Measuring the impact of citizen engagement

Project led by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) – India

Abstract

The influence of citizen engagement and action on governance and pro-poor development outcomes has become a major area for research in recent years. In order to add to this discourse, and to provide an understanding of the strategies for citizen engagement and assessment of their impact on developmental outcomes, CPR joined the Collaboration for Research on Democracy (CORD) Network and hosted two workshops. The first workshop, held in Delhi in December 2012, focused on editing a book on mediation and unruly politics. The second, held in Cape Town in May 2014, sought first to develop greater clarity around CORD's governing structure and mission, and secondly to map democratic practices and examine the role of social media in transforming citizen-state relationships and acting as a driver of activism. Toward these ends, the partners developed various methodological tools, including an interactive platform and digital storytelling. A number of working papers, journal articles, and opinion pieces were also produced.

COLLABORATING INSTITUTIONS

Through this project, CPR solidified its partnership with CORD, a network of global researchers and practitioners that collaborate around themes of citizenship and democracy.

WHAT THEY DID AND WHY

TTI Matching Funds were used to finance two of CORD's major workshops. The first was hosted by CPR in Delhi in December 2012, and the second was held in Cape Town in May 2014.

The first workshop, held in Delhi in December 2012, focused on editing a book on mediation and unruly politics. The main focus of the May 2014 workshop in Cape Town was to map democratic practices and examine the role of social media in transforming citizen-state relationships, and to develop greater clarity around CORD's governing structure and mission, all the while further integrating CPR and other TTI-funded think tanks into new and existing activities of the network's working groups.

Current CORD working groups include:

1. Knowledge, Technology and Democracy
2. Activists, Institutions and Change
3. Economic and Political Citizenship
4. Marginalization and Social Service Provision
5. Urban Peace Building

The newly solidified mission of the network is "to contribute to inclusive citizenship and democratic governance through collaborative, applied research."

As a network studying themes of democracy and citizenship around the world, CORD values modes of collaboration that are horizontal and participatory in their approach, and which seek to include the voices of all members present. With this in mind, some of the ways of working throughout the workshops included:

- "Low-tech" wikis, to co-design CORD's mission statement and values as a network
- Online etherpad applications during working group discussions, so that all members could work collectively to contribute to the same online document.
- The interactive sharing of research methods and best practices through powerpoint and video presentations, followed by a question and answer period for the larger group
- Small and large group discussions on what it means to be a "Citizen" of CORD, and how this should impact its activities and methods of working
- Informal networking events with local organizations to strengthen CORD's international identity and reach

In terms of planned research methodologies, many interesting ideas emerged from each of the working groups. For instance, the "Activists, Institutions and Change" group aims to use a "Stories of Hope" methodology, which would seek to focus on positive outcomes of activists working within institutional settings. Similarly, the "Knowledge, Technology and Democracy" group aims to create a "Living Literature

Landscape" that would map existing open access literature to create a visual overview on the themes of Openness, Big Data and Networked Social Movements.

RESULTS

Overall, participants provided very positive feedback about the structure, content and outcomes of the workshops. During the weeks and months prior to the events, there was some degree of apprehension about how new TTI partners would feel about joining a network in which existing members already have a strong history of working together. Understanding this potential barrier, the CORD steering committee designed the agenda and activities in such a way that TTI partners would feel as though they had an equal voice in designing the upcoming actions plans and governance structures for the network. For instance, the construction of CORD's mission statement and ways of working was facilitated to be as participatory as possible. Overall, CPR and other TTI partners enjoyed their experience as part of the network, and all have expressed an interest in continuing to participate in upcoming meetings and working-group activities.

Participants also relayed that they received considerable value through the sharing of various research methods and engagement with CORD's new platform as a tool to work together across distances. Both of these aspects are something that CORD hopes to continue to develop over the coming year.

NEXT STEPS

The horizontal approach to communication, research and collaboration is likely the most defining characteristic of CORD, as a network. Since CORD works with members from around the world with various skill-sets, priorities and ways of working, it recognizes how important it is to use methods for collaboration that seek to bring out individual strengths. Thus, they have found that participatory methods for engagement and collaboration are often the most effective tools to use within this context and to ensure the network remains sustainable in the long-term. Indeed – methods and activities such as the "low-tech wikis," the sharing of individual research methods and the use of etherpad applications for writing documents collectively are all important for ensuring that everyone feels that his or her voice is heard and valued and remain committed to participating in the network's activities.

The extent to which these methods can be scaled up, however, may be limited, as full participation tends to require more time than other more top-down approaches. Thus, CORD's has determined that smaller workshops with 20 to 30 participants are ideal for this kind of collaboration.