Citizen engagement improves access to public services in low- and middle-income countries, but evidence on development outcomes is limited

Interventions promoting citizen engagement in public service management involve participation, inclusion, transparency and accountability (PITA) mechanisms. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), these interventions are effective in improving active citizenship and service delivery, and may improve the responsiveness of service provider staff for services provided directly by public servants (for example, in health).

In contrast, interventions providing information to stimulate pressure on politicians are not usually effective in improving provider response or service delivery. There is insufficient evidence to conclude whether these interventions are effective in improving wellbeing or the relationship between citizens and the state.

What is this review about?
Failures in governance lead to the exclusion of large portions of society from public services and to waste, fraud and corruption. This review assesses evidence for interventions promoting better governance of public services: participation (participatory planning), inclusion (involvement of marginalised groups), transparency (information about citizen rights or performance of public officials), and accountability (citizen feedback) mechanisms, known collectively as PITA mechanisms.

What studies are included?
The review includes impact evaluations relating to 35 PITA programmes from 20 LMICs. In addition, 36 qualitative and programmatic documents were included to strengthen understanding of implementation context and programme mechanisms.

What are the main findings of this review?
Citizen engagement interventions (i) are usually effective in improving intermediate user engagement outcomes, for example, meeting attendance and contributions to community funds; (ii) improve access to and quality of services but not service use outcomes; (iii) can lead to improvements in some wellbeing outcomes such as health and productive outcomes; (iv) may improve tax collection; but (v) do not usually lead to changes in provider action outcomes such as public spending, staff motivation.
and corruption. There may be an exception where there is direct interaction between citizens and service providers in the regular delivery of services. Interventions providing performance information do not generally improve access or lead to improvements in service quality.

Only interventions focused on services delivered by front-line staff (e.g., in health) achieve positive outcomes. Those delivered without public interaction (e.g., roads) do not. However, engagement with civil society organisations and interest groups may lead to better outcomes for services accessed independently of providers. Inclusive citizen engagement programmes have at least as big an effect on user engagement and access to services as less inclusive approaches.

Many interventions experienced challenges stemming from a lack of positive engagement with supply-side actors, whose power the interventions often sought to diminish. Interventions implemented with the strong support of the targeted service providers were better able to realise positive impacts.

Approaches to citizen-service provider engagement appear to work more effectively when implemented through phased, facilitated collaborative processes rather than one-off accountability meetings that are seen as confrontational.

Only four studies present any data on intervention costs. This limited the potential for any analysis of comparisons across programmes and settings.

In interpreting the findings, it must be noted that each individual outcome is reported in only a few studies and that included studies have important methodological weaknesses with risks of bias arising from weak design, analysis and reporting.

What do the findings of the review mean?

For policy and programme managers: A collaborative rather than confrontational approach with the service providers whose services are under scrutiny is more likely to be effective. Engaging communities may require using civil society organisations to facilitate the community’s participation. Programme design should ensure positive engagement with supply-side actors within the intervention setting.

For researchers: More high-quality studies are needed, comparing different approaches to improving service delivery, paying attention to complete description of the different approaches being compared. Since implementation is a crucial factor, mixed methods studies should be the norm, and will help focus on equity considerations which have been neglected. Finally, there should be standardisation of indicators in PITA studies.