



Interventions aimed at developing groups to take part in participatory decision-making processes

Existing research suggests that formal and informal civil society, such as civil society organizations or informal groups of citizens, can play an essential role in maintaining an open society, building democracy, and supporting the rule of law.¹ A strong civil society may lead to a more responsive state and spread progressive cultural values. It is thought that civil society can also enable people to claim their rights, influence and monitor development policies and practices, provide essential services to poor and marginalized communities, respond to humanitarian emergencies, and contribute to public awareness of development issues.²

This brief summarizes key findings and observations from studies of interventions to support coalitions or groups taking part in participatory decision-making processes. The topic was selected based on the availability of evidence and the priorities of USAID DRG technical experts. The intended audience is DRG practitioners, with a focus on practical information and considerations to inform planning and implementation of DRG programming and research. The brief thus does not synthesize or quantify intervention effect sizes (as in a systematic review), nor does it replace the need for rigorous evaluation of DRG programming.

USAID commissioned the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) to develop an EGM about civil society interventions and outcomes, in which we have included a total of 128 impact evaluations (IEs) and systematic reviews (SR).⁶ In this brief, we have included twelve studies that look at organizing groups of citizens to take part in decision-making processes.

Did you know ?

Previous contributors have asserted that:

- In 2020, only 12.7 per cent of people around the world lived in countries with an open or narrowed civic space rating, an important decline from 17.6 per cent in 2019, and almost 70 per cent of people lived in a repressed or closed civic space.³
- Strong civil society may catalyze changes in policy, regulation, and reform by improving transparency, increasing community-level participation, reducing corruption, and increasing responsiveness to citizen demands.⁴
- There have been continuous threats to civil society across countries, such as violence, arrests, and excessive surveillance against civil society members.⁵

Key messages



For practitioners



- In some instances, participatory budgeting initiatives have worked to redirect resources to civil society's priorities when implemented in already well-decentralized political and administrative environments.
- When involving civil society in project implementation and decision-making processes, implementing mechanisms to avoid elite capture are essential to ensure the whole population, including vulnerable groups, take part in the process.
- A few factors are important for the implementation of participatory decision-making interventions: that marginalized groups join decision-making processes, local governments accept the process, and civil society has the capacity for collective action.

For learning specialists and researchers

- More research in different settings is needed to be able to generalize the results to other contexts, such as comparing relative contributions between hardware- (e.g., infrastructure) and software-related (e.g., social change) activities of inclusive decision-making interventions.
- Long-term results after the intervention ended are still unknown; therefore, there is a need to measure long-term impacts in future research.
- Qualitative research included in IEs can help explain the heterogeneous effects between different groups, such as why women are more motivated to participate in decision-making processes rather than men.

Conceptualizations

How we conceptualize civil society



Civil society is the space outside of the family and state in which uncoerced collective action is taken around shared interests, purpose, and values. In this **Evidence Gap Map (EGM)**, we used a comprehensive definition of civil society that includes formal civil society organizations, informal groups, and individual actors.

The dominant approach to strengthening civil society in international development is a “sandwich approach,” where both governments and civil society are the target of interventions. Therefore, our framework includes interventions that target both civil society members and government officials—for instance, encouraging local leaders to use a more participative decision-making approach.

The top-down approaches to strengthening civil society involve enacting legislation to improve the enabling environment for civil society activity and working with the executive branch to improve the government’s capacity to receive and act on input from civil society. Bottom-up interventions target civil society with material support and training to improve their capacity to do advocacy, watchdog, and social change activities, as well as materially supporting their implementation of those activities. Decision-making

interventions in this brief are usually bottom-up approaches, where civil society is included at various level of process to make their voice heard.

