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THE EVOLUTION OF DEVOLUTION

Considerations for Scaling Local Participatory Planning in Kenya

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Horn of Africa has confronted recurring and increasingly severe droughts threatening economic development and humanitarian disaster. Within this, participatory governance – which aims to include the voices of those *affected* by these problems in the development of solutions – has been increasingly deployed to by multi-lateral donors, NGOs, and domestic governments. Drawing on an in-depth case study of participatory governance in Northern Kenya's dryland region, our study seeks to broadly understand how and when this approach provides the expected instrumental benefits of better tailoring the targeting of aid and public goods and also strengthens the long-term the state-society relation from the grassroots.

Only a decade in, Kenya's devolution, catalyzed by its 2010 referendum and coming into full effect only as recently as 2013, has already produced a sea-change in Kenya's political structure. The creation of county-level governments has dramatically improved the dispersion of development funding from a national perspective, directly allocating fiscal resources to the county-level and allowing previously marginalized

counties to accelerate investment in public services and infrastructure. However, while addressing national-level marginalization, devolved, county-level governance structures have reproduced from many of the weaknesses extant at the national level, including centralizing power in the executive, ‘Big Man’ politics, clientelism, corruption, and weak political party structures (Cornell & D’Arcy 2016; Cheeseman et al. 2019; Ngigi & Busolo 2019).

If increasing the proximity of government structures to the county level is insufficient to avoid reproducing negative governance patterns, how then should the Kenyan government and international community promote democratic and normatively ‘good’ governance in practice, especially at the local level?

A common response in Kenya and globally has been to introduce **participatory planning institutions**, which enable the direct and formal involvement of citizens in a public process to first identify public policy problems and then propose public projects to address these issues (Smoke 2008). By participating in public and deliberative meetings, participatory interventions are thought to improve the quality of public goods while improving the long-term quality of state-society relations. These interventions broaden a community’s interface with government, providing both accountability and acting as a conduit for knowledge about local problems (Oates 1999, as cited in Casey 2018). Programs are also designed to empower marginalized groups in the face of elites or parochial interests through quotas for representation meant to ensure full participation in deliberation and collective action (Gibson & Woolcock 2008; Sheely 2014).

While participatory planning models have become increasingly popular in the past two decades, rigorous evaluations on these interventions paint a mixed picture about whether and when these programs can achieve their stated aims of increased efficiency and democratic empowerment (White et al. 2018; Casey 2018; Baiocchi et al. 2011; Wampler et al. 2021; Touchton and Wampler 2022).¹ Studies find that the programs seem to operate effectively in some contexts, while producing null or even negative results in others, across a wide variety of indicators.

Our research is motivated by a desire to disentangle the mixed results in the broader literature and to provide guidance to policy makers and funders in Kenya working on issues related to devolution and good governance about whether, when, and how different participatory institutions are able to achieve their stated outcomes, and especially to point out potential pitfalls to avoid when ‘scaling’ these models.

Given that attempts to assess participatory planning interventions without considering the key active ingredients have produced frustratingly inconclusive results, we use in-depth case studies and causal process tracing to understand the causal mechanisms operating within a single participatory planning intervention. This allows us to look ‘under the hood’ of a complex participatory planning intervention and use this vantage to make recommendations about how to design and deploy programs between different contexts.

Our in-depth case studies and causal process tracing focus on **Ward Development Planning (WDP)**, a participatory planning intervention implemented by Mercy Corps.² WDP is embedded within the wider

¹ The majority of the scholarly literature has focused on either Community Driven Development (White et al. 2018; Casey 2018) or Participatory Budgeting (Bartocci et al. 2022; Wampler et al. 2021), however, participatory planning is a category of policies and interventions, encompassing a range of possible designs.

² In Kenya, Wards are a sub-county governing area consisting of villages and are the political unit that elects a representative Member of the County Assembly (MCA) to the county legislature.

