So What Difference Does it Make?
Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement
A Meta Synthesis of 100 case studies from the
Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and
Accountability
Executive Summary

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the idea that citizen engagement and participation can contribute to improved governance and pro-poor development outcomes development has become an accepted part of the policy discourse. Yet in spite of the strong convictions that underpin this approach, the impact of civic participation on measurable democratic and developmental outcomes has proved difficult to assess. Where previous research studies have attempted to demonstrate impact, they tend to be limited to single interventions, a limited number of country contexts or varied conceptual and methodological constraints.

In this paper, drawing from the work of the DFID-supported Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability we present the results from a meta-case study analysis of a non-randomised sample of 100 research studies of citizen engagement in 20 countries. Using proven methods of systematic review and meta-case study analysis, we argue that the synthesis of a large sample of qualitative research facilitates a degree of generalisability that could not be achieved by the weight of a single research study.

By mapping over 800 observable effects of citizen participation through a close reading of this pool of case studies, we created a typology of four democratic and developmental outcomes, including the:

- construction of citizenship;
- strengthening of practices of participation;
- strengthening of responsive and accountable states;
- development of inclusive and cohesive societies.

We found that citizen participation produced positive effects across these outcome types in 75 per cent of the outcomes studied in the sample, though in each category there are examples of negative outcomes as well.

Key Findings

The findings provide important and new evidence of the contributions that citizen engagement can make to development and state-building, filling an important gap in the literature.

1. While some approaches to the impact of citizen engagement attempt to draw a straight line from individual actions or behaviours (e.g. voice or participation) to policy or developmental outcomes, our evidence suggests that intermediate outcomes may be equally important. Engagement is itself a way of strengthening

a sense of citizenship, and the knowledge and sense of awareness necessary to achieve it. It can also strengthen the practices and efficacy of participation, through more effective action, the transfer of skills across issues and arenas, and the thickening of alliances and networks. In turn, more aware citizenship, coupled with stronger citizenship practices, can help to contribute to building responsive states, which deliver services, protect and extend rights, and foster a culture of accountability. It can also contribute to broader sense of inclusion of previously marginalised groups within society and have the potential to increase social cohesion across groups.

2. The study also warns that participation is not always used for purely benevolent purposes and does not always generate positive results. Positive outcomes are often mirrored by parallel negative results - which accounted for 25 per cent of all of the outcomes coded in our sample. These include a sense of disempowerment and a reduced sense of agencies; a sense of meaningless, tokenistic, or manipulated participation; the use of new skills and alliances for corrupt or non-positive ends; and elite capture of participatory processes.

3. A large percentage of the negative outcomes observed has to do as much with state behaviour as the ability of citizens to engage. Where sometimes engagement led to building responsive states and institutions, other times it faced bureaucratic 'brick walls', failures to implement or sustain policy gains; and in many cases, reprisals, including violence, against those who challenged the status quo. Where sometimes it could contribute to social inclusion and cohesion, in part by created space for new voices and issues in the public sphere, at other times engagement could result in a greater sense of exclusion, as power relations in the new spaces reinforced old hierarchies based on gender, caste or race.

The impact of types of engagement and political context

Using the coding results across the sample, the study asked whether the differences in outcomes were affected by two broad factors: the strategy of engagement used and the nature of the political context. To examine variations of outcomes by types of engagement, the case studies were coded according to citizen engagement in a) associations (primarily local); b) social movements and campaigns (usually across locality), c) formal participatory governance spaces and d) activities that employed a combination of these approaches.

To look at variations across political context, we used a combination of existing indices of political regimes (Polity IV, Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy) This grouped the 20 countries into three tiers, representing degrees of democratic openness and stability. Again some interesting findings emerged:

4. While in a research programme that largely was about how citizens interact with states we might have expected participation through formal governance spaces to be particularly important, in fact associations and social movements emerged also to be very important sources of change. In nearly every category, over half of the outcomes were linked to associational activity, with the exception of the

outcomes related to accountable and participatory governance (where associations accounted for 40 per cent of the outcomes).

