



## Helpdesk Research Report

# Transparency and accountability

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28.01.2014

## Questions

*Q1. How, where, and under what circumstances is there a link between more and better data and citizens' increased access to that data?*

*Q2. How, where, and under what circumstances does citizens' increased access to more and better data lead to a more accountable political settlement?*

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## 1. Overview

This rapid literature review looks at how, where and under what conditions transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) have had an impact on 1) increased access to data by citizens and 2) the accountability of the political settlement between state and society. Rather than taking a sector-by-sector approach the report presents a synthesis of the key available evidence, organised thematically by common conclusions. The report has prioritised including findings from meta-reviews of TAIs, but as these are scarce, findings from some studies of individual interventions are also included. The report deliberately attempts to cover findings from a wide range of sectors and scale of initiatives, but this is a rapid not comprehensive coverage of the evidence.

There is a consensus that more and better data is a necessary but not sufficient condition for increasing citizens' access to that data. Likewise, increased access to more and better data is a necessary but not sufficient condition for strengthening a government's political accountability to its citizens. Understanding how, where and under what circumstances TAIs lead to increased access to data and improved political accountability is, however, work in progress: experts highlight that there is an acute

lack of evidence on these issues, which ongoing research programmes aim to address<sup>1</sup>. For now though there is a shortage of studies that look at the impact of TAIs, or attempt to elaborate a theory of change for the long, complex and context-specific causal relationship between transparency and accountability. Moreover many TAIs are too new to expect impacts on the longer-term goals such as overall political accountability.

Nevertheless, there are a growing number of empirical studies investigating impacts, and a few studies have started to identify key factors that affect transparency and accountability outcomes. Factors affecting the link between **more and better data and increasing citizens' access to that data** include:

- **Data quality:** technical barriers and poor quality means that much open and transparent data in name is in practice not accessible to citizens in developing countries.
- **Citizens' capabilities and needs:** citizens' access to data is shaped by their capabilities to process, analyse and use the data, which depends on a society's levels of technology, literacy, education and social capital. Effective data resonates with and is of value for the intended audience.
- **Discrimination and inequality:** the potential of transparency to promote inclusion and empowerment can be diminished by persistent power imbalances blocking marginalised and disadvantaged people and groups (on a gender, racial, ethnic, religious, disability or other basis) from accessing data.
- **Information and communication technologies (ICTs):** ICTs have potential to bridge the gap between data and citizens but technological and human capital deficits can limit their reach.
- **Info-mediaries:** Across various sectors, info-mediaries – such as the media, technology innovators, civil society organisations (CSOs), and international platforms – play a vital role in bridging the gap between data and citizens.

Factors shaping whether **increased citizens' access to more and better data may result in a more accountable political settlement** include:

- **Supply-side:** i) the level of democratisation, political will and broader political economy and legal frameworks and incentive structures (Gaventa & McGee, 2013) – of service providers and politicians; ii) processes of political transition and opportunities for reform that arise from fiscal and economic crises, and widely publicised cases of corruption (Khagram et al, 2013).
- **Demand-side:** i) whether the information shared enables understanding of government behaviour and how to influence change; ii) engaging citizens in the design and implementation of transparency policies; iii) understanding the contextual triggers for behavioural change; iv) the capabilities of CSOs and investment in them to support their enabling role; v) other collective mobilisation strategies; vi) and external influences promoting global norms and influencing domestic actors (Gaventa & McGee, 2013; Khagram et al, 2013; Peixoto, 2013b).
- **State-society governance processes:** the quality and nature of state-society engagement and investment in creating new spaces for constructive collaboration on the dissemination, understanding and use of data to strengthen political accountability (Gaventa & McGee, 2013; McGee, 2013)

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the DFID, Sida, USAID, Omidyar Network and Open Society Foundation funded programme *Making All Voices Count*; and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) funded programme *Exploring the Emerging Impacts of Open Data in Development Countries* (ODDC).