Livestock Market Systems (LMS) program funded by USAID and operating from 2017-2023 in five Kenyan counties in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) region of Kenya: Turkana, Wajir, Garissa, Isiolo, and Marsabit.³ These counties are also all part of the Frontier Counties Development Council (FCDC), a regional bloc of county governments supporting good governance and economic development in the region.

From among the five counties where WDP was implemented, Garissa, Turkana, and Isiolo County were selected for field research to maximize variation across ethnicity, religion, and geography. Field research took place in November 2021 and included 58 interviews and 7 focus group discussions, representing a diverse range of voices related to the intervention. The respondents (n=75) include program participants (n=54), county and national government stakeholders (n=12), and implementing staff (n=9). 27% (n=20) of the respondents were female and 73% were male (n=55).

The remainder of this report summarizes our main findings and recommendations. First, we summarize the internal and external factors that allowed the Ward Development Planning intervention to fill a governance gap in Northern Kenya. Second, we present recommendations for scaling the WDP model and similar participatory planning approaches within Kenya and other contexts.

Summary of Key Findings

- The Ward Development Planning intervention produced positive changes in local governance through the following pathways:
 - **Empowering communities** to directly engage in development planning
 - **Limiting marginalization** of communities and wards by creating inclusive and democratic structures to advocate for the ward-level plan
 - **Enabling participatory representation** by Ward Planning Committees that have strong social connections with the communities that they represent
 - **Providing information** that helps counties prioritize funding towards pressing needs
- The success of WDP and other participatory planning interventions depends on strategically adapting design and implementation to:
 - **Avoid redundancy** with existing institutions
 - Emphasize “**best fit**” **program designs** that are adapted to local context
 - Maintain a focus on the core values at the heart of the participatory model: **quality, inclusion, legitimacy, and representative selection**
 - Select staff members with high capacity and intrinsic motivation by investing in **fair and competitive hiring**
 - **Devolve responsibility** to local implementers who are best positioned to judge whether genuine participation and empowerment are occurring

³ The broader LMS program is implemented by a consortium that includes ACDI Voca, Mercy Corps, BOMA Project, and Smart Regional Consultants.

Findings

The WDP model is a participatory planning and development process designed to strengthen community capacities to assess their own needs, and to prioritize, plan and implement their projects. The model is inclusive along geographic and social lines through a locally representative planning committee who are intensively engaged through a systematic process of selection, training, deliberation, planning and advocacy (Figure 1). The model empowers communities to participate in identifying and prioritizing development projects, articulating those priorities within a ward development plan, and electing a **Ward Planning Committee (WPC)** with a broad membership across villages, gender, and age groups to oversee implementation of the plan and to engage directly with county government and other ward and county-level development actors.



Figure 1. Four-stage summary of the WDP Process

Previous program evaluations conducted by Mercy Corps suggest that the WDP model has increased the capacity of local communities to participate in resilience-oriented development planning and to prevent and manage conflicts related to natural resource use. The program has been recognized by Kenyan county governments as a promising model for replication, and county legislatures are in the process of passing legislation that institutionalizes the model in law.

Our research finds that these successes of WDP were contingent on three enabling factors: 1) WDP **filled a genuine governance gap** in a non-redundant manner, 2) the design of the WPC institution was **responsive to contextual factors that might have impeded its ability to function effectively**, and 3) WDP granted **field-level implementers the resources, capacity, authorization, and motivation** to exercise discretion and make further adaptations during implementation.

These findings about WDP suggest that the effectiveness of the broader category of participatory planning interventions depends on the extent to which the team implementing a given program is able successfully activate these enabling factors within the context where they are working. This implication is in contrast with the existing research and evaluation literature on participatory planning, which has argued that this type of intervention does not tend to work on average. Our findings challenge this premise by stressing the ability of participatory planning interventions to be successfully adapted in response to a variety of challenging contextual factors, such as weak political parties, prevailing patterns of corruption and elite capture, and systematic exclusion based on geography, age, or gender.

