



Leveraging Digital Technologies to Strengthen Local Democratic Governance: Opportunities, Best Practices, and Experiences from Shinyanga Municipal and Nzega District Councils

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper was to provide insights regarding digital technology as a tool for enhancing councillors to fulfil their mandate in democratic governance. Guided by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Participatory Governance Theory, the study explored how councillors and community members utilise digital tools to enhance communication, transparency, and citizen participation. A qualitative research approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with councillors, local government officials, and community representatives. Data from 30 participants were thematically analysed to identify key patterns in the use and impact of digital technologies on governance processes. The findings reveal that digital technologies offer significant opportunities for local councillors when effectively utilised. They enhance communication with constituents, facilitate timely access to information, improve responsiveness in service delivery, and expand spaces for citizen participation in decision-making. Emerging best practices, including shared digital units, mobile engagement platforms, and open data portals, demonstrate potential in bridging existing governance gaps. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, and data management gaps hinder effective adoption. The study concludes that digital technologies have significant potential to transform local governance if supported by enabling policies, capacity-building, and infrastructure development. It recommends that local governments institutionalise digital platforms in participatory processes, enhance digital literacy programmes, and develop clear data governance frameworks to ensure sustainability and inclusiveness in democratic governance.

Introduction

In recent years, new governance norms driven by digital technology have emerged, involving the use of the internet, digital networks, social media, and electronic platforms to enhance interactions not only between governments and citizens or businesses but also within local government systems (Sarwar et al., 2023). For local government councillors, these digital tools provide innovative ways to engage with communities, improve service delivery, and perform their roles more effectively, thereby promoting transparency, accountability, and participatory governance at the grassroots level (Xanthopoulou et al., 2023).



In Tanzania, local government councillors operate under the Local Government Acts No. 7 and 8 of 1982, which mandate them to promote democracy, ensure effective utilisation of resources, and guarantee the delivery of essential services such as water, education, health, and agriculture (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 1982a, b). To execute these responsibilities efficiently, councillors require effective mechanisms for interacting with and engaging citizens – mechanisms increasingly enabled by digital technologies. Research demonstrates that digital technology can significantly improve government-citizen communication and service delivery (Luciano et al., 2018).

Recognising this transformative potential, the Government of Tanzania actively supports the application of digital technologies across all development sectors. Various strategies have been developed to ensure effective implementation, including the National ICT Policy of 2016, which provides a framework for leveraging ICT to advance socio-economic development, enhance good governance, and transition toward a knowledge-based society (URT, 2016a). To operationalise these objectives, Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) have aligned with the evolving e-Government Policy, guided by the National ICT Policy. A specialised institution, the e-Government Agency (e-GA), was also established to coordinate, oversee, and promote e-Government initiatives while enforcing institutional frameworks across public institutions, including local government authorities (URT, 2022). The Tanzania Digital Economy Strategic Framework further underscores government efforts to promote good governance through technology (URT, 2024). Key initiatives, led by the Ministry of Communication and Transport, have expanded digital connectivity services, enabling telecom operations in both urban and rural areas. Early evidence indicates that local governments are beginning to integrate digital technologies into their operations. For example, Linje et al. (2022) and Hamad (2018) observed a growing adoption of mobile applications and web-based platforms in governance processes, facilitating citizen engagement. Similarly, Manda and Akhai (2017), in a study of Babati Town Council, found that ICT adoption positively transformed governance operations, with over 85% of respondents expressing strong support for technology-enhanced governance.

Despite these advances, studies indicate that many local government councillors have been slow to embrace digital technology, continuing to rely on traditional paper-based methods (Lupilya, 2015; Bialozyt, 2017). This resistance has hindered the adoption of digital governance, weakened collaboration and engagement, and limited effective information-sharing (Manda & Akhai, 2017; Ishengoma et al., 2018; Sarwar et al., 2023; Xanthopoulou et al., 2023; URT, 2024). Given their constitutional and legal mandates, councillors must incorporate digital tools, platforms, and content into their daily work rather than resisting these innovations.

