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Impact of community monitoring on corruption

Query

What evidence is there of positive impact on corruption from beneficiary monitoring and community mobilisation interventions? Can you highlight what pathways or elements lead to that impact and provide an analysis of the quality of the evidence with regard to methodology, rigour, etc.?

Purpose

Our agency is producing a brief on beneficiary monitoring.

Content

1. Methodological challenges involved in tracking the impact of such interventions
2. Evidence of impact of community-led initiatives
3. Lessons learnt: key features of successful community monitoring processes
4. References

Summary

There are many methodological challenges involved in assessing the impact of anti-corruption community-led monitoring initiatives, in terms of measurement methodologies, attribution, as well as scope and focus of impact tracking studies.

In spite of these various challenges there is an emerging but still mixed body of evidence on the impact of such types of interventions on corruption. Beyond anecdotal evidence of positive outcomes on detection/prosecution of corruption cases, such interventions have contributed in some cases in reducing corruption and leakages of funds as well as improving the quantity and quality of public services and strengthening the demand for longer term reforms.

Partly due to conceptual and methodological challenges as well as the general scope and focus of impact tracking studies, it is difficult to isolate the factors or catalysts of change, underpinning the success of anti-corruption community based initiatives. However, studies indicate that a combination of external - environmental/contextual dynamics that supported the implementation of the intervention- as well as internal factors - institutional design of the intervention, attributes and processes of the implementing agency – may have contributed to the effectiveness of such interventions.

Caveat

Within the framework of this query, the concept of "community monitoring" is understood broadly and covers a wide range of social accountability related

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interventions aimed at mobilising/involving local citizens - beneficiaries, communities or civil society organisations representing them at the local level – in the monitoring of key public activities such as service delivery or budget transparency.

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in recent years in interventions aimed at mobilising the public against corruption and involving beneficiaries in the design, implementation and monitoring of governance and anti-corruption initiatives. Such citizen-led initiatives are based on the assumption that non-state actors can make a critical contribution to strengthening public accountability, improving governance, reducing inefficiencies and combating corruption.

Yet, despite the underpinning assumption that such types of social accountability mechanisms can contribute to produce better development outcomes in terms of poverty reduction and progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, there is an emerging but still limited and uneven body of evidence substantiating the impact and effectiveness of such interventions on corruption and development. When studies point towards positive results, there is even more limited evidence on the pathway to success and factors (contextual and others) that may influence the effectiveness of these interventions. This is partly due to methodological challenges and partly due to the focus of impact studies which tend to look for evidence of change rather than the factors likely to influence the outcome of the interventions.

1 Methodological challenges involved in tracking impact of such interventions

Methodological challenges involved in tracking impact

The impact of community participation/mobilisation on corruption and governance outcomes is difficult to assess for a number of reasons. While there is a growing number of micro-level studies, especially in the field of service delivery and budget transparency, there are only few comparative or meta-level studies focusing on whether impact has been achieved and if so how (McGee, R. and Gaventa, J., and al, 2010).

According to Mc Gee and Gaventa, such impact tracking attempts face a number of challenges, including: 1) These types of interventions are still relatively new and there are only a few impact studies yet; 2) Impact studies are often limited to one initiative in one locality and their findings can not be generalised; 3) They also tend to focus on effectiveness of implementation rather than on outcomes on development or corruption; 4) The emerging body of evidence is uneven: the positive evidence in one setting is not always corroborated (and sometimes contradicted) by findings in another setting.

General challenges involved in tracking impact of anti-corruption interventions

As there is no ideal method for measuring corruption as a phenomenon occurring behind closed doors, such attempts are necessarily limited by the difficulty to measure actual levels of corruption in the first place, with definition and quantification issues that have been documented in various papers and articles (Kaufmann, D. and Kraay, A., No date). In addition to general corruption measurement challenges, assessing corruption trends overtime supposes having a baseline for comparison and collecting data on a regular basis, using a similar methodology to allow comparisons. Measurement efforts can also be limited by resource constraints; local capacity deficits as well as the need to be realistic on what data can be systematically collected and compared overtime.

