
Can Civil Society Overcome Government Failure in Africa?

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Government failures are widespread in Africa. Symptoms include absentee teachers, leakage of public funds, monopolized trucking, and employment-restricting regulations. Can civil society do anything about these failures? Would external donor support to civil society help? We argue that the challenge for civil society is to improve government functioning by strengthening political incentives—the underlying cause of government failure—rather than bypassing or supplanting the state. This paper reviews the available evidence on civil society interventions from this perspective. Although the current increase in political competition and extensive citizen engagement in Africa seems to create the potential for civil society influence, we find that there are large knowledge gaps regarding what works, where, and how. Some rigorous evaluations find significant impacts of civil society involvement on development outcomes, but these studies typically pay insufficient attention to the mechanisms. For example, are impacts due to overcoming government failure or to changing private household behavior, leaving the wasteful allocation of public resources untouched? We conclude that donor support to civil society should take an approach of learning by doing through ongoing experimentation backed by rigorous, data-based evaluations of the mechanisms of impact. JEL codes: H41, O19, P26

Consider the following facts:

- Teachers in public primary schools in Uganda are absent 20 percent of the time; when present, they are in class teaching 18 percent of the time ([Chaudhury et al. 2006](#); [World Bank 2007](#)).
- Only 1 percent of nonsalary expenditures allocated to primary health clinics in Chad actually reach the clinics ([Gauthier and Wane 2009](#)).
- There are huge leakages from fertilizer subsidies in Tanzania, with elected officials receiving 60 percent of the vouchers ([Pan and Christiansen 2011](#)).

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- Efforts to hire workers below the minimum wage in South Africa—a country whose unemployment rate is 25 percent—are met with widespread, sometimes violent, protest.
- Because of regulations that prohibit entry, monopoly rents to trucking companies cause Africa to have the highest transport prices in the world (Teranavithorn and Raballand 2009).

In addition to being emblematic of the problems facing Africans, especially poor Africans, these facts can be explained by failures of “accountability” at various points in the chain of relationships for the implementation of public sector policies. This chain goes from the preferences and needs of citizens, through the political process, and then passes to the bureaucracies and front-line actors charged with delivering services. It also passes to the regulators, judges, and others with responsibility for monitoring and enforcing public behavior. Teacher absenteeism and the leakage of public funds are examples of politicians or central-level bureaucrats’ inability or unwillingness to hold lower-level bureaucrats and service providers accountable. The capture of fertilizer subsidies or wage premiums by politically powerful groups are instances of how special interests are able to shape the behavior of state actors, whereas the broader citizenry, who are unorganized, remain unable to make politicians accountable to their needs.² We call these accountability failures “government failures.” They are analogous to market failures in that public officials act in their own interest, leading to an equilibrium that is socially suboptimal.

The development financing community of bilateral and multilateral donors, including the World Bank, has recently begun to explore how these problems of state accountability might be overcome by civil society organizations. Does a substantially strengthened role for civil society have a sound conceptual and empirical basis, or is it just another fad? Even if there is a sound, substantiated case for some forms of civil society action, can these external actors play a useful role in supporting it, or will they only add a new set of distortions?

This paper attempts to answer these questions by reviewing the available literature and development experience through the lens of accountability relationships. We emphasize the fundamental importance of the political economy in explaining government failures in African societies. We then assess the extent to which civil society interventions have improved outcomes by reducing government failures rather than bypassing or supplanting the state.

The analytics and evidence support a common conclusion: there is a strong *prima facie* case for a strengthened role of civil society in both democratic and semiauthoritarian regimes. However, strategies and interventions in this regard need to focus on mechanisms for reducing government failures rather than increasing the burden on citizens to help themselves in ways that leave state failures largely intact.

More specifically, in attempting to improve government performance and accountability, civil society interventions face the challenge of pervasive rent seeking and “clientelism” in Africa, where politics revolves around providing narrowly targeted benefits (often to particular ethnic, religious, or regional groups) in exchange for political support at the expense of broad public goods. In this setting, unqualified faith in civil society as a force for good is likely to be misplaced. Historically created institutions of inequality or ethnic identity can often inhibit collective action in the broader public interest, promoting narrow sectarian interests and nourishing clientelistic political competition. Furthermore, public-interest action by civil society is heavily constrained by existing systems and institutions of the state.

Nevertheless, civil society action can achieve incremental, and possibly transformational, success in addressing accountability failures. We focus here on the potential for incremental change, building on existing developments in Africa such as greater political contestation and citizen organization.

What does this potential for civil society action mean for external donors? It implies that support for civil society should be both organic and experimental: organic in the sense that interventions contribute to change in existing political and societal structures as opposed to seeking to bring “best practice” ideas from outside; and experimental in the sense that there should be structured monitoring, information generation, and evaluation in the process, with the techniques depending on the nature of the intervention.

In the next section, we examine government failure in the form of breakdowns in accountability relationships and explore how civil society action may or may not help. The following section summarizes our review of the existing evidence on the impact of civil society-related initiatives to improve accountability. A final section discusses the implications for external donors.

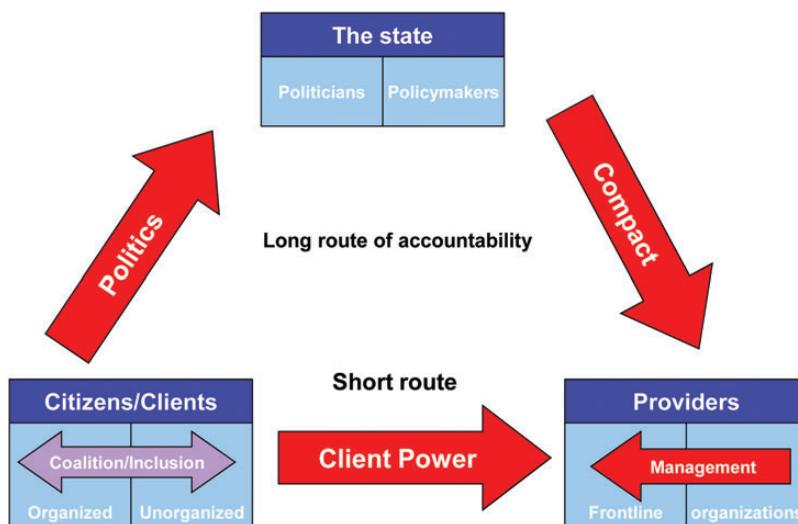
Accountability Relationships and Civil Society Action in an African Context

This section develops the theoretical framework underpinning the arguments regarding the role of civil society in Africa.

