



RESEARCH REPORT

THE **ROLE OF ARTIVISM** IN ADVANCING
SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL
DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA

PAWA254
Art Rising!



RESEARCH REPORT ON THE ROLE OF ARTIVISM IN
ADVANCING SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL
DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA

Message from the Executive Director



For over 15 years, at PAWA254, we believed that art is more than creativity; it is courage, it is voice, and it is action. This study was born out of a simple but powerful conviction: that the stories, struggles, and expressions of artists in Kenya deserve to be heard, respected, and recognized as part of our country's journey of transformation.

As I reflect on the process that led to this report, I am humbled by the generosity of the artists, development partners, government officials, Civil Society Organizations and communities who gave their time and opened their hearts to us. You reminded us that activism is not just about resistance; it is about reimagining what is possible for our society, socially, economically, culturally, and politically.

To every artist who shared their voice, know that this report is your mirror. It reflects your resilience, your brilliance, and your determination to shape a better Kenya. To our partners and supporters, thank you for walking alongside us and for believing in the vision of a creative sector that is not only vibrant but also just and inclusive.

May this report serve as both recognition of what activism has achieved and a call to action for what we can still do together. The journey continues, and I am hopeful because of the incredible community that makes this work possible.

Njeri Mwangi
Executive Director, PAWA 254



Acknowledgement

This study is the result of the collective efforts of many people who generously shared their time, energy, and wisdom.

We begin by thanking the incredible team at PAWA 254, led with vision and passion by Ms. Njeri Mwangi, Executive Director. Your commitment to nurturing spaces where art and activism thrive gave life to this research and carried it from an idea to reality.

To our artists, we are deeply grateful. You opened your hearts and unreservedly shared your stories, struggles, and triumphs. Your creativity and courage are the soul of this report, reminding us that art is not just expression, but power, resilience, and a tool for change. We also thank our partners in the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) who walked alongside us. Your trust, networks, and solidarity made it possible to reach communities, amplify diverse voices, and ground this study in lived realities.

Our appreciation extends to the county and national government officials who engaged with us openly and honestly. Your perspectives helped us see both the opportunities and challenges of integrating activism into governance and development processes.

A special word of thanks goes to the consultants, who approached the work with professionalism, patience, and care, ensuring that the voices of participants were heard and documented with integrity.

Finally, to all the stakeholders and participants who joined the conversations, attended the validation meeting, and shared their feedback, we say thank you. This report carries your fingerprints. It is not just a study, but a collective vision shaped by many hands and voices.

Dedication

This report is dedicated to the artists and communities whose creativity, courage, and resilience continue to inspire change and shape the future of Kenya.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full meaning
CIDPs	County Integrated Development Plans
CBOs	Community-Based Organizations
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DAG	Directed Acyclic Graph
FGD	Focus Group discussion
GBV	Gender- Based Violence
KFCB	Kenya Film and Classification Board
KII	Key Informant Interview
KNCHR	Kenya National Commission on Human Rights
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer, Intersex,+
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
NGO	Non-Government Organization
PWD	Persons with Disability

Executive Summary

This report evaluates the role of activism, the intersection of art and activism in driving socio-economic and political transformation in Kenya. Using a qualitative, results-based monitoring and evaluation framework, the study explores how creative expression advances civic engagement, accountability, and social justice.

Rooted in anti-colonial resistance, activism in Kenya has evolved through diverse forms such as music, graffiti, theatre, poetry, fashion, and digital storytelling. Artists use these platforms to spotlight issues including poor governance, corruption, human rights violations, gender-based violence, environmental degradation, and electoral justice. Digital media has amplified their reach and influence, although barriers such as high internet costs and limited rural connectivity persist.

The study found that activism in Kenya serves as a dynamic vehicle for civic engagement, political advocacy, and social transformation. Through creative media such as music, theatre, graffiti, poetry, and digital storytelling, artists communicate complex governance issues in relatable ways, fostering public accountability and civic participation. Activism has expanded democratic spaces by engaging marginalized groups including women, youth, and persons with disabilities though systemic barriers such as gender bias, censorship, and inadequate institutional support persist. Digital innovation has enhanced activism's visibility and reach, enabling viral campaigns that influence public discourse and policymaking. However, digital exclusion and high internet costs continue to limit participation, particularly among rural communities.

The study also revealed that activism faces cultural resistance in conservative contexts, where it is often dismissed as subversive or unproductive. Despite these challenges, emerging opportunities lie in integrating activism into civic education, policy communication, and youth engagement programs. Best practices identified include participatory and community-based art, multi-sectoral partnerships between CSOs and government, and institutional recognition of activism through policy and funding frameworks. These findings affirm activism's growing role as both a mirror reflecting societal realities and a mobilizer catalyzing collective action for inclusive governance and social justice in Kenya. Additionally, Activism in Kenya drives socio-economic transformation by generating employment, promoting cultural industries, and advancing creative entrepreneurship while fostering civic participation, social cohesion, and inclusive community empowerment



To strengthen activism as a legitimate pillar of democratic development, the report recommends:



01

Integrate activism into policy frameworks at national and county levels, including civic education, youth empowerment, and CIDPs, to legitimize creative civic engagement and unlock funding and partnerships.

02

Expand digital access and skills in rural and informal areas through public Wi-Fi, affordable data, zero-rated platforms, and digital training to broaden participation beyond urban centers.