## 2. Increased access to more and better data

There are various studies describing transparency initiatives that aim to increase citizens' access to more and better data<sup>2</sup> across a range of country contexts, sectors and types of transparency<sup>3</sup>. Some of these report positive impacts on citizen access to data, others disappointing results. There is some tracking of who is accessing the data (whether socio-economically disadvantaged people are, for example) and if they had previous access – but this type of detailed analysis appears to be scarce. Some reviews find growing evidence that increased transparency leads to improved development outcomes, but does not present rigorous evidence on the intermediate step of how citizens' access has changed.

In many cases this is because the initiatives are quite recent. For example, Open Data Barometer Global Report for 2013 reports that strong evidence on the impacts of open government data is “almost universally lacking” and remains anecdotal as few programmes have been evaluated yet. In other cases initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP) do not have a clear theory of change or evaluable objectives relating to how open data can lead to increased access by citizens (expert comment). This is evident in the independent reviews of OGP member governments' progress in implementing their OGP action plans<sup>4</sup> (expert comment).

Here are illustrative examples of the type of evidence available:

- Kenya's open government data initiative has opened up digitised data-sets on budgets, health care and education. Some reports of it present this as one piece in a growing body of evidence that an open approach to development facilitates greater citizen access to information (Development Initiatives, the International Budget Partnership and Global Witness, 2013). Other studies caution that so far citizen access to the newly released data remains low (Rahemtulla et al, n.d.). A survey by Jesuit Hakimani finds that two years after its launch, the majority of Kenyans did not know how to use the open data Government portal, with only 14 per cent of the people interviewed having used it (Jesuit Hakimani Centre, 2013: 54).
- A survey by RAAG and NCPRI on the impact of the Right to Information Act in India interviewed over 35,000 people and analysed data on over 25,000 right to information applications, providing detailed analysis of the reach and uptake of the Right to Information Act (RAAG/NCPRI 2009). Calland and Bentley (2013: 573) conclude that this and other assessments and case studies show “that many citizens have used the Act in innovative ways”.

On the basis of these types of findings, the common conclusion is that while the provision of more and better data can lead to increased access to that data by citizens, this is not an automatic process: the provision of more and better is necessary but not sufficient for increased citizen access.

The rest of this section provides a synthesis of the factors identified in the literature reviewed as affecting citizens' access to data.

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<sup>2</sup> This report uses the terms data and information interchangeably. When 'open data' initiatives – which is formally defined as data which is “machine-readable, accessible in bulk and openly licensed” (Davies, 2013: 15) – are referred to, this is specified.

<sup>3</sup> A key distinction is made between “*proactive transparency*” – the “open data” initiatives where governments or other actors choose to publish data and “*reactive transparency*” as invoked in Right to Information (RTI) and Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation where citizens ask for access to information (Davies et al, 2013: 17).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/independent-reporting-mechanism>

## 2.1 Data quality

The open data community has developed principles for open data that, if met, would ensure there can be “effective use” of the data by the widest possible range of users (Gurstein, 2010). One set of widely used open government data principles are that the data should be: *complete*; *primary* (presented at the lowest level of detail); *timely*; *accessible* (to the widest range of users for the widest range of purposes); *machine processable*; *non-discriminatory* (available to anyone); *non-proprietary*; and *license-free*.<sup>5</sup>

However, not all government data that purports to be “open” meets these criteria. The Open Government Data 2013 Barometer report finds that “although open government data policies have spread fast, the availability of truly open data remains low, with less than 7% of the dataset surveyed in the Barometer published both in bulk machine-readable forms, and under open licenses” (Davies, 2013: 6). This is confirmed by the ongoing research by organisations participating in the Open Data in Developing Countries programme (expert comments).

A 2012 survey by the Open Knowledge Foundation on the use of fiscal information in 18 developed and developing countries reports that common technical barriers stopping citizens from accessing fiscal data include (Chambers et al, 2012: 8):

- **Non-machine readability of data** especially when shared in pdfs.
- **Disappearing or hidden data** with historic data taken off government websites or data that is behind paywalls.
- **Poor quality of the data itself** due to lack of care taken with creating the data, poor structure, too aggregated, and problems with comparing data across timeframes.
- **Lack of supporting documentation** to explain to users what is contained within a dataset.