Attribution

Tracking the impact of community monitoring interventions also faces the major methodological challenge of attribution. Anti-corruption interventions are often highly complex initiatives implemented in multi-faceted contexts, and a wide variety of internal and external factors may contribute or hamper their success. Even if a positive change is recorded, it is difficult to attribute these positive outcomes to a specific intervention. As the dynamics of change are complex, analysis may not be able to provide evidence and isolate the factors that led to the outcomes. This is especially true when it comes to linking the pathways to the positive or negative outcomes of the interventions

Attribution is made even more challenging in the current holistic approach to development which promotes complex initiatives combining more than one intervention. Within this framework, measurement attempts capture the impact of a bundle of activities and it is difficult to isolate the respective impact of specific activities, including beneficiaries involvement in the

intervention (Sirker, K. and Cosic, S., 2007). As the question of attribution is a major challenge for demonstrating impact, the World Bank increasingly refers to the "most likely association" concept (O'Neil, T., Foresti, M. and Hudson, A. 2007).

In addition, even if a correlation or causal relation is uncovered, the direction of causality is not always immediately clear between the transparency intervention and the recorded outcome.

Scope of impact studies

Studies tracking the impact of community mobilisation initiatives are also often limited to highly targeted interventions taking place in very narrow settings or unique contexts, or cover a very small number of countries. The vast majority of studies evaluate interventions taking place at the village or neighbourhood level. Unique contextual features of such units – such as specific patterns of relations at the local level, informal norms, etc - may affect the outcome of the interventions and make it difficult to generalise micro-level findings (Sirker, K. and Cosic, S., 2007). In addition, the numbers of units analysed are often too small often to yield sufficiently precise estimates. For some reasons, studies also often tend to document more short-term process-related impact than longer term outcomes.

Bias in case selection

There can also be a bias in the selection of interventions that are to be evaluated for impact tracking. The "best" performers tend to volunteer their projects for impact evaluation, leading to an accumulation of evidence in certain programmes. This can distort the perceptions of policy-makers and affect their assessment of the average efficacy of a given intervention based on a biased sample of most effective programmes (Sirker, K. and Cosic, S., 2007).

Assessing pathway to success

The "impact" literature focuses primarily on evidence of change and does not look at specific features that could have triggered impact. As already mentioned, several factors can lead to impact in highly complex interventions, and it is difficult to isolate the factor(s) of success. Qualitative studies may help in this regard, but their quality is often uneven and many of them tend to be more descriptive than analytical, which limits their value in terms of linking impact to specific factors. In addition, there have only been limited attempts so far to compare the impact of different mechanisms and reach

broader conclusions on the factors that contribute to the success of specific strategies and interventions (Joshi A., 2010).

Type and Quality of evidence

The literature highlights different types of evidence and methodologies to assess the impact of such interventions, ranging from highly quantitative studies in the form of randomised control trials (RCTs) to qualitative case studies and narratives. There are relatively few quantitative studies that track impact through ex-post evaluations (Joshi A., 2010). While the evidence collected through RCTs and similar evaluations is usually considered to be fairly robust, the quality of qualitative studies is uneven, which affects the quality of the evidence. A recent review of the impact and effectiveness of transparency and accountability initiatives in service delivery identifies four types of impact studies (Joshi A., 2010):

Randomised control trials (RCTs)

RCTs consist in comparing outcomes between a "treatment" group receiving the "programme" or intervention with a randomly selected control group that will not benefit –at least at this point of time- from the intervention to allow isolating the actual impact of the programme itself. RCTs are usually considered to be a rigorous comparative methodology. However, they typically assess very narrow and targeted interventions, with specific outcomes. In addition, results would ideally need to be supplemented by qualitative work to identify factors and processes through which impact has been achieved.

