for information can motivate counties to publish budget documents.
- Counties still have a long way to go in voluntarily providing budget information on a timely basis; external pressure from Champions and facilitators or other actors prompted them to do so.

County-specific cafes on budget transparency for CBTS 2020 & 2021

As part of our engagement with the CBTS 2020 and 2021 survey findings, we as a hub organized county-specific convenings, originally called the 'CBTS Dissemination Café' and now known as the 'CBTS Garage.' These events were held across the six coastal counties: Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi, Taita Taveta, and Tana River. Although counties were involved in providing feedback on the draft findings and comprehensiveness of survey results, these meetings were often chaotic. The county-specific cafés aimed to create a platform for CSOs and budget champions to understand the challenges counties faced in fulfilling their mandate of providing timely information.

In some counties, the forums were smooth, while in others, tensions ran high as government officials perceived the discussions as a witch-hunt and became defensive. Notably, in Tana River, the engagements were exceptionally positive, with county officials not only participating but also facilitating the forums and actively engaging with the budget champions.

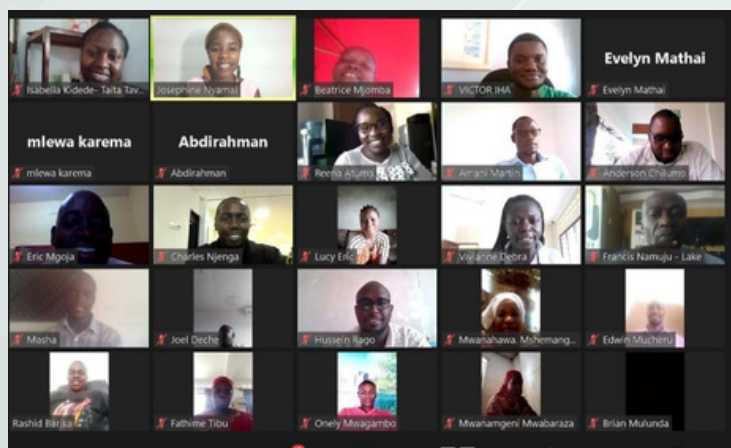
On the flip side, as a Hub, we gained a deeper understanding of the challenges counties face in providing timely information. Some of the key issues identified included insufficient resources to maintain county websites, as seen in Kilifi County and the mistaken belief that information shared in informal spaces like WhatsApp is considered publicly available. Additionally, some counties struggle with internet connectivity and electricity issues, while others face difficulties due to officials' lack of understanding of key budget decisions and timelines.

Key takeaways from the County-specific engagements

- **Tailored approaches are essential for effective engagement-** the varying reactions across different counties highlight the need for tailored engagement strategies. While some counties, like Tana River, responded positively to the forums, others viewed them as confrontational. This suggests that understanding the local context and adapting your approach accordingly is crucial for fostering constructive dialogue and collaboration.



Caption: experience sharing and learning during CBTS dissemination cafe, 2022



Caption: experience sharing and learning during CBTS dissemination cafe, 2022

Identifying and Addressing Operational Challenges Is Crucial for Transparency- The convenings revealed several operational challenges that hinder counties from providing timely information, such as inadequate resources to maintain websites, misconceptions about what constitutes publicly available information, and infrastructure issues like internet connectivity and electricity. Addressing these practical barriers is essential for improving budget transparency at the county level.