## 2.2 Citizens’ capabilities and needs

Citizens’ access to data is shaped by their capabilities to process, analyse and use data, which in turn are structured by a society’s levels of technology, literacy, education and social capital (Gurstein, 2010). There are concerns that in countries with “scarce or undermobilized” technical capabilities to process open data, governments could be meeting transparency targets on paper, although the data disclosed still does not allow for greater citizen access (Peixoto, 2013: 209). In their review of the literature on transparency, Bellver and Kaufmann (2005: 18) note the challenges in implementing Freedom of Information laws in South Africa where few public and private institutions were aware of the law or the mechanism to access information. A review by Rainbow Insights (2009) recommends the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) Secretariat should focus more on capacity-building issues within EITI countries because very few people have the background to be able to review and analyse the detailed reports.

From their research into transparency policies in the United States, Fung et al (2007) recommend providing information that is easy for citizens to use; matching information content and formats to users’ levels of attention and comprehension; and having flexible information policies that can adapt to users’ changing needs. Activities to strengthen citizens’ capabilities to access government data include: i) communication campaigns (at national and sub-national levels) on what the data is, how to access it and

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<sup>5</sup> These are the Sebastopol Open Government Data Principles authored by a working group convened in 2007 in Sebastopol, California. <http://opengovdata.io/2012-02/page/7-1/open-government-data-definition-the-principles-open-government-data>. See also the summary in Davies, 2013: 7.

the benefits of accessing it; ii) presenting the data in local languages; and iii) investing in training initiatives to strengthen citizens' capabilities to use the data (Aguilar et al, 2011; Bellver & Kaufmann, 2005). Aguilar et al (2011) report a positive example from EITI in Nigeria, where road shows were used to disseminate audit reports to community-based CSOs, community leaders, state government officials, subnational government officials, and traditional leaders within the zones.

Several studies also point out the importance of understanding what citizens' actual and potential involvement with the data will be, and designing the data initiative to 'resonate' with the intended audience (Peixoto, 2013: 204). That is, the data must be both relevant and of value to the users (Fung et al, 2007). For example:

- In her review of TAIs on aid, McGee (2013: s108) criticises many of these interventions for seeming to work on the basis of "build it and they'll come", with "they" referring to "aid accountability claimants". However, these interventions lack a clear understanding of who "they" are and what their capacities and constraints, incentives and disincentives to use the aid data are.
- McGee (2013: s119) also finds the focus on aid statistics ignores citizens' broader range of information demands, and in particular their concern with the politics and relationships that shape aid allocation and conditionality.
- A survey of civil society participation in the EITI found that CSO engagement would be improved if the EITI process and data were more meaningful for the local level and affected communities, for example by expanding the data to include more community-relevant data (such as project level revenue data and community-level social expenditures (Mainhardt-Gibbs, 2010: 2).

### 2.3 Impact of discrimination and inequality

Open data and right to information movements are thought to promote inclusion and empowerment, transforming power imbalances that result from asymmetric information, and bringing new (previously marginalised) stakeholders into policy debates (Davies et al, 2013: 16). However, some experts have warned of creating a "data divide" where data is "empowering the empowered" (Gurstein, 2010), with particular concerns that technological innovations will benefit the privileged, as they are more likely to be able to access these new ICTs (Gigler, 2011: 1).

