

POLICY BRIEF

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING IN EAST AFRICA'S DRYLANDS, TAKE TWO

From chasing an illusory panacea to practical learning

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Key findings

- **Participatory planning can potentially achieve many different benefits, but specific interventions can only effectively work towards a subset of outcomes due to time and resource constraints.** Expecting any one programme to act as a panacea, achieving all possible benefits simultaneously, is unrealistic and a recipe for disappointment. Instead, effective implementation teams prioritise specific outcomes, and navigate the complexity of social change when faced with constraints in time, staffing and resources.
- **The active ingredients of participatory planning interventions interact with local social dynamics in complex and contingent ways.** Our experimental results and case studies emphasise that the design of participatory planning interventions is complex and contextually dependent. This means that for complex interventions such as participatory planning, searching for universal 'best practice' is futile; the idea itself is a mirage. Donors and policy-makers should instead seek evidence in assessments and evaluations to help them make decisions regarding the fit of interventions within local contexts.
- **Centring local agency and creativity is the key to successfully implementing participatory planning.** Our case studies highlight the critical importance of local actors in translating formal design into effective action. Many of the critical factors that influence the success of a participatory planning intervention in a specific community are not observable ex ante. This implies that while programme design matters, it is a mistake to think of its implementation in strictly mechanical terms. Donors and policy-makers must go beyond a focus on compliance and explicitly give space for local actors to solve problems creatively.

September 2022 – Wajir, Kenya. A government official speaks during a field visit near Hadado town, where an irrigation project from the local Ward Development Plan was implemented. Credit: Patrick Meinhardt/Mercy Corps



Introduction

As communities in East Africa confront the realities of anthropogenic climate change, the importance of meaningfully including local voices in solutions has never been clearer. In recent decades, communities in East Africa's drylands have often been faced with one of two detrimental situations: either malign neglect, in which governments fail to invest in development or social policies (Odhiambo, 2013; Gillin and Turner, 2022) or the imposition of top-down 'modernisation' policies, characterised by simple narratives and solutions ill-suited to the complex social and ecological realities of dryland regions (Campbell, 2021). Especially concerning is the tendency for top-down planning to discount or seek to displace the traditional knowledge and institutions which (agro-)pastoralist communities have used to successfully navigate the high variability of dryland environments over millennia (Sharifian et al., 2023). How can states and other development actors avoid both neglect and top-down policy-making in drylands contexts?

To answer this question, this brief looks at one promising approach: local participatory planning. Local participatory planning institutionalises the involvement of local communities in a public process for prioritising and planning investments. By providing an institutionalised interface between the communities and state – or NGO-led development projects, participatory planning provides two potential benefits: 1) more efficient allocation of investment, by incorporating local knowledge and institutions into development plans; and 2) improved social outcomes, including reduced conflict and more democratic governance, through inclusive decision-making across conflict rifts and the empowerment of marginalised voices.

While participatory planning promises both social and economic benefits, the accumulated evidence of its impact is mixed. The ability for participatory planning to impact social outcomes related to peace or empowerment varies widely between contexts.¹ These inconsistencies have led critics to conclude that participatory planning as a class of intervention has little or no impact on either peace or governance. Our research challenges both this conclusion and the underlying framing.

Using a combination of experimental studies and in-depth case studies – in dialogue with the broader literature on participatory planning – our research suggests the need for a significant shift in evidence-based policy-making and practice related to participatory planning.² Our overall finding is that considering participatory interventions as mechanical or technological solutions – akin to vaccines – is a fundamental error, which misguides research and policy priorities.³ Instead of a mechanical technology, which can be replicated with high fidelity between contexts, our research suggests that participatory planning is an inherently adaptive model.

Donors interested in harnessing the potential of participatory planning to support adaptive capacity in drylands should centre the agency of local actors to design and implement interventions that are tailored to needs and priorities in local contexts.

Instead of viewing participatory planning interventions as a homogenous class, which produce different results due to inherent unpredictability, we argue that inconsistencies may be better explained by the underappreciated role of human agency in adapting participatory planning itself. This process requires prioritising specific outcomes in response to contextual and resource constraints, which generally go unacknowledged.

This finding means that donors interested in harnessing the potential of participatory planning to support adaptive capacity in drylands should centre the agency of local actors to:

1. prioritise a specific subset of outcomes within their context
2. design institutions to account for interactions with existing local norms and social dynamics
3. address emergent problems and opportunities creatively.

¹ This literature relates primarily to two marquee models of participatory planning: community-driven development, often funded by the World Bank (see White et al., 2018; Casey, 2018), and participatory budgeting (see Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017; Touchton et al., 2022).

² This report synthesises and builds on previous research on the Ward Development Planning intervention in Kenya. This includes an overview of the intervention (Bedelian et al., 2023), qualitative case studies and theory-building (Hakiman and Sheely, 2023a; Hakiman and Sheely, 2023b).

