



Interventions aiming at monitoring public and private institutions via civil society

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 on monitoring public and private institutions through civil society in the 'Strengthening civil society' Evidence gap map (EGM). 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 and systematic review.⁶ This brief includes eight studies looking at efforts by civil society to monitor private and public institutions.

Did you know ?

Previous contributors have asserted that:

- In 2020 only 12.7 per cent of people around the world live in countries with an open or narrowed civic space rating, an important decline from the 17.6 per cent in 2019, and almost 70 per cent of the people live 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



- When implementing interventions to reduce fraud and increase government accountability, consider identifying the relevant contextual channel(s) (e.g., hotlines, locally relevant media sources, public hearings) to inform citizens and allow them to report fraud activities.
- When disseminating information about the government performance scores, consider how to address the existing barriers in authoritarian regimes, which may prevent civil society from taking action.
- Active community engagement can be key when implementing interventions aimed at improving the transparency, accountability, and quality of public services.

For learning specialists and researchers

- The impacts of monitoring and documentation interventions need to be assessed in more varied contexts.
- Combining different data sources can deepen understanding of how impacts were achieved in a local context.
- Non-traditional impact evaluations can be appropriate when intervention and control groups are not well defined.

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 civil society members as well as those targeting government officials’, for instance encouraging local leaders to use a more participative decision-making approach.

Top-down approaches to strengthening civil society involve enacting legislation that improves the enabling environment for civil society activity, as well as working with the executive branch to improve government capacity to receive and act on input from civil society. Bottom-up interventions provide civil society with material support and training to improve their capacity for advocacy, watchdog, and social change activities, and

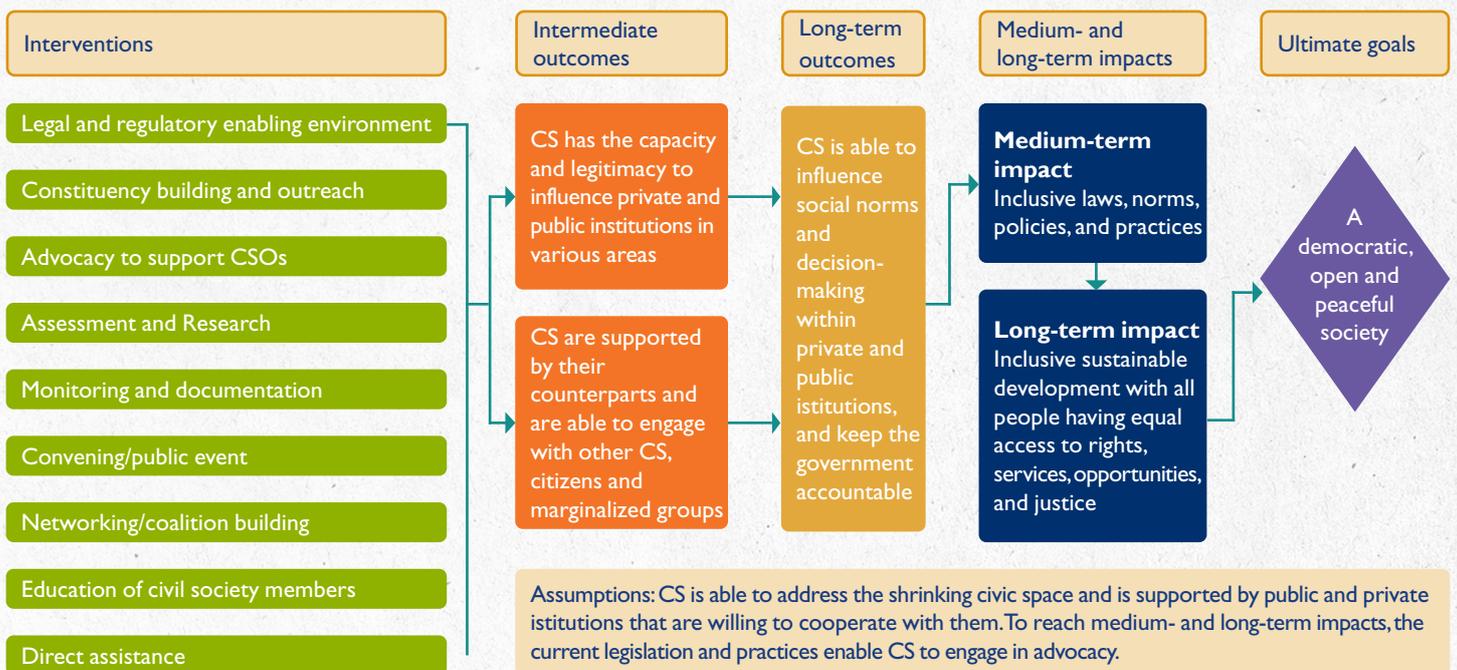
also materially support their implementation of those activities. Monitoring and documentation interventions tend to adopt a bottom-up approach, in which civil society is empowered to hold the government accountable.