Case study material

Case studies dominate the literature on impact of social accountability related interventions. However, as already mentioned such studies typically consist of stocktaking initiatives of social accountability mechanisms and are often largely more descriptive than analytical. As they are usually compiled by practitioners themselves, they tend to focus primarily on success stories. Finally, while they provide a detailed description of processes, it remains difficult to isolate the contribution of a specific intervention from other contextual factors to a given outcome. A useful approach in this regard would be to encourage case studies that more systematically attempt to synthesise the findings of comparable cases to identify most common challenges and factors.

Quantitative survey material

There are only a few cases of independent ex-post evaluation of the impact of such interventions. Such approach has been used for example for tracking the impact of the citizens' report cards in Bangalore. The evaluation used a two-track methodology surveying citizens on perceived improvement of corruption, improvement in services and increased empowerment as well as qualitative interviews with public officials to understand the impact the report card had on their work.

Participatory evaluations

In the field of service delivery, impact can also be assessed through participatory evaluations, which consists in involving users in the outcome assessment exercise, for example through the use of report cards. Such an approach can be complemented by a collective discussion of the quality of public services.

2 Evidence of impact of community-led initiatives

As already mentioned, there is emerging but still limited and uneven evidence of the impact of such approaches on corruption with some findings challenging or contradicting other studies' results. While some case studies claim that such interventions can have a direct impact on reducing corruption, most studies suggest that they have an indirect impact on factors likely to affect corruption, such as increased participation, access to information and citizen empowerment. A review of the impact and effectiveness of transparency and accountability initiatives broadly identifies positive outcomes in five major areas: 1) lowering corruption; 2) increasing state responsiveness; 3) building new space for citizen engagement; 4) empowering local voices; and 5) better budget use and increased quality/quantity of public services (McGee, R. and Gaventa, J., and al, 2010).

Detecting and prosecuting corruption cases

Some case studies provide anecdotal evidence of the impact of community monitoring on detection and prosecution of corruption cases. In the Philippines for example, the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance (CCAGC) is a citizens' group in a remote province of the Philippines that carries out on-the-spot checks on infrastructure projects to ensure that government money is used for its intended purpose.

The CCAGC's monitoring of public works province in the Abra province resulted in the conviction of several public officials on charges of corruption (UNPAN, no date).

In India, a small organisation Mazdoor Kisan Shaki Sangathan (MKSS) challenged official auditing systems and pioneered public hearings to hold local officials accountable for the implementation of programmes at the local level, gathering information about budget and expenditures in public programmes and verifying those with relevant stakeholders. The initiative appeared to have a significant impact in exposing corruption and in some instances even got public officials to return the money they had misappropriated (Götz, A.M., Jenkins, R., 2001).

More generally, a World Bank stocktaking exercise of social accountability initiatives in the Asia and Pacific also underscores the role of such an approach in a number of areas, including prosecuting corruption cases (World Bank Institute, 2005).

However, the above-mentioned 2010 review of transparency and accountability initiatives challenges this statement. Despite a growing demand for accountability and while there have been cases where corruption cases have been exposed through community monitoring, social accountability mechanisms overall still seem to have had a relatively limited impact on triggering more traditional form of accountability (investigations into corruption) and impose formal sanctions (fines) (McGee, R. and Gaventa, J., and al, 2010).

Reducing corruption and fund leakages

There has been an important growth in citizens monitoring of budget processes to promote budget efficiency and efficient delivery of stated policies. The impact of such interventions is mixed and conditioned by factors such as availability and access to budget information as well as the capacity of non-state actors to monitor such complex processes. A recent review of citizens monitoring of budget processes suggests that in this area, more targeted citizen-led expenditure monitoring initiatives and social audits can boast greater success and in a number of cases, such approaches have helped discover missing funds and let to the recovery of funds/disciplinary action (Carlitz, R., 2010).

