

Pathways to strengthen the quality of public service delivery in Uganda

Barazas as citizen advocacy forums

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Key policy messages:

- Despite reforms such as decentralization, local-level public empowerment and involvement in project monitoring remains a key hindrance to quality public service delivery in Uganda.
- A qualitative impact assessment of barazas, which are local-level citizen advocacy forums for information sharing and deliberation, show that such initiatives increase public involvement in monitoring of public service delivery.
- Barazas were found to directly contribute to the finishing or resumption of local projects that previously were dragging; redoing sub-standard work; recovering stolen goods; reducing absenteeism by staff at public agencies; and realigning priorities to better align with the needs of local citizens and communities.
- The benefits of a baraza can be enhanced by organizing follow-up barazas in a relatively short period, as failure to do so may demoralize local stakeholders.
- Increased citizen education and a good working relationship between the political and technical leadership in government are also important to barazas' success.

Studies on governance show that the provision of information and the involvement of beneficiaries in project monitoring can significantly improve both the quantity and the quality of local public service delivery.¹ Drawing on findings from a qualitative impact assessment of barazas,² this policy note provides evidence on the impact pathways through which beneficiary involvement in project monitoring improves public service delivery.

The Baraza project, initiated in 2009, is a government-led effort to increase the quality of public service delivery in Uganda. This is done through the provision of a baraza³ – a citizen advocacy

forum/meeting – at which local citizens receive information and deliberate about the extent and adequacy of public service provision with policy makers and other local government officials.

This policy note summarizes results from a 2017 qualitative impact assessment of the Baraza project that explored:

- i. self-identified pathways through which barazas influence public service delivery, as expressed by baraza participants;
- ii. motivating factors behind behavioral changes surrounding baraza implementation;
- iii. hindrances to achieving positive outcomes; and
- iv. opportunities for enhancing the implementation of barazas in the future.

The assessment focused on two barazas – one district-level baraza in Masindi district in the Western Region of Uganda and one sub-county level baraza in Bagezza sub-county in Mubende district in Central region.

Background

Notable among the reforms the government of Uganda (GoU) has undertaken to address the country's development challenges is a drive to decentralize government. This effort began in the early 1990s. Decentralization was viewed as an important mechanism to address both welfare and governance challenges by improving the efficiency of public service delivery, bringing representative governance closer to citizens, and empowering local stakeholders in development efforts in their communities⁴. Despite the decentralization efforts, public service delivery in Uganda has continued to suffer from limited local-level empowerment, ineffective monitoring, and weak public service accountability mechanisms.

To improve local monitoring and accountability processes, the GoU, under the stewardship of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) initiated the Baraza project in 2009. As citizen advocacy forums, barazas aim to “enhance public involvement in holding the government accountable for service delivery in relation to the resources spent”⁵. The ultimate goal is to increase the quality of public service delivery.

Barazas were first piloted under the project in 2009/10. The full-scale implementation phase of the project ran from 2010/2011 through 2012/2013. With funding from the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) of the Global Development Network (GDN), the GoU in 2015 invited the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to conduct a rigorous impact evaluation study of the impacts of barazas on public service delivery using careful analytical strategies. This evaluation involved a randomized control trial experiment in several areas complemented by the qualitative impact assessment study reported upon here.

The qualitative assessment was conducted in 2017 on the district-level baraza in Masindi district and the Bagezza sub-county baraza in Mubende district. As the principal input to the qualitative assessment, a series of focus group discussions were held with the three main stakeholders in the local barazas – politicians, civil servants, and citizens. In addition, semi-structured interviews were held with some local experts. We inquired about any changes in how public services were delivered locally since the barazas began to be held, asking respondents to reflect on how these changes came about and what motivated the agents involved to affect the changes.

The baraza event and participant stakeholders

A baraza event in any district or sub-county is coordinated by OPM. It is attended by district and sub-county officials, including the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), the Resident District Commissioner (RDC), the Local Council Chairperson, sector heads, sub-county administrative officers (chiefs), and general citizens, including opinion leaders and elders. The baraza meeting is chaired by the Office of the RDC. During the baraza, the RDC seeks accountability and feedback from each head of major sectors – health, education, physical infrastructure, and agriculture – by asking each to make a presentation on:

- i. What services were planned to be delivered in the sub-county or district?
- ii. What was actually delivered and in what quantity and quality?
- iii. What issues and challenges have emerged, and what is the way forward?

The RDC then seeks reactions and feedback from citizens on whether what noted in the sector presentation is what was planned for and whether those goods and services were actually delivered. Sector heads are then given an opportunity to clarify on or react to any issues raised by the citizens.

After a baraza is finished, the RDC makes a report on the meeting to the OPM, indicating issues that arose. This report is to point out in particular any policy or program implementation weaknesses and challenges. These concerns feed into the general government performance management system.

Results

Self-assessed impacts from barazas

In the qualitative assessment, stakeholders had no difficulty providing examples of changes they felt were a direct result of the barazas: Projects that were previously dragging were finished or taken up afresh, sub-standard work was redone, stolen goods were recovered, absenteeism at government agencies was reduced, and priorities were changed to better align with citizens' needs.