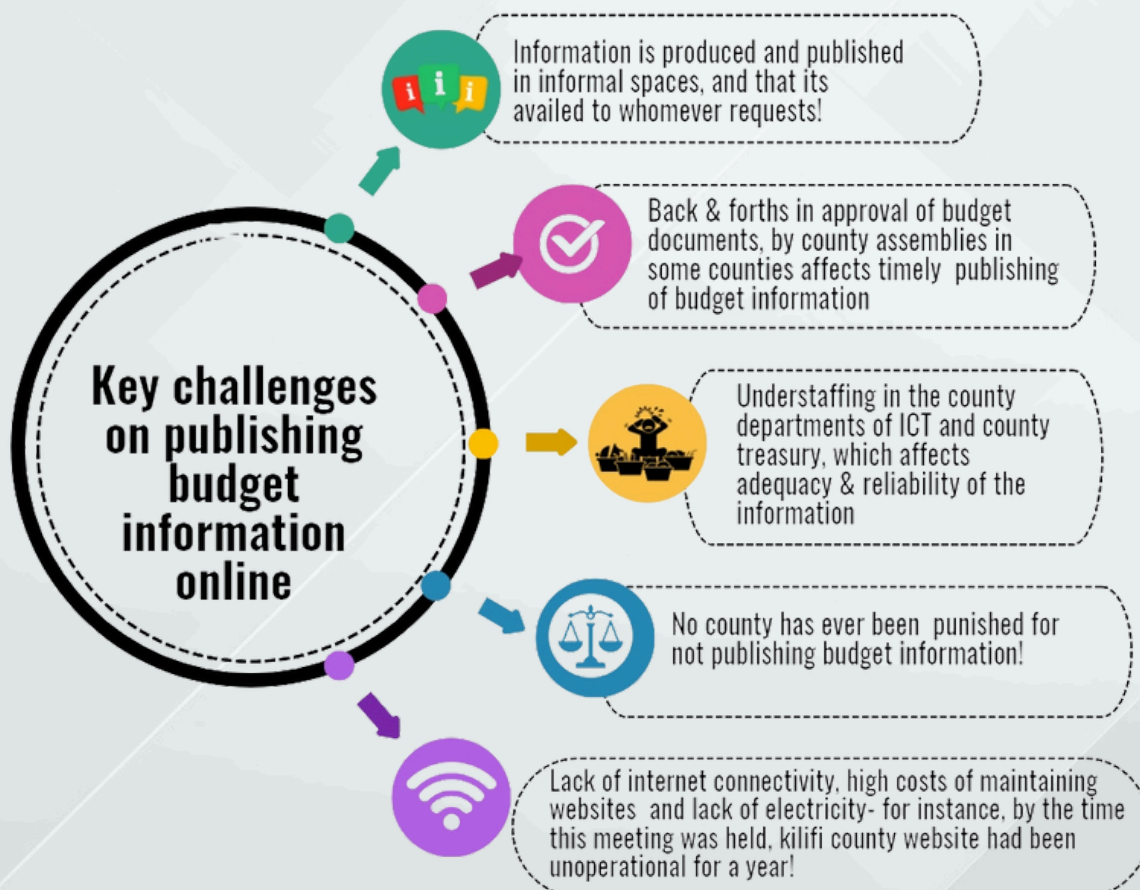
Partnership with development partners in demanding Budget transparency- Case of Kilifi, Wajir, and Lamu counties.

Partners have played a significant role in supporting dialogue between CSO actors and county officials on budget transparency. On the 1st and 2nd of November, 2021, with support from UNICEF and Bajeti Hub (formerly IBP Kenya), a meeting with officials from Kilifi, Lamu, and Wajir counties, was convened. The forum brought together a diverse group of technical officers, including Chief Officers, Directors of Budgets, fiscal analysts, communication teams, statisticians, and ICT officers from the three counties. High-level participants included the County Executive Member for Finance from Lamu and the County Secretary from Wajir County.

To enhance learning and identify challenges, three facilitators, two from the Coast Hub and one from Northeastern, who had conducted surveys in the counties were present. The objective of the convening was to listen to the challenges counties face in publishing budget information and to identify opportunities for improvement.

This was one of those heated meetings, though not as intense as the county-specific cafés. I recall an official insisting that information was available, even showing it on his laptop. Another pointed out that one of the facilitators already had all the necessary information at hand. The real challenge, it seems, was a misunderstanding of what 'publicly available information' truly means.