Since digital governance is still emerging in many local contexts, it is critical to examine how digital technologies can enhance councillors' capacities to fulfil their roles effectively. Learning from global best practices and local experiences, this study seeks to provide insights into how technology can strengthen democratic governance at the local level. Accordingly, the central research question guiding this study is: **How can digital technology support councillors in fulfilling their mandates while promoting democratic governance at the local level?** The specific research questions are: What are the benefits of digital technology for improving democratic governance? And which initiatives constitute potential best-practice approaches to digitally enhanced governance?



Literature review

Theoretical perspective

This study is guided by a hybrid theoretical framework that combines the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Participatory Governance Theory to explain how digital technologies can strengthen local democratic governance in Tanzania.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), posits that the adoption and effective use of technology are primarily influenced by two factors: *perceived usefulness* and *perceived ease of use*. In the context of local governance, these factors determine whether councillors embrace digital tools such as e-governance platforms, mobile applications, and online feedback systems. Councillors are more likely to adopt these technologies if they perceive that the tools improve their effectiveness in delivering services, enhancing transparency, and engaging citizens, and if the tools are easy to use and integrate into their daily activities. TAM provides a conceptual lens to examine both the facilitators and barriers to technology adoption among local government councillors in Shinyanga Municipal and Nzega District Councils.

Complementing TAM, *Participatory Governance Theory* (Fung & Wright, 2001) emphasises the role of citizens in democratic decision-making processes and the importance of transparency, accountability, and inclusive participation. Digital technologies serve as mechanisms to operationalise participatory governance by enabling citizens to interact with local councils, provide feedback, monitor service delivery, and hold councillors accountable. This theory helps to frame the governance outcomes of digital technology adoption, focusing on improvements in citizen engagement, decision-making transparency, and service delivery effectiveness.

Thus, integrating these two theories, the framework illustrates a cause-effect relationship: the adoption of digital technologies by local councillors (as explained by TAM) leads to enhanced participatory governance outcomes (as explained by Participatory Governance Theory). In other words, the study examines how councillors' acceptance and use of digital tools can facilitate democratic governance at the local level, ultimately improving accountability, transparency, and citizen satisfaction.

Empirical literature review

The effective integration of digital technologies into local governance requires well-structured systems supported by institutional safeguards such as data privacy policies and robust cybersecurity measures, which foster citizen trust in digital platforms (Connolly & Bannister, 2007; Hatuka & Zur, 2019). Digital literacy among stakeholders is also critical. Broom (2015) emphasises that responsibilities should be assigned based on competence rather than hierarchical status, and leaders must cultivate trust by allowing individuals to operate within frameworks rather than rigid rules. Similarly, the OECD (2020) outlines several prerequisites for successful digital governance, including realigning government structures and operations to reflect stakeholder needs, fostering individual initiative and tolerance, and developing modern policies to promote transparency and openness in governance. Grigalashvili (2023) further highlights the importance of establishing a digital governance framework to define and delegate authority, formulating a digital strategy with guiding principles and performance goals, developing a comprehensive digital policy to support security and organisational objectives, and setting digital standards to ensure consistent quality and effectiveness. Collectively, these mechanisms provide a foundation for integrating digital technology effectively into local government operations.

International experiences provide valuable insights into how councillors utilise digital technologies in local governance. In Amsterdam, municipal authorities operate under a decentralised system that



grants autonomy in planning and development while maintaining national oversight for accountability. The integration of digital tools has strengthened communication, collaboration, and leadership capacity, with councillors demonstrating a culture of partnership and proactive engagement with communities. Effective political communication has been exemplified by Mayor Eberhard van der Laan, who received the Manchester Prize in 2013 for excellence in public communication (Local Economic Leadership, 2015). In Latin America, municipal councils emphasise citizen participation as a key mechanism for improving governance performance. With increasing fiscal transfers through revenue-sharing agreements, councils have leveraged digital technologies to enhance accountability and responsiveness, supporting economic growth and efficient resource allocation aligned with local needs (Nickson, 2011).

