



Daw Ma Khine Oo epitomises effective women's leadership. Supported by Oxfam, Daw Ma Khine Oo is very active in the community, advocating for community needs and supporting others when their rights are infringed. Photo: Dustin Barter/Oxfam

# TRUST AND CITIZEN ACTION

Theory and evidence from 14 projects

# 1. INTRODUCTION

“Our world is suffering from a bad case of ‘Trust Deficit Disorder’” stated António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2018. In recent years, there has been more and more talk of a ‘crisis of trust’. Does it matter if citizens trust the institutions or NGOs that serve them? What are the levels of trust in different institutions or organisations of the people that Oxfam projects work with? How can trust or distrust affect citizen action? This paper discusses trust in organisations and institutions as one of a multitude of factors that can influence the success of projects that aim to mobilise citizens to engage with duty bearers. First it considers the existing theories and evidence on the effect of trust on development outcomes, in particular active citizenship, in order to demonstrate the challenges in interpreting and acting on information on trust. It then considers evidence from Oxfam’s own projects, based on a comparative analysis of trust and civic action data from 14 projects in 11 countries<sup>1</sup>. It finally provides recommendations for project staff on how to investigate, interpret and act on observed levels of trust amongst their target group.

## 2. WHY IS TRUST IMPORTANT?

Trust can be defined as the belief that others will not deliberately or knowingly do us harm, if they can avoid it, and will look after our interests, if possible (Delhey & Newton, 2005). Citizens may trust or distrust institutions such as local and state governments, NGOs, and other civil society actors, based upon their sense of how these institutions work (Newton, 2009; 2014). Trust can thus be an indicator of political legitimacy.



Figure 1. Development outcomes related to higher levels of trust

Higher levels of trust in institutions are associated with a number of positive development outcomes. Countries where citizens display high levels of trust in institutions have been associated with more democratic development (Inglehart, 1997), more equal income distributions (Knack & Keefer, 1997), and less corruption (Della Porta, 2000). Moreover, in countries where trust in other people, and (political) institutions is high, citizens are more likely to pay their taxes, and get better social services in return (Scholtz & Lubell, 1998).

<sup>1</sup> A full write-up including methodology can be found at the following link: <https://oxfam.box.com/s/6htjga0z30z5mt2h9iq45uj9z3nzx11r>

A number of researchers have found that trust is also one of a variety of factors that can influence the effectiveness of efforts to mobilise citizens. Oxfam’s rights-based approach promotes the active engagement of citizens with duty bearers to demand and claim their rights. Analysis of trust levels in various actors may help understand to what extent citizen mobilisation may be achieved and thus inform project strategy. However, the link between trust and citizen engagement is complex. Higher citizen levels of trust in institutions are associated with higher levels of engagement with them (Fennema and Tillie, 1999). Low levels of trust in government actors might induce dissatisfaction and apathy where citizens refrain from voicing their concerns towards duty bearers at all (Hardin, 1998; Muller, 2013). On the other hand, lower levels of trust could be related to higher levels of action (Goldfinch, Gauld, Herbison, 2009) with such citizens engaging less often in institutionalised political processes but more often in protest behaviour (Hooghe and Marien 2013). At the same time, civic and political participation itself can influence levels of institutional trust, with some researchers finding that civic engagement fosters confidence in government (Putnam, 1993), while others argue that more engagement can lead to disillusionment (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Finkel et al., 2000). This is likely related to whether the experiences of engagement are deemed to be positive or negative (OECD 2013). These complex interactions are summarised in Figure 2.

