
POLICY BRIEF 1 – STRATEGIC LEVEL

Based on Case Study Assessments of Civil Society Participation and Accountability Approaches in Local Governance Processes

Background & Objective

In the framework of the DLGN learning project on Civil Society Participation and Accountability in Local Governance, a number of recommendations for practitioners and policy-makers were formulated. Eight case studies and four mirror case studies¹ were developed as part of the learning project to assess approaches and extract key learnings based on the experience of SDC and selected other local governance programmes in a variety of contexts, including fragile ones. A special focus included the role of civil society in its relation to the state as well as specific aspects of power relations and how they influence local governance and decision-making. An additional focus was placed on specific challenges of accountability and civil society participation in fragile or conflict-affected contexts and its potential for transformation towards increased stability and democracy. The objective of this brief is to provide policy-makers with strategic recommendations to support project/programme teams in strengthening SDC's programming in civil society participation and accountability based on key learnings from the case studies.

Recommendations

The recommendations are organized around the following five categories based on key lessons from the case studies: 1) Addressing power relations and issues; 2) Supporting effective engagement between civil society & state and informal actors; 3) Suitable and context-specific local governance mechanisms and tools for participation and accountability; 4) Understanding risks, limitations, and challenges particularly in fragile situations; and 5) Alignment with national systems and scaling up.

1. Addressing power relations and issues

- ❖ **Local governance processes are usually influenced by power relations and issues at the political level.** Power relations often involve political actors such as local political parties or parliamentarians that exert a strong visible or hidden influence over governance and accountability processes and are therefore, part of the governance problem. Although some political actors had been exerting hidden power on accountability relationships in the reviewed case studies, none of the projects/programmes engaged them in the intervention. This indicates that project teams may be reluctant to work with political actors for various reasons, such as unfamiliarity, a compromise of SDC's

¹ The following SDC and other local governance programmes were assessed for the case studies: Afghanistan: Improved Livelihood of Rural Communities (ILRC) Project; Bhutan: Participatory Forest Management Project (PFMP); Bolivia: Towards a Culture of Non-violence Project; Bosnia & Herzegovina: Municipal Development Project (MDP); Laos: Learning House for Development; Macedonia: Community Forum Programme; Peru: Support of Decentralisation in Rural Areas (APODER in Spanish); and Tanzania: Social Accountability Monitoring (SAM) as part of Tanzania Policy Forum. Four additional projects were included into the case studies as "mirror" cases: Bolivia: Lupita; Kosovo: Local Governance and Decentralisation Support (LOGOS); Macedonia: Civica Mobilitas; Nepal: Public Audit Practice.

neutrality or the sensitivity of engaging in politics, which was also confirmed by a recent e-discussion² with governance practitioners of SDC's DLGN network.

- ⇒ However, ***if project teams assess political actors as part of the governance problem, then engaging these actors in a constructive way in the project/programme may be critical to positively shape intervention outcomes.*** And while the risk of engaging political actors may initially prove to be high, the risk of not engaging them is higher, as it can undermine the development effectiveness of SDC's local governance interventions.
- Therefore, it is strongly recommended that project/programme teams are supported in engaging political actors in the intervention since they are often key to transforming accountability structures. The many examples described by participants of the e-discussion demonstrate that successfully working with political actors is possible and that different strategies are available for doing it.
 - Provide more time and financial resources to programmes/projects that engage with political actors as partners, given the additional required efforts for research, coordination and dialogue.
 - It is important to maintain political neutrality while directly or indirectly engaging with political actors in local governance processes. Therefore, it is recommended to address potential risks by reviewing and revising internal systems and procedures. It is further recommended that project/programme teams are provided with clear guidance on how to act in a neutral and non-partisan manner as well as on how to manage interventions that include political actors in order to maintain a credible reputation. E-discussion participants suggested to:
 - Engage with all political actors within a specific group e.g. all members of parliament
 - Diversify partners with whom the project is implemented
 - Design with a certain flexibility to allow for unpredictable outcomes
 - Collaborate with selected political actors on the basis of professional background irrespective of political background.

2. Supporting effective engagement between civil society & state and informal actors

- ❖ ***The case studies demonstrate that certain social or cultural norms, mindsets, values and behaviours can limit the effective engagement between civil society and state and informal actors*** such as the tendency for citizens not to question authorities, express grievances or the low status of women in certain societies, which may also affect inclusiveness. Similarly, state authorities or informal actors may not know how to react in a responsive and non-defensive manner to citizen grievances or requests for participation, which can lead to conflicts.
- ⇒ In such instances, ***if project/programme teams include long-term capacity-building initiatives to influence certain values, mindsets and behaviours that affect participation or accountability, then local governance interventions are more likely to succeed*** and the potential for conflicts would also be reduced.
- To support more effective engagement, it is strongly recommended that capacity building efforts for CSOs, state and informal actors are designed to focus not only on improving technical skills, but also on influencing values, mindsets and behaviours that relate to participation and accountability, which will also help minimize conflict, especially in closed spaces and fragile contexts.
 - Provide more time, resources, and flexibility for capacity-building efforts in closed spaces and fragile contexts, since citizen-state engagement will likely require more space to evolve and therefore, smaller steps may need to be taken in order not to risk a closure of space or exacerbate conflict.

² The online DLGN e-discussion focused on power analysis and political actors and took place from April 9-19, 2013. This brief also entails some of the main insights from the e-discussion, based on practitioner experiences.

