

# Exhibiting Archaeology: A Qualitative Study on Museums and Public Education

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## Abstract

The museum has played a vital role in educating the public about their past through the use of its exhibits. Museums through their programs provide archaeological public education. Museums' role in protecting cultural heritage cannot be underrated. In this study, data was collected using observation and structured interviews from the public who visited the museum on various occasions. Also, key informant interviews were another key method of obtaining data that was used on museum staff. The research findings indicate that archaeological exhibits are essential in communicating information about the discipline of archaeology. Secondly, museum programs convey information about archaeology to the public. Lastly, museums act as a purveyor of cultural heritage information and as a custodian and protector of heritage. In conclusion, museums have a role in ensuring that exhibitions are well displayed to communicate information about archaeology. The stakeholders in archaeology have a role in partnering with museums in developing programs that are of value to the public. Public education programs should be developed to suit the different segments of the public from the school going children to senior citizens in the country. Museums should be well nurtured by the public and the government in order to protect our cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Exhibit, Museum programs, Public education, Legislation.

## Introduction

Museum is an establishment whose main function involves the preservation (conservation) of a collection of pieces which are of cultural, historical, artistic or scientific significance. A museum has been the main purveyor of archaeological public education. Museums display scientific, historical, cultural and artistic treasures through their exhibits that are essential in shaping our society. Exhibits communicate more about our communities, nation, past cultures. In the absence of this, such noble stories would have faded away. This enables us to understand and appreciate our history creating a sense of pride and patriotism as we appreciate the achievements of the peoples of the past. One of the main ways through which museums convey these messages is through exhibits. Therefore, the museums need to deliver exhibitions through a network of avenues as well as by use of new and emerging technologies like the internet other than relying on the traditional modes of display. This will broaden the catchment area so as to reach the target groups.

A lot of museum scholars have argued that exhibitions are basic services that are performed in the museums. Museum exhibitions are a channel of public communication that provides the education experience that generates the sense of the self-interest and their environment by making the visitors be aware, interested, and value many things about themselves and the world. The museums

as cultural institutions collect, document and preserve artefacts as cultural assets and also display and interpret them to the public through exhibitions to the public (see also Dawson, 2006).

In the recent past, many museums embraced ways such as audio-visual shows, multimedia programs, simulation and other experiences making the museum exhibitions more of entertainment. This interactive experience in turn stimulates desire of visitors towards their environment, feeling a sense of excitement and enthusiasm. Such transformative experiences that stem from the authenticity of the exhibits lead to effective learning only if the museum visitors are having fun. This makes museum exhibits a primary method of education. Exhibitions need to educate the visitor about their subject matter. Museum exhibitions are educational and their educational value is important for their success. According to Lord (2001), museum exhibitions are meant to change certain aspects of the visitors' interests, attitudes or values as effectively as possible. Dawson (2006) also stressed that museum exhibitions as a medium of communication has brought about to a sort of arise, to popularize the visitor experience with thoughtful and complex types of touch screen interactives with other new ways of relaying museum subjects.

This paper addresses the importance of archaeological museum exhibits in public education. The study was conducted at the Nairobi National Museum in Kenya which is the largest museum in the country. Primary data was collected using observation and structured interviews from the public who visited the museum on various occasions. Also, key informant interviews were another key method of obtaining data that was used on museum staff. Based on the collected and analyzed data, the results and discussions in the next subsection are presented.

### Museums and Educational Purpose: a Discussion

This section is presented into two themes; Museums for educational purposes and Protection of the Museums as follows.

#### Museums for educational purposes

The study found that museums remain the focal point of disseminating archaeological knowledge to the public. Through the members of the public, it was revealed that understandable information can be obtained by visiting museums. The findings also depict that education in a museum also gives a wide methodology that individuals can use to gain an understanding and appreciation of a collection. Through one of the key informants (Museum staff) posited;

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*Museums allow individuals to search for collections with the intention of view, teach or be entertained. They are establishments that acquire, preserve, exhibit, conserve and disseminate relics and specimens that form part of the legacy that belongs to the society. Most of them keep these items for display through exhibits which could be permanent or temporary ones in public museums (KII 02).*

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The findings imply that museums provide learning opportunities by providing visitors with unique opportunities to explore various concepts of social sciences. This makes a museum a service provider of knowledge to the public or the general society. It does this through; Thus, it can be stated that museum objects as belonging to the cultural and natural historical heritage of a country. Museum collections entail a group of artefacts that holds the history of a people and are preserved by museum curators who make them accessible to the public viewing.