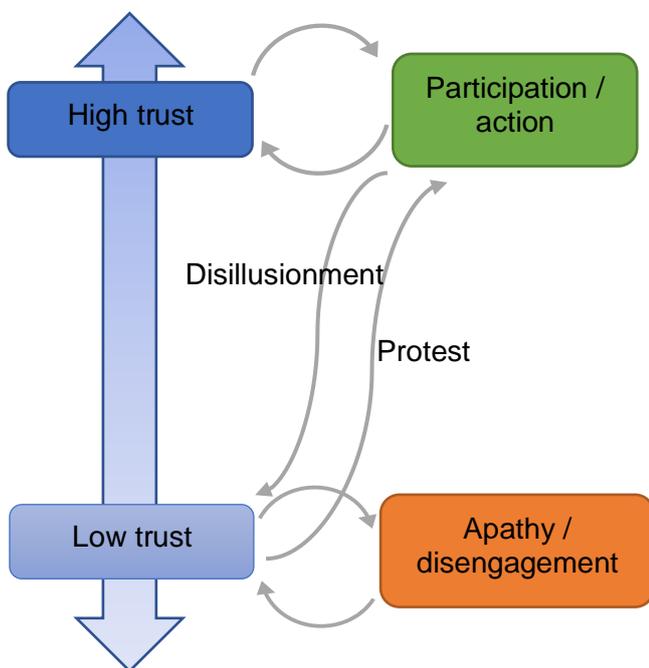


Figure 2 Interaction between levels of trust and citizen participation

### 3. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEVELS OF TRUST: DATA FROM 14 OXFAM PROJECTS

To look at the issue of trust more closely in Oxfam’s projects, Oxfam Novib’s Impact Measurement and Knowledge team in collaboration with Wageningen Economic Research Centre conducted a comparative analysis of data from 14 projects in 11 countries<sup>2</sup> that are part of Oxfam Novib’s Strategic Partnership (SP) programme. One of the SP’s strategies to achieving policy change that is present in all of the selected projects is the mobilisation of citizens to engage with duty bearers. Projects have a thematic focus when working on this issue: Right to Food (R2F), Finance for Development (F4D) and Conflict and Fragility (C&F). Baseline surveys were carried out amongst the target groups of citizens of all 14 projects with a total of 9,445 respondents and included a range of standardised questions,

<sup>2</sup> Burundi, Niger, Nigeria, Mozambique, occupied Palestinian Territories, Uganda, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Pakistan

including one on trust in institutions and organisations and another on reported levels of citizen action. Full information on the projects, sample, survey questions used and analysis conducted can be found at the link in footnote 1.

The comparative analysis set out to answer two questions:

- To what extent do citizens trust different organisations and institutions?
- How do their levels of trust influence the actions they take towards them?

It should be emphasised that surveys were conducted among a specific target group relevant to the country project and data is therefore not representative at a country or regional level. The analysis does not seek to explain the causes for the variations in the levels of trust between the different countries which are likely rooted in numerous contextual factors. However, the analysis allows us to compare levels of trust across the different target groups and draw some general conclusions on how trust can influence citizen action.

### 3.1. TO WHAT EXTENT DO CITIZENS TRUST INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS?

Looking at the average levels of trust in different actors of respondents of all projects we see that the traditional and religious leaders, community volunteers and local CSOs enjoy the highest levels of trust, followed closely by local government, international NGOs and the central government. Big companies and the tax authorities are the least trusted actors (Figure 3). This overall ranking indicates that people tend to have more trust in institutions and organisations that are closest to them – at the community level, rather than those at the national level. These findings confirm other evidence that trust tends to be highest at the local level, where services are delivered and where the link between citizens and government is most concrete (OECD 2013).

