

What we now know about citizen action and development outcomes

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DESPITE ALMOST A DECADE SINCE PARTICIPATION HAS BECOME SOMEWHAT MAINSTREAMED in development practice¹ and since strengthening the demand side has become attractive in good governance strategies², we still have very little evidence about the outcomes of citizen engagement, how they occur and in what contexts and conditions. Evidence from the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability (Citizenship DRC) gives us an opportunity to help fill this knowledge gap.

With funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), as well as from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations in the United States, the Citizenship DRC³ was a collaborative network of some sixty researchers and practitioners in nearly 30 countries.

Taking a ‘citizen’s perspective’, looking upwards and outwards, this project offered a unique insight into how citizens see and experience states and other institutions which affect their lives, as well as how they engage, mobilise and participate to make their voices heard. The overarching finding from the research was that citizens, when organised and empowered, can make a difference in the achievement of development goals, can make states more democratic and responsive, and are invaluable in making human rights a reality - though strategies for citizen action must also be carefully considered to guard against the possibilities of negative or adverse consequences.

In a 2010 synthesis study on ‘Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement’, Citizenship DRC researchers review the results of 100 original, qualitative case studies that the Citizenship DRC conducted in 20 countries, largely in the developing world⁴. Our case studies have helped to chart a range of intermediate outcomes that result from people being politically active, with the discovery that benefits can accumulate over time. Citizen engagement can build people’s knowledge and awareness, or what might be described as their sense of citizenship; this in turn strengthens the practice of participation as citizens learn their constitutional rights, how to file complaints, and how to organise meetings, among other things. Over time, citizen alliances and

1. World Bank (1994), *The World Bank and Participation*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

2. UN (2008) *People Matter: Civic Engagement in Public Governance*, New York: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

3. For more materials from the Citizenship DRC, see <<http://www.drc-citizenship.org/>>.

4. Using a meta case study approach – increasingly used in other fields, but relatively unique in research on development – the researchers coded over 800 instances where citizen engagement was linked, by a series of observable outcomes, to the processes of development, state-building and democracy-building; Gaventa, John and Barrett, Greg (2010) *So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement*, IDS Working Paper 347, Brighton: IDS.

networks often thicken, and these skills are transferred across issues and arenas. More effective citizen action in turn can contribute to more responsive states that deliver services, protect and extend rights, and foster a culture of accountability. Bringing new voices and issues in the public sphere, citizen action can also contribute to a broader sense of inclusion of previously marginalised groups within society and has the potential to increase social cohesion across groups.

The research also warns us that citizen engagement does not always lead to positive results. The benefits of citizen engagement can be mirrored by their opposite. Where in many cases engagement can contribute to construction of active citizenship, in other cases it leads to a sense of disempowerment and a reduced sense of agency, or increased dependency on ‘experts’, or reinforced exclusions. Participatory spaces can merely reinforce old hierarchies based on gender, caste or race. They can also contribute to greater competition and conflict across groups who compete for the recognition and resources in new ways⁵.

The fact, however, that the vast majority of the outcomes found in the studies are positive provides strong evidence of the contribution of citizen engagement for achieving development goals, building responsive and accountable states and realising rights and democracy. For donors and policy makers, therefore, the core question is not whether citizen engagement makes a difference, but how to understand the conditions and pathways under which it does so.

What difference can citizens make?

Gaining citizenship is not only a legal matter of becoming a full rights-bearing resident of a nation, but involves the development of citizens as actors, capable of claiming their rights and acting for themselves. This actor-oriented perspective, which has been at the heart of the Citizenship DRC’s work, is ‘based on the recognition that rights are shaped through actual struggles informed by people’s own understandings of what they are justly entitled to’⁶. Yet in many of the societies in which we have worked, citizens may be unaware of their existing rights, lack the knowledge needed to interact with the state, or do not feel they have the agency and power to act. In such conditions, our work suggests that an important first step – perhaps even a prerequisite to

5. Drawn from Gaventa, John and Barrett, Greg (2010) *So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement*, IDS Working Paper 347, Brighton: IDS.

