The Contribution of Government Communication Capacity to Achieving Good Governance Outcomes

The capacity to communicate effectively with constituents is a fundamental function of modern governance. The success and sustainability of efforts to strengthen public sector systems and processes depend, in large part, on legitimate public authority (Centre for the Future State 2010). The legitimacy of public authority can be earned through good governance, defined by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID) as a demonstrated ability to "get things done" in ways that are responsive to citizens' needs, while being open to public criticism and scrutiny. Legitimacy is also earned by leaders who possess the ability to communicate a clear vision for the country as well as the policy choices and trade-offs they have made on the public's behalf. Integral to the goal of legitimacy is the capacity to carry out two-way communication with citizens in a meaningful and ongoing manner.

Government communication capacity is not just about efficient and effective information dissemination. The ability to "push out" information is necessary, albeit deeply insufficient. The willingness and ability to speak with citizens must be coupled with a willingness and ability to listen to them, incorporate their needs and preferences into the policy process, and engage local patterns of influence and trusted sources of information.

These information intermediaries include opinion leaders and various forms of media at the national and local levels. In today's national contexts, including local jurisdictions with sizable populations, skillful use of multiple modes of mediated communication is thus a necessary condition for local stakeholders cultivating a sense of ownership of and engagement in the political process. The legitimacy of public authority therefore requires effective government communication capacity.

Capacity gaps in this crucial aspect of effective governance are seldom addressed in development literature and operational practice. In an effort to help mitigate these shortcomings, this brief suggests links among government communication capacity, legitimate public authority, and good governance; advances basic definitions and key dimensions (including a rudimentary framework and draft diagnostic tool); and raises critical issues regarding government communication capacity. The closing section of the brief is offered to development professionals—particularly governance and public sector specialists who manage and support reform efforts—to help them consider the potential contributions of government communication capacity to their own efforts, regardless of the level of government or sectoral focus.

Government Communication Capacity and Good Governance

The case for government communication capacity's potential contributions to legitimate public authority can be strengthened by establishing links with good governance outcomes. Success or failure in the creation and exercise of public authority, with the aid of government communication efforts, can be gauged by examining whether using this authority contributes to attaining broader public sector objectives. For this purpose, this report refers to the U.K. DfID's three key characteristics of good governance regimes:

1. *state capability*—the extent to which leaders and governments are able to get things done;

2. *responsiveness*—whether public bodies and institutions respond to the needs of citizens and uphold their rights; and

3. *accountability*—the ability of citizens, civil society, and the private sector to scrutinize public institutions and governments and to hold them to account (DfID 2006, 22).

It seems reasonable to assert that each of the characteristics listed above implies substantial communication support. Table 1 makes such links explicit. Relationships are drawn among the following: DfID's good governance characteristics, subcomponents of those characteristics closely related to government communication capacity,

Table 1. DfID's Key Characteristics of Good Governance Regimes

Sources: DfID 2006 and author's compilation.

Characteristics	Subcomponents Relevant to Government Communication Capacity	Desired Outcomes of Effective Government Communication	Suggested Communication Mechanisms and Tools
State capability— the extent to which leaders and governments are able to get things done	Making sure government departments and services meet people's needs	Building broad support and legitimacy for government priorities, policies, programs, and projects	Systems for providing reliable and up-to-date information on available public services; public campaigns regarding priority programs and projects; tools for persuasion and for leading public opinion
Responsiveness— whether public bodies and institutions respond to the needs of citizens and uphold their rights	Providing ways for people to say what they think and need	Developing the ability to understand and deliver public goods and services founded on an evidence-based knowledge of citizens' needs and preferences	Mechanisms that range from consultation to participatory decision making; tools for measuring and analyzing public opinion; continuous media monitoring
Accountability— the ability of citizens, civil society, and the private sector to scrutinize public institutions and governments and to hold them to account	Offering citizens opportunities to check the laws and decisions made by governments, parliaments, and assemblies; encouraging a free media and freedom of faith and association	Explaining government stewardship through information provision and by setting up mechanisms for citizens to hold elected leaders and public service providers accountable	Public access to government data and statistics on performance (such as the results of monitoring and evaluation projects and programs); public dialogues and debates on performance; popularization of technical information targeted at audiences with varying levels of technical capacity; media coverage and analysis drawn by engaging journalists on an ongoing basis

desired outcomes of effective government communication, and some suggested communication mechanisms and tools.