³ See Yuen Ang (2024) for a broader discussion on how seeking mechanical laws of 'what works' to describe adaptive political economies can mislead both policy and research.

Lesson 1: participatory planning can potentially achieve many different benefits, but specific interventions can only effectively work towards a subset of outcomes due to time and resource constraints

A number of pieces within the existing literature on participatory planning argue that it should not be viewed as a panacea that can automatically induce a wide range of desirable economic, social, and political outcomes all at once (King, 2013; Bennett and D'Onofrio, 2015). However, critiques that build on this line of reasoning don't typically offer affirmative theory or evidence explaining what participatory planning can do effectively, instead implying that participatory planning as a whole fails to meaningfully shift social and political outcomes (Casey, 2018; White et al., 2018).

Rather than characterising it as a panacea, participatory planning may be better viewed as a class of intervention that has the potential to be adapted to many different problems, while recognising that any specific intervention is likely constrained in how many problems it can solve at once. Our research explores two sources of these constraints (further elaborated below): 1) that the design of a specific intervention requires navigating trade-offs between different goals and 2) that local implementers have finite bandwidth – including limits on time, capacity and social capital – to address emergent problems or leverage opportunities during implementation. This requires the implicit or explicit prioritisation of certain goals.

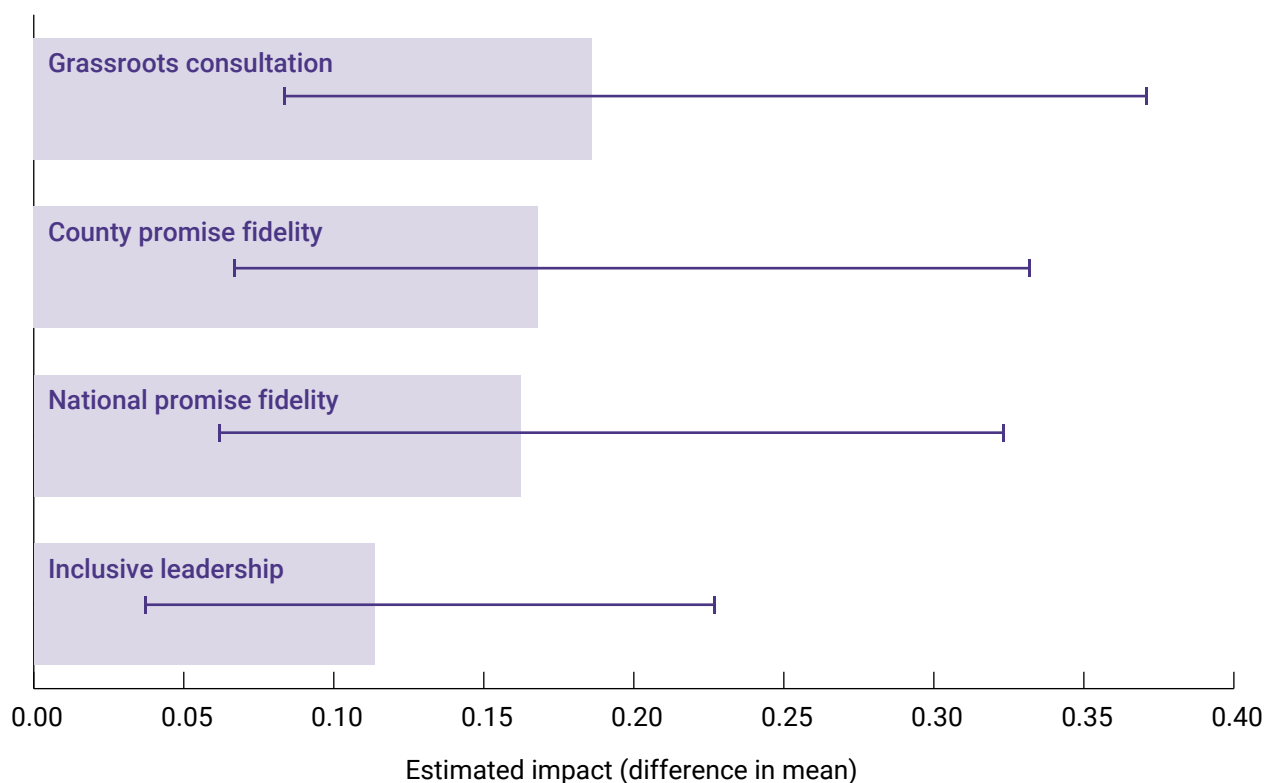
The case of the Ward Development Planning (WDP) intervention in northern Kenya demonstrates how this prioritisation can drive impact. The WDP intervention prioritised shifting norms and behaviours related to governance over other outcomes, due to how the programme team viewed the constraints and opportunities within the context where it was operating. Due to Kenya's long-standing neglect of pastoralist communities in the north of the country (Odhiambo, 2013), and the relatively weak planning capacity for newly created county governments and pastoralist communities, programme leadership, project planners and local implementers deliberately prioritised strengthening the interface between county governments and the full set of smaller communities making up county government wards. Improving governance is not the only outcome the WDP intervention could have potentially selected to prioritise. For instance, reducing inter-communal conflict, or emphasising shifting social

norms (e.g. towards empowering youth and women), or supporting resilient livelihoods and food security in the face of climate shocks, are all areas that could have been prioritised.