The implications of these findings for participatory planning are potentially profound. Our findings reveal that anchoring scale-up efforts in the search for static, 'best practice' models of participatory planning may be pursuing a mirage. There is a world of difference between asking “**do participatory planning interventions work**” versus “**how can they work?**” Our findings suggest that donors would do well to concentrate on the latter question when designing, evaluating, and scaling participatory planning interventions. To increase the likelihood that participatory planning interventions succeed funders, researchers, and implementers working to scale participatory planning approaches should more explicitly stress the need for significant and ongoing

adaptation in both the design and implementation phases. We provide concrete illustrations of what these adaptations may be and how they can be put into action in our concluding recommendations.

Filling a Genuine Institutional Gap in Form *and* Function

Governance gaps are not evenly distributed within political contexts, and participatory designs should be careful that they are diagnosing where these gaps exist. Relevant to our case, Kenya's, county-level institutions are significantly better developed and supported than ward-level institutions below them, due to significant devolution of roles to the county in the 2010 constitution.

We find that in the three northern Kenyan counties considered in our study, there was a **ward-level governance gap**—as evidenced by sparse ward-level governance institutions or civil society groups. This is unsurprising, given the relative novelty of ward- and county-level governance within Kenya's historical and political context, which were established ahead of the first election under the new constitution in 2013. Since this time, more attention has been paid to county-level government, which received direct fiscal responsibility, compared to ward-level political organizing or civic development. This may not be the case for all counties in the FCDC region or Kenya more broadly. Notably, unlike at the ward-level, *community-level* governance and civil society institutions were fairly robust, though informal, and therefore village-level planning institutions may have a higher risk of being redundant or parallel to existing power structures, potentially providing a lower marginal benefit and potential downside of obfuscating lines of accountability.⁴

Besides a gap in governance, we also find that the pre-existing participatory institutions were fairly under-resourced or else defunct, and therefore the WDP intervention was not meaningfully redundant with other development actors seeking to establish participatory governance structures. Yet, even within the few years of WDP implementation, there were instances where NGO-led projects would enter the wards with the intention to deploy a participatory assessment process. While some degree of coordinated verification and updating may be useful, the accumulation of participatory structures, when a legitimate and high-quality process has already been undertaken, may both be inefficient and lead to fatigue.

Filling a governance gap takes more than just creating a new institutional form—that institution also needs to fulfil a meaningful set of functions related to representation, accountability, and service provision. Our evidence indicates that the WDP intervention creates a set of participatory planning institutions and related practices that function as a as a broad, democratic, and participatory interface between local-level community institutions and county-level institutions.⁵ In particular, the WDP fills ward-level governance gaps in the studied wards in counties in four major ways.

First, the WDP process **empowers communities to directly engage in development planning through a systematic process of selection, training, and deliberation**. WPC respondents emphasized how the WDP built their ability to understand how development decisions were made and how to actively promote

⁴ See Beath et al. (2015) for an account of this dynamic of how redundant participatory planning institutions can hinder good governance, from Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program.

⁵ These findings are consistent with the program's overall theory of change and should be interpreted as evidence that the program was successful at achieving its stated aims. In this study, we were not able to directly measure the downstream impacts of the WDP intervention on outcomes related to the quality of governance and public goods allocations. We are currently implementing new research that will aim to measure and evaluate the extent to which WDP had the intended effect on these outcomes.

the interests of their community vis-a-vis the dominant development actors in their counties: county government and international NGOs. This included learning how to identify community problems, how to develop a structured development plan in the ward development plan document, and finally how to engage with the government productively, through formal channels. This experience of empowerment was subjectively in sharp contrast with previous experiences with similar programs led by other implementers, where WPC members expressed recurring frustration when the county government or international NGOs implemented projects without seriously consulting the community or building their capacity to understand the development process taking place.

