Rethinking the Evidence: Tactical vs. Strategic Approaches

Week 1: Video transcript

Featuring

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You just heard Helene discuss context and the enabling environment in the previous video. You’ve also heard theory and frameworks of citizen engagement discussed in some of the other videos in this module. In this talk we'll be discussing the difference between tactical Citizen Engagement and strategic Citizen Engagement, and why this provides a useful framework for analysis.

Discussions of Citizen Engagement sometimes lead enthusiasts to claim that it is a magic bullet for promoting good governance, while skeptics conclude that it is just hype. Realistic expectations are in order. Citizen Engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach that can solve huge problems all by itself, but it can bolster good governance, especially if it is combined with other efforts to strengthen government responsiveness and the rule of law.

The growing body of research evidence about Citizen Engagement efforts poses a dilemma here. Some evaluations find no impact, while other studies show that strategies that encourage public authorities to listen to citizen voice can encourage more effective governance. So what do we make of the fact that results are mixed?

The tendency is for skeptics to cite the studies that find little impact, while enthusiasts naturally focus on the studies that do find impact. In contrast, the approach I’ll take in this talk is to reinterpret both studies that have found high impact and studies that have suggested low impact of particular Citizen Engagement programs. In doing so I hope to inform a new interpretation of what “mixed results” really means.

This presentation summarizes the findings from a meta-analysis of 25 quantitative studies of Citizen Engagement initiatives. Some of these studies used randomized control trials to study pilot programs, while others are large N studies, or studies that are based on a large number of inputs, of actual scaled-up programs. The goal here is to rethink the evidence help to address the “what next?” question.

Here’s the argument we are suggesting: If one unpacks the impact evaluation evidence, it actually tests two very difference approaches under the broad Citizen Engagement umbrella: tactical and strategic.

Tactical citizen engagement initiatives are those that are short-term, address a particular issue with just one tool, and are limited to the very local level, while strategic citizen engagement initiatives refer to long-term campaigns, that combine multiple tactics, and are scaled up beyond the local level - so they are both broader and deeper.
Tactical approaches focus on specific tools intended to encourage action, often through interventions that disseminate information about service delivery outcomes or budget allocations – like citizen report cards. The first assumption behind these approaches is that citizen access to more information will stimulate local voice and collective action to deal with the problems revealed by this information. The second key assumption behind tactical, information-led interventions is that local voice will somehow generate enough leverage to actually influence and improve public sector performance.

According to the impact evaluations, the evidence for these bounded, localized interventions, -- that is, tactical approaches -- is mixed. How, then, does the research lead us to this tactical-strategic distinction?

The evaluations of Citizen Engagement initiatives that find low impact point to three broad trends.

First, information is not enough. For example, just disseminating data on local service delivery outcomes to communities often does not encourage collective action to improve performance.

Second, bottom-up community project monitoring and oversight, by itself, is often not enough to limit corruption.

Third, community participation in local development project decision-making, when induced from above, is often captured by local elites.

When we turn to the other side of “mixed results,” that is, the evidence of positive impacts that have tangibly improved development outcomes, we find a wide range of cases across sectors and countries.

In fact, there is substantial evidence that Citizen Engagement strategies can help to deliver tangible development impacts across a wide range of countries. The research is especially strong on cases from India, Uganda, Indonesia and Brazil – and you have already heard about some of the most important studies from Mary McNeil in the first video of this module.

Rereading the research evidence reveals limitations of tactical approaches to Citizen Engagement, and helps to inform tighter, more strategic Citizen Engagement propositions.

For example, while the tactical approach assumes that information is power, the strategic approach focuses more specifically on information that is perceived as actionable, made accessible in an enabling environment that can motivate collective action.

Similarly, while a tactical approach to decentralization assumes that devolving power to local governments necessarily brings decisions closer to the people, a
strategic approach emphasizes that only democratic decentralization would bring government closer to the people.

In the case of community oversight, assuming that bottom-up monitoring alone would have the capacity to significantly reduce corruption turns out to be overly optimistic. However, it can make a difference if community monitoring is coordinated with serious oversight from above. The research finds synergy between top down and bottom up approaches.

To recap, rereading the research evidence suggests that strategic approaches to Citizen Engagement tend to work better and are more likely to succeed.

This involves taking a harder look at the nature of Citizen Engagement actions, taking into account the enabling environment and government’s incentives and capacity to respond to citizens.

To conclude, it may be useful to define two broad concepts that try to capture the key dynamics in this process of interaction between citizens and the state: Voice and teeth.

“Voice” is shorthand for both the aggregation and representation of the views of under-represented citizens.

Aggregation refers here to many voices coming together, while representation refers to who has the capacity to speak for the many when it comes to negotiating actual changes with the government.

“Teeth” is shorthand for government capacity for responsiveness, which includes both positive incentives to encourage reformers and negative sanctions to address bottlenecks and abuse.

So far, many citizen engagement efforts are constrained by the fact that few are well-coordinated with reforms to encourage government capacity to respond to voice—such as audit/anti-corruption investigative bodies, information access reforms, ombudsman, access to fair courts, among other governance reforms.

This emphasis on the synergy between citizen voice and government response capacity points to the problem of: which comes first, the chicken or the egg? The proposition here is that pathways to change can be either led from below or from above, but that reformers in both society and the state need the other to move reform.

As this diagram shows, some pathways out of low-accountability traps are voice-led, like the lower one, but they need some government response to keep moving towards the upper right section goal of improved public sector performance. Other pathways towards more accountable governance are teeth-
led, as government reformers create space and therefore incentives for citizen action that can, in turn, bolster reformers’ capacity to respond.

The challenge for governance reform is how to trigger virtuous circles, in which enabling environments embolden citizens to exercise voice, which in turn can trigger and empower reforms, which can then encourage more voice.

To sum up, based on rethinking this diverse body of evidence about what kinds of citizen engagement works, and defining teeth as institutional capacity to respond - my final proposition is this: Voice needs teeth to have bite, but teeth may not bite without voice.

Thank you.