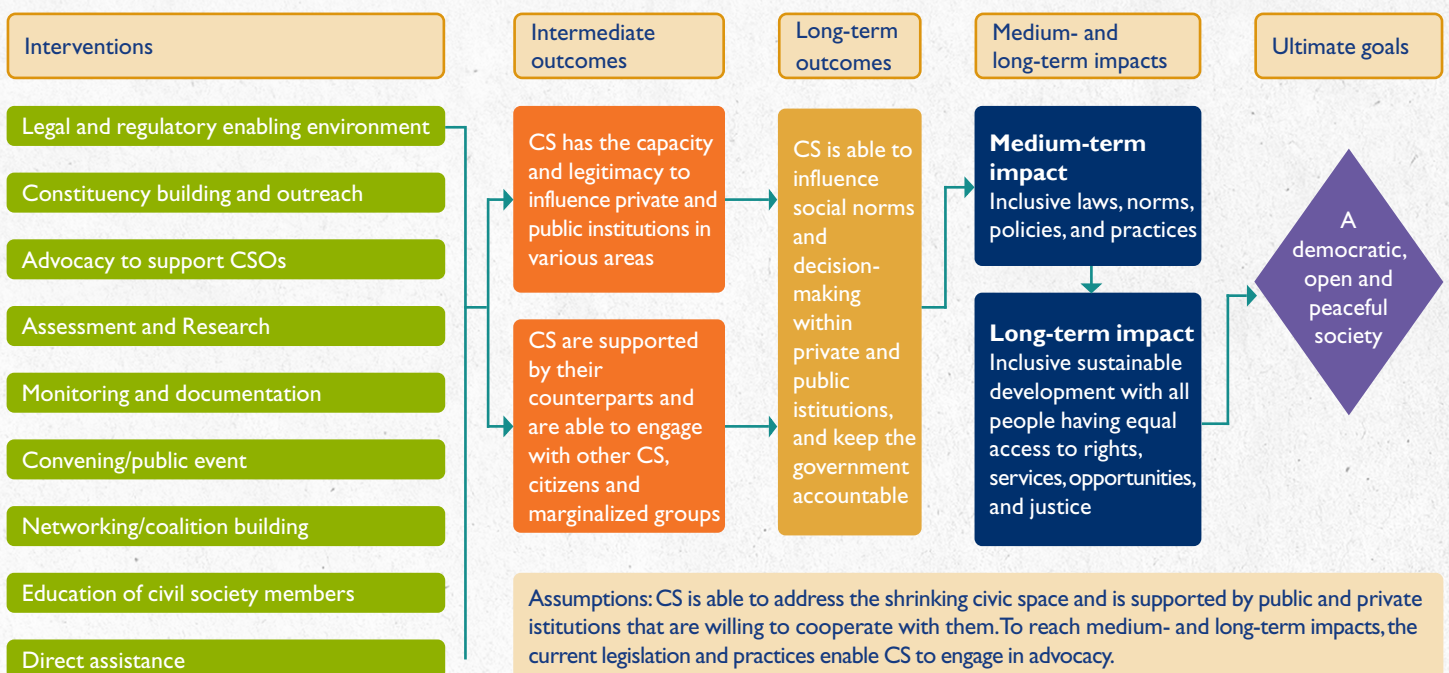
We considered the following approaches to strengthening civil society (Figure 1):

- Supporting a regulatory environment to allow civil society to operate safely;
- Developing institutional capacities and technical skills, providing direct financial or technical support; and
- Creating coalitions and collaborations between civil society and government or other public and private institutions.

These interventions are expected to enable civil society to influence social norms and hold governments accountable, which should ultimately lead to a more democratic, open, and peaceful society.

Participatory decision-making approaches, included under the category “convening public event for promoting or protecting civil society,” can take the forms of (1) participatory approaches to manage public funds, (2) involving civil society in project implementation, and (3) participatory processes for budget allocation and project implementation.

Figure 1: Theory of change for civil society interventions included in the EGM



Source: 3ie. Adapted from a policy document of the Ministry Affairs of the Netherlands (MFAN 2019). Note: CSO = civil society organization; CS = civil society.

About the effects of these interventions

There is currently a large gap in understanding what measures are effective in strengthening civil society in low- and middle-income countries. Filling this gap requires evidence that can quantify changes *attributable* to a program—that is, changes in outcomes after accounting for other factors.