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- ❖ **Some CSOs in the reviewed case studies have been facing the risk of elite capture, which can limit effective engagement among informal actors, state authorities and citizens.** CSOs that receive funding from the government or indirectly support certain political interests, may not truly represent or support the needs and interests of civil society, and hence may be less effective in mobilizing citizens.
 - ⇒ However, **if CSOs are independent and act in a non-partisan manner, then they are more likely to gain the trust, credibility and legitimacy of citizens and state actors that are being engaged and mobilized.**
 - Therefore, it is strongly recommended that CSO implementing partners are strategically assessed and selected and known CSO partners be re-evaluated from time to time, since working with credible, legitimate, non-partisan and independent CSOs who are representative of citizens, is key to effective citizen engagement and to mitigating project risks and challenges.
 - When a programme aims to strengthen civil society, it is advisable to promote citizen's actions rather than promoting "NGO-ism". This would require a good and full picture of Civil Society. A mapping exercise could be useful, which include smaller organisations and informal groups, with a focus on citizen action. Another approach would be to look at what citizen actions are taking place and who are organising these actions, in order to identify CSOs that are seen by citizens as representative and legitimate.
 - If in some contexts CSO implementing partners cannot realistically meet certain requirements (e.g. act independently and truly represent the interests of citizens), then it is recommended that project/programme teams monitor interventions closely and proactively identify mitigation measures to deal with risks and challenges that may arise.
 - Another approach is the support of multi-stakeholder platforms or networks, which bring together different stakeholders around a common issue implementing concrete actions according to each stakeholder's competences.
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3. Suitable and context-specific local governance mechanisms and tools for participation and accountability

- ❖ As evident from the case studies, **the capacity, values, motivations, and incentives of civil society, state and informal actors as well as the political, social and legal conditions of engagement are unique in each context and exert a great influence on local governance interventions.** Ensuring inclusive (e.g. pro-poor and gender sensitive) participation also requires special and context-specific efforts, since cultural norms and values can limit gender inclusion to varying degrees and also affect citizen's willingness to question state authorities. For example, in the case studies while incorporating gender quotas in participation mechanisms worked in certain contexts, these were not suitable in others where cultural norms and values prevented women's participation.
 - ⇒ **If project/programme teams design interventions with mechanisms for participation and accountability based on the context and stakeholders involved, then local governance projects/programmes are more likely to succeed and risks and challenges can be better prevented and mitigated.**
 - Since local governance interventions are complex and highly context-specific, it is strongly recommended to advocate to project/programme teams a 'best fit' rather than a 'best practice' approach that is based on an in-depth systematic and comprehensive context and stakeholder analysis.
- ❖ Moreover, **for a 'best fit' approach, mechanisms will need to be adapted at certain points of the intervention** (e.g. increase in citizen participation/mobilization, advocacy stages, etc.) **or as certain contextual factors or stakeholders change.** For example, **new local government authorities may get re-elected or re-appointed which may affect power relations. Or new rules and legislation may shift incentives and motivations of stakeholders and/or provide new entry points for practitioners.**

- It is recommended to promote a learning-by-doing and flexible implementation approach to project/programme teams (including periodic context/stakeholder re-assessments), since they are key for effective local governance interventions, especially in fragile or closed contexts where contextual factors may change more rapidly.³

4. Managing risks, limitations and challenges particularly in fragile situations

- ❖ **The political nature of accountability and shaping accountability structures can create tensions between citizens and state actors if not mitigated properly.** As previously mentioned, cultural resistance to change, elite capture, and lack of state or civil society capacity to respond appropriately can also drive conflict in interventions. Hence, to limit challenges and prevent conflict **it is crucial to ensure a detailed conflict analysis, particularly in fragile and conflict-prone contexts**, including the prevalence or absence of trust and legitimacy, as well as the extent of inclusion and informal and formal power relationships.
 - ⇒ **If project/programme teams take full notice of existing frictions and alliances between groups, which need to participate in a joint system of local governance, then the risks, limitations and challenges of local governance interventions could be highly reduced.**
 - It is recommended to incorporate conflict-sensitive assessments and approaches into all local governance projects/programmes, since they are essential for anticipating and managing potential risks, limitations and challenges.
 - It is essential to have the right staff, therefore recruiting staff who can manage conflict situations, work with group dynamics and have convening skills, is important.
 - Since transforming accountability structures and power relations is complex and in certain instances more risky and challenging, it is recommended to plan for and provide a longer time horizon for local governance interventions, in order to effectively transform accountability structures.

5. Alignment with national systems and scaling up

- ❖ As the case studies demonstrate, **sustainability is a complex process and difficult to achieve in local governance interventions, because it requires careful planning, resources and time to change mindsets and behaviours to ensure government cooperation at the national level** and effective engagement between civil society, local and national state authorities.
 - It is strongly recommended to focus early on engaging national state actors and other political actors in the implementation process to build trust and cooperation, which requires careful planning.
 - In addition, if necessary, dedicate more time and resources to promising interventions and to demonstrate the value of citizen participation to state authorities, which is crucial to ensure support for scaling up and institutionalizing processes.
 - Participants from the face to face workshop held in Egypt in May 2013 recommended to avoid creating parallel systems where possible, to strengthen state institutions which are perceived as legitimate, or, alternatively, link to platforms that are seen as legitimate.

³ „A Guide for Planning and Strategy Development in the Face of Complexity“, Background Note, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Marc 2013