

Community-driven development, governance, and collective action

Overview of the evidence

Jessica Leight, Anne Angsten Clark, and Katherine Reynolds

Highlights

- Community-driven development (CDD) generally increases local participation in governance, including by community members who are often underrepresented (particularly women).
- CDD can generate positive effects including increased trust, shared purpose, and collective action, though the design of CDD and the program context shape these effects.
- Institutions created by CDD can adapt to changing circumstances and persist over time, even in environments affected by institutional fragility, active conflict, and violence.

Introduction

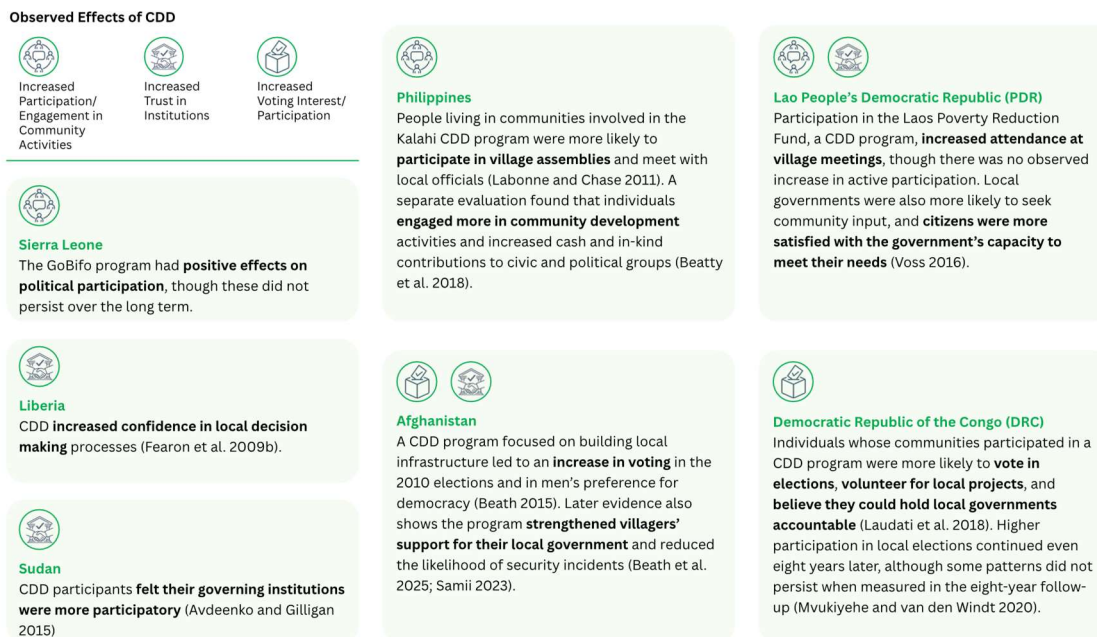
As foreign aid declines, which interventions should we prioritize? Advocates of community-driven development (CDD) have long argued that we should ask this question of the communities and people whom aid is meant to serve.

CDD provides village-level grants and facilitation that support communities in choosing and implementing the projects they consider local priorities, including basic health and education services, local infrastructure, income-generating activities, or other community priorities. In recent years, a growing body of evidence has begun to document and assess the effects of this approach. This brief and a companion brief¹ synthesize findings from a range of rigorous evaluations to describe what we know about the multidimensional impacts of CDD in low- and middle-income contexts and highlight gaps that should be addressed in future research. Here, we focus on the effects of CDD on governance and collective action.

CDD can increase participation, engagement, and trust in local governance outcomes—both in the short and medium term

The CDD approach empowers communities to decide how to allocate development resources in their area, decide on the activities for which those resources will be used, and play a key role in managing funds. As part of this process, community members often develop skills and experience in engaging more with local political institutions. There is strong cross-sectoral evidence that CDD increases local participation in key forms of governance, such as voting in an election, attending a village meeting, or interacting with a local public official, though the observed outcomes and the measured effects vary across contexts. Figure 1 summarizes the evidence across contexts.

Figure 1: Cross-country evidence



Source: Various, cited in figure.

¹ See the first brief: "[Community-driven development, infrastructure, and public services: Overview of the evidence.](#)"

CDD strengthens the civic participation of women and other marginalized groups

CDD projects usually focus on including marginalized groups, such as women, youth, and ethnic and religious minorities, in decision-making, which helps to elevate the voice and influence of these groups in local development processes. Evidence of these effects is relatively limited, but some projects clearly show that CDD effectively enhances women's participation in local institutions.

In Lao PDR, a CDD program not only increased participation in village meetings in general but also increased participation by poor women. In the extremely challenging context of Afghanistan, CDD positively affected women's participation: voting increased among both women and men, and the likelihood of having a village women's council increased from 5 percent to about 50 percent (Beath 2013). In the DRC, the Tuungane CDD program led to an increase in the proportion of women on village committees and in the likelihood of a local women's association existing (Laudati et al. 2018).

CDD enhances trust and capacity for collective action

By supporting structured, context-appropriate processes that help communities make joint decisions on resource allocation, CDD can build social inclusion and institutions, and contribute to a willingness to collaborate on shared goals. However, achieving this goal is challenging, and measuring these experimental effects—and doing so consistently across very different contexts—is also not easy.

The social benefits of CDD have been demonstrated across a range of contexts. In Sierra Leone, the GoBifo project had positive, though limited effects on social inclusion and institutions in both the short term (4 years) and long term (11 years). The project had positive and marginally significant effects on three of nine dimensions measured: collective action, trust, and groups and networks (Casey 2023).

