



**Review of Impact and Effectiveness of  
Transparency and Accountability Initiatives:**

## **Synthesis Report**

**Executive Summary**

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**Executive Summary:**  
**The Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives**  
**A review of the evidence to date**  
**Rosemary McGee & John Gaventa**  
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***Scope of study***

Transparency and accountability have emerged over the past decade as key ways to address both developmental failures and democratic deficits. In the development context, the argument is that through greater accountability, ‘leaky pipes’ of corruption and inefficiency will be repaired, aid will be channelled more effectively, and in turn development initiatives will produce greater and more visible results. For scholars and practitioners of democracy, a parallel argument holds that following the twentieth-century wave of democratisation, democracy now has to ‘deliver the goods’, especially in terms of material outcomes, and that new forms of democratic accountability can help it do so. While traditional forms of state-led accountability are increasingly found to be inadequate, thousands of multi-stakeholder and citizen-led approaches have come to the fore, to supplement or supplant them.

Despite their rapid growth, and the growing donor support they receive, little attention has been paid to the impact and effectiveness of these new transparency and accountability initiatives. Responding to this gap, this report, based on a review of literature and experience across the field with special focus on five sectors of transparency and accountability work, aims to improve understanding among policy-makers and practitioners of the available evidence and identify gaps in knowledge to inform a longer-term research agenda. Commissioned by the Policy Research Fund of the UK Department of International Development (DFID), this project also hopes to inform the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, a new donor collaborative that includes the Ford Foundation, Hivos, the International Budget Partnership, the Omidyar Network, the Open Society Institute, the Revenue Watch Institute, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The research was carried out between May and September 2010 by a team at the Institute of Development Studies in the UK with participation of researchers in the US, South Africa, Brazil and India. A general review of the literature was carried out, plus reviews of five priority sectors: public service delivery; budget processes; freedom of information; natural resource governance; and aid transparency. Two regional papers give further insights from literature and experience in south Asia and Latin America.

In this Executive Summary, we highlight the study’s overall findings. The full findings of the project are shared in an accompanying synthesis report, as well as the five sectoral and two regional reports mentioned. In addition, the project has compiled and annotated bibliography of the top 75 studies in the field.

***The rapidly growing field of transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs)***

The field of transparency and accountability is alive with rapidly emerging citizen-led and multi-stakeholder initiatives. While often varying enormously in scale and ambition, as well as in their duration and maturity, these hold in common assumptions about the relationship of transparency and accountability, as well as the contributions that can be made by non-state actors to strengthening state regulatory and accountability capacities.

- In the area of **service delivery**, an array of strategies, often grouped together under the label ‘social accountability’, include complaints mechanisms, public information/transparency campaigns, citizen report cards and score cards, community monitoring and social audits.
- **Budget transparency and accountability** strategies include the now well-known ‘participatory budget approach’, as well as public expenditure monitoring (including, for instance, gender budgeting), participatory auditing, the Open Budget Index, and other forms of budget advocacy.
- Many of these initiatives are underpinned by initiatives to secure **freedom of information and transparency**, including right to know campaigns, strengthening the media, new legislative frameworks and voluntary disclosure mechanisms.
- In the area of **natural resources**, initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and the Publish What you Pay campaign among others have focused on making revenues from natural resources more transparent, often through multi-stakeholder agreements and review.
- Similar strategies are now being adopted in the area of **aid transparency**, through such initiatives as the International Aid Transparency Initiative, Publish What You Fund, and the longer-standing World Bank Inspection Panel and various downward accountability mechanisms applied within large non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The aims and claims of what these initiatives can deliver tend to be broad. They include promises of contributing to the quality of governance (including deepening democratic outcomes), increasing ‘development effectiveness’, and leading to greater empowerment of citizens or the redressing of unequal power relations, for achieving essential human rights.

#### ***Some emerging evidence of impact, though limited and uneven***

Despite the growth in this field and, over a decade of experience in some sectors, and despite their ambitious claims, few comprehensive, comparative or meta-level studies exist of whether desired impacts have been achieved and if so how. At the same time, there are a number of micro level studies, especially in the service delivery and budget transparency fields. These begin to suggest that in some conditions, the initiatives can contribute to a range of positive outcomes including, for instance,

- increased state or institutional responsiveness
- lowering of corruption
- building new democratic spaces for citizen engagement
- empowering local voices
- better budget utilization and better delivery of services.

The evidence on these impacts is summarized in Table 1 and in section IV of the synthesis report and elaborated more fully in the background papers on each sector.

However, the study cautions against drawing generalized conclusions from the existing evidence base, for a number of reasons.

- In some cases, the initiatives are very new, and accompanying impact studies are underway or just beginning, making it too early to detect or explain resulting impacts;
- Many of the studies focus on only one initiative in one locality, precluding general conclusions, or permitting conclusions based only on limited anecdotal evidence;
- Much literature focuses on the effectiveness of implementation of initiatives – on whether they were implemented as planned, not on their broader developmental or democratic outcomes.

