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Participatory Opportunities in Policy Initiation For ODM Rank and File Party Membership in Kilifi County, Kenya

By

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Abstract
Few studies have looked at grassroots general membership participation in party policy initiation. The purpose of this study was to determine participatory opportunities in policy initiation offered to average party members in the ODM party in Kilifi County in order to ascertain the centrality of the policy function in the ODM party; and establish the extent of rank-and-file ODM party membership policy engagement through party organs, local party structures, and local party processes. Proportionate multi-stage stratified sampling was used to sample 400 grassroots survey respondents. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select key informants and focused group discussants. The study's findings revealed that the ODM party did not prioritize party policy initiation rather the party's emphasis was on sustaining party unity, continuation of the party organization and the intensification of electoral support. The study also found that the ODM party's main avenues that provide the opportunity for policy input from the median party membership consisted of elitist party institutions (that is, the party organs and party structures), and party processes (that include party events, forums and activities). The conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that ordinary party members were not considered important actors during policy initiation by the ODM party.

Keywords: Kenya, Participatory opportunities, party policy initiation, ODM party, rank-and-file party members, Kilifi County

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Introduction

Background to the Case Study

In 2010, Kenya promulgated a new constitutional dispensation that obliges broad citizenry participation in public affairs. The Political Parties Act 2011 expects political parties to have permanent local party organization structures to facilitate uninterrupted participation in party affairs at the grassroots and national levels. According to the Act, for a party to be considered fully registered it must have physical offices in no less than half of the 47 counties. Article 7.15 of the ODM requires the establishment of branch and sub-branch offices in each constituency and ward respectively to serve as custodians of membership registers.

Most times research in political science has focused on top-down decision-making party structures, overlooking grassroots party membership participation (White, 1996; Maiyo, 2008). The immediate consequence is that information on the extent of rank-and-file policy engagement remains uncertain.

Initial findings appeared to suggest that there existed no evidence that average party members of political parties in Africa were not well-represented in decision-making governance institutions and processes at the local and national party organization levels (Afrobarometer, 2020). This blind spot has serious consequences on the country's governance situation. There was, therefore, urgent need to undertake the current study in order to inspire participatory decision-making in party affairs. The purpose of this study was to discover the undercurrents of grassroots party membership participation in policy initiation in the ODM party in Kilifi County.

Study Site: Kilifi County

Kilifi County was formed in 2010. The county has a population of 1.4 million and covers an area of over 12 million square kilometers (KBS). The county is located north of Mombasa and has seven sub counties: Rabai, Kaloleni, Kilifi South, Kilifi North, Ganze, Malaindi and Magarini.

Kilifi County is considered historically neglected and marginalized, and one of the most under-developed regions in Kenya. Basic demographic data reveals that the county has operated on the fringes of national development agenda since independence. Specifically, residents are characterized by worrying high poverty levels, increased cases of hunger, low transitions from primary to secondary school, and early pregnancies. The county is riddled with limited employment opportunities, growing food insecurity and more than two-thirds of the population living below the poverty line eking a meagre living on the fringes within a largely rural subsistent economy.

Goals and Objectives

The ODM party members are obligated to be pro-active in important decision-making processes of the party. This way, far-reaching policy decisions are made transparently,

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inclusively, legally and with their concurrence. Party members are further expected to pro-actively engage with the party purposely to pinpoint public problems requiring the attention of the party and suggesting policy solutions that serve the wider society. On the other hand, the ODM party is duty-bound to guarantee reflective engagement in party policy initiation by providing appropriate prospects and spaces for the party to benefit from these policy proposals. The main goal of this study was to determine inclusive avenues in policy engagement available to ordinary ODM party members in Kilifi County, Kenya. To accomplish this goal this study aimed to:

i. To ascertain the centrality of the policy function in the ODM party;
ii. To establish the extent of rank-and-file ODM party membership policy engagement through party organs;
iii. To establish the extent of ODM rank-and-file party membership policy engagement through local party structures; and
iv. To establish the extent of rank-and-file ODM party membership policy engagement through local party processes.

Materials and Methods

Sampling

This study benefited from primary and secondary data. Primary data was acquired through fieldwork that took place from 2024 to 2025 in Kilifi County.

