Policy BRIEFING

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Understanding 'the users' in Technology for Transparency and Accountability Initiatives

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has risen dramatically since the turn of the millennium, in particular among people in countries of the global South. This has fuelled great enthusiasm among the aid, development and technology communities over the past decade to apply Technology for Transparency and Accountability Initiatives (T4TAIs) in order to deepen democracy and improve developmental outcomes. Funding agencies, engaged activists and governance scholars are looking closely at their impact and effectiveness. In particular, concerns have been raised that not enough attention has been paid to the people expected to take up and use T4TAIs. If T4TAIs are to be accessible, effective and contribute to their stated goals, it is critical that understanding if and how ordinary people currently use T4TAIs and the constraints on their taking action is significantly improved. This Briefing reports on a learning study undertaken by Hivos and partners which is a step in this direction.

Assessing the challenges

Great strides have been made in recent years in analysing nascent T4TAIs' experience and deriving useful lessons to inform and improve practice. However, even obstacles that were already recognised to affect use and uptake have proved to be pitfalls in the subsequent design, implementation and practice of some T4TAIs. Many were designed without due attention to their underpinning theories of change. This has limited their effectiveness and impact, as they are based on unrealistic and un-surfaced assumptions which are not borne out in practice. In cases where T4TAIs have failed to sustainably reduce the costs of seeking accountability (e.g. financial, time, reputation) or to take account of power differentials, there is an increased risk of leaving their users liable for costs they will not sustain, and/or wielding insufficient leverage to achieve their desired outcomes.

Adam Cohn

Case Study 1: Mobile Phones for Improved Access to Safe Water (M4W)

M4W was initiated by SNV Uganda, and has been carried out in partnership with Sustainable Services at Scale (Triple-S) of IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC), Makerere University, WaterAid, and the Ugandan Ministry of Water and Environment. It was designed as a mobile and web-based way to report on defective water sources and develop a coordinated system for repairing them in timely fashion. M4W is supported by Twaweza and the Africa Technology and Transparency Initiative (ATTI).

How it works

M4W consists of two components: (i) water point mapping by Hand Pump Mechanics (HPMs), Community Development Officers and Community Health Assistants using Java-enabled telephone handsets and (ii) a citizen monitoring initiative through which water users report on functionality by sending text messages with any type of mobile phone. The learning study focuses on component (ii), since it is a transparency and accountability initiative strictly speaking.

Underlying assumptions

In M4W's theory of change, the ultimate desired impact of the citizen-monitoring component is stated clearly. However, the assumed connection between the desired impact, outcomes, outputs and inputs are vague. This makes it difficult to trace exactly how the initiative has unfolded. M4W's starting assumptions about potential users' access, capacity and motivation to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) have turned out to be overly optimistic.

Findings

- Users did not assume the role of reporting problems with their water sources as readily as envisaged: after nine months of programme implementation in seven districts, only 65 text messages had been received.
- The lack of uptake likely stems from a lack of awareness for many potential users. Potential users were not adequately sensitised and the system used for labelling water points and advertising M4W was subject to vandalism and degradation.
- Among those who were aware of M4W, many were not using the system as envisaged but were calling mechanics directly. This is a very rational practice from their perspective, since it gets them quicker responses than going through the system. But it effectively bypasses the potentially accountability-enhancing parts of the M4W system.
- For M4W, like many other SMS-based initiatives, the anonymity of texting means that the sex of those reporting faults to M4W cannot be detected. Anecdotal evidence and interviews suggest that women often do not have the same access to M4W as men, given norms about communication with public officials and differential access to and ability to use mobile phones.
- Justifiably, users expect to be contacted directly and informed on the action taken to remedy the fault they reported. Some M4W actors are keenly aware that lack of direct feedback to users limits the programme's credibility and popularity, and recognise that no local-level direct feedback mechanism has been set in place.
- In Lira, Uganda, one of the areas where M4W operates, many people tend not to voice their basic needs even when invited. Operating staff attribute this to the fact that many there have spent years living in displacement camps during conflict, and developed passive attitudes rather than actively demanding their rights and needs.
- Other explanations for limited uptake include the cost to individuals of sending a text, lack of familiarity with texting, the defective water point labelling system, hasty or non-existent awareness-raising on the part of HPMs, and generally a widespread lack of knowledge about M4W.
- M4W is addressing a number of these challenges – for example by investigating better labelling systems for the water points and exploring voice as an alternative SMS for citizen reporting. The fact that M4W is being piloted in multiple districts has allowed its implementers to test assumptions about usage in different geographical spaces and contexts, and adapt accordingly.

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Case Study 2: TRAC FM

TRAC FM is an initiative supported by Hivos, Twaweza and the Africa Technology and Transparency Initiative (ATTI), aiming to strengthen public debate and mechanisms of accountability by analysing data gathered from a wide range of people through surveys conducted during live radio talk-shows and feeding this data back into the public debate. It has been designed as a learning pilot, meant to provide experience and lessons to inform the design and roll-out of a fully-fledged project.