The Accountability Framework

We use the accountability framework of the 2004 *WDR, Making Services Work for Poor People*, presented in figure 1, to examine government failure as breaks in the “long route of accountability.” The argument is as follows. In a private market

Figure 1. The Long and Short Routes of Accountability



transaction where market institutions are reasonably competitive and free from information problems—such as buying a sandwich from a vendor—there is direct accountability of the sandwich provider to the client or consumer. The client pays the vendor directly, she can observe whether she receives the sandwich, and if the market is reasonably competitive, the client can go elsewhere if she does not like the sandwich—and the vendor knows this. This direct market relationship is the “short route of accountability” in figure 1, exercised through client power.

When the state is involved (for example, in response to market failures or redistributive goals), the relationship between the client and the service provider is mediated by the institutions that shape the incentives and behavior of state actors. In the case of publicly provided education, for instance, public school teachers are managed by and answerable to state bureaucrats, termed the “compact” in this framework, and are only indirectly answerable to citizens. Problems of teacher absenteeism are consequences of weak compacts in which teachers are not held accountable by state bureaucrats for showing up and teaching effectively. Why are teachers not held accountable by bureaucrats? The reason, we argue, has to do with politics: teachers’ jobs are often used as political patronage. Teachers help politicians get elected, in return for which they obtain jobs from which they can be absent. In other words, weak political incentives in the long route of accountability lead state actors to select compacts that deliver protected teaching jobs in the public sector rather than the broad public service of quality education.

Our main argument, therefore, is that government failure is fundamentally shaped by the first link in the long route, the relationship between citizens and

politicians, which, in turn, determines the behavior of other state actors. A majority of citizens may prefer teachers to show up and teach effectively. However, imperfections in the political process may result in the election of politicians who provide protected jobs to teachers as opposed to those with an interest in reforming teacher incentives. In the case of education, in addition to jobs as patronage, teachers may be politically powerful. For example, the South African Democratic Teachers Union is both part of the governing coalition and one of the most powerful trade unions in the country (New York Times 2009). In the legislature of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh in the early 2000s, teachers constituted 20 percent of the assembly, and former teachers constituted another 20 percent (Kingdon and Muzammil 2001).

Substantial public spending on the salaries of absent teachers is difficult to explain by policymakers' lack of knowledge of service delivery conditions or lack of access to technology and mechanisms to reduce absenteeism. In this setting, civil society action, such as citizen-based school management committees, may fail to reduce teacher absenteeism if higher-tier bureaucrats do not have political incentives to make teachers or school administrators responsive to local citizens. Success is unlikely if incentives are geared toward protecting jobs in the public sector rather than improving the quality of education. Local school committees may also be captured by local political elites who prefer to safeguard the power of patronage in public sector jobs.

Political economy problems exist everywhere, but recent literature on the persistence of underdevelopment in regions such as Africa argues that political failures in these contexts are severe, institutionalized, and self-perpetuating. One argument is that the unequal distribution of endowments and power leads to state institutions that encourage elites to organize to extract rents from state resources (North et al. 2009; Acemoglu et al. 2001, 2005; Engerman and Sokoloff 1997; Rajan 2009; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Political elites share rents with economic elites but fail to deliver general public goods, such as credible commitment to all investors, the rule of law, market institutions that support entry and competition, and social and other services for the general population.

Elite privileges can be sustained through state repression, especially under authoritarian regimes but also through "clientelist" strategies, in politically competitive or democratic regimes. Clientelism involves the provision of narrowly targeted benefits to particular voters in return for their political support; it allows political elites to get away with high rents and low provision of broad public services (Keefer and Khemani 2005; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Vicente and Wantchekon 2009). This combination of rent sharing among elite groups and clientelism is pervasive in Africa (van de Walle 2001; Azam 2001³).

Elite rent sharing and clientelism are often linked to identity-based politics on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or region (or all three overlapping, as they do in Nigeria and Sudan, for example). Ethnic fragmentation and polarization have been blamed

for enabling politicians to win and remain in public office despite the underprovision of broad public goods (Easterly and Levine 1997; Alesina, Baqir and Easterly 1999; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2010). However, ethnicity is not necessary for clientelism. In Tanzania, for example, identity-based links are much less salient than in many other countries, in part because of a concerted nation-building strategy, but clientelism remains rampant (Kelsall 2002). Such identity-based links are not peculiar to Africa. India is a consolidated democracy in which identity of caste and religion is highly politically salient (Chandra 2004). Widespread poverty can allow clientelist strategies, such as vote buying, to be successful and can hinder collective citizen organization to demand broad public goods (Stokes 2007).

Politicized bureaucracies can perpetuate themselves. Even if a reform-minded politician wants to deliver public goods, he may be unable to do so given the pervasive weaknesses in the state's bureaucratic infrastructure. A clientelist political strategy may be forced upon him for political survival. A highly committed senior education officer can do little if teachers are hired for reasons of political patronage and not to teach. A mining official determined to meet citizens' complaints of flouting environmental standards will not be tolerated if politicians who are party to rent sharing address the mining companies.

Elite rent extraction and clientelist political strategies tend to sustain and reproduce inequalities. State benefits are targeted to those groups with greater capacity to organize (e.g., special interest groups, unions) or those with ethnic, geographic, or other identity-based ties to elites in power. Local elites are selected and supported by clientelistic networks, inhibiting the development of other forms of local organization by citizens, or by programmatic political parties, who may demand broader public goods from the state.

Can civil society action break this vicious cycle and improve the accountability of the state to its broader citizenry? How can civil society organizations mobilize demand for better quality public policies and reduce the power of narrowly targeted patronage in winning political support?

Emerging Potential for Civil Society Action in Africa

Civil society action in Africa is emerging at a time of unprecedented political contestation and citizen engagement. There is evidence of extensive political participation and associational activity in both democratic and (semi)authoritarian polities. Data from the Polity IV effort, which uses the expert opinions of political scientists to categorize the extent of autocracy and democracy of a regime, illustrate the scale of changes.⁴ There is a continuum of regimes, from completely autocratic to fully consolidated democracies, with a large range of intermediate types (called "anocracies") that have elements of both autocratic and democratic processes. Their synthetic classification uses a numerical system, in which -10 to -7 is classified

as autocratic, -6 to $+6$ is classified as intermediate, and $+7$ to $+10$ is classified as democratic.

