

# Policy Brief



## An Institutional Account of Public Service Reforms

A case study of Civic Engagement in Water and Sanitation in Tanzania#

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### Introduction

This brief snapshot key findings from an explanatory qualitative case study that examined the role of civic engagement (CE) in the evolving systems for providing water and sanitation (WATSAN) services in Tanzania. This issue is timely because after more than a decade of implementing civic engagement reforms little is known of how: One, the public participates in the formulation of the reforms and in implementation processes, and Two, the influence, if any, of the community on service provision. The study adopted a case study of water and sanitation of Kawe ward, a local authority area in Kinondoni, Tanzania. It drew on the literatures on public service reforms, civic engagement and historical institutionalism to provide an in-depth, qualitative, rich description of public service reforms, civic engagement and the interactions between civic and organisational actors in defining the provision of water and sanitation services in the case study area.

Fieldwork for the study was conducted between March and July 2014.

Overall, the study established the following two key findings:

- Policy prescriptions for civic engagement in water and sanitation are less than clear. Profound rule ambiguities define the institutional frameworks and processes that produce mixed effects in how civic engagement influences service provision in water and sanitation.
- Reform design in water and sanitation in Tanzania suggests that not enough collective attention has been paid to the conditions required to make civic engagement and other wider reforms in more effective.

This study makes a contribution to the public service reforms and civic engagement literatures by analysing the political and practical complexities underpinning the implementation of civic engagement reforms. It recommends that policy stakeholders, particularly the state, need to review the institutions for civic engagement in a bid to resolve these ambiguities through improved specificity, clarity and resources that will improve the attainment of common objectives in water and sanitation.

## Background and Problem Statement

CE relates to the ability of citizens to influence the development and quality of policy and its delivery through active interactions with other governance stakeholders. CE has been a feature of institutional reforms in WATSAN in Tanzania, intent on improving public service performance. The inclusion of CE in WATSAN reforms in Tanzania mirrors international best practices, first exemplified by the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal 8 and subsequently Sustainable Development Goal 16, that advocate for increased participation and assembly of partnerships for development.

At its core, the motivation for CE in policy and attendant reforms is often based on its normative appeal, as something that ought to be strengthened for moral reasons, and its practical relevance as a governance mechanism for producing effective and equitable outcomes (Barnes et al., 2014). The thinking is that by working collaboratively, civically engaged actors should be able to obtain results that would not be possible independently.

To ensure compliance with international best practices, Tanzania has ratified various international WATSAN codes, and reviewed its policy and institutional framework governing WATSAN to advocate for increased CE in provision, cost recovery, decentralisation of management functions, and a plan of action for integrated resource management (Doering, 2005; URT, 2002). Tanzania has widened citizens' participation in WATSAN in part in an attempt to pool resources to tackle high capital costs in the expansion of access, environmental sustainability of ecosystems, adverse hydrological risks such as floods and droughts, and distributional equity (URT, 1991, 2002). The promise has been that improved WATSAN services would yield benefits spanning a panoply of social and economic spheres, from reductions in health risks and associated opportunity costs to improvements in productivity and returns to labour.

Yet, despite two full decades of reforms in WATSAN, there is mixed evidence of changes in policy delivery. On the one hand, regulatory frameworks (statutory laws, policies, and strategies) and institutions have been put in place. There have been two new water policies, legislations on WATSAN (addressing water and sanitation health), numerous policy implementation strategies and programmes, and legislation for independent regulation. On the other hand, performance indicators related to coverage and utilisation of services show modest improvements in water supply and stagnations in sanitation. Between 1990 and 2012, sanitation coverage remained the same at around a quarter of the population while the overall coverage and capacity utilisation of available water supplies increased from 56% to 65% (NBS, 2014; URT, 2012ca; [Water and Sanitation Program, 2011](#)).

These mixed reform outcomes are indicative of a phenomenon referred to in the policy discourse as *signalling* ([Andrews, 2013, pp. 28-9](#)). *Signalling* occurs when reforms are adopted principally to improve short term external perceptions of government effectiveness—usually to seek financial support and political legitimacy—rather than improving long term results. From the perspective of reforms, the promotion of CE in the WATSAN remains notable for the absence of tangible policy targets which have affected how the public is engaged, resource allocation, performance monitoring and evaluation ([URT, 2012ca](#)). Parallel to wider reforms' performance, measures to broaden CE in WATSAN have also met with mixed results. While CE in the forms of memberships in voluntary association and attendance of community meetings has been high, opinion surveys indicate that public satisfaction with the government's handling of WATSAN has declined from 46% in 2002 to 34% in 2012 (Afrobarometer, 2003, 2012).