Second, the WDP intervention limits **marginalization of communities within the ward, and of wards within the wider county** by creating a ward-level development plan and an inclusive and democratically legitimated Ward Planning Committee to advocate for the ward-level plan. Since the 11-15 members are drawn from across the ward, each WPC member represents a distinct locale, collectively covering the entire ward. WPC members, including those from ethnic minority communities, felt that this geographic dispersion limited the marginalization of minority groups and also the domination of one village cluster. Respondents also suggested that this distributed design hinders attempts to co-opt the body, since they represent a broader array of interests across the entire ward, rather than the interests of one community – this makes them relatively more expensive to ‘buy-off’ than if power was centralized in a single head.

In one illustrative instance, WPC design, and its emphasis on treating all geographic inclusion, was able to block an ongoing pattern of parochial, clientelist treatment by an MCA, which previously directed a disproportionate amount of funding to his home village within the ward. After the WDP process, this preferential treatment became less tenable, as it could be compared against publicly stated priorities of the *entire* ward, including the MCA’s hometown. The resulting WDP directed money more equitably, with relatively less investment being proposed for the MCA’s home area compared to others, as it had received more previous investments and therefore had fewer acute needs.

Third, the WDP process **creates participatory representation for the ward, activating multiple types of accountability**. Mercy Corps convened community members in geographically distributed, participatory meetings to identify development priorities for their ward and to select WPC members. Participatory processes for selecting local representatives provide a richer institutional interface with the wider community, relative to voting alone. During inclusive public selection meetings, deliberation allowed community members to make value-based cases for why a candidate should be a member of a WPC, followed by a public selection process (consensus-seeking consultation or queue voting). In addition, members of the WPC and remain embedded in communities between selection cycles, allowing for ongoing informal accountability. This embeddedness stems from the hyper-local nature of the WPC, whose members continued to live in their village communities while serving, thus remaining enmeshed in day-to-day social patterns. This contrasts with community perception of county representatives who were perceived as living in the faraway county capital and only responsive or accountable during the campaign season.

Finally, the WDP intervention **provides needed ‘ground-level’ information to county-level actors, informing the County Integrated Development Plans and Annual Development Plans**. This helped counties prioritize funding towards the most pressing needs and avoiding wasteful projects. Government agencies and international development funders often lack information about where to target public infrastructure most efficiently. This includes investments designed to manage or mitigate the impacts of climate change. For instance, during the current drought, there is an urgent need for information about where is best to place new boreholes or piping. While seemingly simple, the question often interacts with

complex factors such as migratory patterns and existing assignments of strategic grazing reserves. Weighing different community needs—especially when all needs are severe—is difficult both technically and ethically.

Very often, government and NGO investments result in white elephants, which were inefficient, redundant or actively harmful. Nearly every ward interviewed had pre-WPC stories of ‘white elephant’ investments by the government or NGOs, in which they provided redundant or inefficient public goods. Both governments and WPC members felt the WDP addressed this problem by serving as a ward-level information hub, providing a single ward development plan document which both listed and ranked community priorities related to resilience and climate change. This central document, based on highly textured local information, was novel within the counties and provided an opportunity to integrate community-identified needs into NGO and government plans. The WPC also served as an ongoing, community-level accountability function, by monitoring whether projects were implemented as described in the ward-planning document.

How Institutional Design Interacts with the Local Context

Participatory planning institutions entail a variety of possible design features, for instance whether to have delegated versus direct participation, how to select delegates, what is a locally appropriate means of inviting community members to meetings, how to draw the geographic unit which makes up a ‘community’, and what is a locally legitimate set of rules and operations for WPCs.

Because the WDP was designed specifically for the Kenyan context, we find that its institutional design was well suited for the context it was operating within. Wards in the counties studied were typically ethnically homogenous, with relatively low identity conflict or class cleavages, especially in rural areas. While civil society at the ward level was largely absent, civil society and informal governance at the village / village cluster level was robust and legitimate. Strong local civil society, combined with low conflict cleavages allowed for high internal social cohesion within the village / village clusters which served as the ‘community’ unit of the intervention.

