

JULY 2023

# YOUTH PULSE

**'WE'RE TRYING TO BE HEARD':**

Young Kenyans reflect on  
price-hikes, protests, and politics

**SHUJAAZ  
INC.**

## INTRODUCTION

On 20th March 2023, seven months after the most peaceful national election in decades, thousands of Kenyans took to the streets to take part in nationwide protests. After a hiatus, a second wave of protests began on 7th July 2023 in response to the cost-of-living crisis and the recent [2023 Finance Act](#).

While Kenya has a history of using protest as a tool to drive change, this wave of demonstrations has sparked concern across Kenya with news outlets quick to highlight the economic repercussions of on-going disruption. But what about the impact on young people? What impact have these protests had on their livelihoods and on their fragile relationship with democracy and governance?

To find out, Shujaaz Inc ran a number of dipstick national SMS surveys and a series of group discussions and in-depth interviews with young people, to hear their reflections on the protests.

This brief 'pulse-check' paper builds on the data and insights we shared in our [flagship Young & Kenyan digital report](#) and unpacks young people's experiences and perspectives on this period of unrest. What surfaces is a generation of young people who see these protests as a 'last resort' response to an ever-worsening economic crisis. In the pages that follow, young people assert their belief in the values of democracy, their desire to participate and they make a clear, simple demand: to be heard.

# THE BIG PICTURE

## YOUNG KENYANS ON THE CONTEXT BEHIND THE PROTESTS



Now my life is in the hands of chance because we are suffering more than under the previous government.

**MALE, 19, MUKURU**



I do not even know when I had tea. Things are tough.

**FEMALE, 22, KIBERA**



We have no say at all.

**MALE, 24, KAWANGWARE**



When it comes to numbers, we're the largest. But when it comes to decisions, our voices don't count, because elders think they know everything.

**FEMALE, 24, MUKURU**



The government. The voice of the youth is not heard here. The youths of this nation are seen as bad people. And that's not cool.

**MALE, 24, KAWANGWARE**



We don't feel as part of this community.

**MALE, 21, MUKURU**

### THE ECONOMIC CRISIS HAS HIT HARD

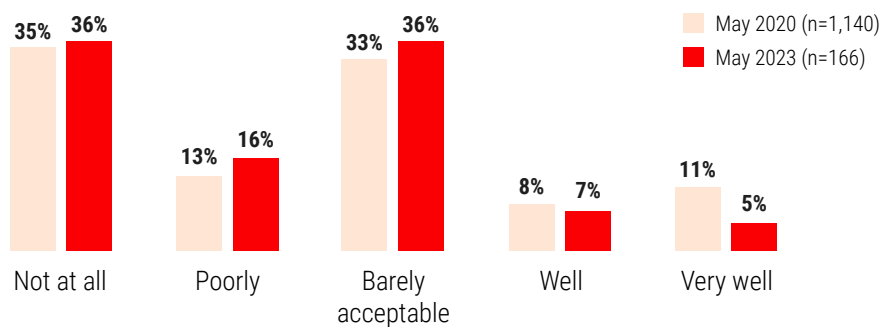
As we tracked in our [Young & Kenyan report](#), young people began reporting a fall in average earnings and a rise in the cost of basics back in 2018. In the last year, the [price](#) of maize flour has doubled and young people say their day-to-day financial security has declined sharply. They report that businesses are shutting, and that they're unable to keep hustles going – and unimaginable before, even the very basics like tea are becoming unaffordable.

Young people feel like they've been left to navigate this worsening economic crisis alone and amongst those they blame, is the government. Several groups cited a perceived government detachment from their reality as one of the causes of the economic decline and are feeling let down and disappointed:

### THIS GENERATION FEEL UNHEARD

In a dipstick SMS poll (N=166), only 12% of 15-24-year-old Kenyans said they felt their voices, struggles and hopes are being reflected by current policies and regulations. That's down from 19% (or a 37% decrease), compared to a similar SMS poll conducted in May 2020 – at the peak of the COVID-19 restrictions.

### HOW WELL ARE YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES, STRUGGLES AND HOPES REFLECTED IN THE CURRENT POLICIES AND REGULATIONS?



