

Improving Political Engagement through First-Hand Experience with Municipal Councils in Burkina Faso



In theory, local government meetings provide important opportunities for citizens to be directly involved in decisions about important services that affect their daily lives. In practice, citizens can be disengaged from local governments, either because they are uninformed or because they do not believe their involvement is welcome or effective. Researchers are working with Innovations for Poverty Action and the government of Burkina Faso to evaluate whether receiving a personal invitation to attend a municipal council meeting affects both citizens' attitudes towards local governments and local officials' decisions and participation in the meeting.

Policy Issue

Governments around the world are experimenting with decentralizing power to local governments. This often entails giving municipalities important new funds and responsibilities in health, education, and other services that are crucial for constituents' wellbeing. Formally, decentralization is meant to bring government closer to citizens and open avenues for their participation. Yet, citizen engagement with local governance is low and municipal governments' accountability towards constituents is often weak. This impairs delivery of important services and can damage the relationship between government and citizens.

This research aims to contribute new evidence about whether encouraging ordinary citizens to participate in local governance by attending municipal council meetings affects both citizens' attitudes towards local government as well as how well local officials fulfil their duties. Firsthand participation in municipal decision-making processes may raise citizens' knowledge about local governance, help citizens better understand the risks and benefits of future opportunities for political participation, and increase (or decrease trust in local institutions). In addition, local officials may respond to the increased participation of their constituents by changing their own behavior and decisions during council meetings.

Evaluation Context

In 2014 and 2015, Burkina Faso underwent a political transition, in which elected government

RESEARCHERS

Malte Lierl, Marcus Holmlund

COUNTRY

Burkina Faso

PARTNERS

Burkina Faso Local Government Support Project (PACT), Development Impact Evaluation (DIME), World Bank

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Governance

TOPIC

Transparency & Accountability

TIMELINE

2015-2017

officials—including local officials in municipal governments—were temporarily suspended and replaced by externally appointed special delegations. Elections to replace these governments were held in May 2016, and members of the transitional special delegations were not eligible to run.

The president of a municipal council in Burkina Faso is an important local leader, taking on the responsibilities of a mayor. Municipal council meetings typically take place four times per year and each village is represented on the council by two councilors. By law, municipal council meetings are open to citizens, theoretically allowing citizens to directly engage with their councilors, demand accountability, and monitor their performance. In practice, citizen participation in municipal council meetings is rare and the vast majority of citizens remain disengaged from municipal affairs.[1] In this context of low engagement, the Burkina Faso Local Government Support Program (PACT) seeks to strengthen the capacity of local governments by fostering accountable and citizen-oriented local public service delivery.

Details of the Intervention

Researchers are working with PACT and Innovations for Poverty Action in Burkina Faso to conduct a randomized evaluation assessing the impact of inviting citizens to municipal council meetings on (1) citizens' attitudes towards and knowledge about local governance and (2) whether and how their presence influences municipal decision-making.

Randomly selected citizens receive a personal invitation from the president of their special delegation (pre-May 2012 municipal elections) or municipal council (post-May 2012 municipal elections) inviting them to attend a municipal government meeting. One of the two local councilors or a special delegation member representing the invitee's village personally deliver the letter. The invited citizens attend the meetings as observers, but are also invited to attend a town hall meeting that follows each meeting. At the town hall meeting, they are asked to share and discuss their points of view and those of their co-villagers with local government members.

Researchers randomly selected 59 rural municipalities in the areas of rural Burkina Faso where PACT works. Between 2015 and end-2016, 4,496 randomly selected citizens from these municipalities received invitations to attend a municipal council meeting. Researchers will compare these citizens to randomly selected individuals from the following four groups:

1. Household members of invited citizens
2. Co-villagers of invited citizens
3. Individuals living in the same municipalities as invited citizens
4. Individuals living in 59 other randomly selected municipalities

By comparing citizens who were invited to the councils with those who were not, researchers will evaluate whether the invitations affected citizens' participation in and contributions to local-level governance, awareness of their rights as citizens, and trust in local government. They will also be able to evaluate whether living in the same household, village, or municipality as someone who was invited to a meeting affected these attitudes and behaviors.

The Government of Burkina Faso is also interested in whether the presence of citizens at municipal

councils affects the dynamic of the meetings. NGO observers attend meetings to record the frequency and type of questions and answers from both citizens and councilors. Also, the endline survey will assess whether councilors whose constituents were at the meetings are able to explain their decisions in ways that constituents find more acceptable. Researchers will also measure citizens' level of agreement with the municipality's expenditure decisions during the past year, to assess whether municipalities in which citizens were invited to attend meetings produce more acceptable local governance decisions.

Results and Policy Lessons

Project ongoing; Results forthcoming.

Sources

[1] World Bank. 2007b. Project Appraisal Document, Burkina Faso—Second Community Based Rural Development Project in support of the National Program for Decentralized Rural Development. World Bank: Washington DC.

GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS

101 Whitney Avenue
New Haven, CT 06510 USA
+1 203.772.2216 | contact@poverty-action.org

poverty-action.org