For example, there is an emerging body of evidence suggesting that Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS) and community monitoring of service delivery can have a clear impact in bringing to light discrepancies between official accounts and practice and subsequently result in reducing corruption and fund leakages. A well known and compelling case study of a PETS conducted in Uganda in the 1990s revealed that only 20% of primary education grant programme reached their indented target. This figure rose to 80 % when information on PETS was made public and accessible to the public through the local media (Svensson J. and Rennikka R, 2005). Although the impact of the intervention was more limited than in Uganda, findings from PETS for health and education spending carried out in Tanzania over two periods (1999 and 2001) confirm the potential of such approach for reducing corruption and fund leakages (Gauthier, B., 2006).

However, some studies report only limited outcome of PETS related approaches on triggering longer term reforms. Others consider that the Uganda case is fairly unique and according to subsequent studies, a number of other elements could have played an important role in yielding the positive outcomes (Carlitz, R., 2010).

In addition, some additional findings suggest that community monitoring can not be seen as a stand-alone, one-size-fits-all intervention to fight corruption. Evidence from a randomised control trial conducted in Indonesia suggest that increasing the probability of external audits of village road projects substantially decreased missing funds, while increasing grass-root participation in the monitoring process had comparatively little impact overall on corruption (Olken, B., 2007).

A promising approach could be to reconcile both approaches and combine bottom-up monitoring with more traditional top-down auditing. A bribery lab experiment investigated the effectiveness of this approach by comparing the tendency of public officials to ask for bribes under 1) no monitoring, 2) top-down auditing, and 3) accountability systems giving citizens the possibility of reporting of corrupt officials even with a low probability of top-down auditing and punishment. Experimental results suggest that "combined" accountability systems can be highly effective in curbing corruption, even if citizens' voice only contributes to formal top-down punishment with a relatively low probability (Serra, D., 2088).

Improving public services performances and efficiency

There is a wider range of studies looking at the broader impact of social accountability-related mechanisms on improving the quantity and quality of public services available to the public and producing better development outcomes. There is sufficient evidence suggesting that such interventions have been effective in reaching their immediate goal in terms of programme implementation and had a positive impact in terms of citizens' empowerment, awareness of rights and entitlements, and active citizenship. However, there is conflicting evidence in terms of their impact on actual quality and accessibility of services (McGee, R. and Gaventa, J., and al, 2010).

For example, an evaluation conducted in Bangalore, which pioneered the citizens report card approach[1] found that the intervention had a considerable impact on improving public services, public agencies' transparency/willingness to share information and that levels of corruption decreased (Ravindra, A, 2004). Evidence from other studies conducted in Madagascar and India indicates that such approaches can result in increased user satisfaction, effective channels of collaboration and communication between service providers and users, improvements of complaints mechanisms, more transparency recruitment procedures (Joshi A., 2010).

Another report evaluating 100 case studies mapping the outcomes of citizen-led initiatives found evidence of significant positive impact in 30 cases (Gaventa J and Barett, G., 2010). For example, new participatory governance councils improved health care services in Brazil, while in Bangladesh, parents' monitoring of teacher attendance decreased absenteeism. A random control experiment in Kenya found that hiring contract teachers along with community monitoring had significant impact on students' achievement.

A RCT conducted in Uganda showed that community monitoring of health services brought significant decrease in absenteeism of doctors and nurses and drug theft, increased responsiveness, shorter waiting times, as well as increased usage of public health

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[1] Citizen report cards measure service users' satisfaction with specific public services, with the expectation that that public exposure of comparative poor performances will stimulate public agencies to perform better.

services, better health outcomes and reduced child mortality (33 % fewer children died under the age of five). A year after the experiment, treatment communities were also more involved in monitoring the provider and attitudinal shift had been recorded in the service orientedness of health care providers (Bjorkman M and Svensson, J., 2009).