Effective states have built up capacities in the various communication mechanisms and tools listed in the fourth column. Their governments deploy a combination of appropriate technologies and impressive skills in supporting their own public service delivery systems. They have invested in the human resources and infrastructure necessary to consult, inform, and persuade citizens—processes that, in turn, enable constituents to engage in meaningful and informed participation whenever they choose to do so. In short, these governments are able to engage in effective two-way communication with various constituencies.

For instance, at any given moment, the United Kingdom has approximately 1,000 communication professionals working throughout government, taking the public's pulse on timely issues; consulting relevant constituencies; and collecting, packaging, and disseminating information likely to be of public interest. The United Kingdom's government communication apparatus is capable of delivering a flyer to every household in the country within 24 hours. In the United States, the White House Communications Office has the ability to reach the major U.S. and global media outlets with the touch of a button. And the Obama administration's Open Government Initiative[1] includes various public consultation mechanisms in diverse policy domains and provides all interested parties access to a vast array of government databases.

Information generated from two-way communic-ation flows can be used to improve the delivery of public services in response to citizens' needs and preferences.[2] These efforts contribute to evidence-based accountability regimes that— although contentious and messy at times—are based on widely shared sets of facts that lead to better-informed public engagement less susceptible to faulty assumptions, misinformation, and ideological biases.

The Problem: Low Levels of Communication Capacity in Developing Countries

Countries in the developed world demonstrate relatively high capacities for deploying approaches and techniques for two-way communication with citizens on matters of public importance. In contrast, poor countries demonstrate low levels of capacity. The International Budget Partnership's 2008 Open Budget Survey[3] assessed 85 countries in terms of public access to key pieces of budget information and opportunities for citizen participation in the budget process, among other things. It found that "eighty percent of the world's governments fail to provide adequate information for the public to hold them accountable for managing their money."[4] With very few exceptions, most of the top spots in the ranking are occupied by rich countries, while developing nations tend to score lower.[5]

The government communication functions in developing countries are dreary backwaters of low skill. In many of these contexts, communication positions are lacking in government offices—even when establishing them would make sense. They are left vacant when they do exist, or are assigned as civil servants' secondary, low-priority tasks. Ministries of information are seen as propaganda machines—with the primary purpose of pushing out information biased toward "any government in power"[6]—with no real capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue with constituents. Agencies and bureaus charged with collecting and managing government data and statistics are often underresourced and frequently lack the capacity to carry out their mandates.

In many developing countries, political cultures are dominated by patronage relationships that, at first blush, may seem antithetical to free flows of information and two-way communication. The desire of political elites to command and control information flows and, ultimately, public opinion stacks incentives in the opposite direction. But it is also in the enlightened self-interest of any regime—even those that tend toward authoritarianism—to build its own capacities to

engage in two-way communication with citizens. These flows enable more efficient and responsive provision of public goods and services, and improved provision enhances constituents' views of the legitimacy and credibility of their leaders.

Despite these potential benefits, there exist only a handful of successful examples of building communication capacity in developing countries[7]; and those instances are usually limited to one sector or thematic area and not represented by systemic, governmentwide improvements. Addressing this multifaceted problem requires considering what government communication capacity is, why some key issues are in this area of work, and what strengthened capacity can contribute toward improving governance.[8]

What Is the Communication Function of Government?

As can be surmised from table 1, the ability to engage in two-way communication with citizens involves a complex set of interlocking structures, processes, and practices. Political scientist Paul Thomas (2009) describes the complexity of the Canadian government's communication function in this way:

The crucial importance of communication, and the highly varied and dynamic nature of communications functions at different levels in the public sector, means, ideally, that this area should be approached in a strategic, anticipatory, planned, and coordinated manner.... Planning for, structuring, conducting, and coordinating communications in a wide range of specialized and complicated policy environments, across numerous departments and agencies, in an era of evolving digital technologies, at a time when there is growing insistence on greater transparency, proactive disclosure, and accountability, and when the public trust and confidence in governments is all low, all combine to give rise to a challenging new era in public sector communications (p. 3).

