

**CAN MEDIA  
AFFECT  
POLITICAL  
PARTICIPATION?**

# What do BBC Media Action’s governance programmes aim to do?

BBC Media Action’s governance programming uses media and communication to provide access to information, stimulate discussion and create platforms that enable people to interact directly with decision-makers. BBC Media Action works with TV, radio, online and mobile platforms and produces a range of factual and entertainment formats including dramas, debate programmes, magazine shows and public service announcements.

The organisation believes that media can influence accountability at three levels, by:

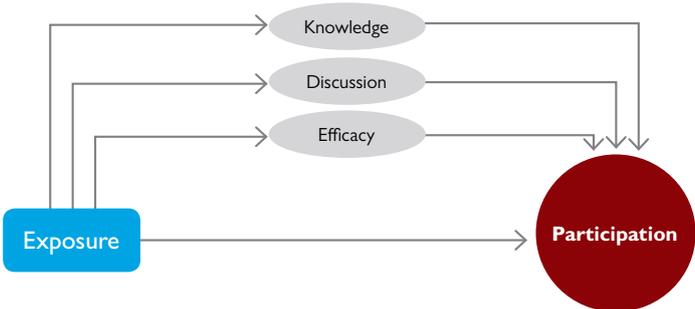
- **Empowering people:** providing trusted, accurate and balanced information, stimulating discussion and challenging barriers so that people from every section of society are able to participate effectively in the decisions that affect their lives
- **Creating space:** supporting more inclusive public discussion on the issues that affect all sections of society
- **Influencing power:** exposing those in power to views from across society, requiring them to explain and answer for their actions,<sup>1</sup> increasing transparency and improving leaders’ responsiveness

By equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills and confidence to **participate** in public life, media can empower citizens to hold their governments accountable and, ultimately, sanction leaders when they fail to deliver. Much of BBC Media Action’s programming is aimed at enabling citizens to demand direct answers from power holders in front of a national audience.

## The research study

Political participation, such as voting in elections, contacting officials or attending local meetings, is central to ensuring accountability between citizens and leaders. This study set out to examine the links between listening to and/or watching BBC Media Action’s governance programmes and political participation in seven countries (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup> It also explored whether exposure to these programmes is associated with three key drivers of political participation: political knowledge, discussion and efficacy. In so doing, the study has contributed to the small but growing evidence base on the influence of media on political participation in developing countries.

Figure 1: Model of exposure to governance programmes



## Research methodology

The research was based on quantitative data collected from more than 23,000 respondents across seven countries where BBC Media Action worked as part of a five-year project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Research participants were chosen to reflect the population demographics of each research country.

The research hypothesis was that exposure to BBC Media Action governance programming is associated with increased political participation and three of its key drivers: political knowledge, discussion and efficacy. The surveys were carried out between 2013 and 2015 and were based on a common set of questions, allowing for cross-country comparison. The data from these surveys can be found at [www.dataportal.bbcmediaaction.org](http://www.dataportal.bbcmediaaction.org)

**Table I: Country survey dates**

Country	Data collection
Bangladesh	July 2015
Kenya	January 2015
Myanmar	August 2013
Nepal	January 2016
Nigeria	December 2014
Sierra Leone	July 2013
Tanzania	August 2013

From these datasets BBC Media Action researchers developed an index to measure participation from 0 to 10, where 0 means not participating in any political action, and not intending to vote, and 10 indicates that the respondent has participated multiple times in all types, plus is very likely to vote.

The individual elements that contribute to the political participation index are: participating in a community effort to solve a problem, attending a formal local meeting, contacting a local official, contacting a nationally elected official, contacting a local chief or traditional leader, and taking part in a protest or demonstration. The likelihood to vote in both national and local elections was also included in the index.

The analysis first looked at the relationships between pairs of individual variables (for instance, exposure to governance programmes and political participation). It then examined these relationships while taking other influencing factors (such as age, income and interest in politics) into account – a process known as “controlling for confounders”. Finally, the research explored “interaction effects” (the effects seen by combining two independent factors) between exposure and individual confounders on levels of political participation, knowledge, discussion and efficacy. This analysis identified whether any of the confounders affected the strength and/or direction of these associations.

While the methods used in the study cannot show that BBC Media Action’s governance programmes cause levels of political participation to change, they can suggest where programmes may be having a greater impact.

# The findings

## Summary

BBC Media Action's audiences participate more in politics than other people: 0.53 points higher on our participation index, taking other influencing factors (confounders) – such as age, income and interest in politics – into account.

This association is slightly stronger for men than for women, and is also stronger for younger, less educated people, and those with less interest in politics. The findings suggest therefore that programmes have a greater impact, in terms of participation, on these groups that are traditionally less engaged in politics. BBC Media Action's audience members also have higher levels of political knowledge, discussion and, to a lesser extent, efficacy.

## Compensation and reinforcement effects

In some cases, influencing factors combine with exposure to BBC Media Action's governance programmes to reduce an existing difference in levels of political participation. For instance, exposure seems to narrow the gap in levels of political participation between people with no interest in politics and those with a higher level of interest. Therefore, exposure to BBC Media Action's governance programmes has a compensating effect on those with little interest in politics. Conversely, exposure seems to increase levels of participation for men more than for women, reinforcing the participation "gap" between them.

