

SPOTLIGHT 11

From transparency to accountability through citizen engagement

The increased visibility of social movements and citizens' demands for well-functioning governance over the last decade has been accompanied by an increase in transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) in many countries. Driven by combinations of grassroots organizations, transnational advocacy networks, and international donors, these initiatives seek to harness information and citizen participation to strengthen accountability from public officials. They include citizen monitoring and oversight of public sector performance, access to and dissemination of information, public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms, and citizen participation in public decision making. TAIs are supported by the growing number, influence, and range of "social intermediaries" (such as nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations, and the media), and they are backed by the availability of new modes of communication (mobile phones, internet, and social media).

A growing body of empirical evidence and analysis points to the mixed results of TAIs in terms of improved outcomes.¹ For all of the widely touted success stories, similar interventions have had poor results or even negative consequences in other contexts. For example, participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, has resulted in increased investment in services for the poor (Ackerman 2004), but it has not been successfully replicated elsewhere (Baiocchi, Heller, and Silva 2011).² Social audits in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh have contributed to combating corruption; however, they have been largely unsuccessful in the state of Bihar (Srinivasan and Park 2013; Dutta and others 2014). In Uganda, community

scorecards for health services helped reduce under-5 mortality by one-third (Bjorkman and Svensson 2009), but community monitoring of health providers in Sierra Leone had limited results in light of accountability gaps up the chain of command (Grandvoinnet, Aslam, and Raha 2015). Interpreted from the perspective of this Report, TAIs seek to reshape the policy arena by enhancing contestability and, when successful, effectively changing the incentives of decision makers in favor of certain outcomes.

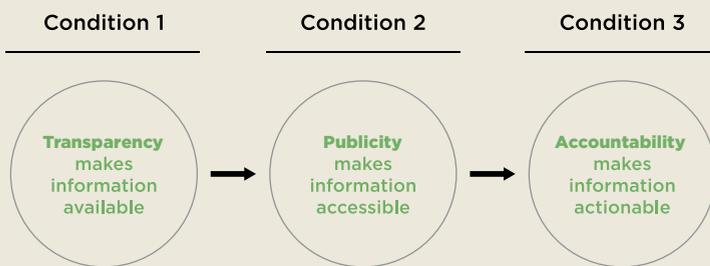
How power asymmetries shape TAI effectiveness: Transparency, publicity, and accountability

Typical approaches to TAIs tend to focus on reducing information asymmetries. However, as this Report acknowledges, providing information alone will not be effective in changing outcomes unless the underlying power asymmetries are addressed as well. Information asymmetries, while arising from problems of whether actions or outcomes are unobservable, are in the end rarely an accident of history. Rather, the lack of disclosure of information is often the result of powerful actors intentionally withholding information or resisting attempts to make it accessible—in other words, information asymmetries are also embedded in existing power asymmetries.

This Report highlights the three key conditions needed for effective information initiatives: transparency, publicity, and accountability (Naurin 2006). However, making information available, making it accessible, and ensuring that it leads to consequences

WDR 2017 team, based on inputs from Helene Grandvoinnet.

Figure S11.1 Transparency is not enough: Three conditions for the effectiveness of information initiatives



Source: WDR 2017 team, based on Naurin 2006.

all involve challenging dynamics related to the nature of the policy arena (figure S11.1).

Transparency

Making information available through transparency initiatives is an important first step toward increasing accountability. However, to effectively change the incentives—political costs—of those in power to adopt such initiatives, citizens need to organize collectively to amplify their bargaining power. Successful reform coalitions often involve various civil society groups collaborating with interested elites, including sympathetic government agencies such as law courts or an ombudsman's office. This type of coalition was a key factor in the successful passage of the Right to Information Act in India (see chapter 8) because a coalition of government officials and eminent citizens helped give voice to initially isolated rural activists.

However, the demand for greater transparency per se may not produce incentives powerful enough to stimulate collective action. Reducing the extent of information asymmetries is not enough. Citizens frequently possess in-depth knowledge of state weaknesses and failures, and yet in most cases, without a process to support their demands, they would rather exit the system than challenge it (Hirschman 1970). Supporting the coordination of citizens' preferences is therefore essential to catalyzing change. Indeed, citizens are not a homogeneous group with common preferences, and in coordinating these preferences there is risk of capture by subgroups (see chapters 6 and 8). Civil society is not immune to power relations, and different civil society actors may have different incentives to maintain or to challenge existing rules. It is not uncommon for representatives to emerge voicing demands reflecting special interests rather than the public good, thereby strengthening rather

than confronting the existing power structures (Mansuri and Rao 2013).

Publicity

Although transparency laws are a necessary first condition, they are far from sufficient for effectively promoting accountability. Publicity, the second condition for effectiveness, requires that the available information be made public and reach the intended actors, particularly those for whom the information matters. Publicity thus activates the potential power of transparency. However, whether information reaches the intended audiences depends on who has the incentives, the means, and the power to publicize it. Even when laws on paper support transparency, citizens may lack the incentives to pursue publication of information if doing so increases the risk of reprisal or the perception that there will be no consequences once the information is publicly available.

The media are a key actor in this regard because their de facto power originates from the decisions they make on what information is made public (see spotlight 12). However, civil society can also play an important role. Information can be made more salient through issue framing and perceived as reliable through dissemination by respected individuals or groups within society (such as local leaders, grassroots organizations, parent-teacher associations, or health committees). The availability of new digital technologies and social media platforms has amplified the possibilities for citizens to play a role in both generating content and publicizing it, especially when the traditional media channels may have limited freedom to do so. Although the social media have been powerful in publicizing more egregious government scandals such as corrupt high-level politicians or the excessive use of force by police, they have been less powerful in mobilizing citizens around everyday issues such as failures in service delivery (World Bank 2016). A growing number of civil society organizations have emerged around the world precisely to solve these types of failures by aggregating and publicizing information from citizens on issues such as bribery or teacher absenteeism. However, an analysis of 17 such initiatives found that only three of them had a high impact in terms of government responsiveness (World Bank 2016).