USAID commissioned 3ie to develop an EGM about civil society interventions and outcomes. An EGM is a visual

representation of completed and ongoing studies that provides this type of effectiveness evidence, structured around a framework of interventions and outcomes.

The interventions and outcomes highlighted in blue are those studied in the four IEs analyzed in this brief.

Table 1: Interventions and outcomes framework

Intervention groups

Legal and regulatory enabling environment

Constituency building and outreach

Advocacy to support civil society

Assessment and research

Monitoring/documentation

Convening/public events

Networking/coalition building

- Development of networks or coalitions with the express purpose of promoting or protecting civil society
- Intervention categories under this group: Decision-making, Advocacy, Awareness, Education, Communications, and Coordinating activities

Education of civil society members

Direct assistance

Outcome categories

- A conducive, open legal and regulatory environment for civil society and labor unions

- An enabling financial environment

- Civil society organizational resilience and sustainability

- Civil society oversight of private or public institutions

- Civil society input to private or public institutions

- Citizens' participation in civic life

- Marginalized groups' participation in civic life

- Dense and diverse civic networks

- Resilience to closing space

- Awareness and trust of civil society organizations

- Partnerships

- Civil society actors' engagement with public information and media

- Citizens' awareness of rights and responsibilities

- Democratic labor and trade unions functionality and rights

What do we know? Where are the gaps?⁹



The civil society EGM included 128 studies, of which 116 were quantitative IEs, ten were qualitative IEs, and two were SRs. The field rapidly expanded in the early 2000s, but growth has leveled off, with about thirteen new studies published per year since 2014. Research is mainly focused on sub-Saharan Africa, where 45 per cent of studies are carried out.

The three most-studied interventions convene activities or public events focused on education, including civic education programs (n = 22); general education of civil society members, mainly through adult literacy projects (n = 12); and networking or coalition building focused on decision-making (n = 12). Twelve evaluations considered the impacts of decision-making interventions.

The most frequently reported outcomes across the map were participation in civic life (including marginalized groups)

and awareness of rights and responsibilities. Among the studies that considered decision-making interventions, citizen participation in civic life was also the most common outcome, followed by civil society input in public institutions.

A broad range of methods have been used. Studies identified in the EGM use a broad range of methods to evaluate interventions, including experimental (58 per cent), quasi-experimental (34 per cent), and qualitative (8 per cent) approaches. Ten qualitative studies across seven intervention types demonstrate that qualitative IEs are employed in this field. Evaluations of decision-making interventions were all quantitative.

In this brief, we have included twelve studies focused on interventions to support coalitions or groups to take part in participatory decision-making processes.



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Lessons learned from the included systematic review



Findings from the included high-confidence SR⁷ suggest citizen participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability mechanisms improve access to and quality of services. They can also improve measures of health and well-being. However, changes in provider action are only likely to be realized if the citizens and providers are in regular

contact, such as with frontline workers. Approaches which allowed for phased, facilitated collaboration between citizens and service providers tended to be more successful. Interventions with support from service providers tended to be more effective, while those with little positive engagement from supply-side actors experienced challenges.

Considerations for implementation



Key messages



When the intervention is...

Participatory approaches to manage public funds



And you want to accomplish this...

- Resources redirected to civil society's priorities
- Increase presence of civil society organizations



Consider doing this...

Provide additional technical assistance to support the implementation of such approaches and engage community facilitators.

Participatory processes for budget allocation and project implementation



- More community participation, especially for marginalized groups
- Better access to services created through projects



Include mechanisms to fight the barriers to engagement for marginalized groups, ensure the process has buy-in from the local government, and ensure support is provided to civil society to grow their collective-action capacities.

Involving civil society in project implementation



- Increase political participation and accountability
- Improve community mobilization



Make sure to avoid elite capture in processes; otherwise, poorer households might not have access to services implemented through the projects.