To obtain primary data, a total of 400 rank-and-file ODM party members were sampled using multistage (proportionate) stratified random sampling to complete survey questionnaires. The grassroots party members were drawn strictly from the 588, 842 voters registered for the 2022 elections. Primary data was also gathered from fifty (50) key informant interviews and a total of seven (7) Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) from the target population, one in each of the seven constituencies using purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. Further primary data was also sourced from the ODM party constitution, statutes, manifesto, policy drafts, annual reports, strategic plans, media interviews and commentaries, minutes of meetings and the party website. The combination of these techniques allowed for targeted selection of participants, and thorough and focused approach to the research.

Secondary data was collected from published sources such as journals, books, newspaper articles, public opinion surveys, theses and dissertations, the 2010 Constitution, bills and Acts of parliament, Kilifi county statistics, socio-economic data, journals, books, poverty indices, reports and policy documents from several agencies including the Kenya Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and the Commission for Revenue Allocation (CRA).

The study underpinning this paper was based on three theories, namely, elite theory, rational choice theory and public participation theory.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This article is an output of data from an ongoing PhD research on the rank-and-file participation in policy initiation in Kilifi County. It focuses on presenting factual results obtained from their perceptions and experiences on participatory opportunities in policy initiation for ODM rank and file party membership in Kilifi County. The purpose of this article, therefore, is three-fold: firstly, to contextualize their experiences; secondly to investigate their implications; and thirdly, to contribute to the literature on the subject area.

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The Centrality of the Policy Function in the ODM Party

Following the First Liberation (the struggle for self-rule), Second Liberation (the fight for party heterogeneity) and now Third Liberation (the quest for constitutionalism and grassroots sovereignty), pundits suggest that the focus of political parties should be on the party policy function (Widner, 1992; Bishop & Davis, 2002; Jonyo, 2013; Nasubo & Ondieki, 2023; Houghton, 2024).

A growing body of evidence suggests that political parties occupy the pillar position in the policy process, particularly in determining policy preferences (Bishop & Davis, 2002). A political party can prioritize the wishes of the party organization and leadership or the desires of the party membership (Wnayande, 2006; IDEA, 2014).

The ODM party has always positioned itself as the conscience of the people - the lead champion for social justice, the preservation of the Kenya's democratic space, and the people's watchdog against vices such as the misuse of public office for private gain (Jonyo, 2013; Kanyinga, 2014). Contrastingly, fieldwork findings suggest that these are simply rash prevalent narratives (Khamala *et a*l., 2025). A key informant observed:

> As ODM, we advocate for justice, equity and civil rights. We advocate for change, devolution and upholding the Constitution. We provide a platform for the voice of those who would otherwise be suppressed or ignored. We bridge the gap between the individual citizen, the state and state institutions. This way we provide a forum for citizens to actively participate in governance and societal development.

According to Table 1, most of the survey respondents acknowledged that the emphasis of the ODM party was to maximize electoral support in order to win elections, maintain the party organization, and maintain the party unity. Meanwhile, only a negligible fraction of the respondents said the emphasis of ODM is to antedate and resolve public policy issues.

Table 1: Emphasis of ODM

Emphasis of ODM	Not important at all		Not very important		Neutral		Somewhat important		Very important		Total	
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	F	%	*f*	%
Maximize electoral support to win elections	7	1.8	17	4.3	19	4.8	51	12.8	306	76.5	400	100.0
Maintaining the party organization	15	3.8	22	5.5	23	5.8	72	18.0	268	67.0	400	100.0
Maintaining party unity	12	3.0	14	3.5	15	3.8	59	14.8	300	75.0	400	100.0
Anticipate and solve public policy issues	283	70.5	111	27.8	5	1.3	1	0.3	1	0.3	400	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024

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These fieldwork findings raise serious questions about ODM party's long-held perversive misconception of being a firm defender of human rights and speaking for the voiceless in society. FGD and KII informants dismissed the ODM assertion as "political posturing" Apparently, the views of average party membership never materialized as they were under-represented in decision-making roles and overlooked in policy interventions.

While most studies in this area have focused on political party elites the focus of this study was on spaces that promote opportunity for policy input from rank-and-file party membership. The study sought to establish whether the median party members of the ODM party were important actors in the policy initiation process; whether they have avenues to make political demands, suggest alternatives to existing policies, and initiate innovative policy suggestions.

Survey findings reveal that the ODM party hierarchy rarely directly engages average party members on important policy decisions. Similarly, average party members were not invited to refine party policy decisions (Table 2). Further, ordinary members were not provided with mechanisms to compel policy change and keep their party leadership honest. The conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that ordinary party members were not considered important during policy initiation by the ODM party.

