Two elements in the draft work plan stood out: 1) the program’s theory of change; and 2) the desire to link lessons from Niger’s recent national elections to the local elections scheduled for January 2017. We could address both of these points by randomizing the messages embedded in invitations to community dialogues, as briefly described below.

The work plan words the theory of change as follows:

*“[I]ncreased understanding of local dynamics hindering or promoting reform (research) and increased positive and constructive public discourse (dialogue), combined with the improved ability of civil society, government, and political parties to form alliances and partnerships to achieve reform (collective action), will ultimately bolster local solutions that promote the public good and shift incentives away from behaviors that undermine this good.”*

To complement and concretize this theory, we can draw on social science research showing that increased understanding of local dynamics is necessary but not sufficient to increase collective action.[[1]](#footnote-1) That is because the costs of participating in collective action (e.g. time and foregone income) fall on individuals, but the main benefits of collective action (e.g. government accountability) accrue to everyone regardless of participation. Therefore, people who are aware of poor governance and who want better accountability are likely to free-ride on the civic engagement of others, resulting in low engagement levels overall.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Other studies reveal that social sanctioning can overcome the free rider problem: If people think they will lose respect for shirking, they will be more likely to participate in collective action. Typically, effective social sanctioning comes from close neighbors or co-ethnics who can make credible threats to punish free-riders.[[3]](#footnote-3) We could test the effectiveness of social sanctioning in the Nigérien context by embedding messages within a subset of the invitations to community dialogues along the lines of, “Your participation in the dialogue is important to your neighbors, who may be in attendance and will notice if you are absent.” A control group would not receive that message.

We could also explore a second source of encouragement to participate in community dialogues and long-term collective action: the knowledge that citizens in other African countries are currently participating in historic social movements to promote government accountability. Two examples are Y’en a Marre in Senegal and Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso. Both of these movements have massive followings of citizens who form local “clubs” that meet regularly and contribute to national dialogues with politicians and opinion leaders. We could randomize a version of the invitations along the lines of, “Nigériens did not hold many dialogues during the national elections, but there is still time to do so for the local elections. Are you aware that citizens of Senegal and Burkina Faso are mobilizing for change and holding their leaders accountable? Now you have the chance to do the same.” We might expect such a message to inspire citizens to participate. A social-sanctioning variant could end with, “Citizens of neighboring countries are watching to see if Nigeriens seize this opportunity.”

A fourth version of the invitations would be a high encouragement treatment arm, in which we promised to provide a small payment (per diem for travel time) for attendance. This will help ensure adequate participation in the event that the social sanctioning or inspiration primes do not work.

To summarize, versions of dialogue invitations would be:

1. Social sanctioning via neighborhood monitoring
2. Social sanctioning via transnational monitoring
3. Transnational inspiration
4. High encouragement
5. Control

We would track the impact of each treatment by having citizens turn in their invitations at the dialogues, and by collecting household surveys (baseline and endline panel surveys) to measure long-term changes in civic engagement.

1. Corning, Alexandra F. and Daniel J. Myers. 2002. “Individual Orientation Toward Engagement in Social Action.” *Political Psychology* 23.4: 703-729. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Olson, Mancur. 1971. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Habyarimana, James et al. 2011. *Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)