Participatory approaches to managing public funds



In Brazil and Russia, participatory approaches to managing public funds resulted in funding patterns more closely responding to citizen needs when additional technical support was provided.

Participatory budgeting is often justified as having intrinsic value by supporting civic participation.⁸ However, this did not correspond to a change in service provision, and effects were variable depending on the party of the mayor. In both Russia and Brazil, spending became more aligned with citizen priorities after the introduction of participatory budgeting.⁹ Participatory budgeting increased health-care spending and reduced infant mortality in one study in Brazil.¹⁰ In Russia, another study found that participatory budgeting was only effective when adequate technical assistance was provided to ensure the effective implementation of the intervention. Effects were larger in areas with a history of decentralized administration.

In Indonesia and the Philippines, participatory approaches to managing project funds increased satisfaction and participation, when community facilitators were engaged.

When villagers in Indonesia were able to directly vote on how development project funds were spent, they reported higher satisfaction with limited impact on the actual projects implemented.¹¹ The use of community facilitators for a community-driven development project in the Philippines contributed to meaningful participation and representation of community members in the committee.¹² Positive effects were reported on the frequency of public assemblies and meetings between local officials and the resident civil society. However, negative effects were found on collective action and group membership in religious or nongovernmental organizations. The authors suggest that households were time constrained and chose to join the public assemblies rather than participate in collective action and group membership activities. However, the Philippines study had a high risk of bias, so results should be interpreted cautiously.

Engaging civil society in project implementation



Studies from Bangladesh, Jamaica, México, and Uganda found that when civil society was involved in the implementation of a project, addressing elite capture was critical to increasing community and political participation, and improving access to primary services might help overcome some economic barriers.

Delegating decisions regarding the location of new safe drinking water sources to the community in Bangladesh significantly increased the use of the safe water sources whenever the elite influence in the decision-making process could be limited.¹³ These effects were seen despite a high risk of spillovers, which may have attenuated results. In Jamaica, while evaluating the impact of a community-driven social fund, researchers identified elite capture as a major barrier.¹⁴ Better-networked individuals seem to dominate the participation decision-making process, causing their preferred projects to be the one chosen, and

seem better able to develop collective-action skills, limiting nonelite groups' influence. Please note that this study was rated as having a high risk of bias.

In other cases, it worked differently. In Mexico,¹⁵ neighborhood development programs required that the community pay a portion of the cost of the program, which was subsidized at 60 per cent by the government, possibly avoiding easy elite capture in this way.¹⁶ The participation of one neighborhood development program improved program take-up, political engagement, sense of community, and perceptions of personal nationwide economic conditions. Finally, a stakeholder engagement approach implemented in villages in Uganda affected by oil extraction¹⁷ that facilitated interaction between local elected villagers and oil companies' decision-makers enabled the treated communities to hold the oil companies accountable and to mobilize and represent their own interests.



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Combinations of the two interventions above



In Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, it was found that when the two elements are implemented in a single project, the results for community engagement and access to a public service were mixed. In Afghanistan,¹⁸ a Community Development Council was established to involve civil society, especially women, in the allocations of the grants and implementation of the chosen projects. Outcomes for women's empowerment improved, and women were successfully

involved in the implementation of the projects. These projects were able to support women's participation in local governance, while respecting the local rules which separated women and men. In the Democratic Republic of Congo,¹⁹ village-level committees were involved in both allocating the funds and implementing the projects. The intervention contributed to the maintenance of physical infrastructure built through the program but had no effect on other outcomes, such as women's empowerment, health, and education.

Implications for researchers

Key messages



- The extent to which generalizability is feasible within these interventions is uncertain and warrants further investigation.
- Long-term results after the intervention ended are still unknown; therefore, there is a need to measure long-term impacts in future research.

- Qualitative research included in IEs can help explain the heterogeneous effects between different groups, such as why women are more motivated to participate in decision-making processes than men.

