

LEARNING CASE / 2018

Navigating Access to Information with Twaweza and MIT GOV/LAB

As part of a larger suite of projects, MIT GOV/LAB and Twaweza East Africa partnered to conduct a mystery shopper field experiment looking at access to information and government transparency. The project was piloted in Tanzania in 2016 and then in Kenya in 2017. This learning case focuses on the process of adapting the research design to new country contexts and the challenges of meeting timelines for practitioner relevance.

This learning case discusses the research collaboration process. For research results see: MIT GOV/LAB Research Brief. 2018. "Testing Access to Information in Kenya with Mystery Shoppers" and "Testing Access to Information in Tanzania with Mystery Shoppers." Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Governance Lab.

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What is a learning case?

Bringing in voices from the field and the academy, the aim of the learning case series is to listen, process, and learn from how we approach practitioner-academic research collaborations and ultimately contribute to theory-building and change on the ground.

In political science and international development, there is often pressure to report positive results and change on the ground. Yet there is no single pathway or easy fix for improving governance, and, particularly, advancing tenets of transparency, accountability, and participation. Improved governance outcomes depend on us building robust evidence, and learning from failures and false-starts as well as successes.

In the hard sciences, a majority of experiments have null results or no significant findings. The scientific process can oftentimes be characterized as a series of failures, punctuated by eureka moments, which lead to advancements in knowledge. We recognize that the same can apply to our own field, where productive types of failure can come from hypothesis testing in complex contexts with high-degrees of uncertainty – failure that is necessary for organizations to learn and improve.

This is precisely what we aim to do at GOV/LAB by collaborating with partners to test underlying assumptions of their theories of change through experimentation and learning. Learning case studies are an opportunity to reflect back on our research collaborations and design process, and to integrate these lessons into our future work.

Key Takeaways

Recognizing that learning is a process, and that some tension can make for creative collaboration, here are a few lessons from the GOV/LAB-Twaweza partnership that we are working to put in practice going forward:¹

- **Getting local offices on board.** Initially the aim was to conduct the same mystery shopper research in the three countries where Twaweza operates, in order to provide a comparative analysis aligned with Twaweza's overall strategy.

However, upon beginning the Kenya work, different priorities emerged between Twaweza headquarters in Dar es Salaam and the Twaweza Kenya office in terms of where this research fit into their operational plans. Ultimately, we were able to reach consensus, but making sure everyone was on board before commencing the project would have allowed for better preparation and tailoring the design to local priorities.

¹ This learning case was developed with support from MIT Political Science PhD student Stuart Russell who conducted interviews with both GOV/LAB and Twaweza staff involved in the mystery shopper research.

- **Balancing timeliness with rigor.**

GOV/LAB took too long to analyze and deliver final results to Twaweza, leading to premature reporting of incorrect results and a loss of momentum in making the data useful in policy discussions on the ground. Additionally, delayed results limited the opportunity to learn from the first experiment in Tanzania in order to better adapt the design for Kenya.

- **Leaving space for research to evolve.**

The mystery shopper approach was not originally part of our initial research agreement. The design emerged through various discussions between Twaweza and GOV/LAB and would not have come to existence without a fluid and iterative relationship, marked by frequent dialogue and willingness to adjust plans and budgets. As the project developed, both teams became increasingly interested in the mystery shopper approach – first as a way to test comparatively across East Africa and later as a preliminary step to conducting further research on government or bureaucrat behavior, an emerging priority in both practitioner and academic spheres. The organic evolution of priorities for both teams is an important reminder not to predetermine the utility of any single effort, since creative collaboration can move in unexpected and interesting directions.

after the study ended. Kenya also approved its *Access to Information Act* in 2016, several months before we started data collection in that country.

In light of these ongoing government actions, the mystery shopper studies had two primary objectives. First, GOV/LAB and Twaweza sought to gain a baseline understanding of access to information at the local level. The idea was to gather evidence about whether or not transparency legislation at the national level translates into actual improvements at the local level. Second, the Tanzania and Kenya studies assessed the most effective ways for citizens to frame their information requests by introducing an experimental component to the project.

The research designs of the two mystery shopper studies followed the same general methodology. In each study, GOV/LAB trained local researchers as “mystery shoppers,” each of whom were members of Twaweza’s Uwezo community. Uwezo is a large network of citizens throughout Tanzania and Kenya who are involved in education advocacy at the local level. As mystery shoppers, the researchers were instructed to approach local government offices in their home districts and request specific pieces of information. The mystery shoppers were trained to not reveal their affiliation with Twaweza or GOV/LAB nor to reveal that they were acting as part of a research study. The goal was to replicate the situation that an average citizen searching for information would experience. If necessary, the mystery shoppers would return to the office several times after the initial interaction.

