

Effect of civil society capacity building and civic engagement and empowerment initiatives on civic participation

Civil society capacity building and civic engagement initiatives moderately increased local participation and voter coordination. They negatively affected national engagement, democratic values, and institutional trust, resulting in a harmful overall effect on civic participation.

Geographical region: Sub Saharan Africa

Effect size: Harmful effect ($g=-0.281$)

Confidence in study findings: Low confidence (5 studies; 24 ES)

Short summary

Civil society capacity building and civic engagement initiatives aimed to enhance civic participation but had a **harmful effect** overall. Local-level participation and voter coordination improved, with some initiatives reducing parochial voting and vote monopolization. However, national political engagement remained limited, and effects on democratic values, decentralization support, and institutional trust were negative or negligible. Confidence in this cell is low due to inconsistent effect sizes and variation across studies.

Long summary

The intervention

The interventions included workshops, media campaigns, voter mobilization efforts, civic education programs, town halls, and security committees. These aimed to improve political knowledge, electoral participation, decentralization awareness, and institutional accountability in fragile democracies across Kenya, DRC, Liberia, and Rwanda.

How the intervention is expected to work

These initiatives sought to increase civic knowledge, foster engagement, and enhance political participation. Workshops, media campaigns, and town halls educated citizens on governance, voting rights, and democratic processes. Voter mobilization programs encouraged electoral participation and reduced clientelism. Strengthened civil society was expected to advocate for policy change and accountability, promote decentralization awareness, and enhance participatory governance. Overall, the interventions aimed to build democratic resilience and informed civic engagement.

The evidence base

The cell includes five primary studies and used randomized controlled trials, randomized encouragement designs, comparison group designs, and observational survey analysis.

The studies were conducted in Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia and Rwanda.

Evidence findings

Civil society capacity building and civic engagement initiatives moderately increased local participation and voter coordination but had a harmful effect on national engagement, democratic values, decentralization support, and institutional trust, with limited broader political impact.

Included studies

Finkel (2012) The study evaluates Kenya's National Civic Education Program II (NCEP II), conducted from 2006 to 2007 in a polarized political environment. Aimed at enhancing civic knowledge and engagement, the program included workshops, theatre performances, and media campaigns, reaching an estimated 4.5–5.5 million people. Using survey data from 3,600 individuals (1,800 treatment, 1,800 control), researchers analysed the program's effects on various democratic measures. Findings indicate significant improvements in political knowledge ($p < 0.05$) and perceived knowledge of the constitution ($p < 0.05$), with moderate gains in local political participation ($p < 0.05$). However, no significant change was found in national political participation. Regarding values, there was no significant shift in attitudes toward democracy being the best system or support for the rule of law. A moderate positive effect was observed in the rejection of vote buying ($p < 0.05$). The program was less impactful in fostering ethnic tolerance and had limited influence on attitudes about women's rights or democratic values. The study is rated as a low confidence quantitative study due to lack of pretest data and recall bias.

Marx (2016) The study assesses the impact of Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) voter mobilization via an SMS campaign before the 2013 elections. Conducted across 12,160 polling stations, the intervention targeted 4.9 million voters, encouraging participation, providing election information, and promoting transparency. Researchers employed a randomized controlled trial design using administrative and survey data to measure effects. Findings show a modest increase in voter turnout. Based on votes cast, turnout increased by approximately 0.3 percentage points (88.0% in control vs. 88.3% in treatment, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, valid votes followed this trend, showing consistent treatment effects. However, self-reported turnout demonstrated a stronger increase of about 2 percentage points (93% in control vs. 95% in treatment, $p < 0.05$). This study is considered a low confidence quantitative study.

Finkel (2021) evaluates the Voter Opinion and Involvement through Civic Education (VOICE) program conducted in 2011 in Bandundu Province, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The intervention aimed to increase civic knowledge and engagement with the decentralization process through participatory "Boîtes à Images" workshops that used images to discuss decentralization and broader democratic concepts. The study employed a randomized encouragement design involving 1,120 participants across eight villages, with 800 encouraged to attend workshops. Surveys were conducted pre- and post-intervention to assess changes in attitudes and perceptions. Findings revealed that perceived support for the decentralization process decreased significantly. The Instrumental Variable (IV) estimate indicated a larger decrease of -0.397 ($p < 0.05$). This represents a decline of over 0.75 standard deviations among participants, as exposure to VOICE highlighted deficiencies in the decentralization process and governance in DRC. The program demonstrated the potential to deepen democratic values while revealing dissatisfaction with institutional performance, a dual effect of civic education in fragile democracies. This study is considered a low confidence quantitative study.

Mvukiyehe (2017) examines two democracy promotion interventions in rural Liberia ahead of the 2011 general elections: a civic education program with town halls and a security committee program. Conducted in five counties, the interventions aimed to enhance electoral quality in a post-conflict state marked by fragmented authority and clientelist systems. The study involved 142 towns, randomly assigned to receive civic education, security interventions, both, or none. Data included polling place results and surveys. The diversity of vote choice, measured via the Herfindahl index, improved modestly in communities exposed to the security committee program ($p < 0.10$), indicating reduced vote monopolization. However, the civic education program produced a coordinated shift in voting, particularly toward national-level candidates such as the Unity Party ($p < 0.01$), reducing parochial voting (-9% ; $p < 0.01$). Combined interventions showed similar but weaker effects. Overall, civic education increased voter coordination, while the security program modestly reduced localized influences. These findings underscore the potential of targeted interventions to improve electoral dynamics in fragile, post-conflict democracies. This study is considered a high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Nichols-Barrer (2014) The Rwanda Threshold Program (RTP), implemented between 2009 and 2011, aimed to enhance governance and accountability through multiple initiatives, including the "Every Voice Counts" campaign by the Rwanda National Police (RNP). This intervention installed approximately 250 submission boxes for citizen complaints and commendations nationwide. The study evaluated citizen preferences for voicing complaints, using a comparison group design with data from nationwide surveys conducted in 2011 and 2012, involving 20,000 respondents across 416 sectors. Findings reveal that 58% of citizens aware of the program preferred using submission boxes, while 26% favoured contacting police officers directly, 8% preferred contacting police supervisors, and 5% opted for contacting local government officials. About 3% were unsure how to voice complaints. Additionally, completely satisfied with RNP services stood at 39%, reflecting moderate approval levels. Awareness of the submission boxes was higher in sectors containing boxes, with respondents in such areas being 8 percentage points more likely to know about the initiative. However, proximity to submission boxes did not significantly improve perceptions of RNP trustworthiness or effectiveness. This study is considered a high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Confidence assessment

The overall confidence of the cell is low due to inconsistency in the effect sizes reported across studies.

Other outcomes in the study/cell

- Violence and atrocity prevention/Social norms regarding violence and atrocities
- Social cohesion/Feelings of trust & acceptance of diversity/Willingness to participate or help
- Community and state governance/Access to justice, rights and public services/Govt. performance
- Human security/Political security/Intermediate social cohesion outcomes