Meeting the challenges that Thomas cites and taking advantage of the opportunities they provide can begin with a variegated understanding of the communication function itself. Figure 1 suggests a framework for breaking the communication function into a few suggested primary components. The framework is one that moves outward, from access to government data at the innermost circle to general consumption (public engagement) at the outermost ring. This framework is merely indicative and not meant to be exhaustive; nor are the framework components mutually exclusive.

The components of Figure 1 are these:

- *Providing all interested parties with access to government information and data*—This must be a coordinated effort among various government agencies, usually initiated by the executive branch and including the following functions: gathering and sharing information, organizing records, setting up systems for data capture and internal and external access, and developing the ability to deliver information on request.

- *Providing public access to technical analyses of government priorities and performance from multiple perspectives*—This can be carried out by drawing on the expertise of a combination of independent research groups (such as universities and think tanks), technology-savvy civil society organizations, and government analysts.

- *Popularizing analysis of government performance*—Frontline government agencies and their spokespeople at both national and local levels, as well as specialized media outlets, can be charged with this task.

Figure 1.
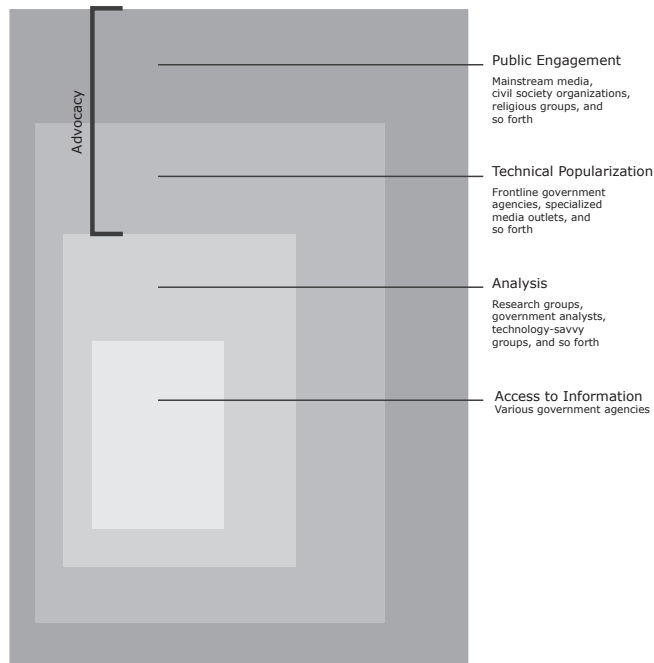
- *Engaging the mass public*—This can involve people who specialize in public engagement efforts, such as public and private mainstream media outlets and organizations with large networks (such as national government agencies, religious groups, school systems, and other civil society organizations).

As mentioned above, this proposed framework does not seek to offer a comprehensive view of the constituent components of government communication capacity. However, it does partially illustrate the challenges implied when trying to strengthen a government's communication function. Aday, Brown, and Livingston (2008, 9) suggest a partial typology that can be instructive in envisioning different types of assistance:

- A scenario where government lacks any appreciation of the importance of communications and, hence, does not see the need to develop communication capacity.

- A scenario where commitment to government communications is limited. For instance, a situation where there is some capacity to communicate but where this is seen as a job for specialists so that communications is marginalized within government as a whole.

- A scenario where no distinction is made between government and political communication (that is, partisan, pro-administration), leading to a lack of credibility and an erosion of overall government capacity.

- A scenario where a strongly partisan or underdeveloped media sector limits the reach of government communications activities.

In table 2, the same authors provide a diagnostic tool that proposes key dimensions for assessing government communication capacity. By including a broader set of societal actors and stakeholders in their diagnostic tool, the authors remind us that "in assessing communication capacity, we need to look directly at the communication activities of government but also at the fit of government and its environment. An assessment of the legal, media and civil society environment for government communications will reveal constraints and opportunities" (Aday, Brown, and Livingston 2008, 8).

Given the rapidly changing information and communication environments around the world, strengthening government communication capacity should leverage existing and potential convergences in a country's communication space and media mix. New information and communication technologies can help enhance each of the constituent functions described above; but so can interpersonal influence, opinion leadership, social networks, and traditional and indigenous modes of communication. It has been shown that a combination of new and traditional information and communication technologies can provide leapfrog opportunities in some contexts.[9]

Table 2. Dimensions of Government Communication Capacity

Source: Aday, Brown, and Livingston 2008.

