



**Innovations in Accountability and Transparency through
Citizen Engagement –
The Role of Donors in Supporting and Sustaining Change**
Summary Report from a workshop held at the
Bellagio Study and Conference Centre
June 16 – 20, 2008



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Introduction

Improving the accountability and transparency of government is a major challenge for better governance in emerging democracies. Democratic transitions in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America over the past two decades have strengthened civil liberties and political freedoms but there has been more limited progress in opening up government decision-making to public scrutiny and citizen participation. Improved transparency in the use of public funds and improved revenue flows from natural resources are central to enhancing the material wellbeing of poor citizens and promoting sustained economic growth in pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals. Improved accountability is also integral to deepening democracy and participation by inducing responsible leadership on the part of public officials, and to ensure that basic services are delivered to those who need them the most.

The growing recognition of the accountability agenda can be seen in many different parts of the world, involving many different players.

- *A host of initiatives have been launched in recent years by civil society organisations to foster better accountability and transparency.* These are gradually coming together through a number of broad networks focusing on areas of citizen participation in setting and monitoring government priorities, making budget priorities and processes more transparent, and making information on government revenues, policies and information more open and accessible. One indicator of the ‘density’ of initiatives in this field is seen in response to DFID’s recent Governance and Transparency Fund, whose aim was ‘to help make governments more accountable to their citizens by strengthening civil society and the media to give greater voice to citizens’. Over 400 concept notes and 270 proposals were received for large-scale, multi-year projects from civil society organisations and networks. Of these 100 were considered to be ‘high quality’.

* This report was prepared by Dr John Gaventa, director of the DFID supported Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability, at the Institute of Development Studies. I am grateful to the very helpful comments and inputs from Julia Moffett and Mark Robinson.

- *The accountability and transparency agenda is also gaining priority in the agendas of large-scale bilateral and multilateral aid organisations.* The World Bank has recently established a new Governance and Anti-Corruption initiative (GAC), with the belief that ‘a capable and accountable state creates opportunities for poor people, provides better services and improves development outcomes.’ The largest priority area of the UNDP is now the promotion of democratic governance, in which democratic accountability is a key theme. For bilateral donors like CIDA and DFID, accountability has also become a core plank of its governance programmes. The Paris Declaration focuses on building ‘mutual accountability’ between donors and states, and the role that civil society can also play in making states more accountable to poor people. The combined aid flows under the accountability and transparency agenda are enormous (while no clear data exists on its actual size.) UNDP’s budget for democratic governance alone represents 5 billion USD over three years.
- *Meanwhile, the contributions of private foundations and philanthropists to the field are also growing in importance.* While some like the Ford Foundation have long funded work on such strategies as budget priorities, citizen participation, and local governance innovations, new actors are entering the scene. The Open Society Institute is supporting large scale networks focusing on revenue monitoring and transparency. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is launching a new transparency and accountability initiative, as is Google.org. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently made some large grants to the field, and is considering its future strategies. Others – such as the Mo Ibrahim Foundation – are also playing an important role.

While work on accountability and transparency towards the mutual goals of deepening democratic governance, meeting development targets and delivering basic services appears to be growing, there also have been few opportunities for these various actors to come together to share approaches, to develop strategies for more synergistic work, and to think further about how to build the field. The risks of failing to do so are large – work could remain in silos, lessons and learning could remain unshared and opportunities for collaboration that would make the work greater than the sum of its parts could be missed.

In order to build on the opportunities, as well as to minimise these risks, DFID and the Open Society Institute convened a workshop at the Bellagio Study and Conference Centre from June 16 – 20, 2008 around the theme of **Innovations in Accountability and Transparency through Citizen Engagement –The role of Donors in Supporting and Sustaining**

Change. The workshop brought together 23 participants from civil society organisations, bilateral and multilateral aid organisations and private foundations for the purposes of:

- Sharing knowledge and practical learning of ‘What’s working? What’s innovative? and what’s missing?’ in work on accountability and transparency;
- Identifying key issues and factors for success; and
- Developing a broader vision/strategy for building the field collaboratively.