- Where we find positive evidence in one setting, this is often not corroborated – and sometimes even contradicted - by findings in another setting where different, or even similar, methods have been used.

In addition to these reasons for caution, the study elaborates on three significant limits of the existing evidence base: a) untested assumptions and theories of change; b) the methodological challenges of assessing what are often highly complex initiatives; and c) the complexity of factors which contribute to their success.

### ***Untested assumptions and unarticulated theories of change***

While the aims and claims of many TAIs are quite broad, the assumptions behind them are often unarticulated, untested and open to challenge. A common assumption is that greater transparency generates greater accountability, yet growing evidence exists that transparency alone is insufficient, and only leads to greater accountability in interaction with other factors. Another common assumption is that making information available will stimulate action on the part of a broad range of stakeholders, when in fact little may be known about the incentives and constraints of collective action to use this information. And finally, many assumptions often assume homogeneous or monolithic categories of actors, such as 'states', 'citizens', 'media', 'civil society', without looking at critical differences of position, power, behaviors and incentives within them.

In addition to untested assumptions, very few initiatives articulate a theory of change, making it very difficult to trace or ascertain the changes that are likely to occur. Theories of change need not be rigid or linear, as sometimes becomes the case when translated into log-frames and indicators, but do need to offer plausible explanations for how the sought changes are likely to occur. Yet the sequence of steps necessary for TAIs to be successful, their durability, and their interaction with other factors, are frequently poorly understood. Often, replication or spread of what appear to be successful initiatives is encouraged without understanding fully the conditions for the success, or whether these are transferable to other issues, settings or initiatives.

### ***Methodological richness, as well as enormous challenges***

Assessing the impact of complex, multi-actor change processes is difficult in any field, and this one is no exception. To do so means facing up to a number of difficult methodological challenges and tensions, including issues and trade-offs involving: the amount and quality of evidence currently available, correlation and causation, attribution and contribution, measuring single factors versus the interaction of complex factors, choosing appropriate indicators, and deciding whose knowledge and perspectives count.

On the one hand, impact assessment in the field of transparency and accountability has produced a rich array of methodological approaches and innovations, including quantitative surveys, randomized control trials and other experimental approaches, qualitative case studies, stakeholder interviews, indices and rankings and user assessments. Each of these has strengths and weaknesses, depending on the purpose of the individual study: for instance, whether it is for strengthening internal learning and improved strategy, or for extracting and demonstrating results to others. On the other hand, the study notes a number of surprising methodological gaps when compared to other similar fields (as outlined in the concluding section).

### ***Factors that make a difference: Understanding the complexity of change***

Despite the unevenness and limits of the evidence base, a review across the sectors begins to point to some common factors that shape the impact of transparency and accountability initiatives. These involve understanding accountability and transparency not only as formal mechanisms or instruments, but also as relationships involving power dynamics across state and society, and as patterns of attitudes and behaviors affecting all actors.

On the citizen voice (or demand) side of the equation, key factors include: a) the capabilities of citizens and civil society organizations to access and use information made transparent/accessible and to mobilize for greater accountability; b) the extent to which TAIs are linked to broader forms of collective action and mobilization; and c) the degree to which accountability, transparency and participation initiatives are embedded throughout all stages of the policy cycle, from how decisions are made to whether and how they are implemented.

On the state (or supply) side of the relationship, key factors include: a) the level of democratization or space for accountability demands to be made; b) the degree of 'political will' or support from the inside for accountability and transparency demands and initiatives; c) the broader political economy, including enabling legal frameworks, incentives and sanctions which affect the behaviors of public officials.

However, while this traditional demand and supply side framework is analytically helpful, the more interesting work in the field looks closely at the interaction of these two sides, and at how accountability relations are mutually constructed through cross-cutting coalitions of actors, as well as changing norms, expectations and 'cultures' of accountability on all sides.

### ***'Probes' for designing new initiatives***

While the study urges caution about drawing generalized conclusions from the existing evidence base, it also gleans some pointers for the design of new transparency and accountability initiatives. For donors or other actors in the field, these imply asking early on a series of questions, including:

- Does the intervention/initiative itself articulate a clear theory of change? Does it disentangle common assumptions about the links between transparency, accountability and participation?
- Does it understand enough the reasons for success of one set of tools or approaches in one context before adapting, replicating or scaling to other settings? Has it considered issues of timing, sequencing and durability?
- Does its strategy take into account complex, contextual factors, including the capacities and incentives on both the citizen and state side of the equation, and the linking mechanisms across the two?
- Does the evaluation plan use methods of analysis which are appropriate to the purpose of the impact assessment, taking into account its audience, the level of complexity involved, and positionality of those doing the study
- Does it include methods for tracking change over time, including reference to a clear baseline; or for learning by comparison with other, comparable, initiatives?

While the answers to these questions may vary enormously, a failure to take them into account from the beginning will likely affect the possibility of demonstrating the success of the initiative, and may even undermine its success.