Denmark provides another example of digital-enabled local democracy, marked by strong citizen participation and inter-municipal collaboration. Councillors are proactive and innovative, following democratic and good governance principles while using digital platforms and social media to engage stakeholders in policymaking and enhance cooperation with other municipalities, private actors, and citizens in service delivery (Bentzen et al., 2019). In South Africa, ward councillors are accountable to their communities and perform key roles, including addressing community concerns, reporting on ward progress, explaining council decisions, monitoring service delivery, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources. They also assess whether capital projects align with Integrated Development Plans and serve as crucial links between communities and municipal officials (Paradza et al., 2010). Similarly, in India, particularly in Kerala, local councils exercise authority over planning and budgeting, supported by government-led capacity-building programmes. These initiatives enable councillors and citizens to effectively use digital tools in governance, enhancing democratic participation through the "big-bang" approach to digital-enabled governance (Apostol & Stan, 2021).

Lessons learned from international experiences

Globally, the empirical literature underscores the importance of digital technologies in strengthening cooperation between local councils and community stakeholders, both internally and externally. Councillors are expected to uphold principles of good governance, promote collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, and leverage digital tools to enhance transparency, resource efficiency, and service delivery. Ultimately, the success of local councils depends on the commitment, innovation, and openness of leaders, as well as their capacity to engage stakeholders in a digital environment.

Methods

Study Design

This study adopted a case study design within a qualitative research approach to gain in-depth insights into the use of digital technologies to strengthen local democratic governance (Saunders et al., 2015). The case study design was particularly appropriate because it allowed for a detailed exploration of the complex, context-specific experiences of Shinyanga Municipal and Nzega District Councils. It captured the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and the nuances of local governance processes, which quantitative methods alone could not adequately reveal.

Study Area

The selected cases were the Nzega District Council and the Shinyanga Municipal Council, purposively chosen due to documented challenges in collaboration, information-sharing, and resource management. The URT report (2016b) highlighted difficulties in effective coordination, while the World Bank (2015) reported inadequate resource allocation and utilisation, adversely affecting service delivery. These areas were particularly suitable for the study because they represent diverse governance contexts within Tanzania—Shinyanga, a municipal council with relatively higher



urbanisation and administrative capacity, and Nzega, a district council with more rural characteristics and dispersed populations. This diversity allowed the study to capture comparative insights into how digital technologies are adopted and utilised in different local governance settings. Furthermore, both councils have recently initiated digital governance interventions, such as online platforms for citizen engagement, digital reporting systems, and ICT-based service delivery mechanisms. Studying these councils offered a unique opportunity to investigate the practical implementation, challenges, and outcomes of digital governance initiatives in contexts where infrastructural, technical, and human resource limitations are evident. By focusing on these councils, the study provides relevant lessons and best practices that can inform the broader Tanzanian local government system and other similar settings in sub-Saharan Africa.

Study Population

The study population comprised councillors, ICT officials, and citizens who are directly involved in local governance processes and digital initiatives. These groups were selected because of their direct engagement with digital tools and governance practices, making them best positioned to provide relevant insights.

Sampling and Sample Size

A total of thirty (30) participants were purposively selected based on their experience, knowledge, and accessibility. The sample size was determined using the principle of saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged. Purposive sampling ensured that participants with relevant expertise and experience were included, and that diverse perspectives across the different stakeholder groups were captured.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, observations, and document reviews. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to provide detailed insights into their experiences, perceptions, and practices regarding digital governance. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for in-depth discussion. Observations facilitated understanding of how digital tools were applied in real-life council operations. Document reviews—including policy documents, strategic plans, and reports—provided contextual and corroborative evidence to support the study findings.

Furthermore, to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection tools, the interview guide and observation checklist were reviewed by two experts in local governance and ICT studies. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with three participants outside the study area to refine questions for clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Triangulation was employed by using multiple data sources—interviews, observations, and document reviews—to validate findings and enhance the study's credibility.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was manually conducted using thematic analysis, without the aid of qualitative data analysis software. The process involved systematically coding, categorising, and identifying patterns and themes emerging from the data. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were meticulously reviewed to detect recurring concepts related to digital technology adoption, governance practices, stakeholder engagement, and challenges encountered. The identified themes were interpreted in relation to the study's research questions and theoretical framework, yielding nuanced insights into how digital technologies influence democratic governance at the local level.