Table 2: Centrality of rank and file in party policy function and available participatory opportunities

Centrality of Rank and File in Party Policy Function and Available Participatory Opportunities	Definitely		Probably		Neutral		Probably not		Definitely not		Total	
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%
Does the ODM party hierarchy directly consult with ordinary members on important policy decisions?	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	3.0	15	3.8	373	93.3	400	100.0
Does the ODM party provide ordinary members with opportunities to shape the policy decisions that affect their lives	1	0.3	1	0.3	7	1.8	27	6.8	364	91.0	400	100.0
Does the ODM party have mechanism (party structures) that allow members to hold their leaders to account?	2	0.5	5	1.3	10	2.0	21	5.3	362	90.5	400	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024

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This study's findings provide insights into the dynamics of the ODM party policy initiation. What is interesting about these findings is that they suggest that grassroots members of the ODM party face major hurdles to have their perceptions, preferences, values and political demands influencing party policy decisions. One consequence of this is that few policy interventions were tailored to this group even when they face unique public problems

According to KII and FGD respondents, political parties are elite institutions and cannot serve the wider interests of the populace. They observed that the rank and file do not sit at the table when important party decisions were being made. Above all, they lacked forums at which they could suggest and/or adopt progressive policy positions to the party leader, national party officials and elected representatives.

On a positive note, the findings suggest that the average party membership at least get the opportunity to directly face-off with top politicians and the party hierarchy during funerals, marketplaces and at rallies. However, these venues were inappropriate for party policy initiation.

The study found that the ODM party policy decision-making happens through party institutions – these are the party organs, party structures and party processes (that include party events, forums and activities).

Rank and File Policy Engagement through ODM Party Organs

Each political party has programs, objectives and policies that can only be realized by operating through party organs. According to Article, the ODM party has in place party organs, including the NDC (the National Delegates Convention), the NGC (the National Governing Council), NEC (the National Executive Council), CMC (the Central Management Committee), RDCs (Regional Delegates Conferences), CDCs (County Delegates Conferences), the National Disciplinary Committee, the Youth League, the Women League, the Persons with Disability League, and PPG (the Party Parliamentary Group).

Surprisingly, the ODM party did have in place the policy organ to facilitate the party membership the opportunity to ventilate and decided appropriate policy choices. The party opted to making decisions via elite consensus. Policy decisions were made during the NDC through acclamation [*kura ya makelele*]. The party hierarchy and ordinary party members drawn from the grassroots congregated to decide the party policy agenda – the party manifesto.

The study's findings show that respondents questioned the process leading to the composition of delegates for NDCs. It emerged that as per Article 7.14, the most basic local party structure was the Polling Station Steering Committee (PSSC) was supposed to be constituted through a popular vote by all party members resident in the polling area. Unfortunately, this was not always the case. Hand-picked committee officials were the norm at PSSCs and other party organs rather than the exception. One FGD respondent observed as follows:

> Look here. Being an NDC delegate is a one-day engagement. Your work is to endorse the party manifesto that you did not participate in origination and shaping. Thereafter, you wait for five years hoping you will be engaged again, that is, if the party will still be in existence.

Fieldwork findings indicate that the party's rank and file did not regard the NDC as an important arena to make develop decisive policy positions. For them, NDCS were

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opportunities to endorse the party leader, national officials and party candidates. One discussant stated as follows:

> Political parties are organized to pursue common goals. But whose goals? Typically, power elites are only interested in their political survival. For that reason, persons with an elitist bend produce manifestos for the rest of the party thereby influencing political conversations during electioneering. If they were serious, the entire period in-between elections should be used to engage the party membership on possible party policy directions.

For many rank and file members, the party manifesto, other party documents and policy decisions made at party organs focused on fringe issues rather their core issues since they were not properly represented in decision-making roles. In their view, the established power structures and elites took advantage of their positions in the party to misrepresent policy preferences and policy outputs that were finally presented to voters at election time.

Policy Engagement through Local Party Structures

For the ODM party to involve the grassroots when developing the party policy position the party must have in place permanent local party structures in the form of the local party organization structure that allows party members the opportunity to interact with party uninterruptedly both during and in between elections. Moreover, for the ODM party to pronounce policies that appeal to the grassroots party constituents, the party must have a popularly elected local party leadership structure.

Local Party Organization Structure

Kenya's legal framework requires political parties to establish long-term grassroots party structures to allow the party membership interact with party through election periods (Political Parties Act, 2011).