Starting with Context

As we collected data in Tanzania in 2016, a longstanding effort to pass a freedom of information law was nearing completion. Tanzania’s legislation ultimately passed shortly

In order to test whether personal or legal justifications were more effective for obtaining information, GOV/LAB randomly assigned researchers a personal or legal narrative. One



A mystery shopper visits a district office in Dar es Salaam (Michelle Cerna).

group used a personal story to explain why they needed that specific information. Mystery shoppers with a legal narrative justified their need for the information only with reference to their right as a citizen to access it. Anecdotal evidence in both countries suggested that citizens must either know someone in the administration or must have a valid, believable story in order to get information from the government. Therefore, we hypothesized that the personal narrative would be more successful, since convincing a bureaucrat to provide information might be more about personal trust than legality or citizen rights.

Adapting from Tanzania to Kenya

Despite the same general design, there were some important differences between the Tanzania and Kenya studies. Most of these differences reflect lessons GOV/LAB learned while implementing the approach in Tanzania.

Centralized training

To start, the Kenya study significantly refined the data collection process used in Tanzania. Most notably, the Tanzanian study relied on a “training of trainers” model in which some researchers were trained in Dar es Salaam and then spread across Tanzania to train other researchers in smaller sessions. In contrast, the Kenya study trained every researcher centrally in Nairobi with a single three-day session.

The centralized training in Kenya helped ensure that everyone received identical instructions, something that couldn’t be easily verified in Tanzania. This is important because, in order to draw inferences from the random assignment of the legal and personal narratives, each script must be applied in a consistent manner. Part of the reason the Tanzania study relied on a “training of trainers” model was that Tanzania is a larger country with a weaker road infrastructure, making it logistically difficult and more costly to bring every researcher to Dar es Salaam.

Data collection on paper vs. mobile phone

While the Kenya study used mobile phones for data collection, researchers in the Tanzania study recorded data on paper. Paper data collection created many problems for the reliability and completeness of the data. Researchers were instructed to complete a different paper form for each visit to the office, thus generating a lot of paper records to manage. Some of these paper forms were never returned, meaning there wasn't a complete, verifiable raw dataset. One implication of these missing data was that subsequent data analyses couldn't observe the format in which every completed request was fulfilled. We avoided most of these problems in Kenya as collection was standardized and centralized through mobile phones. Since the phones saved the data online soon after collection, data collected throughout the country could be checked and verified remotely.

Lessons Learned

The Tanzania and Kenya projects revealed two general challenges common in practitioner-academic collaborations. The first is the difficulty each organization has understanding and distilling the motivations, priorities, and internal dynamics of the other. The second challenge is reconciling the different timelines of academic researchers and practitioners on the ground. From afar, it is relatively easy for one side of the collaboration to view the other as a uniform entity. However, every organization has a unique internal culture and a range of internal dynamics – and these may not be apparent or declared, but emerge through the collaborative process.

Motivations and Internal Dynamics

This first challenge arose during implementation of the mystery shopper project in Kenya. Both GOV/LAB staff members interviewed for this memo observed a disconnect between Twaweza's headquarters in Dar es Salaam and the Twaweza staff in Nairobi. Because Twaweza's research staff was located in Dar es Salaam, the individuals driving the project were largely in Tanzania. Though the staff in Nairobi was welcoming and helpful, GOV/LAB felt that the Kenya office never "owned" the mystery shopper project. It sometimes seemed to be imposed on them from outside, and rarely appeared to be a top priority.

Instead of focusing on an organization as one large entity, it helps to understand individual incentives in the specific sections you'll be working with. For example, one GOV/LAB staff member reported that the logistics of implementing the project in Kenya became far easier once they better understood the priorities of a key contact in Twaweza's Kenya office. This contact was the coordinator of the Uwezo network, which the study depended on for research assistants. The coordinator's main priority was ensuring that Uwezo members were well-paid and satisfied so that they would remain in the Uwezo community. This objective wasn't at odds with quality data collection, although it was largely instrumental and didn't speak to the overall learning objectives of the research. Once the GOV/LAB staff members were able to understand and factor in the coordinator's perspective, the assistance was invaluable.

Twaweza has a strategy guiding collaborative research with academic partners; however, the specific interests and research questions do differ between country contexts. The mystery

shopper exercise highlighted the need for a more participatory and iterative internal process to identify and design core research questions, possibly bringing country-based colleagues into early conversations with the research partners. This may create more ownership, which, beyond facilitating implementation, would ensure that local teams actively use and disseminate the results to a range of audiences.