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, ultimately leading to a democratic, open, and peaceful society. Monitoring and documentation interventions represent a direct approach to increase governmental accountability and achieve change.

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.

Within the EGM's framework, we specifically identified interventions that used monitoring and documentation

approaches to strengthen civil society. Based on discussions with technical experts within the Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, this area was identified as important and is the topic of this brief. Monitoring and documentation interventions, and the outcomes they were evaluated against, are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: Interventions and outcomes framework

Intervention groups

Legal and regulatory enabling environment

- Establishment of policies, laws, and reforms that promote or protect freedom of association and assembly for civil society

Constituency building and outreach

- Membership drives and recruitment activities to encourage participation in civil society organizations

Advocacy to support civil society

- Coordinated set of advocacy activities aiming to promote civil society to the general public and policy makers

Assessment and research

- Analyses of legal, communications, needs and strategy, partners and network, and public awareness areas pertaining to civil society

Monitoring/documentation

- Monitoring and documenting compliance with rules, regulations, and norms pertaining to civil society

Convening/public events

- Gathering stakeholders with the express purpose of promoting or protecting civil society

Networking/coalition building

- Development of networks or coalitions with the express purpose of promoting or protecting civil society

Education of civil society members

- Knowledge transfer to strengthen capacities to manage civil society and increase its influence

Direct assistance

- Direct technical or financial support to civil society

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 impact evaluations (IEs), 10 were qualitative IEs, and two were systematic reviews (SRs). The field rapidly expanded in the early 2000s, but growth has leveled off, with about 13 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 = 13). Eight evaluations and one systematic review considered the impacts of monitoring and documentation 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 monitoring and documentation interventions, citizen participation in civic life was also the most common outcome, followed by civil society oversight of public institutions, and then 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%), quasi-experimental (34%), and qualitative (8%) approaches. Ten qualitative studies across seven intervention types demonstrate that qualitative IEs are employed in this field. Evaluations of monitoring and documentation interventions tended to be mostly quantitative (73%), with only one qualitative evaluation (18%).

In this brief, we have included eight studies focused on interventions aimed at monitoring public institutions such as the government, or the provision of public services, or politicians' performance.



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Lessons learned from the included systematic review



Findings from the single high-confidence systematic review⁷ included in the map suggest that citizen monitoring mechanisms of service providers can have positive effects on increasing active participation and meeting attendance, but does not appear to improve provider response. Some individual studies reported positive effects for provider actions and staff motivation. Several service access and use outcomes resulted in positive but on average not statistically significant, including service quality and user satisfaction (six studies).

Overall, these interventions seem to work better when the following conditions are met: (1) citizens are in direct contact with the front-line service providers; (2) both providers and citizens are involved in the monitoring processes and the creation of common knowledge about it; (3) the mechanisms use performance benchmarks; and (4) the intervention include activities with local community organizations to strengthen community members' voices.

Considerations for implementation



Key messages



When the intervention is...

Citizen monitoring of the government



And you want to accomplish this...

Reduce electoral fraud and increase government accountability



Consider doing this...

Identify the relevant contextual channel(s) (e.g., hotlines, locally relevant media sources, public hearings) to inform citizens and allow them to report fraud activities

Assessing and reporting government performance scores on the delivery of essential services



Increase public participation in civic activities



Disseminate the scores and consider how to address the existing barriers in authoritarian regimes (e.g., censorship, fear to speak against the government) which prevent civil society from taking action

Monitoring of public service provision



Improve transparency and accountability



Active community-based assembly and engagement

Citizen monitoring of the government



In Benin and Ghana, public accountability efforts, such as performance audits and accountability meetings, were found to have mixed effects on transparency and accountability. In Benin,⁹ public accountability hearings allowed citizens to identify problems, provide recommendations, and pressure municipal authorities for change, as found in a qualitative impact evaluation using process tracing. In addition, monitoring municipal planning was thought to support transparency by uncovering misappropriation of funds. However, in Ghana,⁹ local government performance audits, citizen campaigns, and civil society organization-led social audits had no effect on transparency or corruption. They did reduce overall citizen satisfaction with services, largely driven by reactions to negative audit reports. This study was determined to have a high risk of bias, which may explain the inconclusive results.