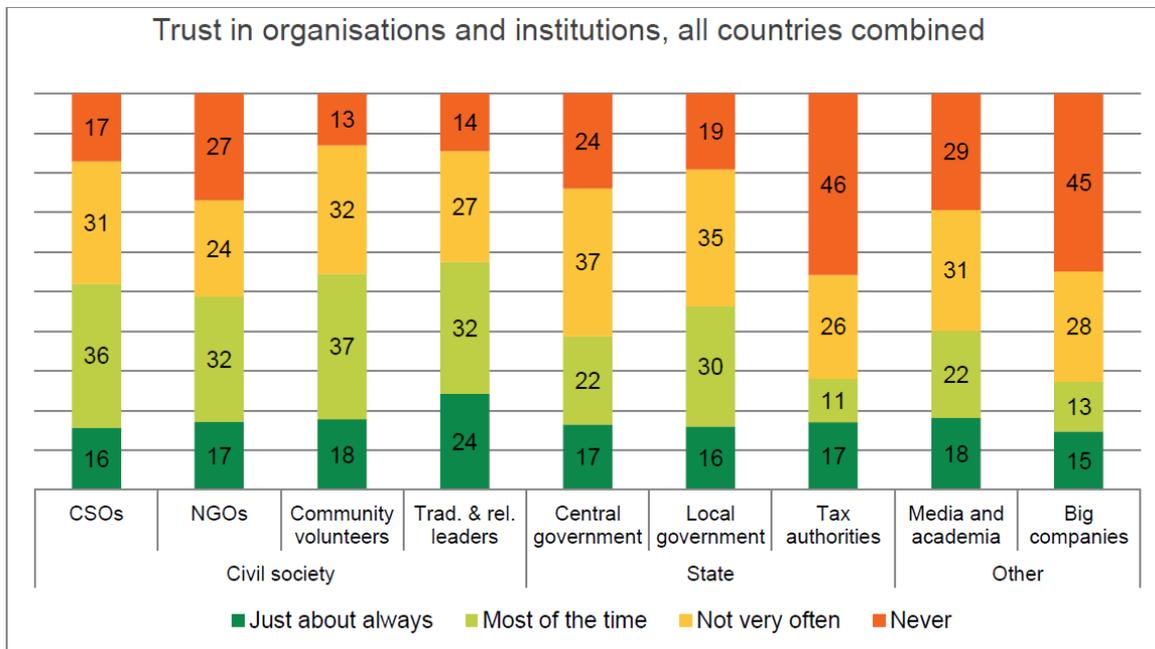


Figure 3. Trust in organisations and institutions, all respondents

Project strategies of the SP include mobilising citizens through the activities of local CSOs and international NGOs to take action towards decision-makers. Whilst we see that on average, citizens trust local CSOs more than the local and national government in many countries the difference is not very pronounced. Furthermore, international NGOs fall slightly behind the local government in measures of trust towards them. Such findings call into question the perceived legitimacy of Oxfam

and even its local partners in some countries to campaign on behalf of citizens and encourage them to mobilise.

However, the overall picture masks significant differences between countries. Figure 4 zooms in on trust in local CSOs in particular and compares results across countries. Although on average overall local CSOs enjoy the highest levels of trust out of all actors, we find that levels of trust in them vary widely across countries and projects and in some cases trust in local CSOs and/or international NGOs is below 50%. Mozambique, Pakistan and Burundi have the lowest levels of trust in local CSOs with around two thirds of respondents stating that they trust local CSOs not very often or never. On the other hand, respondents in Nigeria and Uganda overwhelmingly trust local CSOs most of the time or just about always.