Challenges on publishing information online



Challenges cited related to comprehensiveness of budget information



Key takeaways & Lessons from this engagement

- Siloed Operations in County Entities-** One key lesson learned is that many, if not all, county entities work in silos. From the outside, it might seem that government functions as a unified system, but we discovered that departments operate independently, especially when it comes to budget transparency, where multiple actors are involved. For example, the Director of Budgets and Planning’s responsibility ends with writing the budget documents, while it’s the ICT department’s role to upload these documents online. Additionally, the Monitoring and Evaluation department oversees providing non-financial information related to capital or transformational projects. Understanding the distinct roles within county departments allows for more effective and targeted engagement, ensuring that the right stakeholders are approached for specific aspects of budget transparency. This realization changed our perspective of engagement and advocacy on budget transparency.
- Effective Solution-Oriented Engagement with County Governments on budget transparency works-** One of the most valuable lessons learned was the importance of objective engagement rather than attacking county governments. Approaching the discussions with a focus on providing solutions, rather than assigning blame, proved to be far more effective. For example, by the end of the meeting, Lamu County officials committed to reorganizing their website and updating all budget documents, a task they completed the following week. Similarly, Kilifi County fixed their website and uploaded several documents.
- Leveraging Peer Learning to Improve County Budget Transparency-** A key lesson learned is the value of including a well-performing county in discussions, especially when most participants are from poorly performing regions. In CBTS 2020, Wajir had no budget documents on their website, Lamu scored just 10 out of 100, and Kilifi scored 30 out of 100, all below the halfway mark. Focusing solely on poor performers can lead to harsh, defensive reactions rather than constructive, solution-oriented dialogue. This experience has influenced our approach to CBTS engagements, emphasizing the importance of creating platforms for peer learning, where counties that are excelling can share best practices with those still developing their processes.

“Understanding the distinct roles within county departments allows for more effective and targeted engagement, ensuring that the right stakeholders are approached for specific aspects of budget transparency.”

Media advocacy (social & mainstream media)-the role of community radios & social media in budget transparency.

Both social and mainstream media have played a crucial role in our advocacy efforts for budget transparency. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges in accessing information, as public physical gatherings were banned to contain the virus's spread. As a result, social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook became some of the few remaining avenues for engaging with the government and making direct requests for budget information. You may read here one of the case examples on the power of social media and access to information ([Social media & ATI](#)).

In our quest to enhance budget transparency, our Hub has strategically leveraged community radio stations as a vital platform to disseminate the findings of the County Budget Transparency Survey (CBTS). This has significantly bridged the information gap, enabling more citizens to grasp the essential role transparency plays in governance and civic engagement. Community radios, with their extensive reach and localized impact, have been instrumental in our efforts, facilitating a broader understanding and fostering accessible dialogue for all, regardless of geographical or social standing.



Harnessing the power of both traditional and digital media has allowed us to do more than just inform the community but also it has enabled them to demand accountability and transparency from their government. This dual-channel approach has and continue to ensure that the insights from the CBTS findings are not confined to policy circles but also to the grassroots level, making budget transparency a shared goal rather than just a statutory requirement. These engagements have reinforced the belief that an informed citizenry is the cornerstone of a transparent, accountable government.

“Through community radios and social media, we continue to build a society that is not only aware of its right to information but also capable of advocating for its implementation in governance processes.”

Budget transparency advocacy in the corridors of media



CRBH media engagement with CBTS findings

Enhancing intra-county peer learning on budget transparency- CBTS 2022.

Informed by previous engagement strategies in CBTS 2020 and 2021, our engagement with CBTS 2022 results was geared towards promoting peer-to-peer learning among the coastal counties. In CBTS 2022, the Jumuiya ya Kaunti Za Pwani regional bloc emerged as the most improved region in terms of budget transparency, with an overall transparency score of 52 out of 100, from 23 out of 100. This engagement was attended by county partners from the coastal counties, budget facilitators, champions, and Bajeti Hub and UNICEF. The key activities undertaken during this engagement were key highlights of CBTS 2022, focusing on the Coastal Counties, while highlighting the best practices from other counties, county cafes for learning and panel sessions. In 2022, the linkage was more on budget transparency, public participation and service delivery.



Caption: panel session during CBTS 2022 dissemination and learning garage, in Ocean Breeze, Kilifi County.