Evidence-gap maps identify where future researchers may need to concentrate and thus generate new evidence that informs researchers evaluating future interventions. The twelve studies included in this brief were generally reported as having a low risk of bias or limited concerns, with two studies assessed as having a high risk of bias.

The extent to which generalizability is feasible within these interventions is uncertain and warrants further investigation. The appropriateness of generalizability may depend on the contributions of hardware- (e.g., infrastructure) and software-related (e.g., social change) activities of inclusive decision-making interventions. One paper²⁰ explicitly stated that findings from a community-driven development program in the Democratic Republic of Congo contribute to a generalizable understanding of similar programs' impacts in a fragile and conflict setting. Another paper in Afghanistan²¹ stated that although their findings may not be generalizable to villages that were lost to follow-up due to insecurity, the effects on women may generalize to gender-biased environments where women are restricted by cultural and religious norms. In other studies,^{22,23} authors warn the results might not be generalizable to different contexts due to the specific characteristics of each setting, calling for more evidence from different settings.

Long-term results after the intervention ended are still unknown; therefore, there is a need to measure long-term impacts in future research.

Many interventions were not evaluated over the long term.²⁴ However, evidence from participatory budgeting in Brazil indicates that impacts may increase over time.^{25,26,27} Long-term evaluation in other contexts is still needed.

Qualitative research included in IEs can help explain the heterogeneous effects between different groups, such as why women are more motivated to participate in decision-making processes than men.

Only two studies included qualitative research to better interpret the qualitative findings.^{28,29} In one of them, the qualitative survey revealed that women saw the opportunity to participate in proposing community projects as a one-shot game and put more effort into the process than did men, therefore making their projects were more likely to be chosen. More mixed-methods studies are needed to develop a full picture of the causal chain. An improved understanding of the causal chain could help in the redesign of interventions to support more broad-based participation.



About the evidence

Figure 2: What types of evidence are included in this brief?

Evidence type	M&E indicators and project reports	Performance and process evaluations	Impact Evaluations (IEs)	Systematic Review (SRs)
Key question	WHAT was done?	HOW was it done?	Did it have an EFFECT?	Were the effects CONTEXT dependent?
Use(s) of findings	Help guide program implementation and course correction and demonstrate accountability.	Multiple purposes—e.g., program adherence to the plan, implementer performance, achievement of planned outputs and immediate outcomes, and stakeholder/partner/client feedback.	Measure intervention effectiveness, after accounting for other factors; published IEs provide examples of interventions that have or have not had an impact on a targeted outcome.	Synthesize findings from multiple IEs (often through quantitative meta-analysis) on a particular issue, increasing confidence and generalizability.
Included in EGM	No	No	Yes	Yes ⁹

In effectiveness evidence from IEs and SRs, **negative findings are just as important** as positive ones because they help to refine our understanding of what works (or not, and why or why not). In addition, the **absence of effectiveness evidence does not mean an intervention should be avoided**, but rather highlights the potential benefit of an IE, particularly if the intervention:

- is innovative,
- may be scaled up, or
- is being considered as a potential model for replication elsewhere.



Why evidence matters

Why is this important for practitioners?