In Afghanistan and Mozambique, it was found that hotlines to report fraud reduced electoral fraud for when certain media channels were used. Afghanistan,¹⁰ an initiative that provided telephone lines for citizens to report fraud resulted in lower electoral fraud. In Mozambique,¹¹ the distribution of a newspaper which included a resource for a telephone hotline that allowed citizens to report electoral misconduct increased accountability-based participation and decreased the rate of electoral problems. However, an SMS hotline for electoral misconduct had no effect on reporting the incidence of electoral problems, possibly because it was less culturally relevant. This study suffered from significant risk of spillovers; effects probably would have been stronger if this risk was not realized.

Government performance scores



Disclosure of government performance scores was found to increase civic participation and transparency in China and the Philippines, but existing contextual barriers prevented the civil society from keep discussing the topic and take actions. In the Philippines,¹² publicly disseminating the scores of local government performance increased the probability of membership in local organizations, engagement in local public projects, and participation in civic activities. In China,¹³ the national government's Institute for Public and Environmental Affairs and researchers monitored the municipal government's public compliance

with requirements to disclose local Pollution Information Transparency Index scores that are published annually by an NGO. As a result, compliance with national mandates to be transparent about the management of pollution increased. Even in highly authoritarian contexts, public monitoring improved transparency. However, media attention on public discontent, pollution, and transparency, and citizen petitions on environmental issues did not change, possibly due to existing censorship and fear to speak against the government. This study suffered from significant risk of spillovers, which likely reduced observed treatment effects and may explain null results.

Monitoring of public service provision



School-based management was found to have a complementary role in correcting financial market failures in one study in Burkina Faso. In Burkina Faso, a study on community-based school committees that implementing an annual action plan for the school – including monitoring, accounting, and auditing – increased student enrollment, voluntary contributions to public goods, and female toilets at school.¹⁴

Community-based monitoring of public primary healthcare providers increased transparency and accountability in one study in Uganda.¹⁵ In Uganda, a local NGO encouraged communities to provide feedback to health clinic staff and strengthened their capacity to hold local health providers accountable for their performance. After one year of the project, healthcare facilities were more likely to have suggestion boxes and waiting cards. The number of facilities that posted information on free services and patients' rights and obligations also increased. Both the quality and the quantity of services improved.

Implications for researchers

Key messages



- The impacts of monitoring and documentation interventions need to be assessed in more varied contexts.
- Combining different data sources can deepen understanding of how impacts were achieved in a local context.
- Non-traditional impact evaluations can be appropriate when intervention and control groups are not well defined.

EGMs identify where future research may need to concentrate, and thus generate new evidence that informs practitioners and researchers in the design and implementation of effective and proven interventions. The eight studies reflect evaluation approaches to monitoring and documentation interventions in several different contexts.

The impacts of monitoring and documentation interventions need to be assessed in more varied contexts. The two studies that considered government performance scores took place in highly centralized East Asian countries, while the two studies that considered the impacts of citizen monitoring of public services were carried out in more decentralized African countries. It is not clear that the same impacts would be seen in different contexts. Therefore, we suggest incorporating impact evaluation with program implementation when these interventions are brought to new contexts.

Combining different data sources can deepen understanding of how impacts were achieved in a local context. Three studies used a mixed methods approach with randomized controlled trials and qualitative interviews. The authors indicated that qualitative interviews with city-level officials, municipal officials, local scholars, and local NGOs were useful in monitoring intervention implementation. The interviews also provided valuable information about local-provincial central government dynamics.^{16,17,18} Qualitative results identified conditions for the emergence of governance monitoring in authoritarian settings.¹⁹ A quasi-experimental study²⁰ combined regression discontinuity with a spatial

framework to determine the spatial heterogeneity of the effects and develop generalizable conclusions that could guide the design of localized policies.

