

How Do World Bank Projects Commit to Citizen Engagement?

The World Bank provides one of the world’s largest sources of international development funding, in 2019 committing US\$62.3bn in loans, grants, equity investments, and guarantees to governments and private businesses. The institution’s responsibilities to partner governments are well defined. Yet its duty to consider the perspectives and experiences of those affected by its projects, as well as of civil society more broadly, remains ambiguous. Long-standing concerns about whether and how the World Bank demonstrates accountability to citizens have become amplified as it expands involvement in fragile, conflict-, and violence-affected settings.

Former president Jim Yong Kim attempted to confront these kinds of concerns in 2013, promising that the World Bank would ‘become a better listener’ by incorporating feedback into all projects with ‘clear beneficiaries’. World Bank management then made Kim’s pledge obligatory, requiring that investment projects meet specific benchmarks, including:

- integrating at least one citizen engagement (CE) mechanism into project design,
- constructing at least one indicator to measure CE progress,
- reporting on that indicator during implementation.

To provide guidance for how large-scale development projects can develop citizen response capacity and make projects responsive to their inputs, the World Bank developed the Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement (‘CE Strategic Framework’). It defines CE as:

The **two-way interaction between citizens and governments** [emphasis added] or the private sector within the

scope of World Bank Group interventions... that gives citizens a stake in decision-making with the objective of improving the intermediate and final development outcomes of the intervention.

Both the CE concept and the CE Strategic Framework are outcomes of more than 45 years of evolving approaches to engagement between the World Bank, civil society, and project-affected people. What makes the current CE commitment distinct from prior approaches is the World Bank management’s claim that including beneficiary feedback is no longer optional. In 2018, the World Bank launched its new Environmental and Social Framework (ESF), which for the first time requires projects to undertake stakeholder assessment plans. The ESF operates on a track parallel to the CE commitment, though they are potentially mutually reinforcing.

The World Bank touts that meeting its CE requirements makes projects ‘citizen-oriented’. More realistically, such standards merely establish a minimum threshold for citizen involvement that

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projects must reach, rather than lead to developing projects that are fundamentally oriented to citizen-identified needs and perspectives. Still, given the World Bank's institutional clout and the proportion of development assistance it administers, if projects actually meet higher standards for CE, they can potentially protect and foster the contribution of citizen voice to development effectiveness.

In this context, the [Accountability Research Center \(ARC\)](#) at American University conducted research to answer this question: how and to what degree does the World Bank fulfil institutional commitments to incorporating CE into project design, the critical early stage of donor involvement? Undertaken as part of the [Action for Empowerment and Accountability \(A4EA\)](#) research programme into large donor efforts to enable empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict-, and violence-affected settings, ARC reviewed CE in World Bank project design for 57 projects in Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan, which had been approved in Fiscal Years (FY) 2015–17. The resulting independent country analyses and a [comparative synthesis report](#), including a detailed methods discussion, are available online.

ARC developed an original assessment tool to identify the nature of the World Bank's commitments to CE in project design. Relying on official project documents made public on the [World Bank's online operations portal](#) and the CE categories laid out in the Bank's CE Strategic Framework, the tool helps users to identify whether and how projects commit to:

- **CE mechanisms planned throughout the project life cycle**, including but not limited to public meetings, satisfaction surveys, and participatory monitoring,
- **additional, planned mechanisms that go beyond consultation and could facilitate an enabling environment for CE**, including third-party monitoring, specific social inclusion actions, and plans for proactive information disclosure.

The assessment informs analysis to answer two overarching questions:

- To what degree do World Bank projects demonstrate a commitment to explicit minimum standards for *informed CE*?

- To what degree do projects go beyond minimalist approaches and demonstrate both depth and specificity in their CE commitments, as well as a potential for synergy across multiple CE commitments?

This focus on design-related findings spells out a baseline for accountability, and can inform independent, field-based assessments of how CE commitments are implemented. The distinction between projects with mere 'tick-the-box' approaches vs more robust sets of CE commitments can also inform stakeholder decisions about whether and how to engage. In addition, ARC has partnered with Southern civil society organisations to pilot independent monitoring of CE implementation in select World Bank projects in Colombia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Uganda.