The chosen prioritisation was both intentional and practical, and involved adaptive management over time. It was based on reflections about the underlying problems faced by communities, along with evolving assessments of constraints on political capital, staffing, resources and time. Early in its implementation, the programme decided to shift away from a narrow focus on climate adaptation, and towards a more holistic participatory planning process which focused broadly on improving the governance relationship between the county and wards. This shift was based on conversations with pastoralist communities, county governments, and civil society. During conversations, it became apparent that this sharp division between climate adaptation and the broader needs of the ward was artificial, and focusing on climate adaptation alone critically ignored the need for strengthening the coordination and planning capacity of the various actors working in wards – including not only the county government as a central actor, but also NGOs who often failed to understand the local priorities of the communities they worked within. The lack of pre-existing capacity for inclusive public planning at the ward level is unsurprising, given that wards as an administrative level were only created through Kenya's 2013 devolution process, four years before the start of the WDP implementation.

Two brief examples illustrate how the WDP intervention navigated trade-offs and how this prioritisation cascaded down to local implementation. First, on navigating design trade-offs, the WDP intervention prioritised the inclusion of county-level officials as ex officio members of all participatory committees to maximise building connections between the ward-level committees and the county government, which was key to the WDP intervention's theory of change. WDP implementers felt this was the best course of action given the relatively small grants associated with the programme and the pivotal importance of influencing the county budgeting process. However, this was recognised as being a trade-off for other goals, such as protecting the committees from political interference. Second, institutions are not self-enforcing but instead require significant attention by local implementers to produce the desired change. For example, selecting a committee requires a process perceived as fair, inclusive and legitimate by the local community. This requires implementers to understand local norms, map stakeholders and protect the process from elite capture.

FIGURE 1: ESTIMATED IMPACT OF THE WDP INTERVENTION ON GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE INDICATORS



Note: Figure 1 shows the estimated mean effect of the WDP intervention, with a 95% confidence interval (purple line) and respondent-level controls (e.g. age, gender, income). Measures remain statistically significant ($p < .05$) after family-wise error correction. Impact estimated through a representative post-intervention survey in 2023 (N=2,856).

Source: Authors' own.

Adding additional goals, such as significantly shifting the social role of youth and women, requires navigating a different set of political constraints and opportunities.⁴ While both may be feasible given enough time and resources, this is subject to bandwidth constraints.

Prioritising governance as an outcome area shaped the design of the WDP intervention, the ways in which it was implemented and the specific outcomes that it was able to influence. In a retrospective evaluation, we found a substantial increase in community members' perception that governance in their ward was participatory, and that the county and national government kept their promises (see Figure 1).⁵ This finding is further strengthened for the subset of randomly surveyed community members who were aware of the intervention.

