Enhancing inclusive management and cooperation of forests for persons with disabilities in Kenya

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Abstract

Kenya is one of the richest countries when it comes to natural forest terrains categorized as protected. These areas embrace various types of ecosystems namely: forests, wetlands, savannah, marine, arid and semi-arid. The areas are managed by two State Corporations: the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) mandated enhance forest management and to conserve and manage wildlife in Kenya respectively whereas enforcing related laws and regulations. Despite the existing legislations, the access of the forest terrains by persons with disabilities (PWDs) remains unaddressed due to lack of inclusive standardized guidelines. Under this premise, the objective of the study is to establish the existence of inclusive forest access policies in Kenya, as well as explore best practices that can be incorporated on inclusive regulations for forests without boundaries. The study will use an online survey to collect primary data and synthesize the literature to ascertain the extent to which PWDs can access forest landscapes and terrains. The findings of this study will be beneficial to various stakeholders in the forest management sector: Kenya Wildlife Service, Kenya Forest Service, development agencies and all stakeholders within the forestry sector.

Keywords: Persons with disability, forest management, inclusive legislation

Introduction, scope and main objectives

The forest sector represents one of the most challenging areas in the development of community and global public policy. Despite significant resource flows, international concern, and political pressure, a combination of market and institutional failures has led to forests failing to realize their potential to reduce poverty, promote inclusive economic growth, and be valued for their contributions to the local and global environment (World Bank, 2014). The World Bank (2014) asserts that Governments have lean resources to effectively administer and protect the more than 600 million hectares of protected areas established in developing countries including Kenya.

Kenya is considered one of the richest and most diverse countries when it comes to natural forest terrains categorized as protected globally and within the African continent. These areas embrace various types of ecosystems namely: forests, wetlands, savannah, marine, arid and semi-arid. The protected areas comprise of 23 terrestrial National parks, 28 terrestrial National Reserves, 4 marine National parks, 6 marine National Reserves and 4 National sanctuaries (Kenya Wildlife Service, 2017). The areas are managed by two State Corporations: the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). The KFS Forest Conservation and Management Act No. 34 of 2016 and the Forest policy are the existing legislation on forest management in Kenya. Whereas, the Kenya Wildlife Service is established under an Act of Parliament Cap 376 with the mandate to conserve and manage wildlife and to enforce related laws and regulations. Despite the existing legislations, the access of the forest terrains by persons with disabilities (PWDs) remains unaddressed due to lack of inclusive standardized guidelines. This is a result of constrained budgetary financing to

implement inclusive policy reforms and programs effectively. Furthermore, incentives for the private sector to implement sustainable inclusive forest management are either absent or limited.

Scope of the Forest Terrain in Kenya

Over decades, KFS and KWS has managed the Kenya's forest terrain and endeavored to strengthen diversity at the ecosystem, species, and genetic levels besides ensuring that the forest ecosystem is climate adaptive and has drought tolerant tree species. The Government of Kenya ratified a new forest bill in September 2005, an outcome of the Kenya Forestry Master Plan 1991. The bill unlocks opportunities for forest resources to contribute to economic development, poverty alleviation, and to enable socially and environmentally sustainable forest management and conservation. Moreover, the bill embraces the concept of participatory forest management besides the formation of forest community associations to be recognized as management partners (World Bank, 2007).

Consequently, in April 2006, the World Bank supported a strategic environmental assessments (SEA) of the implementation of the Kenya Forests Act, focused on integrating environmental, social, economic, and institutional considerations of the act to strengthen the processes for its implementation. The act contains innovative improvements including: emphasis on partnerships, engagement of local communities, and promotion of private investment. The purpose of the SEA was to inform and influence the process of implementing the new Forests Act and indirectly inform the policy dialogue regarding sustainable use of natural resources for national development. The SEA examined risks confronting both woodland and forest environments and the social wellbeing of communities relying on these resources. Evidence gathered through research and extensive consultation was used to identify the scope for improving institutional structures and governance processes under the planned forestry reforms; notably those relating to the Kenya Forest Service and the participation of communities and the private sector in forest management. The SEA recommends ways of enhancing the opportunities for environmental and social gain, which already form part of the overall goal of the Forests Act (World Bank, 2002) on one hand. However, the SEA did not put into perspective the plight exposed to PWDs in accessing the rich biodiversity of the forest terrain.