There are multiple examples of how the WDP intervention’s design was well-matched to the local contexts in which it was implemented. In most wards, public selection processes were able to select WPC members based on perceived trustworthiness and previous civic service. This was dependent on relatively robust and pre-existing civil society at the local level, which signaled these qualities to the community. Another common finding was that the high density of connections between individual representatives and the local community of WPC members provided an informal accountability mechanism.⁶ This was dependent on constituent villages clusters being ethnically homogenous, having limited economic inequality, and having relatively high social cohesion. In other wards, selecting committee members from geographic regions across the ward served as a horizontal accountability mechanism, which limited the ability of any one village cluster representative to be overly parochial by advocating for their own community over other. However, this was partially dependent on dense social ties between communities in the ward such, as intermarriage and shared ethnicity. **The fit between the each of these intervention design elements and the local context**

⁶ In governance research, social connections between governance actors and communities have also been described as “social embeddedness” and “linking social capital”. See Tsai (2007) for a discussion on how solidarity ties and embeddedness operate as informal accountability mechanisms.

allowed for the program to succeed, and the same institution may struggle if these factors were not in place.

Besides being responsive to the context, the program's components also interacted with one another. The best example of this was that the WDP process was largely consultative and its decisions were non-binding with regard to NGO or public budgets. This had a number of effects. First, there were weak incentives for community or government elites to try and capture the process. As a result, the program was able to proactively include government leaders as *ex officio* members within the committees, to both provide technical advice and increase the legitimacy of the resulting ward development plan. This was a boon for the program, as it was able to coordinate closely with county government actors and work for integration with only a small risk of capture, a topic we revisit below. Finally, because the program did not control actual budgets, there were few instances where the committee had to make direct trade-offs to entirely include or exclude certain public goods within the plan. Rather, the plans could accommodate far more than would actually be funded within five years. Because of this, the WDP process was able to allow prioritization to be largely based on informal discussions and consensus-seeking, with minimal risk of conflict.

Adaptive Implementation and Managing for Motivation

We also find that the process of implementation at the ground-level matters enormously, and success is only partially a result of getting the institutional 'recipe' right. We find that field-level implementers operate as *strategic* agents, who substantially influence whether a program is able to trigger the causal pathways assumed by its theory of change. We emphasize this strategic nature of implementation, because these field-implementers make decisions based on a program's high-level theory of change, in conjunction with a set of intuitive theories regarding how a program's theory of change operates within a specific context. No matter how specific a participatory process is, it cannot be entirely specified, and there will always be substantial discretionary space where the field agent must deploy contextual knowledge of what is politically and practically feasible and locally legitimate, weighing this against what may represent the 'standard' form of the intended program design element.

This was demonstrated within our case study in Kenya, as the WDP implementation process was reliant on the ability of high-capacity local implementers to operate semi-autonomously, with limited direct observation in the field. This autonomy allowed implementers to use strategic discretion regarding how to best implement the program's design features. Instances of discretion and adaptation were ubiquitous throughout implementation. However, below we discuss three recurring types of adaptation:

First, implementers **adjusted design features to be locally recognizable and legitimate**. Doing this well requires a detailed understanding of the local political and social context, which field-level implementers are best positioned to bring to bear. A clear and recurring example of this discretionary adaptation being applied across concerns how WPC members were selected. For the program's theory of change, it is pivotal that this selection process be perceived as open and fair within the community. Yet, at the community-level context in Kenya, what a legitimate and fair selection process looks like differs by region and ethnicity. Thus, within ethnic Turkana communities, we find that, after a deliberative and open process for selecting candidates, queue voting was used almost exclusively to select the successful candidates. However, within ethnically Buran communities, communities deliberated to select the candidates, followed by another round of consensus-seeking consultation to select the final members. In some cases, participants drew comparisons between these forms of deliberation to select committee members and the importance of public consultation (shura) within Islam for making decisions.