The workshop was facilitated by Professor John Gaventa of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, and Julia Moffett, a consultant formerly working with the Omidyar Fund. This report provides a short summary of what were four days of rich, intense and vigorous discussions, highlighting in particular ideas and strategies for future work to strengthen the field of accountability and transparency.

Why Accountability? Why Now?

In preparation for the workshop, a number of participants commented that the conversation was coming at a critical time, either because of internal conversations in their organisations about how to develop and implement work in this field, or because such work could, with the right strategies, reach ‘a tipping point’ towards greater impact and change. In fact, for a number of the donors – who amongst them hold potentially significant resources – this is a key moment in devising and implementing new strategic initiatives in the field.

What are the forces driving the current accountability and transparency agenda? Workshop participants identified a number of key factors, including the following:

- *The need for democracy to deliver.* If the previous decades have been characterised by a the move towards greater democratisation in many countries, there is now the subsequent and growing pressure for democratic institutions to be seen to be delivering the goods, especially in terms of material outcomes. Citizen-led accountability mechanisms, especially when combined with government reforms, are seen as one way to both deepen democratic governance, and to assure that democratic gains are translated into developmental gains as well.
- *The shift to new aid modalities.* New aid approaches, such as those focusing on budget support through the Paris Agreement, put more pressure on the need for ‘downstream’ transparency and accountability mechanisms to help to ensure that aid

is well spent. With a focus on 'country ownership', donors can no longer impose external conditionalities and put greater emphasis on internal checks and balances to hold governments to account. Increasingly, civil society organisations are expected to play that role.

- *The pressure to show results.* With growing resources going into the aid – both through official and private channels - there is a pressure to demonstrate effectiveness through concrete results. Delivering basic services through increased accountability mechanisms are seen as one means of doing so.
- *The need to repair 'the leaky pipes' of service delivery.* In a number of countries, economic growth or extraction of vast mineral resources lead to larger national budgets which could be available to provide basic services to those affected by poverty. And yet, research shows that these funds rarely reach the poor, either due to lack of capacities, corruption or misuse. Greater transparency of budgets and revenue flows are seen as a way of ensuring that people can demand services from increasingly well-funded governments.

In all of these drivers, there was consensus that accountability was not simply a question of 'accountancy' or of counting. Rather, it represents a core principle of democratic relationships between states and citizens, which must be strengthened in order to realise broader goals of governance and development. Similarly, while citizen or civil society-led initiatives for accountability and transparency are increasingly seen as critical, so too is it important to focus on 'both sides of the citizen-state equation', through also supporting the capacity of governments to respond to citizen demand, and for civil society initiatives to link to official bodies, such as oversight commissions, parliaments and others. The promotion of accountability between states and citizens also often involves being aware of power relationships and engaging with politics (with a small p), an arena which is sometimes challenging for external donors and others to enter.

If there is a temptation to see the accountability agenda as 'the new approach to democratisation' or 'the new silver bullet in development', there were also important cautions raised about how far these expectations should go. For some long-term activists in the room, it was important to see these newer expressions for accountability as deeply linked to longer struggles for people's participation and voice in development and governance processes. Indeed, focusing on how citizens hold governments to account for implementation of policies and priorities *after* they are made is limited if not also linked to how citizens' voices are heard and responded to *in the shaping* of these policies and priorities in the first place. For others, there was concern that the accountability agenda

simply represented a latest fad, whose potential for change would be co-opted or corrupted by a development industry incapable of itself being accountable and responsive. And yet others cautioned that for citizens and civil society to hold governments to account required an enabling environment in which they had the safety and autonomy to do so, while trends at least in some countries pointed to a growing tightening of political space and a diminishing of resources required for civil society autonomy.

What's working? What's innovative?

What's missing?

From asking 'Why accountability? Why now?' the workshop went on to hear about a number of innovative strategies for accountability from practitioners and donors, including a special session on information, the role of media and new technologies.

