The Impact of Broadening Traditional Leaders' Advisors on Inclusive Governance in Zimbabwe

Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Location: Mutare District

Sample: 270 villages

Target group: Rural population

Intervention type: Nudges and reminders Training

Research Papers: Accountability and Inclusion in Customary Institutions: Evidence from a Village...

Partner organization(s): United States Agency for International Development (USAID), International Rescue Committee (IRC)

Traditional political institutions, which are often criticized for a lack of accountability and inclusive decision-making, play a significant role in governance at the village-level in countries throughout the world. Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test how encouraging traditional leaders to broaden their circle of advisors affects inclusive governance in Zimbabwe. They found that nudging traditional leaders to include a new civil society leader as an advisor led to more inclusive decision-making processes as well as improved outcomes for political opponents of the traditional leader, such as less partisan court decisions and food aid distribution.

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Approximately a quarter of the population of UN member states live in communities governed by traditional political institutions, such as kingships and village assemblies. Scholars have suggested that traditional institutions may fail to govern inclusively due to low accountability, concentration of decision-making power in a single leader, and bias against individuals with lower traditional status, including women. While many interventions attempt to replace traditional political institutions with new, more democratic structures, there is growing evidence that this approach yields limited improvements in governance.

The existence of advisory councils in many traditional political institutions challenges the assumption that decisions are made unilaterally without any collective deliberation. The researchers of this study theorize that broadening the composition of the advisors – and the demographic and social groups represented by them – can help improve inclusive decision-making and accountability within traditional political institutions.

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In rural Zimbabwe, village chiefs, also known as village heads, play an important role in local governance. This may include managing village courts, distributing land within the community, presiding over village assembly meetings, and facilitating the delivery of goods and services, such as the distribution of food aid. In pre-colonial times, there was a tradition of village chiefs ruling with advisory bodies, engaging in collective decision making with advisors. During the 1980s, the government attempted to replace traditional political institutions with elected village governments; however, these attempts were unsuccessful. Over the last decades, the government has opted instead to work alongside traditional leaders.

This study was conducted in the Mutare District in eastern Zimbabwe, comprised predominantly of people belonging to the Shona group. Village chiefs in this district inherit their leadership through patrilineal lineage and serve for a lifetime. Historically, Shona traditional leaderships could be considered inclusive, participatory, and egalitarian. Major decisions in the village are expected to involve all family heads, villages tend to be open to in-migration from people of varying lineages, and courts are generally treated as an open forum with decisions based on public consensus. While Shona traditional political institutions did not historically treat women and unmarried men as equals, this evolved over time and in the study area, many villages had headwomen. At the time of this evaluation in 2012-13, there were strong political divides in the villages, affecting local governance.

Nearly all villages in the study area (94 percent) had an advisory council, comprising about six people. Advisors varied in both their representativeness of the community and the manner in which they engaged with the wider community. Most adults (86 percent) in the villages belonged to at least one civil society group. In the study villages, civil society leadership consisted of religious leaders, farm group leaders, volunteer village health workers, and caregiver group leaders. Before the study, village advisors did not fully represent the diverse interests and opinions held by civil society leaders. There were differences in opinions on the level of power courts should have, demographics, economic status, political allegiance, and knowledge of law between advisors and civil society leaders, creating an opportunity to broaden representation within village advisory councils.



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Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test if encouraging traditional leaders to have a broader group of advisors can lead to more inclusive governance in Zimbabwe. The study comprised 270 villages in Mutare District in eastern Zimbabwe,

divided into 35 blocks of villages, where villages in the same ward and on the same land classification comprised a block. Within each block, researchers randomly assigned villages to one of three groups:

1. *Workshops for village chief (69 villages):* In these villages, village chiefs were offered workshops on laws and norms that promote inclusion and transparency in governance. A local NGO with experience working with high-level traditional leaders on similar themes delivered the content during two different three-day workshops, separated by several months and taking place between September 2012 – May 2013.
2. *Workshops for village chiefs and civil society leaders (65 villages):* In these villages, village chiefs were asked to invite a local civil society leader that was not already part of their council to attend the workshops with them. The intention was to provide civil society leaders with increased knowledge on traditional governance, access to the chief, and new status as an advisor.
3. *Comparison group (136 villages):* There was no workshop conducted in these villages in the timeframe of the evaluation.

