



# Mobilization, Participatory Planning Institutions, and Elite Capture: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Rural Kenya

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**Summary.** — This paper examines the linkage between mobilization and elite capture in participatory institutions using a randomized experiment in Kenya. In the treatment group, an environmental organization mobilized individuals to attend a participatory local government planning meeting. Mobilization had a large and significant effect on citizen participation. Despite this effect, mobilization did not lead to increased adoption of either the organization’s preferred projects or the projects requested by citizens. Instead, the intervention changes the type of discrepancies observed in final allocations, indicating that elite control over planning institutions can adapt to increased mobilization and participation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, many countries have implemented reforms that decentralize authority to local governments (Bardhan, 2002; Crook, 2003). Many decentralization reforms have included the creation of participatory planning institutions in local governments. These institutions directly involve citizens in various aspects of municipal governance, including identifying policy problems, selecting projects, and in some cases creating budgets and delivering public services (De Sousa Santos, 1998; Fung, 2006; Heller, 2001; Shah, 2007; Speer, 2012). The aim of including this type of participatory planning institution in decentralization reforms is to empower citizens by encouraging their direct participation in planning local government projects (Fung & Wright, 2001; Ribot, 2007; Schneider, 1999).

Despite the popularity of participatory planning institutions, academics and practitioners have noted that politicians, bureaucrats, and interest groups are often able to capture such institutions (Agrawal & Gupta, 2005; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2000; Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013; Platteau, 2004; Shah, 2007; Véron, Williams, Corbridge, & Srivastava, 2006). When citizens do not attend and participate in planning meetings, politicians or interest groups can more easily bypass these institutions or fill meetings with only their own supporters (Mansuri & Rao, 2012; Platteau & Gaspard, 2003). If this interpretation is true, mobilizing citizens to participate in planning meetings should lead to lower levels of capture and a greater connection between citizen voice and service delivery outcomes (Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013).

Many development practitioners utilize mobilization and information campaigns to encourage citizens to participate in politics and to reduce elite capture of policymaking processes (Björkman & Svensson, 2009; Mansuri & Rao, 2012; Pande, 2011). However, there is limited evidence about the effectiveness of such mobilization campaigns, particularly in the context of participatory planning institutions. This lack of evidence motivates two central research questions about

the link between mobilization, participation, and elite capture. How does mobilization by civil society organizations shape patterns of citizen participation in local government planning institutions? Does mobilization increase the likelihood that government allocations match citizen priorities, or is mobilization also susceptible to capture by interest groups or governing elites?

I provide an initial set of answers to these questions using a block-randomized field experiment conducted in a rural local government in north-central Kenya. I grouped the fourteen local government wards in the sample into pairs based on the degree of prior involvement by a local environmental organization and the level of ethnic diversity in each ward.

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One ward in each pair was randomly assigned to a treatment in which the environmental organization mobilized community members to attend the upcoming local government meeting and to publicly support the organization's preferred project at that meeting. Enumerators assessed the level of participation and meeting outcomes through structured qualitative observation of meetings in all treatment and control wards, and supplemented these observations with administrative records of the actual project proposals that the local government decided to fund.

This combination of randomized field experimentation and structured qualitative research provides a unique source of evidence about the operation of participatory planning institutions. Although other studies have randomly assigned mobilization, observed planning meetings, and examined administrative data, no studies have simultaneously used all three methods to understand the link between mobilization, participation, and elite capture (Björkman & Svensson, 2009; Fearon, Humphreys, & Weinstein, 2009; Olken, 2007, 2010; Paluck & Green, 2009; Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2013; Casey, Miguel, & Glennerster, 2012; Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013; Nolte & Voget-Kleschin, 2014). Despite the analytic leverage provided by this mixed-methods research design, the in-depth qualitative observation of planning meetings necessitates the small sample size used in this experiment. In order to overcome analytic challenges associated with small sample sizes, I analyze the results of the experiment using randomization inference, which allows me to test the null hypothesis of no treatment effect without making distributional assumptions that are often violated in small samples (Keele, McConnaughy, & White, 2012; Rosenbaum, 2002).