From these sessions, a number of key trends emerged:

Strategies for Accountability

- ✓ Budget information and transparency
- ✓ Other work on revenues and financial streams
- ✓ Participatory governance - increased voice in priority setting and policy making
- ✓ Community-based monitoring and advocacy
- ✓ Access to information
- ✓ Media and other communications
- ✓ Using new information technologies
- ✓ Standards, indexes, report cards
- ✓ Aid transparency and accountability
- ✓ Parliamentary and other forms of governmental oversight
- ✓ Access to justice/ legal strategies
- ✓ Building oversight coalitions
- ✓ Independent research/information

- The accountability strategies used by practitioners are many, though often they may not be linked up in practice. A review of such strategies from participants indicated at least a dozen key approaches (see adjacent box).
- Information is a fundamental part of the enabling environment, and yet much more could be done to use new information tools, media and technologies to make information useable and accessible to broader populations. The workshop heard exciting and fascinating examples of new uses of such communication tools as mobile phones, YouTube, electronic mapping, interactive and local media to inform, hold to account, foster dialogue and promote advocacy.
- Linked to the support of this work, the group also heard of a number of new funding initiatives by donors, including large-scale competitive funds such as DFID's Governance and Transparency Fund, pooled and long-term funding approaches, re-granting approaches being carried out through large civil society networks, growing emphasis on 'mutual accountability' and 'democratic ownership' through the Paris Agreement, support for building local capacities and institutions, and new partnerships

amongst multi-laterals and bi-laterals, especially in how they work with and through governments to support this work.

Despite these innovative strategies, new information technologies and multiple donor approaches, there was a sense that much more is needed to go beyond the 'sum of the parts'. As someone said quite correctly, 'a bunch of good projects does not add up to impact.'

Key factors and issues for success

From the presentations of case studies, the workshop generated six broad areas on which more work would be needed to deepen or extend the collective impact of the work.

These included:

1. Making the Case and Sharing our Knowledge

A key challenge involves strengthening the evidence base that shows how and under what circumstances accountability and transparency initiatives lead to broader outcomes, be they improved services, more responsive governance or broader development dividends. While some studies exist in the academic literature, they are few and far between. On the other hand, a brief scan of existing research in the pipeline known by those in the room produced a far greater list than expected, yet there are few vehicles for collecting, sharing and aggregating such knowledge to build a more complete narrative and understanding in the field.

A number of questions or gaps in current knowledge emerged for possible further research.

These include:

- How do we build accountability and transparency work in conflict settings? In those with weak state structures? In settings where there is little political space?
- How can we get more sophisticated not only in understanding what kinds of outcomes emerge from greater accountability, but also in knowing what kinds of actions/strategies lead to what kinds of goods, in different settings?
- How do we build and test the theory of change that rests behind work for greater accountability and transparency?

- How can we develop and fund a plurality of methods for evidence building and learning, ranging from rigorous external (and often expensive) studies to more participatory and informal ways of learning?

Discussions of building the knowledge base also link immediately to questions of what kind of knowledge, for and by whom. While certain kinds of evidence of what works may be needed for higher level policy makers, other kinds of knowledge may be needed for local officials, activists and civil society organisations. There is also a need to build research processes, methods and networks that link researchers and practitioners, that strengthen the capacity of southern-based researchers and those close to the ground to do strong monitoring and learning, and to support and reward internal learning mechanisms for civil society, donor and other networks to become more effective.

Finally, there was broad recognition of the need for much better pooling of information and mapping of the field to increase our understanding of who is doing what and where, to track emerging knowledge of about impacts and evidence, to identify gaps, and to be able to scan and identify new issues that might be emerging.

Action Steps: Making the case and sharing our knowledge

1. Develop a repository or mapping of studies and evidence 'in the pipeline' and a way for aggregating and identifying gaps (findings, audience, methods);
2. Develop a pool of funding to support further work in research and impact assessment, paying special attention to building capacities and a plurality of methods;
3. Support vehicles for linking research and practise, and for incentivising learning and sharing of methods;
4. Use new information technologies to support mapping the field – who is doing what, where and with whom? Where are the best examples? the key learning resources?

2. *New strategic emphases and directions*

While recognising the need to gather evidence on impacts, to build new forms of learning across north and south and across research and practice, and to map what is going on more effectively, a second challenge involves the question of identifying new strategic directions and emphases in the field. Though the workshop participants together identified a number of strategies at work, the group also recognised the need to continually experiment with new approaches, to look at new issues, and to expand the work to other parts of the world.