As well as feeling unheard, the young people we spoke to said they feel ignored, mistrusted, and even vilified by elders in their communities. They were quick to point out the paradox here: they form the majority of the country's population (three in five Kenyans are under 25), but they feel like the least represented group in the national conversation.

# THE PROTESTS

## YOUNG KENYANS' PERSPECTIVE



We are already on fire – demonstration is the right way to speak.

**MALE, 23, KIBERA**



We thought participating in the demonstrations would help reduce the high cost of living.

**FEMALE, 24, MUKURU**



Many people would like to participate, but they fear the teargas and the police.

**MALE, 23, KIBERA**



The Constitution allows us to hold demonstrations. So, I was asking myself why the police started throwing tear gas?

**MALE, 24, KAWANGWARE**



I didn't expect it to be like this. I was expecting a peaceful one.

**MALE, 23, KAWANGWARE**



First, I got angry, then I saw a fight in my mind, people demonstrating for the fall in prices of things. Some got hurt, others were arrested and beaten, and so this whole story made me angry at my own country.

**MALE, 23, KAWANGWARE**

### YOUNG KENYANS SAY PROTESTS ARE A RESPONSE TO ECONOMIC CRISIS, BUT POLITICAL TACTICS ALSO PLAY A ROLE

The young people we spoke to were aware of the political context of the call to protest. For most participants however, these demonstrations are seen as a 'last resort'; an attempt to get their voices heard during a fast-declining economic crisis. They said the immediate goal of the protests was to raise the alarm about the lack of employment opportunities, the challenges facing entrepreneurs, and the unsustainable hikes in the cost of living. In the longer-term, young people said they hoped the demonstrations would lead to better political representation for their generation and greater youth involvement in governance.

In our Nairobi based group discussions, almost half of the participants said they have joined in the protests and that they knew somebody who took part in one or more of the protests.

Some participants expressed scepticism about the protests: they feared their peers were being used by the opposition party to further their challenge to the election result – under the guise of protesting the cost of living.

In a dipstick SMS survey (N=164), 60% of respondents believed that social media and fake news were at least partially responsible for the protests.

### PROTESTS SEEN AS A PART OF DEMOCRACY

Whether they'd protested or not, most participants in our group discussions were clear: protests are part of a democracy. The Kenya constitution allows for protests once a permit is granted under the Public Order Act. While it is unclear if all protests were legal, many young people were keen to highlight that the right to protest is guaranteed under Kenya's constitution. The people who'd taken part in demonstrations were seen as 'good citizens' who were 'defending' democratic rights – and fighting for young people's voices to be heard. As for those who were hesitant to join, young people expressed sympathy. They understood there were real dangers in taking to the streets, and also understood that some of their peers might have been confused as to what the protests were about, due to conflicting reports about the election results. Conversely, those who'd decided to stay home, with no intention of joining protests, were seen less sympathetically. Some participants suggested those people were likely to be wealthy, connected to the government, or with no understanding of how ordinary people are struggling. Others highlighted that people who chose to stay at home were unlikely to believe that protests can achieve change.

### VIOLENCE AND POLICE RESPONSE SHOCKED YOUNG PEOPLE

While the protests appear to have been mostly peaceful, some protests have become violent. Many young people reported being shocked, saddened, scared and even heartbroken by the on-the-ground reality of the demonstrations, having been hopeful for peaceful protests and surprised when violence broke out. Others said they wanted peace but knew it would be unlikely. Many however were startled by the level of aggression – including tear gas and live gunfire – directed towards protesters by the police. [Reports](#) of excessive force, including lethal force by riot police, have been widespread.

# WHERE NEXT

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE



The demonstrations were successful because we have more youth participating. We have awakened.

**MALE, 21, MUKURU**



At least the protests made the government understand a bit. The government will understand what we, the youth, need because the majority of us are suffering.

**FEMALE, 22, MUKURU**



Yes, the government agreed to a dialogue, but there's no change to be seen.

**FEMALE, 22, KIBERA**



The hustle was disrupted. Families suffered because they were dependent on one family member's job.

