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Participatory governance: how citizens value inclusive institutions (/blog/participatory-governance-how-citizens-value-inclusive-institutions)

Citizen engagement, community mobilization, local governance, and decentralized service delivery are at the core of institutional reforms in many countries. But are these participatory initiatives able to transform local decision-making or empower the poor in any enduring way? There is little evidence that 'community-driven development' can transform community decision-making and local institutions. This column investigates one possible reason why.



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approaches for the delivery of development interventions.

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 986/11859) (CDD) has emerged as one of the dominant

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For example, as part of Bangladesh's reform agenda on open and transparent government, the Union Parishads Act (2009) mandates local administrative units to hold a series of consultation meetings, open to all citizens, before approving the local budget. Yet despite formal compliance (<http://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/index.php/resources/sub-menu-item/download/6-policy-notes/138-social-accountability-in-public-procurement-how-citizen-engagement-can-make-a-difference>), the reception and implementation of the 'Open Budget' process have been lukewarm (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.2040-0209.2013.00419.x>).

Promoters of CDD interventions often hope that their programs have spillover effects (<http://www.macartan.nyc/comments/cdd-what-is-it-good-for/>) on local institutions and social dynamics – for example, by increasing citizens' demand for public consultations and opportunities to engage in local decision-making. Unfortunately, as summarized in a recent report (http://www.3ieimpact.org/media/filer_public/2018/03/12/cdd-brief-wp30.pdf) by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, there is little evidence that CDD can transform community decision-making and local institutions.

Here, we report some evidence that helps elucidate why that is the case. We draw lessons from a CDD program implemented in Bangladesh between 2015 and 2018 by the NGO Forum for Public Health (<http://www.ngof.org/>). As part of a broader research agenda on CDD and community decision-making, we run a 'lab-in-the-field' experiment (https://www.dropbox.com/s/a2s7p4xbckk8g3r/CDD%20and%20value%20of%20participation_20190626.pdf?dl=0) and a field experiment (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/meyyn2otmpwio7s/PAP.pdf?dl=0>) to explore what citizens think about participatory practices. Our findings challenge some widely held beliefs about the links between participatory practices and institutional development.

Citizens value inclusive institutions

Advocates of citizen engagement in public service delivery and monitoring often argue that consulting and involving program beneficiaries in decision-making is valuable per se and that deliberative processes create a sense of legitimacy for project decisions. But the exercise of voice and choice can be costly, for example, because of the opportunity cost of the time dedicated to participation, the psychological costs of contentious deliberations, or the material and social costs of taking positions that are contrary to the interests of powerful groups.

One recent study (<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-economics-080217-053339>) of 'radical decentralization' stresses the need for a better understanding of the overall welfare impact of CDD programs, considering the perceived benefits and costs of participation.



making collective decisions via an inclusive process. Citizens prefer unity itself, but they also express an unmet demand for regulating and participative.

Previous experience of participatory governance via a CDD program increases citizens' value of inclusive institutions

Experiencing a CDD program provides communities with new tools to avoid or solve conflicts and tensions during public deliberations, therefore reducing the non-monetary costs (conflicts) associated with future participatory practices. Through a CDD program, citizens learn about the intrinsic qualities of these types of institutional arrangements (legitimacy and agency, for example), especially in communities in which the CDD program is more inclusive and where more citizens participated in the process.

Through these channels, experiencing a CDD program can boost citizens' demand for the adoption of participatory processes for future collective decisions.

Policy lessons

But despite some changes in citizens' value of participatory practices, *we find little evidence for changes in individual participation choices or local government practices*, consistent with many other studies. Nor do realized institutions reflect the social and political preferences of the majority of the population. Our evidence suggests that institutions may be persistent because they are constrained by the existing social and political power structures within society.

Overall, our findings have important policy implications. Reforms aimed at improving governance through decentralization and citizen engagement may be most effective if they focus on removing the barriers that prevent the full and meaningful participation of all community members.

For example, active measures should be taken to ensure that all households are informed and invited to participatory fora. Community meetings should be mediated and organized so that the clientelist relationships that govern local communities do not prevent community members from freely expressing their opinions and views.

More optimistically, it is encouraging that exposure to new democratic and inclusive institutions (for example through a CDD program) leads to some changes in how citizens value alternative institutional arrangements. These shifts in preferences and attitudes may represent a fertile ground for follow-up interventions to strengthen civil society and support citizen engagement in public consultations and demands for political transformations.

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