

Civil society initiatives: row summary

Civil society capacity-building and civic engagement interventions resulted in a large improvement in some government performance outcomes but harmful pooled effects in civic participation and in one case increased ethnic violence.

Civil society initiatives are interventions that develop the capacity of individuals and organizations in civil society and increase civic engagement and empowerment, including strengthening community interest groups and oversight of public institutions. There is variation in the type of intervention in the included studies. They can be classified as (i) civic education and participatory workshops on rights, governance and decentralization; (ii) voter mobilization and election-focused engagement such as town halls and SMS campaigns; (iii) youth-focused secondary education paired with civic engagement and service projects; (iv) anonymous citizen complaint mechanisms intended to improve accountability of public services such as policing; (v) community-based electoral security and violence early-warning systems coordinated with UN peacekeepers; and (vi) poverty alleviation transfers and work-for-relief grants that financed local infrastructure while also expanding administrative and public security spending.

These initiatives are intended to reduce conflict risks by changing information, incentives and by supporting collective action. Civic education and deliberative forums are expected to increase political knowledge, political efficacy and tolerance, strengthen non-violent norms, and enable citizens to make political choices without intimidation or clientelist pressure. Accountability mechanisms such as complaint boxes are intended to lower the costs and risks of reporting misconduct, deter abuse, and improve responsiveness of authorities, thereby strengthening trust and access to justice. Youth education and civic engagement components aim to expand skills and future opportunities while providing non-violent pathways for participation, reducing the appeal of armed groups. Economic and infrastructure components are expected to reduce grievances by improving livelihoods and service delivery, but programmes can also raise expectations that institutions cannot meet or be used to strengthen administrative control, which may generate dissatisfaction or exacerbate tensions.

Perceptions of government performance showed a large improvement ($g=0.22$; 2 studies, 14 effect sizes) linked to civic education workshops and citizen complaint boxes, but one workshop intervention also reduced satisfaction with democracy, suggesting that increasing knowledge can expose governance failures and widen the gap between citizen expectations and institutional delivery. Intermediate social cohesion outcomes improved moderately ($g=0.19$; 3 studies, 9 effect sizes), reflecting gains in civic competence, political efficacy and participation-related mediators. Physical security in Xinjiang, China improved moderately ($g=0.18$; 1 study, 4 effect sizes) mainly through increased public security and administrative spending, but the evidence noted limited direct improvement in community safety where spending prioritised administration and control. Economic security also improved moderately ($g=0.18$; 2 studies, 8 effect sizes), driven by work-for-relief gains in agricultural production and reduced youth disappointment about livelihood opportunities, while fiscal assistance showed limited direct economic impact and no immediate revenue gains. Willingness to participate was moderately improved in a Liberia election programme ($g=0.15$; 1

study, 3 effect sizes), including higher engagement and a shift away from parochial voting, while a related electoral security component mainly affected vote diversity. Social norms regarding violence showed a moderate reduction in acceptance of political violence ($g=0.10$; 2 studies, 14 effect sizes), with effects that varied by gender and context, and stronger reductions in less violent areas and among women and urban youth in Somalia. Several outcomes showed only small or little to no effects: political security ($g=0.08$; 4 studies, 22 effect sizes), sense of belongingness ($g=0.062$; 1 study, 2 effect sizes) and feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity ($g=0.058$; 2 studies, 4 effect sizes), with qualitative evidence highlighting persistent clan-based or ethnic divisions that limited inclusion. Access to justice, rights and public services showed little or no overall change ($g=0.03$; 1 study, 4 effect sizes), including small declines in perceived local government knowledge and influence alongside improvements in awareness of district budgets and performance information. Two outcomes showed harmful pooled effects: civic participation ($g=-0.281$; 5 studies, 24 effect sizes) and the nature and scale of violence in Xinjiang ($g=-0.088$; 1 study, 2 effect sizes). The civic participation result reflects negative or negligible impacts on national political engagement, decentralization support and institutional trust despite some improvements in local participation and voter coordination. The Xinjiang violence finding suggests that some fiscal transfers correlated with intensified ethnic violence while work-for-relief showed mixed effects. For sexual and gender-based violence, the review evidence reports no demonstrated effect for civic engagement and empowerment programmes, while some economic empowerment interventions may reduce intimate partner violence when male partners participate. Unintended consequences such as stigma or retaliation against survivors were also reported in some settings.

Overall confidence in these findings is low for most outcomes because the evidence base is small, context-specific and heterogeneous, with many estimates coming from a handful of studies conducted in a limited set of countries and using diverse designs. Many initiatives bundle multiple components, making it difficult to isolate which elements drive observed effects. The direction of effects also depends on implementation quality and local political conditions, including whether civic engagement translates into improved institutional performance or instead raises expectations and contestation without a corresponding increase in accountability. The sexual and gender-based violence evidence comes from two high-confidence systematic reviews but relies on narrative synthesis of a small set of primary studies with limited follow-up, which constrains certainty about size and persistence of effects. Taken together, the current evidence supports cautious conclusions: civil society initiatives can yield meaningful gains in some governance and cohesion-related outcomes, but impacts are uneven and can be null or harmful in other domains.

Effect sizes (Hedge's g)

Outcome	g	Interpretation (by g)	Direction	Number of studies	Number of effect sizes
Government performance	0.22	Large effect	Positive	2	14
Intermediate social cohesion outcomes	0.193	Moderate effect	Positive	3	9
Physical security	0.181	Moderate effect	Positive	1	4
Economic security	0.181	Moderate effect	Positive	2	8
Willingness to participate	0.148	Moderate effect	Positive	1	3
Social norms regarding violence and atrocities	0.102	Moderate effect	Positive	2	14
Political security	0.08	Small effect	Positive	4	22
Sense of belongingness	0.062	Small effect	Positive	1	2

Feelings of trust and acceptance of diversity	0.058	Small effect	Positive	2	4
Access to justice, rights and public services	0.027	Little or no effect	Positive	1	4
Nature and scale of violence and atrocities	-0.088	Small effect	Harmful	1	2
Civic participation	-0.281	Large effect	Harmful	5	24
Sexual and gender-based violence		Not reported	No effect reported for civic engagement; mixed for economic empowerment		