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Research report

MAKING ALL
VOICES COUNT

A GRAND CHALLENGE
FOR DEVELOPMENT

Sometimes it is about the tech: choosing tools in South African and Kenyan transparency and accountability initiatives

Key findings and executive summary



the engine room



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Key findings

We interviewed staff members from 38 diverse organisations in Kenya and South Africa about the way they had chosen a digital technology tool to use in a transparency and accountability initiative. We wanted to understand the processes they went through to choose tools, and how this influenced the effectiveness of their work. We found that these organisations were adopting digital technology tools because they, and the people they aim to reach, are using more digital tools in more aspects of their lives.

Less than a quarter of the organisations were happy with the tools they had chosen. They often found technical issues that made the tool hard to use, *after* they had decided to adopt it, while half the organisations discovered that their intended users did not use the tools to the extent that they had hoped (a trend that was often linked to specific attributes of the tool).

We found links between the way that organisations chose tools and the outcome of their selections. Most organisations did very limited research to understand their intended users, the technology options available and the problem the tool was expected to solve. More than half the organisations built a tool from scratch without first checking if existing tools could do the job, while few organisations tested out a tool before choosing it (particularly with the tool's intended users). All these trends were associated with tool choices that did not meet organisations' needs.

Organisations' lack of awareness of their own knowledge gaps, difficulties accessing relevant, impartial advice, and limited user research and trialling often prevented them from choosing tools effectively. To address these issues, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

For organisations choosing tools in transparency and accountability initiatives: Six rules of thumb

1 Map out what you need to know

Do at least some research in all of these three areas: (1) the goal or problem you want the tool to address; (2) the interests and needs of the people you want to use the tool; and (3) the tool options that are available. Work out what you don't know, and ask for help to fill the gaps.

2 Think twice before you build

Look for existing tools that can do the job; building new technologies from scratch is complex and risky.

3 Get a second opinion

Someone else has probably tried a similar approach before you. Find them (and ask for advice).

4 Always take it for a test drive

Trial the tool; it highlights problems early on and raises questions you never knew you had. Try out at least one tool, with the people you want to use it, before making a choice.

5 Plan for failure

Don't expect to get it right first time; budget for a series of adjustments to your tool during the project.

6 Stop and reflect on what you're doing

Keep thinking about what is working, and what isn't. Apply what you are learning to your organisation's broader work, and share with other organisations.

Recommendations for funders

1 Help organisations do more (and more effective) research

Before organisations become wedded to using a particular tool, support and encourage them to develop project plans that include thorough research into the tool's intended users, the overall goal they think the tool could help achieve, and what alternative tool options are available.

2 Give the space to trial and adjust

The first attempt to use a tool is unlikely to be the one that succeeds. Promote the inclusion of structured trialling phases in projects and allow initiatives the resources to adjust tools in response to the results.

3 Support networks that provide face-to-face advice

Organisations frequently struggle to find suitable

technology partners, work well with those they find, or access advice from peers with similar levels of experience. Make connections and support spaces where organisations can share experiences openly or get access to appropriate, tool-agnostic advice.

4 Make research more accessible and actionable

Organisations often don't find or use relevant research that identifies common problems to avoid – and then experience those problems themselves. To help them make better informed choices, investigate various ways to present key heuristics and guidance in ways that are relevant to organisations' specific contexts and actionable at key points in the tool selection process.²

² The Six Rules of Thumb for organisations choosing tools to use in their work (above) and the Tool Selection Assistant (toolselect.theengineroom.org), which presents our research findings in the form of an online guide through the tool selection process, are two attempts to meet this need. However, further efforts are required to understand how organisations find and use research effectively.

Executive summary

The organisations in our research, the technology they use, and how they use it

- To better understand the process of finding effective digital technology tools in transparency and accountability initiatives, we interviewed 38 organisations in South Africa and Kenya that had recently chosen tools to use in their work. We asked them why they had chosen a particular tool, how they chose it, and if they were happy with the results.
- The organisations we interviewed were diverse (ranging from large, national organisations to very small, community-based initiatives). They worked in areas that varied widely. Many focused on governance-related issues such as corruption, while others monitored public service delivery in sectors such as health or education, or mobilised citizens to hold local or national governments accountable for their actions.
- Organisations are actively attempting to innovate (both to work more efficiently and in response to trends amongst the people they wish to engage and among their peers). However, most organisations in our study were not primarily focused on using technology, and had only limited technical experience and skills.
- The technologies organisations used ranged in complexity from short messaging service (SMS) systems to web-based data portals. Few had staff with specific responsibility for technology, and with extensive experience or skills in using technology tools.