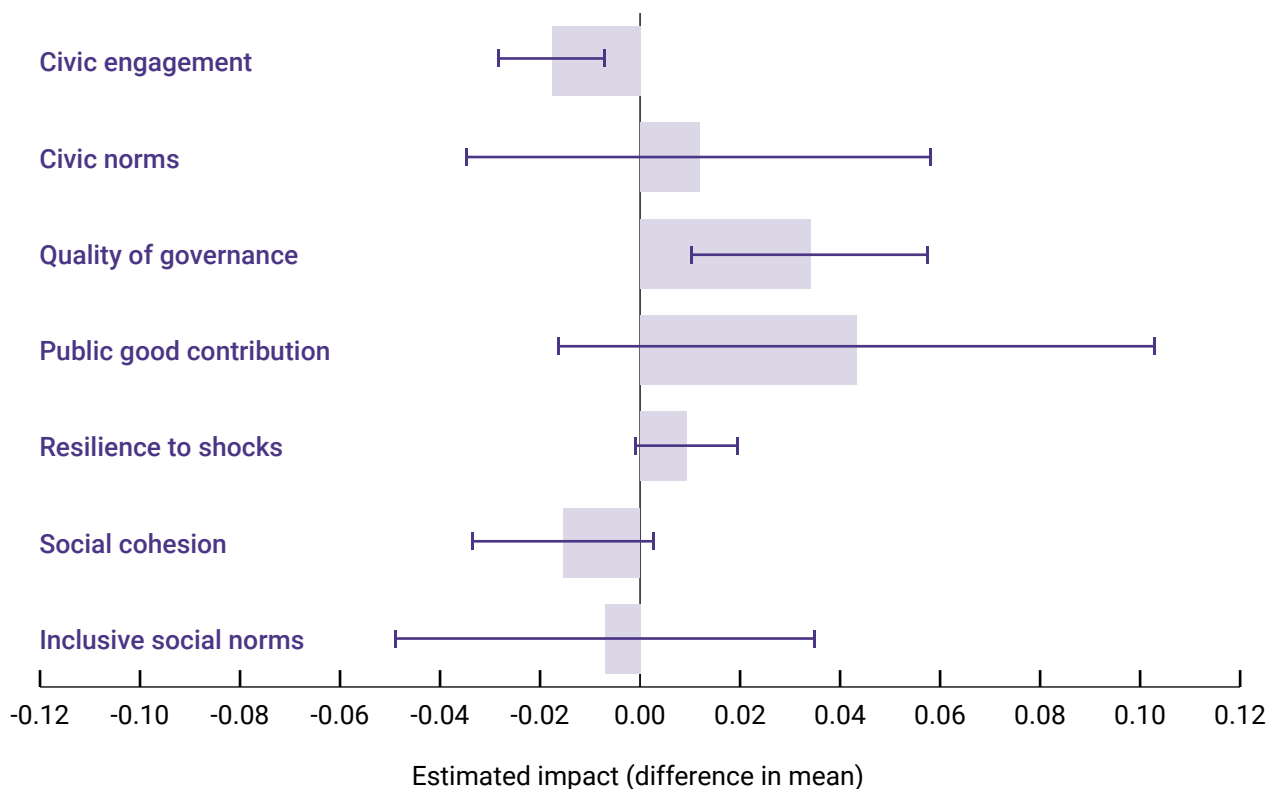
The evaluation largely does not find corresponding shifts in other categories (see Figure 2), such as social norms related to women or youth empowerment, social cohesion or the likelihood of food insecurity.

We attribute this to two reasons. First, the relative lack of impact on social cohesion and the empowerment of youth and women would largely be expected from the prioritisation of governance outcomes in the design and implementation of the programme. The WDP intervention included relatively moderate quotas for women and youth. Likewise, implementation took place in largely ethnically homogenous wards and villages (or village clusters). Because of this, there was likely a ceiling effect for building new social cohesion.

⁴ Note that this is different from an institutional trade-off. Simply adding or modifying an inclusion quota is insufficient. Local implementers must expend political capital, time, and problem-solving at the community level to ensure the quota operates as theorised (e.g. that women are attending and participating meaningfully).

⁵ This evaluation, from which Figures 1 and 2 are drawn, was based on a propensity-score matching design at the ward level (in which treated wards were matched with comparable controls). This evidence is suggestive, rather than definitively causal, due to the lack of randomisation and a baseline.

FIGURE 2: THE IMPACT OF WDP ON GOVERNANCE, COMPARED TO OTHER OUTCOME CATEGORIES



Note: Figure 2 shows the estimated mean effect of the WDP intervention, with a 95% confidence interval (purple lines), including controls (e.g. age, gender). Category indexes were constructed using inverse-variance weighting. Impact estimated via a 2023 post-intervention survey (N=2,856).

Source: Authors' own.

Meanwhile, the lack of impact on food security outcomes may also be expected from the prioritised theory of change, which focused on county-level allocations in public goods. While this is arguably the most sustainable change, integrating community priorities into county-level budgetary processes is a long route to impact, so the five-year time horizon may not capture ward-level committees shifting county budgets, given that the first county budget cycle after implementation occurred in 2023.

Lesson 2: the active ingredients of participatory planning interventions interact with local social dynamics in complex and contingent ways

Participatory planning interventions are institutionally complex because they are composed of numerous design elements which interact with one another and with the local social and political context. Put another way, the active ingredients of a participatory planning programme (its rules or institutions) are not good or bad in a vacuum, but must be understood interdependently. While questions like 'does the WDP model work for

improving accountability?' are attractive in their simplicity, they imply that there is a single optimal recipe which can or should be adopted across contexts. This flies in the face of what we know about taking context seriously (Levine and Pain, 2024), and the fundamentally complex and political nature of decentralisation efforts, which seek to shift power (Faguet and Pal, 2023).

As a result, our research suggests that searching for 'best practices' is a flawed premise due to the need to adapt programme design to context. We illustrate this with two examples related to accountability and shifting social norms related to inclusion. While the specific types of interaction described here are based in the specifics of northern Kenya's drylands, the broader necessity to consider interaction effects between context and programme design has wider implications for policy-makers and implementers in East Africa and for the wider academic and practitioner literature on participatory planning.