Article 7.15 requires the ODM party to maintain decentralized physical presence by having administrative structures working at regional, county, constituency, ward and polling station levels.

The study to establish whether the ODM party has the capacity (branch offices) to operate effectively and engage with the party's grassroots across Kilifi County. Fieldwork findings demonstrated that the ODM party did not maintain permanent party structures at the grassroots. These structures simply popped during campaign seasons and did not last beyond a single election cycle. Survey findings (Table 3) indicate that an overwhelming majority of the respondents 357 (89.3%) said 'Definitely not' when asked whether the ODM party operated at the local level.

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Table 3: Is there a clear party administrative structure set up and working at county, sub-county and ward levels?

	Frequency	Percent
Definitely	1	0.3
Probably	6	1.5
Neutral	1	0.3
Probably not	35	8.8
Definitely not	357	89.0
Total	400	100

Source: Field Data 2024

The ODM party officials suggested that they had a strong physical presence at the subnational levels but a paltry percentage of the rank and file shared their sentiments. FGD findings revealed that the ODM party lacked any real organization at the grassroots level except temporary party branches that were created at election time to serve as voter enlistment units to increase voter turnout.

Most of the FGD and KII informants were not in the picture on the exact location of party offices at county, constituency and ward levels. Some were, however, familiar with the informal structures of local power and decision-making that were regularly stimulated during campaigns. The implication was that the ODM party depended on discontinuous party structures to acquire power and was not keen on strengthening policy engagement at the local levels.

On the whole, the common impression among ODM rank and file party membership was that they had been sidelined from party policy engagement as evidenced by the distorted party administrative structures at the sub-national levels.

Local Party Leadership Structure

Fieldwork findings on self-reported rank-and-file party membership engagement with the ODM party officials at the local level that was not campaign related was rare. The rarity of the contact was because of the absence of local presence of the local party leadership. Ostensibly to avoid chaotic party elections and party primaries, party officials and party candidates respectively were directly nominated. An elderly participant in one of the FGDs angrily stated the following regarding the use of the consensus selection method:

> There are only two times that as ODM members we directly engage the party – when selecting party officials and when nominating party candidates during national elections. Most times, these rare opportunities are normally taken away from us using the most unorthodox underhand tactics. What is the essence of party membership then?

Information gathered through interviews and FGD shows that the average party membership was excluded from selecting the local leadership of the local party organization. On the few occasions popular elections were conducted to fill decentralized positions in the party, infiltration by hired criminals, relatives, friends and neighbors compromised the outcomes.

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Policy Engagement through Local Party Processes

The ODM party maintain contact with the party membership between and during elections through local party processes that include party events, party forums and party activities.

Some of the notable party processes include election of local party officials, candidate nomination and membership referendum.

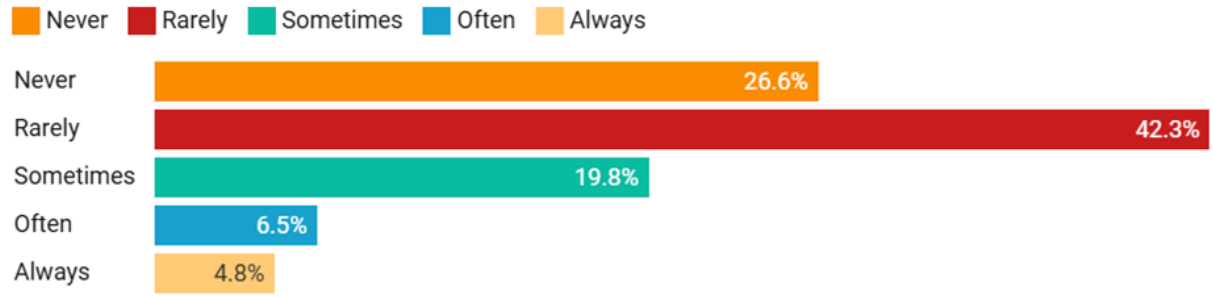
Fieldwork findings incorporating survey informants' self-reported sentiments as collaborated by FGD and KII findings revealed that the rank-and-file party membership were rarely engaged in local party processes that were not election related. Policy-related events and forums were almost non-existent.

Policy Engagement through Local Party Events and Forums

Political parties in Kenya are well-known for organizing grand events and forums such as meetings and campaign rallies, as a mechanism to directly and in-directly engage citizens. That being the case, event and forum attendances were important party policy initiation arenas.