03

Protect artistic freedom by reviewing restrictive laws like the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018) and Public Order Act, and establish legal aid and safe reporting mechanisms for artists facing intimidation.

04

Support inclusive creative spaces, including community theatres, open venues, and cultural festivals, ensuring accessibility for women, youth, persons with disabilities, and rural creatives.

05

Foster participatory engagement and impact measurement by creating platforms for artists in public dialogue and decision-making, and developing simple tools to track their influence on awareness, attitudes, and policy

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction of the Study

Artivism, the strategic fusion of art and activism, has emerged as a powerful force for civic expression, resistance, and socio-political engagement in Kenya. Rooted in Kenya's rich traditions of oral poetry, protest music, storytelling, and visual symbolism, artivism has evolved into a dynamic ecosystem of expression. From theatre to murals, spoken word to satire, digital campaigns to fashion statements, Kenyan creatives are not only narrating the national experience, but they are also shaping it. Today, platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have enabled activists to mobilise mass audiences, catalyse civic action, and influence policy discourses in real time.

This study was commissioned to evaluate the role of artivism in advancing socio-economic and political transformation in Kenya to generate evidence to inform policy, resource allocation and programmatic strategy. Framed within a results-based M&E approach, the study draws on literature, field data and stakeholder insights to examine both the impact and potential of artivism as a development tool.

In a rapidly evolving civic landscape, understanding how artivism functions and how it can be strengthened is critical. This report speaks to a broad coalition of stakeholders: policymakers, civil society actors, activists, donors and development partners and creative practitioners.



This research aimed to assess the effectiveness, challenges and untapped potential of activism in Kenya's development journey. Specifically, it aims to:

- i. Evaluate how activism has shaped governance structures, influenced policy making, and expanded democratic spaces;
- ii. Identify socio-economic outcomes of activist interventions, including shifts in public awareness, inclusion, and community mobilisation;
- iii. Examine structural and societal barriers to creative civic expression, including censorship, inadequate funding, and public misperceptions;
- iv. Explore emerging opportunities to strengthen activism, particularly through digital innovation, youth engagement, and multi-sectoral partnerships, and
- v. Generate evidence-based, actionable recommendations for institutionalising and scaling activism as a recognised vehicle for social transformation.

1.1 Context and Situation Analysis: Activism in Kenya

Activism, the fusion of art and activism has become an influential medium for civic participation and social transformation in Kenya. Emerging from the anti-colonial resistance era, it has evolved into diverse contemporary forms such as spoken word, graffiti, music, and digital storytelling that challenge power, expose inequality, and promote justice.¹ Kenyan artists have used creative expression to address governance failures, corruption, gender-based violence, and human rights abuses, often giving voice to communities excluded from mainstream political processes.²

Legally, Kenya's Constitution (2010) provides a progressive foundation for artistic freedom. It guarantees freedom of expression (Article 33), freedom of the media (Article 34), and cultural rights (Article 44), affirming art as a protected form of democratic engagement.³ Yet, state practices sometimes contradict these provisions. The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018) and Public Order Act (Cap. 56) have, at times, been invoked to suppress critical artistic expression, raising concerns over shrinking civic space and the securitization of dissent.⁴

Digital technology has revolutionized activism's reach and influence. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram have enabled youth-led movements like #MyDressMyChoice and #EndPoliceBrutalityKE to mobilize citizens, shape public opinion, and influence policy debates.⁵ Despite this progress, structural inequalities including limited access to funding, mentorship, and digital infrastructure continue to hinder activists in rural and marginalized regions.⁶

1.2 Approaches and Methodology



This study employed a qualitative design, beginning with the analysis of existing policies and reports to establish a conceptual framework focused on activism's historical evolution, mediums, institutional trends, and impact. This framework then guided fieldwork consisting of 18 Key Informant Interviews (KIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) across seven Kenyan counties. The sites Nairobi, Kisumu, Mombasa, Nakuru, Uasin Gishu, Embu, and Turkana were selected to capture Kenya's regional and socio-economic diversity, including urban activism hubs, cultural highlands, and marginalized northern communities. Participants included activism practitioners, artists, activists, and representatives from CSOs, CBOs, NGOs, and the government, both at the national and county levels.

Data collection tools were designed to explore activism's role, challenges and opportunities in public and political spheres. Sessions were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and analysed using Dedoose software. Thematic analysis involved both deductive and inductive coding with themes refined iteratively to capture regional and participant-specific insights, ensuring systematic and grounded findings.



Transcripts were coded and thematically analysed from data familiarization to report production. Pre-made tools guided the process, with emerging themes validated through participant quotes to enhance credibility. This approach ensured a rigorous, nuanced understanding of activism's impact, reflecting diverse experiences while maintaining methodological consistency.

Dedoose was used to methodically organize and track all coding decisions, and a structured codebook was consistently applied during thematic coding to achieve reliability. Triangulating data from several participant groups and geographical locations allowed for the recording and comparison of a variety of viewpoints, ensuring validity. Furthermore, by establishing themes in the participants' actual experiences, the inclusion of exact quotes enhanced the trustworthiness.