### ***Gaps for future work***

While the evidence base on accountability and transparency may be underdeveloped, this does not mean that the lessons to be learned from existing evidence, or that the TAIs themselves, are not significant. As we have seen, some insights may already be gained as to impact, factors of change, and design principles for new initiatives. However, **a core challenge is to deepen the evidence and knowledge base of the impact of TAIs, building on the methods and insights which are emerging in a dynamic, relatively young but rapidly expanding field.**

The study also points to the silos which currently characterise the transparency and accountability field. Both the literature and the key actors working in the fields of service delivery, budgets, information, natural resource and aid are often segmented and operate in isolation from one another. And yet, in practice there are enormous interactions between initiatives in the fields of budgets, services, information, aid and even natural resources. From a strategic point of view, there are potentially important synergies to be gained from developing more cross-cutting strategies and networks across these initiatives; and from an impact assessment point of view, far more comparative and holistic analysis is needed of how the ensemble of TAIs now available can interact with one another to maximize the possibilities of change.

In addition to this general point, on the methodological side, the review suggests a number of strategies or innovations which could help to strengthen the quality and depth of the current evidence base. At one level, as argued previously, we need more of the same. A number of good, specific studies exist, using a range of methods, but there are not enough of these, across enough settings and methods, to begin to point unequivocally to overall patterns or to draw higher order conclusions. In addition, the state of the evidence, we suggest, could be improved through the following:

- given the complex nature of TAIs, new approaches to impact assessment could be piloted, drawing on tools for understanding non-linear change and complexity in other fields, and which combine approaches and methods;
- given their widespread use in other fields, more rigorous user/participatory approaches could be developed and explored both as a tool for evidence, as well as tools for strengthening transparency, accountability and empowerment themselves;
- given the maturing and expanding nature of the TAI field, more comparative in-depth work across contexts and initiatives is needed, as well as multi-case and other more synthetic forms of analysis;
- given the methodological challenges of impact assessment, initiatives are needed which strengthen the capacities of researchers and practitioners to carry out such work effectively, to develop and build upon innovative approaches and to systematise knowledge in the field;
- given the rapid spread of new initiatives, more work is needed from the beginning to incorporate into them lessons about impact assessment approaches, including clarifying theories of change, using methods and indicators fit for purpose, and building in clear baselines or other comparators.

On the 'factors for greater impact' side, the report also points to the potential several new areas for both strategic and knowledge building work, including the needs to:

- deepen the understanding of the synergies of transparency, accountability, participation and citizen voice, and the conditions under which these occur, as well as to join up fragmented work across sectors;
- continue analysing factors for success, including deepening our understanding of the reasons and incentives for collective action on transparency and accountability, as well as

unpacking the ‘black box’ of power and politics that often intervene between initiatives for transparency and accountability and their resulting impacts;

- go beyond simple dichotomies which pervade the field (e.g. ‘supply - demand’, ‘voice-responsiveness’) to build new knowledge on how to build cross-cutting accountability coalitions that link civil society actors, media, champions inside government, researchers, and others across boundaries;
- draw from current cutting-edge thinking on governance to explore the transparency and accountability work, especially work relating to the interaction of global, national and local governance regimes, as well as work on the private sector as significant non-state actor in governance coalitions;
- explore whether initiatives can travel across context, method and issue. While there is an assumption that this review of the impact of past initiatives will inform the design of future ones, we need to understand more fully what travels and what does not. Far more understanding may be needed of what works and why in ‘successful’ initiatives, rushing to replicate, spread or scale them up in others.

The report concludes by urging that more investment be made in the assessment and knowledge-building aspects of the transparency and accountability field, if it is to maximise the potential to realise its broad aims.

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In addition to this executive summary, components parts of the study include:

1. Synthesis Report: The Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives A review of the evidence to date , Rosemary McGee ([R.McGee@ids.ac.uk](mailto:R.McGee@ids.ac.uk)) and John Gaventa ([J.Gaventa@ids.ac.uk](mailto:J.Gaventa@ids.ac.uk))
2. Background sectoral papers:
  - Annex 1: Service Delivery, Anuradha Joshi ([A.Joshi@ids.ac.uk](mailto:A.Joshi@ids.ac.uk))
  - Annex 2: Budget Processes, Ruth Carlitz ([ruthcarlitz@gmail.com](mailto:ruthcarlitz@gmail.com))
  - Annex 3: Freedom of information, Richard Calland ([richard.calland@uct.ac.za](mailto:richard.calland@uct.ac.za))
  - Annex 4: Natural Resource Governance, Andrés Mejía Acosta ([a.mejiaacosta@ids.ac.uk](mailto:a.mejiaacosta@ids.ac.uk))
  - Annex 5: Aid Transparency, Rosemary McGee ([R.McGee@ids.ac.uk](mailto:R.McGee@ids.ac.uk))
3. Abstracts of key literature (approximately 75 key sources by sector) – forthcoming, principally prepared by Greg Barrett ([G.Barrett@ids.ac.uk](mailto:G.Barrett@ids.ac.uk)) and authors above.

All documents will soon be available from [www.drc-citizenship.org](http://www.drc-citizenship.org), as well as other websites.