In another interview with members of the public, one informant noted that museums are unique in the sense that they provide real stuff that reflects past livelihood. He posited;

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*...The exhibits are in form of physical objects that are displayed in trays as specimens while others can be watched via the internet. However if one wants the real thing, visiting a museum is the best option. In museums, we (visitors) get opportunities to get closer to museum exhibits, see them, touch them and this harnesses the process of learning (KII 05).*

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The findings show that in Kenya, just as it is the case in other countries, museums have varying aims ranging from serving as research centers to serving the public. Museums exhibitions provide the means of conveying information about archaeology to the students and the general public even those outside the profession. This is done in order to promote stewardship and make archaeology relevant to society. These findings align with Greenhill's work that in terms of education, visiting a museum can bring what is taught in schools to life by observing exhibits (Greenhill 2007, 200). Thus, learning directly from objects provides firsthand information and experience to the learners. Museum visits can make learning enthusiastic among children, thereby the chance of success for those children that face difficulties in learning in school environment. This makes a museum a service provider of knowledge to the public or the general society It does this through; Thus, it can be stated that museum objects as belonging to the cultural and natural historical heritage of a country.

In a different related study by Hopper –Greenhill (2005), the vital functions of museums are detailed. The authors opine that museums are institutions that are in place with the intention of helping out the public most importantly in their education. Therefore, they are unique educational institutions complementing the traditional school and college system and belonging to the sphere of informal learning. They expand the process of the formal education and provide various possibilities of learning, entertaining and debating. Museums present material culture to be viewed. By the use of objects of the past to generate knowledge they enlighten the minds of the public. Museums collect objects, display them and illustrates information on these objects therefore produce interpretation for visitors.

Hooper-Greenhill further argues that visitors deploy their own interpretive strategies to make sense of the objects. Teaching with objects enhances the school curriculum as these materials engage students who do not respond to written materials. These objects facilitate students to relate with their environment, their culture as well as other cultures. Besides, using of objects reinforces the connection between sensory perceptions and learners' subjects, thus developing new levels of interest. This creates students with higher levels of visual literacy. Museum objects when used for teaching purposes can help students understand the topics presented as well as offering leadership skills amongst their peers. Objects are a powerful tool that helps students develops a high level of reasoning (Hooper-Greenhill, 2005: 276). Besides, the presence of movable objects taken into classrooms means that the experience obtained by learning-changes becomes existential. This encourages students to develop their own questions about the objects they explore.

The current study also revealed that museum exhibits are designed to inspire, teach and delight visitors. The exhibits thereby enable the making of archaeology understandable to be engaged in the interpretational process of reading of the past by the distinct parties of the experts and the laymen. They are used as platforms for communication. One key museum staff as a key informant reported, "Museums can be used as venues to promote the continuing education of people at every age". The sentiments are in tandem with existing literature that details how individual visitors at the museum have freedom around the museum (Falk and Dierking 2000). As the public pay visit to the museum, they have a chance to speak with others while groups are able to have different experiences than their routine learning experience

The study showed that museums are centres of research findings dissemination. One of the museum staff posted;

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*Archaeologists get opportunities to present papers at archaeological conferences. Proper archaeological resource management is always at the centre of public archaeology. This is a branch of archaeology which mainly focuses on the discovery, location, survey, appraisal, survey and documentation of different sites and artefacts in an effort to help in their conservation and protection and aid in management, visual representation, and utilization via mitigation measures (KII 01).*

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The findings imply that public lecturers, seminars and outreach programs in museums are powerful tools through which archaeological knowledge can be disseminated to the public. It offers a platform where professionals and nonprofessionals interact. Public outreach programs in archaeology are essential as they enhance interpretation of archaeology and its essence to the public it serves (Chiarulli, 2016: 551). Museum programs are developed by the education department of the museum. Hence, it is expected that the museum educator should be acquainted with the shifts in the education system of the country so as to harmonize his/her programs with the school curriculum. The programs engage visitors in learning experiences in providing essential information related to museums. If there are no educational programs, children and other visitors will not have such great opportunity to meet the collections of the museum and, therefore, to get acquainted with the history.