Interactions between committee representation, informal accountability and social cohesion

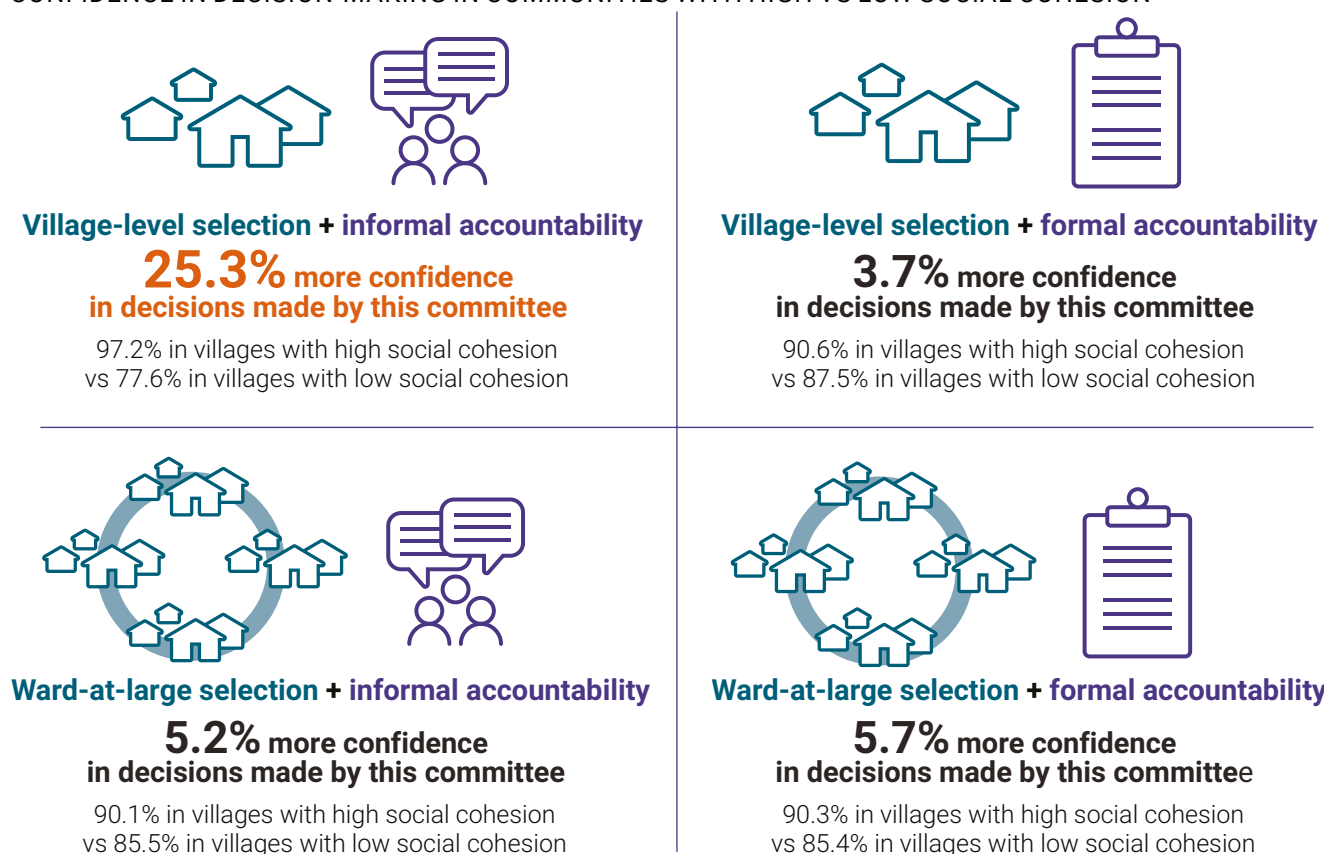
In the context of northern Kenya, our qualitative case studies showed that high social embeddedness and strong local social ties provided effective informal

accountability, by which community members felt they could hold their committee representatives accountable (Hakiman and Sheely, 2023a). Respondents in rural areas reported feeling able to access and hold their local committee representative accountable through informal social sanctions. This social accountability was enabled by the ways in which community representatives were embedded in dense kinship and civil society ties at the village level (Tsai, 2007). Villages were also largely ethnically homogenous, limiting group-level competition over resources.⁶

Using survey experiments, we confirm this qualitative indication, finding that informal social accountability operated only under conditions of strong social ties and when the committee member was selected from nearby (within the village). In villages with high levels of

social cohesion, respondents expressed more positive expectations about the efficacy of informal accountability mechanisms such as gossip and social pressure – see Figure 3. However, this effect did not hold if committee members in the scenario were selected from the ward-at-large instead of village-by-village. In contrast, in low social cohesion villages, the combination of village-level selection and informal accountability performed the worst. In scenarios with at-large committee selection at the ward level, respondents were slightly more likely to express positive assessments of formal accountability mechanisms, such as a complaint line to report poor service delivery. These findings illustrate that the ways that participatory planning institutions function are dependent on two types of interaction: between the institution and social dynamics in the local context and between different elements of the institution itself.

