

U4 Expert Answer



Evidence of citizen engagement impact in promoting good governance and anti-corruption efforts

Query

What is the evidence available on the impact of citizen engagement activities in promoting good governance and anti-corruption efforts?

Purpose

As citizen engagement is increasingly viewed as an approach to promote good governance and anti-corruption, it is necessary to review and update the current knowledge regarding its impact.

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Caveat

This answer is an update of the U4 Expert Answer The Impact of Strengthening Citizen Demand for Anti-Corruption Reform from July 2008.

Summary

Citizen engagement has garnered strength in the last 20 years as a response to the shortcomings of government reforms designed to improve governance. Different forms of citizen engagement and social accountability have been implemented over the years, ranging from institutionalised participatory processes to performing social audits and raising awareness.

The evidence available highlights that there are different types of positive effects in increasing good governance and anti-corruption efforts, such as increased citizen participation, building more responsive states, and identifying and sanctioning cases of corruption. However, the extent of the impact of citizen engagement is influenced by factors that may enable or limit this impact, such as political will and access to information.

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U4 is a resource centre for development practitioners who wish to effectively address corruption challenges in their work. Expert Answers are produced by the U4 Helpdesk – operated by Transparency International – as quick responses to operational and policy questions from U4 Partner Agency staff.

1. What is citizen engagement?

Citizen engagement has garnered strength in the last 20 years as a response to the shortcomings of government reforms designed to improve governance. Development agencies, international civil society and governments themselves have, in many ways, supported the engagement of citizens in development strategies to improve government outcomes and reduce corruption. Institutions such as the OECD and the United Nations have stressed the importance of partnerships with civil society in addressing governance issues like corruption (Verdenicci & Hough 2015). Likewise, the World Bank recognises that citizens are essential to constraining corruption and as a result invested circa US\$7 billion in 2003 on community-based and community-driven development projects (Mansuri & Rao 2004). Since that time, investment by the bank in citizen engagement initiatives have continued to grow (World Bank Group 2014).

Citizen engagement can be defined as the activities of private citizens that seek to influence public decision-making processes which affect their lives and their communities. Citizen engagement is an essential part of open and inclusive governance, which is then determined by the *processes* and the *outcomes* of the engagement. The former refers to the extent of interaction between the duty-bearers (e.g. service providers) and the citizens, and the level of involvement of the citizens, while the latter refers to the degree that the duty-bearer is motivated or compelled to address the feedback resulting from the process (World Bank Group 2014).

This increased attention to citizen engagement, or citizen-centred approaches to increasing good governance and anti-corruption, is founded on a varied set of theories around democratic governance, development and public administration. This section will present a summary of the rationale and practice of citizen engagement in promoting good governance and anti-corruption efforts.

Types and examples of citizen engagement activities that promote good governance and anti-corruption efforts

Citizen engagement is referred to by different names in the literature and by practitioners, and is often also referred to as citizen participation, citizen-centred approaches and social accountability. These all broadly refer to the same concept described above; however, they may differ in their process or outcome. For example, social accountability initiatives are usually the subset of citizen engagement activities that seek to hold a government to account. This subset is different from citizen feedback, for example, which does not necessarily imply an accountability component. Accordingly, there are a number of different types of citizen engagement approaches that differ in their process and outcomes.¹

Citizens can seek accountability from public institutions and reduce the space for corruption by engaging in the promotion of transparency. Increased public information can help citizens to sanction elected officials during election times or can allow citizens to “exit” and change public service providers if given a choice (Ackerman 2004). However, transparency is widely recognised as a *necessary but not sufficient condition* to hold public officials to account. As a result, citizens and civil society organisations have performed and still advocate for increasing transparency as it is instrumental to other social accountability and citizen engagement activities, and increases societal trust and cohesion (Verdenicci & Hough 2015).

Transparency mechanisms can help break the informational monopoly that power holders may have over citizens and empower the public to reject corruption. For example, citizens’ charters arm people with knowledge of their rights, affecting the principal-agent-client relationship and minimising the space for fraud (Marin 2013). In addition, access to information initiatives is also seen as an end in itself (Gaventa & McGee 2013) given that access to information is a human right that enables the achievement of other social and economic rights.

¹ For a succinct overview of citizen engagement mechanisms please see Annex I of World Bank Group 2014.

Examples of citizen engagement in promoting greater transparency include the promotion and use of access to information rights or open data on which online platforms are developed by civil society to provide more and better information to citizens.

