



Eastern Africa Journal of Contemporary Research (EAJCR)

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Article information:

To cite this article:

Mugambi, F. M., Njoroge, G.G., & Gichugu M.U. (2026). Access to Information as a Pillar of Good Governance: Evidence, Challenges, and Policy Implications for Kenya. *Eastern Africa Journal of Contemporary Research*, 6(1), 81-91

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The Eastern Africa Journal of Contemporary Research (EAJCR) is both an online (ISSN: 2663-7367) and print (ISSN: 2663-7359) double-blind peer-reviewed quarterly journal published by the Directorate of Research and Publications of Greta University, Kenya.

EAJCR aims at advancing the frontiers of knowledge by publishing contemporary multidisciplinary conceptual/ theoretical and empirical research articles as well as case studies and book reviews.

Access to Information as a Pillar of Good Governance: Evidence, Challenges, and Policy Implications for Kenya

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Abstract

The study aimed to examine the supply-side administrative barriers and demand-side usability constraints that hinder the practical utility of disclosed public data by citizens to achieve accountability and good governance in Kenya. A purely quantitative approach was deemed the best method to get broad patterns across different groups of people. The study focused on adult registered voters in four counties: Nairobi, Machakos, Embu, and Vihiga. A sample size of N=400 was used and data was collected using a structured digital survey over a period of four months. The study achieved a response rate of 85.8%. Overall, the study findings highlight a significant gap between formal transparency mechanisms and practical usability. Kenya has established impressive legal and digital systems, yet those investments aren't fully translating into everyday civic empowerment. On the supply side, unusable data formats remain the primary obstacle, while on the demand-side issues like distrust, low awareness, and limited information literacy skills emerged as the key barriers. The study recommends government institutions to adopt more user-friendly formats such as short videos and social media to communicate to the public. The ministry of education may consider integrating information literacy skills into the school curriculum to address low information literacy skills among citizens and public agencies may need to focus on improving the accuracy and consistency of public data published.

Key Words: Access to Information, Public Information, Governance, Accountability, Kenya

1. Introduction

Transparency has been described as the cornerstone of democracy with information access closely associated with fundamental human rights. The right to access government information provides the structural basis for civic engagement and public oversight with the expectations that when citizens access the right information, they become informed electorate who are in a better position to decide who should govern and how he/she should



govern leading to a better governance (Martynenko,2022). Transparency has been anchored in both local and international frameworks. Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises freedom of access to information as a basic human right and a core principle of democracy. The 193 member states have integrated this declaration in their national and regional regulatory frameworks through laws such as Freedom of Expression and Access to Information.

The 1948 declaration remains relevant today as it was seven decades ago acting as a roadmap for realization of good governance across the globe. The declaration hoped to transition member states from institutions that treated public information in secrecy to governments where citizens have free access to public information (Davis, 2023). An audit of the implementation of article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reviewed that only 116 countries out of the 193 had fully implemented functional open government data and a quarter of the nations still required structural reforms to make their open government mechanisms functional (Ty, 2023).

A look at the 116 that have implemented the freedom of access to information show that challenges still persist in the full realization of the goals of the declaration with the most prominent challenges being fragmented legislation, weak oversight, low institutional response rates, and non-standardized proactive disclosure (Ty, 2023). The implementation gaps are more visible in the developing nations. Kenya's journey to transparent government framework can be traced back in 2010 when the country legally integrated the 1948 universal human rights declarations in its constitution. In 2011, the country launched the open government data initiative that aimed at streamlining dissemination of government data to the public.

Since then, major developments include the adoption of a decentralized system of government in 2013, the automation of government procurement in 2014 through IFMIS system, the digitization of government services in 2014 through eCitizen platform, the enactment of Access to Information Act in 2016 and the expansion of eCitizen services in 2023 (Ondiek & Onyango, 2025). Through these measures, Kenya hoped to achieve good governance and economic growth.

Indexes on good governance in Kenya paint a different picture of a country that has continued to perform below average. Kenya dropped from 42 points in 2016 to 35 points on the Voice and Accountability index score by the World Bank while the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, Kenya scored 30 points in 2025 a slight improvement from 26 points in 2016. The data is supported by a national survey by the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) 2024 that showed 60% of adult population had witnessed some form of corruption in the government. The office of the Auditor General further flagged 44.8 billion that collected from the eCitizen platform in the financial year 2024/2025 was spent without authorization.