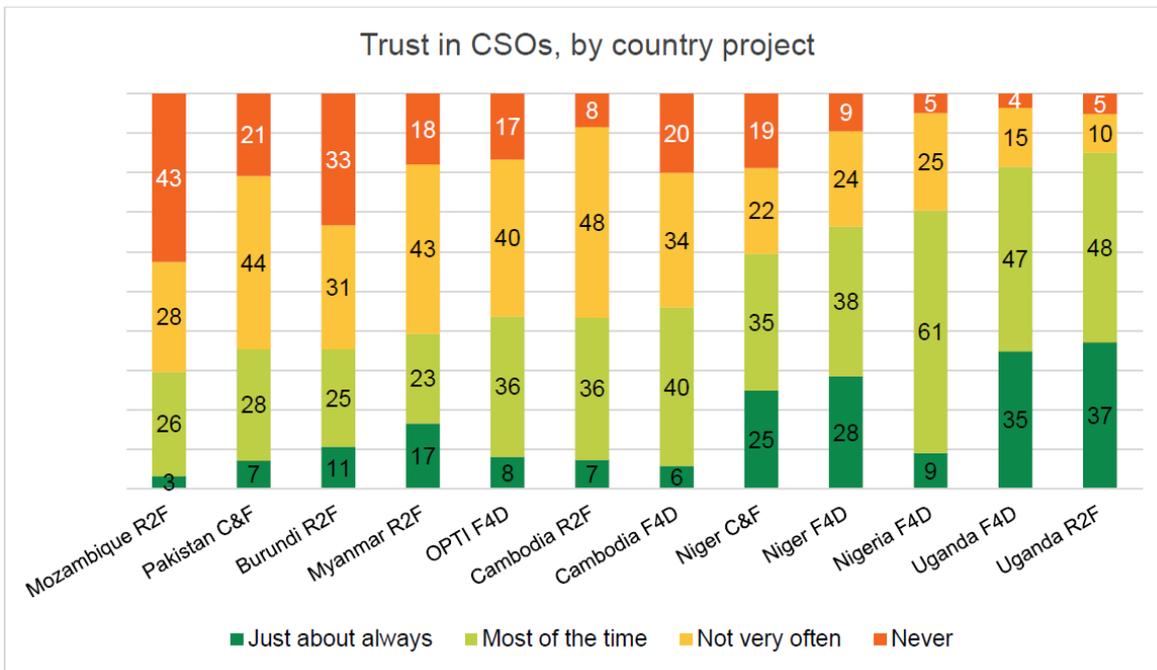


Figure 4 Trust in CSOs, by country project

The local government is the most trusted of all state institutions included in the survey. However, most notably in Pakistan, levels of trust in the local government remain remarkably low among our target group. The local government enjoys high levels of trust in Cambodia, especially among the R2F target group, as well as Niger, particularly among the C&F target group (Figure 6). These findings indicate, for instance, that in Niger and Cambodia trust in the local government is much higher than in local CSOs. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, whilst trust in local CSOs is low, it is nonetheless much higher than in the local government. Individual projects should seek to understand the causes for these findings more thoroughly and adapt their citizen engagement strategies accordingly in order to increase their effectiveness.