The success of the programs may vary depending on several elements such as the willingness of schoolteachers which in turn is complemented with preparations made by the teachers within class prior the visit to the museum. Furthermore, the attitudes and practices of museum educators or teaching staff and the geographical setting of the schools are instrumental to the effectiveness of the activities. In this case they are asserting that for a program to be effective there should be a compatibility between teachers and museum educators.

The potential of the museum educational programs is one of the targets and it is not to make specialists in particular field but to assist and direct the visitors to use the gained information in another perspective (Ceróne and Mz-Recaman, 1994). If the archaeologists were unable to clearly bring their research into perspective of the modern world, the modern world will continue to develop in such a way that will be able to do without the services of the archaeologists. So if archaeology, its methods and results are to be an important part of the discussion throughout this country, then the people undertaking this work have to consider what makes this science important (Fritz and Plog, 1970: 406).

The current study revealed that museums host educational programs that are very crucial in the exhibitions and the curators play a very important role in this process. The curators are regarded as the most appropriate individuals to provide recommendations to the educational department concerning the choice of programs and their appropriateness. However, their input into the programs is crucial because the curators are responsible for carrying out the right kind of research to favor the museums targeted users before the planning and execution of an exhibition. One of the key informants (museum staff) posited;

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*The curators are very much involved in the actual formulation of the education programs. This category of workers select, arrange, preserve and facilitate the viewing/ accessing of artistic and cultural artefacts. They are responsible for managing a set of displays in a museum. They also consult with the Educational Department regarding program themes and objects to be incorporated to the program, texts for presentation and question, new concepts, and ideas in program development and redevelopment (KII 04).*

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In general the curators seemed to have trust in what the Educational Department was doing. Both of them mentioned that curators are the experts of the exhibitions but they are more involved in making educational programs about it and their collection is a bit limited but very valuable. This is why the cooperation between curators and the Educational Department necessary to stimulate the creation of highly interesting and effective, children's educational programs.

Formerly, duties of museum officers were confined only to procuring, preserving, studying and exhibiting various forms of art artifacts, archeological relics, ethnological pieces, scientific and technological instruments, etc. Today's museum staff have a much broader functions for the visitors of the museum in the world that is considered to be developed (Prahbas, 1997). Besides just regarding the objects and admiring, enjoying them, people learn from them in museums and pass them over to the generations that follow. Museum archaeologists are critical because they are the centre of appreciation of archaeology and archaeological resources. Consequently, the functions of museum educators are quite simple since they are the ones that work directly with the public. They are the people that children and other visitors first interact with in their initial visit and are the people that children and other museum visitors listen and emulate during the educational activities.

Teachers are employed in a museum to ensure they provide information to the audience that is in the museum. Some of their duties entails developing and presenting tours and children and adult programs, training teachers, constructing classroom and continuing education materials, community education and volunteers. Not only do educators directly engage with members of the public, but they also consult other employees of the museum to determine the kind of exhibitions and programs to develop to make the exhibits more public- friendly. For this reason, it is crucial that these people are educated on the different educational programs that may be offered in a museum. It is evident that the main roles of the museum archaeologist are curation of artefacts and dissemination of archaeological information to the public.

Students and the general public gain a lot of information from the lectures and tutorials given by the museum staff on the archaeological past. They also interact with the museum staff as they address question to them on what they observed in the museum in relation to what they had learnt in schools. The education project at the museum encourages the teachers to bring children to the museum as this will strengthen and broaden their knowledge of the past. In Kenya, the museum remains the single most centers of archaeological heritage studies. It attracts those interested in learning about the past and most visitors are school children.