5. Assumptions which link positive democratic and development outcomes to the level of democratisation in a given country did not hold true. This can be seen, for instance, when looking at the bottom end of the scale – at the countries in our study which ranked as the least democratic and stable. In such cases, there has been a predominant view either a) that civil society organisations are not likely to exist or b) that development interventions must support state institutions first, and then focus on the tasks of citizen engagement. In fact, we found a very strong presence of associations in particular in these least democratic settings. In turn these associations play very important roles across each of the outcome types: constructing citizenship, improving practices of participation, strengthening accountability, and contributing to social cohesion.

6. These findings suggest that engagement can make positive differences, even in the least democratic settings – a proposition that challenges those who would argue for building states or institutions in these settings first and leaving the support of citizen engagement until later.

7. While a common assumption is that citizen engagement can be more risky in weaker political regimes, as it may raise demands that states cannot handle, our data did not necessarily support this view. Rather, the case studies revealed a high degree of 'backlash' against increased citizen voice, across all settings, including the 'more democratic' states. This took the form of state violence, as well as economic and social reprisals, including using access to development resources – land, housing, jobs – as political clubs to maintain the status quo.

Practical implications

There are of course a number of practical implications from these findings for activists and policy makers as well as for donors and development agencies seeking to foster positive developmental and democratic outcomes through citizen engagements. These include:

1. Citizen engagement can be linked positively in a number of instances to achieving development outcomes, such as health, water, sanitation and education, as well as to democratic outcomes, such as building accountable institutions and making real national and international human rights frameworks. The challenge for donors and policy makers is how to support such engagement effectively.

2. Active and effective citizens who can help deliver these development and democratic gains do not emerge automatically. As with the process of building states and institutions other more intermediary measures of change are also highly important. An awareness or rights, knowledge or legal and institutional procedures, disposition towards action, organising skills and the thickness of civic networks are all indicators which help to measure the degree to which democratic citizenship is emerging. Such indicators can supplement governance and democracy indices focus primarily on institutional arrangements – e.g. fair elections, rule of law, and a free and open media.

3. While 'good change' can happen through citizen engagement, there are also risks. Careful attention must be paid to the quality and direction of change, as well as to its incidence. Positive outcomes of citizen engagement can be mirrored by their opposite.

4. Citizen action through their own associations and social movements can have as much or more consequence for states as participation through formal governance processes, even participatory ones. Strengthening these broader change processes, and their interaction, can create opportunities for state reformers to respond to demands, build external alliances and contribute to state responsiveness.

5. Citizen engagement – especially when citizens are challenging powerful interests in the status quo - also faces risks of reprisal. Donors and policy makers alike can play an important role in protecting and strengthening the space for citizens to exercise their voice, and supporting the enabling conditions for citizen engagement to occur. In particular, they can promote the value of broader movements for both democracy and development, support champions of engagement within the state, and monitor state reprisals against greater citizen voice.

6. For those donors and development actors working in fragile and weak settings, the research points to the need to recognise early the role which local associations and other citizen activities can play in the strengthening of cultures of citizenship, which in turn can contribute to building responsive states. Citizen-based strategies can be as important in these settings can be as important as those found in stronger democracies.

7. For those seeking methods to assess impact and results, this study argues that while outcomes matter, they can be understood through a variety of methods. Systematic reviews of qualitative data over multiple cases and contexts can be as important and insightful as highly quantitative and controlled evidence building in a small number of settings.

Finally, after more than two decades of support in international development for greater citizen participation, the study argues that we must move beyond a focus on results alone. The issue is not simply 'what difference does citizen engagement make?' but to understand further the conditions under which it does so. Future research must focus also on the quality and direction of the differences which are made, and how they are attained.

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