Figure 2 illustrates the difference between 1985 and 2009. In the mid-1980s, 31 out of a total of 40 countries in the database were fully autocratic, with only two full-fledged democracies (Gambia and Mauritius) and six intermediate regimes, most of which had a heavy predominance of autocracy. By late 2009, the Polity IV classification listed 12 fully democratic regimes (Benin, Botswana, Comoros, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Mauritius, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Zambia) and only three fully autocratic regimes (Eritrea, Somalia, and Swaziland⁵). The majority are classified as intermediate (anocratic) regimes, most with significant democratic elements (including, for example, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe).

Data from the Afrobarometer surveys show large-scale citizen participation and mobilization across countries.⁶ Table 1 provides a few indicators of the scale of citizen participation across countries. Interestingly, reported participation is not strikingly different between countries classified as “full democracies” and those

Figure 2. Democratic and Autocratic Regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1985 and 2009

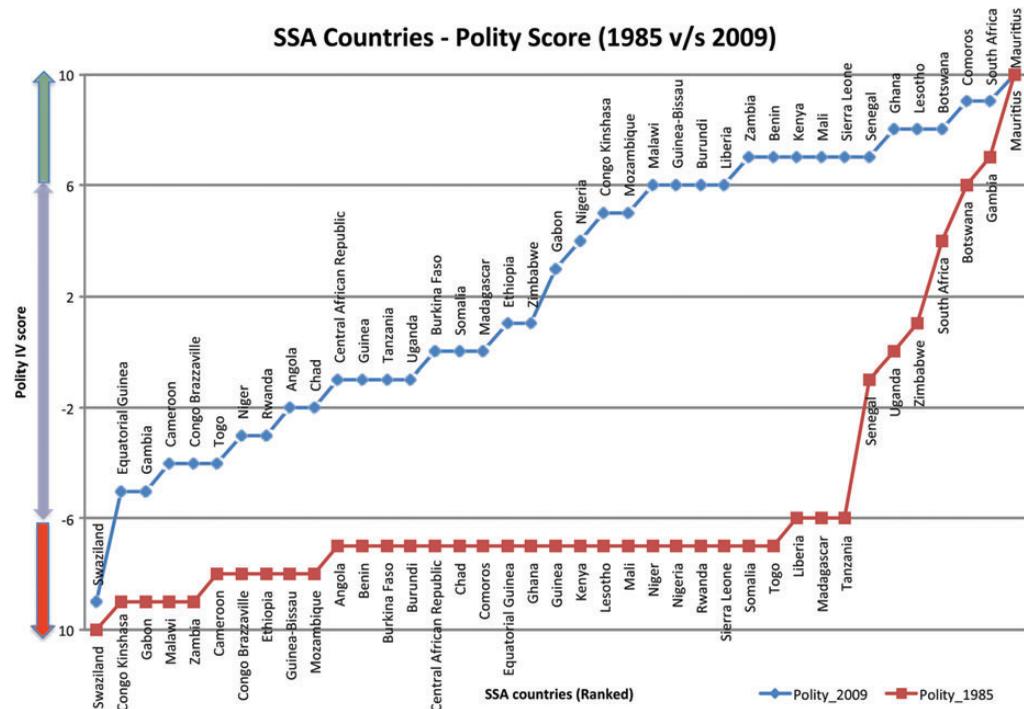


Table 1. Civil Society Activity across Countries

Country	Percentage of Respondents Answering "Yes" to:					
	Voted in last elections	Active member of a group	Often attended group meetings	Often joined others to raise an issue	Willing to demonstrate or protest	Punishment likely if people complain
<i>Polity IV Score between 10 and 6 ("full democracies")</i>						
South Africa	65	16	29	20	45	46
Botswana	59	17	55	39	52	19
Lesotho	61	28	67	50	52	74
Ghana	81	35	40	38	30	32
Senegal	79	28	60	55	62	60
Mali	77	29	57	55	59	46
Kenya	79	43	44	35	40	37
Benin	91	23	53	50	65	25
Zambia	59	24	45	33	45	47
Liberia	78	45	50	42	24	40
Malawi	75	22	60	54	50	27
Avg.	73	28	51	43	48	41
<i>Polity IV Score between 6 and 2 ("higher scoring intermediate democracies")</i>						
Mozambique	60	18	49	45	57	47
Nigeria	60	27	30	26	43	57
Avg.	60	23	40	36	50	52
<i>Polity IV Score between 2 and -2 ("lower scoring intermediate democracies")</i>						
Zimbabwe	61	16	51	38	42	44
Madagascar	70	4	75	29	20	61
Burkina	72	18	59	52	63	53
Uganda	70	31	44	33	35	41
Tanzania	82	35	64	51	65	57
Avg.	71	21	59	41	45	51

Source: Afrobarometer Round 4, 2008.

classified as intermediate by the Polity IV criteria. Average self-reported voter turnout in the 2008 round was more than 70 percent in "full democracies" and 60–70 percent for the intermediate cases. Among the full democracies, the highest-ranked countries (South Africa and Botswana) reported active group membership of only 16 and 17 percent compared to 43 and 45 percent for Kenya and Liberia, both of which are lower on the "democracy" scale. Among intermediate regimes, group membership and attendance in meetings is particularly high for Tanzania.⁷

Even among the countries with the lowest Polity IV scores, an average of 41 percent state that they have often joined others to raise an issue, and 45 percent state that they are willing to protest or demonstrate as part of citizen action. These findings indicate both the potential and pitfalls of civil society action. Even in less

democratic societies, the relatively high degree of citizen participation could be a basis for greater participation and, possibly, political contestation. At the same time, those who participate may face obstacles, such as fear of retribution. Furthermore, citizens may participate to serve ethnic interests, for example, leading to even more perverse politics.

Further analysis of the Afrobarometer data suggests that both hypotheses are possible. Local-level organization of citizens into groups can include the poor. For six countries—Benin, Botswana, Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, and Zimbabwe—an indicator of poverty in the Afrobarometer (when a respondent says the household has gone without adequate food many times in the recent past) is significantly associated with greater attendance at group meetings (after controlling for respondent age, gender, education, media access, household size, and neighborhood availability of infrastructure).

At the same time, citizens report fear of punishment or reprisals should they complain about the poor quality of government services or the misuse of government funds. The results from seven countries—Benin, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe—indicate that poor respondents are more likely to report these fears.

