



Does Information Lead to More Active Citizenship? Evidence from an Education Intervention in Rural Kenya

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Summary. — We study a randomized educational intervention in 550 households in 26 matched villages in two Kenyan districts. The intervention provided parents with information about their children’s performance on literacy and numeracy tests, and materials about how to become more involved in improving their children’s learning. We find the provision of such information had no discernible impact on either private or collective action. In discussing these findings, we articulate a framework linking information provision to changes in citizens’ behavior, and assess the present intervention at each step. Future research on information provision should pay greater attention to this framework.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Providing information to citizens about the quality of the government services they receive has been seized upon by development organizations in recent years as a key lever for improving the welfare of the world’s poorest people. The logic is straightforward: Poverty can be reduced by improvements in governance and service delivery (World Bank, 2004). In turn, governance and service delivery can be strengthened by increasing bottom-up pressure from citizens (Bruns, Filmer, & Patrinos, 2011). And, in keeping with the rich scholarly literature on the role of asymmetric information in principal-agent relationships (Besley, 2006; Fearon, 1999; Ferejohn, 1986), bottom-up pressure can be increased by providing citizens with comprehensible information about what their governments and elected representatives are (or are not) doing on their behalf. The causal chain runs from information to citizen pressure to improved service delivery to welfare improvements.

This logic has motivated donors to support hundreds of millions of dollars of interventions designed to alleviate the presumed informational constraints faced by citizens in developing countries. And yet, these projects risk proving as unproductive as the ones they supplanted in the absence of a deeper understanding of the conditions under which information is likely to change people’s behavior. Indeed, various researchers have begun to shed light on this plausible development strategy through a series of experimental interventions to study the effects of information provision, including through the distribution of report cards on local health service provision, school quality, and legislators’ performance.¹ Others have involved media campaigns to publicize the leakage of development funds.² Still others have disseminated

information about municipal spending, corruption, and other outcomes.³ However, to date, the results from these studies have been mixed, and clearly more research is needed to draw stronger conclusions about the logic and assumptions undergirding the recent enthusiasm for information campaigns as development strategy.

This paper aims to further this understanding by evaluating and then unpacking the results of a large-scale informational intervention designed to generate both citizen activism and private behavioral change on behalf of improved educational outcomes in Kenya. Our study is unique with respect to most impact evaluation research in this area in that we manage to avoid many of the typical tradeoffs between internal and external validity: We study a largely “natural” intervention in the sense that we, as investigators, did not influence the formulation of the treatment materials, the sampling, or any aspect of

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its implementation; but we are also able to make relatively strong inferences about causal relationships because villages and households were randomly sampled for inclusion in the program. That said, there are also some limitations associated with our study that are distinct from field experiments designed purely for research purposes: the intervention combined multiple treatments in ways that make it difficult to assess their independent impact; the information provided to citizens only indirectly addresses the outcomes the intervention seeks to produce; and the theory of change structuring the intervention relied on a set of relatively optimistic assumptions about people's willingness to take costly actions to achieve collective ends. These characteristics, however, make the project no different from many other initiatives launched by major development organizations and, in some respects, make it more, not less, important to try to determine whether the project achieved its goals (and, if not, why).

We employ a post-treatment field study conducted in matched villages in two rural Kenyan districts. Using multiple measures, we evaluate both public citizen activism and private actions taken by members of households that did and did not receive a randomized informational intervention. The intervention involved two different kinds of information: the reporting to parents of the results of literacy and numeracy tests administered to their school-aged children, and the provision of materials describing strategies parents might employ to improve their children's learning. The objective of the former was to provide parents with factual information from which they could make an inference about the performance of their local primary school, and hence the need to take action to improve it.⁴ The goal of the supplementary materials was to expand parents' repertoires of action by providing them with ideas for concrete steps they could take in order to hold schools and government accountable for better education.