On the other hand, KWS is mandated to conserve and manage Kenya's iconic wildlife and the world-famous National parks and reserves for the benefit of the present and future generations. This responsibility includes ensuring wildlife remains safe and abundant; continues to attract visitors from across the globe and provides sustained benefits to the people. To succeed in this endeavor, the ecological integrity of wildlife habitats, including National parks and reserves and the ecosystems in which they exist must remain healthy and whole. This necessitates KWS to collaborate with communities, landowners and other partners to ensure the survival of wildlife outside protected areas (Kenya Wildlife Service, 2019). Nonetheless, the provisons of the KWS mandate is deficient of disability mainstraming policies in terms of PWDs access and when training the KWS staff who manage various National parks. Whereas both instutions have made deliberate efforts to instutute facilitative governnace mechanisms for access to the protected areas by vistiors and tourists, lack of inclusive amenities to cater for the diverse needs of PWDs remain unaddressed. This is due to exiting policy gaps as well as lack of adequate finance to implement disability mainstreaming within the forest terrains. Besides, there is limited research on disability mainstreamed forest terrains access by PWDs not only in Kenya but also within the African continent.

Objectives of the study

1. To establish the assistive devices used by the Kenya Forest Service and to aid PWDs to access forest terrains in Kenya.
2. To assess the existing forestry policy legislation used to mainstream disability in Kenya.
3. To explore the challenges in instituting and implementing forest inclusion standards in Kenya.

Methodology/approach

To ascertain the level of inclusive management and cooperation of forests for persons with disabilities in Kenya an online survey was carried and Google documents was used. Purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure institutions mandated with the management and preservation of forests participated. The survey was also shared on various social media platforms for ease of access by the target respondents.

Results

Demographics of the Respondents: Gender of the Respondents

The respondents comprised 50% female, 41.7% male, and 8.3% respondent described their gender as X. The majority of the respondents were female 50% implying that the conservation sector has more female employees as compared to male employees attributed to gender mainstreaming and equity on job distribution.

Age of Respondents

The respondents' age varied from 16.7% respondents between 21-30 years, 41.7%, 31-40 years, 33.3%, 41-50 years, 8.3%, 51-60 years, and no respondent was aged 60 years and above.

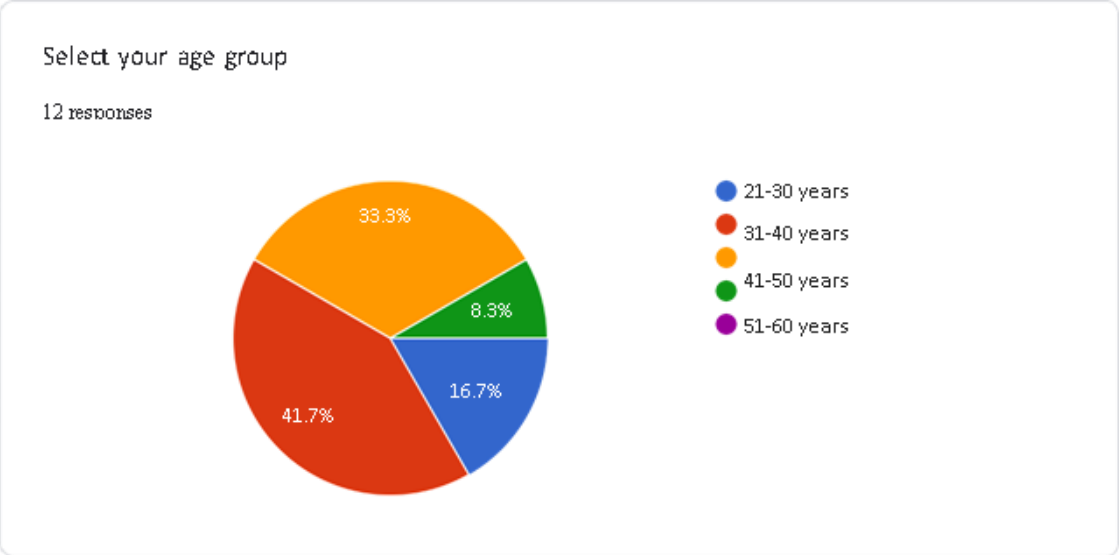

Fig 1: Age of the respondents

The figure above illustrates ages 31-40 years as the predominant category with (41.7%). It comprised of young adults who were developing their careers and settled in their present occupation which they perceived as satisfying for their personal development. On the other hand, (0%) of the respondents ranged from 51-60 represented those who have worked for several years and are seeking retirement from service as mandated for all civil servants to retire at the age of 60.

To establish the assistive devices used by the Kenya Forest Service and to aid PWDs to access forest terrains in Kenya

To evaluate whether respondents were knowledgeable on the existence of PWDs population within the forestry sector, 54.5% indicated they agreed while 45.5% were neutral. Majority of the respondents 54.4% indicated they were knowledgeable that there exists a population PWDs within the forestry ecosystem. This indicates that the respondents are conversant with the mandate of the National Council for Persons with Disabilities in Kenya which is the body that regulate and advocates on the rights of PWDs in Kenya. Importantly, the Constitution of Kenya 2010, makes provision for PWDs as population who deserve equitable treatment through a multi-sectorial approach.

