

## KENYA

### TRADITIONAL CULTURAL MEDIA IN LAMU

*Low levels of awareness about civic rights and governance are barriers to effective urban and regional development. The Tawasal Foundation is using traditional Swahili poetry and song to increase civic awareness, enhance community participation and strengthen civil society in Lamu, Kenya.*

In Lamu Town, an ancient Swahili urban settlement on Kenya's coast, social and economic development has long been constrained by spatial isolation, political marginalisation and a lack of community awareness and participation. Many indigenous coastal peoples in Kenya have only a rudimentary notion of their rights and have limited access to participation in urban, regional, or national decision-making processes. The challenge faced by these communities is exacerbated by the conspicuous lack of civil society organisations, other than networks of religious associations.



Before the Lamu community and municipal government were able to address specific sectoral urban and regional development issues, the problems of inadequate community participation in decision-making and low levels of civic awareness had to be remedied. For example, most of Lamu's poorest inhabitants lived as squatters in informal settlements, yet most residents and even many local leaders were unfamiliar with the most basic aspects of Kenya's land tenure

laws. Unlike other areas of the country, conferences or educational programmes about civic issues had never been held in Lamu. In 1999, the Tawasal

Foundation, the only local NGO operating in Lamu District, initiated a creative, innovative approach to civic education. The Tawasal Foundation started with the premise that, given Kenya's enormous social, economic, and environmental diversity, any successful civic education campaign would need to be locally designed, culturally appropriate and rooted in existing forms of information exchange.

The Swahili people's rich cultural repertoire of poetry and songs was identified as an effective vehicle for awareness raising and for restoring the population's muted voice. With support from the Ford Foundation and USAID, the Tawasal Foundation initiated a Citizenship Awareness Project for the Swahili-Speaking People of the Kenya Coast. A series of creative workshops were held to set the agenda of the campaign. A wide range of actors participated in these workshops, including community members, professionals, scholars, social activists, civic education specialists, civil servants, and artists. Working groups addressed specific themes such as government and electoral systems, minority and indigenous rights, economic governance and administrative corruption, land and natural resource governance, and community involvement and participation. Local artists and poets were commissioned to craft verses about each theme, incorporating points raised in working group discussions.

The workshops, which received unprecedented levels of public participation and engagement, generated a valuable collection of Swahili songs and poetry with compelling civic education content. For example, the following verse in the Kibajuni dialect of Swahili addresses the concept of universal human rights and the need to protect them:

*Navafahamu vakwechu* / Let our people understand  
*Malimwengu apichavo* / The ways of the world  
*Vakisimama kivach'u* / If they stand firm  
*Vatapacha haki dhavo* / They will get their rights  
*Avach'u hupacha vach'u* / What is rightfully yours is yours  
*Dhivumbe na uch'u wavo* / And these rights must be honoured



The material created in the workshops is delivered through two methods. First, a travelling 'road show' gives live performances with local artists and performers in local neighbourhoods. Second, audio-cassettes are circulated to individuals through community networks and to local restaurants, bus lines, and other venues that typically play Swahili music.

The Citizenship Awareness Project in Lamu has had several significant impacts. The actual process of implementing the project has had enormous capacity-building benefits for over 150 people who attended creative workshops. For many of these men and women, the creative workshops marked the first time that they had ever been asked for their opinion and their participation in an official capacity. Participation in the project has empowered residents who, for the first time, are being treated as local experts. Hundreds of Lamu residents are exposed to meaningful, locally generated and appropriate civic awareness messages in an innovative and engaging way. As the verses are part of the community's collective repertoire, they have become a widespread, sustainable resource for ongoing awareness raising and helped to reactivate the Swahili tradition of political poetry.

The co-ordinating role of a local NGO is an important element of the initiative. The project has brought together men and women (farmers, professionals, scholars, civil servants, religious leaders, activists, and artists) in a creative atmosphere for dialogue and debate. As a locally based organisation, the Tawasal Foundation has been able to identify and include interest groups and stakeholders that might

have been otherwise overlooked, given the complex diversity of Kenya's social fabric.

Finally, the project has laid the foundation for new initiatives to address specific urban and regional problems in Lamu. By focusing on core issues of governance, community participation, and civic rights and responsibilities, the project has helped the community to initiate a process of setting their own agenda for change.



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