

Community-Led Road Maintenance Initiative: Lessons and Successes from Tharaka Nithi County Road Marshals Initiative

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Introduction

Tharaka Nithi County, spanning 2609 km² and home to a population of 393,177 residents, is blessed with fertile lands due to its abundant rainfall. However, this blessing also comes with the challenge of maintaining clear roads and drainage systems, as fallen tree logs often obstruct them, rendering them impassable.



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In response to this ongoing issue, the Tharaka Nithi County Government has taken proactive measures through the Tharaka Nithi Road Marshal initiative, which involves the community in road maintenance. Specifically, the Department of Roads collaborates with residents to clear roads, especially after rainfalls, and to unclog drainage systems. Annually, the County allocates more than Ksh200 million to road maintenance, a costly endeavor.

Recognizing that this problem is recurrent due to the County's geographical location, mountainous-hilly-valley terrain, which experiences heavy rainfall, the County devised a strategy to train local youth in various road maintenance techniques, including log removal and drainage clearance. This initiative has significantly reduced the number of complaints to County offices regarding blocked roads.

Now, residents contact their respective road marshal leaders in each area, who coordinate efforts to keep the roads clean. To ensure consistent cleanliness, road marshals are required to work twice a week, regardless of the weather conditions. To further motivate their involvement, the County provides each road marshal with a stipend of Ksh 3,000 as an incentive for their efforts.



Road marshals in Tharaka Nithi County

Implementation of the practice

The implementation of this practice began with the Tharaka Nithi County Government's efforts to engage the public in September 2021, seeking input on ways to address community needs. Among the various concerns raised during this public participation, road maintenance and drainage issues emerged as the most pressing. Tharaka Nithi County comprises 15 wards, each interconnected by roads leading to schools, towns, markets and facilitating trade between sub-counties. While not all roads were tarmacked, they all faced similar challenges during rainy seasons.

In April 2023, the County Government initiated a comprehensive training program for local youth on drainage cleaning and road maintenance. This training was conducted across all sub-counties, with the aim of empowering these road marshals to become environmental stewards within their communities. The County provided essential equipment, such as wheelbarrows, safety gear, cleaning tools, and brooms to enable road marshals to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

In July 2023, the County officially launched the Road Marshal initiative, establishing a database comprising 700 trained road marshals. To sustain this initiative, the County allocates a monthly budget of Ksh2.5 million, ensuring that resources are available to support the program. Additionally, the County outlined its road maintenance strategy in compliance with the Tharaka Nithi County Assessment Act of 2021, ensuring consistency in road upkeep across the entire County.

To further ensure the long-term viability of this initiative, Tharaka Nithi County has incorporated it into the County Integrated Development Plan, emphasizing its commitment to ongoing road maintenance and environmental stewardship.



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Results of the practice

Youth Empowerment: The initiative provides local youth with training and employment opportunities. The stipends offered to road marshals serve as an incentive for their participation and contribute to their financial well-being.

Improved Road Maintenance: The initiative has led to better road maintenance practices across the County, making it easier for residents to travel between different sub-counties, schools, markets and towns.

Enhanced Environmental Stewardship: By involving local youth as road marshals, the initiative has promoted environmental consciousness within the community. This not only keeps the roads clean but also contributes to a cleaner and healthier local environment.

Community Engagement: The program has fostered a sense of community engagement and ownership. Residents actively participate in maintaining their infrastructure, leading to a greater sense of responsibility and pride in their surroundings.

Lessons learnt

Community Engagement is Key: Involving the community in identifying and addressing local issues is essential. Conducting Public participation in 2021 helped identify road maintenance and drainage as top priorities.

Local Empowerment: Empowering residents, especially youth, by providing them with training and tools can lead to more sustainable solutions to community challenges.

Environmental Stewardship: Promoting environmental consciousness within the community not only benefits the roads but also contributes to a cleaner and healthier local environment.

Cost-Efficient Solutions: Investing in training and equipping local road marshals proved to be a cost-effective approach compared to solely relying on county government resources for road maintenance.

Conclusion

The Tharaka Nithi County Road Marshal initiative serves as a shining example of how community engagement, empowerment, and innovative approaches to local challenges can yield significant benefits. By involving residents in the maintenance of roads and drainage systems, the initiative has not only improved infrastructure but also fostered environmental stewardship, economic growth, and community ownership.

The lessons learned from this initiative underscore the importance of collaboration between local governments and their communities in addressing pressing issues. It demonstrates that investing in the training and empowerment of local youth can result in cost-effective and sustainable solutions.





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