



POLICY BRIEF ON
THE ROLE OF ARTIVISM IN ADVANCING
SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL
DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA.

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PAWA254
Art Rising!

1. Overview

Art and activism are joining forces in Kenya, creating a movement that's changing how people engage with social issues. Through music, street art, theatre performances, poetry, and social media campaigns, local artists are breaking down complex topics like government accountability, social inequality, climate change, and gender violence. They're taking these big, often overwhelming issues and transforming them into something everyone can understand and connect with.

We conducted research, which included community discussions, expert interviews, and an extensive review of creative civic engagement (policies and laws), to show just how powerful this combination of art and activism (artivism) can be. We saw firsthand how art-based activism helps everyday Kenyans not only to grasp important policy issues but also to feel empowered to take action.

Key recommendations speak to everyone from government officials and county leaders to development partners, community organisations, and artists. It is time to recognize that combining art with activism isn't just a feel-good effort; it is a force for change that deserves attention and support. When artists tackle social, economic and political issues, they're not just creating beautiful work - they're helping build a better Kenya.



2. Why Activism Matters

Art and activism work together to shake things up by getting people talking and creating real change in our communities. In Kenya, where corruption and lack of civic engagement often keep people from having their voices heard, creative expression has become a vital way for citizens to speak up and take action. Whether it's through street art, music, or poetry, activism gives Kenyans a way to challenge the status quo and participate in shaping our democracy, even when traditional channels feel closed off.

Democratic Participation

Activism simplifies policy issues and drives political engagement. The protest anthem "#Unbwogable" mobilized voters in the 2002 elections, while the #Maandamano2024 digital movement forced amendments to a controversial Finance Bill 2024. Campaigns like #KenyaDecides boosted youth turnout, and #DeKUTLivesMatter graffiti and vigils highlighted police brutality, showing art's ability to convert frustration into active participation.

Social Cohesion

Creative activism builds bridges across divides by reclaiming public spaces and amplifying marginalised voices. PAWA254 and similar collectives foster safe, intergenerational collaboration. Movements such as #MyDressMyChoice challenged gender-based violence, while Stories of Our Lives sparked national dialogue on LGBTQ+ rights despite state bans. Theatre, murals, and film have also reduced HIV stigma and advanced women's land rights.

Economic Livelihoods

Activism fuels Kenya's creative economy by generating income for performers, designers, and digital creators. Murals, protest songs, and viral campaigns create jobs and stimulate micro-businesses, though opportunities remain uneven and urban-centred.

Policy Influence

Kenyan activists repeatedly shape political outcomes. The satirical #MPigs protest exposed MPs' salary demands, #SaveOurForests halted a logging ban, and #LetLiveBreathe secured new air-quality monitors and draft pollution controls. From King Kaka's Wajinga Nyinyi to Karura Forest's eco-art trails, creative action pressures decision-makers and sparks reform.



3. Context and Evidence from the Ground

Kenya has a rich activist tradition spanning four key eras:

- 1. Anti-Colonial Resistance (1940s–1963):** Protest songs, theatre, and cultural symbolism were central to resisting colonial domination. Creative expression was inseparable from the independence struggle.
- 2. Post-Independence Repression (1963–1980s):** The one-party state cracked down on dissent, but artists responded with coded lyrics, banned plays, and underground performances that critiqued corruption and authoritarianism.
- 3. Democratic Opening (1990s):** With the return of multi-party politics, protest music, public murals, and political theatre flourished. Civic groups partnered with artists to demand constitutional reforms and accountability.
- 4. The Digital Age (2000s–present):** Hashtags such as #MyDressMyChoice, #MPigs, and #EndPoliceBrutalityKE have mobilized citizens in real time, amplifying civic demands across borders and linking Kenyan struggles to global movements such as Black Lives Matter and #EndSARS.

Legal and Policy Landscape

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) provides the strongest foundation for activism by guaranteeing freedoms of expression, association, and cultural participation. However, these freedoms are subject to reasonable limitations under Article 24, which leaves room for restrictive interpretations.

Other relevant laws and policies include:

- ✦ **Public Order Act** – regulates public gatherings and performances, sometimes used to restrict protests.
- ✦ **Copyright Act** – protects intellectual property, though enforcement is weak and benefits remain uneven.
- ✦ **National Cohesion and Integration Act** – prohibits hate speech but has also been invoked selectively.
- ✦ **Kenya Film Classification Board regulations** – vet and sometimes censor content.
- ✦ **ICT and Digital Economy Master Plan** – promotes digital innovation and creative industries, but does not adequately address online harassment or rural digital exclusion.

Overall, Kenya's legal framework provides both opportunities and constraints, with inconsistent application often leaving activists vulnerable to censorship, harassment, or economic exclusion.

Research Methodology

The study engaged 55 participants: 31 men, 24 women, and 5 persons with disabilities through KIs and 18 FGDs with an average of 8 to 12 participants drawn from Nairobi, Kisumu, and Turkana, Mombasa, Nakuru, Uasin Gishu and Embu counties. The participants included artists, policymakers, and civil society actors. We also conducted surveys alongside a desk review of existing policies, reports and laws to explore Kenya's activism legal landscape and its socio-economic and political impact

4. Emerging Trends in Kenyan Artivism

a) Digitalisation of Dissent

Social media platforms like X, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp are now frontline spaces for civic mobilisation. Campaigns such as #JusticeForRex, #EndFemicideKE, and the 2024 Finance Bill protests used infographics, viral videos, and live digital spaces to explain policy language, challenge official narratives, and mobilise mass action in real time.