Key takeaways & Lessons from this engagement

- **Public participation-** the level of information on public participation provided by counties remains minimal, although it is improving at a slow pace. CBTS 2020, information on public participation provided was 6 out of 100, in 2021 8 out of 100 and 10 out 100 in 2022. A detailed discussion focused on the type of public participation information that should be provided in key budget documents, such as *the County Annual Development Plan, County Fiscal Strategy Paper, and Budget Estimates*. Unlike in previous meetings, there was a consensus that, even though some counties do not provide public participation information in these documents, such details are captured in separate public participation reports by the counties. For instance, Mombasa and Tana River counties provide public participation reports. However, the emphasis was on ensuring that these reports clearly show how public input influenced the final decisions in the key budget documents.
- **Budget transparency and access to service delivery-** Budget transparency and access to service delivery are crucial for ensuring that public funds are used efficiently and effectively. When budget documents are made publicly available and easily accessible, it empowers citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), and other stakeholders to monitor and scrutinize how these funds are allocated and spent. This scrutiny not only fosters accountability but also reduces the risk of mismanagement or corruption, ultimately leading to better outcomes in critical sectors such as health, water, and education. *This was exemplified during a panel session, where CSOs shared how they leverage budget data to advocate for more effective health budgets, resulting in improved health services.* Development partners also emphasized the strong connection between transparency and public participation in delivering essential services like nutrition and education for children.
- **Mixing best-performing counties with poor performers in budget transparency is a strategy that could help counties improve and learn from their peers-**In previous years, we encountered challenges when engaging with CBTS findings, particularly when not so well performing counties were grouped. These meetings often became unproductive, *as they tended to devolve into defensive and confrontational exchanges rather than fostering learning.* To address this, we adopted a different approach, that entailed hosting meetings in the worst-performing counties and inviting the improved and best-performing counties within the same region to participate. This strategy not only created a more constructive environment but also facilitated peer learning and shared best practices. For instance, Lamu County shared how they had embraced addressing understaffing in the departments by ensuring they have economists in all the concerned departments. Further, they shared how the presentation of the information on the website had improved the ease of accessing information by the citizens. Kwale county shared on the motivation for transparency.

Outward looking- enhancing inter-regional learning using CBTS 2023.

The CBTS 2023 findings revealed an encouraging improvement in budget transparency across most counties, with the overall score rising to 56 out of 100, up from 43 out of 100 in the previous year. For the first time in the history of CBTS, one county achieved an “A” grade, marking a historic milestone. Remarkably, this achievement belongs to Kwale county, from Jumuiya ya Kaunti za Pwani, what an accomplishment! This breakthrough not only reflects significant progress but also sets a new benchmark for other counties to aspire to. Could this be the beginning of a broader trend towards greater transparency across the country?

However, the discussion began to evolve, shifting from merely the availability of budget information and its details to a more service delivery-oriented focus. The central question that emerged was, “As budget transparency improves, is the quality of services in the counties getting better?” When a map of transparency, once marked in red, turns green, signalling transparency, what will this truly mean for service delivery? This shift in focus has challenged us to consider whether transparency alone is enough, or if it must be coupled with concrete improvements in how services are delivered to the public.



County government representatives during CBTS 2023 dissemination & learning garage in Mombasa.

In light of the above, our regional CBTS 2023 dissemination and learning garage adopted a fresh approach, aiming to sustain the gains of budget transparency while also fostering deeper discussions on its impact on service delivery. Our theme, “*Transparency Transforms-Fostering Cross-County Collaboration & Learning for Equitable Service Delivery,*” represented our commitment to driving real change. To promote peer learning, the Coast Regional Budget Hub took an outward-looking approach, extending beyond the Coast region to include counties like **Makueni, Bungoma, and Nakuru**, representing the NEC, Lake, and Rift Valley budget hubs, respectively. By encouraging this cross-regional collaboration, we aimed to not only sustain transparency gains but also catalyze meaningful improvements in service delivery across all participating counties featuring Makueni, Bungoma & Nakuru counties in sharing best practices. Learning sessions also tackled the contentious issue of public participation. Some counties claim to engage citizens but fail to show how input influences final decisions. Nakuru and Makueni counties shared their approaches, sparking dynamic exchanges that emphasized the need for genuine public involvement and transparency in decision-making processes.

Key takeaways & Lessons from this engagement

(i) Peer Learning Encourages Innovation and Continuous Improvement

The exchange between county officials during the learning sessions emphasized the value of peer learning. By asking questions and sharing experiences, county officials can gain new insights, adapt innovative approaches, and continuously improve their budgeting and service delivery practices. The outward-looking approach of the CBTS 2023 dissemination, which included counties from different regions, demonstrated the value of inter-regional learning.