Political parties engage citizens through local party events and forums such as meetings and rallies that could serve as spaces for policy-related engagement. However, according to Fig. 1, just a fraction of the respondents 19 (4.8%) said that they always attend; 26 (6.5%) said they often attend; 79 (19.8%) said they sometimes attend; 169 (42.3%) said they rarely attend; and 107 (26.6%) said they never attend such events or meetings.

Fig. 1: How often do you attend ODM party events or meetings?



Source: Field Data 2024

Further examination through in-depth interviews revealed that cumulatively the 105 (26.3%) of respondents who stated that they often or sometimes patronized ODM party events and/or forums actually participated in electioneering-related party processes. During election campaigns, the most common public gatherings at the grassroot level were rallies, open or closed-door campaign meetings, and meet-the-people tours that did not allow for policy-related engagement.

Policy Engagement through Local Party Activities

Fieldwork findings revealed that the ODM party had funded several activities in the last twelve months of the 2022 electoral campaign. These local party activities included local party enrolment; voting during party primaries; and the deployment of campaign teams and volunteers during election periods.

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The study sought to establish whether the activities were campaign-related and whether the party made effort to avail opportunities for the rank-and-file party members to engage on policy-related matters. Besides, the study sought to establish whether the party engaged professional staff to guide the party on policy issues that were pertinent to the rank-and-file membership.

Policy Engagement through Local Party Enrolment

The study's findings revealed that the ODM party was ranked highly in Kilifi County because of its track record on people issue advocacy. In fact, FGD and KII responses indicated that policy issues were the primary motivation for most Kilifians to join the party. This suggests that policy standpoints were highly valued by the ODM party membership.

It emerged that the ODM party leadership sporadically organized mass membership registration drives to recruit new members. Observably, grassroots membership registration exercises were conducted just before party elections as a vote-maximizing strategy. These observations suggest that the ODM party's focus is purely on electoral success.

Rank-and-file party members complained that once they were recruited, they lacked the opportunity to influence the party's policy platform. These demonstrates that the rank-and-file opinions on policy and strategy do not attraction adequate attention leading to hostile internal relations.

The study's findings resonate with the findings of an earlier study by Karp (2012) on the intensified attempts by political parties to mobilize and engage online audiences. It emerged the new trends in party mobilization and online engagement were not genuine efforts to enable fruitful engagement but merely campaign strategies to enhance voter turnout.

Policy Engagement through Voting

Voting is an important political activity that allows the party membership to choose the party leadership, party candidates, and more importantly the party's programmatic and/ or ideological standpoints.

Internal leadership party contests and party primaries are important to political parties and their membership since they assist in the recruitment of party officials and candidates. This study sought to establish whether the rank-and-file exercised discretion in the choice of the local party leadership, party candidates and the local party election platform.

The study's findings reveal that most often the ODM party hierarchy avoided intra-party elections denying the grassroots the opportunity to democratically select local party officials, party candidates and by extension the local policy platform.

It emerged that the Party leadership regularly hand-picked party officials and party candidates undermining the important role of the median party membership in choosing the people to occupy party positions and to run for public office. Without intra-party competition, party members were denied the opportunity to witness internal debates on alternative policy preferences.

Survey data in Fig. 2 reveals that the vast majority 325 (81.3%) of the surveyed respondents indicated that they did vote for ODM in the 2022 election; 18 (4.5%) voted for another party; 22 (5.5%) voted but could not say for which party; 21 (5.3%) did not vote and 14 (3.5%) did not indicate whether they voted or not.

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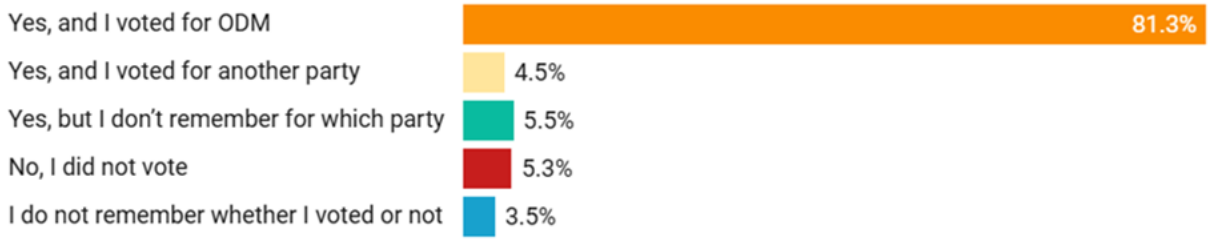
Fig. 2: Did you vote in the last local election held on 9 August 2022?