Furthermore, in five countries—Benin, Ghana, Senegal, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—respondents who report frequent attendance in group meetings are also more likely to have ethnic grievances. This finding suggests that when civil society groups pursue sectional interests, they are potentially a source of distortions. In the public-choice literature, the power of organized “special interests” has been blamed for distortions to growth-promoting or efficient or equitable fiscal policies, even in advanced industrial democracies such as the United States (Tullock 1959; Becker 1985). An extreme and tragic example is the Hutu mobilization (and the use of radio within this mobilization) in the Rwandan genocide (Yanagizawa-Drott 2012).

Yet, detailed research on the political behavior of citizens in Africa suggests that there is significant potential for change. Citizens do not respond only to clientelistic appeals and ethnic identity; government performance in managing the economy and delivering development matters to them as well (see, for example, Bratton et al. 2011; Young 2009). There are examples of civil society organizations transcending the “special-interest” type of distortionary action and trying to mobilize citizens to demand broader public goods.⁸ Effective mobilization may bring sanctions upon nonperforming public agents and may reward those with good performance. Civil society action may lead to changes through the electoral process (in which nonperforming incumbents are voted out of power) or by activating other institutions for sanctions within the state, such as internal bureaucratic structures, or formal independent institutions within the state, such as the judiciary and auditing departments.

The critical point is that to successfully reduce government failures, these actions need to address the underlying political incentives. For example, mobilizing citizens

around the quality of education in a community where politics revolves around patronage and where the mobilization effort has not taken that into account is likely to fail. Providing citizens with information about teacher absenteeism in this context may be superfluous; citizens are already aware of it, but they are unable or unwilling to do anything because they know teachers' jobs are politically protected.

Opportunities for successful civil society action in the public interest may emerge in a community where local institutions have facilitated local collective action or in a sector where broad citizen demand for improved public services has emerged. In contrast, opportunities may arise at a higher level, around national or provincial state entities, because of broader-based political competition, for example. Civil society action at that level may facilitate institutional changes that alter practices or discipline errant local providers.

In sum, the changing political context in Africa suggests that there is significant scope and potential for civil society action. Is there evidence of effectiveness? In the next section, we consider evidence of the success of civil society interventions in mobilizing citizens to demand better performance from the state. We continue the education example, among others, to assess whether available impact evaluations that have improved education outcomes have done so by reducing the political power of teachers. Did previously errant public school teachers become more responsive to citizen demands? Or did outcomes improve because parents contributed more of their own resources to education, including greater financial support to teachers (a form of higher local taxation), leaving patronage teachers unscathed?

Evidence of the Mechanisms of the Impact of Civil Society Interventions⁹

We focus on interventions that have been rigorously assessed, organizing them on the basis of which “arm” of the accountability triangle (fig. 1) they principally address. The most common interventions assessed in the policy literature involved attempts to strengthen the client power relationship, typically via some combination of providing information to communities on the performance of local service providers and direct support for local collective action. Broader transparency and information interventions, where civil society organizations track and monitor government programs, budgets, and policy performance, are attempts to influence the compact relationship. Finally, a few interventions have directly focused on the political relationship by providing information on politicians. Regardless of which arm the interventions directly targeted, we consider whether the pattern of evidence suggests that any impact on development outcomes was achieved by overcoming government failure rather than by private efforts bypassing the state.

Client Power Interventions

One source of inspiration for the recent trend toward civil society engagement is the experience of a civil society organization based in Bangalore, India, the Public Affairs Centre, which pioneered the use of “citizen report cards” as a tool for client power.¹⁰ In the anecdotal evidence provided by Paul (2002), this initiative aggregated citizens’ perceptions of the quality of urban services in the city of Bangalore and then publicized these perceptions through local media, serving as a massive, collective complaint. The quality of services improved over time. The intervention either “shamed” the agencies into improving services or sent a strong signal to local politicians that citizens care about service delivery, leading politicians, in turn, to pressure the providers to improve performance.

Two studies of client-power interventions in health and education in Africa, both from Uganda, stand out in the literature for their identification of significant positive impacts on outcomes within public delivery systems (Björkman and Svensson 2009; Barr et al. 2012). However, as we argue below, neither is able to clarify whether this impact was achieved because a government failure was overcome or because communities were mobilized to make additional private contributions to public services—a form of local taxation—without addressing government failure. A third study from a different context, rural India, which is able to say something on mechanisms, finds that very similarly structured client-power interventions (as in Uganda) had no impact on the public system (that is, on government failure) but improved outcomes through greater private efforts of communities that bypassed the public schools (Banerjee et al. 2010c). This suggests that much more evidence is needed on whether or what types of citizen mobilization interventions might work in Africa to address government failures.

Björkman and Svensson (2009) undertake a randomized control trial of a citizen report card intervention in the health sector in Uganda. In this study, local civil society organizations were trained to compile data on citizens’ perceptions of the quality of services at local health clinics and to use these as the basis of discussions between selected community members and the health providers. On average, the intervention communities experienced significant improvements in health services and in health outcomes (as measured by weight for age and under-five mortality). However, there is insufficient evidence on the mechanisms by which this impact was achieved. Did the interventions generate such striking impacts on health outcomes because they increased private demand for health services such as immunization? Or did they overcome government failures by providing incentives to health providers to improve the quality of service delivery?

One piece of evidence is consistent with the latter interpretation—the interventions may have made the directly elected Health Users Management Committees more responsive to citizens for the quality of services. In intervention

areas, on average, the Health Users Management Committees experienced significant turnover in elected positions after the citizen campaign. This finding reinforces the importance of addressing local political incentives if outcomes are to be improved.

Follow-up work in this area in Uganda lends support to some of the specific hypotheses in section 2, which suggest that particular institutions in Africa, such as ethnic identity and historical inequality, can thwart collective action to overcome government failures. Björkman and Svensson (2009) find that the impact within intervention communities was particularly sensitive to the degree of ethnic heterogeneity and wealth inequality. There were significant impacts only in those communities that were relatively homogeneous along both ethnolinguistic and economic dimensions.¹¹ How civil society interventions might overcome these divisions remains an area for future research and policy learning.

The second strand of evidence from Uganda comes from education. Previous research has revealed that a first-order accountability failure in education is teacher absenteeism. In surveys across several developing countries in 2002, Uganda had the highest rate of teacher absenteeism, at 27 percent (Chaudhury et al. 2006). Subsequent work supports the view that this was not due to poor working conditions (Chaudhury et al. 2006; Habyarimana 2004). Government teacher salaries in Uganda are significantly higher than the market wages of individuals with similar qualifications, and variation in the infrastructure conditions of schools and communities is not correlated with variations in teacher absence. More detailed research from other regions, notably South Asia and Latin America, suggests that poor public school teacher performance is sustained because of the political power of teachers as an organized interest group and because of the value of extending patronage through teaching jobs (Grindle 2004; Pritchett and Murgai 2006; Béteille 2009) In this context, can civil society interventions mobilize communities to demand better performance from teachers?