Dimension 1: Communication in Government

A. Communication and Governance: Does government incorporate the role of communication in governance?

i. Incorporating. Is there recognition of the role of communication in the formulation and implementation of policy?

ii. Communicating. Do government leaders regularly communicate with the public?

iii. Questioning. Are there opportunities to question key government authorities through press conferences, briefings, and interviews?

iv. Regulating. Are there guidelines that set out the boundary between government and political communication activities and between the work that can be done by politicians and political appointees versus civil servants?

v. Consulting. Are there mechanisms for consulting a representative range of interested and affected parties about future legislation and policy?

vi. Counting. Are there clearly defined procedures for the production and publication of government statistics?

B. Government Communication Institutions: Does government commit resources to communication?

i. Mapping communication institutions. Are there institutions that gather and communicate government information, such as central government press and communication offices?

a. Do these institutions operate at departmental and agency levels?

b. Are there similar institutions at regional, state, and local levels?

ii. Resources. Does government have access to sufficient resources and expertise to communicate via available communication channels?

a. What resources exist to communicate with private and public sector news organizations?

b. What resources exist to mount paid media campaigns, including ad buying and product design?

c. What resources exist to work with community media?

d. What resources exist to make use of digital communications channels?

iii. Procedures. Are there regular channels for the release of information to the media through statements and releases?

a. Are communication staff able to gather information on the work of government?

b. Are communication staff able to monitor and respond to media stories?

iv. Staff. Are there adequate numbers of specialist communications staff?

a. Is the communications staff recruited for its expertise and/or is there an adequate program of training?

b. Are communication postings or career tracks appropriately recognized and rewarded?

v. Coordinating and planning. Are there effective mechanisms for coordinating communication across government agencies?

a. Does government have the capacity to plan routine communication activities and to coordinate them across institutional boundaries?

b. Does government have the capacity to plan and coordinate communications initiatives and campaigns?

c. Does government have the capacity to develop communications plans to deal with national emergencies?

vi. Evaluation. Are there mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of government communications activities?

Dimension 2: The Environment for Government Communication

A. Legal Environment: Is there an enabling environment for effective government communication?

i. Are there effective guarantees of freedom of speech and publication?

ii. Is there freedom of information legislation?

B. Media Environment: How does the media environment shape the impact of government communication?

i. To what extent does the media environment facilitate or obstruct government communication efforts?

ii. To what extent do media organizations report government activities?

C. Civil Society Environment: Is there a civil society environment that provides alternatives?

i. Robust civil society (an array of nongovernmental, civil, sometimes transnational organizations) often serves as an alternative and even contrarian source of information; and, in the process, lowers levels of press dependence on government sources of information. Press independence and capacity to encourage transparency and accountability are accentuated by a robust civil society.

What Are Some of the Critical Issues in This Area of Work?

Despite the potential contributions of government communication capacity to effective public sector governance, merely stating the desire to improve such capacity often comes up against fierce and perhaps even justified resistance from reform-minded groups and individuals. Aday, Brown, and Livingston (2008) provide an excellent summary of some of the most commonly raised controversies regarding this area of work:

Communication requirements often pull government institutions in opposite directions. On the one hand, governments must operate in an impartial way to maintain credibility and meet transparency and accountability expectations. On the other hand, government institutions must also act as advocates for their own policies. The attributes of advocacy do not always mesh well with the attributes of openness and accountability. Indeed, they are often orthogonal. Thus, a central challenge for government communications is to remain credible and trustworthy, while advocating policy in a contested communication environment. Ironically, the more robust the debate, the greater the tension is likely to be. Despite this tension, accountability requires effective communication attributes in government institutional structures and procedures (p. 8).

To deepen understanding of these critical issues, the George Washington University's Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication, School of Media and Public Affairs, and the World Bank's Communication for Governance and Accountability Program jointly organized a roundtable discussion titled "The Contribution of Government Communication Capacity to Good Governance Outcomes." The event brought together government officials, public sector specialists, communication and media experts, civil society leaders, and academics to discuss critical issues arising from actual experience in developed and developing countries alike. Below are summaries of some of the key discussion topics, organized under ethical considerations, propaganda versus participation, and disincentives for improving government communication capacity:

- *Ethics in government communication*— Setting up and staffing press offices alone will not increase government communication capacity or citizens' confidence in the government. For government communication capacity to contribute meaningfully to good governance regimes, the following ethical efforts should be considered: (1) provide useful and relevant information to constituents, (2) listen to citizens and stakeholder groups, (3) continuously learn from interactions with citizens and stakeholders, (4) communicate in a professional manner, (5) be truthful (that is, do no harm and do not willingly mislead), and (6) illuminate issues and add value to public discussion.