Second, implementers **protected the process from political interference**. There were multiple reports that implementers had to fend off attempts to influence the selection process or strategically invited civil and government actors jointly, to create additional transparency and accountability. However, perhaps the most striking example of field-level discretion took place when the wife of a local chief became a candidate for the committee. While this was not against the rules (chiefs were automatically *ex-officio* but typically could not be members) the implementer decided to adapt the selection process, to account for the possibility that community members would not feel comfortable publicly voting against the chief's wife. The implementer instead implemented a secret ballot selection mechanism, and the wife was not elected.

Third, and most broad category for discretionary action concerns **what implementers do beyond what is either strictly included in the programs' design, and also beyond what is observable to their managers**. This includes the innumerable micro-decisions which project staff must make in accomplishing a project as transaction intensive as participatory planning, including hundreds of interactions with community, government, and civil society stakeholders, each of which represents some degree of opportunity for the program but are also costly in terms of time and effort for the implementer. Despite the natural incentive to implement of the program with an eye to 'minimal compliance', avoiding costly effort which requires going beyond the program's required actions. We find that program implementers often went well beyond observable effort to ensure the program operated as intended throughout all stages of implementation.

Accountability and oversight, no matter how granular, are unlikely to replace the value of intrinsic motivation, combined with authorization from management to make discretionary decisions. Though the management of the WDP intervention was not the focus of our study, throughout interacting with staff, we observed that they felt empowered to make in-the-field tactical decisions about how to best navigate uncertainty and various micro-decisions involved in implementing community meetings and the broader participatory planning process. Rather than managing through accountability, there was a steady flow of communication between staff and management, which was largely consultative, and did not seem to impose an overly rigid formula. Aligning with current research on managing for motivation, rather than control, this style protected the intrinsic motivation of field-level implementers, and crucially, this motivation was combined with authorization from the management-structure to make field-level decisions strategically, allow local implementers to use their own judgment in problem solving (Honig 2018, Honig 2022).

Recommendations

As participatory planning institutions continue to proliferate both in Kenya and around the world, our research points to the need for funders, policy makers, and implementers to re-conceptualize what it means to bring participatory planning programs to scale. Most broadly, our findings suggest that stakeholders would do well to abandon the language related to 'what works' and the associated desire to 'scale evidence-based models'. Rather, we suggest that stakeholders base scale-up efforts for WDP and other participatory interventions on an understanding that 'good' institutional design is contingent on a careful process of adapting program elements. This type of adaption requires that program designers and implementers are empowered to assess and anticipate which contextual factors (cultural, institutional, political) may enable or block the program's theory of change.

While we do not seek to provide universal solutions, below we discuss three core problems which this adaptation must address: avoiding redundancy, matching program design to context, and encouraging the use of adaptation and discretion at the field level.

Avoiding Redundancy

Participatory planning interventions should limit competition with informal governance structures with pre-existing legitimacy. Governance structures very often exist, even when the formal state is weak or missing. While wards are something of an exception in Kenya, due to their novelty, there is a high risk in other contexts that the participatory institution will overlap with existing structures, and there are many examples globally where programs created competing institutions.⁷ Even if existing, traditional governance structures do not exhibit all the characteristics desired from a policy standpoint. For example, they may have limited capacity or may be based on patriarchal or ageist norms. Even in these cases, there are costs to creating competing structures when a locally legitimate one exists and is performing some functions.

Government agencies, donors and civil society organizations should coordinate to avoid proliferating redundant participatory processes in the same communities. Even within the brief time in which WDP was being implemented, there were instances where NGO-led projects would enter the wards with the intention to deploy a parallel participatory process. International NGOs especially must navigate a tendency to discount existing participatory planning programs led by competitors, while also avoiding overstating the success of their own. These patterns are likely intensified by competition for funding and, potentially legitimate, fears that existing participatory structures have been captured by political actors.⁸

Matching Program Design to Context

Efforts to ‘scale’ the WDP and other participatory planning institutions must understand and be responsive to how specific institutional design elements interact with contextual factors. For example, delegated representation may function best when there is a strong and independent civil society at the smaller geographic ‘community’ unit from which the program is drawing. When that is not the case, a program may instead opt for more direct participation and decision-making by community members. This same logic can be applied to numerous design aspects as the WDP model expands.

