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**Leave no one behind**

**Give citizens a more audible voice in  
development cooperation**

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# The Current Column

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## Give citizens a more audible voice in development cooperation

Bonn, 11 November 2018. In mid-October, Reuters published news of a planned law change in Tanzania that would criminalise the questioning of public statistics. Once signed by President John Magufuli, anyone who publicly criticises statistics faces a fine equivalent to 3,780 euros or up to three years in jail. The World Bank and numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are deeply concerned about this change in the law.

Statistical data are an important basis for evidence. Evidence is broadly understood as knowledge based on facts, such as indications of potential solutions to problems and their relevance: insight into what does (not) work in a specific context. This often refers to scientific findings that have been generated using a variety of methods. Data and information on development policy collected by implementing organisations, such as the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), also play an important role in practice. For years, development cooperation has been under considerable pressure to justify itself. Evidence is, therefore, used to report and account for projects on an ongoing basis. Evidence is also used to adapt existing projects or to design new interventions, but in order to assess the reliability of available evidence, its quality must be known.

Whether and how results are generated depends on how questions are formulated, what methods are used and whether the corresponding indicators also measure what they are supposed to. The governments of donor and partner countries, but also implementing organisations, may have a different view of interventions than civil society, which should be the beneficiary of development measures. This is the reason why it is crucial to take citizens' perceptions into account when formulating policies. Participatory approaches emphasise 'citizen evidence' as another key source of information. Everyone gathers direct insights and experiences in daily life: in the local context, for example, about who benefits from governmental activities and who is marginalised. The corresponding knowledge can be expressed through democratic processes such as elections. Village meetings can be used to register the concerns of civil society. Citizen evidence can also be conveyed through NGOs.

In order to generate citizen evidence, it is important to involve all those potentially affected. In particular, marginalised groups who are excluded, for example

due to their gender, age or geographical location, must be specifically identified and their concerns addressed in order for their voices to be heard. This allows us to critically examine whether the right measures are being planned (such as roads), whether projects are designed to reach these particular groups (social transfers) and if there is room for improvement. The inclusion of citizen evidence must, therefore, be the cornerstone of strategies that aim to "Leave no one behind". Involving everyone is a very ambitious development policy goal that can only be achieved if we know who is falling through the net and what these people's needs are.

Citizens can participate, for example, by providing information about the perception of corruption as well as the impact of government spending programmes. Citizen evidence can, therefore, be an active contribution against fake news. Amnesty International, for instance, has set up the Citizen Evidence Lab as an online platform to track down potentially fake YouTube footage.

However, citizen evidence should not be confused with individuals' opinions. Feedback from civil society is very much open to abuse. In Uganda, for example, there have been smartphone apps for several years through which perceived corruption can be reported. However, the apps can also be used to denigrate certain persons for no reason. It is, therefore, crucial to find and develop appropriate tools so that high-quality citizen evidence is available for use in making decisions. It must be used to critically reflect on official reporting.

The significance of citizen evidence is being intensively discussed with regard to individual issues, especially in the global South, for example at the Evidence 2018 conference of the Africa Evidence Network in September 2018 in Pretoria. However, most donors still attach too little importance to it. It is not enough to refer to existing methods of generating evidence, 'ownership' in partner countries, the inclusion of local cooperation partners and the involvement of non-governmental organisations. Citizen evidence must be integrated appropriately into development cooperation processes because it is a crucial lever for improving its effectiveness. All actors involved must, therefore, be obliged to seek ways and means to adequately reflect the needs of civil society. This is the only way 'Leave no one behind' can be achieved.