The poor performance in good governance despite the transparency measures put in place may be indicative that in practice, the measures have remained procedural rather than empowering citizens to hold their government accountable. The disclosed government data seems not to bear the desired civic action raising important questions on where are the

gaps? A study by Munene et al (2022) in Kitui county on seed distribution to local farmers identified a glaring gap between the official reported yield of the crop per acre after the programme and the actual yield reported by farmers suggesting that sometimes the disclosed government data has quality concerns ultimately affecting its trustworthiness. This finding is supported by Amnesty Kenya (2026) who found out that only 28% of citizens had complete trust in the information released by the national government.

The office of Ombudsman (2022) in a national survey on the status of implementation of the Access to Information Act 2016 by state institutions and departments reported low compliance rate with the Act's requirement for proactive disclosures of public activities. The disclosures by government were hoped to help citizens track public spending and call out for accountability in areas that appear to be mismanaged. The idea was to build a participatory government where citizens are actively involved in monitoring the progress of their government.

Ondiek and Onyango, (2025) on their part while assessing the implementation of open government data initiative in Kenya identified poor formatting and use of technical language in government reports as the major hindrance to effective utilization of public information. The idea is backed by Transparency International (2024) who noted that the reports by the Office of the Auditor General were often bulky and full of technical jargons such that members of County Assemblies found it difficult to debate them when tabled for them to scrutinize their county government spending.

The government move to digitize its services through the eCitizen platform, IFMIS and the Open Data Portal was hoped to increase transparency and remove prior physical barriers to access to government information. While the initiatives to a larger extent have made government activities more visible to citizens, they have also created new inequalities especially among populations with poor internet connectivity and those with low digital literacy skills (Kemboi, & Premanandam 2026). Therefore, the e-government initiatives have done little to democratize information access.

Kenya's recent history with governance challenges highlights the tensions between making public data available to the people and the achievement of good governance. This study explores access to information as a core pillar of Kenyan governance, looking specifically at the drop-off between data availability and actual public use.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Access to information is widely recognized as a cornerstone of open governance, countries like Kenya that have put in measures to guarantee citizen's access to information like enactment of the 2016 Access to Information Act, alongside strong constitutional mandates for transparency, they seem to guarantee little impact in terms of practical public accountability. Across East Africa, and Kenya in particular, governments have invested in various consultation channels, ranging from physical town halls to digital open government portals. Yet these processes seem to function largely as procedural box-checking.

Part of the challenge appears to lie in basic administration. Public institutions rarely practice



proactive disclosure, and civil servants frequently treat routine data as classified information and when independent agencies like the Auditor General do release information, such as audited accounts, the process is usually slow and heavily technical. Then there is the matter of usability. Simply publishing raw data into the public domain does not mean people can actually use it. Annual county budget estimates, IFMIS printouts, and technical policy briefs are often packed with jargon that confuses even motivated readers. Even when presented before members of County Assemblies for debate and mandatory public participation forums, the exercise risks becoming a routine excise. Citizens often show up to local barazas, but without digestible summaries, genuine input remains nearly impossible.

Unequal access further skews who benefit from transparency. Digital platforms like the eCitizen portal promise convenience, but they naturally favour digitally literate urban and educated populations. In contrast, residents in remote or low-income areas, where network coverage is poor and digital literacy remains low, are left out. Rather than bridging the information gaps, digital platform disclosure strategies may be actually widening existing information divides.

Data fragmentation creates additional friction. Official figures on public spending or project completion often contradict data gathered independently by local civil society groups and the Auditor General. For instance, a ministry report might list a water borehole as fully operational, while community monitors report a dry, abandoned site. This discrepancy fuels scepticism on both sides, making constructive dialogue around public resources much harder to achieve.

It is therefore clear that the belief that information automatically drives accountability appears overly optimistic. This does not mean that public disclosure is not important but it may suggest that information is only a prerequisite for accountability, not an automatic trigger. This intersecting section point to a persistent divide between policy goals and lived realities.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the factors that shape how Kenyan citizens interact with disclosed public data, moving beyond the assumption of automatic accountability to analyze the structural conditions that determine its practical utility.

2. Objective of the Study

The study aimed to examine the supply-side administrative barriers and demand-side usability constraints that hinder the practical utility of disclosed public data.

3. Methodology

To get a sense of how Kenyans view the actual usefulness of information accessed from the government, a cross-sectional quantitative survey was used. Choosing a quantitative approach seemed the best method to get broad patterns across different groups of people. The study focused on adult registered voters in four counties: Nairobi, Machakos, Embu, and Vihiga. These counties were picked on purpose to capture a mix of urban setup, semi-urban spaces, and rural setting. Information access infrastructure varies wildly between



these areas. Someone trying to look for a public record in Nairobi, where internet connectivity is relatively stable, faces very different hurdles than a farmer in Vihiga who might rely entirely on a basic mobile connection.