In India, a case study of community monitoring of rural health services in Maharashtra also indicates that this approach had a significant impact on raising community awareness of health entitlements through public hearings, strengthening demand for change and improving health delivery, with a positive impact on health outcomes in terms of immunisation rates, use of untied funds, and quality of health services (Kadke, D., Scott, K., and Shukla, A., 2011).

However, not all studies point to the positive outcomes of community monitoring. For example, an intervention conducted by the Rajasthan Police tested several interventions to enhance police performance, improve public trust and gather objective data on crime rates and performances. In different police stations, researchers respectively tested the impact on improving police training, freezing administrative transfers, introducing a weekly day off and duty rotation system, and community based monitoring, consisting of local community observers observing day-to-day activities. Training and the freezing of transfers were found to be the most effective interventions in terms of higher job satisfaction and victims' satisfaction with the investigation, while community observers had little to no effect on the public perception of police performance (Banerjee, A., Chattopadhayay R., Duflo, E. and Keniston, D., 2008).

Broader outcomes

Citizen-led initiatives can also have an indirect impact on corruption by affecting the overall governance environment in which corruption occurs. For example, although not specifically focussed on corruption, the above mentioned meta-case study of a randomised sample of 100 research studies of citizen engagement initiatives in 20 countries mapped the effect of citizen participation. The study found evidence of positive outcomes in four major areas, including: 1) the construction of citizenship; 2) strengthening the practice of participation; 3) strengthening of responsive and accountable states; and 4) development of inclusive and cohesive societies (Gaventa, J. and Barrett, G., 2010).

The above mentioned World Bank stocktaking of social accountability mechanisms also indicate that, beyond detection/prosecution of corruption cases, citizens-led initiatives had an impact in a number of areas, including exposing social problems, mobilising public opinion against corruption, increasing transparency of procurement processes and development projects, influencing laws and policies, increasing efficiency of public service, etc (World Bank Institute, 2005). The MKSS initiative also led to policy reform, with a successful campaign for the statutory right to information (Götz, A.M., Jenkins, R., 2001).

While there is stronger evidence of widespread change in middle-income countries in this regard, several case studies have also documented the positive impact of budget transparency/monitoring on institutions, policies, allocations and the quality of expenditures (Fölscher, A., 2010). While access to information and citizens' engagement opportunities are considered as major constraints, especially in aid-dependent or natural resource rich countries, some positive outcomes have also been observed in lower income countries such as but also in lower income countries such as Chad, India, Malawi and Pakistan.

3 Lessons learned: Key features of successful community monitoring processes

As already mentioned, mostly due to methodological challenges, there is still a relatively limited understanding of the contextual dynamics, programming choices and pathway to success. The wide range and diversity of initiatives makes it difficult to isolate the factors that contribute to the positive (or negative) outcome of citizen-led interventions. This constitutes a gap in knowledge and there is a need to examine why specific initiatives succeed (or fail) and what factors matters in this regard (Joshi A., 2010).

However, the literature usually points to a combination of external (environmental/contextual dynamics that supported the implementation of the intervention) and internal factors (relating more to the institutional design of the intervention, attributes and processes contributing to the outcome.)

External factors

In spite of these challenges, there is a relative consensus across studies on common external factors of success (Joshi A., 2010; McGee, R. and Gaventa, J., and al, 2010; and Carlitz, R., 2010).

At the institutional/state side, there is a wide range of factors that can foster a supportive environment and contribute to the success of citizen-led initiatives, including:

Contextual factors

Context does matter. The understanding of local politics is fundamental to success and interventions need to be grounded in the political economy analysis of the local context, including the enabling framework, incentives and sanctions which may affect the behaviours of public officials.

More generally, public perceptions and attitudes with regard to corruption appear to play an important role in creating a supportive environment for such interventions, including "different stakeholders recognising corruption as a problem" and "community members discussing about corruption" (Richards, K., 2006).

Although difficult to predict, in some cases, unanticipated factors have played as a catalyst for change, such as a crisis event or external supporter providing unexpected support for change.