6. Nyamu-Musembi, Celestine (2005) ‘Towards an Actor-Oriented Perspective on Human Rights’, in N. Kabeer (ed.), *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, London: Zed Books.

further action and participation – is to develop a greater awareness of rights and of one’s agency. In these contexts, one important function of citizen participation is that it helps to create and strengthen citizenship itself. To develop such an active citizenry, however, requires time and experience. Through trial and error, citizens gradually acquire crucial knowledge, a sense of their ability and a disposition to act. There is a long and arduous process that occurs between the time when people feel powerless and marginalised and when, perhaps many years later, they are cooperating with the government to reduce maternal mortality, for instance, or mobilising for improved health services, or demanding that their vote counts. The outcomes recorded by the Citizenship DRC, in other words, did not come overnight.

Citizens can be makers and shapers of services

Mainstream approaches to service provision stress the quality of the state’s policies, institutions and bureaucracies. From this perspective, citizens are treated as *consumers* who exercise their power by deciding where to spend or invest their money, or by playing a watchdog role to hold service deliverers accountable⁷. Whilst giving citizens a choice and powers of oversight can be useful, the research from the Citizenship DRC on service delivery – especially on health – suggests that service delivery systems will appropriately, effectively and fairly serve the marginalised and poor only when citizen-led organisations are able to bring independent and sometimes contentious views to bear at both the local and national levels.

The Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement study⁸ gives over 30 examples of where citizen engagement has led to tangible developmental or material outcomes in the areas of health, education, water, housing and infrastructure, and access to livelihoods. But whilst many approaches to the role of citizens in service delivery focus on their role as self-providers, or on NGOs as providers of services for the state or instead of the state, most of the examples from the Citizenship DRC present a different path. Citizens engage through collective action throughout the service delivery process, from advocating and pressing for social policies and programmes, to working with the state as partners in the implementation process, to holding the process to account through both formal and informal means. By using these means, citizens not only gain access to critical resources; they also leave behind a democratic dividend.

7. Cornwall, A. and Gaventa, J. (2001) *From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers: Repositioning Participation in Social Policy*, IDS Working Paper 127, Brighton: IDS.

8. Gaventa, John and Barrett, Greg (2010) *So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement*, IDS Working Paper 347, Brighton: IDS.

Citizens help to build accountable and responsive states

Increasingly, the accountability agenda is seen as critical in development and democracy circles. Accountability is used to refer to the responsibilities of states to their citizens, development agents to their recipients, corporations to their stockholders and stakeholders. Whilst state accountability in the past has often been seen as a 'horizontal process', in which one branch of the government monitored another, our research focuses on how to build vertical strands of accountability that connect marginalised and discriminated groups to international and state institutions⁹. A number of research studies by the World Bank, ODI, UNDP and bilateral agencies already refer to the contributions of citizen engagement to accountability¹⁰, but the Citizenship DRC's research gives a more confident appraisal, in part because of the scale of its dataset. Of all the outcomes documented from the Citizenship DRC's 100 case studies, numerous examples relate to states becoming more accountable and responsive as citizen action contributes to new legal frameworks, mechanisms and cultures that make accountability possible. In several cases, citizen engagement led to other forms of institutionalised practices that in turn strengthen the possibilities of further citizen engagement and citizen-led accountability demands.¹¹ Our research also turns political opportunity theory on its head. Conventional wisdom in political science is that social movements emerge when the political system creates opportunities to do so. However, we found that social movements, from the outside, create and hold open democratic spaces that create possibilities for reformers on the inside to change and implement policy.¹²

Social mobilisation extends and deepens democracy

Citizen engagement also contributes to the fulfilment of rights, and in the process can help to deepen democracy. The myriad of social, cultural and political struggles in both the North and South – autonomous movements such as those of women, the landless and indigenous peoples – have repeatedly put people on the path from clientelism to meaningful citizenship. By documenting this process, the research highlights

9. Newell, Peter and Wheeler, Joanna (2006) 'Making Accountability Count', IDS Policy Briefing 33, Brighton: IDS.

10. McGee, Rosemary and Gaventa, John (2010) 'Review of Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives: Synthesis Report', prepared for the Transparency and Accountability Initiative Workshop, October 14–15, 2010: Brighton.