Barr et al. (2012) provide evidence that a community monitoring intervention, albeit implemented by government agencies rather than civil society, reduced teacher absenteeism and improved learning outcomes in Uganda. These authors attempt to address the question of mechanisms of impact through direct evidence that the successful intervention resolved collective action problems. The results of behavioral experiments—which involve playing games with participants in a laboratory setting—suggest that parents in intervention villages were more willing to make voluntary contributions to public goods. This is an intriguing and valuable result, but it does not, on its own, answer the question of whether the improvements occurred because the government failure was addressed. Did outcomes improve because parents contributed more of their own resources to education, including greater financial support to teachers, or because

previously errant public school teachers became more responsive to citizens' demands?

Furthermore, the result hinges on the behavior of those teachers who continued their tenure at the sampled schools in the two years between baseline and follow-up and is particularly sensitive to the length of tenure. Frequent teacher turnover is a significant issue in Uganda—36 percent of teachers who were on the schools' books at baseline were no longer there at follow-up. If politically connected teachers are able to move to a different school (and continue to get away with poor performance), then the intervention may have had no real effect on the government failure. Turnover rates were no different in treatment and control schools.

Evidence on whether the mechanism of impact worked through changes in the public sector, or private action, is available from another context—rural India—and has implications for the design and evaluation of future work in Africa. A similar school-based citizen report card exercise as in Uganda was organized in rural India, in a province known for local patronage politics (Uttar Pradesh), and had no impact on either teacher effort or learning outcomes in public schools (Banerjee et al. 2010c). The intervention also had no impact on local school committees, the Village Education Committees, which had nominally been created for greater local agency, monitoring, and participation but were found to be defunct at baseline. In contrast to this complete lack of impact on the public system, the initiative successfully mobilized private action by local youth volunteers to hold remedial classes outside school. Children who attended the volunteer-led classes made dramatic improvements in learning. In short, some people were able to take private action to improve education, but they were not able to hold the state accountable for better quality public education.

A review of the larger literature on the performance of citizen monitoring and participation through local committees shows more systematically that success depends upon the nature of social organization within communities (particularly the degree of inequality) and, importantly, on whether higher-tier state agencies provide the power and resources to local committees to be effective (see Mansuri and Rao 2013). The outstanding question is whether higher-tier agencies have sufficient political incentives to devolve power and to structure local institutions appropriately. Moreover, such committees are often not autonomous civil society organizations outside state structures because they are designed to be part of state institutions, with representation of politicians and bureaucrats.¹² A recent study from Latin America argues specifically that state representatives can undermine parental participation in community-managed schools (Altschuler 2013).¹³ In sum, more research and evidence is needed on whether civil society can “activate” existing state institutions to perform better.

Client Power and the Compact as Alternatives or Complements

Some studies have sought to directly compare the effectiveness of civil society initiatives that work through client power with those that work through strengthened sanctions in the compact between bureaucrats and service providers. Is the exertion of client power through civil society engagement more effective than technocratic changes to the compact between governments and their local agents?¹⁴ For Indonesia, [Olken \(2005\)](#) compares the impact of information provision to local citizens about corruption in local roads projects against the impact of the provision of information on a technocratic government-led initiative—credible audits of local projects by higher tier authorities. The state-led audits are substantially more effective at reducing corruption. The unaddressed question is whether civil society interventions might complement government incentives to undertake credible audits to overcome corruption.¹⁵

By contrast, a study with a similar design in Madagascar that compares interventions designed to encourage district education bureaucrats to improve their monitoring of schools (versus directly engaging school communities to do so) shows that local-level monitoring is more effective ([Nguyen and Lassibille 2008](#)). A key difference of the audit intervention in Indonesia, however, is that the Madagascar intervention did not *require* district officials to improve their monitoring. Again, the question remains whether civil society action can more efficiently achieve outcomes by changing bureaucratic behavior or by encouraging community participation.

A new study from Kenya provides an important insight on this issue ([Bold et al. 2012](#)). It evaluates a policy of using contract teachers—lesser-paid teachers without the security of tenure compared to regular civil service teachers. In previous work with NGO-managed schools in Kenya ([Duflo et al. 2012](#)), the use of contract teachers is reported to be highly cost effective because contract teachers are paid lower salaries than regular civil service teachers, yet they have lower absence rates and are associated with higher test scores. [Bold et al. \(2012\)](#) provide a follow-up study in Kenya in which the intervention involved a government-supported contract teacher pilot program administered under two alternative management regimes, one run by an NGO and one by the government. They find significant positive effects of contract teachers on student learning in schools administered by the NGO, but none in those directly managed by the government. They provide descriptive evidence that the lack of impact in the government-managed intervention was associated with a fierce reaction of the teachers' union to the use of contract teachers, which led to both salary delays and eventual agreement by the Ministry of Education to make the contract teachers permanent civil servants at the end of the two-year period.

This evidence is consistent with our arguments in section 2 that political incentives (teachers' unions are politically powerful in Kenya) can thwart efforts (such as

hiring contract teachers) to overcome government failures, even if these efforts were shown in other settings to yield superior results in terms of cost effectiveness and student learning compared with civil servant teachers. Once again, the unanswered question relates to the role of civil society not as direct providers or managers of services (such as the NGO in this Kenya case) but as agents that can help change government incentives.

Compact Interventions: Country- or Sector-wide Information and Accountability Initiatives

Many civil society initiatives seek to bring about greater transparency in government budgets and programs. The assumption is that when civil society brings more information to light, governments will be pressured to address their failures. Citizen action and donor pressure on governments have contributed to the adoption of legislation for citizens' "Right to Information" and various initiatives to facilitate citizens' ability to monitor public budgets and the allocation of public resources, such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and the Open Budget Index.

Much of the evidence on how these initiatives work and their impact is qualitative and focuses on intermediate outcomes, such as whether citizens became more informed and engaged in budget processes (McGee and Gaventa 2010, and Gaventa and Barrett 2010, provide reviews). Some quantitative studies reviewed by Carlitz (2010) provide mostly cross-country correlations of indicators of greater budget transparency with indicators of governance, corruption, socioeconomic and human development, and even political participation. However, correlations say nothing about causation; it is not possible to draw conclusions about whether specific budget transparency initiatives lead to better outcomes or whether other underlying changes in government accountability to citizens drive the outcomes.

