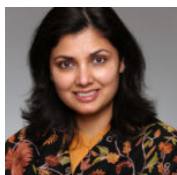
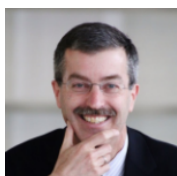


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Published on: 19 Jan 2015

Countries: International

Research themes: Political Economy,
State

Transparency: Who does it hold accountable?

Transparency and accountability of government are considered core institutions for political and economic development. Yet, an issue that often gets obscured is whether by increasing information provision, and thus further enabling private citizens' to help themselves, greater transparency actually relieves government officials of certain responsibilities

In our (justifiable) enthusiasm for transparency, an issue that is too often obscured is whether information provision leads to increases in private citizens' contributions to help themselves, and relieves government officials of their responsibilities. If so, we may not be quite there (yet) in finding the tools to improve government accountability.

Take the case of community radio, a classic tool for information sharing for accountability in Africa. It is supposed to organise communities and literally give voice to the opinions and needs of the marginalised. It also carries public interest messages, communicating the importance of health, education, and democratic values. New data from Benin, a country with a vibrant community radio network, indeed show that people in poorer and far-flung regions are able to access news and information, and share views, because of this medium.

Better informed citizens

But these data yield some surprising results. In villages with greater access to community radio, where people are more informed about the value of services, they are more likely to invest their own, private resources in education and health. More informed parents contribute tuition for their children's education and buy textbooks, even though policy changes have formally removed tuition payments from primary schools. More informed households are more likely to purchase bed nets from government officials, paying for this public health good to combat malaria, even though nets are supposed to be distributed free. That is, community radio indeed has an important impact — it informs citizens about the value of health and education, and effects beneficial changes in their behaviour, making them more accountable to themselves for taking appropriate actions towards development. Indeed, because of this, a final development outcome — child literacy rates — is higher in villages with greater access to community radio.

The transparency and accountability of government

However, community radio does not enable citizens to receive

greater benefits from public spending — more informed citizens do not receive more government inputs for the village public school, and they do not receive more free bed nets from the country's malaria eradication program. This is particularly surprising because we collected our data at a time following large increases in public education spending and in the distribution of free bed nets, so that if radio influenced people's ability to demand better public services, there would be scope to capture its impact on availability of government-provided inputs or benefits. Instead, radio programming persuades households to invest more private resources into the education of their children and the health of their families.

In the case of household payments for bed nets that are supposed to be free, the data are not sufficient to examine whether local officials retain the payments as rents, or to finance other improvements in local health services. Other research has interpreted evidence that local officials do not follow centrally-set rules as a sign of "local capture". These results from Benin are surprising since they point to greater divergence from centrally-set rules (of free bed net distribution by government providers in Benin), or greater "local capture" for those who want to interpret it thus, precisely in locales where citizens are better informed.

Citizens fending for themselves

An older example from another African country, of citizens fending for themselves in procuring health and education, and letting governments off the hook, seems topical now. In Nigeria, when the local government failed to pay the salaries of community-based health workers, health service provision did not decline. Instead, through the private effort of health workers and with the support of the community, health services were provided outside of the public health facility.

These results from Africa are also similar to what we learn from other contexts about how citizens bypass government systems to help themselves. In India, a citizen report card initiative that revealed significant information about the dismal state of public education in the village had no impact on community monitoring and the performance of village public schools; yet surprisingly, it had a large impact on community activity outside the public school system. Village youth volunteered to hold private remedial classes, parents enrolled their children to class capacity, and the children made dramatic improvements in learning.

Enlightened self-interest

Such findings of private citizen participation are, of course, inspiring, but they leave open a billion-dollar question: how do we make public resources less wasteful and more effective in delivering development? How can public officials be motivated to work harder and better for citizens? Even rigorous impact evaluations often don't provide adequate answers to this question because the interventions are typically designed to generate local collective action that is supposed to involve significant private contributions from citizens.

However, in a climate of nonular protests and citizen

However, in a climate of popular protest and citizen disaffection, it would seem to be in the enlightened self-interest of government leaders to make the public system work better for citizens. How to do that requires confronting the political economy of governance problems, rather than passing the buck to citizens.