

## **SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE: HOW SOLIDARITY IS SHAPING CITIZENSHIP IN KENYA**

The ingredients for collective action that can win positive systemic change are many: strategy, clarity, patience, and power, among others. But at the heart of any successful collective action will be an engaged and cohesive group of people. When taking on an injustice entrenched by history and power, that group will have to take the form of a diverse coalition that can maintain unity over time and through challenges. We call this solidarity. This is a case study of how one team built solidarity on a divisive issue and used it to win meaningful change.

### **The Fault Lines of Belonging**

Millions of people around the world are without citizenship or without the legal identity documents required to exercise their citizenship rights. Namati's citizenship justice work is centered in Kenya, a country of over 50 million people coming from more than 40 recognized tribes. Many people from both

recognized and unrecognized tribes are excluded from full citizenship due to discrimination based on ethnicity and religion.

For most Kenyans, applying for identification is a simple formality, with forms processed in just a couple of weeks. But for certain minority populations, the process is slow and arduous. Applicants are repeatedly called in for "vetting," where they are asked intrusive questions and required to produce more documents, including some that may be hard to obtain or may not even exist, like their grandmothers' birth certificates. The process can drag on for months or years. Many simply give up.

Even as citizenship exclusion affects multiple populations, unity across them has proven hard to come by. Some people assume their exclusion is the result of a lack of state capacity or due to their own poverty rather than systemic discrimination.

Others have trouble identifying with other ethnic groups, seeing the exclusion of those groups as unique or even justified.

And yet, unity has begun to emerge. Communities are finding common cause, and new actors are joining the fray. What changed, and what is driving the progress? We reflected on years of work and uncovered some key insights.

### **Solidarity Doesn't Emerge by Chance**

"It just happened."

That's what Aisha, Senior Manager of Namati's Citizenship Program, said when we first sat down to reflect on how the walls between communities had started to break down. The shift appeared to be totally organic. It seemed that gradually a common conversation about ID and citizenship was emerging across the country. The justice seekers we accompany started talking about systemic causes of the injustice. Some of our partners did, too. And slowly, so did many others, including influential people with whom we had never had contact.

One place we have seen the conversation become both deeper and broader is within Kenya's Muslim community. Not all of the groups excluded from full citizenship are Muslim, but it is a major factor in the discrimination against Nubians, Somali-Kenyans, and others. It is now common to hear Muslim leaders name ID as an issue that affects their whole community. Similarly, policymakers and community leaders who once addressed citizenship as an issue for a single constituency—such as "the Somali community"—now speak about it pertaining to "the Muslim community," minority communities as a whole, or even just anyone subject to vetting.

What we realized by reflecting on our work and how this unity has begun to surface was that it didn't happen spontaneously. Aisha started by saying, "it just happened," but she went on to describe years-long efforts to develop a deeper understanding of systemic causes with communities, connect the citizenship issue to other challenges faced by marginalized people, develop ties between affected communities, and introduce stories of shared struggle and liberation. It turns out that unity didn't just happen.

## Citizenship as “the mother of all rights”

Access to identity documents is the mother of all rights. Having these vital documents means an individual has the “gate pass” to access all other basic rights and government entitlements. For a child to access education, they need a birth certificate. A young woman or man seeking an opportunity to further their studies or take on official employment would need an identity document. As Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa faced one of the harshest droughts ever experienced, identity documents were required to access the aid being provided by humanitarian organizations. This is a clear indication that organizations working on other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or human rights issues should consider the critical role citizenship plays in realizing one's fullest potential.

## Critical Consciousness Is the Foundation for Solidarity

When Namati began its citizenship work in Kenya, most justice seekers saw their struggles as isolated incidents. They believed they had “fallen through the cracks,” unaware that the delays and denials they faced were not the norm for people from the country's majority ethnic and religious groups. To address this, Namati worked closely with partners in affected communities to help people understand their rights by holding community forums, canvassing potential justice seekers, and showing up in spaces where people without IDs are likely to be.

Through those interactions with justice seekers, it became clear that more needed to be done to build knowledge of citizenship rights and the policies that shape them. Community education cannot just focus on the letter of the law and how the system works in practice. It needs to include how the laws came to be, counter prevalent narratives in Kenyan culture, and illuminate the extent of the discrimination and exclusion faced by minority communities in the country. It also needs to open the door to action. In short, the team and its community ambassadors needed to build critical consciousness.

Namati program staff, partner paralegals, and community ambassadors came together to develop new ways of talking about citizenship issues and new stories to share from each affected community. They practiced delivering concise, impactful messages—“elevator speeches”—to articulate these ideas clearly and consistently.