Yet digital activism comes with risks. Online harassment, cyberbullying, and surveillance are rampant, particularly against women and LGBTQ+ activists. Rural activists are disadvantaged by poor connectivity, high data costs, and limited digital literacy.

b) Intersectionality of Causes

Kenyan artists increasingly link multiple struggles into single campaigns. Murals in Nairobi's informal settlements connect gender equality with environmental justice, while digital campaigns highlight the intersection of police violence with economic exclusion. This approach strengthens alliances but complicates monitoring and evaluation, requiring flexible community-driven tools to capture layered impacts.

c) Generational and Cultural Shifts

Youth embrace artivism as civic education and cultural reclamation, while many elders view it as rebellion or disrespect. This tension highlights the need for intergenerational dialogue to bridge perceptions and validate artivism as a legitimate civic tool.



5. Voices from the Field



The research revealed how activism is reshaping Kenya's public discourse:

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Excerpts
Population Understanding	Activism is understood differently across age groups and communities. While younger people view it as organised resistance and social commentary, many elders misinterpret it as disrespectful or rebellious.	"Art is organised discomfort, but elders see it as disrespect." (Kisumu FGD)
Civic Engagement	Activism provides an accessible form of civic education and political advocacy through plays, graffiti, satire, spoken word, and music, making complex issues easier for the public to understand.	"When you speak, people may ignore. But when you sing, they listen." (Kisumu FGD)
Inclusion & Representation	Despite growing efforts, women, rural youth, and persons living with disabilities remain underrepresented in activist spaces, limiting diversity and reach.	"Sometimes women are left out, and PWDs are rarely seen on stage." (Nairobi FGD)

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Excerpts
Digital Technology	Social media platforms like X, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok amplify activist messages and connect audiences across borders, but they also expose artists to harassment and highlight rural–urban digital divides.	“Social media accounts can be lost if your message is too radical.” (Nairobi FGD)
Institutional Support	Civil society organizations offer training, funding, and platforms, but government actors often censor or ignore activist work, creating a hostile environment for advocacy.	“We only get support from NGOs; the government paints over our murals.” (Nairobi FGD)
Cultural Framing	Cultural norms and generational values shape how activism is received. Older, more conservative audiences sometimes see artists as rebellious, underscoring the need for intergenerational dialogue.	“Our parents see us as rebellious, but it is our way to speak truth.” (Kisumu FGD)
Opportunities for Growth	Expanding digital innovation, integrating activism into schools, and establishing county-level incubation hubs could scale and sustain the movement.	“If counties could create art hubs, we'd grow faster.” (Turkana FGD)
Economic Impact	Activism generates livelihoods through murals, performances, and online platforms, though irregular pay, limited funding, and poor infrastructure hinder long-term economic security.	“That one job created five more. It is how I survive now.” (Kisumu FGD)
Counter-Narratives & Smear Campaigns	Artists face misrepresentation and smear campaigns portraying them as radicals, vandals, or political agitators, which undermines public trust and support.	“Artists are often portrayed as rabble-rousers and troublemakers.” (Nairobi FGD)

6. Challenges and Policy Gaps

Despite its vitality, activism faces persistent barriers:

1. **Institutional Marginalisation** Activism is absent from formal education, governance, and development planning. Artists lack structured entry points into county budgets or national cultural strategies and programs.
2. **Economic and Digital Constraints** Opportunities are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural creatives without mentorship, studios, or equipment. High data costs and poor connectivity reinforce exclusion.
3. **State Repression** Censorship, surveillance, and arrests under laws such as the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act 2018 intimidate activists and curtail freedom of expression, violating constitutional rights.
4. **Cultural Resistance** Generational divides and cultural conservatism often frame activists as "jobless youth" or radicals, undermining their legitimacy in public discourse.



ART

7. Policy Recommendations

Unlocking activism's potential requires coordinated action across government, civil society, and development partners.

National and County Government

- ✦ **Formal Recognition:** Integrate activism into County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), youth programs, and civic education frameworks.
- ✦ **Legal Protection:** Review restrictive laws to prevent misuse against artists. Establish county-level legal aid desks and reporting channels for activists facing harassment.
- ✦ **Digital Inclusion:** Expand affordable internet, community Wi-Fi hubs, and digital literacy training to bridge the rural-urban divide.
- ✦ **Public Investment:** Create structured public funding streams, art hubs, and incubators to support the sector and sustain livelihoods.



Development Partners and Donors

- ✦ Provide sustained, flexible funding for grassroots-led initiatives.
- ✦ Support creative innovation through podcasts, virtual exhibitions, interactive apps, and community radio.
- ✦ Back inclusive grant-making that prioritizes women, PWDs, and rural activists.

8. Conclusion

Artivism is far more than entertainment. It is a tool for change, a mode of civic education, an engine of livelihoods, and a driver of democratic accountability. Kenyan artists have repeatedly proven their ability to connect citizens with policy debates, pressure decision-makers, and foster cultural and social change.

Yet their potential remains constrained by digital divides, economic precarity, state repression, and lack of institutional recognition. Unlocking this potential requires bold policy action: integrating artivism into county and national frameworks, protecting creative freedoms, bridging digital gaps, and investing in sustainable livelihoods.

If these steps are taken, Kenya's vibrant artist movement can serve as a cornerstone of inclusive development, ensuring that creativity remains a powerful force for justice, accountability, and social change.

