

Book Review

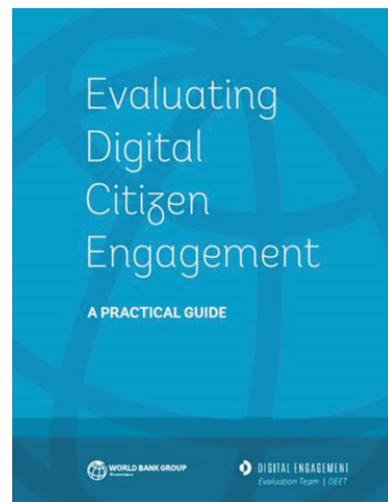
Digital Citizen Engagement: Moving Beyond Conventional Evaluation

World Bank Group, *Evaluating Digital Citizen Engagement: A Practical Guide*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 163 pages. Available free at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/23752>.

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Citizen engagement has long been considered an integral part of achieving developmental results, and the World Bank has recently engaged with this theme in several ways. Two recent examples are the 2014 publication *Closing the Feedback Loop: Can Technology Bridge the Accountability Gap?* and the 2015 launch of the World Bank massive open online course (MOOC) "Engaging Citizens: A Game Changer for Development." A central theme of both initiatives is the host of opportunities and challenges of ICTs in facilitating citizen engagement and promoting improved government accountability. *Evaluating Digital Citizen Engagement: A Practical Guide* seeks to further augment our understanding of ICTs and citizen engagement by focusing explicitly on an evaluation that draws on case studies from Brazil, Uganda, Cameroon, and Kenya. This is a worthy endeavor, particularly given the lack of evaluation frameworks accessible to and relevant for use by development practitioners. The novelty of this guide lies in the fact that it proposes a methodology for evaluation that draws inspiration from academic literature and at the same time it provides a workable template for use at the field level. The guide employs five lenses through which digital citizen engagement is conceptualized and which help to frame the methodology employed for the evaluation exercise.



The first lens relates to the overall program objectives calling for critical evaluation as to whether these objectives are realizable, given the contextual constraints within which the program is embedded. The value of this lens is that it places emphasis on establishing the internal validity of the program in terms of whether its design matches the stated objectives or leads to a *design-reality gap*. An example of such a gap from the information and communication technologies for development (ICTD) literature is the Ration Card Management System in Kerala, where Masiero (2015) shows how a system designed to improve the front-end processing of ration cards through biometric identification of citizens, although adopted by a critical mass of users, ultimately failed to achieve its objective of making the ration card process easier and quicker for citizens. The second lens refers to control and is intended to focus the practitioner's attention on how power manifests itself in a technological project to ensure that the intended users of the system are included from the start of the planning effort. A good example from the ICTD literature is the Akshaya telecenter project in Kerala, where one of the main reasons for the financial and social sustainability of the pilot project was precisely the fact that citizens, local community representatives such as politicians, and religious leaders were invited to take ownership of the project from start (Rajalekshmi, 2007). The third lens refers to participation and brings to the fore issues

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related to access, representation, and agency of citizens as they learn to engage with and propose solutions to local priorities. In particular, many studies have been undertaken to identify the inclusion of marginalized groups in citizen engagement projects. For example, in the context of rural India, Mohanty's (2007) ethnographic study examines the extent to which rural poor women are represented in village development committees aimed at increasing civic engagement in village planning. The study sheds light on how rigid caste and patriarchal hierarchies continue to challenge meaningful participation of women in these forums, preventing them from accessing basic infrastructure and resources. The fourth lens focuses the evaluation exercise on the choice of technology and its affordances, given the various technologies available today that can be used to engage citizens. The guide identifies the need to continuously scan whether new technological solutions and nondigital approaches can be used to enhance citizen engagement. In an ongoing study in Karnataka on improving primary healthcare accountability, village health committees rather than digital technologies appear to be motivating citizens to engage with local health priorities (Madon, 2014). The fifth lens focuses on the impact of the evaluation exercise, sensitizing the practitioner to consider negative and positive, shorter and longer, direct and indirect impacts. The creation of such a data repository can surely serve as a crucial source of learning about how citizen engagement is experienced and the tangible developmental benefits that accrue to communities.

The book's main strength lies in how it straddles conceptualization and hands-on practical application. The conceptual framework developed in the book is made operational in the practical guide and toolkits that use quantitative and qualitative methods to assist practitioners in evaluating digital citizen engagement projects. However, a question remains regarding the capacity of the evaluation exercise to address the complexities and uncertainties characteristic of initiatives designed to bring about social change within the context of competing developmental priorities. This raises a deeper epistemological issue about what we hope to gain from the evaluation exercise. The evaluation questions derived from the objective lens focus on the achievement of stated goals which are refined during the course of the evaluation exercise using data obtained from citizens on contextual issues. This means that the entire evaluation exercise can be interpreted as a top-down, planned undertaking, although in reality the social context within which a digital citizen engagement project is implemented can surely give rise to behavior that may support, inhibit, or divert the project from its initially preconceived objectives. For example, drawing on the study of digitized ration cards mentioned earlier, while citizens were engaged in terms of using the technological intervention, there were no tangible developmental gains for them in obtaining basic ration items.

An evaluation approach that appears to be more appropriate for handling the complexity inherent in the implementation of social change initiatives may be *developmental evaluation* (Patton, 2011). Here, the purpose of the evaluation exercise is neither formative nor summative, but aims at learning about and experimenting with the intervention at the same time it is being rolled out and in partnership with project implementers. Rather than being predetermined at the outset of the evaluation exercise, such an approach to evaluation would consider the goals of a digital citizen engagement initiative to be both emergent and dynamic. Moreover, the time for the evaluation would not be fixed and externally imposed, but fluid, thereby providing scope for gaining an understanding of how the process of engaging citizens occurs. Instead of a singular focus on the potential of ICTs to engage citizens, local government functionaries and elected representatives have a crucial role to play in engaging citizens and providing improved services. For example, based on fieldwork conducted in eastern India, Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, and Veron (2005) found that a tribal woman in a rural locality who needs to engage with the government is far more likely to turn to a local political or government official for assistance in obtaining an entitlement such as a ration card or pension, for employment, or to register a death. It follows, then, that citizen engagement is a process that needs to be enacted over time primarily through interactions that take place between state and societal actors who come together to strengthen the ground-level practice of democratic accountability. Longitudinal analysis of trends in participation rates of citizens in digital engagement projects and associated community factors can provide a more holistic understanding of outcomes in terms of improving government accountability.

While *Evaluating Digital Citizen Engagement* has provided a useful initial framework for evaluating digital citizen engagement, recent advances in evaluation theory need to be harnessed to move beyond conventional

goal-oriented approaches. In particular, the entire point of evaluation should be around simultaneously learning and adapting to new experiences, both digital and non-digital as they emerge during program implementation. By doing so, the huge investment that has no doubt been earmarked for evaluating digital citizen engagement projects will have a better chance to influence policy action aimed at improving service delivery to citizens in the developing world. ■

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