11. Citizenship DRC (2009) 'Backed by Popular Demand: Citizen Actions for Accountability', Citizenship DRC Case Study Series, Brighton: IDS

12. Gaventa, John and Mayne, Ruth (2008) 'Building Responsive States: Citizen Action and National Policy Change', In Focus 5, Brighton: IDS.

the socially and politically transformative nature of rights claims, especially those that include demands for new rights and for participation in decision-making. Where social movements exist that can weave together international discourses on rights with local symbols and values, and where participatory spaces allow citizen groups to demand their entitlements, the state often emerges more capable of protecting and enforcing human rights. In this sense, the Citizenship DRC's research demonstrates how democratisation is a continuous process of struggle and contestation rather than the adoption of a standard institutional design and presents a series of insights into how social movements, civil society organisations and ordinary citizens contribute to this process, in both the North and the South. It shows that democracy is not easily engineered by political institutions or developmental interventions alone, but that organised citizens also strengthen democratic practice when they demand new rights, mobilise pressure for policy change and monitor government performance. Referring to the Nigerian context, Jibrin Ibrahim, director of Nigeria's Centre for Democracy and Development said: 'We have a political class that is complicit in the history of electoral fraud. Given this context, our position in civil society is that at the end of the day, it is direct citizen action that can make the difference'. A citizen-led approach¹³ argues that democracy is not a set recipe that can be reproduced anywhere. It is not about transferring one set of mechanisms or practices from one context to another, nor is it about following a straight linear path. 'Democratisation' is an ongoing process of struggle and contestation that occurs uniquely in each cultural and historical setting.

There are many instances documented by the Citizenship DRC of citizen action that has made no immediate contribution to poverty eradication or, worse, has incited a backlash by the state. But in many of the cases, citizen action – whether through associations, social movements or through participatory forums – has left behind key skills that come back into play in the next meeting, next campaign or next policy debate. Strategies for citizen engagement should thus be measured by more than short-term policy results, but also by the more fundamental and less obvious outcomes that underpin lasting change, such as popular awareness, increased capacity of organisations and stronger leadership. These outcomes - which can be considered indicators of *citizen* effectiveness - are needed to maintain the gains that have been made and become essential resources in future campaigns as well.

13. Schattan, Vera P. Coelho and Bettina von Lieres (eds), (2010) *Mobilizing for Democracy: Citizen Engagement and the Politics of Public Participation*, London: Zed Books.

What strategies can citizens use?

As people's sense of citizenship grows, they begin to engage politically with the state. The Citizenship DRC's research has looked specifically at how they do this in ways other than, or in addition to, voting and participating in political parties. These are through:

- *Nurturing associations at the grassroots* (neighbourhood associations, cooperatives, trade unions, religious groups, etc.): The links between associationalism and democracy in western democracies have long been highlighted, yet international development actors in recent years have paid little attention to the role of local associations in poorer countries. But local, membership-based, groups that gather for a common purpose – a cooperative, savings group or religious assembly – can play important roles not only for service delivery or community cohesion, but also as building blocks of democracy. The Citizenship DRC documented over 30 such case studies of grassroots associational life. In many examples, these local associations have served as schools of citizenship, transforming the outlook of their members, and in doing so, helping to reconfigure social relations.

Not all local associations are 'virtuous', however, as work on local youth associations, gangs and militias reveals in Nigeria, Jamaica and Brazil. Still, the Citizenship DRC's research has found the negative outcomes from associational life to be far lower than from other forms of citizen engagement, and to be largely positive in some of the weakest democracies¹⁴. And even in the context where democratic institutions have been tried and tested, associational life still remains a vital source of socially progressive values that needs to be nurtured.

- *Making new spaces for public participation more inclusive and effective*: Many countries have adopted a variety of techniques and forums that invite citizens to participate in policymaking. These new democratic spaces include community and user groups and participatory consultation exercises of various kinds, participatory sectoral councils and the institutions of participatory budgeting and participatory planning. These new arenas are found at multiple tiers of government, sometimes arising from processes of democratic decentralisation, or as part of a national consultative process. Even at the local level, their remit varies greatly: some local co-management initiatives focus on mobilising communities' own resources, whilst others oversee the allocation of

14. Just 10 per cent of outcomes resulting from associations were negative, compared with 35 per cent of the outcomes from other forms of citizen engagement (including cases where multiple strategies were pursued).

public funds. Taken together, they represent an increasingly vibrant new aspect of democracy, and imply new relationships between citizens and their governments. However, only a few are strongly accountable, inclusive and representative, and fewer still go beyond resource management or delivery to help shape laws and policies. In each case studied by the Citizenship DRC, the difference is made by a series of contextual factors: legal and institutional variables; small details in the design and management of the participatory process; and the social legacies left behind by a country's particular history of social mobilisation. Importing a best-practice model from elsewhere will not guarantee success.