The study utilised a multistage non-probability approach, first purposively picking the four counties and then breaking them down into 14 sub-county regions. From there, appropriate quotas were allocated to the 14 regions and randomly surveyed whoever was accessible and willing to participate in the study. A sample size of N=400 was used. Over a period of four months, respondents filled out a structured digital survey administered physically by research assistants using dedicated smartphones. To measure ideas like government transparency, data usability, and state of accountability, a standard 5-point Likert scales (from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") were used.

Before launching the full survey, a pilot test with 30 people in a neighbouring sub-county was conducted which yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 across the board. After cleaning and coding the data, descriptive statistics, that is mean and percentages were used to map out the basic trends. Ordinal logistic regression and chi-square tests were used to infer relationship between the variables.

4. Findings

4.1 Response Rate

A total of 343 questionnaires out of the 400 distributed were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 85.8%. The results are presented in two categories, that is supply-side administrative barriers and demand-side usability constraints.

4.2 Supply-side Administrative Barriers

4.2.1 Selective Disclosure of Government Information

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement regarding the statement that government institutions proactively do disclose information needed by the public. The findings reveal a relatively divided perception. Of the 343 respondents, 49 (14.3%) strongly disagreed and 68 (19.8%) disagreed that the government is pro-active in disclosing all necessary public information. Taken together, 117 respondents (34.1%), expressed a negative view.

A further 106 respondents (30.9%) were neutral and 91 respondents (26.5%) agreed and 29 (8.5%) strongly agreed, giving a combined positive response of 35.0%.

4.2.2 Format and Usability of Public Information

The study examined respondents' perceptions of the usability of different formats and channels through which government information is communicated. Considerable variation was observed across the different formats.

With regard to reports and policy briefs, 42 respondents (12.3%) indicated that these were



usable to a very great extent, while 53 (15.5%) indicated a great extent. Combined, only 27.8% considered reports and policy briefs usable. A larger proportion, 113 respondents (33.0%), rated their usability as moderate, while 134 respondents (39.2%) rated them as usable only to a small extent or not at all.

The results for infographics and visual materials show a similar pattern. 28 (8.2%) respondents considered them usable to a very great extent and 70 (20.5%) to a great extent, giving a combined positive response of 28.7%. The bigger proportion, 127 (37.1%) respondents, reported moderate usability. A further 117 (34.2%) respondents rated them as usable only to a small extent or not at all.

The social media emerged as a more user-friendly medium with 82 (24.0%) of the respondents indicated very great usability and 98 (28.7%) indicated great usability. Thus, 52.7% considered social media highly usable. Another 82 respondents (24.0%) reported moderate usability, while 79 (23.1%) rated it as having little usability for this purpose.

The results for short video content were also relatively favourable. 59 (17.2%) of respondents rated it as usable to a very great extent, while 102 (29.7%) rated it to a great extent. Together, 46.9% reported high usability. Ninety-eight respondents (28.6%) reported moderate usability, compared with 84 respondents (24.5%) who reported usability to a small extent or not at all.

For official government websites, only 33(9.6%) of respondents considered them usable to a very great extent and 62 (18.1%) to a great extent. Thus, just 27.7% reported high usability. Seventy-seven respondents (22.4%) rated their usability as moderate, while 171 respondents (49.9%) reported that official government websites were usable only to a small extent or not at all.

Similarly, direct communication from public officers received mixed ratings. Fifty-two respondents (15.2%) reported very great usability and 61 (17.8%) great usability, giving a combined positive response of 33.0%. Another 106 respondents (31.0%) reported moderate usability. In contrast, 123 respondents (36.0%) considered direct communication usable to a small extent or not at all.

Taken together, the findings point to an interesting difference between newer, shorter and more conversational formats and conventional government information channels. Social media and short videos appear to be more usable than official websites, reports and policy briefs. This may suggest that the problem is not simply whether government information is disclosed, but how it is packaged and delivered. Formal disclosure through conventional institutional channels may satisfy administrative requirements without necessarily making information easy for citizens to consume.