Space for accountability

The level of democratisation is also critical to consider, in terms of a supportive legal and institutional framework providing space for accountability demands. In this regard, the success of such interventions will largely depend on access to information, levels of transparency as well as a legal standing for non-government actors and engagement opportunities for them. The presence of an active and independent media and civil society that are willing to use the information to hold leaders accountable and ask for reforms are also key contributing factors.

Political will

The degree of political will to support such initiatives is also an important recurrent feature of successful interventions. In some cases, this has materialised in the presence of public officials who acted as "champions" for reform. At another level, political will can translate in enhancing transparency and enabling

access to public information: interventions are usually more successful when public officials are committed to secure access to official data and facilitate direct communication between authorities and communities.

Constructive engagement between citizens and public institutions

Related to political will, there is more generally, a need to match citizens demand for accountability with strengthening the willingness and capacity of public institutions to respond, including the political will to follow up on findings of community monitoring initiatives (ex: PETS). Successful initiatives usually promote constructive engagement and dialogue between citizens and the state, between service users and providers.

Link to the probability of sanction and punishment

Also related to the above, citizen-led initiatives are more likely to have an impact when the public sector is willing to support accountability initiatives, through a combination of top-down and bottom-up accountability approaches. As without the threat of effective sanctions, citizens' mobilisation can be difficult to sustain over time, mechanisms that have the potential to trigger strong sanctions are more likely to be used and to be effective. Community monitoring interventions work better if they can lead to sanctions and punishment and the probability of criminal action or social sanctions if corruption is detected.

Nature and strength of civil society

One also needs to be realistic about the capacity of civil society to engage in monitoring processes and act as a channel for citizens' voice and demands. According to McGee and Gaventa, key factors of success in this regard relate to: 1) the capacity of citizens and civil society organisations to access and use information made accessible and to mobilise for greater accountability; 2) the extent to which the intervention is linked to broader forms of collective actions; and 3) the degree to which participation initiatives are embedded throughout the whole policy cycle, from decision making to implementation and monitoring.

Internal factors

There is less consensus on/research into the features of institutional design that are most important to success. However, according to a 2006 review of 15 community-based anti-corruption initiatives in Asia and

Europe, internal factors appear to be more influential than external factors for the success of such approaches (Richards, K., 2006). These include the process used for designing the programme, people employed to run the programme, and the ability of the organisation to engage with the stakeholders, including government authorities. The study identifies a number of contributing internal factors, including (among others):

- Gaining/building trust of the local communities is obviously a key contributing factor to the success of such interventions.

- A clear and defined focus and strategy for the programme with in-built flexibility is important;

- Human resource needs to be given careful attention, as a skilled and competent team appears to be critical. In some highly technical activities such as monitoring budget /financial management processes, it can be a great challenge to access, develop and retain the required high-end skills ;

- Providing for communities to take the lead is also a prerequisite for success. In the MKSS case study for example, the implementing organisation stepped back at some point to give the community the control over the scope and direction of the programme, allowing activities to vary according to the community's priorities;

- Demonstrable success. Starting small with pilot interventions that demonstrated "quick-win" success have allowed the scaling up of successful initiatives.

Further critical internal conditions for success include factors such as the capacity and legitimacy of the initiative and the timing at which such interventions are staged. More research would be needed to isolate determinants of success in this regard.

Implications for designing new initiatives

The 2010 review of transparency initiatives recommends being cautious about drawing conclusion from the current base of evidence and suggests instead asking a series of questions when designing such interventions (McGee, R. and Gaventa, J., and al, 2010):

- Does the intervention articulate a theory of change and disentangle common assumptions about the links between transparency, participation and accountability?

- Does it understand the reasons for success of tools in one context before replicating them in another context?

- Doest it strategy take into account complex, contextual factors?

- Does it include methods for tracking changes overtime, including reference to a clear baseline?

- E.t.c.

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