Against these mixed results, it is clear that CE reforms in WATSAN have not yielded the desired outcomes. The study, therefore, responded to this gap in understanding. It did so by addressing two issues: *first*, by examining the institutional framework for civic engagement, and *second*, by examining the influence of CE on service provision. The study adopted a case study of Water and Sanitation (WATSAN) for the analysis of the institutional structures and processes for civic engagement. In examining civic engagement, this study focuses on interactions between citizens and formal institutions and examines the influence of CE on service provision. Analysis focuses on the period 2002-2013. This period is characterized by implementation of service reforms in WATSAN in Tanzania that have actively pursued CE as a mechanism for policy delivery.

Specifically, the study sought to answer two key questions:

1. *How do institutional structure and processes influence CE in WATSAN?*
2. *How does CE influence service provision in WATSAN?*

To answer these questions, the study focused on how citizens interact with institutions governing CE reforms in WATSAN.

## Findings

In response to research question 1- ***How do institutional structures and processes influence Civic Engagement?***—findings suggest that extant institutions enable and constrain civic engagement by conferring rights as well as responsibilities, privileges as well as duties, and licences as well as mandates (Scott, 2013a, p. 64). These affect how actors interact with rules, determining the type and nature of engagement. Institutional effects impact the adoption or endorsement of civic engagement

and thus their legitimacy. In their present form, a robust regulative framework exists alongside norms and cognitions that promote contradictory or exploitative interpretation and enactment of rules. The contradictory potential of informal rules often manifests itself in instances where authority for CE has been delegated, aided by weak legal monitoring and enforcement of organisational actors. These distort the distribution of rents from CE in ways that affect the type of engagement undertaken: resistant or complementary acquiescence (Oliver, 1991). Findings suggest that passive and other resistant forms of engagement prevail in WATSAN. These are indicative of a gradual erosion of support for regulative reforms, as the returns from compliance are outweighed by engagement in other structures. Further attempts, at the study's conceptual stage, to distinguish institutional structures from agency appear unfounded.

Overall, findings suggest that informal institutions—of the normative and cultural orientations<sup>1</sup>—explain the levels of civic engagement in WATSAN. Organisational and societal norms and relations inform how individual actors behave and attach meaning to civic engagement (Oliver, 1991). The nature of these norms—adverse or otherwise—explains an individual's likelihood to engage in collective or individual actions that seek to conform, defy or manipulate outcomes. Worryingly for the other dependent reforms in WATSAN, formal understandings of CE appear not to be shared by the community. This poses challenges in the diffusion of CE as organisations and communities utilise seemingly divergent terms of reference or scripts. This represents a ready-made constituency of change actors to the reforms in WATSAN. As Andrews (2013) and Peters and Pierre (2016) suggest, further institutional changes in such contexts may not necessarily be a bad thing. Such changes are needed to ensure that the alignment of the three institutional pillars reflects

contextual realities and leads to the achievement of desired goals. A realignment of the institutional order would affect the type and levels of civic engagement in ways that reinforce reforms.

In response to research question 2—*How does CE influence service provision in WATSAN*—findings suggest that the main reform objective in WATSAN is to improve service provision. CE is employed as an instrument to support this through the promotion of access to service, organisational accountability and cost recovery. However, because of the prevalence of ambiguities and their exploitations, the evidence on the influence of CE on service provision is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, centrally organised CE has succeeded in enhancing community accountability. CE has seen increased flows of information between providers, local authorities and the community. This has been instrumental in increasing awareness about consumer rights and responsibilities which have improved compliance with reforms. In some cases, CE has also led to efforts by higher authorities to improve services. Noticeably, this has occurred despite reported low levels of CE in another key area of reform, the design of cost sharing.