How it works

Easy-to-use software allows radio presenters to hold surveys during their talk-show to which listeners can and are encouraged to react via SMS (free of charge). The radio polls gather information from citizens about service delivery in Kampala and four other districts. Text messages collected by TRAC FM are processed by visualisation software and instantly relayed to FM stations where radio talk-show hosts can verbally feed the data back into the public debate. The data gathered both serves TRAC FM's own purposes of programming, campaigning and research and analysis, and can be shared with other actors (NGOs, media, government) subject to privacy considerations.

Underlying assumptions

TRAC FM was based on the following underlying assumptions about users and uptake, most of which were implicit rather than explicit in the design stage.

- For citizen voice to lead to government responsiveness, a key missing ingredient is citizens' knowledge of policy-related issues.
- A major explanation for poor service delivery is a non-functional feedback loop between citizens and service providers, and politicians.
- TRAC FM users are representative of Ugandan citizens more broadly.
- Anonymity of SMSs compared to other ways of expressing voice makes people freer in what they say.
- Potential electoral implications of non-responsiveness motivate politicians to respond by applying and enforcing better regulation of service deliverers.
- Insertion of TRAC FM poll data into print media fuels public debate and stimulates government responsiveness.

Findings

- TRAC FM developed starting assumptions about user numbers based on extensive research. These proved to be largely realistic. However, little attention or priority was given at design stage to biases affecting uptake or the possibility of differentiated uptake.
- With regard to listeners and one-off participants, the number of people who participated in at least one TRAC FM poll far outstripped expectations. The proportion of urban users was lower than expected while the proportion of rural users was higher than expected. The 25 – 35 age group dominates.
- In the case of TRAC FM, the laissez faire attitude taken to its catchment population has meant that uptake reflects many 'naturalised' biases that exist in society, particularly gender bias. Ten per cent of TRAC FM participants are women, in all regions of Uganda, likely reflecting mobile ownership patterns and women's reluctance to participate in public debate more generally.
- Those who participate in TRAC FM polls see them as a useful platform for informing the wider society about problems and applying pressure for change.
- For TRAC FM, the availability of a variety of alternative urban radio stations and opinion-polling programmes and platforms and the fact that users exercise choice between these, makes non-user status more understandable and less telling about the T4TAI itself.

Lessons learnt

Drawing on the experiences of the T4TAIs in the highlighted case studies, and elsewhere, there are clear lessons to be learnt in terms of informing the design, implementation and evaluation of future initiatives. These include:

- Among the myriad T4TAIs currently being implemented, **few are demonstrably transforming governance and accountability**. This may be not because they lack any transformative impact, but because they are presently not demonstrating it well.
- **T4TAIs' active participants are often the 'usual suspects'** – men, urban dwellers, and people with higher levels of education and/or access to information.
- It is not always certain that marginalised people actually want more direct means of engaging with their governments. The people who are meant to be 'sensitised' and brought in are often **time-poor – especially women** – and also may have historic reasons to **expect little responsiveness** from their governments.
- The gender bias in uptake of both M4W and TRAC FM draws attention to the **risks of T4TAIs unwittingly 'empowering' only *some* kinds of citizen**, which could further entrench discrimination and social exclusion rather than increase accountability and equity for all.
- There is evidence that many organisations put insufficient thought and resources into publicising their initiatives, and that this contributes to low uptake. **Targeted outreach to particular user groups** is an element of particular importance in the theories of change of many T4TAIs.
- **Response, feedback and interactivity are important determinants of uptake and sustained use.** Among users there is a desire to see that the information they contribute is being used in some way.

Policy recommendations

To improve the impact and accessibility of T4TAIs, designers and practitioners should:

- Integrate T4TAIs into people's ways of doing things. Significant behaviour change cannot be expected to ensue from telling potential users what is good for them. Practices and technologies that are already embedded in people's daily realities are more likely to be adopted.
- Gather more information about potential and actual users, in both design and monitoring and evaluation phases, so that various dimensions of social exclusion (gender, age, disability) can be addressed.
- Develop more clearly articulated theories of change and outline realistic levels of expectations about behaviour change at the outset.
- Address the trade-off between the goals of amassing detailed information on uptake and participation and protecting users' privacy.
- Improve their own capacity to conduct applied research and action research on 'users' as inputs to better programme design and monitoring and evaluation, within the context of their own practice.
- Consider how initiatives might be monitored and assessed and the costs of demonstrating impact, when designing programmes that will need to be evaluated.

Funders should:

- Acknowledge that impact may be difficult to quantify or assess reliably in qualitative terms in the short term and support phased approaches to programme design and adaptive programme management that can respond accordingly to successes and failures.
- Support learning collaboration between practitioners and researchers, funding not only research programmes but also spaces for practitioner learning within the practitioner-led initiatives that they fund.

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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE UK
T +44 (0) 1273 606261 **F** + 44 (0) 1273 621202 **E** ids@ids.ac.uk **W** **www.ids.ac.uk**
twitter.com/IDS_UK #idspolicy facebook.com/idsuk

Further reading

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Credits

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This Brief was written by **Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert** and edited by **Hannah Corbett** and **Carol Smithyes**.