



Bridging the information gap between citizens and local governments: Evidence from a civic participation strengthening program in Rwanda



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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates a program sponsored by the Millennium Challenge Corporation to promote civic participation in local governance in Rwanda. Called the Strengthening Civic Participation, the program supported civil society organizations advocating for local issues and trained district government officials to increase responsiveness to citizens. Our evaluation uses a stratified random assignment design, whereby districts were matched on baseline characteristics and randomly assigned to either a treatment or a control group. Using nationally representative household-level survey data, we find a pattern of small negative effects on citizens' perceived access to government information, perceived personal influence on government officials, and satisfaction with government services. There were no discernible impacts on citizens' awareness of government meetings, familiarity with government officials, or knowledge of local government affairs. We investigate the underlying mechanisms that produced these impacts using qualitative interviews and find that the program succeeded in encouraging citizens to question local government policies more openly in some circumstances.

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1. Introduction

Democracy and governance have become an important public policy topic area in recent years. A large body of research has focused on understanding the linkages between political institutions, in general, and economic development (North, 1991; Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, 2001; Rodrik, Subramanian, and Trebbi, 2004; Radelet, 2010). The general consensus is that countries whose political systems are open and democratic are better economic performers than those whose systems are not (Dal Bó & Finan, 2016). Consequently, international donor agencies have directed considerable attention and funding toward policies and programs that aim to promote good governance. For example, one of the three broad indicators used by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) in selecting countries that are eligible for funding is “ruling justly,” which combines six subindicators to measure just and democratic governance. In 2012, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched

the Center for Excellence in Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance with the twofold goal of measuring and evaluating effective actions and sharing best practices in the area of democracy and governance with the international development community.

Given the focus on this area, it is important to understand which programs and policies can be effective in influencing democracy and good governance and how components of these programs work and interact with one another. Broadly, good governance involves the institutions and processes that ensure the provision of public goods and is characterized by both demand and supply side factors (Gisselquist and Niño-Zarazúa, 2013). On the demand side, good governance is characterized by institutions and processes that encourage civic participation to ensure government representativeness, transparency, and accountability. On the supply side are the effectiveness of the government and the quality of public goods and services provided.

The nature and evolution of good governance depends on historical context and cultural norms; however, inefficiencies in governance can occur due to incomplete and asymmetric information on both the demand and supply sides. On the demand side, citizens who are not well informed cannot participate effectively in governance. On the supply side, a lack of information about problems or ways to resolve them can result in ineffective government

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(Dal Bó & Finan, 2016). Thus, learning which programs and policies can effectively address information asymmetries is extremely important in the study of good governance.

In this paper, we examine the impacts of the Strengthening Civic Participation (SCP) Program in Rwanda, funded by MCC. The program attempted to bridge the information gap between citizens and the government in order to increase the transparency and accountability of the government. We employed a stratified random assignment design, taking advantage of planned staggered implementation, to identify how the program affected citizen knowledge of, perceived influence on, and satisfaction with the local government. In addition, we used qualitative data to understand the underlying processes that link the program's activities to the outcomes.

Increasingly, recent studies have attempted to rigorously evaluate programs intended to reduce the information gap and allow for increased citizen participation and greater accountability and performance of the government.¹ In Uganda, broadcasting results of local government audits to randomly assigned subcounties changed the knowledge, attitude, and behavior of citizens and performance of government officials (Moehler, 2008). A randomized study in Indonesia found that citizens who participated directly in local policymaking through a plebiscite were more satisfied with policy outcomes than those who did not (Olken, 2010). A community-based information campaign, across three Indian states, to disseminate information to communities regarding the roles and responsibilities of school management improved school performance (Pandey, Goyal, & Sundararaman, 2009). Similarly, Björkman and Svensson (2009) found significant improvement in health worker performance when the workers were monitored by citizens through community report cards. Some studies have examined the impact on election outcomes of providing citizens with information about candidates, and they report both changes in voter behavior (e.g., Ferraz & Finan, 2008; Banerjee, Kumar, Pande, & Su, 2011) and no impacts (e.g., Chong, Ana, Karlan, & Wantchekon, 2015; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2012).