There are three sets of findings from the analysis. First, the mobilization had a significant and substantively large effect on citizen participation in local government meetings, as measured by the number of attendees, the number of individuals speaking, and the length of the meeting. Second, despite the effect of the mobilization on participation in the planning meeting, mobilization had no effect on the likelihood of the civil society organization's preferred project being ranked first or second by meeting participants. Mobilization also did not increase the likelihood that the local government actually allocated funding to the projects requested during the planning meetings.

Finally, although mobilization did not increase the match between project rankings in the meetings and actual project allocations, mobilization did have an effect on the specific nature of deviations. Mobilization decreased the likelihood that the local government requested funding for projects that had not been selected in the community meetings and increased the likelihood that the local government only requested funding for one project. Taken together, these results indicate that even if mobilization is successful in increasing participation in planning meetings, it may also cause elites to modify the tactics that they use to maintain influence over participatory institutions.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I draw on existing research to define the core concepts of "participatory planning institutions" and "elite capture" and to develop a set of testable hypotheses about the relationship between mobilization by civil society organizations, citizen participation, and political capture in local government planning institutions. I then describe the design of the mobilization experiment, focusing on the design of the intervention, the method used to randomly assign wards to the treatment and control conditions, the data collection methods, and the empirical strategy used to analyze the data. I then present the results of the experiment. I focus first on the effects of mobilization on participa-

tion, and then examining the effects of mobilization on capture of the planning institution by the mobilizing organization and governing elites. I conclude by briefly considering the theoretical, policy, and methodological implications of the empirical findings.

## 2. CONCEPTS, THEORY, AND HYPOTHESES

Broadly speaking, participatory institutions are designed to enable and encourage the direct involvement of citizens in the creation or implementation of public policies and public goods projects (Fung, 2006; Pateman, 2012; Speer, 2012).<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on one particular subset of participatory institutions: participatory planning institutions in local governments.<sup>2</sup> Participatory planning institutions can be defined as institutions that formally incorporate citizens into a government's processes for identifying public policy problems and proposing projects to address those problems (Smoke, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Although participatory planning institutions take on many different forms in practice, the common feature of such institutions are community meetings in which the residents of a given municipality or neighborhood rank policy priorities and suggest possible projects that the local government can implement to address those problems (Beard, Mirafteb, & Silver, 2008). The public works projects suggested by citizens may be funded by either a fixed budget set by the government or by a flexible budget set by citizens as part of the participatory process itself (Cabannes, 2004; Pateman, 2012; Shah, 2007; Smoke, 2008).

The earliest and best-known participatory planning institution is the system of participatory budgeting implemented in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 1988 (De Sousa Santos, 2005; Fung & Wright, 2001; Pateman, 2012). In the 25 years since the creation of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, over 1,000 local governments around the world have implemented some form of participatory planning institution (Pateman, 2012). Although scholars and practitioners have developed a variety of normative arguments in favor of this global expansion of participatory planning institutions, the core idea in this literature is that broad public participation in participatory planning institutions empowers ordinary citizens vis-à-vis political and economic elites and narrow interest groups (Bland, 2011; Fung & Wright, 2003; Gibson & Woolcock, 2008; Pateman, 2012; Shah, 2007; Speer, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

One implication of this body of research is that the core normative goals of participatory planning institutions are undermined when governing elites or interest groups are able to capture the planning meetings. Scholars of participatory institutions have defined elite capture and interest-group capture in a variety of ways and have debated whether capture of participatory institutions is primarily harmful or benevolent (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007; Fritzen, 2007; Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013; Pan & Christiaensen, 2012).<sup>5</sup> Some of this lack of consensus in the literature is due to the fact that different studies focus on different kinds of social and political elites. This study focuses on the governing elites in local governments: elected local government representatives and appointed bureaucrats in the locality.<sup>6</sup>

The most basic form of elite capture in participatory planning institutions occurs when governing elites disregard the policy priorities identified by citizens in planning meetings and implement some other project (Fung & Wright, 2003; Gibson & Woolcock, 2008). A second common form of capture in participatory planning institutions occurs when governing elites or local civil society organizations fill planning meetings with their supporters and exclude the broader com-

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