A small number of studies provide more rigorous results, highlighting the importance of understanding mechanisms of impact. Keefer and Khemani (2011a, b) examine the role of community radio, a medium that is particularly suited to conveying information to poor citizens in Africa. They find that in Benin, greater access to community radio is *not* associated with the ability of citizens to extract greater benefits from their government. Villages with greater access to information through community radio did not receive more or better inputs for their public schools, nor did they receive more bed nets to protect their populations from malaria. Instead, households were persuaded by the public interest programming on the radio to increase their private investments in the education of their children and the health of their family. Although this is a useful role for mass media to play in development, it is not evidence that this mechanism will address government failures.

The finding in Benin contrasts with evidence from more mature democracies (the United States and India) of greater government responsiveness to more informed

citizens (Stromberg 2004; Besley and Burgess 2002). It may be that the information provided by community radio in Benin was not politically salient or that the ways in which issues were “framed” mattered (Prat and Strömberg 2011). Inasmuch as politics in Benin is characterized by clientelist provision of narrowly targeted benefits at the expense of broad public services (Wantchekon 2003), community radio broadcasts may not frame these service delivery issues in terms of government accountability, and citizens may not act upon information to demand greater government accountability (relying instead on private actions).

The Benin findings also contrast with an intervention in Uganda in which media were used more purposefully by higher-tier authorities. In this case, PETS measured discrepancies between budget allocations to schools and the amounts that actually reached the schools (Reinikka and Svensson 2004). After finding large-scale diversion of budgeted funds away from schools, the Ministry of Education began publishing information about school entitlements. This information campaign has been credited with reducing the “leakage” of funds (Reinikka and Svensson 2005). However, the lesson for the role of civil society in this case is unclear—did information provision succeed because it was led by the Ministry and served as a signal to district bureaucrats that any leakage would be punished?

Following the celebrated example of Uganda, higher-tier governments and external donors have supported a proliferation of PETS activities. They have sought to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to undertake surveys to uncover and publicize local leakage and thereby to stem it. Qualitative evaluations of these efforts suggest that they can be frequently successful in getting funds to reach the intended destinations, although to a lesser degree than the estimates in Uganda (McGee and Gaventa 2010). More rigorous impact evaluations are needed, especially to address the recurring questions in this paper: Is civil society more effective than strengthened institutions within the state? What role can civil society play in strengthening state institutions?

Other explanations of the Uganda experience suggest that it was driven by larger changes in political incentives; there was a push from higher-level government leaders to enforce the implementation of their school budget allocations (Hubbard 2007). In particular, free and universal primary education was a prominent theme in President Museveni’s 1996 election campaign (Uganda is considered a semiauthoritarian regime by Polity IV—see fig. 2 above). This explanation suggests the importance of the role of citizens or civil society as voters and the demands that they make of their political representatives.

African cross-country evidence shows that increasing political competition is associated with the abolition of school fees and greater access to education but is not necessarily associated with improvements in education quality (Harding and Stasavage 2011). A puzzle that remains unaddressed in PETS-type interventions is why other information about the wastage in public spending, such as large-scale

teacher absenteeism, does not lead to public action. The school grants covered by the PETS in Uganda are a much smaller proportion of government education spending than teacher salaries (Hubbard 2007). One reason may be the political constraints to improving teacher performance in the public sector. A body of evidence across states of India (reviewed in Khemani 2010), where more data are available, is consistent with the use of teacher hiring at election times to win support through patronage rather than by improving the quality of education. Can civil society interventions undercut such patronage politics and mobilize citizens to more effectively demand better quality education?

Interventions on the “Politics” Arm: Improving Political Accountability for Broad Public Goods

In the first round of the 2006 Presidential elections in Benin, a civil society group organized town hall meetings with political candidates to discuss specific policy proposals informed by empirical evidence. Where such town halls were held, voter turnout was higher and support for clientelist political platforms was lower (Wantchekon 2009). A campaign by a civil society organization in India to persuade voters not to vote on the basis of candidates’ caste identity was effective in increasing voter turnout and reducing the votes of caste-preferred candidates with criminal records (Banerjee et al. 2010a). Another civil society campaign in India to provide information on politicians’ performance in delivering benefits to their constituents led to poorly performing incumbents being voted out of office (Banerjee et al. 2010b). However, a similar experiment in Uganda with the African Leadership Initiative that provided information about the legislative activities of Members of Parliament and their efforts at spending their constituency development funds had little or no impact on election outcomes (Humphreys and Weinstein 2010).

In São Tomé and Príncipe and Mozambique, voter education campaigns were undertaken to persuade voters not to “sell” their vote. Previous work in São Tomé and Príncipe had documented that vote-buying practices increased dramatically in the late 1990s after the discovery of oil (Vicente 2010). As discussed in section 2, such practices enabled political leaders to extract large rents from public resources while providing low quality and a low quantity of public services. In Nigeria, community campaigns were undertaken by civil society groups to encourage voters to oppose political intimidation or violence (Collier and Vicente 2010).

These are important examples of the engagement of civil society in strengthening politics, but this body of work is not designed to examine the ultimate impact on policies and development outcomes. The work focuses on measuring the impact on specific political outcomes, such as voter turnout and the use of different electoral strategies by incumbents and challengers. It is therefore not immediately clear

whether even significant electoral effects of voter education campaigns effectively translate into different or better policy choices. For example, by reducing the efficacy of vote-buying tactics employed by political challengers, the campaigns may primarily strengthen the hands of incumbent politicians, protecting them from the risks of losing office and enabling them to continue rent-extraction policies. An example from the Philippines suggests that addressing the proximate symptoms of clientelist political competition may not be effective. There, voter education campaigns to reduce vote-buying practices had the unintended effect of offending target groups—the poor—who were convinced of the legitimacy of receiving benefits from politicians in exchange for their vote. These campaigns may also have intensified “class divides” between the poor and the middle or upper classes who were the sponsors of the campaigns (Schaffer 2005).

Interventions Addressing All Three Accountability Relationships

Although we have attempted to assign specific types of interventions to one or the other of the three arms of accountability in figure 1, many interventions aim to address all three. An example is the institution of “participatory budgeting” pioneered in the 1990s in Porto Alegre, Brazil, which seeks to mobilize civil society to participate actively in the formulation and implementation of municipal budgets. Together with the citizen report cards of Bangalore, participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre has served as an inspiration for the trend toward civil society engagement.