That approach set things in motion. The systemic understanding that harsh vetting and exclusion are based in discrimination started to show up more and more out in the community, on social media, and in political debates. As a result, it became easier for justice seekers to identify with others, which laid the groundwork for solidarity between disparate communities. It also made it possible to use that solidarity as the basis for coordinated campaigning that could make a difference.

For example, as the Kenyan government prepared to roll out a new digital ID regime, communities and advocates from across the country united to challenge it. Together, they argued in public and in court that transitioning to a digital system risked

entrenching the exclusion of entire communities. The system was halted, partially reformed, and then restarted with new protections for populations that had been subject to discriminatory vetting in the past. Although they tried, the government and other supporters of vetting were unsuccessful in undermining the new narrative of systemic discrimination and in dividing the coalition fighting for citizenship justice.

A lot of work went into maintaining the coalition as it grew more diverse and increasingly ran into pushback from the government and in the media. Focusing on critical consciousness proved to be one of the coalition’s most impactful strategies. The coalition and their constituencies had conversations over and over that kept coming back to the same shared understandings: “This is systemic discrimination” and “the solution is to end vetting.” Repetition was key in seeding and solidifying consciousness.

The coalition also consistently centered the voices of people from across Kenya who were directly impacted by the discrimination. That meant

building their consciousness and creating opportunities for them to articulate their views on the injustice and how it should be solved. The result for the coalition was a stronger message that carried the credibility of coming from those most impacted.

### **Ambition and Collective Action Expand as Solidarity Grows**

Bolstered by the understanding that grew from deep conversations facilitated by paralegals, communities began defining policy goals, crafting petitions, and strategizing

collectively. Seeing other communities take similar steps inspired them to think bigger. They started to think about how to move together. In short, they developed a power analysis to accompany their goals.

By connecting their demands to those of other excluded groups, communities became more ambitious. Once hesitant to confront the vetting process, some now view ending vetting altogether as an achievable goal.

That increased ambition also showed up in casework. For example, paralegals from Namati's





partner organization Haki na Sheria have accompanied many people to get birth certificates for themselves and/or their children, but they were hesitant to devote more time and resources to helping people get IDs. The vetting challenge seemed insurmountable. Slowly, however, they began to take on more ID cases. What changed? First, the Haki na Sheria team saw they weren't alone in pushing for full recognition of everyone's citizenship rights, which meant they were more powerful than they realized. Second, they started to see responsiveness from the government on the issue, so their confidence in the possibility of real change grew over time.

The results are clear. In 2022, Haki na Sheria won a government commitment to provide 14,000 ID cards for Kenyans living in and around refugee camps in the north, where many people are wrongly classified as refugees and therefore not eligible for Kenyan citizenship. Almost all of those promised ID cards have been delivered, and Haki na Sheria continues to fight for recognition for tens of thousands more victims of this "double registration."

## **Integrated Strategies Reinforce Collective Action**

The Namati team and its partners worked to ensure that every activity—casework, outreach, and organizing—reinforced the broader strategy of building a unified movement. They consistently ask themselves: How does this activity contribute to our larger goals? For example, do the topics on their regular radio show reinforce the messaging delivered in community forums and during casework and advocacy?

This integrated approach required both careful planning and adaptability. It's not just the team, either; partners, community ambassadors, allies, and community leaders are all contributing to and looping into the design and delivery of this integrated strategy.

The team has also found ways to connect the fight for equal citizenship with other fights in order to raise the profile and gain allies. Digital security and privacy groups with global reach took up the cause, as did social welfare organizations that saw that a lack of ID would be a barrier to accessing benefits.

These integrated strategies led to an extraordinary breakthrough. In May 2024, President Ruto pledged to end vetting. It was the first time a Kenyan president publicly acknowledged the unconstitutional nature of this decades-old system. In February 2025, the president followed through by abolishing vetting committees. This was a change few thought was possible when paralegals first started helping discriminated communities to secure IDs in 2012. Today, the coalition—paralegals, grassroots leaders, community members, and allies—are working to ensure the president's historic declaration translates into a truly inclusive ID system in practice.

## Conclusion

Solidarity across affected communities has proven essential to advancing citizenship justice in Kenya. By connecting communities, the movement has highlighted systemic gaps and amplified the call for systemic change. Solidarity has also provided protection for vocal ethnic tribes by aligning them with other communities in the push for an inclusive identity system. Once systemic remedies are achieved, they will encompass all those who face barriers in accessing identity documents, ensuring a more just and equitable system for everyone.



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