1.2.1 Recruitment of Participants in the Survey

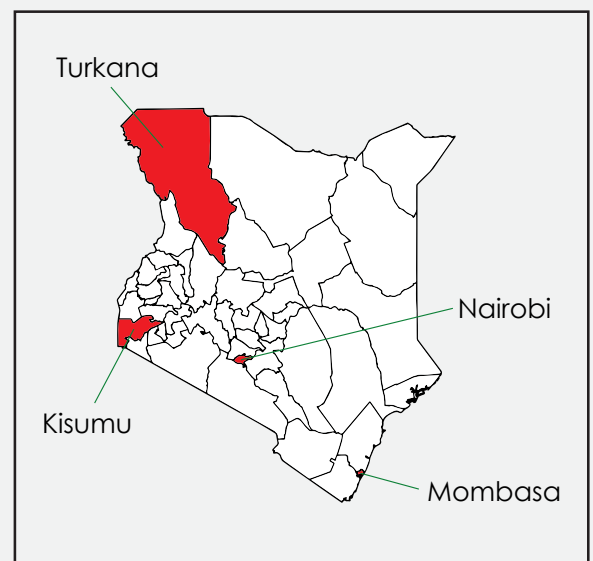
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Kisumu (n=10), Nairobi (n=6), Mombasa (n=8), and Turkana (n=10). Each group comprised primarily of artists and community-based CSO representatives, with sizes ranging from 6 to 10 participants per FGD.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were held with government officials (n=9), CSO leaders (n=5), and one senior artist (n=1) to capture both institutional and practitioner perspectives.

Overall, the sample consisted of artists (n=28), CSO representatives (n=12), and government officials (n=9), totalling N=49 participants. The gender distribution was 29 male and 20 female, including five persons with disabilities (3 male, 2 female).

1.2.2. Scope and Delimitation

This study focused on examining the role of activism in advancing socio-economic and political transformation in Kenya. It covered selected counties; Nairobi, Kisumu, Mombasa, and Turkana to capture diverse regional, cultural, and socio-political contexts. The study targeted artists, community-based CSOs, and government officials involved in civic engagement, advocacy, and cultural expression. It was limited to qualitative data collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).



1.2.3 Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure the safety, dignity, and confidentiality of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant after clearly explaining the purpose, process, and voluntary nature of the study. Anonymity was maintained by omitting personal identifiers in all records and reports. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Sensitive topics, particularly those related to political expression and digital surveillance, were handled with discretion and respect. Data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes, ensuring compliance with ethical research principles.

1.2.4 Key Concept and Definition



Artivism

Artivism refers to the strategic fusion of art and activism, where creative expression is used as a tool for social and political engagement, awareness creation, and transformation in society.⁷

Activism

Activism is the process of mobilizing people and resources to challenge injustice, influence public policy, or promote reform through organized social, political, or cultural action.⁸

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement involves individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern, promoting participation in governance and community development.⁹

Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion ensures equitable access to digital technologies, skills, and internet connectivity, enabling participation in online spaces for learning, creativity, and advocacy.¹⁰



CHAPTER TWO

2.0. Conceptual and Historical Context

2.1. Global Evolution of Artivism

Artivism is not a new phenomenon. Its roots can be traced to global resistance movements that used art as a means of political defiance. In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement used protest songs and photography to catalyse racial justice¹¹. In Latin America, Chilean arpilleras and theatre under military rule documented state violence and preserved memory¹². In Eastern Europe, graffiti and rock music were central to the Velvet Revolution¹³.

The evolution of artivism from analogue to digital spaces has expanded its reach and redefined its modalities. Today, social media platforms serve as new civic arenas allowing artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers, build movements across borders, and shape discourse in real time. However, this expansion also introduces risks such as algorithmic exclusion, digital surveillance, and performative "clicktivism" which must be acknowledged and evaluated.

2.2. Development of Artivism in Kenya

Artivism in Kenya is deeply rooted in the country's socio-political history, serving as a cultural tradition and a tool of resistance against oppressive structures. From the independence era protest music and theatre to contemporary graffiti, digital storytelling, and spoken word, Kenyan artists have continuously pushed the boundaries of civic discourse. Artivism in Kenya

has emerged not only as a form of resistance and critique but also as a tool for education, mobilisation, and policy engagement.

Kenya's activist landscape has evolved through four key historical phases. Each influenced by political transitions, civic space, and cultural expression.



PERIOD	CHARACTERISTICS	OUTCOME
PRE-INDEPENDENCE (BEFORE 1963)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Oral poetry, music, and symbolism used to mobilise resistance during the anti-colonial struggle. -The Mau Mau's use of mūthuũre songs is a prime example. 	Unified political rebellion hence eventual independence.
POST-INDEPENDENCE (1963-1990)	-Artistic repression under authoritarian rule. Banned theatre (Ngaahika Ndeenda), underground music (Benga), and community centres (e.g., Kamĩĩĩthũ).	Limited civic space and under-documented impact due to censorship.
DEMOCRATIC OPENING (1990-2010)	-Emergence of protest music, satire, public murals, and institutional collectives (e.g., PAWA254, The Nest Collective).	Growth in public dialogue and civic expression.
DIGITAL AGE (2010-PRESENT)	-Integration of memes, livestreams, digital storytelling, and social media campaigns (e.g., #MyDressMyChoice, Maandamano2024).	Rapid mobilisation, global reach, and measurable digital engagement. However, impact attribution remains complex.