Several studies show that discrimination and inequality affects which citizens access data, and the responses to their data requests:

- The Open Data Global Barometer survey asked about six kinds of Open Government Data (OGD) impact (government efficiency, transparency and accountability, environmental sustainability, inclusion of marginalised groups, economic growth, and supporting entrepreneurs). In many countries the average evidence of impact was low, and particularly low for inclusion impacts of OGD, suggesting an area in need of further focus. (Davies, 2013: 7)
- In a survey of access to information laws and practices in 14 countries, the Open Society Justice Initiative (2006) found that people from a marginalised racial, ethnic, religious or socio-economic group received fewer responses to information requests to government bodies than journalists or NGO representatives.
- A study of access to information in India found that location (rural/urban), age, occupation and educational level made "huge differences" as to whether people requested for information, with

people from tribes and designated lower castes and women making far fewer requests. Men accounted for 90 per cent of rural applicants and 85 per cent of urban applicants. (RAAG/NCPRI, 2009: 8 – cited in Calland and Bentley, 2013: s76)

- Looking at the impact on women and girls, the UN 2010 e-government survey reports that women do not have equal access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), and specific, targeted gender goals and strategies are required in ICT projects (UN, 2010: 90). However, there are also positive experiences. The UN report provides details of a successful intervention in Andhra Pradesh India where rural government e-services centres aimed at serving women in particular have become an important interface for communication and transactions between the local administration and the community. This has had a positive impact on the participating women's standing and influence in their villages (ibid.).

## 2.4 Information and communication technologies

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – particularly online and mobile technology tools – are changing the transparency and accountability field (Kuriyan et al, 2012; Avila et al, 2011). A review of how technology can be used to enhance transparency and accountability, finds that ICTs play an important role in (Kuriyan, et al, 2012: 6):

- “Reducing the distance between government service provider and user with more access to decision makers’, information and platforms to raise concerns and issues.
- Providing multi-platform opportunities for dissemination and interaction with information.
- Providing visual and analytical tools for citizens to access government data and therefore simplifying traditionally presented government information (e.g. budgets [...]).
- Providing real-time opportunities for citizen and interaction and feedback”.

A review of technologies for transparency concludes, however, that the (social, political, economic) impacts of ICT initiatives for governments and citizens are still unclear and there needs to be better understanding of the factors that enable or constrain impacts (Kailya et al, 2011: 7). The United Nations’ 2010 E-Government Survey found that many of the least developed countries have limited capacity to use ICTs for transparency due to the cost, lack of infrastructure, limited human capital and weak private sectors (United Nations, 2010: 4). Moreover projects supporting developing countries’ technological capacity have often been small-scale, ad-hoc and unsustainable. Exceptions include successful use of e-technology in education in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, and mobile health in Rwanda, where enabling legal and regulatory frameworks played a critical role (ibid.). The review goes on to specify that the effectiveness of ICTs depends on: i) people’s informational capabilities; ii) the ICT infrastructure itself; iii) levels of connectivity throughout a country and broadband penetration; and iv) who owns ICT devices (Kuriyan et al, 2012: 7).

The UN report recommends that in developing countries, expanding access to information through e-services includes these basic steps (ibid.: 89):

- “Increasing the number of Internet users and personal computer usage;
- Increasing the broadband capacity to allow for greater use of mobile devices for e-government;
- Developing content that citizens find important and useful;

- Improving education levels, so that citizens are able to use the information and knowledge provided; [...]
- Encouraging citizen participation”

On the latter point, the report recommends including people in planning the e-services prior to implementation, as people consulted “are more likely to use the e-services when they are operational” (ibid). Avila et al’s (2011: 5) global mapping of technology for transparency and accountability also finds that projects have “a better chance of effectively producing change” when there is a collaborative approach with a feedback mechanism between information-generators and information-users, and when various stakeholders (service users, NGOs, government, service providers) participate.

## 2.5 Info-mediaries

Across various sectors, “info-mediaries” play “an essential role to bridging the gap between data and citizens”, through translating and communicating information (McGee, 2013: s117; Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s20). Important info-mediaries include the media, technology developers, civil society organisations, and international initiatives.

### *A competitive and free media*

Experts find that the media is one of the main vehicles that provide the public with accessible information, acting both as a mechanism for external control on government action, and as a platform for citizens to voice concerns (Peixoto, 2013: 205). In their analysis of the empirical evidence on transparency and corruption in resource-rich developing countries, Kolstad and Wiig (2009: 527) find that a higher degree of media competition can ensure the good quality of available information. In their study of the impact of Freedom of Information (FOI) on the UK central government, Hazell and Worthy (2010: 7) find that the media has a key influence on the impact of FOI as a key user and defender of FOI and “a key conduit for shaping wider perception of FOI”.