Examples of how barazas can speed up projects were provided in Bagezza sub-county. Residents complained during the baraza that the government promised a "seed" secondary school in Mugungulu parish, but that no follow-up action had ensued. Officials from the education department attending the baraza explained that the district had recently received substantial funds from the central government for the construction of this school. After the baraza, land surveying took place. In January 2017, it was reported that the government had hired 21 new teachers, giving the impression that plans for the school's construction were becoming more concrete.

Marching band in Bagezza sub-county, Mubende district, publicizing an upcoming local baraza forum



Source: Authors.

Projects that were previously dragging were finished; sub-standard work was redone; stolen goods were recovered; absenteeism at government agencies was reduced; and priorities were aligned with citizens' needs.

Similar examples of how barazas have been used to uncover sub-standard work on government projects or by public agencies and bring about corrective action were reported in Masindi.

Baraza impact pathways

A substantial part of the impact of barazas in improving local public service delivery seemed to derive simply from how barazas reduce inefficiencies in the flow of information among local citizens and organizations. For example, the Bagezza sub-county Chairperson noted that provision of information during a baraza is important because citizens better understand what ‘belongs’ to them.

Barazas reduce inefficiencies in local information flows and increase top-down monitoring

The example of the seed secondary school was used. Both technical and political staff at the sub-county level had heard of the plans to open the new school in the sub-county. However, it was only after questioning the CAO during the baraza that they learnt that the funds were available and that a school board meeting had already taken place. Moreover, the information flow is two-way. The sub-county Chairperson emphasized that barazas gave him information from communities in the area on which public goods and services they place the greatest priority.

Increased top-down monitoring – that is, district to sub-county – was yet another major perceived impact pathway for improved service delivery through barazas.

Motivations for behavioral changes surrounding baraza implementation

Service providers acknowledged that citizens are now more willing and able to report problems or other issues that they are experiencing with public service delivery than before. These increased complaints, they added, are motivating service providers to better account for how they fulfil their responsibilities. The increased flow of information about what is expected and what has actually happened with respect to public service delivery leads to a change in service providers’ norms and practices. They feel more certain that they will be reported to their bosses, such as the CAO and the Local Council Chairperson, for any non-performance of their duties, and they fear that this may result in indictment.

Citizens are now more compelled to report service delivery issues than before they participated in a baraza

Limits to barazas

Focus group discussions suggest that a baraza can only be effective if there is regular follow-up by all stakeholders involved. In particular, it is important that a subsequent baraza is organized in the same area in a relatively short period such that residents can be updated on the steps taken to resolve the issues raised at the previous meeting. Failure to follow up on issues raised during the baraza, both in terms of action and information, may undermine barazas as a governance tool.

Stakeholders may get demoralized if a baraza is not followed-up by another in the same area to address the issues raised at previous barazas

The often-poor relationship between local politicians and technical personnel is another clear hindrance to achieving improved service delivery outcomes from the introduction of a baraza in a community. This was observed in the Masindi district baraza in a particularly problematic relationship between the CAO and the District Council Chairperson. With the public airing of

information on the quality of and failures in local public service delivery, barazas can bring out into the open such problematic working relationships and escalate them to a crisis level.

Recommendations for strengthening barazas

In general, stakeholders are very positive about barazas. Barazas are especially important to reduce information asymmetries, as government officials learn about the priorities of citizens, and the citizens' often unrealistic expectations are matched up against reality. In addition, the bottom-up approach of the baraza leads to an increase in top-down monitoring, as officials learn from vocal citizens how to scrutinize public services delivered.

Failure to follow up on the issues raised during a baraza is a real threat to the baraza model. Instead of just holding government accountable, barazas can also become a platform to collectively reflect on how inputs can be most effectively translated into outcomes, and what the role of each stakeholder is.

Civic education, through which citizens will be sensitized about the proper use of public services and their responsibility for maintaining public infrastructure, is also seen as an important complementary effort to barazas. This would contribute to an improved understanding of what citizens can expect from government and how they should engage with government for improved local delivery of public goods and services.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bjorkman, M., and J. Svensson. 2009. "Power to the People: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment on Community-Based Monitoring in Uganda." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124 (2): 735–769.
- ² van Campenhout, B., E. Bizimungu, J. Smart, and N. Kabunga. 2018. "Impact pathways of a participatory local governance initiative in Uganda: a qualitative exploration." *Development in Practice*, 28 (8): 1046-1056.
- ³ *Baraza* is a generic term used in Uganda for a public meeting. It is taken from Kiswahili.
- ⁴ Francis, P., and R. James. 2003. "Balancing Rural Poverty Reduction and Citizen Participation: The Contradictions of Uganda's Decentralization Program." *World Development*, 31 (2): 325-337.
- ⁵ Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). 2013. *Implementation of the Baraza Initiative: Progress Report*. Kampala: Government of Uganda.

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