Timelines and Priorities

The second obstacle the mystery shopper projects revealed was the conflict between different timelines. The pace of academic research is often much slower than what a non-governmental organization's stringent fiscal years and reporting timelines require. While academic research is generally slow and deliberative, Twaweza's goal is to work on issues that are current and timely. In politically volatile spaces like Kenya and Tanzania, these issues can evolve quickly, potentially rendering the results of academic work less useful.

This obstacle appeared during the data analysis phase of the Tanzania project. Data from the Tanzania mystery shopper's project were collected in early 2016, but the final draft of the results was not ready for Twaweza until October 2017. Part of this delay was due to a lack of institutionalized processes within GOV/LAB for review and verification of data analysis. In addition, GOV/LAB did not have staff with adequate time and experience assigned to the task.

This delay was problematic from Twaweza's perspective. For one, the delay meant that Twaweza didn't fully learn from the first mystery shopper iteration before starting the second. Twaweza staff members interviewed for this memo explained that, when the second iteration was starting, the analysis appeared to

show the legal and personal narratives may have had a significant effect, but later adjustments erased the significance. However, if the null effect was known prior to the second iteration, Twaweza may have preferred to use the Kenya study to investigate other questions like the effect of gender or bureaucratic discretion on access to information.

More broadly, a research partnership with GOV/LAB was important for Twaweza's relations with its board and donors, but promoting the collaboration created expectations that the results would come relatively quickly. Since Twaweza faces strict reporting deadlines, it appeared less credible to these funders when it could not share results by the end of the fiscal year.

The different timelines are likely to remain, but they need not conflict. One important step that could help in overcoming the problem is to discuss the issue at the onset of the collaboration. For example, the two parties could create a joint (and conservative) timeline at the beginning of the project that clearly outlines the needs and the constraints of either side. For Twaweza, this would help clarify communication to donors and the organization's Board. While unforeseen delays may occur, delineating clear expectations about the probable timeline of deliverables at the beginning of a partnership would likely help in moderating any unexpected problems.

Since these studies, GOV/LAB has worked to build team capacity, established processes for reviewing results, and is now developing work plans (in the form of concept memos) with partners to establish shared expectations on timelines and deliverables. Another key point about timelines, from Twaweza, is recognizing that this type of partnership might not be suited for some time-limited issues (windows of

opportunities, crises, etc.). Instead, it is best to focus these partnerships on questions that have longevity and are more fundamental: testing assumptions and theory of change, and therefore shaping future work.

Conclusion

Despite these challenges, the collaboration resulted in innovative research and information. For Twaweza, this collaboration was unique, marked by a clear interest from the research partner to tailor and accommodate the work to maximize relevance to the practitioner organization. GOV/LAB provided experience with respect to research design and data analysis that increased the methodological rigor of the study. Twaweza provided important knowledge about the local context in both countries.

Most notably though, without Twaweza's Uwezo networks, the projects would likely not have happened at all. The mystery shopper method is only possible if the mystery shoppers themselves are from or live close to the areas served by the targeted county offices. If they aren't, their credibility is greatly diminished

because local officials may recognize that they are community outsiders. Twaweza's input was crucial in this respect as it would have been very timely and costly for GOV/LAB to find, recruit, and train researchers that were geographically dispersed around Tanzania and Kenya.

The mystery shopper projects in Tanzania and Kenya were fruitful studies, both in terms of the results they produced and the experiences they generated for the two organizations. Each partner benefited from the collaboration.

Twaweza has since included the mystery shopper results in communications strategies related to open government and transparency. For instance, the mystery shopper data were one of the main talking points in a recent symposium Twaweza hosted on democratic society and civic space in Tanzania. Likewise, through the Tanzania and Kenya projects, MIT GOV/LAB tested and refined the mystery shopper methodology, a research design relatively new to the political science discipline. Inspired by these two studies, GOV/LAB is examining the feasibility of related mystery shopper projects in other countries.

Featured research project: Tsai, Lily L. and Alisa Zomer. "Evaluating public information provision and government transparency using a mystery shopper methodology." *Work in progress*.

Partner: This research collaboration was undertaken with **Twaweza**, a civil society organization that works on enabling children to learn, citizens to exercise agency and governments to be more open and responsive in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda (www.twaweza.org).



The MIT Governance Lab [GOV/LAB] is a group of political scientists focusing on innovation in citizen engagement and government responsiveness.

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