- *Linking to new issue areas.* While much attention has been paid to transparency and accountability on budgets, there was also a suggestion of the need to focus more on how revenues are generated, especially related to taxation. And, while much work on accountability focuses on aid flows, there was also a need to recognise that in many contexts, aid is just a small part of the revenue stream – revenues from oil and other extractives, private investments, etc. may do far more to shape people's lives than aid expenditures. Similarly there was discussion of the need to develop far more transparency in many countries around money and politics, and to link the methods to emerging issues, such as how to build accountable state-citizen relations around disasters and humanitarian relief, climate change, or infrastructures (such as electricity and roads).
- *Drilling down in existing issues.* While recognising the need to expand the work to new issues, a second strategy suggested focusing multiple accountability strategies on key sectors. What, for instance, would a concerted focus on accountability in health or education, either in country or globally, and using a multiplicity of approaches, look like? How could new alliances be developed between 'accountability' focused groups, e.g. those doing work on budgets, and groups already working in these sectors? In another sense, how could accountability work 'drill down' further to the local level, taking advantage especially of where there are new openings through decentralisation.
- *Expanding to new areas/contexts.* While accountability and transparency work is growing, the concentration of resources and groups appears to be uneven, with a great deal of resources going towards certain countries and networks, a far less to others. There was widespread recognition of the need to learn more about how to expand this type of work to new contexts, especially to conflict, post-conflict or more fragile settings, and to be able to scan new openings and entry points for change and to respond quickly to them. There was also recognition of the need to deepen analysis of country contexts in order to develop appropriate strategies for differing circumstances.

Action Steps: New strategic emphases and directions

1. Strengthen work on new issues areas – e.g. taxation, non-ODA revenue streams, road construction, electricity, sewage, judiciary, police;
2. Develop 'rapid deployment' teams or 'test the waters road show' to be able to respond to emerging opportunities or to pilot work in new areas and new countries;
3. Develop support for more experimental and risk-taking approaches; as well as support for sectoral or thematic initiatives;
4. Extend and pilot work to new contexts, especially post-conflict and fragile settings.

3. Extending the reach: linking to and building broad-based demand

The development of new strategic directions and emphasis is closely related to a third challenge of how to deepen the base of this work at the grassroots and how to extend its reach to new audiences and actors. While it was clear at the workshop that there are growing resources going to the field, and the growth of certain networks within it, there is also a risk that the agenda is still lead by a relatively small circle of players, or that the strategies will not find popular roots to maximise effectiveness, sustainability and impacts. Insights for addressing this issue included:

- The need to start with understanding where poor people get their information, and build upon those channels, be they through mobile phone providers, religious groups or the local media;
- The need to build alliances between information and transparency groups and other movements, campaigns and sectors who are already working on key issues, e.g. HIV/AIDs, delivery of basic services, or disaster relief and rehabilitation. For instance, following recent earthquakes in China, there were spontaneous demands for accountability from government over the quality of housing and school construction, popularly organised through mobile phone technologies;
- The need to understand more how access to information in turn translates to action and mobilisation which contribute to change. This also involves constantly being aware of whose knowledge and voices are being marginalised in the process.

Action Steps: Extending the reach: Linking to and building broad-based demand

1. Build the story or narrative: what do accountability and transparency contribute?
2. Look for the narrative hooks and build links to other issues, movements, coalition where people are already organised;
3. Find the 'self-moving' vehicles for reaching broad audiences, e.g. radio, mobile phones;
4. Identify and support the latent and less visible capacity in different settings.