Figure 3: Bigger gains for people less interested in politics

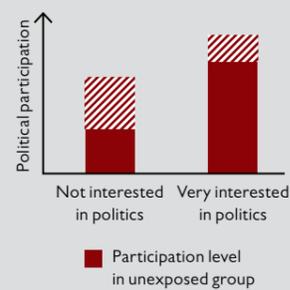
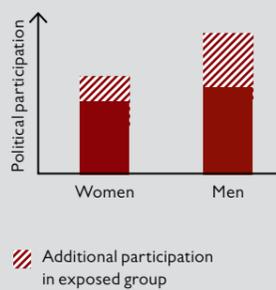


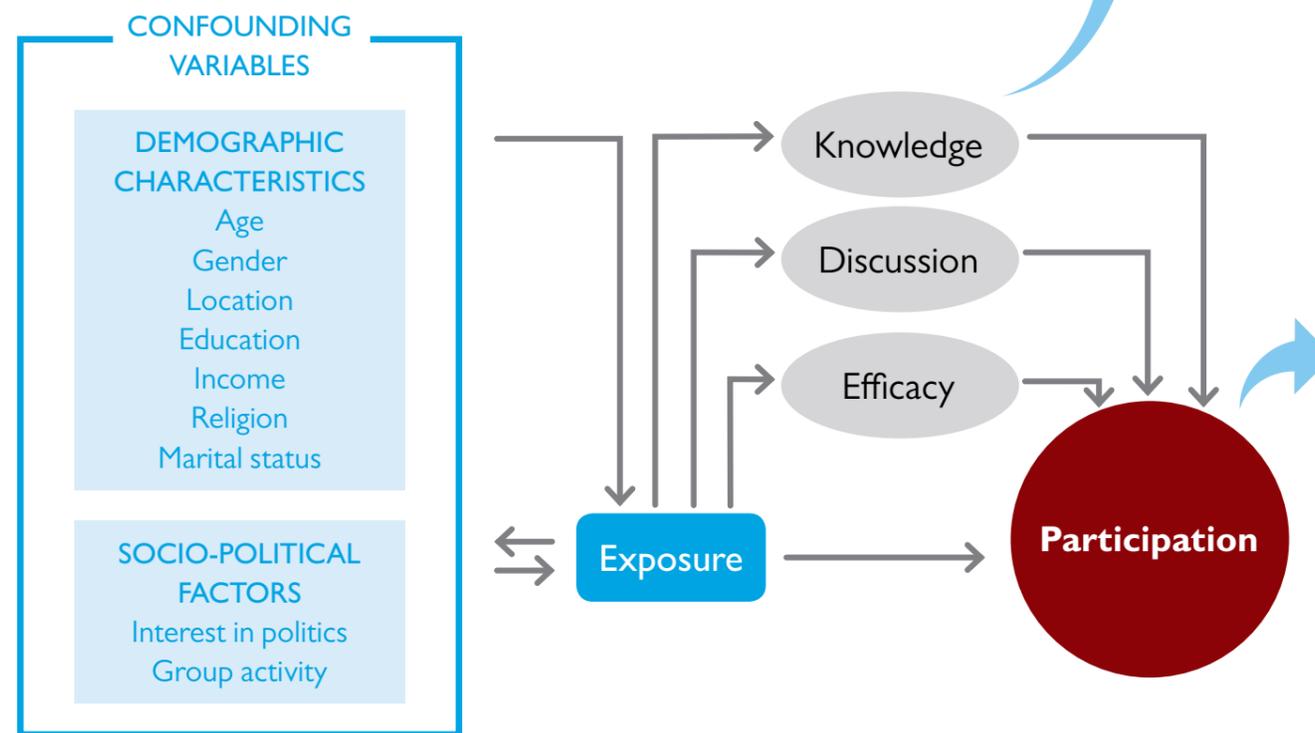
Figure 4: Smaller gains for women



## Drivers of participation

- Exposure to BBC Media Action's governance programmes is positively associated with political knowledge and political discussion and, more weakly, with increased political efficacy
- Political knowledge and discussion are also positively associated with age, being active in a social group, level of education and interest in politics
- Exposure appears to have a **compensating effect** on political knowledge and discussion for younger and less educated people, and those who are less interested in politics

Figure 2: Exposure and the drivers of participation, with confounders



## Political participation

- Overall, exposure to BBC Media Action's governance programmes is positively associated with political participation
- Exposure is more strongly associated with higher participation for younger and less educated people and for those with less interest in politics. It appears to have a **compensating effect** for these groups
- Although women exposed to BBC Media Action's governance programmes participate more in politics than their unexposed peers, men who watch or listen to the programmes have an even higher level of political participation. Our programmes, therefore, seem to have a **reinforcing effect** on the gender gap

## Implications

Media clearly matters when it comes to political participation and the factors contributing to participation. Programming that is balanced and fair, such as that supported by BBC Media Action, seems to have a positive effect on all of these factors.

Because of the diversity of the programmes themselves, the audiences they cater for, and the political contexts in the seven countries in which they are produced, the link between programmes and political participation might be expected to vary substantially; it did not.

The findings also indicate that certain marginalised sections of BBC Media Action's audience – people who tend to participate less overall in politics – gain more by watching or listening to its media outputs. This suggests that discussion and debate programme formats could be a powerful tool for social inclusion.

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## Endnotes

1. This is often defined as “answerability” – the obligation of government and other power holders to provide information on, and explanations of, their decisions and actions.
2. This briefing is based on the BBC Media Action research report *Media and political participation: fostering inclusive governance*, which is available from: [www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/reports/media-and-political-participation](http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/reports/media-and-political-participation).

