



Arezza | www.arezza.net | skype: arezza | twitter: @arezza | info@arezza.net

Going Local: Lessons from the World Bank

by [Adrienne Valdez](#) in [The Development Newswire](#)

Within the development community, engaging local civil society actors in designing and implementing projects is seen as one way to ensure maximum benefit and results. But does this method always produce the desired results?

In a new [report](#), [World Bank](#) economists analyzed nearly 500 studies on participatory development and decentralization to find out what works and what doesn't. The authors, Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, found that while tapping local civic groups in projects related to health and education has produced positive results, "the causal link between participation and service delivery outcomes is often vague." The authors did note that community engagement in these sectors work best when combined with other factors, such as working with trained health professionals.

But the report finds community participation has very little impact on poverty reduction and capacity building programs. Further, the design of participatory programs often attracts wealthier members of the community, "making exclusion more likely." Building cohesive and resilient organizations have been a challenge as well.

The authors note three main lessons from the studies they reviewed:

1. Community participation works best when the state is responsive to the demands of local civic groups.
2. Projects need to be sensitive to local and national contexts, which vary widely and often have unpredictable effects on outcomes.
3. Clear, measurable results within a specific timeframe aren't always possible.

But with donors, including the World Bank, increasingly pouring more funds into participatory development, the authors offer a few recommendations to increase the impact of such projects.

1. Allow for flexibility in project structures.
2. Include political, social and economic analyses when designing projects and evaluating their impact.
3. Implement cost-effective monitoring tools.
4. Create a clear system for feedback and monitoring.
5. Cultivate an environment where participants can give honest feedback without being subjected and where failure is tolerated. Such an environment can foster innovation and evidence-based policy decisions.

Over the past 10 years, the World Bank invested \$85 billion in local participatory projects. Other donors have invested as much, or even more.

“Genuine efforts at inducing civic engagement require a sustained long-term commitment and a clear understanding of the social and political forces at all levels of society,” Mansuri, who is the lead economist at the bank’s poverty reduction and equity group, said in a [press release](#).

“Such efforts face multiple challenges, such as lack of coordination, inequality, lack of transparency, corruption, free-riding, and low capacity,” noted Rao, lead economist at the bank’s development research group. “Participation works best as a sandwich with bottom-up participation supported by top-down supervision.”

[Adrienne Valdez](#) is a staff writer for Devex, covering breaking international development news for the Development Newswire. Before joining Devex, Adrienne worked as a news correspondent for a public-sector modernization publication.