(ii) Transparency Alone is Insufficient Without a Focus on Service Delivery

While transparency in budget processes is a fundamental aspect of good governance, it should not be viewed as an end in itself. Transparency involves making budget information accessible and understandable to the public, allowing citizens to see how public funds are allocated and spent. However, the bigger picture should be the improvement of public services, ensure efficient use of resources, and foster trust between the government and the public. The discussions highlighted that even when counties achieve significant improvements in budget transparency, this does not automatically translate into better service delivery. For example, a county might score well on transparency index by publishing detailed budget documents and making financial information available to the public. However, if these efforts do not lead to tangible improvements in how services are delivered, such as better healthcare, education, water or social protection, the impact of transparency remains limited.

The shift in focus from *"Is budget information available?"* to *"Is the quality of services improving as transparency increases?"* is crucial. This shift encourages a deeper examination of how well resources are being utilized and whether the intended outcomes, such as improved health services or more efficient public infrastructure, are being achieved. It challenges county governments to move beyond the mere disclosure of information to actively use that information to drive performance and enhance public services. For instance, when a county achieves high transparency, but citizens still experience poor health services, it raises critical questions. Is the budget being effectively allocated to meet the needs of the population? Are there inefficiencies or mismanagement that transparency alone has not resolved? This situation calls for the need for counties to focus on making budgets transparent and ensure that these budgets are strategically designed and implemented to improve service delivery and livelihoods of the underserved communities.

Demonstrating the Impact of Public Participation in the Final Budget Decisions

Experiences from the learning revealed that some counties claim to engage citizens in the budgeting process but fail to show how public input influences final decisions. This underscores the need for counties to not only involve citizens but also transparently demonstrate how their contributions shape outcomes, thereby enhancing trust and legitimacy in the governance process. *For example, in Makueni County, if you were to randomly ask grassroots citizens whether they are involved in budget discussions, they would likely confirm their participation.* This contrasts with some other counties where the public's experiences do not align with what is documented on paper, indicating a gap between reported public participation and the actual involvement of citizens in the budget process.

Conclusion

As we move forward, sustaining advocacy efforts and fostering a culture of voluntary disclosure of budget information by counties is crucial. Political goodwill, coupled with multi-stakeholder engagement and peer learning, will be key in ensuring that transparency is not just an end in itself but a catalyst for real, tangible improvements in the lives of citizens, more so, the underserved and the marginalised.

As counties continue to embrace transparency and citizens become more informed, we must ask: What's next? While transparency maps increasingly turn green, does this automatically guarantee better service delivery? The real challenge now is to ensure that as transparency improves, the quality of public services follows suit. Budget transparency should not be the end goal but a means to achieve better governance, enhanced services, and ultimately, a higher quality of life for all citizens.



Caption: CRBH , Bajeti Hub team and county officials from Coastal counties, during CBTS 2023 launch.

The County Budget Transparency Survey (CBTS) findings continue to be a powerful tool for evidence-based engagement with counties. As demonstrated on our utilization for the study findings, we remain objective in our engagement with the state actors, not only to identify the gaps, but also to provide lasting solutions as we celebrate the low hanging fruits of budget transparency. The future of budget transparency at sub-national level, in Kenya is promising, and so should be delivery of services!



Caption: CRBH team & Mombasa Governor H.E Nassir and County treasury team during presentation of CBTS 2023 award for the most comprehensive Finance Act.

For more information:

-  **Coast Regional Budget Hub-CRBH**
-  **@Coast_hub**
-  **Coast Regional Budget Hub**
-  **Coast Regional Budget Hub**

The Coast Regional Budget Hub is a platform for Public Finance Management (PFM) practitioners that brings together regional voices for collective efforts and synergy to enhance public budgets and services across the Coast Region of Kenya. The Hub is among the four hubs: The Nairobi Eastern and Central (NEC) Hub, The Rift Valley Hub and the Lake Region Hub, established by Bajeti Hub, formerly International Budget Partnership Kenya.

The Coast Regional Hub builds communities' collective capacity to engage effectively and mobilises participation in the county, regional, and national budget-making processes. The CRBH achieves this through continuous capacity building of budget champions and communities in budget processes, research, and budget analysis for evidence-based advocacy engagement and stakeholder network-building. The Hub has over 15 budget facilitators and over 300 budget champions across the Coast.