In addition to transparency mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation activities can also have an impact on accountability directly by elevating the moral or reputational cost of corruption to public officials (which can be considered informal sanctions), or by activating the deployment of horizontal accountability mechanisms to apply the respective sanctions (Gaventa & McGee 2013).

By exposing and denouncing cases of governmental wrongdoing identified through monitoring and evaluation activities, civil society can activate external and internal agencies of control, contributing to the adherence of the rule of law (Peruzzoti and Smulovitz 2002). As a result, monitoring the evaluation mechanisms can greatly enhance the probability of identifying malfeasance and the imposition of subsequent sanctions by the competent authorities.

Some examples of monitoring and evaluation activities include public expenditure tracking (PET) and public revenue monitoring mechanisms, which seek to involve citizens in monitoring public expenditure to help identify the embezzlement of public funds. Citizen scorecards, report cards, and the citizen feedback models allow citizens to provide feedback to administrators and governments of public services and denounce bribery, while public audits are a formal mechanism for citizens to evaluate expenditure and implementation of projects and/or programmes (Marin 2013).

Lastly, mechanisms of citizen engagement that promote participation in decision making go to the heart of discretion in policy making and its implementation. For example, participatory budgeting or community-led procurement allow for input and oversight directly in the allocation of public resources and the granting of public contracts, effectively reducing the spaces for abuse of power. In contrast to horizontal accountability mechanisms, public participation mechanisms can play an important role in preventing corruption from within and do not have to wait for ex-post mechanisms of control (Marin 2013).

How does citizen engagement promote good governance and anti-corruption efforts?

There are many and varied ways in which citizens engage in good governance and anti-corruption efforts. The actors that might participate in good governance activities can be members of a community, a loose network of like-minded citizens or, more commonly, a civil society organisation. In addition, these actors can take part in a range of activities from taking part in institutionalised participatory processes to performing social audits and collaborating to raise awareness on a specific issue, such as anti-corruption. How this wide range of activities contributes to better governance and decreased corruption can be explained through different rationales.

One rationale for citizen engagement in promoting good governance, and specifically in anti-corruption efforts, considers that corruption is a collective action problem and, in order to tackle it, high social capital and social trust are necessary (Verdenicci & Hough 2015).

Social trust can be increased through greater transparency as an enabling factor, and through more democratised and participatory governance processes given that greater participation brings more voices and interest into a governing process and limits opportunities for public officials to abuse their powers (Verdenicci & Hough 2015).

Another rationale is based on the assumption that failures in government, such as poor service delivery, stem from a lack of accountability (accountability gaps) (Fox 2015). If a lack of accountability within the public sector and related institutions is part of the problem, then citizen participation can seek this accountability directly from the government. The idea is summed up by Gaventa and McGee: “through greater accountability, the leaky pipes of corruption and inefficiency will be repaired” (2013, p. 4).

Social accountability and citizen monitoring of government actions can be particularly effective when coupled with the ability to enforce certain types of changes or to sanction government agents. Citizens can demand accountability from elected officials through voting (electoral sanctions). Nevertheless, elections, as a method of seeking accountability, do not apply to many members of the public sphere, namely non-

elected public officials (Ackerman 2004). As a response, social accountability mechanisms can be applied to activate horizontal accountability² actions, such as a legislative oversight committee inquiry, an internal administrative sanction or a criminal sanction. These can apply both to elected as well as to non-elected officials.

The notion of social accountability stems from this rationale. Social accountability can be defined as “non-electoral, yet vertical mechanisms of control that rest on the actions of a multiple array of citizens’ associations and movements and on the media, actions that aim at exposing governmental wrongdoing, bringing new issues into the public agenda or activating the operation of horizontal agencies” (Schatz 2003, p. 162).

2. Evidence of impact of citizen engagement to promote good governance and anti-corruption efforts

Challenges involved in assessing the impact of citizens’ actions

After two decades of citizen engagement activities to curb corruption and improve governance, there are increasing efforts to provide evidence of their effectiveness and impact.³ Overall, there have been advances and innovations in implementing agencies to assess the impact of citizen engagement activities through developing indicators, methodological approaches and theories of change. Nonetheless, there are inherent challenges to assessing impact as many of the outcomes of these types of initiatives are rarely visible, tangible or measurable (Gaventa & McGee 2013).