### Protection of the Museums

The second theme of this article is based on the need to protect the museums regarding the importance to educational purposes. The study found that it is essential to include the protection of the archaeological heritage in the list of one's moral duties towards oneself and others, not only for a museum. It is also a collective public responsibility. This finding is in congruence with existing literature that the remains of the past are unique and irreplaceable and therefore need to be protected for future generations (Carman, 2002: 99). The study, through one of the key informants, found that in the recent past, population pressure, increase in industrialization and economic demands have continuously threatened the survival of archaeological resources in many countries especially in Africa. The informant posited;

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*Without any doubt, African's archaeology heritage is on the decline. This has been in the disguise of development projects, theft or probably looting. Some local communities at times cut down trees to get stones for constructions while others graze their cattle on the sites and still others make foot paths and bridle ways on what they*

*consider as waste products from the heritage sites. In many a case, these communities are completely unaware of the destruction their activities have on archaeological sites and artifacts, monuments and other cultural icons around them (KII 07).*

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The findings imply that as a result of awareness in communities, the museums remain important assets that would of immense benefit to the country's socioeconomic and civilization advancement has been negated (Kyule, 2016). This context led to the formation of Archaeological heritage management (AHM) which is used to give protection, proper care and preservation of the backwards. This entailed development of measures to counter the destruction of archaeological resources through enactments of legislations and policies in national and international arenas. This obligation has to be recognized by respective legislation and provision of sufficient funds for the legislative activities and the support of legislative measures needed for the successful management and protection of heritage assets.

Carman (2002) appears to support the above contention on protecting the past. He posits that there is no such thing as 'private archaeology', positing that no single person can behave in a manner that becomes detrimental to the public's right to access ancient relics. In addition, Mc Gimsey (1972) further argues that such a view entails the notion that "archaeology is the public's right" and the need to have control over the private in order to protect the archaeological heritage from the public. While there is a difference from one country to the other in legislation for the protection of archaeological heritage; to ensure the public and private nature of archaeology, modern states introduce an official mechanism for the control. This system as reflected by laws and regulations, classifies, categorizes and groups of archaeological sites and objects commonly to define their status or treatment for protection. In this respect, the state administration is good for archaeology as a form of the public authority that constrains the private. The goal of archaeological heritage management should be the long-term preservation of all artifacts and historical structures and sites in their original context. The identification, registration and documentation of all record and artifact collections should also be included in this initiative. ([www.international.icomos.org](http://www.international.icomos.org)).

The study further reports that without the active participation of the public in archaeology, there cannot be public support for the subject. Similarly, without public support, there cannot be legislation to provide funding and means for the recovery and protection of a states or nations archaeological resource. This is in tandem with existing literature that mention that without such appreciation, there can be no protection of sites or of information contained in sites; there can be no well-written, enforceable antiquities legislation and no effective willing cooperation of those who control use of lands (McGimsey, 1972).

The findings on protection of the museums corroborate the existing literature where Kenya is believed to be among the few countries in Africa, which spearheads protective policy and legislation for heritage management. The first step taken by the country to preserve ancient monuments was through a passing of the Ancient Monuments Preservation Ordinance No. 17 of 1927. This law was soon succeeded by the Preservation of Objects of Archaeological and Paleontological Interest Ordinance, 1934. This was the only legal instrument for preservation of the nation's archaeological and paleontological resources until 1983 when it was repealed and enacted into the Kenyan Statute Books as the Mining (preservation of Archaeological and paleontological resources) Act Chapter 215 of laws of Kenya (ICOMOS, 1990).

The Kenyan Parliament also enacted the National Museums Act, Cap 216 that was aimed at controlling, managing, and developing National Museums. The Act defines the roles and responsibilities of the NMK and puts the task of studying the culture of the nation and interpreting it to the public into the



NMK's hands. It also re-affirms the country's desire and commitment to identifying, safeguarding and promoting the conservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage in Kenya, inclusive of pre-historic & historic periods, paleo-anthropological assets, archaeological sites and properties. A land and building, or any part thereof, whether or not containing structure of place of historical, archaeological or architectural interest, anything contained therein and every artifact and historical, archaeological or architectural structure in the physical possession of the NMK; (Republic of Kenya 2006).