FIGURE 3: COMPARING HOW DIFFERENT TYPES OF PARTICIPATORY PLANNING INSTITUTIONS SHAPE CONFIDENCE IN DECISION-MAKING IN COMMUNITIES WITH HIGH VS LOW SOCIAL COHESION



Note: Figure 3 shows the conditional effectiveness of institutional design (selection and accountability of committee members) depending on the level of social trust in villages. The summary percentage in each of the four quadrants of the graphic represents the magnitude of the difference between villages with high and low social cohesion – that is, the percentage point difference divided by the second number. Institutional elements were varied in a 2x2 experiment, while social cohesion was estimated using an index of attitudes towards the respondent’s in-group. As social cohesion was not varied experimentally, the findings are suggestive. The effect is statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Source: Authors’ own.

⁶ Notably, this was less the case for urban settings, which were more diverse, with more transient populations.



September 2022 – Wajir, Kenya. A woman speaks during a field visit near Hadado town, the site of a Ward Development Plan irrigation project. Credit: Patrick Meinhardt/Mercy Corps

The interaction of local norms with inclusion quotas for youth and women

The reasons why the WDP intervention did not shift social norms related to the inclusion of youth and women can also be understood as being related to the interaction between context and institution. Social norms are relative to a specific society, and in qualitative interviews, respondents indicated that the participation of women in WDP committees was not seen as transgressive of social norms in the local context. On the contrary: in later debriefs, implementers felt that families were largely supportive of female members participating, in hopes of receiving benefits. Community members and implementers, however, felt that participation would have been transgressive a decade ago, when gender roles were stricter and more patriarchal.

This example of a participatory planning institution operating in a context where social norms have already shifted to allow participation of women and youth is in stark contrast to a different, but similar, participatory planning intervention that operated in Kabul, Afghanistan in 2020–2021. In this context, the mere participation of women and young people in planning meetings was seen as more transgressive of local norms and power dynamics. These qualitative accounts reinforce the notion that a single institutional design – such as quotas mandating the inclusion of women or youth – cannot shift social norms across all settings, and must be understood as relative to local contextual factors.

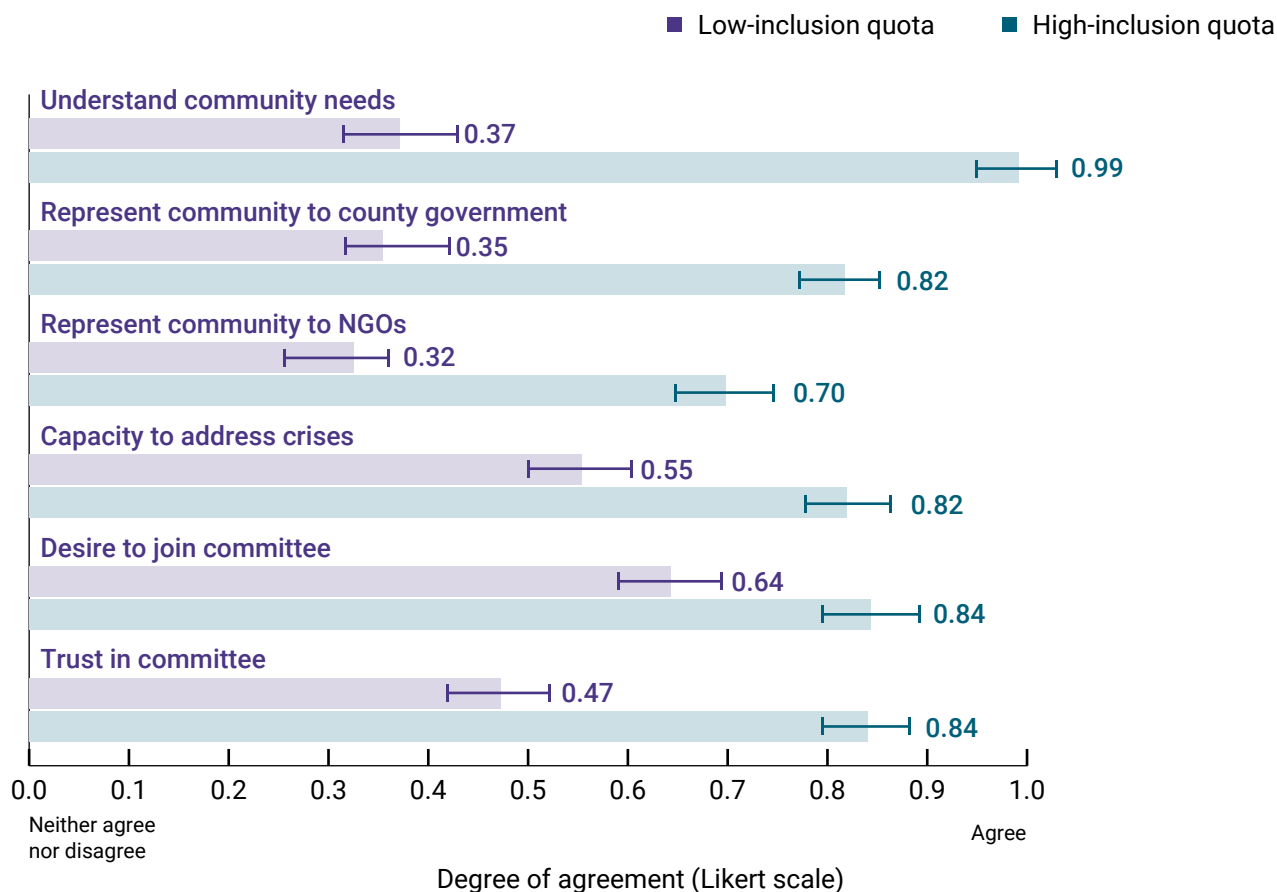
Using a survey experiment, we tested whether a hypothetical scenario increasing the quota for women's and youths' participation in planning committees from 20% to 50% would increase the perception of deviation from