On the other hand, despite implementing CE reforms for over a decade, tangible gains in water and sanitation services remain limited. Despite high community enthusiasm and focus, CE has failed to improve access to sewerage in the case study area. Where service improvements have occurred—in water supplies—, progress has been made outside the formal participatory spaces, involving minimal to no contribution from formal reform implementers. This finding corresponds to the World Bank's (2017) observation of the inadequacy of formal CE processes in most developing countries. These findings can be interpreted in principally two ways:

- i. Improvements to water supplies have occurred irrespective of formal CE. They have been made possible by other instruments of reforms such as the promotion of auxiliary actors working directly with communities.
- ii. Equally, it can be argued that despite formal CE being largely tokenistic and consultative, there have been spill-over effects that have led to self-mobilisation by the community. This contention is supported by findings suggesting that some community collective action has been influenced by shared awareness of the formal provider's capacity constraints. Realisations that engagement with the service provider would not yield desired outcomes prompted the community to innovate in ways that complemented existing laws.

Overall, the evidence suggests a shared recognition among

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<sup>1</sup> The sociologist William Richard Scott argues that cultural cognitive elements are features of institutions that are reflected in ideologies and scripts that underpin social groups and beliefs such as religion, nationality, and language (Scott, 2013). These provide a template for interpreting the institutional environment, as well as receiving, processing and giving meaning to information. Normative elements, on the other hand, include norms and values inherent in an individual's society. These define and set the parameters of social appropriateness and acceptability. Normative elements influence the behaviour of individuals by evoking feelings of honour or shame in response to the course of action pursued or contemplated, relative to established social values. Normative elements exert an intrinsic effect on individuals. Collectively, these elements are the logics that structure behaviour and performance of public institutions (Scott, 2013a). That is, a law or policy on its own is not an institution. Their institutional value derives from the collective influence of the different effects they have on the behaviour of an individual. Therefore, for a law or a policy to be an institution, an operational platform made up of normative and cultural-cognitive elements must exist to allow regulative devices to operate. This would typically entail moral and social codes on the appropriateness of the subject matter being addressed by the law or policy, for example the acceptance that a certain course of action is right or wrong and the volition by relevant actors to uphold the law or policy.

WATSAN actors that capital expenditure is key to procuring tangible outcomes in WATSAN. That is, CE plays a supportive rather than an attributive role. This is reflected in the expectations about CE's role shared by the community and organisational actors. Yet, community feedback is suggestive of unmet expectations. Despite controlling information flows through CE, authorities in WATSAN appear incapable of responding to community needs. This adversely affects the likelihood of future community engagement. This is in itself paradoxical as CE reforms aim to strengthen inclusion and accountability rather than apathy or competing solutions. This has potential consequences on the legitimacy of reforms in the medium and long term as it undermines their acceptability and/or desirability.

Therefore, by viewing CE reforms as process, this study has enabled a deeper understanding of the political and practical complexities involved in the adoption and administration of CE. These findings are important if we are to learn about, in the words of Ole Therkildsen, again, "*how to improve and sustain performance under present and foreseeable economic, administrative and political conditions*" (2000, p. 20).

### Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This study concludes that, overall, civic engagement (CE) plays a minimal role in the evolving systems for providing WATSAN in Tanzania. This role is undermined by ambiguities

in the institutional frameworks and processes for CE (**Research Question 1**) which in turn produce mixed effects in how CE influences service provision in WATSAN (**Research Question 2**). The prevalence of ambiguities suggests that not enough collective attention has been paid on how to make CE or wider reforms in WATSAN more effective. Stakeholders, particularly the state, need to review the institutions for CE in a bid to resolve these ambiguities through improved specificity, clarity and resources that will improve attainment of common objectives in WATSAN. This would improve the definition of formal rules around which informal practices coalesce.

The study does not offer a blueprint for designing and executing public service reforms. Rather, it identifies a number of issues in civic engagement reforms that warrant consideration from state and non-state actors seeking to improve public service provision in WATSAN in Tanzania and the effectiveness of civic engagement. In the light of the research questions, this study offers a series of recommendations along with suggestions of their likely feasibility:

- i. Improve the design of formal regulative rules
- ii. Prioritise the definition of key actors
- iii. Adopt a results-oriented approach to reforms
- iv. Improve reconciliation of civic engagement with wider WATSAN needs for cost recovery and service expansion

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