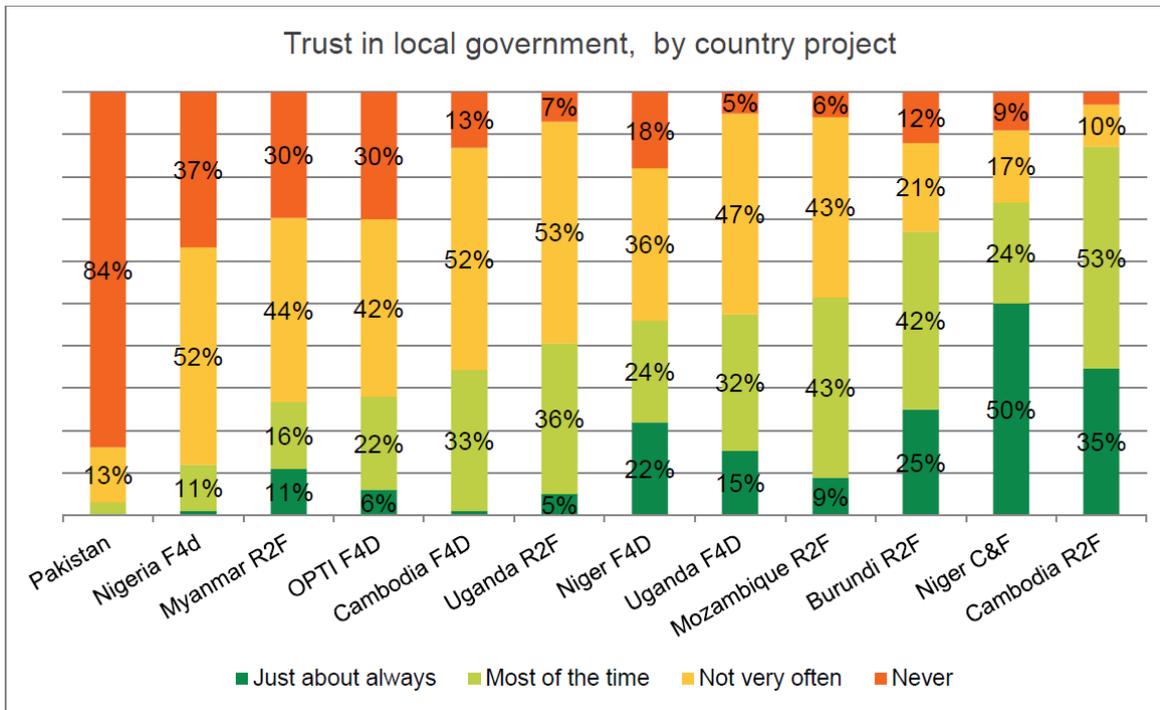


Figure 5 Trust in local government, by country project

The tax authorities are the least trusted of all actors included in the survey. As Figure 5 shows, the tax authorities are trusted the least in Cambodia where around 80% of respondents never trust them and a further 15% do not trust them very often. On the other hand, tax authorities enjoy the highest levels of trust in Niger, where among respondents of the F4D project around 55% state that they trust them just about always or most of the time. Such results indicate that projects seeking to mobilise citizens around taxation issues need to take very different approaches depending on the country of implementation.