The current study makes a further contribution to the growing literature on the impacts of programs designed to address information asymmetries in governance. In particular, this paper presents findings from an intervention that attempts to address both the supply and the demand side asymmetries in information. In addition, this paper contributes to the literature by presenting rigorous impact findings for a governance intervention implemented at the country level, which is not common in the literature. Typically, initiatives that are nationwide in scope, targeting the entire population of interest, more closely resemble the type of large-scale governance programs currently used by development agencies and foundations. Also, such programs are often targeted toward countries with policy environments that may impede the programs' success for various reasons. For example, programs that encourage citizen participation are regularly targeted to nations with weak central government structures (i.e., post-conflict environments) and to semi-authoritarian states that discourage some forms of open political discourse. Given the wide range of potential contexts for these programs, this study in Rwanda also contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of programs implemented under challenging policy environments.

We find that the SCP Program increased citizens' willingness to voice concerns about local governance; in treatment districts, more citizens raised concerns about limited access to government information, low citizen influence, and poor local services. However, the

effects were modest, and the program did not impact citizens' awareness of government meetings, familiarity with government officials, or knowledge about government affairs. Qualitative data suggest that these impacts may have been tempered by the program's limited activity schedule and uneven implementation across districts. Even with these limitations, the SCP Program's successes in fostering citizens' willingness to voice criticism could represent meaningful first steps toward increasing public advocacy and producing positive changes in local governance over time.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we detail the intervention and the context in which it was implemented. In Section 3, we discuss the evaluation design and timeline of the project. We discuss the data collection strategy and sample characteristics in Section 4, present the empirical strategy in Section 5, and present the evaluation's results in Section 6. We present findings from the qualitative fieldwork in Section 7 and discuss the results in Section 8.

2. Country context and the strengthening civic participation (SCP) program

2.1. Country context

Beginning in 2002, the Government of Rwanda (GoR) began an extensive decentralization initiative designed in part to encourage more citizen participation in local government. With support from multilateral donors including The World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the GoR implemented a series of reforms to develop more open and effective local political institutions (UNDP, 2005). These decentralization reforms were designed to increase governmental accountability and transparency and to empower local communities to take control of their governance processes (World Bank, 2009).

As these decentralization reforms have been implemented, however, civil society organizations (CSOs) have struggled to engage with governance processes in meaningful ways and to influence government policymaking at both national and local levels. Although many CSOs are active in Rwanda, there are important restrictions on their political activities and direct advocacy (USAID, 2002). The GoR has been accused of obstructing the activities of multiple human rights groups operating in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2011), and policies limiting political dissent in Rwanda have garnered criticism from outside observers, especially after the 2010 presidential elections (Amnesty International, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2010; European Parliament, 2012). To avoid these challenges, many CSOs focus on issues that are less closely tied to national politics in Rwanda. In practice, this has limited the capacity of CSOs to attract funding and support beyond what is available through government initiatives, thus calling their independence into question.

In response to these issues, MCC sponsored the Rwanda Threshold Program (RTP),² which includes two initiatives related to civic participation, Strengthening Civic Participation (SCP) and Strengthening Civil Society. These components of the RTP were intended to enhance the involvement of local and national CSOs in government

¹ See the excellent reviews by Dal Bó and Finan (2016) on studies analyzing the links between institutions and economic development, and by Gisselquist & Niño-Zarazúa (2013) and Moehler (2010) on experimental studies in democracy and governance.

² Since its inception in 2004, MCC has funded initiatives to promote economic growth and poverty reduction around the world. MCC supports large, multiyear development initiatives, known as "compacts," in countries that achieve high scores on a set of economic and governance indicators. Compacts fund development priorities identified by recipient country governments. Separately, MCC also provides smaller "threshold" programs to countries that are close to meeting the compact requirements but fall short of the eligibility criteria in some areas. Threshold programs are intended to support policy reform and help countries improve their compact eligibility scores (MCC Threshold Program, available at <https://www.mcc.gov/resources/story/story-cbj-fy2015-threshold-program>, accessed June 26, 2017).

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