The constitution of Kenya also has cap 216 that notes that no person should destroy, excavate or alter any archaeological site without an exploitation/excavation permit from the cabinet secretary. The ministry of education, science and technology through the Kenya National Council for Science and technology first grants a research license, section 27 on the other hand accords the cabinet secretary in charge of the NMK discretion in granting exploration-excavation permits on public and private lands (Republic of Kenya, 2006). Thus, the two documents are crucial to any form of field study an archaeologist wishes to conduct. The research license does not entitle a researcher to access land to explore/excavate, and more so, the cabinet secretary will not allow a researcher to proceed with explorations/excavations. This reduces risks of destruction of cultural and archaeological sites.

Notably, in the late 1997 the NMK put into practice the research and excavation permit by law to ensure individual research projects takes responsibility of the requirements of the conservation of the material excavated. The same by-law further demands that any researcher especially those undertaking cross border research projects, must be accompanied by NMK staff each time they are conducting field work research. The main purpose of this is to give the staff of NMK practical experience in field work training and in addition, to oversee, for NMK, the compliance by the researchers with the conditions of research permits. Most of the time, this staff consists of technicians with low academic achievements and therefore, generically restricted from understanding the modalities of the research they are supposed to oversee. These circumstances allow the odious researchers to either ignore or not fully adhere to any guidelines that may be hampering their project's interests in the field, as well as not record and in some cases spirit out of the country notable artifacts (Republic of Kenya, 2006).

## Conclusion

It came out clear that museum exhibits are crucial in passing information about archaeology discovered through education process to people outside of the profession. When the audience uses their vision through observation, this creates a relationship between the observer and the object stimulating a process of learning. Visitors also gain experience by engaging with objects stimulating future learning experience that can build inside and outside the museum. Museum displays with their contents on hold carry information about the past especially if they are well set to capture target groups. Exhibitions is one of the fascinating ways that many visitors find as an avenue of communication used by museums about the past since they get chances to touch, hold the exhibits with the direction of museum staff arousing their learning process. Exhibitions that are well arranged accompanied by information on every exhibit attracted many visitors as they were exposed to real stuff facilitating the process of learning.

Museums have a duty in ensuring that that exhibits are well displayed in order to communicate information about what they offer. Exhibits are among the major avenues that museums use to pass information about archaeology to people within and outside the profession. The art of seeing enables the visitors connect with the object resonating him or her to develop attachment with the object. These exhibits need to be displayed with information pertaining to them in simple and clear language that is understandable by all.

Programs run by museums are also very important in communicating information about archaeology to the public. These includes seminars, videos, talks among others that are geared towards letting the public know what the museum offers. Museum educators in Education Department are responsible for developing museum programs and activities. These staff have historical, cultural, and artistic education background to understand who their audiences are and tailor make these programs to suit all target groups. Curators are the people appropriate of doing research to meet the needs of the museums. They collaborate with museum Education Department in coming up with themes of programs, selection of objects to be used, texts for presentation as well as coming up with new concepts and ideas. The cooperation between curators and Education Department is vital for the development of interactive and stimulating activities to ensure creation of programs that are exciting to children and the public. In some instances, curators appear in introductory movies explaining historical concepts and show objects in exhibitions facilitating the process of learning.

Museum programs are essential in conveying information about archaeology to the public. Visitors felt motivated by listening to talks, seminars and presentations from museum staff as this offered an interactive platform for learning. In the context of education, it emerged that a museum is an institution that offers education experience across a wide range of variables museum programs being among them. These programs are categorized to those meant for school going children, college and university students and the general public. This ensured that all visitors in museums are able to obtain information about the materials showcased in museums in a language that is suitable for their levels. The programs that were meant for school going children entailed demonstrations and videos in ways that communicates to the age bracket in a more luring and appealing to them. The same case to adult visitors to the museum programs were more in form of seminars and talks in a more inclusivity ways that involved interactions with museum objects and staff.