One considerable challenge in citizen-led transparency and accountability studies is that the citizen engagement component of the intervention being evaluated is poorly theorised or explained. For example, there is limited information about how and why citizens act upon information received and the ways in which they exact

accountability from authorities. As a result of this, there is a limited understanding of the role citizens and civil society play in the logical chain that results in greater accountability (Gaventa & McGee 2013).

It is also important to note that identifying and measuring positive outcomes to citizen-centred approaches depend on the research approach, the definition of “positive outcomes” and the conditions under which the citizen engagement activity was successful. It has also been noted that there have been few efforts to identify the negative impacts of transparency and accountability initiatives (McGee & Gaventa 2010).

That said, there is evidence of the different effects that citizen engagement activities have on direct short-term outcomes (such as denouncing corruption) and indirect longer-term outcomes (such as improving health or education for communities).

Evidence of impact

Citizen engagement can have different types of impact, some of which are broad and diffuse, such as: strengthening inclusive and cohesive societies and raising citizen awareness on an issue, which can lead to government action.

Other types of impact from social accountability are specific to the sector and to the activity, such as: improving the effectiveness of expenditure for a particular public service; sanctioning public officials who seek bribes or perform acts of malfeasance; or improving a governance process like budgeting.

The impact of a citizen engagement activity can occur at many levels and it can be difficult to capture all the different effects an activity has. Hence, the impact of a citizen engagement activity can be classified in many ways.

Below are some examples that illustrate the effects citizen action can have on good governance and public integrity.

² Horizontal accountability refers to accountability within the public administration and between actors of the public sector, including autonomous agencies and government branches.

³ Please see the further reading section below for additional sources on citizen engagement impact.

Social and governance impact

A study of 100 cases across 20 countries using meta-case study analysis methods revealed that citizen engagement initiatives have multiple positive social and governance outcomes in four broad areas: the construction of citizenship; strengthened practices of citizen engagement; building responsive and accountable states; and more inclusive and cohesive societies. From the 100 cases studies, 75% had positive results that contributed to these outcomes (Gaventa & Barrett 2012).

There is also evidence that a vibrant civil society had an impact on reducing corruption but only in cases where the other enabling factors were present, such as media freedom, government transparency and citizens' ability to choose their politicians (Grimes 2012). This points to the fact that citizen engagement can have an impact on broad issues, such as curbing corruption.

Impact in awareness raising and government responsiveness

Another interesting example of citizen engagement is the "I Paid a Bribe"⁴ website, which sought to raise awareness to bribery and recommend procedural reforms (Verdenicci & Hough 2015). This citizen engagement initiative asked citizens to report when they had paid a bribe to a public officer. The website had, as of November 2014, 4.5 million visits and 32,000 reports. The initiative helped the governments in India change policies in high corruption areas, such as driver licence distribution and land-registration (Verdenicci & Hough 2015).

Similarly, a citizen feedback model in Pakistan sought feedback on bribe requests via SMS from public service users. As of November 2014, 4 million service users were contacted, 500,000 citizens had responded to the feedback request, 110,000 reported corruption issues and 3,600 actions were taken by the authorities against complaints (Verdenicci & Hough).

Impact of citizen engagement in service delivery

Anuradha Joshi (2013), in a study on the impact of transparency and accountability initiatives in service delivery, finds that the evidence is mixed regarding impact. She finds evidence which

suggests that initiatives are more effective in achieving first order goals, such as exposing corruption, than on the ultimate goal, such as improving overall responsiveness of service providers.

Impact of citizen engagement in public financial management and development

In a similar study, Ruth Carlitz (2013) finds a patchwork of results while evaluating the impact of initiatives to improve accountability and transparency in budget processes. For example, she highlights the positive outcomes of participatory budgeting in Brazil in areas such as greater access to public sanitation and paved roads. Nevertheless, the study finds that there are many more studies that document the immediate process-related impact, such as greater openness in the budget process, than on the effects on longer-term outcomes.

A review of studies of large-scale programmes and field experiments of social accountability demonstrates that there are positive development effects including: reducing leakages of public funds destined for public education in Uganda; disseminating funding information to citizens; and reduction in wage thefts in India through social audits (Fox 2015).

Noteworthy is the Uganda PET case, which has been thoroughly documented and demonstrates how a public information campaign that disclosed the information of school entitlements to citizens reduced the diversion of funds by intermediary provincial agencies from approximately 74% to less than 20% (Carlitz 2013).