Table 1: Knowledge on the existence of PWDs population

Knowledge on the PWDs population	No. of respondents
Strongly agree	54.5%
Agree	45.5%
Neutral	0
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0
Total	100%

To ascertain which assistive devices facilities are available within the National park for persons with disabilities 54.4% of the respondents indicated none, 9.1% wheelchairs, 9.1% white canes, 9.1% hearing aids, 4.5% accessible buildings, 4.6% receptionist with sign language knowledge, 9.1% crutches. This indicates the need for policy review to mainstream disability within the forests terrain. Furthermore, there is lack of information on inclusion on how PWDs can freely enjoy the flora and fauna within the diverse natural landscapes. Besides, there are misconceptions to what level of participation that PWDs can engage in regards to accessing ecotourism sites.

Assistive devices are external devices that are designed, made, or adapted to assist PWDs to perform particular tasks. Majority of PWDs depend on assistive devices to enable them to carry out daily activities and participate actively and productively in community life. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Articles 4, 20 and 26, request countries to promote the availability of appropriate devices and mobility aids and provide accessible information that is translated into other readable formats. Accordingly, the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for PWDs also calls upon States to support the development, production, distribution and servicing of assistive devices and equipment and the dissemination of knowledge about them. To this end, KWS and KFS ought to design a strategy through which they can invest in more assistive devices for social inclusion within the forestry ecosystem.

Table 2: Accessible assistive devices in forest terrains

Assistive device	No. of respondents
Wheelchairs	9.1%
White canes	9.1%
Hearing aids	9.1%
Access to the building	4.5%
Receptionist with sign language knowledge	4.6%
Crutches	9.1%
None	54.5%
Total	100%

When asked on their level of competency on Kenya sign language (KSL) 45.5% of the respondents indicated that they did not know, 36.6% beginners and 18.1% slightly knowledgeable. There is an urgent need for KSL training to be incorporated in the training curriculum of all the staff of KFS and KWS with the aim to reduce communication barriers that may arise in line of duty.

Table 3: Competency levels on Kenya sign language

Level of competency of sign language	No. of respondents
Very knowledge	0.0
Slightly knowledgeable	18.1%
Beginner	36.4%
I don't know	45.5%
Total	100%

To assess the existing forestry policy legislation used to mainstream disability in Kenya

When asked whether the respondents have operational policies on mainstreaming disability within the forest terrains, 41.7% respondents agreed, whereas 41.7% respondents disagreed while 17.7% were not certain. This implies the need for internal stakeholders on operational institutional policies.

When asked to state the name of the disability mainstreaming policy and year of enactment pertaining to inclusion, the respondents indicated that there is an existing draft, other respondents indicated that they were not knowledgeable on specific internal policies on inclusive forest terrain access and even though they did exist, they are yet to be enacted. This necessitates developing mechanisms for information sharing on the available institutional information to enhance internal knowledge sharing that can go along well in ensuring that all and sundry are familiar within existing policies. Importantly, by virtue that the internal staff are the service providers to the visitors of the National parks and ecotourism sites equipping them with requisite information is a form of empowerment that strengthens both institutional and personnel capacity on information sharing on one hand. On the other hand, if the information is not shared, it creates information asymmetry which stifles quality service delivery of the organizations.

Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that there are existing policy gap that impede disability mainstreaming within forest terrains in Kenya. Therefore, the study recommends that KFS and KWS develops an inclusion plan or strategy that makes the provision of assistive devices for PWDs such as white canes, wheelchairs and sign language interpreters when they are within the forest terrains. Importantly, the infrastructural amenities within the forest terrains ought to be inclusive with universal designs besides information being translated in other readable formats such as braille and audio to facilitate equitable accessibility of PWDs in all recreation facilities. Critically, all the staff of both institutions need to undertake basic disability mainstreaming training to be equipped with proficiencies to handle and manage PWDs with diligence and decorum.

Conclusions/ wider implications of findings

In conclusion, this study concludes that KFS and KWS should carry out access audits at all the forest terrains in Kenya to establish the barriers faced by PWDs. What is more, KFS and KWS personnel require training on assistive devices to ensure that they are able to provide accurate information, referral and education for the users. Essentially, KFS and KWS ought to create structures that will enable PWDs access transport not just within the forest terrains but also to and from the site. This requires collaboration and partnerships local transport providers. Consequently, the health and safety of PWDs ought to be put into consideration by ensuring that all spaces have signage such as foot paths and picnic areas. Lastly, PWDs need to be sensitized

on the available outdoor spaces that they can access indiscriminately. This implies that KFS and KWS can carry out outreach programmes with local organizations that deal with disability mainstreaming to promote information sharing on the accessibility of the forest reaction amenities.

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