Table 1: Historical Trajectory of Activism in Kenya



2.3. The Legal Context for Artivism

Artivism in Kenya operates within a multifaceted legal landscape that simultaneously empowers and restricts creative expression. This framework spans local and global dimensions, where national laws, constitutional rights, and international conventions collectively shape how artists engage in civic advocacy, challenge power structures, and promote social change.

2.3.1 Legal Landscape framework on Artivism in Kenya

2.3.1.1 Constitution of Kenya (2010)

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) provides a solid foundation for artivism by protecting key freedoms that enable creative civic engagement. Article 33 guarantees freedom of expression and artistic creativity, while Articles 31 and 32 secure freedoms of association, assembly, and conscience—vital for collaborative artivism. Article 35 ensures access to information for informed advocacy, and Article 11 recognizes culture as central to national identity, mandating state support for the arts. However, the main challenge lies in the inconsistent enforcement of these rights, as restrictive laws, censorship, and intimidation of artists often undermine constitutional guarantees and limit the full realization of artistic freedom.

2.3.1.2 Public Order Act (Cap. 56, 1997)

The **Public Order Act (Cap. 56, 1997)** regulates public gatherings by requiring prior police notification or permits for assemblies, processions, and public displays—including street performances and art-based protests. While the law aims to maintain public order and safety, its restrictive application often limits spontaneous or grassroots artivism. Authorities' narrow or inconsistent interpretation of the Act has, at times, led to the suppression of creative expression and peaceful artistic demonstrations, undermining constitutional freedoms under Article 33 and 37 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010).

2.3.1.3 Copyright Act (Cap. 130, 2001)

The **Copyright Act (Cap. 130, 2001)** provides the legal framework for protecting intellectual property rights in Kenya, granting creators exclusive rights over their artistic, musical, literary, and audiovisual works. It empowers artists to control reproduction, distribution, and commercialization of their creations, ensuring fair compensation and recognition. However, gaps remain in enforcement and awareness—many artists lack knowledge of copyright procedures or access to legal support, leading to exploitation and loss of revenue, particularly in the digital space. Strengthening institutional capacity and public education is essential to fully realize the Act's protective intent.

2.3.1.4 National Cohesion and Integration Act (No. 12 of 2008)

The **National Cohesion and Integration Act (No. 12 of 2008)** promote national unity and prohibits discrimination and hate speech in Kenya. For activists, it provides a legal safeguard against divisive or inflammatory expression, encouraging responsible artistic engagement that fosters social harmony and mutual respect. However, its broad interpretation of hate speech has sometimes been used to restrict legitimate political or critical art, creating tension between maintaining cohesion and protecting freedom of expression under Article 33 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010). Clearer guidelines are needed to balance these objectives.

2.3.1.5 Access to Information Act (No. 31 of 2016)

The Access to Information Act (No. 31 of 2016) operationalizes Article 35 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) by granting every citizen the right to access information held by public bodies and private entities that impact the public interest. For activists, it enables evidence-based advocacy and informed creative expression, allowing them to expose social injustices, corruption, and governance failures. However, implementation gaps persist due to bureaucratic delays, limited public awareness, and institutional resistance, which hinder transparency and constrain activists' ability to produce fact-based, accountable art.

2.3.1.6 Public Benefit Organizations (PBO) Act, 2013

The **Public Benefit Organizations (PBO) Act, 2013** provides a framework for registering and regulating non-profits in Kenya, recognizing the right to form organizations that promote public interests through art, culture, and advocacy. For activists, it offers legal legitimacy and access to funding and partnerships. However, delayed implementation and bureaucratic barriers have limited its impact, forcing many creative groups to operate informally. Full enforcement of the Act would enhance the institutional and financial foundation for activism in Kenya.

Others include, National Urban Development Policy (NUDP) 2016, ICT and Digital Economy Master Plan (2022–2032), National Film Policy (2016), NGO Coordination Act (Cap. 19, 1990), Kenya Film and Classification Board (KFCB) Regulations, **Museums and Heritage Act (No. 6 of 2006)**

2.3.2 Global Legal Framework

2.3.2.1 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) establishes the global foundation for freedom of expression and creativity. Article 19 guarantees everyone the right to hold opinions and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and form of expression. This principle legitimizes activism as a form of human rights advocacy and civic participation. Additionally, Article 27 recognizes the right to freely participate in cultural life and enjoy the arts, reinforcing the protection of artistic expression. Together, these provisions affirm that art and activism are integral to human dignity, dialogue, and democratic engagement.

2.3.2.2 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966)

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) provides a binding international framework protecting freedoms essential to activism. Article 19 safeguards the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to create and share artistic works without censorship. Articles 21 and 22 protect the rights to peaceful assembly and association, enabling artists and activists to organize, collaborate, and advocate for social change. Collectively, these provisions affirm that artistic expression is a legitimate form of civic participation, and any state restrictions must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate to a legitimate public interest.



2.4. Context Analysis of Artivism

2.4.1. How Artivism has shaped governance structures, influenced policy making, and expanded democratic spaces

Artivism has increasingly become a transformative force in reshaping governance structures by promoting accountability, transparency, and citizen participation. Through visual art, music, theatre, and digital media, artists have challenged corruption, authoritarianism, and social exclusion, thereby strengthening democratic governance. In Kenya, movements such as PAWA 254 and The Nest Collective have used creative expression to critique state power, mobilize civic engagement, and encourage inclusive governance practices.¹⁴ These initiatives demonstrate how art can serve as both a mirror and a mobilizer in governance reform.