Participatory budgeting has been credited in qualitative and descriptive analysis with substantial improvements in local governance and responsiveness to the needs of the poor, including significant changes in budget allocations. There is, however, a particular problem in identifying causation. The introduction of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre went hand in hand with the election of a particular political party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* or Workers Party) that catered to a particular constituency of citizen activists (and therefore adopted a particular mode of participatory institutions to implement its compact) and that had strong political incentives to serve the poor.

Baiocchi et al. (2011) use a regression discontinuity empirical design to address the possible conflation of the political effects of voter support for the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* with the use of the institution of participatory budgeting. They compare outcomes across municipalities where the party won or lost the elections by a narrow margin. Therefore, although these municipalities are similar in voter support for the party, participatory budgeting was adopted by the municipality in only one set, where the party won narrowly. They report significant differences in the process of citizen engagement with the local government, but they do not examine the impact on outcomes of service delivery or poverty reduction.

In a comparative study of three cities in Latin America—Porto Alegre, Montevideo, and Caracas—Goldfrank (2011) reports that Porto Alegre experienced the largest and most significant rise in civic engagement, Caracas experienced neither substantial citizen participation nor improved governance, and Montevideo fell somewhere in between. Cornwall et al. (2007) argue that a combination of innovative institutional design and the presence of effective preconditions for participatory governance explain why some participatory experiments in Brazil have been more successful than others in enhancing citizen engagement.

There is no rigorous evidence on whether or how “participatory budgeting” might be exported to contexts outside Brazil or Latin America, especially those as different as Africa, and whether this would reduce government failures. Combined with the lack of evidence on whether Bangalore-style Citizen Report Cards can be effective in reducing government failures in Africa, this review shows that any future support to civil society in Africa needs to be based on a systematic process of experimentation, impact evaluation, and learning. There are too many unanswered questions for policy to proceed as though “good practice” is already known. The potential for civil society action should be tapped through a program of rigorous, data-based impact evaluation rather than simply greater advocacy for supporting civil society or media independence and transparency. This analysis indicates that this evaluation would need to involve both an analysis of causal effects on development outcomes and a careful analysis of the mechanisms of impact, particularly how these mechanisms interact with the local political and social context.

Donor-driven creation or funding of local groups may change the nature of who participates most actively in these groups and for what purpose. Arcand and Fafchamps (2012) find that local organizations in two West African rural areas tend to be biased toward relatively privileged individuals—people with more ties to village authorities in Burkina Faso and those with greater landholdings in Senegal. Donor-supported community-based organizations were less elitist in some dimensions, at least in Senegal, but they still had elite biases. In a program in rural Kenya that provided leadership training and agricultural inputs to small self-help organizations with mainly women members, Gugerty and Kremer (2008) find that membership in the groups selected for the program changed as the program was rolled out, with greater representation of the more educated and those more likely to have formal-sector income. Group membership and leadership moved into the hands of younger and better educated women. At the same time, perhaps surprisingly, the program showed unimpressive results in terms of productivity gains.

In our review, we found no systematic or rigorous evidence on the organization and incentives of national civil society organizations. This is an obvious lacuna given recent policy directions for donor support to such organizations.

Emerging Efforts that Need Evaluation

There are some important recent examples of civil society interventions that may have an impact by tapping the potential from greater political contestation and citizen participation. These must be evaluated to assess whether and how they might overcome government failures. One such effort, called Uwezo,¹⁶ measures education service delivery and learning outcomes on a large scale, enabling performance measures to be computed at disaggregated jurisdictional levels, such as districts. Such disaggregated measurement might enable the attribution of performance in delivering education services to specific government agents and politicians, thereby strengthening political incentives.

The Uwezo effort was partly inspired by a similar effort in India, called the Annual Status of Education Report, which was run by the civil society organization Pratham.¹⁷ Although media stories suggest that such initiatives contribute to strengthening political accountability for education outcomes, there is no evidence of how they change politically motivated distortions in education allocations. In the case of India, eight years of Annual Status of Education Reports have played an important role in raising public awareness of education quality, but there has been no overall increase in test scores for rural children in the period to 2011 (*ASER 2012*). There remains substantial untapped potential for examining whether such disaggregated information can generate sufficient political pressure to improve performance, such as through yardstick competition across jurisdictions (*Khemani 2007*).

The conventional wisdom on the drivers of the recent Arab Spring indicates that collective citizen action at such a scale was facilitated by social media and ICT. Indeed, efforts to develop platforms for “crowd-sourced” information have their roots in Africa (specifically, the platform of Ushahidi¹⁸), with much enthusiasm that these technological advances can have far-reaching accountability effects by spurring collective action among citizens. Again, however, there is little rigorous research on whether or how ICT enables greater public accountability. Most of the work on accountability and transparency from ICT remains at the level of assuming that greater use of and investment in such technology is both necessary and sufficient. Little or no work has investigated what types of accountability messages or interventions delivered through ICT achieve or fail to achieve development effectiveness. There is substantial scope for pursuing such a research program, which may have especially large returns in terms of reaching the pivotal “youth” group.

Conclusion: Implications for External Donor Support to Civil Society

This paper has evaluated whether civil society engagement in Africa can overcome government failures in facilitating growth and development. The evidence from

within and outside Africa suggests that there is little in the way of “best” or “good” practices. At the same time, there is growing political contestation and citizen participation in Africa, suggesting substantial scope and potential for civil society action, which could be explored through a program of rigorous learning by doing. That the evidence gathered within Africa is sometimes at odds with that from outside the continent reinforces the point that interventions should be structured so that there is maximal learning and the possibility of mid-course corrections.

Should external donors support civil society to address accountability problems in African states? The analysis of this paper indicates that such a policy, despite significant potential, is fraught with both difficulties and uncertainties—difficulties because of the intrinsic problem of an external actor seeking to change a sociopolitical system and uncertainties because of the weak information on what does and does not work. There is a *prima facie* case for greater action, but it is important that this be both organic (building on local forces of change in political and civil society institutions) and experimental (structured for careful monitoring and assessment of how interventions work in practice in relation to their political and social context).