Results and discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study on how digital technologies can strengthen local democratic governance in Shinyanga Municipal and Nzega District Councils. The analysis is organised thematically based on recurring patterns and insights from interviews with councillors, community members, and local government officials. The main themes identified include: (i) digital technologies as a platform for community voice, (ii) improved responsiveness in service delivery, (iii) easy generation and sharing of information, (iv) enhanced social interrelation and support, and (v) increased community participation in democratic processes.

Digital technologies as a platform for community voice

The study found that digital technologies have expanded the avenues through which citizens can express their opinions and engage in governance processes. Councillors and citizens commonly used mobile phones and social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, to communicate on public affairs, share information, and organise community events.

As one participant explained:

... WhatsApp and Facebook are facilitating me to communicate with my people and to get information on time. (PAR/T 09)

Another participant attested that:

... I have different social network platforms which help me to easily spread information, identify and discuss any community problem. (PAR/T 08)

These findings reveal that digital spaces are becoming alternative forums for public discourse and feedback. This aligns with Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025), who found that digital tools in East Africa have enhanced dialogue and collaboration between citizens and government. The results affirm that ICTs can increase transparency, inclusiveness, and responsiveness in local governance by amplifying citizens' voices. From the TAM perspective, this widespread use demonstrates a high perceived usefulness of digital tools in facilitating communication and improving efficiency. Users recognise that technology enhances their ability to participate in governance processes, consistent with Davis's (1989) notion that perceived usefulness predicts behavioural intention to use technology. Moreover, the perceived ease of use of social media platforms, which require minimal technical training, explains their rapid adoption among both councillors and ordinary citizens.

On the other hand, from a Participatory Governance Theory standpoint, these findings signify a transformation in the citizen–state relationship. Digital spaces now act as informal deliberative forums where community voices are amplified and accountability pressures emerge from below. This resonates with Fung and Wright's (2001) idea of "empowered participatory governance," where citizens influence decision-making through accessible, decentralised mechanisms. Hence, the use of digital platforms in Shinyanga and Nzega reflects both technological acceptance and institutional democratisation.

Improved responsiveness in service delivery

The study revealed that digital tools have improved the responsiveness of local authorities in handling public concerns. For instance, both Shinyanga Municipal and Nzega District Councils provide online platforms for submitting complaints and accessing service-related information.

A council official stated:



... nowadays we have an online platform for receiving and addressing customers' complaints. The community members can report issues via the council's digital website, hence the distance is reduced. (PAR/T 04)

This shows that digital platforms shorten bureaucratic procedures and foster timely responses. However, as Kwata and Ogunleye (2024) contend, accessibility and digital literacy remain critical factors for inclusive use. While these initiatives represent significant progress, the effectiveness of digital responsiveness depends on citizens' awareness and ability to navigate online systems. Similar to findings by Aryatama et al. (2024), true responsiveness in governance requires that technology be accompanied by active institutional and human capacity development. Through the lens of TAM, this improved responsiveness reinforces perceived usefulness—citizens see tangible benefits from using digital platforms, such as reduced waiting times and improved problem resolution. However, as noted by Kwata and Ogunleye (2024), perceived ease of use is still constrained by low digital literacy and inconsistent access to reliable internet, which may reduce overall adoption.

Easy generation and sharing of information

Participants consistently emphasised that digital technologies facilitate faster communication, replacing slow, paper-based processes. Councillors can now receive meeting notices, updates, and public feedback instantly through mobile messaging.

One participant reported:

... before, meeting invitation letters would take days to reach us, but now they just send messages and call us. (PAR/T 01)

Another added:

... digital technology enhances individuals to do their work. I can get a message about a matter and respond on the spot. (PAR/T 04)

These findings indicate that technology accelerates decision-making, improves coordination, and reduces information loss. This echoes the arguments of Munyengabe et al. (2019), who observed that rapid information exchange through ICT promotes efficiency and accountability in service delivery. Also, these results align with the TAM construct of perceived usefulness, as participants clearly perceive digital communication as enhancing their productivity and coordination. The elimination of bureaucratic delays increases satisfaction and reinforces continued usage, a cycle consistent with Davis's (1989) model of technology acceptance.