Source: Field Data 2024

The aforesaid survey findings seem to suggest that majority of the respondents voted for the ODM party in the 2022 general elections possibly because the party policy platform resonates with Kilifi County residents. However, evidence from FGD does not support this claim. A local resident underscored this argument as follows:

> I never went to school. I can neither read nor write but I normally for ODM without fail. I have always voted for ODM on every occasion it went for elections alone or as part of a coalition. The moment I arrive at the polling station, I have been tutored to simply demand for six oranges [six ballot boxes representing the positions of President, Governor, Senator, MP, Women representative and MCA]. Kilifi is an ODM stronghold and therefore I have never been shortchanged.

The foregoing evidence does not support the general assumption that ODM rank-and-file party members could initiate changes in policy program with their voting power. Actually, voting is pointless if the average party membership cannot not determine the local party platform. During an intense FGD one respondent observed:

> It appears to me that we ordinary members are normally courted by ODM politicians for votes. Thereafter, we are ignored since we lack a political voice, and an organized mechanism to hold the handful powerful people controlling the party to account. And, these is the complete truth!

Policy Engagement through Party Policy Initiation

In multiparty settings, political parties do not simply represent citizens but provide the opportunity for the party membership to determine policy choices (NDI, 2005). The party membership mandates their parties to fulfil voter preferences by addressing party membership concerns.

The party policy function characteristically involves party membership interaction with the party through the party organs, party structures, and party processes. Ideally, through this engagement, the party membership identifies, initiates, develops and actualizes public solutions to public problems.

This study sought to establish whether the ODM party oversees policy initiation forums to enable the rank-and-file party membership to be informed about and to effectively participate in policy initiation processes.

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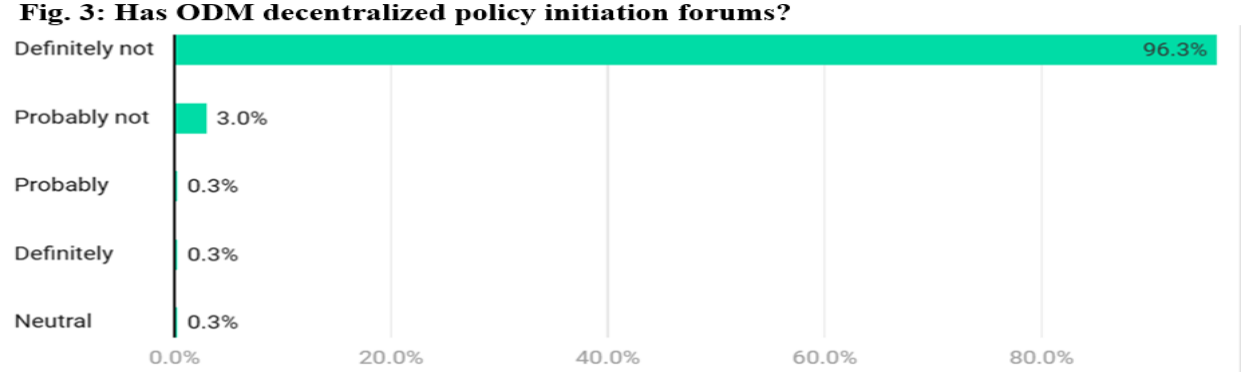
Survey data on the ODM party both during and in between election campaigns indicate that there were no activities on the ground relating to policy initiation; more so without the physical presence of long-term party offices.

Figure 3 shows that almost all the respondents 385 (96.3%) when asked whether ODM had decentralized policy initiation forums said 'definitely not', 12 (3%) said 'probably not', 1 (0.3%) said 'probably', 1 (0.3%) said 'definitely', and 1 (0.3%) did not comment.

Fig. 3: Has ODM decentralized policy initiation forums?



Source: Field Data 2024

Interview and FGD findings indicated that very few ODM party members had been active in policy initiation consultation processes. This observation was not surprising given the lack of decentralization of membership consultations, and the uncommonness of public events and forums unrelated to electioneering.

Conclusion

The study identified the various participatory opportunities in policy initiation, namely, party institutions (party organs and structures), and party processes (party events, forums and activities). However, according to the findings, the ODM party was internally conflicted, and the institutionalized mechanisms to enrich the party's policy options were few and in-between since the party's focus was on electoral mobilization. Subsequently, the ODM rank-and-file party membership exhibited insufficient involvement in policy initiation.

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