4.2.3 Fragmentation of Government Data

Respondents were also asked whether fragmentation of government data was a problem affecting its utility. The findings do not indicate strong agreement with this proposition. A majority of respondents, 176 (51.3%), indicated No, while 59 (17.2%) indicated Yes. A

4.3 Demand-side Usability Constraints

4.3.1 Trust in Government-provided Information

Trust emerged as an important demand-side consideration. Respondents were asked about their level of trust in information provided by government institutions, including institutions such as the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC), the Office of the Government Spokesperson, and the Directorate of Criminal Investigations.

76 (22.2%) reported complete distrust, while 62 (18.1%) reported that they somewhat distrusted government information. Collectively, 40.3% of respondents expressed some level of distrust. In contrast, 68 respondents (19.8%) somewhat trusted and 53 (15.5%) completely trusted the information, producing a combined trust level of 35.3%. A further 84 respondents (24.5%) remained neutral.

4.3.2 Awareness of Public Information Platforms

Awareness of available public platforms for accessing corruption-related information was relatively limited. 106 (31.1%) indicated that they were not at all aware of such platforms, while 75 (22.0%) were only slightly aware. Combined, 53.1% demonstrated low levels of awareness.

By comparison, 68 (19.9%) respondents were moderately aware, 60 (17.6%) were very aware, and only 32 (9.4%) were extremely aware. Thus, just 27.0% reported high levels of awareness.

4.3.3 Information Literacy Practices

The study further examined how frequently respondents' fact-check information. 40 (11.7%) indicated that they never fact-check information, while 78 (22.7%) reported that they rarely do so. Together, 34.4% reported infrequent or no fact-checking.

A further 111 (32.4%) respondents indicated that they sometimes fact-check information. On the more positive side, 86 respondents (25.1%) reported that they often fact-check, while only 28 (8.2%) indicated that they always do so. The combined proportion that often or always fact-checks was therefore 33.3%.

4.3.4 Information Overload

Information overload was measured by asking respondents whether they often felt overwhelmed by the amount of information available about public affairs. 62 (18.1%) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement and 81 (23.6%) disagreed, producing a combined disagreement of 41.7%. 91 (26.5%) respondents were neutral. In contrast, 70 (20.4%) respondents agreed and 39 (11.4%) strongly agreed, giving a combined agreement of 31.8%.



4.4 Discussion

The findings point toward a clear gap between making information public and making it genuinely useful. While Kenya has spent years building up a solid legal, institutional, and digital framework for open government, the practical value of these systems remains quite uneven on the ground. The findings suggests that the problem is not entirely a supply of information issue but more of demand side constraints in how citizens interact with public information.

Looking at the balanced split in how respondents felt about disclosure of government information, where 35% of the respondents felt that the government institutions actively disseminate public information while 34% disagreed may suggest that public information is out there only that a majority of citizens are uncertain about what exactly should government institutions be disclosing as pointed out by the sizable number of respondents who were neutral at 31%.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights framed access to data as a foundational civic right (United Nations, 1948), an idea meant to break down deeply ingrained habits of official secrecy. The finding agrees with the findings of Davis (2023) who observed that, many democracies are yet to fully realize the goals of this article even where formal structures exist to facilitate government transparency.

Kenya exemplifies this observation having rolled out major digital reforms like the Open Government Data portal, IFMIS, eCitizen, and the 2016 Access to Information Act, these tools have technically opened up government data to the public (Ondiek & Onyango, 2025). However, formal access has not fully transformed day-to-day public administrative culture. Reports from the Ombudsman (2022) confirm low compliance across state departments when it comes to routine disclosures. The biggest supply-side barrier comes down to formatting. Reports and policy briefs were rated highly usable by only 27.8% of respondents, with nearly 39.2% finding them barely usable at all. Infographics were also rated poorly with only 28.7% of the respondents indicating that they were usable. Social media, on the other hand, was considered highly usable. Over half (52.7%) found social platforms highly usable for tracking public data, followed closely by short videos at 46.9%. Meanwhile, official government websites lagged behind at 27.7%, with nearly half of all respondents finding them clunky or unhelpful.

This contrast suggests that volume of public information disclosed is not the primary issue. The real bottleneck is how that information is packaged. Ondiek and Onyango (2025) noted similar barriers in Kenya, where government information has technical jargon makes them less usable by the general public. Transparency International (2024) highlighted the same problem regarding Auditor-General reports; they are often long and technical that even County Assembly members struggle to debate them effectively.

A 100-page financial PDF uploaded to a site satisfies legal transparency requirements, but it doesn't help a citizen figure out if their local dispensary actually received its allocated



medicine budget. Technical availability is simply not the same as functional usability. People naturally lean toward social media and short clips because those formats match everyday communication habits. However, social media may not be the ideal transparency model because it easily amplifies misinformation and strips away necessary context. The high usability scores for video and social channels should be read as a demand for accessible communication, not proof that social media provides cleaner data. As Martynenko (2022) argued, access is meant to build an informed citizenry.

