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Title: Encouraging Participation

Despite a decades-long worldwide commitment, public service systems that support education, health, and other basic human capabilities frequently fail to realize their promise. This paper examines an increasingly popular approach to improving underperforming public services, in which NGOs offer information about deficiencies in those services to citizens and encourage them to participate in alleviating those deficiencies. The evidence for this approach is mixed: several studies suggest that these programs can catalyze participants’ latent potential to improve their public services; others that they are insufficient, inappropriate, or even reinforce the problems they were designed to fix. We explore these possibilities by examining the experiences of participants in a large-scale experimental program in 200 communities across multiple regions of Tanzania and Indonesia—two widely contexts—that was designed to encourage them to improve maternal and newborn health care. Interviews and systematic observations before, during, and immediately after the program suggest in a majority of communities, participants engaged in sustained deliberations about problems with their care and in civic activities to alleviate those deficiencies, were optimistic that they could sustain their progress, and were significantly more confident after the program in their capacities to improve their communities, even after controlling for place, life experiences of participants, and interpersonal differences in interpreting civic efficacy. But interviews and meeting observations also suggest that this was not the experience of participants in every community: in a large minority, participants were either largely disengaged from the program or seemed in meeting discussions and individual interviews to be pessimistic that their efforts would improve their community’s maternal and newborn health. Engagement, optimism, and perceptions of civic efficacy do not necessarily reflect progress, nor disengagement, pessimism, and perceptions of inefficacy lack of progress; parallel analyses explore the program’s associations with objective measures of maternal and newborn health and health care as well as other intended and unintended impacts. Yet based on their perceptions and responses to the program, a majority of participants appear to have engaged substantially with the program and to have found their participation helpful and empowering.