

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

Civil society capacity-building and civic engagement initiatives, including civic education workshops and citizen complaint boxes, had a large effect on government performance outcomes.

Geographical region: Sub Saharan Africa

Effect size: Large effect ($g=0.22$)

Confidence in study findings: Low confidence (2 studies; 14 ES)

Short summary

Civic education workshops and citizen complaint mechanisms had large effects on government performance outcomes. Workshops increased citizen awareness of decentralization and democratic processes, while complaint boxes improved engagement with local authorities. However, satisfaction with democracy decreased in some contexts, reflecting misalignment between citizen expectations and weak institutions. Confidence is low due to the limited number of studies.

Long summary

The intervention

The interventions focused on civic engagement and government accountability. Community workshops used visual aids to educate citizens on democratic processes and decentralization, and anonymous complaint boxes were introduced to allow reporting of police misconduct. Both interventions aimed to empower citizens, though effectiveness was constrained by fragile governance structures.

How the intervention is expected to work

Workshops increase citizen knowledge of democratic processes and local governance, fostering informed engagement and accountability demands. Complaint boxes provide a low-risk channel to report misconduct, intending to improve transparency and responsiveness of local authorities. Together, these mechanisms are designed to strengthen democratic governance, though results depend on institutional capacity and political willingness to act on citizen input.

The evidence base

The cell includes two primary studies, using a field experiment with encouragement design and a quasi-experimental design.

The studies were conducted in Bandundu Province, Democratic Republic of Congo and multiple districts across Rwanda.

Evidence findings

The interventions increased awareness and civic engagement, producing a large effect on government performance outcomes, but had limited impact on overall government accountability, transparency, and citizen satisfaction.

Included studies

Finkel (2021) evaluates the "VOICE" civic education program conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between 2010 and 2011. It aimed to improve political awareness and engagement through community workshops using illustrative "picture boxes" to discuss decentralization reforms and democracy. The program sought to inform citizens about democratic processes in a fragile political context. The study was conducted at Democratic Republic of Congo, specifically Bandundu Province. A field experiment using an encouragement design. Researchers invited a randomly selected subset of individuals to participate in workshops and measured changes in democratic attitudes through pre- and post-intervention surveys. The study involved 1,120 respondents from eight villages, with 800 encouraged to attend the workshops and 320 as controls. The program negatively impacted satisfaction, showing a reduction of nearly 0.4 standard deviations in satisfaction among attendees. This highlights the challenges of aligning citizen expectations with the weak democratic supply in fragile contexts. This study is considered a low confidence quantitative study.

Nichols-Barrer (2014) The Rwanda Threshold Program's "Every Voice Counts" campaign was implemented to enhance transparency and accountability in the Rwanda National Police (RNP) through anonymous citizen complaint and commendation boxes. This initiative was part of broader efforts to improve public perceptions of governance. The study was conducted in Rwanda, covering multiple districts. A quasi-experimental design was used, comparing sectors with complaint boxes (treatment group) to those without (comparison group), supported by surveys in 2011 and 2012. The study surveyed a nationally representative sample of 10,032 respondents in 2012, alongside qualitative interviews with stakeholders. The findings indicated that 20% of respondents nationwide were aware of the initiative, with awareness 8 percentage points higher in sectors with boxes. 58% of aware respondents preferred boxes as a communication method; usage likelihood was 1.5 times higher in treatment sectors. 68% believed RNP punished officers' crimes, 58% believed crimes by local officials were punished, and 62% believed average citizens faced punishment. Agreement rates for fairness (63%), honesty (61%), consistency (59%), and effectiveness (64%) showed no significant differences across groups. The study is considered high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Confidence assessment

This cell has low confidence due to a limited number of studies in the cell.

Other outcomes in the study

- Social cohesion/Feelings of trust & acceptance of diversity
- Community and state governance/Access to justice, rights and public services/Civic participation
- Human security/Political security/Intermediate social cohesion outcomes