- *Mobilising and mediating for global change*: Whilst much of the focus of how citizens engage with states has been on institutionalised processes, whether through elections or through other forms of state-sponsored participation, our research also points to the important role that social movements, advocacy campaigns and other forms of collective action play in building more responsive, accountable and pro-poor states. Change happens in a number of ways: protests outside the seats of power whilst lobbying on the inside; working with the media to shape public opinion whilst working with experts to engage in technical policy debates; contesting elites through litigation whilst collaborating with them as well. These and other forms of activism do not constitute the failure of democratic politics; they are an essential component.

To be effective in a global world, change must link simultaneously and synergistically across levels, from grassroots communities to national governments to international authorities. What happens at the international level – the decisions of multilateral institutions or global institutions, whether the World Bank or the Global Fund – affect what states and citizens at the national and local levels can do. Conversely, local and national actors – both states and civil society organisations – can also appeal to international authority and use international pressures to bring about change.

To hold together diverse movements for change, the role of mediators (those who interpret, represent, and communicate the movement both within and outside the movement) is critical. However, the growing role of mediators – be they individuals, networks or organisations – also raises questions of legitimacy, representation and accountability of the mediators themselves. Mobilisations can be used for many purposes, some of which are in the interests of poor people, and others that are not. Even those movements and campaigns that seek pro-poor or democratic governance reform may produce new forms of exclusion or patronage within them.

Under which conditions does citizen engagement make a difference?

A key question for the future is not simply to ask ‘what difference does citizen engagement make?’; we also need to understand further the conditions under which it makes a positive difference¹⁵. This final section outlines some of the concrete lessons learnt by the Citizenship DRC about how to work in this manner. A word of caution, however, is needed: even after ten years of research there remain no easy-to-follow instructions for how to promote successful citizen engagement. Nor should there be. A ‘cookie-cutter’, ‘one-size-fits all’ approach to change will rarely fit neatly into the diverse circumstances in which citizens find themselves. Rather, our research underscores that social and political change is a highly iterative process, rarely linear, often uneven and scarcely predictable. Even the stories of ‘success’ – where citizens have engaged to change a policy, claimed their rights, or improved their communities – have been fraught with setbacks, missteps, reversals and unintended consequences. This is not to say that that ‘success’ is completely contingent on context, but the process of change is complex, and the tension between this complexity and the need of project-oriented initiatives to show results persists.

The Citizenship DRC has identified six factors that have an influence on whether citizen engagement takes on the positive, self-reinforcing dynamic that we have seen in so many cases, or whether, vitiated by hollow or tokenistic forms of participation, it generates a negative cycle. None of these factors constitute an insurmountable obstacle to citizen engagement, which is possible even in post-conflict and insecure settings. The difference, rather, between positive and negative outcomes will be determined by whether the chosen strategy for citizen engagement is appropriate to the contextual factors. In any given context, consideration of these factors will help to identify appropriate strategies.

The institutional and political environment: The presence of free and fair elections and the existence of independent government institutions with a mandate to protect citizens’ rights (among other common ‘indicators’ of a healthy democracy) will strongly influence the strategies for citizen engagement that are possible. In regimes where essential freedoms are entirely absent, for instance, citizens have a more limited repertoire of actions. In these different contexts, different outcomes can also be expected. In more fragile settings, associations make a crucial contribution to social cohesion and

15. Gaventa, John and Barrett, G. (2010) *So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement*, IDS Working Paper 347, Brighton: IDS: 60.

political cultures, whilst in the more ‘mature’ democracies we have found that the accountability of the government and the allocation of state resources are often at stake.