There is, therefore, evidence that citizen-centred approaches to anti-corruption and good governance can be successful. The number of successful cases is not insignificant, even though much of the evidence comes from specific case studies. There is limited systematic evidence of the different ways in which citizen-centred approaches affect anti-corruption and good governance. This limited evidence is a reflection of the complexities and the need for more systematic assessments of these types of initiatives.

As Gaventa and Barrett highlight, "the issue is not simply to ask 'what difference does it make?' but

⁴ www.ipaidabribe.com

to understand further the conditions under which it makes a positive difference” (2007, p. 2407). The following section summarises the main findings to date on the conditions that enable and limit positive outcomes from citizen engagement activities to promote good governance and reduce corruption.

3. Enablers and limits of citizen engagement to promote good governance and anti-corruption efforts

Citizen engagement activities are undertaken in different socio-political contexts which, as research suggests, affects their level of impact. In addition, citizen engagement mechanisms have limits.

Enablers of citizen engagement

Citizen engagement activities, including social accountability mechanisms, intend to elicit a response from governments and to respond to a specific need; for example, for reduced corruption and better public services. In broad terms, this can be done in two general ways: by seeking accountability after the fact – such as through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms – or by preventing malfeasance through increased citizen participation (Grimes 2008).

Effectiveness of horizontal institutions to seek accountability and apply sanctions

In the case of social accountability mechanisms that seek accountability after the fact, studies have found that one precondition for success is the effectiveness of horizontal institutions to exact accountability and apply sanctions. Attributes of effective horizontal accountability institutions include authority and autonomy (Grimes 2008). This stems from the fact that, in many cases, the citizen engagement activity raises an alarm of an impropriety and attempts to activate the oversight system. In this way, citizen engagement activities can apply formal sanctions to instances of corruption (Grimes 2008).

Degree of electoral accountability

Some authors argue that effective horizontal institutions are affected by the degree of electoral

accountability in the state. A study by Florian Schatz (2013) illustrates that a social accountability mechanism was comparatively more effective in reducing corruption when there was effective electoral accountability. The argument follows that horizontal accountability mechanisms depend on political will and this, in turn, is best generated through citizens sanctioning through the electoral process. In other words, the presence of a viable political competition may be needed to incentivise political leaders to respond to citizen demand or support civil society organisations in the pursuit of anti-corruption and good governance (Grimes 2008).

Political will

Political will is important not only in activating horizontal accountability mechanisms ex-post, but it also plays a key role in participatory mechanisms of citizen engagement. Studies have found that political will to allow citizens to participate is key. An example is the case of participatory budgeting in Brazil where the mayor of Porto Alegre was willing to cede power to the citizens to make budgetary decisions (Grimes 2008). In addition, political will must be present not to block participatory mechanisms (freedom from manipulation). Two studies of citizen engagement in participatory mechanisms in India⁵ and Indonesia⁶ found that the citizens’ monitoring process was captured by political elites, which negatively affected the impact of the citizen engagement (Grimes 2008).

In cases where there is a lack of political will, civil society organisations and citizens can play an important role in generating this political will. In fact, many social accountability mechanisms have this specific goal. Some of the more common strategies to generate political will include empowering and mobilising citizens, and direct advocacy (Martinez B. Kukutschka 2014).

Access to information

In both ex-post social accountability mechanisms and participatory mechanisms, access to information plays a crucial role. Information on government processes and resources allows citizens to understand, make informed decisions and identify cases of corruption. In sum, only informed citizens can demand their rights and hold public officials to account (Chêne 2008).

⁵ See Verón et al. 2006 in Further Readings.

⁶ See Olken 2007 in Further Readings.

In some cases, citizen engagement activities cannot apply formal sanctions but can apply social or informal sanctions. For example, in Argentina, a case of political corruption did not end in criminal or administrative sanctions but, due to the high level of media attention and popular pressure, the key actors involved in the scandal resigned from their offices (Grimes 2008).

Free media

This leads us to another enabler of successful citizen engagement, the free media. A free press is important to citizen engagement as it can generate and support demand for good governance by reporting on and drawing attention to violations. This requires that the media be independent to report on corruption and good governance stories (Grimes 2012). A study by Grimes (2012) found through statistical analysis that press freedom positively affects the capacity of civil society to hold governments to account.