Citizen Engagement Density Scale

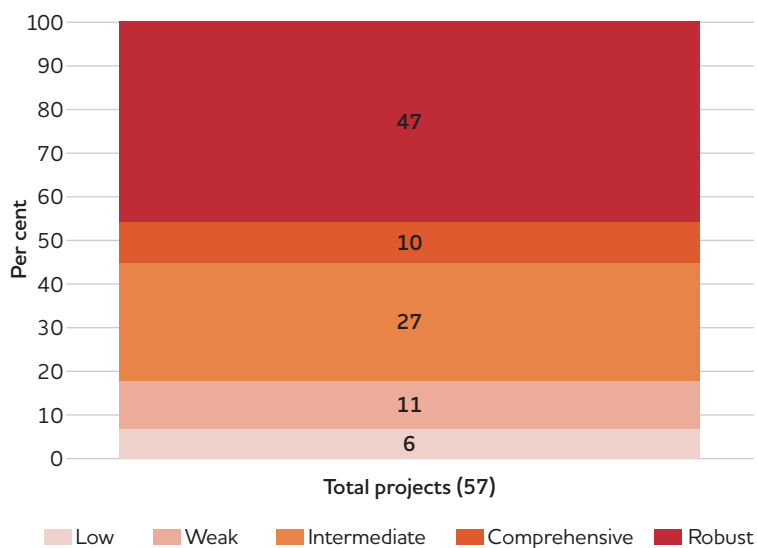
The Accountability Research Center (ARC) approach is consistent with the World Bank's own [Independent Evaluation Group \(IEG\)'s 2018 study of CE](#), distinguishing between projects that apply 'thick citizen engagement that is regular and continuous, uses multiple tools, and is embedded in country systems' and those that apply 'thin approaches using only one or two mechanisms [that] are short-lived'. ARC then applied an original 'Citizen Engagement Density Scale' to rank the 'thickness' of project commitments to CE across five categories: *robust*, *comprehensive*, *intermediate*, *weak*, and *low*. At the highest end of this spectrum, the *robust* assessment signifies that a project has committed to including a combination of [multiple tactics](#) for engagement that together create strategic opportunities and can be mutually reinforcing. The CE Density Scale aims to differentiate between the Bank's institutional standards for CE, which set a floor for the minimum level of CE that projects must report on, and the pursuit of comprehensive approaches to CE that raise the ceiling on what projects could actually accomplish.

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Key findings

- Most of the 57 projects analysed commit to incorporating multiple CE mechanisms throughout the project life cycle, with almost half (27) ranked as *robust*, the top category on the CE Density Scale (see Figure 1). Most projects therefore exceed the World Bank’s minimum CE design requirements and, in so doing, offer the potential for CE to have strategic impacts.
- However, analysis of the content of commitments revealed that most projects – even those in the top two categories of ‘robust’ and ‘comprehensive’ – only describe their plans in general terms; few explain *how* CE commitments will be implemented. This finding underscores the importance of independent monitoring of how CE commitments are implemented to determine whether they actually lead to real, meaningful opportunities for input and engagement, or whether they remain perfunctory, ‘tick-the-box’ exercises.
- Most projects (80 per cent) incorporate at least one CE indicator. However, the indicators typically used, the data captured, and the results made available are so narrowly framed that they do not meaningfully inform the public about the nature and impact of civic involvement.
- Project-specific grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs) are the most common CE modality (selected by 91 per cent of projects). However, just under a quarter of projects (23 per cent) commit to reporting GRM results to World Bank management, and even fewer commit to disclosing results publicly. This finding means that key information about the most common CE mechanisms will most likely be inaccessible – including fundamental facts about the nature of complaints and how, or if, they are resolved.
- There is a significant discrepancy between plans to deploy CE mechanisms and commitments to proactively disclose their results. This reveals the Bank’s limited transparency and public accountability goals, and poses a significant threat to the ability of CE to achieve accountability outcomes.
- Only one project among the 57 reviewed made its operational manual readily accessible to the public. The operational

Figure 1 CE Density Scale – combined results from Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan



manual is extremely relevant for informed CE because it spells out government plans for translating project commitments into specific goals, actions, rules, and responsibilities. While such manuals may appear to be mere administrative documents, they serve as potential roadmaps to guide public accountability strategies. However, the World Bank’s existing public information disclosure policy does not apply to operational manuals.