Since the mid-1990s, the aid community has emphasized accountability, with activities supporting “governance” and community-driven development as well as a longer tradition of support to institutional development. The history with respect to actual results is cautionary. For example, an evaluation of public sector reforms by the World Bank’s independent evaluation group suggests mixed results at best (World Bank 2008). Although there have been some highly celebrated community-driven development programs (e.g., the self-help group movement in India), actual evidence of major change is weak, as indicated in the review of evidence above and other more extensive reviews (Mansuri and Rao 2013). In this concluding section, we extend our hypothesis that ignoring the underlying political economy drivers of accountability may have been a major factor in cases with results that were less than satisfactory to the case of aid. This is speculative, but we believe it is important for its potentially powerful implications for external aid strategies.

Aid that supports accountability improvements can get lost within a clientelistic or predatory state system, whether the aid attempts to improve public administration against the grain of underlying incentives and organizational culture or supports small local islands of client power. Furthermore, aid can exacerbate existing distortions within the system, especially when the aid is large in scale (as it is in many African countries). For instance, aid for civil society can become a basis for new breeds of rent-seeking NGOs, complete with mutually agreeable new narratives, just as African counterparts in the 1980s and 1990s learned the language of structural adjustment even while the aid was going into a highly clientelistic system.

The analysis of this paper therefore presents a difficult challenge: it develops the case for systemic change while suggesting the difficulty of external aid initiatives in doing this successfully (or at least not making things worse). This challenge is

further highlighted by the lack of clear evidence on what works. To resolve this challenge, we suggest some principles that external donors can apply to ensure that their interventions to support civil society and strengthen accountability will lead to improvements in development outcomes.

In general, aid should not be focused on “money.” This may be counterproductive, including creating incentives for rent-seeking NGOs that become adept at playing the latest game in the aid business. Rather, external partners can provide technical assistance in designing locally grown interventions, and they can play a role in financing information gathering by local NGOs (e.g., Pratham and Annual Status of Education Reports).

The most valuable area for external donors is likely to be support for a domestic process of innovation and learning through experimentation. Such a learning process can be costly—for state actors (who often have incentives to work within existing procedures and practices), for civil society actors, and for researchers. An important question concerns what techniques to use. Certainly, carefully structured experimentation is desirable; randomized control trials are one particularly powerful instrument for those interventions that are amenable to a design around treatment and control. However, the analysis suggests that it is also important to link these trials to analysis of the political and social context—the history of local political behavior, the nature of social networks and group mobilization, and so on.¹⁹ Some interventions will not be amenable to experimental methods, such as generalized legal changes in school accountability and in the responsibilities of mining investors to communities. Nevertheless, careful economic, social, and political analysis of change in different contexts can be undertaken.

Can aid ever lead to transformational changes in accountability relations? It almost certainly cannot, if designs are hatched and brought in from outside. However, aid can potentially provide a supporting role if it is aligned with the flow of internal initiatives, is consistent with domestic political strategy, and supports greater accountability at the margins of major projects. This paper has made the case that overcoming government failure requires addressing the underlying political incentives in the system. An aspiration to strengthen civil society to affect those political incentives is admirable. However, for donors, this aspiration needs to be blended with humility regarding the limits and unintended consequences of external action and a central focus on helping domestic actors learn by doing.

Notes

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1. **Disclaimer:** The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent.

2. It is important to note that these are not problems that can be solved by rolling back the state. For a wide range of goods and policies, the state has an important role to play in facilitating markets, growth, poverty reduction, and human development. The concern here is how to make the state more accountable for better development policies in domains in which state action is desirable.

3. Many political scientists of Africa use the term “neo-patrimonial” to describe this particular mix.

4. See *Polity IV (2011)* for a description of the project and the data used here.

5. Eritrea and Somalia are not included in the figure because data were not available for the earlier year.

6. Afrobarometer data and research papers can be found at http://www.afrobarometer.org/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=39.

7. This was quite visible during field visits to Tanzanian villages by one of the authors (Khemani), with posters listing village groups and their membership plastered over the walls of the village government office.

8. A review of civil society theories is outside the scope of this short paper. *Habermas (1984)* is a seminal contribution; *Baiocchi et al. (2011)* Chapter 1, provides a useful interpretive survey.

9. This section makes use of selected studies drawn from more comprehensive reviews as well as an academic literature review, undertaken specifically for this paper by Avnish Gungadurdoss of the Harvard Kennedy School, that focused on evidence generated through randomized control trials and other econometric methods for the rigorous identification of impact. This literature review is appended to the working paper available at http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/2011/07/25/000158349_20110725162228/Rendered/PDF/WPS5733.pdf.

10. While this and some of the other examples in the paper refer to contexts outside Africa, they are nevertheless relevant to our lessons and recommendations about intervention design and impact evaluation in Africa. Care should be taken, however, in expecting any one study to have the same impact in another context, be it within or across continents.

11. The authors use a measure of ethnolinguistic fractionalization and a household asset-based proxy for incomes and compare impacts for the 25th and 75th percentile of these measures.

12. We do not review the extensive literature on “community driven development” for this reason: most of the evidence consists of evaluating the impact of state devolution to local institutions created by the state, with local politicians and state-appointed bureaucrats at the helm (as in the case of local governments).

13. Despite this, other work, including work from the same author (*Altschuler and Corrales 2012*), suggests that parents who participated on school committees in Honduras and Guatemala developed skills to participate in other group activities and to join other civic organizations. Such spill-over effects suggest that participatory interventions may have impacts outside the immediate domain of a project.

14. Even when governments (perhaps driven by donor or NGO pressure) elect to undertake projects that engage civil society, they may continue to let their bureaucrats and providers get away with high salaries and low effort in servicing citizens. This situation relates to a general concern with community participation initiatives, as expressed in *Banerjee and Duflo (2008)*, that the responsibility for managing projects and services is being placed on largely poor communities and can be viewed as a

tax on their time and efforts, especially in comparison with other ways of making government agents work harder and better for the poor.

15. The Olken study was conducted within areas that had already experienced substantial efforts to improve local government and community involvement under the Kecamatan Development Program. There is also evidence from Brazil of the impact of state-led audit reforms in reducing local corruption (Ferraz and Finan 2008). However, there is no clear description available of the role of civil society for this reform.

16. <http://www.uwezo.net/>.

17. <http://www.pratham.org/M-20-3-ASER.aspx>.

18. <http://www.usahidi.com/>.

19. Joshi and Houtzager (2012) make a similar methodological point in favor of analysis on local political processes, although we have argued that such an analysis can be linked to experimentation with interventions to identify specific features of what works, under what conditions, in effecting change.

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