

Community-driven development, infrastructure, and public services

Overview of the evidence

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Highlights

- Community-driven development (CDD) reliably delivers locally prioritized public infrastructure and services, often at a lower cost and with less leakage than traditional government-managed projects, and it has proven particularly effective in challenging contexts affected by institutional fragility, conflict, and violence.
- CDD effectively supports communities in prioritizing projects, producing a wide range of positive local outcomes. Yet, the diversity of choices makes generalizing the efficacy of CDD across settings difficult, highlighting the need for more research and better approaches to generating evidence and identifying impact.
- Emerging evidence suggests that infrastructure built by communities through CDD programs often endures longer than development projects that employ more traditional “top-down” approaches, with positive effects persisting for a decade or more.

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 synthesizes 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 public infrastructure and services.

Delivery of low-cost public infrastructure and services

CDD reliably delivers small-scale public infrastructure and services, and it has proven particularly effective in contexts affected by institutional fragility, conflict, and violence. In settings from Afghanistan to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to Sierra Leone, communities have decided on, designed, and built what they deem infrastructural priorities, including schools, clinics, wells, latrines, and other basic infrastructure. Grant sizes vary widely across programs, from as little as \$5,000 to as much as \$60,000, but the core principle remains the same—communities direct resources to the services they value most. A meta-analysis of CDD programs finds consistent and significant improvements in the existence and functionality of local public goods (Casey 2018).

When communities control funds, they typically spend them responsibly, despite challenging contexts. Evidence of diversion or loss of funds is limited, but estimates in Sierra Leone and Indonesia indicate losses of roughly 13–27 percent (Casey et al. 2012, Olken 2007). These estimates compare favorably to other forms of government-administered development finance: for example, 87 percent leakage occurs from government school grants in Uganda (Reinikka and Svensson), and 20 percent from public employment programs in India (Banerjee et al. 2020).

CDD projects are often cheaper than government procurement, even though additional work is needed to increase the rigor of estimates on both sides. The Kecamatan Development Project in Indonesia built roads, bridges, a water supply, and irrigation at roughly half the usual cost (estimated through a re-costing exercise using local government data on contractor costs and unit labor costs) or a third less if including the value of village labor, which was contributed at no cost (Torrens 2005). Similar programs in Burkina Faso and the Philippines also delivered infrastructure more efficiently, with CDD project costs ranging from 20 to 80 percent of estimated typical government procurement prices,² depending on the project type and context (Van Dolemen 2007).

¹ See the second brief: "[Community-driven development, governance, and collective action: Overview of the evidence.](#)"

² The method used to calculate the price of a typical government project was not described, however.

Community choice can deliver positive effects on a wide range of outcomes – but is hard to generalize

A core feature of CDD involves enabling communities to prioritize the projects they value most. While this empowers communities to drive their own development, it also results in a wide range of projects and thus, intended and actual outcomes. This diversity reflects the model’s responsiveness to local needs, and cross-country evidence illustrates the variation as summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Cross-country evidence



Source: Various, cited in figure.

These examples highlight both the adaptability of CDD to local priorities and the challenge of consistently measuring its effects. To build a more nuanced understanding of when and how CDD most effectively delivers intended benefits, future research should examine its impacts on specific types of infrastructure across different geographic, substantive, and social contexts—an agenda that continues to be an important topic of discussion among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Such evidence would help communities, governments, and development partners better determine when CDD is—or is not—the most appropriate approach.

Emerging evidence suggests that positive effects of CDD persist for a decade or more

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). When there is follow-up, evidence around the long-term effects of infrastructure projects often proves disappointing: in Kenya, around half of the borehole projects funded by an international donor were not functional 10 years after construction, despite community initiatives to invest in well maintenance (Miguel and Gugerty 2005).

Evidence on the long-term impact of CDD programs remains limited and more research is needed, but where solid evidence exists, community-built infrastructure appears to persist better than many projects pursued through top-down approaches. Sierra Leone’s GoBifo project particularly demonstrates the durability of CDD-built infrastructure: 11 years after the project’s launch, 60 percent of treatment villages had a functional primary school, compared to only 47 percent of control villages. Similarly, 15 percent of treatment villages had a midwife post, compared to only 3 percent of control villages. These findings suggest the persistence of key positive effects from the project’s CDD approach.

Similar long-term results are apparent in the DRC, where the Tuungane program led to consistent improvements in health facility infrastructure. Treatment villages scored 5–10 percent higher on measures of quality (roof, floor, toilets) and reported 30–40 percent more medical inventory eight years after the program, though there were no detectable effects on health outcomes (Mvukiyehe and van den Windt 2020).

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 infrastructure investments over time, even in challenging contexts. The limited evidence base also underscores the need for more systematic long-term evaluation across a wider range of contexts.

Conclusion

As aid flows decline and communities, governments, and donors work to leverage scarce resources, this evidence brief shows that CDD reliably delivers low-cost public infrastructure and services, including in the most difficult contexts. Leveraging community choice can deliver benefits across a wide range of outcomes, even as community-level prioritization of different activities makes it challenging to generalize across interventions. Emerging evidence also suggests that the positive effects of CDD persist for

a decade or more, making it well-positioned to help drive durable development impact amid increasingly scarce resources.

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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.

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