**MALE, 21, MUKURU**

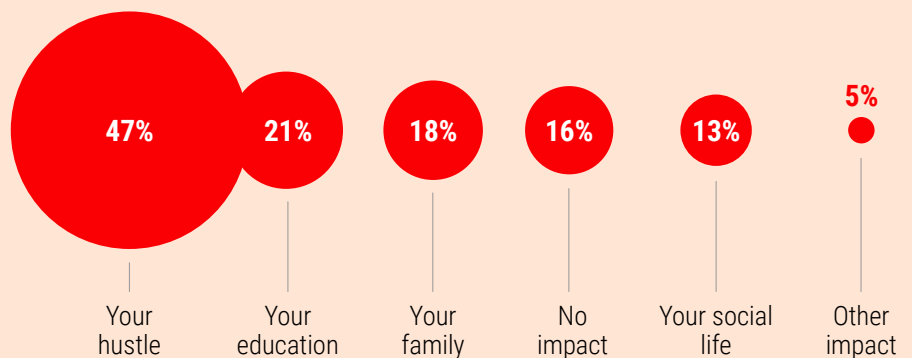
### PROTESTS CAPTURE ATTENTION – BUT HAVEN'T CREATED CHANGE

Most young people in our discussions believed that, at the very least, demonstrating caught the attention of those in power. It showed the authorities that, united, young people have a powerful collective voice – and they want to be heard. Nonetheless, young Kenyans said they are aware – and saddened by the fact – that the protests are yet to affect any real economic or political change. Some are sceptical that change will ever come.

### DISRUPTION CONCERNS YOUNG KENYANS – BUT A FIFTH WOULD PROTEST AGAIN

Many young people said they believed in the necessity of the protest, but they were also concerned about the disruption to their lives. In a time of economic hardship, young people particularly felt the impact on their livelihoods. Only 16% of respondents to our dipstick survey (N=212) said the demonstrations didn't impact their lives, while almost half reported a negative impact on their businesses.

### WHAT PART OF YOUR LIFE WAS MOST AFFECTED BY RECENT PROTESTS



Despite the disruption, 21% of respondents to our survey (N=212) in May 2023 said they would take part in future demonstrations. Why? Young Kenyans said they couldn't see any other way to engage in governance.

**//** I'm sad, but when I see the sun rise, I still have hopes that Kenyans will not get tired of fighting for their rights. When the time is right, we will march on the roads without waiting for politicians to ask us to. It was heart-breaking to imagine that it existed, but the protests gave us hope because we saw the government cooperating in some areas.

**MALE, 21, MUKURU**

# WHERE NEXT

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE



We are still sad and tired. We want our Kenya back, we want our economy back.

**FEMALE, 22, MUKURU**



Demonstrations only prove that Kenya needed a political reform; demonstrations only prove that the common resident does not have a voice, I even wonder why it is in the constitution.

**FEMALE, 22, NAIROBI**



Our ancestors fought for us to enjoy freedom, so it's our responsibility to rise for our children and ensure they don't become slaves in their own land. Every good thing comes with a price. It's all about sacrifice.

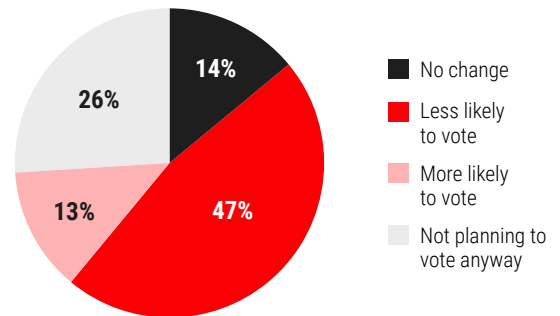
**MALE, 21, MUKURU**

### YOUNG PEOPLE 'WANT THEIR KENYA BACK'

In the [Youth Pulse](#) report that we co-published with UNDP's MAPEMA consortium and the NCIC following the 2022 elections, we highlighted that a largely peaceful and well-managed election might have helped to restore the trust of many young Kenyans in the governance structures of their country. In a dipstick poll in October 2022, over half of respondents said that they had more trust in the electoral process as a result of the election.