local norms and invite backlash. However, instead of backlash, the survey found that communities perceived these more inclusive committees as more trustworthy and effective.⁷ As Figure 4 shows, this preference towards more inclusion of youth and women held across several categories, such as the ability to represent the community and capacity to address crises. This does not necessarily imply communities have egalitarian attitudes across the board, but more likely reflects more nuanced gender roles – in which women and youth's participation is valued but involves other limitations. This interpretation is grounded in qualitative evidence. During interviews, we found few objections to women participating in committees, but did note that they often took on lower-power roles on the committees, such as treasurer rather than chairperson, and, on average, had relatively less influence on decision-making. Taken together, these findings indicate that future participatory planning interventions seeking to further advance inclusion of women and youth in northern Kenya could couple higher quotas for participation with additional activities and support geared towards amplifying the voice and power of these groups in decision-making and leadership within these local institutions.

This example also indicates that using experiments alongside qualitative evidence can help to refine and test assumptions within a programme's theory of change – such as that patriarchal attitudes are a barrier to female inclusion. By testing assumptions, programmes can use evidence to localise institutional design, beyond attempting to transplant universal 'best practices' based on other contexts.

⁷ These findings correspond with recent findings by Kao et al. (2023), who similarly find that women's inclusion increases the legitimacy of government institutions in patriarchal societies, such as Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco.

FIGURE 4: COMMUNITY MEMBERS SHOW PREFERENCE FOR COMMITTEES WITH A HIGH QUOTA FOR INCLUSION OF WOMEN AND YOUTH



Note: Figure 4 shows the mean in respondent perception for high (50%) versus low (20%) inclusion quotas for a hypothetical committee, based on a 5-point Likert scale of agreement (Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Agree; Strongly Agree). 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' is scored 0, 'Agree' is scored 1.

Source: Authors' own.

Lesson 3: Centring local agency and creativity is the key to successfully implementing participatory planning

The success or failure of the WDP model is not attributable to its design alone, but also depends on the agency and empowerment of local implementers. Qualitative case studies illustrate how success or failure in those cases crucially depended on the agency and motivation of local implementers to solve unanticipated, emergent problems. The capacity for implementers to 'navigate by judgement' (Honig, 2018) required the empowerment of local implementers, who were encouraged to use discretion and problem-solving, rather than being micromanaged through rigid, top-down controls. Implementers used their limited time, resources,

and social capital to decide how to prioritise which problems to solve and how to bring the programme's theory of change to life in practice.

The necessity for adapting a formal programme design to local context emerges from the variation in community contexts, which are characterised by diverse cultures and highly localised political economies.⁸ By understanding cultural and political factors at the community level, local implementers can navigate emergent opportunities and threats to the programme's theory of change. The ability for local agents across to do this was critical for the WDP programme's success in shifting governance outcomes, providing lessons for broader applications both in Kenya's drylands and more widely.

⁸ This process of adapting formal programme designs to local context is known as bricolage, in which the technical design of programmes is reassembled by local implementers as they encounter local political economies and other contextual factors (Cleaver, 2017; Pain, 2018).