- *Propaganda versus participation*—Government communication should not be framed as propaganda. It is better understood as "information development" with two major dimensions: first, information development is about creating a culture of public disclosure; and, second, it is about developing the capacity to make relevant information available. Although all governments are involved in propaganda to some extent, the challenge is to convince and motivate them to use their communication structures and resources so that citizens have the means to become more informed and participatory. Efforts

could include sending out persuasive messages to the public, explaining working policies, creating awareness of the rights of citizens, and developing mechanisms that enable two-way communication between citizens and government.

- *Disincentives for capacity building*—Lacking budgetary resources, an enabling legal regime, and the knowledge and skills to compete in an information environment; and being fearful of losing control discourage governments from building their communication capacities. In many countries, budgets are not provided for communication efforts. Secrecy laws go against the grain of public engagement. The fear that data released publicly may "look bad" impedes officials' willingness to communicate. Political elites and bureaucrats may believe that having knowledge is powerful and that sharing it results in diminished influence. In some countries, governments do not see the need to raise their own capacity because they already own media outlets, such as television stations, radio stations, and newspapers.

Summary: What Can Government Communication Capacity Contribute to Good Governance?

This report has argued that the capacity to communicate effectively with constituents is a fundamental function of modern governance. Effective two-way communication between the government and the public strengthens legitimate public authority; and that, in turn, increases the likelihood of attaining good governance outcomes.

These outcomes are restated below, under DfID's three key characteristics of good governance— *state capability, responsiveness,* and *accountability*:

- *state capability*—building broad support and legitimacy for government priorities, policies, programs, and projects;

- *responsiveness*—developing the ability to understand and deliver public goods and services founded on an evidence-based knowledge of citizens' needs and preferences; and

- *accountability*—Explaining government stewardship through information provision and by setting up mechanisms for citizens to hold elected leaders and public service providers accountable.

As legitimate players in their own evolving information environments, governments benefit from developing and maintaining effective communication capacity. Improved capacity enables a government to better take stock of its citizens' needs and preferences and to foster a more deliberative public space for multistakeholder participation and informed policy debate that lead to enhanced public ownership of and support for policies and their implementation. This can also result in more legitimate public authority and, under certain conditions, improved governance outcomes.

There is an additional benefit to building communication capacity: it increases the internal coherence of policies. External communication with the media and the public can have a disciplining impact on policy work and help coordinate communication within governments because consistent internal information is required to communicate effectively with external audiences. Not only do many countries lack capacity in public engagement; they also need to improve internal communication channels among government agencies.

Why Should Governance Advisers and Development Professionals Work Toward Strengthening Government Communication Capacity?

Speaking from decades of high-level experience in senior government positions, U.S. statesman James A. Baker III makes the case for government communication capacity in no uncertain terms:

I'm a realist 'cause I'm a politician. And I know having been there in these jobs for those 12 years that you can't get things done if you do not have the support of the American people…the final arbiter of policy in our democracy is the will of the American people. If you can't bring them along, then you're not going to be able to implement the policy very successfully. And to bring them along, you must have a significant national interest…if you can't say, look, here's why this is important to America from a national interest standpoint, then you can't sustain the policy.[10]

In stark contrast, one former president of an African country once intimated to a participant in a government communication capacity roundtable that, given the chance to repeat his term, he would prioritize improving his administration's ability to communicate with the public. Why? Because when he traveled the countryside as he neared the end of his term, none of his rural constituents were aware of the projects his administration had championed nationally for years.

Governments have an interest in instituting regimes that are capable, responsive, and accountable. Providing citizens with adequate information on priorities, programs, and activities increases the likelihood that the public authority will be perceived as legitimate by citizens and stakeholder groups, contributing to stabilizing a country's political situation. When governments face crises of legitimacy, they are vulnerable to disruptive forces and may not be able to carry out their mandates effectively. Thus, it is in the interest of governments to communicate effectively about the work they do on behalf of their constituents.