However, early indications suggest that the protests and growing financial insecurity might be eroding those gains. Almost half of the respondents to our dipstick survey (N=157) said the protests had made them less likely to vote in the next election.

#### ARE YOU MORE OR LESS LIKELY TO VOTE IN THE NEXT ELECTIONS BECAUSE OF THE RECENT PROTESTS?



### YOUNG PEOPLE BELIEVE IN DEMOCRACY – AND WANT A ROLE IN MAKING IT WORK

As we tracked in our [Young & Kenyan report](#), despite the instability over the last seven years, an average of [7 in 10 young people have consistently](#) said they believe their generation has a role to play in shaping the governance of Kenya. In 2022, 82% of 15-24-year-olds said they had something to contribute to their communities. A far cry from the 'apathetic youth' stereotype, this generation deeply believe in the values of democracy. In our recent conversations, young people evidenced their enthusiastic engagement with – and understanding of – the principles of democracy. While a small minority expressed hope, many said their view was clear: this generation believe in democracy – but they don't trust it's working right now.

#### THEORY VS REALITY: YOUNG KENYANS ON DEMOCRACY

THEORY	REALITY
"Democracy is the power of the people for the people by the people."	"Kenya now lacks democracy."
"Democracy is being governed by the majority with an ear to the minority."	"The government is a mess, and even the villages we live in are a mess."
"Democracy means members of state participating in rule making."	"Corruption, self-centeredness, tribalism."
	"I feel that this is a growing government with new ideals, and I am certain that good days are yet to come."

# WHERE NEXT

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE



They say our points don't make sense and that theirs are more reasonable. We are not listened to.

**MALE, 24, KAWANGWARE**



We want the judiciary and other organizations to reach out to the youths and educate us.

**MALE, 21, MUKURU**



The youths are the future of this country, so matters about the elections really matter to us.

**MALE, 23, KIBERA**



We are the nation of tomorrow.

**MALE, 24, KAWANGWARE**



Yes, there are many ways, like writing memorandums about the situation. When we hold conversations in the community, we should invite leaders.

**FEMALE, 24, KAWANGWARE**

### **'WE ARE THE NATION OF TOMORROW' YOUNG PEOPLE WANT OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE, THEY'RE CALLING ON THE GOVERNMENT TO LISTEN AND MAKE CHANGE**

This generation is aware they will shape Kenya's future, but they feel locked out of the conversation. They see demonstrations as their last resort to make their voice heard.

In our conversations with them, they reported that what their generation really wants is stability and to contribute to a better future for their country. They are calling for access to a variety of community-level and national platforms; engagement structures that give them the opportunity to get their voices heard by their leaders; and for opportunities to contribute to formal politics and their communities. Those platforms must directly connect to government, and to policy makers.

As one of our respondents said, "We are the nation of tomorrow." Young Kenyans need to feel heard.

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report relies on several sources of primary and secondary data.

## **New research**

- Dipstick SMS national survey with Shujaaz audience, May 2023, N=234.
- Focus group discussions with 20 Shujaaz audience members (9 male and 11 female), conducted in May 2023 in Nairobi (Mukuru, Kibera and Kawangware).
- In-depth interviews with 3 Shujaaz audience members, conducted in May 2023.

## **Previous research**

- Shujaaz annual national surveys of young Kenyans (15–24 years old):
  - Wave 2017 (N=2,923), January–May 2017; Wave 2018 (N=2,020), February–March 2018; Wave 2019 (N=2,020), April 2019; Wave 2021 (N=2,015), December 2020–January 2021; Wave 2022 (N=2,006), November 2021–January 2022.
  - The sample for the survey was drawn using a stratified multistage approach. The Census data (2009 for Waves 2017–2019 and 2019 for Wave 2021–2022) on Kenyans aged 15–24 was used as the sampling framework. Proportional-to-population-size calculations were carried out to allocate the number of primary sampling units (PSUs) in each of the 47 counties. A total of 200+ secondary sampling units (SSUs) were selected randomly from the list of SSUs in each county. A total of 10 PSUs/households were selected in each SSU using a random route technique. Only one respondent was interviewed in each household.
  - The participants in the survey were male and female, both urban and rural.



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