In policy influence, artists have used creative campaigns to frame social and political issues in compelling, human-centered ways that drive public discourse and institutional response. Globally, examples such as Banksy's political murals and Ai Weiwei's installations have pressured governments to respond to human rights violations and social inequities.¹⁵ In Kenya, art-based advocacy around gender equality, environmental protection, and electoral justice has influenced legislative debates and policy priorities, particularly by translating complex issues into relatable narratives that resonate with the public and policymakers alike.¹⁶

Artivism has expanded democratic spaces by reclaiming public forums for expression and civic dialogue. Street art, community theatre, and digital storytelling have provided marginalized groups especially youth and women with alternative avenues to voice their concerns and participate in governance processes. This has democratized communication beyond traditional political institutions, fostering a culture of dialogue and accountability.¹⁷ By turning creativity into civic agency, artivism not only critiques governance systems but also co-creates pathways for social transformation.

2.4.2 Identify socio-economic outcomes of activist interventions, including shifts in public awareness, inclusion, and community mobilisation

Artist interventions have generated significant socio-economic outcomes by shifting public awareness, fostering inclusion, and driving collective community action. Through visual art, spoken word, music, and digital campaigns, artists have raised consciousness around social injustices such as inequality, corruption, and gender-based violence, translating abstract policy issues into relatable narratives that engage wider audiences.¹⁸ This has expanded civic literacy and encouraged citizens to demand accountability and equitable governance.

14 Wanjiru, C., & Khamasi, J. (2021). Artivism and Civic Engagement in Kenya: Creative Pathways to Accountability.

15 Duncombe, S., & Lambert, S. (2018). The Art of Activism: Your All-Purpose Guide to Making the Impossible Possible

16 Mutua, M. (2020). Cultural Activism and Policy Influence in Contemporary Kenya

17 Bishop, C. (2012). Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship

18 Duncombe, S., & Lambert, S. (2018). The Art of Activism: Your All-Purpose Guide to Making the Impossible Possible. New York

In terms of social inclusion, activism has amplified marginalized voices particularly those of youth, women, and persons with disabilities by creating platforms for participation and representation in public discourse.¹⁹ Community-based art projects have provided spaces for dialogue and healing, breaking social barriers and promoting cohesion across ethnic, gender, and class divides. In Kenya, initiatives like Slum Film Festival and PAWA 254's community murals have integrated excluded communities into conversations on urban justice and sustainable development.²⁰

Activism has catalysed community mobilization by transforming creative expression into collective action. Public performances, street murals, and online art campaigns have inspired grassroots organizing, advocacy movements, and volunteerism around social causes.²¹ These actions not only enhance community solidarity but also contribute to local economic empowerment through cultural entrepreneurship, creative industries, and social innovation. Thus, activism functions as both a social movement and an economic catalyst, bridging creativity with civic transformation.

Activism in Kenya contributes significantly to socio-economic transformation by creating employment opportunities, promoting cultural industries, and stimulating creative entrepreneurship. It raises public awareness on governance, social justice, and equity issues, fostering civic participation and accountability. Moreover, by engaging marginalized communities, activism drives social cohesion, empowerment, and inclusive development.²²

2.4.3 Structural and societal barriers to creative civic expression, including censorship, inadequate funding, and public misperceptions;

Activism in Kenya and globally faces multiple structural and societal barriers that limit its potential as a tool for civic engagement and governance transformation. One major obstacle is censorship and restrictive regulation, where state authorities often invoke public order or morality laws to suppress politically sensitive art, protests, or performances.²³ Creative expression that critiques government actions or exposes corruption is frequently subjected to intimidation, license revocation, or arbitrary arrests, constraining artistic freedom and dissent.

Another key barrier is inadequate funding and institutional support for the creative sector. Many artists and cultural organizations lack sustainable financing, relying on inconsistent donor aid or self-funding.²⁴ The absence of public grants and limited private investment in arts infrastructure hinder the scalability and continuity of social impact projects. This economic fragility discourages long-term engagement in civic-oriented art, especially among youth and grassroots groups.

19 Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*

20 Wanjiru, C., & Khamasi, J. (2021). *Activism and Civic Engagement in Kenya*

21 Holmes, B., Krøijer, S., & Thompson, N. (2013). *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*

22 Ndunda, J., & Mwangi, W. (2022). *Activism and Social Change in Kenya: Exploring the Intersection of Art, Activism, and Governance*. Nairobi: African Research and Policy Institute.

23 Article 19. (2020). *Freedom of Expression and Artistic Creativity in Kenya*

Public misperceptions and societal conservatism undermine the legitimacy of activism as a form of civic participation. Artistic protest is often dismissed as disruptive or unpatriotic, while artists challenging entrenched norms especially around gender, sexuality, or governance face stigmatization and social backlash.²⁵ These attitudes reflect broader cultural resistance to alternative voices, limiting inclusive dialogue and the transformative capacity of creative expression in democratic life.

2.4.4 Emerging opportunities to strengthen activism, particularly through digital innovation, youth engagement, and multi-sectoral partnerships

Despite persistent structural barriers, several emerging opportunities are transforming and strengthening the activism landscape in Kenya and globally.