Interestingly, data fragmentation didn't come across as a major roadblock to access to public information. About 51.3% indicated that lack of a centralised source of government information was not a problem, while only 17.2% explicitly flagged it as a barrier. A substantial 31.5%, were not sure.

This finding seems to go against the literature which identified fragmented public information disclosures as a barrier to effective information utilization (Ty, 2023). The discrepancy probably says more about the average citizen's expectations where, a citizen may be experiencing challenges accessing government information without recognising that the underlying problem could be the fragmentation of the government data. On the demand side, trust stands out as a major obstacle. Around 40.3% of respondents admitted to distrusting official government information to some degree, compared to 35.3% who expressed trust, alongside 24.5% who remained neutral. This finding aligns with broader national trends. Amnesty Kenya (2026) recorded that only 28% of citizens fully trusted statements coming out of the national government. When official figures contradict with daily reality, trust erodes rapidly. Awareness of government open data platforms was low with 53.1% of respondents reporting little or no awareness of existing platforms, while only 27.0% were well aware of them. This means that while government information is technically available, citizens do not know that it exists. Ondiek & Onyango, (2025) also observed that low utilization of open government data platforms means low return on investment for the infrastructure.

Low information literacy skills emerged as another demand side roadblock to utilization of government information with only 33.3% of respondents indicating that they regularly verify the information they receive, while 34.4% rarely or never do. In an information landscape that is characterised by misinformation and information overload failure to verify the accessed information means that citizens are likely to be misled.

Overall, these findings highlight a significant gap between formal transparency mechanisms and practical usability. Kenya has established impressive legal and digital systems, yet those investments aren't fully translating into everyday civic empowerment. This gap mirrors wider national indicators. World Bank metrics show Kenya's Voice and Accountability score slipping from 42 in 2016 down to 35, while its Transparency International Corruption Perception Index score has barely budged, moving from 26 in 2016 to 30 in 2025. Additionally, local EACC surveys report that 60% of citizens have personally witnessed public sector corruption. The findings demonstrate that transparency infrastructure alone clearly cannot fix governance issues when citizens access and use of the availed public information lag behind

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusions

The study set out to examine the supply-side administrative barriers and demand-side usability constraints that hinder the practical utility of disclosed public data. The findings of the study indicate that the main barrier to practical utilization of disclosed government information in the supply-side are issues related with the formats in which official information is packaged in. On the demand-side issues like distrust, low awareness, and limited information literacy skills emerged as the key barriers.

In conclusion, the study has demonstrated that there exist few roadblocks to effective utilization of public information on the supply side. Major breakdown occurs on the demand side of the public information disclosure. Public information only becomes usable when it is proactive, credible, timely, easy to read, and delivered through channels people actually use. Formal reports and databases remain vital for auditors and journalists, but plain-language summaries, short videos, and visual breakdowns are what help the general public engage with the government. Moving forward, the key question isn't just whether government data is available to the public, but whether that data actually empowers citizens to understand, verify, and act. That distinction will determine whether transparency becomes a real tool for accountability or stays routine exercise.

5.2 Recommendations

The finding that (49.9%) of the respondents rated official government websites not usable raises the need for government to adopt more user-friendly formats such as short videos and social media to communicate to the public as supported by the higher usability ratings for social media (52.7%) and short video content (46.9%). However, these formats should not replace the formal communication formats such as reports but instead should complement these formal communication channels.

The finding that 34.4% of respondents never or rarely fact-check information they access indicates a need to empower citizens with information literacy skills to help them navigate the current information landscape that is characterised by misinformation and information overload. The ministry of education may consider integrating information literacy skills into the school curriculum.

Roughly four out of ten respondents expressed some level of distrust in government data, which points to a deeper issue. Public agencies may need to focus on improving the accuracy and consistency of public data published. A clear example of this dynamic appears in the study by Munene et al. (2022), where official harvest reports clashed with what farmers actually reported on the ground. When published government information do not align with daily reality, scepticism naturally takes root, highlighting how closely credibility relies on accuracy of data reported.



Moreover, over half the people surveyed, 53.1%, said they were barely aware of official portals where government records get published. Therefore, oversight bodies, media outlets, and local advocacy groups probably need to step up basic awareness campaigns regarding where citizens can access public information.

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