Controversies notwithstanding, the communication function undergirds many processes of modern leadership and is complementary to various forms of technical expertise. In many cases, successful and sustainable public sector reform requires persuasion: seeking support from elites, shepherding change

processes within bureaucracies, and striking an ethical balance between listening to and leading public opinion.

Governance advisers and development professionals who wish to support governments increase their own communication capacities need to generate political buy-in among leaders who may perceive communicating with the public as a risk. These leaders need to be shown examples of counterparts from other countries or localities who have successfully amassed political capital, served consecutive terms, and built legacies by effectively engaging with their own constituents.[11] Should the opportunity arise to provide technical assistance in this area of work, a rudimentary framework (figure 1) and a proposed diagnostic tool (table 2) have been provided in this report.

Strengthening government communication capacity is essentially about building up the capacity of agencies, officials, and bureaucrats to engage in two-way dialogue with their citizens—whatever the level of government or the sector. The ability of a government to communicate with its citizens has important implications. Well organized, the government communication apparatus and skilled staff will play the following roles, all of which are central to the evolution of effective, responsive, and accountable governance:

- explain the working policies and actions of the government/department/agency;

- create awareness of the rights, benefits, and obligations of individual citizens and groups of citizens;

- persuade groups of citizens to act in accordance with agreed policies in defined circumstances; and

- advise the government/department/agency of the public's and the news media's reactions to its policies and actions (cited in Mozammel and Odugbemi 2005, 2125).

For all these and other reasons, governance advisers and development professionals should consider doing what they can to improve the capacity of governments to engage in two-way communication with their citizens.

Notes

1. Available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/open.

2. See, for instance, Caddy, Peixoto, and McNeil's stocktaking study (2007).

3. Available at http://internationalbudget.org/what-we-do/open-budget-survey/.

4. The quote was featured on Transparency

International's Web site, http://www.transparency.org/publications/newsletter/2009/february_2009/anti_corruption_work/open_budget_index (accessed March 4, 2011).

5. The top five spots in the 2008 survey ranking featured the United Kingdom, South Africa, France, New Zealand, and the United States; the bottom five include São Tomé and Principe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Equatorial Guinea. The data are available at http://internationalbudget.org/files/Rankings2008-Revised.pdf.

6. "Any government in power" (or its acronym "AGIP") is a commonly used phrase in Nigeria, referring to instances when people join the bandwagon. See, for example, http://www.transparencyng.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2937:any-government-in-power-agip-akunyili-chukwumerije-examples&catid=67:politics&Itemid=151.

7. These examples include improving government communication capacity in the context of public sector reform in Nicaragua (Bruni 2008), economic reforms in Slovakia (CommGAP 2008a), judicial reform in Georgia (Bassat 2008), and tax reform in Bulgaria (CommGAP 2008b).

8. It was with this goal in mind that George Washington University's Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication, School of Media and Public Affairs, with the support of the World Bank's Communication for Governance and Accountability Program, organized a one-day roundtable on the contributions of government communication capacity to achieving good

governance outcomes. The roundtable was held in February 2009.

9. See, for example, Livingston's (2011) study on the evolving information environments in six African countries.

10. Baker's quote is taken from a 2011 televised interview on CNN. The transcript for the interview is available at http://transcripts.cnn.com/ TRANSCRIPTS/1002/21/fzgps.01.html. This idea is not new. In 1792, Jacques Necker, finance minister to France's King Louis XVI, observed, "Only fools, pure theorists, or apprentices fail to take public opinion into account" (cited in Price 1992, 12).

11. See, for instance, a conference coorganized by the Asian Institute of Management, Ateneo School of Government, and the World Bank Country Office in the Philippines (http://www.admu.edu. ph/index.php?p=120&type=2&sec=26&aid=7520), which showcased local government officials who championed participatory approaches within their own jurisdictions and had been repeatedly elected to multiple terms of office.

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CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

CommGAP has launched a blog entitled People, Spaces, Deliberation to share ideas about the role of the democratic public sphere in governance among a growing global community of practice with members who are united in their commitment to improve governance and accountability in developing countries. The blog is addressing issues such as accountability, governance, media development, anti-corruption, post conflict environments, and public opinion.

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