4. Joining up strategies for scale and sustainability

No matter how good the evidence, or how effective and deep the strategies, there is also a challenge of how to take accountability and transparency work to a larger scale, both

'horizontally' in terms of expanding its reach with more groups in more places, but also 'vertically' through linking projects and civil society initiatives to larger institutional reforms and change. Discussion here focused on:

- The need to go beyond a project focus to include a broader understanding of the 'ecosystem' of change in any one country. To do so might also require mechanisms that foster horizontal networks across civil society networks working on particular sectors, to examine more deliberately how efforts to strengthen citizen participation, budget monitoring and information transparency can be linked together, and to focus then on building a critical mass of action in any one sector or place.
- The possibility of 'reversing the equation' by 'starting with scale', e.g. finding those forums, institutions or channels where people already are getting a great deal of information or acting collectively, and work to build these into forces for greater accountability between states and citizens.
- The need to be more deliberate in building links with 'official' accountability institutions – oversight commissions, parliaments, the judiciary' - and 'unofficial' movements or initiatives. There is scope here for building new kinds of 'oversight coalitions' that cut across state and civil society.

Action Steps: Joining up strategies for scale and sustainability

1. Learn from past movements about how they dealt with issues of going to scale, replication or 'mainstreaming', while maintaining their cutting edge;
2. Work to build a critical mass of change in certain areas, countries or sectors;
3. Develop coalitions across actors – government, civil society, media and others;
4. Support mechanisms for 'cross fertilising' strategies that work, across contexts, issues, and methods.

5. Building donors' own accountability and legitimacy

As both official aid donors (multilaterals and bilateral), private foundations and large civil society networks push for greater transparency and accountability of others, legitimate questions increasingly arise as to their own accountability. What information is publicly available on who they fund? How do they engage responsibly in potentially controversial political and power issues in other countries? In a plenary session, the workshop heard about and discussed a number of initiatives to address these issues.

- In some settings, governments are being pressed to be more accountable to their citizens, yet they in turn are dependent upon external aid actors, who in turn may not be truly accountable to governments. Promises of funding may go unfulfilled, pressures to report upwards may work against pressures to consult and report to citizens, and contradictory pressures from multiple donors may make effective and unified action difficult. The workshop discussed the important opportunities to re-visit questions of 'government' or 'democratic' ownership at the upcoming High Level Conference on Aid Effectiveness in Accra in September 2008.
- In response to these tensions, increasing attention is being paid to a 'Publish What you Pay' campaign which will make donor funding more transparent. Further work is needed on how to establish the accountability of private foundations to the partners and publics affected by their work.
- Another strategy is to work towards the creation of clear 'international accountability standards' that are applicable to donors, governments, and civil society groups alike. Some organisations, such as Oxfam Great Britain, have begun voluntarily to publish an 'accountability report' for its stakeholders, spelling out, in addition to its normal financial information, how it is accountability to others on a range of issues, and the mechanisms through which partners or stakeholders may hold it accountable.
- Increasingly, however, civil society organisations in country are put in a difficult position in their accountability role. On the one hand, they are expected within the prevailing accountability frameworks, to play a monitoring, watchdog or oversight role *vis a vis* governments. To do so effectively requires a certain degree of political space, freedom to act and voice dissent, and financial independence. On the other hand, in many countries, political space for NGOs and other civil society actors is narrowing, and in some cases, with a growing emphasis on budget support to governments, there may be less funding available to support their work.

Action Steps: Building donors own accountability and legitimacy

1. Develop global transparency and accountability standards for donors
2. Fuel broader public debates on aid and revenue flows
3. Strengthen work on the enabling environment for civil society to play its accountability monitoring and watchdog roles

6. Developing innovative funding mechanisms

Fundamental to dealing with each of the above challenges is the challenge of how to develop smarter, larger and more innovative funding mechanisms to support the growing work on accountability and transparency more effectively. Here discussion revolved around the challenges of:

- How to develop more cross-donor collaboration, understanding and paying attention more fully to the comparative advantages and roles of official donors, private foundations, and civil society groups in a particular setting or context;
- Developing the right 'mix' of funding in any one setting or issue, to ensure greater synergy of multiple strategies and actors. For instance, is media built strongly enough into the funding opportunities available for accountability work on a given issue or strategy?
- How to develop more sustainable groups and networks, over a longer period of time. The value of long term funding in order to build capacity, learning and effectiveness was noted through a number of examples.
- The need to find and develop funding partnerships in areas in which the accountability issues are large, but in which so far, there is little external funding to address them – e.g. Nigeria.
- The question of how to fund more risky work, or work for greater experimentation. Does the obsession with 'results' risk stifling innovation?