Digital innovation has opened unprecedented avenues for creative civic expression through social media, podcasts, and online exhibitions. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) allow artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers, mobilize audiences instantly, and document social injustices in real time.²⁶ These digital tools have democratized access to civic participation, amplifying marginalized voices and expanding the reach of activism beyond physical spaces.



Youth engagement represents another powerful driver of activism's growth. With Kenya's youth comprising over 70% of the population, young artists are increasingly using music, street murals, spoken word, and digital storytelling to challenge inequality and promote accountability.²⁷ This generational shift reflects a dynamic form of civic innovation where creativity becomes both livelihood and political agency nurturing a culture of participation and critical consciousness.

Multi-sectoral partnerships between activists, civil society organizations, private sector actors, and government institutions offer scalable opportunities for sustainable impact.²⁸ Collaborations in civic education, environmental campaigns, and social inclusion programs have shown that integrating artistic expression into policy and development initiatives enhances public engagement and communication effectiveness. Strengthening such partnerships can institutionalize activism as a legitimate and strategic pillar of democratic governance.

24 UNESCO. (2018). Re | Shaping Cultural Policies: Advancing Creativity for Development

25 Wanjiru, C., & Khamasi, J. (2021). Artivism and Civic Engagement in Kenya

26 UNESCO. (2023). Culture and Digitalization: Reshaping Creative Economies for Inclusive Growth

27 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2021). Youth and Civic Innovation in Africa: Amplifying Voices through Creative Expression

2.5. Emerging Trends in Kenyan Artivism

Following the historical contextualisation of artivism in Kenya emerging trends point to a rapidly evolving landscape. These developments reflect broader shifts in Kenya's socio-political context, technological capacity, and civic consciousness. This section identifies and examines four notable trends each of which reshapes how artivism is expressed, interpreted, and evaluated in the country today.

2.5.1 Digitalisation of Dissent

The digitalisation of dissent represents a profound transformation in how resistance is conceptualised and disseminated. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly twitter) have become core arenas for creative mobilisation, enabling artivists to produce and share content with unprecedented speed and scale. These platforms decentralise activism allowing grassroots actors especially youth to amplify their voices without reliance on traditional media gatekeepers.

Digital artivism also accommodates new artistic forms including memes, livestreams, virtual exhibitions, and AI-generated satire. These not only capture attention but foster real-time dialogue expanding civic space in digital spheres. However, this digital shift also presents new vulnerabilities, including algorithmic censorship, digital surveillance and disparities in digital access.²⁹



2.5.2 Intersectionality of Causes

A key trend among contemporary Kenyan artivists is the deliberate embrace of intersectionality in campaign design and thematic focus. Rather than adopting siloed approaches many campaigns link multiple issues such as linking gender justice with climate change or economic exclusion with state violence. For example, murals by PAWA254 have simultaneously depicted themes of police brutality and economic inequality, creating layered narratives that resonate across constituencies.³⁰

28 African Union Commission. (2022). Continental Framework on Culture and Creative Industries for Sustainable Development

29 Kolečková, B. (2024). Artivism in Kenya: Bridging the gap between people and policy makers (Master's thesis, Lund University, Master of Science in International Development and Management). Lund University Publications

30 PAWA254. (n.d.). Programs and Initiatives. Retrieved from <https://pawa254.org/>

This intersectional praxis broadens the impact and reaches of campaigns, facilitating coalition building across diverse movements. However, from a Monitoring and Evaluation lens, intersectionality introduces challenges related to attribution. Determining which outcomes derive from which component of a multifaceted campaign requires refined and adaptive evaluation tools that go beyond traditional linear models.

2.5.3 Institutionalisation of Activism

The growing support for activism from international donors, NGOs, and development agencies has led to its partial institutionalisation. On one hand, this provides essential resources, capacity-building and exposure. On the other, it raises critical questions about autonomy, co-optation, and alignment with donor expectations. For instance, projects may increasingly prioritise quantifiable outputs over community-rooted processes potentially diluting the radical and organic nature of activism.³¹

Institutionalisation presents a classic tension between scalability and authenticity. Whereas donor support facilitates formalisation, it may also impose bureaucratic requirements that inhibit creativity or compromise responsiveness. M&E frameworks in such contexts must balance accountability with cultural sensitivity, and be co-designed with activists to ensure relevance.

2.5.4. Evolving Monitoring and Evaluation Practices

One of the most noteworthy developments in Kenyan activism is the gradual shift from symbolic impact to systems-level change accompanied by increasingly sophisticated M&E methodologies. Traditionally, activism was measured through anecdotal evidence or audience engagement. Today, hybrid models are being adopted that combine qualitative narratives with quantitative indicators.³²

For example, in gender-based violence (GBV) advocacy, art interventions have been tracked alongside hotline reporting data to observe correlations in public responsiveness. However, challenges persist in demonstrating causality between activist outputs and legal or institutional reforms. Furthermore, digital activism complicates longitudinal tracking due to the short-lived nature of online content.

To address these gaps, some collectives are experimenting with participatory M&E frameworks that involve activists in designing their own impact metrics. These include storytelling impact diaries, community feedback loops, and outcome harvesting techniques that capture unexpected effects and ripple impacts.

31 Musila, G. M. (2019). Art, activism and the quest for justice in Kenya. In M. M. Koster & M. de Theije (Eds.), *Anthropology and the politics of representation* (pp. 145–162). Palgrave Macmillan.