### *Technology innovators*

In an analysis of the impacts of open data, Davies et al (2013: 6) highlight that donor investment has led to standardised practices to support technology innovators in making open data more accessible. These include: “*hackdays*” that bring together technology developers to work with government datasets; “*apps competitions*” that aim to generate innovation from outside government; and “*data journalism*” where government datasets are used to generate media stories. One example is Kenya, where the World Bank and other donors have put “considerable investment” into building the capacity of the technical community to unlock the potential of the Kenya open data portal (Davies et al, 2013: 6).

There are single descriptive case studies on how these types of efforts have supported increased access to data by citizens (see for example the story of how a Kenyan reporter used skills learnt in a “data boot camp” to interpret government data for a story about why girls were dropping out of school – Butler, 2012). However, this rapid review has not found any systematic evidence on the impact of these kinds of initiatives on citizens’ access to data.

## *Civil society organisations*

Studies highlight the essential role of CSOs in enabling citizens' access to data. For example:

- Van Zyl reviews 21 International Budget Partnership (IBP) case studies and finds that CSOs play a vital role in “accessing, interpreting, and distributing information to multiple stakeholders in usable and accessible formats” (van Zyl, 2014: 1).
- A comparative study on access to information in 14 countries finds that requests for information in countries with civil society involved in drafting, adopting, and implementing access to information laws received responses to their information requests in more instances (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2006).
- Calland and Bentley (2013) compare experiences with right to information legislation in India and South Africa. In India the initial civil society activism led to a wider transparency movement in the country, whereas in South Africa where civil society's capacity was comparatively limited and its scale and scope far narrower, the uptake of FOI was low.

Challenges for CSOs include:

- **Poor quality of data:** Pedersen and Chambers (2013: page) find that while many CSOs consulted for their study “engaged in sophisticated analysis and uncovered subtle connections, in terms of person-hours, the bulk of their work consisted of merely collecting data and refining it”.
- **Limited support to civil society engagement:** A 2008 assessment of the IMF and World Bank's extractive industries transparency initiatives reports a lack of attention to civil society engagement. Only about a quarter of the World Bank country programmes reviewed provided support to civil society participation, and there were no benchmarks to hold government and private sector projects accountable for the adequacy of civil society engagement (Bank Information Center & Global Witness, 2008).
- **Neglect of local/community-based CSOs:** A survey of civil society participation in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) highlights that working with national non-governmental organisations was prioritised over building the capacity of local/community-based CSOs to act on the data and raise public awareness (Mainhardt-Gibbs, 2010). Another review of EITI experience by Aguilar et al (2011) recommended that initiatives working at the sub-national level needed to take particular care to invest in start-up and capacity strengthening of community-based organisations. An assessment of the Publish What You Pay initiative found there were complaints from civil society groups in some countries that the initiative often involved the more visible and well-resourced NGOs and did not engage at the grassroots (van Oranje & Parham, 2009: 18).

## *International platforms*

Many transparency initiatives are supported through global platforms. In her review McGee (2013) finds that when aid TAIs have a global as well as national or local dimension, although it is hard to prove, it appears that this “further enhances the prospects of impact” (McGee, 2013: s118).

In their assessment of the Publish What You Pay initiative, van Oranje and Parham (2009) find on the positive side that international NGOs and donor agencies have increasingly mobilised resources to support local civil society groups with capacity building and with technical assistance programmes. However, the international coalition has found it challenging to effectively involve all national actors due



to language barriers, geographic isolation, lack of access to technology, shortages of funding, lack of resources and inadequate technical capacity.

### 3. Strengthened political accountability

#### 3.1 How increased access to data has led to a more accountable political settlement

As well as addressing more immediate “developmental failures” such as service delivery outcomes, some transparency and accountability proponents hold that TAIs can have “democratic outcomes” (Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s4). The theory is that improved access to information can strengthen citizens’ ability to hold governments to account, resulting in an overall more accountable political settlement,<sup>6</sup> where government and citizens relate in “more informed, organised, constructive and systematic manner” (Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s10, citing Malena et al 2004: 5).