Enhancing social interrelation and community support

Digital platforms have also strengthened social cohesion and mutual support within communities (Sarwar et al., 2023; Hatuka & Zur, 2019). Councillors noted that online groups, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook communities, have become spaces for collective problem-solving, solidarity, and civic engagement.

For example, one councillor stated:

... many of my constituents are very active in WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These platforms allow them to share urgent matters like accidents or water shortages instantly. It helps us as leaders to respond much faster. (PAR/T 09)

Similarly, community members highlighted how digital spaces enable emotional and material support during crises:



... in our WhatsApp group, we help each other with issues like job searching and even grieving. When one member lost a parent, within minutes people were offering prayers and contributions. (PAR/T 30)

These findings are consistent with Sarwar et al. (2023) and Hatuka & Zur (2019), who contend that online communities foster civic engagement and social resilience. Digital platforms, therefore, serve not only as information-sharing tools but also as virtual civic spaces where empathy, solidarity, and participatory action thrive. From the TAM perspective, these platforms have achieved high perceived usefulness beyond administrative purposes, extending into social and emotional domains. The integration of social utility with civic engagement increases user motivation and normalises digital participation within everyday life.

Promoting citizen participation in democratic processes

Digital technologies have opened new pathways for citizen inclusion in council decision-making and policy formulation. Councillors and citizens noted that social media and mobile communication tools allow broader participation even from those unable to attend physical meetings.

A councillor observed:

... with WhatsApp and normal phones, we now involve more community members in planning discussions. Even those who cannot attend meetings can send their views and suggestions. (PAR/T 8).

Community members echoed this sentiment:

... before, we didn't know what was happening in the council. But now, leaders post updates online and ask for our views. It makes us feel included. (PAR/T 30)

The findings demonstrate that digital participation enhances transparency, accountability, and trust between citizens and elected representatives. This supports Scullion's (2017) assertion that participatory digital governance increases the legitimacy of public decisions. Overall, digital communication tools are reshaping how communities interact with their councils, moving from traditional top-down communication to inclusive, dialogical engagement. From the Participatory Governance perspective, digital participation represents a new form of deliberative democracy. It enables inclusivity, transparency, and legitimacy in local governance processes, consistent with Scullion (2017), who argues that participatory digital platforms broaden citizen agency and reduce elite domination. In Shinyanga and Nzega, this transformation shifts local governance from a top-down communication structure to a dialogical, interactive system, where citizens are no longer passive recipients of services but active contributors to public decision-making.

Limitations of the study

This study had several limitations. It focused on only two local government authorities—Shinyanga Municipal Council and Nzega District Council, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other councils in Tanzania or similar contexts. Data were self-reported primarily through interviews, which could be subject to response bias; however, triangulation with observations and document reviews helped mitigate this risk. Additionally, some participants had limited digital literacy and access, potentially limiting their ability to articulate their experiences with digital governance initiatives fully. Finally, the manual thematic analysis, conducted without qualitative data analysis software, may have limited the handling of large datasets and the detection of subtle patterns, despite careful coding and triangulation. Nevertheless, the study provides robust, contextually grounded insights into the opportunities, challenges, and best practices for leveraging digital technologies to strengthen local democratic governance.



Conclusion

This study examined how digital technologies can strengthen local democratic governance in Shinyanga Municipal and Nzega District Councils, focusing on their role in enhancing communication, responsiveness, information-sharing, social interaction, and citizen participation. The findings revealed that digital tools, particularly mobile phones, WhatsApp, and Facebook, have become integral to everyday governance and civic engagement. They provide platforms through which citizens express their voices, councillors coordinate activities, and local governments respond more promptly to community needs.