We find that these informational interventions did not have any substantial impact on parents' public or private behavior. Parents that received the informational treatments were no more likely than other parents to take actions at school or in the public sphere to improve the quality of their children's schooling or to adopt behaviors at home that might have a positive impact on their children's learning. Nor were they more likely to increase their levels of citizen activism or community participation in areas outside education.

Although disappointing from the standpoint of those who have embraced the link between information provision and service delivery improvements, our null findings provide an opportunity for exploring some of the (usually unarticulated) conditions that may be necessary for information provision to generate real behavioral change. Specifically, we suggest that for information to generate citizen action it must be understood; it must cause people to update their prior beliefs in some manner; and it must speak to an issue that people prioritize and also believe is their responsibility to address. In addition, the people at whom the information is directed must know what actions to take and possess the skills for taking these actions; they must believe that authorities will respond to their actions; and, to the extent that the outcome in question requires collective action, they must believe that others in the community will act as well. And, of course, they cannot already be doing everything that is possible for them to do.

Either these conditions must already be met prior to the informational intervention or the intervention itself must produce these conditions. The absence of any of these conditions may be enough to interrupt the presumed link between information and both private and public actions. Our articulation of these key conditions has implications not just for making

sense of our findings but for the assessment, design, and understanding of informational interventions more broadly.

2. RELATION TO THE LITERATURE

The hypothesized link between information and citizen activism for improved service delivery has been subjected to a growing number of empirical tests. Multiple studies have found that informed citizens are more likely to be involved in civic and political action and to engage in participatory activities such as voting, attending political meetings, contacting officials, and protesting (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Gerber & Green, 2000; Neuman, 1986; Zaller, 1992). Studies have also shown that such participation is associated with higher levels of service provision (e.g., Bjorkman-Nyqvist, de Walque, & Svensson, 2013; Heller, 2001). Yet, a great deal of empirical work has found little substantive impact from the provision of information to poor citizens. This is true both among studies (like ours) that test for a link between the provision of information and changes in citizens' public and private behaviors and among those that investigate the reduced form relationship between information and the improved public service provision that these behaviors are thought to promote. Little empirical consensus has emerged.

A number of studies in this literature focus on the impact of information on voting. Among these, Banerjee *et al.* (2011) find that slum dwellers in Delhi increase turnout and select for better performing candidates when equipped with pre-election report cards on incumbent performance and candidate qualifications. However, Chong *et al.* (2012) find that the provision of information on municipal spending and corruption to Mexican voters has no impact on turnout or vote choices. Humphreys and Weinstein (2012) also find no effect on voters' electoral behavior in Uganda 2 years after the dissemination of report cards detailing their MP's performance. De Figueiredo, Hidalgo, and Kasahara (2011) investigate the impact on turnout, ballot spoilage, and electoral support of publicizing a candidate's conviction on corruption charges in Brazil. They find that the effect of providing such information is conditional on the convicted candidate's party connection, presumably because of the differing dispositions of each party's support base *vis-a-vis* corruption.

These mixed findings are echoed in studies that emphasize the impact of information on citizen actions outside of voting. Banerjee *et al.* (2010) find that providing information to citizens in Uttar Pradesh about the role of the local village education committee and about the quality of learning in local schools had no impact on parental involvement in the school system. Keefer and Khemani (2011) employ a natural experiment in Benin built around within-commune variation in access to community radio programming to evaluate the effects of information dissemination on literacy, government inputs to education, citizen involvement in Parent-Teacher Association meetings, and private investments in children's learning. They find that increased radio access has no impact on community-level participation, although it does seem to affect private behavior supportive of children's learning, such as purchasing books or making informal or private tuition payments to schools. Bjorkman and Svensson (2009) find that providing communities in Uganda with information about the performance of their local health facilities and encouraging community members to become more involved in monitoring their performance is associated with greater citizen involvement.

Another set of studies sidesteps the intermediate link between information and citizens' public or private actions and

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