This is hard to prove. Various studies and experts find that increased access to more and better data can help strengthen the accountability of the political settlement but this does not happen automatically, with many steps in the causal chain (expert comment; Fox, 2007). Few studies trace the outcomes of TAIs all the way to their impact on overall political accountability, which is a long-term goal and hard to measure. There is also a lack of studies that investigate the aggregated impact on the state-society relationship of multiple individual TAIs that focus on immediate, specific goals such as improving service delivery or budget utilisation (McGee and Gaventa, 2010). Moreover there are many different types of transparency and different understandings of accountability, which refer to a broad range of processes, actors and power relations (Fox, 2007). As a result, according to McGee and Gaventa (2010: s11), “much of the current evidence relies on untested normative assumptions and under-specified relationships between mechanisms and outcomes”.

The literature reviewed and contributions of experts highlight two factors that influence how citizens’ access to data can lead to stronger political accountability:

- **Context:** While increased access to data can open up more possibilities through changing the informational environment, it does not determine what activity takes place (expert comment). Efforts to trace simple results chains from transparency to better political settlements may be misleading and unhelpful (expert comment). What works in terms of instigating change, particularly in the sphere of governance, will depend very much on the particular context (see work by, for example, Andrews, 2013) (expert comment). Gaventa and McGee (2013: s19) advise that context should determine which transparency and accountability objectives are feasible and desirable, and which initiatives are appropriate to achieve these objectives.
- **Power and politics:** Whether increased access to data leads to more political accountability is fundamentally about how TAIs can influence the underlying power and political relationships that structure the state-society relationships. Gaventa and McGee (2013: s6) find that TAIs pay too little attention to these underlying issues, and as a result their potential for deepening democracy or empowering citizens tends to be underplayed.

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<sup>6</sup> Political settlements define how political and economic power is organised and are usually agreed between elites. They include formal and informal agreements that establish the basic rules governing economic relations and resource allocation. (DFID, 2010: 7, 22)

## 3.2 Where increased access to data has led to a more accountable political settlement

There are a small but growing number of studies that identify the impact of increased access to data on various outcomes that influence the overall political settlement. These include: i) greater state responsiveness to citizens' needs; ii) the creation of spaces for citizen engagement; and iii) the empowerment of local voices (Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s12). Gaventa & McGee's (2013) synthesis of this evidence base shows that a number of TAIs have had a positive effect on political accountability, but this is not guaranteed. Below are illustrative examples of this evidence base, taken primarily from the Gaventa & McGee synthesis and supplemented by a few other studies covered by this rapid review. Many of these are examples of positive impact, but the evidence also highlights mixed and some unintended effects resulting from contextual factors.

### *State responsiveness*

- A 14 country study by OSJI in 2006, finds that freedom of information initiatives have led to greater state responsiveness, although not in all cases, and is highly dependent on the status of the person submitting the request and civil-society pressure (Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s14).
- In their article summarising Calland's 2010 review of Freedom of Information initiatives, Calland and Bentley (2013; s76) find that right to information activism is being used as "a potent instrument to improve governance and transparency across a range of issues" (e.g. elections, trade unions, water rights, labour relations).
- Some studies report that freedom of information requests can reduce trust between government and citizens, as the minority of stories that get the most attention tend to involve negative aspects of government behaviour (Hazell & Worthy, 2009 – looking at the United Kingdom; Fung & Weil, 2010 – looking at the United States).

### *Citizen engagement*

- Participatory budgeting initiatives can (but do not necessarily) lead to new civic associations and strengthened democratic processes (Goldfrank, 2006, looking at multiple cases mainly in Brazil or Latin America – cited in Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s15).
- A South Africa case study finds that community-based Freedom of Information strategies can be instrumental in leveraging other rights (e.g. related to housing and water) (ODAC, 2010 – cited in Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s15).
- The EITI self-evaluation contends that it has successfully built a platform for public engagement in a number of African countries (EATI Secretariat, 2010 – cited in Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s15).

