So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement

The potential contribution of citizen engagement to improved governance and developmental outcomes has become accepted in policy discourse, but its impact has proved difficult to assess. An analysis of qualitative data from multiple cases identifies effects across different outcomes and examines how outcomes vary according to the type of engagement and political context.

Previous research studies attempting to demonstrate the impact of citizen engagement have tended to be limited to single case studies or a few country contexts, or by methodological constraints. This paper presents the results from an analysis of a sample of 100 research studies of citizen engagement in 20 countries produced by the UK Department for International Development-supported Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability over ten years. Such a large body of work offers an opportunity to explore the evidence to support or critique the proposition that citizen participation contributes to improved democratic and developmental outcomes.

By mapping over 800 observable effects of citizen participation from the pool of 100 case studies, the authors created a typology of four democratic and developmental outcomes:

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

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 were also examples of negative outcomes.

The paper then examines whether the differences in outcomes were affected by either the strategy of engagement or the political context. To examine variations by types of engagement the case studies were coded according to citizen engagement in: (a) local associations, (b) social movements and campaigns, (c) formal participatory governance spaces, and (d) activities that employed a combination of these approaches. To examine variations across political context, a combination of existing indices of political regimes was used to group the 20 countries according to three tiers of democratic strength.

The results in both areas challenge assumptions about how and where change occurs. Engagement through local associations and social movements emerges as a more important source of change than has previously been understood, with associations showing the highest percentage of positive outcomes in each outcome type.

When looking at outcomes across contexts, in contrast to assumptions that link positive democratic and development outcomes to the level of democratisation, a very strong presence of associations, in particular, is found in the least democratic settings. In turn these associations play very important roles across each of the outcomes studied.

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" To the question 'Does citizen engagement make a difference to developmental and democratic outcomes?' the answer is clearly yes "

Key research findings:

1. Citizen engagement can be linked positively to achieving developmental and democratic outcomes.

2. However, while some approaches to the impact of citizen engagement attempt to draw a straight line from individual actions or behaviours to these outcomes, intermediate indices such as awareness of rights, knowledge, disposition towards action, organising skills and the thickness of civic networks may be equally important.

3. Positive outcomes are often mirrored by negative results, including a sense of disempowerment or of tokenistic participation, or new skills and alliances used for corrupt ends or captured by elites.

4. Many negative outcomes relate to state behaviour: bureaucratic 'brick walls', failures to implement or sustain policy gains, and reprisals against those who challenge the status quo. A greater sense of exclusion may emerge where new power relations reinforce old hierarchies.

5. Associations and social movements are as important sources of change as more formal participation.

6. Citizen engagement can make positive differences regardless of the level of democratisation.

The study shows that systematic reviews of qualitative data over multiple cases and contexts can provide insightful information about the outcomes of citizen engagement.

To the question 'Does citizen engagement make a difference to developmental and democratic outcomes?' the answer is clearly yes, with practical implications from the findings for policy makers, donors and development actors. To move the debate on, it is necessary to understand further the conditions under which it makes a positive difference. Rather than simply measure the contribution, future research should focus also on the quality and direction of the differences that are made, and how they are attained.

Key policy lessons/implications of research

1. Intermediary measures of change can supplement governance and democracy indices that focus primarily on institutional arrangements such as fair elections, the rule of law, open media.

2. Strengthening citizen action through associations and social movements can enable state reformers to respond to demands, build external alliances and contribute to state responsiveness.

3. Donors and policy makers have an important role in protecting spaces for citizens to exercise their voice and supporting enabling conditions for engagement.

4. In fragile settings, the role that local associations and other citizen activities can play in strengthening cultures of citizenship needs to be recognised early.

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