Researchers measured the impact of providing workshops for just village chiefs and workshops for village chiefs with civil society leaders on three key outcomes: inclusive decision-making processes, impartiality and effectiveness of decision-making outcomes, and the legitimacy of traditional institutions.

Researchers surveyed village chiefs, civil society leaders, and households in August and September 2013, more than three months after the last workshop. Survey data was coupled with qualitative interviews conducted in 10 villages one year after the surveys to evaluate the effect of the program.

Zimbabwe is an electoral authoritarian regime, and individuals' political opinions are often a sensitive issue. As a result, the study was designed and implemented to ensure multiple levels of protection for respondents. For example, to protect respondents, the researchers collected identifying information on separate cover sheets that could not be linked back to the main surveys in the field. To maintain confidentiality of village heads and villages as a whole, the researchers used codes for different communities, which were filled out in advance before teams entered the field to avoid sending the codebook into the field. In addition, they used prompts not recorded on the survey instrument and alphabetic and numeric codes to record responses to sensitive questions.

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Village chiefs improved their decision-making processes when they attended the workshop on inclusive and transparent governance and were accompanied by a civil society member. Notably, decision-making processes became more open and decision-making outcomes for political opponents of the chief improved, including by reducing bias in the distribution of food aid and court rulings.

Inclusive decision-making processes: Researchers measured inclusive decision-making through an index of diversity of advisory council membership, level of consultation with other governance bodies, and the transparency of local bureaucratic proceedings. When only the village chief attended the workshop, decision-making processes did not change. However, when a civil society leader accompanied the village chief, researchers found that inclusive decision-making improved significantly (with an increase in more than half a standard deviation in inclusive decision-making).

Decision-making outcomes: Researchers measured the effect of the intervention on decision making outcomes based on efficacy in managing local issues, as well as the level of impartiality in decision making with respect to political opponents receiving food aid and perceived fairness of court decisions. When chiefs attended workshops alone, there was no significant effect on the impartiality of decisions; however, when civil society leaders also joined the workshops, the impartiality of decisions improved by 13 percentage points (from a base of 43 percent in the comparison group). With respect to management of local problems, when the chief attended workshops alone, the percentage of households whose food needs were met increased; however, there was a

negative effect on dispute management. Meanwhile, the workshops including the civil society leader led to small improvements in both food security and dispute resolution.

Village chief's legitimacy: When the chief and civil society leader attended the workshop together, the village chief's legitimacy improved slightly. When the village chief attended alone, their legitimacy decreased slightly.

While all village chiefs were instructed to bring a new civil society leader in the second intervention, about one quarter brought existing traditional advisers instead. Researchers found that among the village chiefs who were likely to bring new civil society leaders to the workshop, the inclusiveness and impartiality of decision-making would tend to increase. Conversely, in villages where the chiefs were likely to bring existing advisors, the workshops may decrease inclusive and impartial decision-making.

This research finds that expanding the village chief's circle of advisors with a new member of civil society, that represents previously underrepresented interests and communities, can make village-level decision-making processes and outcomes more inclusive and impartial, as well as increase the effectiveness of local dispute management. Qualitative interviews indicated that civil society leaders gained new information and developed stronger relationships with the chief by joining the workshop, allowing for increased deliberation and facilitating more inclusive governance. This study thus indicates that it is possible to make gradual improvements to governance *within* traditional political institutions, as opposed to replacing them.

Additional research on the long-term effects of broadening traditional leader's advisors on inclusive governance can shed further light on how to improve local governance.