From a theoretical perspective, the study demonstrates the relevance of both the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Participatory Governance Theory in understanding the digital transformation of local governance. The TAM explains the behavioural dimensions of adoption, showing that councillors and citizens are more likely to use digital tools when they perceive them as useful and easy to operate. Conversely, the Participatory Governance Theory captures the institutional and democratic outcomes of this adoption, illustrating how technology-enabled interactions foster transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability in decision-making processes. The integration of these two theories thus provides a holistic understanding of how technology adoption translates into participatory governance outcomes.

Empirically, the study establishes that digital technologies are not only communication tools but also mechanisms for deepening citizen-government relationships. They enable continuous dialogue, facilitate rapid feedback loops, and support collaborative problem-solving, thereby bridging the gap between elected representatives and the people they serve. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven access to internet services persist, constraining the inclusiveness and sustainability of these digital governance initiatives.

In light of these findings, the study recommends that local government authorities invest in digital literacy programmes for both councillors and citizens, expand ICT infrastructure in rural and peri-urban areas, and institutionalise digital platforms as formal channels for public participation and accountability. Furthermore, policies should be developed to ensure data security, protect users' privacy, and promote equitable access to digital services. Overall, leveraging digital technologies offers a promising pathway toward strengthening local democratic governance in Tanzania. When effectively adopted and supported by participatory frameworks, digital innovations can transform traditional governance structures into more transparent, inclusive, and responsive systems. The experiences from Shinyanga Municipal and Nzega District Councils thus provide valuable lessons for other local authorities seeking to integrate digital technologies into governance processes as part of Tanzania's broader digital transformation and democratic consolidation agenda.

Policy and practical implications

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for policymakers, local government administrators, and practitioners seeking to strengthen local democratic governance through digital technologies. Both the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Participatory Governance Theory underpin these implications, demonstrating that successful digital transformation depends not only on technological adoption but also on inclusive governance structures and community participation.

First, there is a need to mainstream digital governance within Tanzania's local government policy frameworks. Despite ongoing digital reforms, the integration of technology into council operations remains fragmented and largely dependent on individual initiatives. The Ministry of Regional Administration and Local Government (TAMISEMI), in collaboration with the e-Government Authority (e-GA), should develop comprehensive guidelines and regulatory frameworks to



institutionalise digital governance across all Local Government Authorities (LGAs). Such frameworks should provide clear directives on the use of digital tools for council meetings, public consultations, and feedback collection, ensuring that technology becomes a formal instrument for enhancing transparency and accountability.

Second, the study highlights low levels of digital literacy among councillors and community members, which hinder the effective use of digital platforms. Policymakers should therefore prioritise digital capacity-building through continuous training programmes for councillors, administrative staff, and citizens. Establishing a Local Government Digital Skills Development Strategy would ensure that councillors acquire the necessary technical competence to navigate e-platforms confidently. This initiative would increase perceived usefulness and ease of use, core dimensions of the Technology Acceptance Model, thereby encouraging broader adoption and utilisation of digital systems in local governance.

Third, the uneven distribution of ICT infrastructure and internet connectivity remains a major obstacle, especially in rural councils like Nzega. The government, through partnerships with private telecom operators and the Universal Communications Service Access Fund (UCSAF), should intensify investments in broadband expansion, stable electricity supply, and affordable mobile data services. Improving connectivity will enhance inclusiveness and enable citizens in remote areas to participate effectively in governance processes, reducing the digital divide that currently limits equitable access to information and services.

Fourth, the adoption of digital platforms necessitates robust data governance frameworks to ensure data privacy, security, and ethical use. As councils increasingly handle citizen data through online complaint systems, social media pages, and e-government portals, policymakers should enforce regulations that safeguard sensitive information. Strengthening data protection policies will build citizen trust, a prerequisite for participatory governance and open communication between local governments and their constituents.

Finally, Local Government Authorities should establish monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks for digital governance initiatives. These frameworks would track usage rates, citizen engagement levels, and service response times, allowing continuous improvement and evidence-based policy adjustment. The institutionalisation of digital M&E practices would help identify best practices that can be scaled up across other councils, contributing to Tanzania's broader e-government and decentralisation reform agenda.

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