

# Bridging the Research-Policy Divide to Promote Local Development

GLD recently held its **5th Annual Conference**, “Giving and Taking: Studies on Extraction and Participation in Local Development,” in Brastad, Sweden. 25 scholars and policy actors presented ongoing research, while a group of respondents provided feedback on the research and its relevance to advancing public welfare across the globe.

These respondents were **Ahmed Morsy** (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), **Joseph Asunka** (Afrobarometer), **Ana Maria Vargas Falla** (Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy), **Boniface Dulani** (Institute of Public Opinion Research Malawi & Afrobarometer), **Marja Hinfelaar** (Southern African Institute for Policy and Research Zambia), and **Mine Eder** (Bogazici University). In this briefing, we highlight some of the themes they raised.

## 1. Improving Citizen Participation

Presenters discussed local citizen engagement in Tunisia<sup>i</sup> Pakistan<sup>ii</sup> Zambia<sup>iii</sup> Tanzania<sup>iv</sup> Nigeria<sup>v</sup> and Malawi<sup>vi</sup>. Studies carried out in these and other countries found that boosting citizen participation is limited in sparking meaningful change. It does not always deepen institutional trust, nor does it always deliver accountability. Moreover, participation in authoritarian regimes can be limited and might require different interventions. Local context matters and collective action is essential.

Vargas Falla emphasized the importance of understanding who is not participating in local governance—who is being left out in the decision-making process. She warned, “Be careful with invited spaces of participation” because decisions might be made elsewhere. Similarly,

Dulani asked provocatively, “Whose voice counts? Whose voices are we hearing?” Turning citizen participation into meaningful action is itself a political process that varies across contexts, political systems, and social environments

## 2. Building a Social Contract

The long-term challenge for many local governance efforts is building a social contract between citizens and the state. Decentralization is one set of reforms meant to bring people closer to their governments and build legitimacy in the process, but this is not always the case.

Studies from Indonesia<sup>vii</sup> and Afghanistan<sup>viii</sup> showed how elite capture and political power can derail the process. In response, Vargas Falla emphasized that everyday experience of decentralization can vary from “law in books” and “law in action,” and Dulani noted the multiple circles of authority operating within decentralized governance structures.

Some presenters suggested that decentralization can help build legitimate governance. For example, Jennifer Murtazashvili<sup>ix</sup> used the case of Ukraine to demonstrate how decentralization can help build legitimate governance. Ukrainians are now fighting for their towns, cities, and the people they elected and brought to power. In Egypt, Rehab Sakr<sup>x</sup> explained that informal participatory councils govern heritage sites, contributing to effective self-government. Finally, drawing on evidence from Zambia, Kenya, and Malawi, Alex Ogusoxi demonstrated the importance of partisanship and citizen experience in enhancing tax morale to improve resource mobilization, potential factors that could strengthen social contracts.

<sup>i</sup> Salih Yasun, Indiana University, “Co-Partisanship with Mayors, Institutional Performance, and Citizen Trust in Local Governance Institutions: Evidence from Tunisia.”

<sup>ii</sup> Andy Harris (NYU Abu Dhabi) and Rabia Malik (University of Essex), “A Booth of One’s Own: Gender and Turnout in Pakistan.”

<sup>iii</sup> Prisca Jöst (University of Konstanz) and Ellen Lust (GLD), “Authority and Mobilization: The Role of Leader Influence, Centrality and Domain Congruence on Campaign Participation in Zambia.”

<sup>iv</sup> Helen Ahlborg (Chalmers University of Technology), Frida Borang (University of Gothenburg) and Marcia Grimes (University of Gothenburg), “Competing for Development: How Project Design in Community-Driven Development Can Undermine Local Collective Action.”

<sup>v</sup> Laura Keen (Results for Development Institute), Erin K. Fletcher (Altitude Worldwide Research), Praneetha Vissapragada (University of Michigan), and Yemi Adamolekun (Enough is Enough Nigeria), “Storytelling to Engage Citizen Participation in Anti-Corruption Initiatives in Nigeria.”