Action Steps: Developing innovative funding mechanisms

1. Develop 'mezzanine' funding to take ideas that are working and help them to grow;
2. Look at other examples of donor collaborative and pooled funding that can apply to this area;
3. Map existing funding flows to identify gaps and areas for collaboration;
4. Develop a list of the 'riskiest ideas' and see if they could gain support.

Moving Forward: Building the field or movement

On the final day, the workshop reviewed progress on addressing the challenges and opportunities and came back to the task of outlining a broader strategy vision for building the accountability field or, as some preferred, 'the movement' in a collaborative way.

For some, the workshop raised the possibility that the gathering momentum for work on accountability and transparency was taking us towards a 'tipping point', in which the scale and magnitude of impact could be increased rapidly and exponentially over the next few years. For others, there were still major risks which could not be ignored to grow the work or movement more effectively.

If we were to be 'successful' over the next five to ten years, what would 'success' look like? By way of summary of the previous day's discussion, we felt that the following indicators of success would need to be present to build the field towards the future:

- The presence of a broad-based, deeply rooted popular base;
- A strong knowledge base and widespread understanding of 'the case';
- Well developed networks and centres for support and learning;
- More ambitious and smarter investments;
- Increased scale and impact - in more places, levels, and sectors;
- Greater capacity and agility to pursue new opportunities and entry points for change.

At the same time, we recognised that this agenda faced a number of risks which could throw it off course, or keep it from realising its potential. These included risks that:

- The work would be unable to navigate the complexities of power and politics that shape and surround it;
- 'Accountability and transparency' would be 'captured' by the mainstream development industry, and represent in a few years just another in a long list of 'development fads' that had failed to realise its potential;
- The strategy would not be able to effectively straddle 'both sides of the equation' – i.e. be able to engage both with official government accountability institutions, as well as to support change through civil society and citizen engagement;
- The closing space for civil society and a disabling political environment in many settings would make the work increasingly difficult;
- In an attempt to 'mainstream' the agenda, it would in fact be diluted to a degree that it lost its cutting edge and potential for change.

In addressing these issues, we were also reminded that 'those in the room did not constitute the field', that we needed to be very aware of the many actors and networks not represented. The challenge therefore was how to build a broader based conversation on

these issues, bringing in more perspectives and actors, and to extend the capacity of the actors and networks who were in the room through identifying and allying with sometimes less visible actors and capacities elsewhere. There was recognition that there are already many initiatives and tools already at work – the challenge is to connect them up and the risk is that new actors will ignore or duplicated them. There were also concerns that we needed to continue to clarify the vision of this work – focusing not only on accountability and transparency in general, but for whom and towards what ends. And finally, we were reminded of the perhaps what the biggest threats – that work in this field would fail to connect with, or be overshadowed by, other global forces such as on climate change, food insecurity, and growing inequalities that affect poverty.

Yet we also were reminded that at the heart of all of these emerging global issues is the core issue of the nature of the relationship that exists between citizens and the larger institutions that affect their lives. That relationship – or social contract – goes to the core of what democratic accountability and transparency mean. Strengthening that relationship is also at the core of extending democracies, delivering services, and meeting development goals.

The potential is great, and the workshop concluded with greater clarity and commitments for addressing key challenges in a more collaborative and joined up way. Concrete follow-up actions included:

- Forming an ongoing interactive web-space for participants to continue their conversations and share their learning;
- Naming of follow-up task groups to take forward conversations in several specific areas, including a) expanding research in the field; b) telling ‘the story’ and reaching out more broadly to other groups; c) continuing to explore new entry points and opportunities for work on transparency and accountability and d) mapping and sharing our knowledge;
- Exploring possibilities of a small follow-up coordinating mechanism to be supported by the workshop convenors, DFID and OSI.

The workshop ended with thanks to DFID and OSI for convening the event, the Rockefeller Foundation for hosting it at its Bellagio Conference Centre, and the facilitators for their role in organising and guiding the discussions.

For further information about this workshop, you may contact:

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Attachments: list of participants