

# Mobilisation Is Not Leadership: Closing East Africa's Civic Capability Gap

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## At A Glance

*East Africa's youth can mobilise. They have demonstrated this repeatedly, in Kenya's streets, in cross-border digital solidarity campaigns, in rapidly assembled coalitions that have pressured governments and shifted public narratives. But the conflation of mobilisation capacity with civic leadership is one of the most persistent analytical errors in development discourse on African youth. They are not the same thing, and treating them as equivalent is part of why the gap between civic energy and institutional change remains so wide.*

## Two Different Skill Sets

Mobilisation capacity is a tactical skill. It involves the ability to coordinate large numbers of people around a shared grievance, often quickly and with minimal hierarchical structure. Digital tools have made this dramatically easier for young people in East Africa, and the results are visible.

Civic leadership is something different. It is a structural skill set: the capacity to negotiate institutional change, sustain organisational coherence over time, and build

multi-stakeholder accountability. It requires legal literacy, coalition negotiation skills, policy analysis capacity, and the ability to navigate bureaucratic systems. These skills are developed through entirely different mechanisms than protest coordination, and neither university curricula nor digital activism routinely builds them.

The African Development Bank's 2023 African Economic Outlook identifies a 'youth civic capability gap' across Sub-Saharan Africa. Youth civic participation rates are rising, but participation in formal political structures, party committees, legislative advisory processes, statutory bodies, remains below 8% for the 18–35 cohort in most African countries. In Kenya, youth aged 18–35 constitute 37% of registered voters but hold less than 12% of elective positions at county and national levels (IEBC, 2022).

### **Three Mechanisms Behind the Gap**

#### ***Electoral system design***

East Africa's electoral systems concentrate political power in executive presidencies supported by ethnic coalition arithmetic. Kenya's 'tyranny of numbers' electoral logic rewards ethnic bloc mobilisation, not issue-based mobilisation. Young Kenyans who coordinated cross-ethnically in 2024 found no mechanism to translate that coalition into electoral leverage.

#### ***Party capture***

Kenya's party institutionalisation score from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (2024) stands at 0.41 on a 0–1 scale, below Ghana (0.56), South Africa (0.62), and Botswana (0.71). Parties are personality-driven, programmatically incoherent, and structurally closed to new entrants without financial resources or ethnic credentials.

#### ***Civic space compression***

Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2024 report scores Uganda as 'Not Free' (35/100) and Tanzania as 'Partly Free' (40/100). In Uganda, the 2013 Public Order Management Act has deterred sustained civic organising. Tanzania's Cybercrime Act has been used to prosecute online political commentary. Even Kenya, at 48/100, is not immune: the 2023 Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act has created ambiguity around digital organising.

### **What Civic Leadership Infrastructure Actually Requires**

Closing the capability gap requires more than training programmes. 'Civic leadership infrastructure' refers to the structured institutional pathways, competency development systems, and enabling environments that convert mobilisation capacity into durable democratic participation. Three components stand out.

First, parliamentary and legislative interface mechanisms. Kenya's County Assemblies, established under the 2010 Constitution, were designed partly to provide entry-level legislative participation for youth. Their effectiveness has been constrained by under-resourcing, county assemblies receive less than 4% of devolved resources on average, and by the dominance of patronage networks in candidate selection.

Second, civil society organisational development. Kenya's civil society ecosystem includes an estimated 8,600 registered NGOs as of 2023, but remains fragmented and donor-dependent. Organisations that develop sustained civic leadership through mentorship, policy engagement training, and intergenerational knowledge transfer are a minority. The knowledge of how to negotiate with governments, sustain coalitions under pressure, and convert civic moments into legislative outcomes is not being transferred at scale.

Third, digital-to-formal bridging infrastructure. Platforms like Mzalendo (Kenya parliamentary monitoring) and Twaweza

(East Africa civic engagement data) are growing, but their active user bases represent a fraction of the population that participated in the 2024 Finance Bill protests. Digital civic infrastructure must complement, not substitute for, formal participation pathways.

#### The Three Pillars of Civic Leadership Infrastructure

1. Legislative Interface Mechanisms, structured entry points into formal governance
2. Civil Society Organisational Development, long-term institution-building and policy engagement training
3. Digital-to-Formal Bridging, connecting digital mobilisation networks to formal accountability mechanisms

The region's youth have demonstrated they can generate civic energy. The next challenge is building the architecture that turns that energy into lasting democratic change. Without it, the same cycle repeats: remarkable mobilisation, limited institutional absorption, and the gradual erosion of confidence that anything can actually change.

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