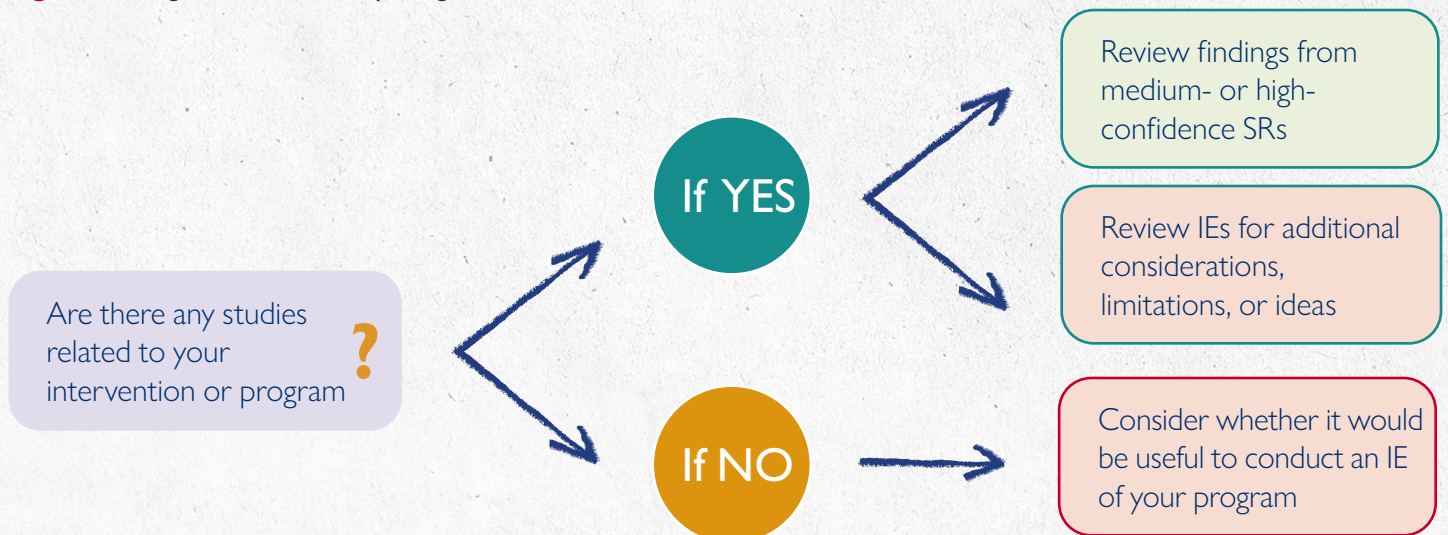
This brief (along with the associated EGM matrix and report) is designed to inform USAID practitioners' investments in participatory decision-making interventions at multiple phases of the Program Cycle, including strategic planning, project design and implementation, activity design and implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

- Results will feed into the **technical evidence** base in the **learning** phase of USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Framework.
- IE findings provide USAID practitioners with ideas about which interventions they may want to consider when developing a **program design**.

- Like IEs, SRs may include an explanation of relevant theories of change, which can be useful during the **project and activity design** stage.
- In SRs, the more consistent the findings are across contexts, the higher the likelihood that the approach may work in a new context.

We encourage practitioners to take a closer look at the [online Evidence Gap Map](#)³⁰ to engage with the available evidence (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Using evidence in activity design



You can always reach out to civil society experts in USAID/Washington at ddi.drg.emailist@usaid.gov if you have any questions, ideas, or suggestions related to evidence that may help inform the design of your project(s) and/or activity(ies).

About the brief

This brief draws on twelve quantitative IEs and one SR, which looked at interventions that supported civil society to participate in decision-making processes. Decision-making interventions allow civil society, including marginalized groups, to take part directly in the allocation of public funds to certain projects rather than others and actively implement those projects themselves. The interventions included a variety of approaches, including community-driven development, participatory budgeting, and stakeholder engagement. They highlight the breadth of approaches used in the field.

The studies on which this brief is based were identified through the **strengthening civil society gap map (EGM)** by Miriam Berretta and colleagues (forthcoming). The authors systematically searched for published and unpublished IEs and SRs through the first quarter of 2021 and then identified,

mapped, and described the evidence base of interventions that aim to strengthen civil society in L&MICs. The map contains total 128 studies; 116 were quantitative IEs, ten were qualitative IEs, and two were SRs. The characteristics of the evidence are described and mapped according to a framework of thirty-six interventions and sixteen outcomes, with five crosscutting themes. The EGM can be viewed at <https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/strengthening-civil-society-egm>.

You can always reach out to civil society experts in USAID/ Washington at ddi.drg.elmaillist@usaid.gov.

This brief was authored by Miriam Berretta, Sanghwa Lee, and Douglas Glandon. They are solely responsible for all content, errors, and omissions. It was designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta and Tanvi Lal.





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