### *Citizen empowerment*

- TAIs in individual sectors (e.g. budget, extractive industries) can lead to improved awareness and ability to analyse information (as reported by Robinson, 2006 and Rainbow Insight, 2009 – cited in Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s15).
- An assessment of the right to information legislation in India finds improvements in people's perceptions of declining corruption, misuse of power and influence being exposed and grievances redressed (RAAG/NPRI, 2009 – cited in Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s15).

- Studies show that increased information about politician performance can result in lower votes for low-performing or corrupt representatives (e.g. in Brazil – Ferraz & Finan, 2008 – and India – Banerjee et al, 2011).
- Hazell & Worthy’s evaluation of the impact of FOI in the UK finds that FOI increased transparency and accountability, in that it was used by the media, MPs and campaigners to make the government more accountable. But there is little evidence that FOI improved government decision-making and it had little impact on public understanding of government decision-making. It did not promote wider engagement by the public with government decision-making. (Hazell & Worthy, 2009: 5)

### 3.3 Factors affecting the impact of increased access on political accountability

Arguably the evidence base is “not large enough” to assess overall trends (Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s19). In addition most empirical research does not investigate “the causal mechanisms through which change actually takes place” (Meija Acosta, 2013: s95). Nevertheless some meta-analyses have started to identify common factors that have shaped the impact of transparency and accountability initiatives, across the board or in particular sectors.

#### *Supply-side*

From their synthesis of extensive reviews of TAIs in five sectors (service delivery, budget process, freedom of information, natural resource governance and aid transparency) Gaventa & McGee (2013: s20) identify the following state or supply-side enabling conditions:

- **Level of democratisation:** essential freedoms of association, voice or media enhance the prospects of impact;
- **Political will** to implement a balanced supply- and demand- side approach to accountability, with fully institutionalised accountability provisions that have ‘teeth’;
- **Broader political economy and prevailing legal frameworks and incentive structures** within which political representatives and state functionaries operate.

Reviewing initiatives that aim to improve fiscal transparency and participation, Khagram et al (2013: 3) identify “stand out” state “causal triggers” that contribute to improved outcomes:

- **“Processes of political transition** towards more democratic forms of political contestation and alternation;
- **Fiscal and economic crises** that force governments to put in place enhanced mechanisms for fiscal discipline and independent scrutiny;
- **Widely publicised cases of corruption** that give reformers political space to introduce reforms that improve public access to fiscal information”.

Individual case studies illustrate the extent of the impact of supply-side factors on transparency efforts to improve the political settlement. In one case, a randomised experiment by Malesky et al (2011)<sup>7</sup> shows that the more a Vietnamese National Assembly delegates’ actions were publicized, the less likely they were to criticise the national government. In another, Tan (2012) examines the impact of improved

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Peixoto, 2013b.

environmental transparency regulations in China, and finds that given China's authoritarian structure, civil society initiatives had limited impact on key stakeholder (government and private sector) behaviour.

Kosack and Fung's (forthcoming) analysis of 16 experimental evaluations of TAI interventions identifies five possible "worlds" which affect the impact of TAI interventions. These worlds are differentiated by the incentives service providers and policymakers have to respond to transparency interventions:

- **A competitive service world:** TAI interventions are highly successful because users can choose from multiple service providers, as long as an intervention gives users good information about different providers of a service whose quality they care about.
- **A world where providers are willing to engage in reform efforts:** This is a positive environment for TAIs, with providers willing to engage in collaborative problem solving with community members. However, Kosack and Fung found that none of the reviewed 16 TAIs saw themselves as operating in this kind of world.
- **A world with little competition and where service providers are (at least initially) unwilling to engage in reforms:** TAIs studied in this world had mixed outcomes as users face barriers to collective action and success requires a shift in the balance of power between citizens and providers.
- **A world with little competition and unwilling service providers, but where policymakers and/or politicians are willing to engage:** TAIs can be successful by working through the 'long route' of accountability and collaborating with politicians and policy-makers at a higher level.
- **A world where everyone is unwilling to engage in reform:** TAIs are least likely to be effective as they have to overcome barriers to collective action, alter the incentives of reluctant public service officials and overcome the difficulties of a long implementation chain to alter the incentives of front-line providers.