In Liberia, communities exposed to CDD programs showed more willingness to cooperate (Fearon et al. 2009a). However, this pattern was not evident in Sudan (Avdeenko and Gilligan 2015). In the Philippines, individuals living in communities involved in CDD were less likely to engage in collective action; this may be because participants view village assembly decision-making, in which they were more involved, as a substitute for collective action. CDD also strengthened trust, though effects proved somewhat inconsistent across participating communities (Labonne and Chase 2011).

Some of the variation in the effects of CDD on trust and collective action may also reflect variation in implementation (the quality of leadership and facilitation that is deployed in the collective decision-making process). Understanding more about the effects of facilitator quality on outcomes is also an important priority for future research.

CDD institutions can persist over time and adapt to crises

In development, evidence of long-run effects is often surprisingly limited. Very few RCTs are evaluated over a follow-up period of 10 years or more (Bouguen et al. 2019).

Evidence on the long-term impact of CDD programs remains limited and more research is needed, but some evidence shows that the enhanced institutions generated by CDD can persist over time and

adapt to challenging circumstances. In Sierra Leone, communities exposed to CDD interventions better managed shocks linked to the 2014 Ebola crisis (Casey 2023) than did non-CDD communities. In Afghanistan, local councils created through CDD continued to operate after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. In an extremely challenging political and security environment, the councils served as an effective mechanism for the identification of beneficiaries of a local cash transfer program launched in 2022 (Callen et al. 2025)

Taken together, the limited but credible long-run evidence suggests that while many development interventions struggle to endure, community-driven approaches may be more successful in sustaining and adapting institutions over time, even in challenging contexts. The limited evidence base also underscores the need for more systematic long-term evaluation.

Conclusion

As aid flows decline and communities, governments, and donors work to leverage scarce resources, CDD can strengthen local governance and enhance social capital, even in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Some of these beneficial impacts can persist over time and help communities adapt to new shocks, making CDD well-positioned to help drive durable development impact, despite increasingly scarce resources.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jessica Leight is a Senior Research Fellow at IFPRI in the Poverty, Gender, and Inclusion unit. Anne Angsten Clark is Chief Innovation Officer at Spark Microgrants. Katherine Reynolds is Director of Learning and Sector Building at Spark Microgrants.

REFERENCES

- Avdeenko, Alexandra, and Michael J. Gilligan. 2015. "International Interventions to Build Social Capital: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Sudan." *American Political Science Review* 109 (3): 427–449.
- Beath, Andrew, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov. 2013. "Empowering Women through Development Aid: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan." *American Political Science Review* 107 (3): 540–557.
- Beath, Andrew, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov. 2015. "The National Solidarity Programme: Assessing the Effects of Community-Driven Development in Afghanistan." World Bank Policy Research Working Paper no. 7415.
- Beath, Andrew, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov. 2025. "Can Development Programs Counter Insurgencies? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 17 (3): 80–116.
- Beatty, Amanda, Ariel BenYishay, Elizabeth King, Aniceto Orbeta, and Menno Pradhan. 2018. *Kalahi-CIDSS Impact Evaluation: Third Round Report*. Innovations for Poverty Action. <https://poverty-action.org/publication/kalahi-cidss-impact-evaluation-third-round-report>.
- Bouguen, Adrien, Yuyu Huang, Michael Kremer, and Edward Miguel. 2019. "Using RCTs to Estimate Long-Run Impacts in Development Economics." *Annual Review of Economics* 11: 523–561.
- Callen, Michael, Miguel Fajardo-Steinhäuser, Michael G. Findley, and Tarek Ghani. 2025. "Can Digital Aid Deliver During Humanitarian Crises?" *Management Science* 71 (11): 9730–9748.
- Casey, Katherine, Rachel Glennerster, Edward Miguel, and Maarten Voors. 2023. "Long-Run Effects of Aid: Forecasts and Evidence from Sierra Leone." *The Economic Journal* 133 (652): 1348–1370.
- Fearon, James D., Macartan Humphreys, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. 2009a. "Can Development Aid Contribute to Social Cohesion after Civil War? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Post-Conflict Liberia." *American Economic Review* 99 (2): 287–291.
- Fearon, James D., Macartan Humphreys, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. 2009b. *Development Assistance, Institution Building, and Social Cohesion after Civil War: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Liberia*. Center for Global Development Working Paper no. 194.
- Labonne, Julien, and Robert S. Chase. 2011. "Do Community-Driven Development Projects Enhance Social Capital? Evidence from the Philippines." *Journal of Development Economics* 96 (2): 348–358.

Laudati, Annalisa, Eric Mvukiyehe, and Peter van der Windt. 2018. *Participatory Development in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts: An Impact Evaluation of the Tuungane 2 Program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. https://www.petervanderwindt.com/uploads/8/0/2/2/80222480/tuungane_1- evaluation final report.pdf.

Mvukiyehe, Eric, and Peter Van der Windt. 2020. *Assessing the Longer-Term Impact of Community-Driven Development Programs: Evidence from a Field Experiment in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper no. 9140.

Samii, Cyrus. 2023. *Revisiting Community-Driven Reconstruction In Fragile States*. No. 2023/26. WIDER Working Paper.

Voss, John. 2016. *Lao Poverty Reduction Fund Phase II Impact Evaluation: Final Report*. World Bank.

Funding for this work was provided by Spark Microgrants. This publication has not been independently peer reviewed. Any opinions expressed here belong to the author(s) and are not necessarily representative of or endorsed by IFPRI.

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A world free of hunger and malnutrition

IFPRI is a CGIAR Research Center

1201 Eye Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005 USA | T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606 | Email: ifpri@cgiar.org | www.ifpri.org | www.ifpri.info

© 2026 International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). This publication is licensed for use under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.