Museum has a crucial role in the protection of cultural heritage of a people by providing access to important artifact/ exhibits that are used in the reconstruction of national identity and promotion of national culture. It has a central role in the protection of knowledge through creating a setting that allows people to learn experience and pass information. Nevertheless, it is evident that heritage conservation is everyone's business including the private sector. Organisations such as the travel and hospitality industries profit from heritage through tourist attractions and other heritage related business but they are not seen as significant players in conservation endeavours. This is a situation that apparently applies to most African countries including Kenya where apparently the private sector has not done anything or, at best, very little to support heritage conservation. Museums come up with legislation mechanisms and policies for the protection of both cultural and natural heritage. In these policies it stipulates the penalties and fines subjected to those who destroy heritage either intentionally or accidentally. The hefty penalties are likely to scare the general public against destruction of their heritage. The legislation mechanism put to safeguard cultural heritage in Kenya are weak while some are outdated. Some of the penalties for violators of these legislations are very lenient and many destroy heritage since they can be able to afford the penalties. Most African legislation tend to favour the concept of monument protection neglecting other heritage like built environment, landscape heritage, underwater heritage among others. This process tends to make conservation of heritage that does not fall under the category of monument.

## Recommendations

There is no doubt that museum exhibits are avenues of education to students and the public visiting museums. Exhibitions are contexts in which people become engaged with one another and 'talk' with products and artifacts. The interaction should be practiced at least in a controlled environment, for instance, by inviting the touch in certain artifacts including in a special exhibit or in a handling



tray. It also can offer samples of handling the materials which the object was produced from. Some of the recommendations may include the following; There is need to have children museums. If children are young and restricted by the fact that they have very little or in fact no information to work from, they can turn to children museum that is meant for students of their age. It is at this young age when the children are in their most formative age that museums should not lack in the intended contribution to education. Museums should display their exhibits accompanied by well described and clearly written information to suit any target groups visiting. Display of exhibits should be made colorful by use of warm colors and appealing to the eyes of visitors in order to attract attention and facilitate the process of learning. Museums should align themselves to meet the demands of its target groups.

Museum education department should aim at coming up with programs that are in line with school curriculum. They should do so in consultative joint committees of teachers and museum educationists. The museum educationists should offer lectures that are illustrated by use of slides, films, demonstrations and guided tours. Museums should have well-arranged special tours according to the needs of the visiting groups. The programs should for instance be aligned to the school syllabus and visits well planned ahead so that children can relate what is taught in class and what is on the ground. The museum educationist is expected to talk and act like a teacher so that children can feel the correlation of class studies and museum studies. Museum programs should be frequently revised to suit the changes of school curricula so that to be efficient in providing information to its audience. Additionally, collaboration between archaeologists and community should be encouraged in order to illuminate paths towards greater dissemination of information to the public. This can facilitate the process of learning through experience.

Museums have a duty of protecting cultural heritage since it's a reflection of a peoples' ways of life. Heritage is very important to national identity and is also the foundation upon which the culture of a people is developed. Cultural heritage once destroyed is not renewable and therefore there is need to protect it for future generations. Museums have come up with legislation mechanisms and policies for the protection of cultural heritage. These laws help define what is deserving of protection and enables museums develop the right mechanisms based on their particular features and needs. In these legislations, the laid laws stipulate what it takes to those who destroy heritage. These laws should be very crucial in sensitizing the public on the dos and do not's when interacting with heritage both tangible and intangible. Without legal protection, heritage will be eroded resulting in cultural and natural loss. Heritage is about what is handed down from one generation to the next; it's much linked to the present needs of the people and therefore needs to be preserved.

Protection of cultural heritage can be successful if all stakeholders are involved in formulating policies and protective legislation mechanisms. All communities have the right to conserve and develop their heritage and should be accorded unrestricted opportunities to do so. In instances where the legal framework is weak, there is need to review or completely have a change over in some of the legislations to suit the prevailing circumstances. This includes increasing penalties to hefty figures and those who fail to pay the fines to be jailed for long terms. This would scare people from destroying their heritage. Legislation relating to cultural heritage preservation needs to have local ownership as when communities feel there are part of these policies, they will find the essence of protecting their heritage.

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## Declarations

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical clearance by the University of Nairobi (NUMBER)

### Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.