### *Demand-side*

A number of reviewers also identify a series of demand-side factors that influence whether increased transparency has an impact on accountability.

- **Type of information shared:** From his review of 21 TAI case studies by the International Budget Partnership, van Zyl (2014: 4) finds that any demand for accountability requires knowing "what government did, and who in government was responsible". This is defined by Fox (2007: 667) as "clear transparency" – "reliable information about institutional performance" that allows people to understand the behaviour of organisations and officials, enabling them "to pursue strategies of constructive change".
- **Engaging citizens "upstream" in formulating transparency policies** (Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s20): Carlitz (2013: s60) finds that involving citizens in the design and implementation of budget process TAIs can mean they are more likely to engage in monitoring them.
- **Understanding behavioural change triggers:** There are few studies that explore in more detail the causal pathways leading to citizens' behaviour change. One exception is a study by Lierberman et al (2013) which articulated a causal chain of behavioural change to assess an educational TAI giving parents information about their children's educational performance and on how to become more involved in improving their children's learning. They recommend using their theory of behavioural change in other research to understand better why, as they found in

their study, informational interventions do not always led to transformational behavioural change (Lieberman et al, 2013: 40-41; summarised in Peixoto, 2013b).

- **The role of CSOs:** van Zyl (2014) argues that CSOs play a more important role in bridging the gap between transparency and accountability than the literature recognizes. From the 21 case studies on budget TAIs, he finds CSOs impact on accountability through various channels. These include direct demands through the media and grassroots mobilisation; and pressurising and supporting (through training and research support) formal oversight actors (legislatures, auditors, judiciaries) and other actors (executive insiders, political parties, donors).
- **Collective mobilisation strategies:** McGee & Gaventa (2013) find TAIs can be successful when they are linked to other mobilisation strategies (litigation, electoral pressure or protest movements) and invoke collective action.
- **External influences:** Khagram et al (2013) highlight the importance of external influences that promote global norms and empower domestic reformers and civil society actors.

### *Improving state-society governance processes*

Studies highlight that commonly it is “**a confluence of demand- and supply-side factors**” that affects the impact of transparency on accountability (Carlitz, 2013: s59). In particular the **nature and quality of the state-citizen governance relationship** is thought to be an important condition for improving political accountability (Gaventa & McGee, 2013: s21; Carlitz, 2013: s59). Examples of evidence for this include:

- McGee (2013: s117) finds that, compared with simple demand or supply side initiatives and one-off interventions, state-citizen collaboration through a multi-stakeholder process “adds to the capacity, outreach, utilisation, legitimacy and authority” of aid TAIs and appears critical to its impact”.
- Meija Acosta’s review of natural resource management transparency initiatives find that they aim to improve “governance processes around natural-resources management such as promoting the inclusion and active participation of stakeholders, demanding the public disclosure of government accounts or working to ensure the commitment of political elites” (Meija Acosta, 2013: s93).
- The EITI self-evaluation of impact in 32 countries finds that in some countries (e.g. Gabon, Liberia, Nigeria) the multi-stakeholder approach of the EITI has created platforms for dialogue and engagement between government and other actors which did not exist previously (EITI Secretariat, 2010). However, Scanteam’s (2011) evaluation of EITI which undertook three country studies (Gabon, Mongolia, Nigeria), finds few discernible governance impacts, largely due to lack of links between simple EITI dissemination activities and discussions on the public sector reform.
- The rural, grassroots civil society movement in India called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), used innovative participatory methods – public meetings where local people checked official expenditure records – to tackle corruption of public services funds. This put the power to hold public officials to account into the hands of those deprived of their entitlements (Calland, 2010: 8).

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## Suggested citation

Carter, B. (2014). *Transparency and accountability* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1067). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

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