- Most projects that include provisions for third-party monitoring use it as a management tool rather than as an input to inform CE. The lack of commitments to public disclosure of third-party monitoring results means that even if external monitors maintain independence from project implementers, their work loses its value as an accountability tool for the public.
- Projects consistently made commitments to proactive social inclusion in CE processes around gender. In contrast, few projects documented plans to ensure that other socially excluded groups (e.g. people with disabilities, youth, internally displaced people, and ethnic minorities) would have a voice in project-facilitated engagement.
- Projects rarely specify dedicated funding for CE in project design, turning it into an unfunded mandate must compete with other priorities. As long as this situation continues, even projects that make ambitious CE commitments may not deliver on them.

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Policy recommendations

Provide more explicit support to strengthen the enabling environment for CE. The World Bank's CE Strategic Framework does not mandate or prioritise investments in key elements of the enabling environment for informed citizen action, such as proactive social inclusion, independent monitoring, or proactive information disclosure. When CE efforts focus only on project-related mechanisms (i.e. consultation spaces and feedback hotlines) without simultaneously working to strengthen the overall enabling environment in which these are situated, processes can be neutered by more powerful interest groups. In fragile, conflict- and violence-affected settings, official spaces for participation are especially vulnerable to elite capture. World Bank staff may also be unaware of this (especially if project monitoring is not specifically designed to detect such problems). The lack of timely proactive disclosure of relevant monitoring findings limits citizens' capacity to hold their governments and the World Bank accountable for their CE commitments.

Mandate that project operational manuals should be made public, readily accessible to citizens, and available in all national languages. Unlike other World Bank project documents, operational manuals define both the responsibilities allocated to government actors and agencies, and the rules they must follow – thus providing the baseline for accountability. Yet this research found that the Bank's public information policy does not cover the disclosure of operational manuals and that therefore public release ultimately depends on the discretion of government officials and Bank teams, who do not necessarily recognise the relevance of disclosure (or can be threatened by such disclosure).

Collaborate directly with national accountability institutions to protect citizen voice from reprisals and bolster state capacity to address accountability failures (e.g. ombuds agencies, audit bureaus, human rights commissions, public prosecutors, information access agencies). The Bank's current CE approach neglects the risks that citizens take when exercising voice – and rarely invests in the kinds of national institutions whose missions are to focus on accountability and transparency. The World Bank would vastly improve the odds of meeting its CE goals if it were to provide direct project support to national accountability agencies to carry out their distinctive roles and responsibilities within the accountability process. This would ultimately be more effective and have longer-term impacts than projects attempting to contribute to an enabling environment for CE in isolation.

Systematically link the CE agenda with the Bank's new Environmental and Social Framework as these are mutually reinforcing. The ESF [policy](#), supported by strict guidelines and dedicated staff, has a level of internal institutional enforcement that is missing from the CE agenda. Yet the ESF's requirement for robust stakeholder engagement plans ties directly in with the principles that guide the World Bank's approach to CE. Where the CE agenda and the ESF overlap – particularly in fragile, conflict- and violence-affected settings – there is now a new, powerful entry point to push for and pursue robust and strategic CE.

Further reading

Fox, J. (2014) *Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?* GPSA Working Paper 1, Washington DC: Global Partnership for Social Accountability, World Bank

Gaventa, J. and Oswald, K. (2019) *Empowerment and Accountability in Difficult Settings: What Are We Learning? Key Messages Emerging from the Action for Empowerment and Accountability Programme*, Brighton: IDS

Manroth, A. et al. (2014) *Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement in World Bank Group Operations: Engaging with Citizens for Improved Results*, Washington DC: World Bank

Nadelman, R.; Le, H. and Sah, A. (2019) *How Does the World Bank Build Citizen Engagement Commitments into Project Design? Results from Pilot Assessments in Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan*, IDS Working Paper 525, Brighton: IDS

World Bank (2018) *Engaging Citizens for Better Development Results*, Washington DC: Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank

Credits

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