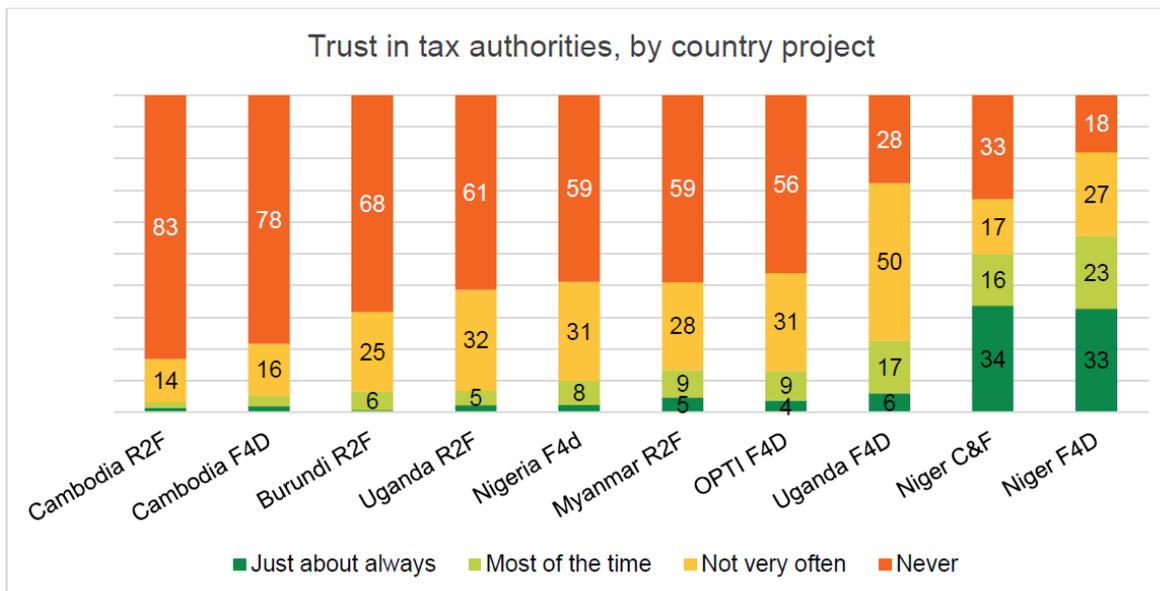


Figure 6 Trust in tax authorities, by country project

## 3.2. HOW DOES TRUST INFLUENCE CITIZEN ACTION?

The results from our target groups show that in general, people who trust local CSOs, international NGOs and community volunteers, the national government or the tax authorities, are more likely to be active. Meanwhile, trust in religious and traditional leaders, the media and academics, or the local government, does not seem to be associated with whether a person is active or not. This seems to indicate that in general, trust in state institutions and civil society is positively associated with active citizenship. Whether higher levels of trust lead to higher levels of action, or whether higher levels of action lead to higher levels of trust, cannot be answered with this data at this stage, and may differ per actor.

Our results also show that on average, active citizens are more often younger, literate, yet have a lower education level, and have higher household poverty rates than inactive citizens. There was no significant difference in the level of action of women and men. This shows that low education levels and household poverty are not a barrier to active citizenship.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis confirms existing research findings that higher levels of trust in a variety of institutions are associated with more active citizenship. We find that across the 14 projects in 11 countries that we studied people tend to have more trust in institutions and organisations that are closest to the community level, such as traditional and religious leaders, community volunteers and local CSOs. Big companies and the tax authorities are generally the least trusted actors. Comparing across countries we find that in some cases local CSOs and/or international NGOs are widely distrusted, more so than other institutions and organisations. These findings have important implications for project strategies, particularly those aiming to mobilise citizens to claim their rights. Future research could focus on understanding the different drivers of trust in different contexts and understanding effective strategies to build trust in order to increase citizen action.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROJECTS

### Monitoring and researching trust

- Survey data collected at the start of a project can help build up a picture on trust of citizens in the main actors identified in a project's stakeholder and power analysis. More in-depth investigation into key findings, for instance using qualitative methods, can help to identify the causes for levels of trust and help inform project strategies.
- Investigating and documenting the reasons for high levels of trust in particular actors, such as the local government, for instance, may be useful in sharing lessons learned with countries where trust is low.
- Projects should examine differences in levels of action and trust amongst different age groups, genders and levels of education in order to devise tailored strategies that take into account the specificities of each group.
- Document and share effective strategies to build trust and interaction between citizens, the state and civil society for their mutual benefit.

### Acting on findings on trust

- In cases where trust in international NGOs is low but trust in local CSOs is higher, take action to promote the visibility of local partners in leading activities with citizens and minimise the visibility of Oxfam.
- In instances where trust in local CSOs is low, identify preliminary activities that can serve to increase the trust and thus the legitimacy of local partners before moving on to activities aiming to mobilise citizens. Consider alternative approaches to mobilising citizens, such as minimising the visibility of local partners and promoting a bottom-up identity for citizen action.

- Negative interactions of citizens with institutions or organisations can fuel disillusionment whilst positive interactions can fuel a virtuous cycle of more trust and more engagement. Analysis of citizen perceptions and experiences of local services can inform project strategies that aim to ensure interactions are positive and increase service delivery quality.
- In the case of public campaigns, smaller, quicker wins may help maintain enthusiasm for participation and avoid disillusionment. In the case of working to increase citizens' access to services, ensure that preliminary work is done to increase the quality of those services or that feedback is quickly acted on. The aim of this is to build trust through positive exposure to services.
- Citizens tend to trust local institutions or organisations more than those at the national level. Getting them involved in local level campaign issues can therefore be an entry point to linking them up with national or global issues.
- In contexts with widespread distrust, protest or outsider strategies may be more effective in increasing citizen action. Identifying high levels of apathy and devising contextualised strategies to address this may help push non-active, low trusting citizens to take action.

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