Non-traditional impact evaluations can be appropriate when intervention and control groups are not well defined. These evaluations are commonly used when it is not possible to develop a plausible counterfactual. When the treatment and control groups are in the same district, spillovers can result in them not being fully distinct and making a counterfactual based on the control group unreliable.²¹ Conversely, district-wide interventions (e.g., government auditing standards performance audits and civil society organization-led social audit and information campaign) may fail to reach the majority of citizens, resulting in considerable heterogeneity in treatment exposure.²² Delayed or inconsistent impacts across treatment arms can also induce heterogeneity. These sources of variation can exacerbate the challenge of detecting small treatment effects. Realist evaluations, process tracing, contribution analysis, contribution tracing, general elimination methodology, qualitative comparative analysis, outcome harvesting, and the qualitative impact assessment protocol are rigorous qualitative impact evaluation designs²³ that can provide impact evaluations without then need for a quantitative counterfactual. However, only one included study was entirely qualitative. It evaluated the impacts of public accountability hearings and municipal planning monitoring through process tracing.



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	Assistance in guiding program implementation and course-correction and demonstrating accountability	Multiple purposes (e.g., program adherence to the plan, implementer performance, achievement of planned outputs and immediate outcomes, 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? !

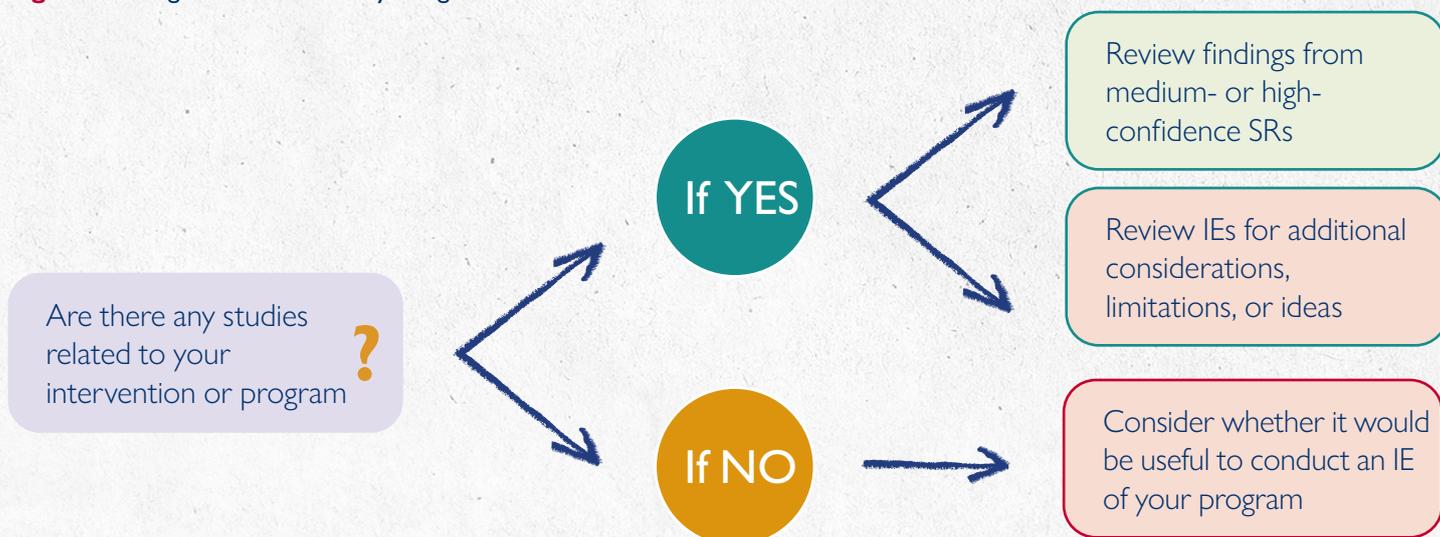
This brief (along with the associated EGM matrix and report) is designed to inform USAID practitioners' investments in rule of law systems-level interventions at multiple phases of the program cycle, including: strategic planning; project design and implementation; activity design and implementation; 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**¹⁵ 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.emallist@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 nine IEs that looked at interventions using monitoring and documentation to strengthen civil society. Monitoring and documentation interventions directly or indirectly support the documentation of information regarding the performance of government and public sector services. They can also support the dissemination of this information. These nine interventions included a variety of approaches, including citizen hotlines, audits and performance scores, and monitoring meetings. 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**, 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 low- and middle-income countries. The map contains 116 quantitative IEs, 10 qualitative IEs, and two SRs. The characteristics of the evidence are described and mapped according to a framework of 36 interventions and 16 outcomes, with five cross-cutting themes. The EGM can be viewed at: <https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/strengthening-civil-society-egm>

This brief was authored by Charlotte Lane, Miriam Berretta, Katherine Quant, Ingunn Storhaug, 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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²⁴ The map is available at: <https://gapmaps.3ieimpact.org/evidence-maps/rule-law-egm>



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