To allow for this complex understanding of participatory planning institutions to be mapped onto a new context and specific social, political, and economic goals, **fundors must invest in the process of transferring and adapting programs across contexts rather than seeking a silver bullet or set of ‘best practices’ which can scale.** This will entail investing in developing and testing [mid-level theories of change](#) that clearly describe how specific program elements are expected to shape behaviors and interact with the local context (Cartwright 2020).

Increasing the **formalization and power of the WDP will be crucial for its sustainability, yet this will also require a careful assessment of the model’s ability to resist political interference.** We find that the WDP model needs consistent and long-term support to build capacity, beyond a single 5-year cycle. In addition, better integration with government and NGOs will allow the WDP to more effectively direct public funding. As the power of the WPC increases, it may be desire to increase formal social accountability mechanisms that document the committee’s decisions and actions and share this information with the

⁷ For example, see the Community Driven Development project in Afghanistan, where participatory planning diluted accountability (Beath et al. 2013).

⁸ By this, we mean that implementers are more punished for instances of corruption or influence than for lost opportunity for coordination, which is unmeasured in evaluations and less politically embarrassing.

broader community. However, formalization and documentation *alone* may not be sufficient to ensure that WPCs remain responsive and accountable to the communities they represent (Mansbridge 2009). Our findings also stress the importance of authentic participation within selection processes, with wide participation free from interference. In the WDP intervention, wide and uninhibited participation formed the bedrock of informal social accountability, as it allowed communities to select committee members who they knew personally and had close social ties with. These social connections—otherwise known as embeddedness—functioned as a key informal accountability mechanism. We suggest that scale-up efforts should emphasize this informal, social accountability and prioritize the quality of participation as the most important source of accountability. This is expected to produce high quality WPC candidates who are inherently bound to their community through social ties (Tsai 2007).

Encouraging Field-level Adaptation and Discretion

Even if the high-level program model is excellently matched to the needs of a context, the process of implementation matters, and it cannot be standardized. Rather, our findings stress that field-level implementers must strategically use discretion in implementing programs and that allowing for this process to be adaptive is crucial for the success of participatory planning programs. Due to their complexity and extraordinarily transaction-intensive nature, participatory planning implementation cannot be considered a mechanical endeavor (in which a recipe is faithfully executed) but rather should be considered as a deeply strategic task, in which the implementer weighs trade-offs as they decide how to best execute the program within a particular context.

First, funders, policy-makers, and implementers should **realize the necessity of managing for motivation and encouraging the use of ground-level judgment** (Honig 2018; Honig 2022). Investing in fair and competitive selection processes, with adequate pay, are crucial for selecting high capacity and intrinsically motivated implementing staff. Additionally, management structures should carefully frame and design accountability structures, to emphasize their willingness to trust implementers and emphasizing the importance of mission rather than incentives or punishments as a reason for exerting effort. Attempting to scale the institutional form of participatory planning institutions without intrinsically motivated and high capacity implementing staff is likely going to result in relatively empty institutions, in which the mandated institutional *form* exists (community meetings are held), yet the intended *function* (marginalized populations are able to contest via public deliberation) is absent.

Second, **programs should provide field-level implementers with user-friendly theories of change that supplement the existing intuitive theories they are already using.** This will entail creating increased ownership and understanding of the program's mid-level theory of change during onboarding and ongoing adaptive management. It also entails creating a credible perception among field-level implementers that they are empowered to be *strategic* actors who *should* be making significant and ongoing changes to program design during implementation, in service of pursuing the program's stated aims. We find that implementers are constantly deploying such strategic decision-making. However, the theoretical ideas that form the basis for this kind of strategic action are often intuitively applied, and there is significant room to standardize the theory of change across the program at a more granular level. By being empowered as co-owners of a living, user friendly theory-of-change, highly motivated and strategic implementers will be even better able to use their to adaptively respond to different challenges and opportunities that emerge over the course of leading a participatory planning intervention.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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