Prior citizen capabilities: Just as a lack of state capacity can hinder governance, so too can a lack of capacity among citizens. In contexts where the knowledge and skills needed to be an effective citizen are lacking, it is unrealistic to expect citizen action to deliver accountability or development goals. Yet, these capabilities are also an outcome of citizen engagement. The Citizenship DRC’s research has strongly indicated that getting citizens involved is the best way to improve their knowledge and skills.

The strength of internal champions: Change often happens when there is both citizen pressure on the one hand, and political will from inside the state on the other. The presence of influential officials who are committed to holding open the door for citizens significantly expands what can be accomplished through citizen engagement – and further still when those officials have a background in activism. Many times, such champions emerge as a result of elections or internal competitions for political power. In some cases, champions exist, but remain silent in their institutions and unaware that others like them exist.

The history and style of engagement: Understanding these differences in history is crucial for designing context-appropriate programmes. What forms of action have citizens taken in the past and how did the state respond? What institutional practices or cultural norms did past engagement with citizens leave behind? Where are past citizen leaders now? This kind of enquiry can help to highlight past mistakes, and to reveal where an established pattern of citizen engagement already exists.

The nature of the issue and how it is framed: The very nature of the issue at the centre of citizen engagement will also influence possibilities of change. Whether the issue deals with questions of science, whether it is socially and culturally contentious, whether it has been framed by global actors or whether it has already been acknowledged as a political matter, a variety of these questions can drive the form of engagement, as well as the nature of the response.

The location of power and decision-making: In an increasingly globalised world, authority is held across many levels, and decisions are made through networks of actors. In this environment, it is crucial that citizen engagement follow the changing patterns of power – from the local, to the national to the global – in order to bring about effective

change. For this reason, citizen engagement is most effective when it employs multiple strategies, and when those strategies touch upon multiple stages of the policy process. This coordinated, multifaceted, multilevel way of approaching citizen engagement is crucial for positive outcomes.

Making strategic decisions at the nexus of state and society

Since its inception, the Citizenship DRC has argued for the importance of ‘working on both sides of the equation’, with state institutions and with citizen groups. At its core, this was not a novel idea. Strategies for promoting good governance, of which citizen engagement is commonly one component, have often evoked the economic concepts of supply and demand. The state, on one side, is the supplier – the duty-bearer and the agent being held accountable. Citizens do their part on the other side of the transaction by demanding their rights and an account of what the state has done. The Citizenship DRC, however, distinguished its perspective from the supply and demand approach by insisting that one side of the equation – the citizen’s perspective – be privileged when determining the balance. In the course of the ten years since its establishment, the Citizenship DRC has come to assume an even more distinct position.

Our work now suggests that change happens not just through strategies that work on both sides of the equation, but also through strategies that work across them – that build the alliances, mechanisms and platforms which link champions of change together from both state and society. We argue that there is a need to go beyond the simplistic dichotomy of supply and demand towards a recognition that state and society do not exist in isolation from one another. In practice, the lines between them are blurred; they may be interdependent and mutually constructive. National policy change happens through highly complex coalitions that link NGOs, social movements, faith-based groups, the media, intellectuals and others in deep-rooted mobilising networks. Whilst the state is often a target in such movements, actors within the state also play a critical role, opening and closing opportunities for engagement, championing and sustaining reforms, and protecting the legitimacy and safety of the movements. In Chile, for example, an NGO-led coalition on child rights linked civil society and state champions together, and led to a new policy framework benefiting children, contributing to a decrease in child poverty.

This approach has important implications for donors, and for civil society as well as government actors, for it points to new ways of working that deliberately cross

state–society boundaries. Blurring the boundaries between state and society poses a challenge to us all to think and work differently. But to truly change the way we practise development or run a government or lead a social movement or do research also implies a commitment to change the institutions where we work. In the Citizenship DRC, we have tried to embrace this challenge by paying attention to our own ways of working, as we have also tried to understand how others act as citizens. This has meant, for instance, learning how to work as mediators across spaces and levels of change, building our own forms of internal accountability, linking our research to action – and learning from our mistakes, as we tried to strengthen our impact. Supporting citizen engagement is not just about what others do. How we engage as citizens in our own institutional settings is vitally important to how effective we are in enabling the engagement of others.