September 2022 – Wajir, Kenya. Women collect water near Hadado town, where a Ward Development Plan irrigation project was implemented. Credit: Patrick Meinhardt/Mercy Corps

The success or failure of participatory planning is contingent on the ways that programme designers and implementers navigate constraints and opportunities

Two examples illustrate the importance of this adaptation, looking narrowly at a single element of the WDP programme: the public selection of committee members. For the programme's theory of change, the community must perceive the public selection of a local committee as legitimate. Because of this, local implementers decided to use selection processes familiar to and trusted by the communities. In Turkana ethnic communities, this was often 'queue voting' (a form of non-secret ballot voting), while in Buran and Somali communities, public deliberation and consensus-seeking consultations were the main mechanisms that implementers used to select committees. When asked why they did not use the international best practice of secret ballot, both the implementers and participants felt that the community would see this as less legitimate and trustworthy, since they could not verify that everyone's vote was considered. An exception to this was when a local chief's wife decided to put herself forward for a position on the committee.⁹ Due to the possibility that community members would feel pressured to vote for her, the local implementer decided to introduce a secret ballot in this one case only, and the wife was ultimately not selected for the committee. This exception shows the importance of allowing local discretion to shape the rules with the ultimate goals of the programme in mind. Crucially, not all eventualities or variables could possibly have been considered at the county or national level, and therefore this local ability to navigate by judgement was a necessary element for successful implementation.

⁹ Chiefs were barred from being on the committee, with no provision for relatives.

Conclusion

Our research stresses the potential for participatory planning interventions to integrate local voices into decision-making in dryland contexts. However, it also cautions that realising these effects requires donors and policy-makers to reconceptualise the possibilities of participatory planning. By synthesising across three distinct methodologies – qualitative, impact evaluation, and survey experiments – a clear throughline emerges: the success or failure of participatory planning is contingent on three ways that programme designers and implementers navigate constraints and opportunities. First, implementation of participatory interventions will face trade-offs in prioritising staff time and resources across all potentially desirable outcomes. Variation in this prioritisation should be expected to produce uneven results within and between national implementation contexts. Second, the institutional design of participatory institutions is complex, with rules interacting among each other and with contextual factors. Third and finally, prioritisation, rule design, and on-the-ground implementation each require some degree of discretion by local actors. Fostering creativity and problem-solving by these actors is pivotal for programme success..

Recommendations

Donors often demand evidence that answers questions about ‘what works’ and what are ‘best practices’. Our study suggests that, for complex interventions such as participatory planning, answers to these kinds of questions are often a mirage, as they ignore the importance of context. Our findings agree with growing calls to avoid ‘panacea-type thinking’ (Ostrom et al., 2007; King, 2013), while showing that participatory planning has significant potential to be a worthwhile approach for advancing a variety of goals in drylands contexts in East Africa and beyond. The key need, however, is to support programmes and communities to select and prioritise a subset of possible outcomes to pursue in a given intervention.

Alongside this overarching recommendation, our findings also have the following specific implications for donors and practitioners working with participatory planning institutions in drylands contexts and beyond:

- Donors and policy-makers should encourage programmes to be realistic about which subset of goals participatory planning is expected to produce within a context. This requires explicit identification of priorities and trade-offs in the design of programmes and their underlying theories of change.
- Donors, implementers and researchers focused on participatory planning should jointly work towards a cultural shift in both research and knowledge accumulation: away from asking about ‘what works’ universally, and towards learning agendas focused on understanding and supporting locally-led adaptations. Concretely, this kind of cultural shift in evidence and learning about participatory planning requires changes throughout the evidence lifecycle. This will include shifting from asking about ‘best practice’ to asking about ‘best fit’ – and from seeking universal theories of change to pursuing middle-range theories that explicitly articulate how programme elements interact with each other and with the local context. Progress will also entail shifting from narrow views of randomised controlled trials as the ‘gold standard’ in policy-relevant learning towards a diverse basket of assessment and evaluation methods that support these aims, such as process tracing, survey experiments and participatory methods.
- Donors and implementers working with participatory planning institutions should invest in funding, reporting, and hiring mechanisms which allow for creative problem-solving at the local level, rather than an emphasis on rigid, top-down compliance. Centring the agency and decision-making of local practitioners, communities, and organisations in this way simultaneously allows for participatory planning institutions to realise their full potential, while providing a concrete example of what localisation can look like in practice.

June 2022 – Wajir County, Kenya. Farmers in northeast Kenya supported with projects from Ward Development Plans (WDP), improving water access through a borehole and de-silting the local water pan. Credit: Joel Mulwa/Mercy Corps



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The quantitative analyses presented in this paper are preliminary findings and should be considered to be a work-in-progress. As such, findings or their interpretation may change in future publications based on this data.

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agropastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), donors, nongovernmental organisations, local and national governments and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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