

How does feedback from citizens improve public service delivery?

project facts

Key words

Citizen engagement, civic tech, feedback, public service delivery

Behavioral themes

Hawthorne effect, self-efficacy, locus of control

Research design

Qualitative study with open-ended in-depth interviews and observational checklist

Scope

- 58 45-minute interviews with three groups of research respondents. Citizens who use public health and justice: courts, judiciary and police stations. Bureaucrats who manage public facilities. Government/NGOs/development partners that are actively involved in citizen empowerment initiatives.
- Study period: 11/2022-9/2023

Location

Central Uganda: Entebbe, Wakiso and Kampala
Eastern Uganda: Jina
Northern Uganda: Gulu
Western Uganda: Mbarara

Partner

SEMA

Ethics approval

Internal evaluation of the partner's model

The research sought to understand if civic tech-supported feedback can improve the quality of public service delivery long term.

Citizen feedback delivered via civic technology (via a physical push button feedback device) improves citizens' perception of behavior of public servants in the short term. However, there is limited evidence that the actual quality of service delivery improves.

Background: Increasing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of feedback systems on service delivery

Improving public service delivery is a major focus of global development. A common Theory of Change is that citizens' feedback is important both as part of citizen participation as well as in pushing for better quality of services. Yet, there is very little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of feedback systems for actually improving service delivery, or what exactly would make feedback effective.

Conducting the research

The study used qualitative interviews and observation to interrogate whether behavior of service deliverers changes when there is citizen engagement. Interviews were analyzed to find what was valuable to citizens in terms of service delivery improvement, what improvements had actually been made to public service delivery as a result of feedback mechanisms, and what feedback mechanisms were existent and accessible to citizens. Participants were assured anonymity of their identity.

Key Research Insights

- » The Hawthorne effect—which means that people change their behavior when observed—is real also for bureaucrats: bureaucrats change their behavior short-term when they know they are being watched. Yet this does not seem to change their values or the underlying structures of their long-term approach to service delivery.
- » However, bureaucrats at lower levels could be empowered through feedback and had enough self-efficacy and locus of control to make small changes.
- » Participation needs to be meaningful: it cannot be box-ticked by having a few prominent citizens participate very visibly, rather than making it accessible for everyone.
- » Citizens put value on knowing what happens to their feedback, so a good feedback mechanism needs to be a two-way street.
- » Understanding cause and effect of long-term change is challenging as it is difficult to trace how feedback given actually leads to change. In some instances people could connect changes in quality of delivery directly to feedback given. This was more difficult with long-term changes on bigger issues such as corruption (for example when needing to pay to receive medication).

Implications

For program implementers:

- Understanding the level of empirical evidence that underpins a Theory of Change makes the difference between a hypothetical mechanism and designing a program according to known causal pathways.

- What constitutes meaningful participation for different groups of citizens requires careful consideration.
- Relaying information back to citizens on what happened to their feedback is important for citizens.

For funders: Participation is not a valuable good in itself: support for participation requires understanding what makes participation meaningful.

For researchers: Seeking ways to measure the connection between feedback and long-term change requires longitudinal, multi-method research.

Recommendations for future research

Qualitative and quantitative research is needed to answer the question of what makes participation meaningful. Effectiveness of feedback mechanisms will require testing in a randomized controlled trial to test how different types of feedback mechanisms create different types of outcomes in perception and change in quality of public service delivery.

Further reading

Bachmann, R., Gillespie, N., & Priem, R. (2015, September). Repairing Trust in Organizations and Institutions: Toward a Conceptual Framework. *Organization Studies*, 36 (9), 1123–1142. Retrieved 2024-03-14, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840615599334> (Publisher: SAGE Publications Ltd) doi: 10.1177/0170840615599334

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Karlan, D., Mobius, M., Rosenblat, T., & Szeidl, A. (2009, August). Trust and Social Collateral*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124 (3), 1307–1361. Retrieved 2024-03-14, from <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2009.124.3.1307> doi: 10.1162/qjec.2009.124.3.1307

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To cite:

Busara. 2024. *How does feedback from citizens improve public service delivery?* (The *aha!* moment No. 4). Kampala: Busara. DOI: doi.org/10.62372/CFYP3191

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