32 Ndung'u, D. (2021). Activism and gender justice in Kenya: Creative resistance and feminist futures. *African Studies Review*, 64(3), 512–530. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.45>

CHAPTER THREE

3.0. Insights from KIIs and FGDs

The insight present summarizes the key patterns and insights that emerged from the qualitative analysis of activism in Kenya.

Theme	Key Issues / Findings	Proposed Solutions
1. Population Understanding on Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Activism uses creative forms like music, drama, graffiti, and poetry to express dissent.• It provokes discomfort to challenge societal norms and inspire social change.• Activism advances citizens' rights through voluntary engagement in theatre, debates, digital media, and writing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mainstream activism as a civic education tool.• Support art-based training to enhance social consciousness.
2. Civic Engagement and Political Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Activism dramatizes issues (e.g., corruption, elections, finance bills) to drive public accountability.• It simplifies complex governance issues using creative storytelling and digital media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Integrate creative civic education into policy communication.• Use community theatre and digital platforms for participatory governance.
3. Inclusion and Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gender bias excludes talented girls due to limited access and networks.• Unsafe and male-dominated digital art spaces for women.• Tokenism, mockery, and stereotyping affect women and rural-based youth.• PWDs lack interpreters, accessible venues, and inclusion in performances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure inclusive participation of women, PWDs, and minorities.• Provide sign interpreters and accessible performance venues.• Promote grassroots performances and digital inclusion.• Establish safe and gender-sensitive digital spaces.

Theme	Key Issues / Findings	Proposed Solutions
4. Digital Technology and Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital art transforms graffiti and creative works into viral online activism influencing policymakers. • Limited access to digital tools for rural youth and low-income communities. • High internet cost limits reach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support digital literacy and low-cost access programs. • Use offline sharing (e.g., Bluetooth) to reach rural audiences. • Encourage youth-led digital art campaigns.
5. Institutional Support and Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artists depend on CSO support due to lack of government backing. • No structured funding or county policy for activism. • Censorship, bureaucracy, and police interference hinder creative expression. • Limited public performance spaces and monitoring by state actors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalize activism in county and national policies. • Allocate budgets and provide safe civic spaces for expression. • Strengthen partnerships between CSOs and government.
6. Cultural Framing and Public Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elders view artists as idle; youth see them as change-makers. • Cultural conservatism in rural areas resists urban art forms like graffiti and hip-hop. • Locally relevant themes (education, drought) increase acceptance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote culturally grounded activism. • Encourage intergenerational dialogue and rural art outreach.
7. Opportunities for Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of institutional structures for youth art participation. • Absence of artist recognition in formal education and policy spaces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate art-based civic education into school curricula. • Establish County youth art councils. • Register artist groups as CBOs to access funding and tenders. • Develop school and community art collaborations.

- “Through theatre or graffiti, we show what the system ignores: hunger, corruption, bad leadership.” –Mombasa KII003
- “Sometimes our videos are picked up by blogs and TV stations. Suddenly, MPs are talking about what we said in a rap song.” – Kisumu FGD009
- “In Turkana, we used storytelling and songs in the local language to push for water access. The MCA came to the show. Later, he called a baraza.” – Turkana FGD008
- “Even when women are allowed to perform, it’s always as background dancers or singers, not as leaders or writers.” – Nairobi FGD007
- “My spoken word piece on femicide was reposted by an NGO in Canada. That’s when I realized the global power of our voices.” – Nairobi KII002
- “Our group just produced an animation series on climate change in Sheng. It’s reaching kids and teens better than workshops.” – Nairobi FGD007



Insights from the KIIs and FGDs reveal that activism in Kenya is a powerful tool for civic engagement and social transformation, effectively translating complex governance issues into relatable creative expressions. Activists use music, theatre, graffiti, and digital media to inspire public accountability and advocacy, though challenges such as gender bias, digital exclusion, limited institutional support, and cultural conservatism persist. Despite these barriers, opportunities exist to mainstream activism in civic education, policy communication, and youth empowerment programs, while promoting inclusivity, digital access, and stronger institutional recognition to enhance activism’s role in advancing democratic participation and social justice.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0. Recommendations and Strategic Interventions

Integrate Artivism into Policy and Governance Frameworks:

Institutionalize artivism within national and county development plans, including civic education, youth empowerment, and cultural policy frameworks. Recognizing artivism as a legitimate civic engagement tool will enhance policy participation, unlock funding, and align creative expression with governance and social transformation goals.



Enhance Digital Inclusion and Infrastructure for Creative Expression:

Invest in affordable internet access, public Wi-Fi, and digital literacy especially in rural and marginalized areas to expand equitable participation. Strengthening digital spaces ensures that artists can effectively use online platforms for civic dialogue, mobilization, and advocacy.

Strengthen Legal and Institutional Protection for Artistic Freedom: Review and harmonize laws such as the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act and the Public Order Act to prevent censorship and harassment of artists. Establish legal aid and protection mechanisms to safeguard freedom of expression and encourage responsible creative activism.

Promote Safe, Inclusive, and Accessible Creative Spaces: Support the creation and maintenance of public venues such as community theatres, art centers, and cultural festivals that are safe and accessible to women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Such inclusive spaces encourage collaboration, participation, and innovation in civic art.