Accountability

Once information is made public, the effectiveness of TAIs to promote government responsiveness ultimately depends on their ability to reshape the policy arena by rebalancing the power asymmetries.

Responsiveness is a function of the incentives public officials face in terms of the chances of being held accountable. Citizen engagement may succeed in shifting those incentives by applying pressure on authorities and increasing the cost of inaction (especially where there is a direct possibility of being sanctioned or being voted out of office).

The road from transparency to accountability, however, is not free of hurdles. Depending on its nature, citizen engagement can lead to positive or negative outcomes. Although assessment of these experiences faces the challenge of defining clearly the dimension over which results are expected, Gaventa and Barrett (2012) propose four dimensions across which to measure these outcomes (table S11.1).³ According to their analysis of over 800 examples of citizen engagement strategies, the highest percentage of positive outcomes for the indicator *enhanced state responsiveness and accountability* is the result of multiple engagement strategies (as opposed to a single engagement strategy).⁴

In addition to multiple engagement strategies, the effectiveness of citizen engagement to promote accountability also depends on the effectiveness of a broader set of institutional incentives, mechanisms to enforce sanctions, and coalitions with a broad set of actors (including political elites). For example, the need among elite actors to maintain relationships both horizontally (with other elite groups) and vertically (with organized social groups) in order to preserve their influence can create strong incentives to respond (or not) to particular demands, which may

vary by sector or over time (Bukenya, Hickey, and King 2012). Some agencies or levels of government are more amenable than others to partnering with civil society to ensure the accountability of other state actors—such as oversight institutions, a central government eager to monitor local governments or agencies, or a regulatory agency partnering with citizens to check the policy of an energy ministry. The judiciary can be an important actor as well to the extent that it has the space and incentives to challenge public authorities (see spotlight 3 on effective and equitable legal institutions). During Hosni Mubarak’s rule in the Arab Republic of Egypt, for example, human rights groups took advantage of an important window of judicial independence to systematically challenge repressive legislation through the Supreme Constitutional Court (Moustafa 2007; Staton 2010).

Creating coalitions across different levels of the policy arena can also be critical for scaling up the success of localized interventions. For example, when local obstacles stem from weaknesses at a higher level, improving local accountability alone will not be sufficient (the different policy arenas in which players interact are not independent of each other). In Sierra Leone, a process of community scorecards reached a ceiling when nurses and community members proved unable to resolve issues that involved greater power imbalances or larger institutional breakdowns. Strategies of *vertical integration*, or the coordination of civil society oversight at different levels of public decision making, are important not only for identifying possible (interconnected) entry points

Table S11.1 Positive and negative outcomes of citizen engagement

Positive	Negative
<i>Construction of citizenship</i>	
Increased civic and political knowledge	Reliance on knowledge intermediaries
Greater sense of empowerment and agency	Disempowerment and reduced sense of agency
<i>Practices of citizen participation</i>	
Increased capacities for collective action	New capacities used for “negative” purposes
New forms of participation	Tokenistic or “captured” forms of participation
Deepening of networks and solidarities	Lack of accountability and representation in networks
<i>Responsive and accountable states</i>	
Greater access to state services and resources	Denial of state services and resources
Greater realization of rights	Social, economic, and political reprisals
Enhanced state responsiveness and accountability	Violent or coercive state response
<i>Inclusive and cohesive societies</i>	
Inclusion of new actors and issues in public spaces	Reinforcement of social hierarchies and exclusion
Greater social cohesion across groups	Increased horizontal conflict and violence

Source: Gaventa and Barrett 2012, table 1.

for reform, but also for strengthening the bargaining power of actors to actually pressure for reform. The initiative Textbook Count in the Philippines reveals how this type of strategy was successful in reducing textbook funds lost to corruption as well as improving the quality, cost, and delivery time of textbooks. However, the initiative also reveals how the challenge of sustaining such gains relies on the ability to overcome power asymmetries that prevent commitment to longer-term reform objectives (Fox and Akeron 2016).

Transparency and accountability: Complements for policy effectiveness

The road from transparency to accountability via citizen engagement and coalition building requires an effective reshaping of the policy arena. This can be done through two entry points: enhancing contestability and effectively changing the incentives of decision makers. In other words, transparency and access to information are not effective if the pre-existing relative bargaining power of actors remains unchanged.

Accountability is effective when citizens, acting individually in response to new information, vote out those who are politically responsible for bad policies (Khemani and others 2016). Accountability is also strengthened by collective mobilization that increases the cost of inaction for those with the authority to hold others responsible (Grandvoininnet, Aslam, and Raha 2015). As experience shows, coalitions between different groups (citizens and elites) at different levels (local, national, and international) tend to be the most effective ones to bring about change.

Notes

1. For overviews of the evidence, see Gaventa and McGee (2013); Joshi (2013); Fox (2015); Grandvoininnet, Aslam, and Raha (2015); Fox and Akeron (2016); and Khemani and others (2016).
2. See chapter 8 for a more in-depth discussion of the case of Brazil.
3. Grandvoininnet, Aslam, and Raha (2015) propose an alternative set of categories based on within-state, state-society, and within-society outcomes, as well as on whether outcomes are more “instrumental” or “institutional.”

4. The single engagement strategies analyzed include local associations, social movements and campaigns, and formal participatory governance spaces.

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