<sup>vi</sup> Adam Harris (University College London) and Eliphaz Kuseni (Multiconsult-Partners), “Understanding Local Development Contributions in Malawi.”

<sup>vii</sup> Eitan Paul (University of Michigan), “Raising Representation? Gender and Village Budgeting Reforms in Indonesia.”

<sup>viii</sup> Jennifer Murtazashvili (University of Pittsburgh), “Federalism, Decentralization, and Violent Conflict in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Nepal.”

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Rehab Sakr (Cairo University), “Decentralization of Development: Successful Experiences in Participatory Rural Development – The Case Study of the Egyptian Village Kafr Wahb.”

These institutional practices have important implications for building trust and potentially strengthening the social contract between government and citizens. Morsy wondered whether these insights could strengthen nation-building efforts where there is a crisis of legitimacy. Eder suggested that, by uncovering the unintended consequences of institutional design, scholars and policymakers are locating the different dimensions of statehood, especially the critical activities occurring beyond the state.

### 3. Holding Leaders Accountable

“It is time to refocus the role of leadership” to authorities like chiefs, tribal heads, and party leaders, said Morsy. “We need to find the right language to translate this knowledge into action.” This is particularly important as non-state leaders might have an outsized influence on ordinary citizens’ everyday experiences.

Presentations shed light on local leadership accountability, including how traditional institutions in Ghana shape chieftaincy vacancies;<sup>xii</sup> socially embedded and centrally networked local leaders in Zambia spur collective mobilization;<sup>xiii</sup> strong relationships between bureaucrats and civil society organizations in Nairobi advance programmatic policies,<sup>xiv</sup> and; gender quotas for development leaders can amplify women’s voices.<sup>xv</sup>

Asunka explained that refocusing the study of accountability on to different types of leaders requires a better understanding of the relationship between leaders and society. Elections are not always the answer to improving accountability. In some contexts, local leaders might respond better to shaming mechanisms, while in others, honor mechanisms might work better. Nonetheless, Asunka warned that we should not let governments off the hook: “Are we expecting too much from citizens, and not enough from governments?” he asked.

### 4. Engagement with Policymakers and Local Communities

“How do we create citizen awareness and participation through our work?” Hinfelaar wondered. This is a challenge that all researchers face. Participants made a few suggestions to improve the policy relevance of their work, including:

- Improve collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and community members when designing interventions.
- Use more integrative research methods.
- Consider how research findings can empower local populations.
- Partner with interlocutors to share research findings.
- Invest in long-term relationships to build credibility on the ground.

An important takeaway is, as Hinfelaar noted, that not all scholars need to make traction in policymaking. Researchers might sit on a lot of knowledge but being humble about one’s own competence is a skill itself: “We need to understand our limitations,” Asunka explained. Yet scholars can continue to play an active role by providing specific and relevant evidence that is tailored to the context, while keeping an open dialogue with policymakers to improve impact on the ground.

xi Alex Oguso (Kenya Revenue Authority), Ellen Lust (GLD), and Cecilia Ahsan Jansson (University of Gothenburg), “Enhancing Tax Morale for Improved Domestic Resource Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from a Cross-Country Survey.”

xii Daniel Appiah (University of Ghana Business School), John-Paul Adjadeh (Ghana Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs), and Ellen Lust (GLD), “Traditional Leadership Contestations in Ghana: The Role of Gender and Institutions on Chieftaincy Succession Resolution.”

xiii Prisca Jöst (University of Konstanz) and Ellen Lust (GLD), “Authority and Mobilization.”

xiv Christopher Gore (Toronto Metropolitan), “Urban Policy Diffusion in Africa: Explaining Convergence and Divergence in Cities.”

xv Eitan Paul (University of Michigan), “Raising Representation? Gender and Village Budgeting Reforms in Indonesia.”

## About GLD

The Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) is a research program based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Program Director, Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The program is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Program findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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