Institutionalize Artivism Monitoring, Evaluation, and Capacity Development: Develop participatory tools to track the social, civic, and economic impact of artist initiatives. Strengthen artists' skills in advocacy, communication, and project management through training and mentorship programs to ensure sustainability and evidence-based policy influence.

CONCLUSION

5.0. Insight and Next Steps for Stakeholders

5.1. Summary of the Key Insight

The study revealed that activism in Kenya functions as a powerful medium for civic engagement, political advocacy, and social transformation, using creative forms such as music, graffiti, theatre, poetry, and digital storytelling to communicate governance issues in relatable ways. Activists have expanded democratic participation by amplifying marginalized voices—particularly women, youth, and persons with disabilities while promoting public accountability and social consciousness. However, challenges persist, including gender bias, censorship, limited institutional support, and digital exclusion that restricts the reach and inclusivity of creative activism.

Despite these obstacles, activism presents growing opportunities for policy engagement and civic innovation. Digital platforms have increased visibility and influence, enabling artists to shape public discourse and mobilize communities around governance and social justice issues. The findings highlight the need for supportive policy frameworks, inclusive creative spaces, affordable digital access, and protection of artistic freedom to sustain activism as a catalyst for inclusive governance, civic participation, and cultural transformation in Kenya.



5.2. Next Step

PAWA 254- Programmatic Interventions

- **Institutionalizing partnerships with national and county governments** to integrate creative civic engagement into policy, civic education, and youth empowerment programs. This can include collaboration in County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) and national culture strategies to position activism as a legitimate tool for public participation.
- **Expand and strengthen its digital empowerment initiatives** by providing targeted training, mentorship, and infrastructure support to rural and marginalized artists, thereby bridging the digital divide, enhancing digital literacy, and promoting equitable access to online platforms for inclusive and impactful creative expression.
- **Strengthen legal and psychosocial support systems for artists** by establishing coordinated referral networks, accessible legal aid desks, and robust safety and wellbeing protocols to protect those facing censorship, intimidation, or rights violations.
- **Establish community-based art hubs and inclusive creative spaces** that are gender-responsive and accessible to youth, women, and persons with disabilities, fostering equitable participation, collaboration, and cultural expression at the grassroots level.



National and County Government

- **Integrate activism into national and county development frameworks** by embedding it within civic education, youth empowerment, and cultural policies to enhance citizen participation, strengthen creative governance, and unlock institutional and financial support for inclusive civic engagement.
- **Safeguard artistic freedom and expression** by reviewing and amending restrictive laws such as the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act and the Public Order Act—while establishing legal aid services, protection mechanisms, and clear guidelines to shield artists from censorship, harassment, and undue intimidation.
- **Invest in inclusive creative infrastructure** by allocating public funding to develop accessible, gender-sensitive cultural spaces, community theatres, and digital hubs, fostering talent development and enabling broad-based civic participation across urban and rural counties.

Civil Society Organisation

- **Capacity Building and Mentorship** by strengthening support for artists through training, mentorship, and resources for youth, women, and marginalized groups. Foster collaborative networks and knowledge sharing to enhance advocacy impact. Expand community engagement and ensure the sustainability of artist initiatives.
- **Advocacy and Policy Engagement** by partnering with government and other stakeholders to mainstream activism in civic education, policy frameworks, and community development programs, ensuring artists' voices are recognized in decision-making processes.
- **Safe and Inclusive Spaces** by establishing and manage community-based art hubs, safe performance venues, and digital platforms that are accessible to women, youth, and persons with disabilities, promoting inclusive participation and cultural expression.

International Community & Development Partners

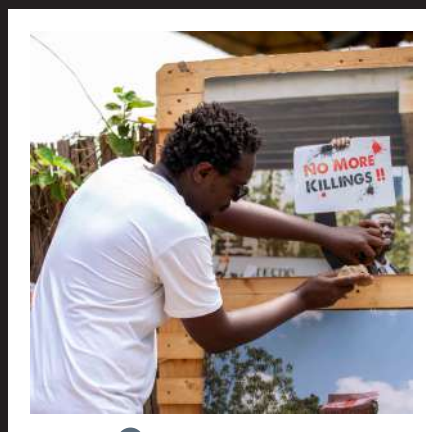
- **Support Funding and Resource Mobilization** by providing targeted grants and financial support for activist initiatives, especially those promoting inclusion, digital innovation, and civic engagement in marginalized communities.
- **Facilitate Knowledge Exchange and Capacity Building** by enabling international collaborations, mentorship programs, and cross-cultural learning opportunities to strengthen skills, advocacy strategies, and global visibility of Kenyan activists.
- **Advocate for Policy and Legal Reform** by using diplomatic and development platforms to encourage the Kenyan government to protect artistic freedom, review restrictive laws, and institutionalize activism in national and county policy frameworks.

Activism

- **Leverage Digital Platforms for Civic Impact** by expand online campaigns, social media storytelling, and digital collaborations to engage wider audiences, raise awareness, and influence policy discussions.
- **Promote Inclusive and Intersectional Activism** by ensure participation of youth, women, persons with disabilities, and marginalized groups, while addressing multiple social issues through creative expression.
- **Strengthen Organizational and Collaborative Capacity** by form networks, alliances, and community-based hubs to share resources, mentor emerging activists, and enhance sustainability and impact of creative initiatives.



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