Plural and organised civil society

The attributes of civil society organisations and networks have also been found to affect the effectiveness of citizen engagement. Some argue there is compelling evidence that more professionalised civil society organisations (rather than community-based) and a plurality of organisations tend to have more success in their interventions. A well-developed network of civil society organisations is more likely to mobilise local populations to gather information and stage protests that force public officials to take action (Grimes 2008). In addition, broad and inclusive constituencies help to avoid elite capture in the citizen engagement processes (Chêne 2008).

Therefore, the ability of citizen engagement to hold public officials accountable is dependent on the political, associational, institutional and the media landscape (Grimes 2008). The evidence suggests that some basic democratic principles should be in place to ensure effectiveness (Schatz 2013).

In light of these enablers of citizen engagement, Fox (2015) proposes a reinterpretation of the impact evidence through a new lens. Fox proposes that there are two approaches to social accountability: tactical approaches, which are

bounded interventions or tools that only seek to “project voice” or raise awareness through enhanced information; and strategic approaches, which deploy multiple-tactics, encourage an enabling environment and bolster governmental capacity to respond. The evidence on impact suggests that strategic social accountability tends to be more successful in holding governments to account than tactical social accountability approaches (Fox 2015). This argument is in line with previous findings that approaches that take into consideration and work with the enabling factors described above are more likely to achieve success.

A study by Grimes (2012) looked into whether a strong civil society affects corruption through social accountability mechanisms and citizen engagement. The findings of this country comparative analysis were cautiously supportive of this thesis. In fact, the regressions found that a strong civil society was effective in reducing corruption only in cases where there was higher political competition, press freedom and governmental transparency. The study concludes that the absence of these conditions means that the “density of civil society”⁷ does not have an impact on the level of corruption in a country (Grimes 2012).⁸

Limits of citizen engagement

Despite the evidence of the positive effects of citizen-led activities and the overall enthusiasm towards citizen engagement activities to fight corruption and enhance good governance, these mechanisms do have their limits.

Limited civil society and citizen capacity

Citizen engagement approaches rely heavily on citizens being able to fulfil the tasks asked of them. In some cases, there is a need to perform varied analytical duties, complex reporting, planning (Verdenicci & Hough 2015) and effectively communicating with stakeholders, which may be duties outside their expertise or they simply lack the time to perform. In this case, organised and professionalised civil society organisations can mitigate this hurdle; nevertheless, there is still a need for skills and

⁷ Density of civil society is measured in this study as the number of organisations in a country that self-label as working with community development.

⁸ See Annex II of World Bank Group 2014 for an overview of context analysis of citizen engagement impact.

abilities to effectively engage with governments on anti-corruption and good governance issues.

Lack of government will or capacity to respond

There is an assumption that governments are able to respond to citizen's demands for accountability and better service provisions. Most citizen-centred efforts take place within more or less formalised institutional arrangements, which implies that there must exist the ability and willingness of politicians and public officials to cooperate with citizen groups and civil society organisations (Verdenicci & Hough 2015). In many states this is not the case and institutions lack capacity, processes and/or resources to respond to demands or carry out participatory mechanisms.

Lack of inclusiveness and co-optation risks

Another limit stems from the fact that citizen-led activities are not automatically inclusive. Findings suggest that in many cases, participants of citizen engagement activities are wealthier, better educated and hold a higher social status (Verdenicci & Hough 2015). In addition, the participants run the risk of being manipulated or co-opted by powerful local elites (Verdenicci & Hough 2015).

Induced citizen engagement

Lastly, the re-creation of citizen engagement activities by external agents can alter the dynamic between citizens and states, creating an induced reaction by citizens or civil society groups within a country context. The evidence on "induced" citizen engagement to curb corruption points to disappointing results (Verdenicci & Hough 2015).

4. Conclusion

Citizen engagement, defined as the activities of private citizens who seek to influence public decision-making processes which affect their lives and their communities, has garnered strength in the last 20 years as a response to the shortcomings of government reforms designed to improve governance. There are many and varied ways in which citizens engage in good governance and anti-corruption efforts, ranging from increasing the transparency of government actions to participating in policy decisions.

Despite the challenges involved in assessing the impact of citizens' actions, there is evidence of the different effects that these activities have on direct

short-term outcomes – such as denouncing corruption – and indirect longer-term outcomes – such as improving health or education for communities.

However, the impact of citizen engagement is influenced by enabling or limiting factors, such as political will and access to information. Despite the concrete evidence of impact, there is more to be done to collect evidence on the different ways in which citizen-centred approaches affect anti-corruption and good governance.

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