- Organisations in our research brought technology tools into their initiatives from three starting points:
 - Most (21 out of 38) had a need that they thought a tool could address.
 - Some (9 out of 38) had already discovered a tool and wanted to find a way to use it.
 - Others (8 out of 38) saw a peer organisation using a tool and wanted to implement a similar project in their own context.

In nearly half the cases (17 out of 38), the organisation started with the tool or type of tool they wanted to use before they knew how they would use it.

How do organisations choose tools?

- Organisations' decision-making processes were rarely linear or highly formalised.
- Many organisations conducted little or no research. Those that did focused on one or more of the following questions:
 - What was the nature of the problem the overall initiative was trying to address?
 - What technology tools were available, and what they could do?
 - Who were the people the organisation hoped would use the tool, and what factors might affect their use?

Hardly any organisations (3 of the 38 interviewed) did research on all three.

- Organisations generally did very limited research to understand their potential users (whether those users were inside or outside the

How organisations chose tools. This diagram explains the paths that organisations typically took when choosing tools.



organisation). Only 15 did any research on their users at all. Before launching, they rarely trialled a tool with the people they expected to use it.

- Few organisations identified and assessed more than one tool and compared it with other options before making their choice.
- A very high proportion of organisations (10 out of 20 in Kenya, and 11 out of 18 in South Africa) built a tool from scratch, often with very limited prior experience and without checking if existing tools could do the job. In a large number of these cases, organisations didn't choose a tool at all, but delegated the decision to technical partners.

What happened next: what worked and what didn't?

- Less than a quarter of the 38 organisations were happy with the tools they had chosen.
- The most common reasons for dissatisfaction were:
 - technical issues that made tools hard to use or limited their usefulness, which participants only discovered after they had chosen the tools.
 - the targeted users' failure to adopt the tools to the extent that the organisation had hoped. This was a problem among almost half the organisations interviewed. Although this 'uptake failure' wasn't always attributable to the particular tool itself, the tool's specific attributes often contributed directly to it.
- Both problems were especially common among organisations that built a tool from scratch. Problems included delays, budget overruns and difficulties in managing relationships with technical partners or suppliers that limited the initiative's overall effectiveness.
- Many organisations had already considered or chosen alternative tools since their initial attempts (5 out of 20 in Kenya, and 6 out of 18 in South Africa). Regarding the process, very few participants (4 out of 38) said that, in a similar scenario, they would choose a tool in the same way again.

How could organisations make better tool choices?

- For organisations with limited resources and technical expertise, we found that the most efficient research strategy was trialling a tool

before adopting it. Trialling brought up issues that organisations had not considered, and helped them think about a broader set of factors and contexts when choosing a tool. Organisations that trialled, particularly with their intended users in the context in which the tool would be used, were usually happy with a tool's performance.

- The most effective way of avoiding wasting time and resources by choosing an unsuitable tool was to include a series of 'iterations' (adaptations made throughout the course of a project) in a project's design. Most organisations made no allowance for adapting a tool after beginning to implement it, often continuing the project despite knowing that the tool was ineffective.
- Many of the problems we saw could have been mitigated if organisations had done more research *before* choosing a tool. But for organisations to identify *in advance* what research is most needed is challenging. The organisations we studied often faced "unknown unknowns" – they didn't know enough to identify the gaps in their knowledge.
- Among organisations that were satisfied with their chosen tool, the tool's complexity typically matched the organisation's levels of technical knowledge and capacity. However, organisations often struggled to judge their own levels of knowledge, and how far they could realistically extend them within the space of a single project.
- Overall, many organisations showed that, through learning by doing, they were learning useful lessons about how to choose tools effectively. However, their learning was hampered by their lack of awareness of their own knowledge gaps, limited adoption of structured trialling phases and user research, and difficulties in accessing relevant, impartial advice from peers, researchers or software developers.
- To learn more quickly and effectively, organisations need to commit to understanding and tackling gaps in their own knowledge, as well as gaining better access to networks and practical guidance that is relevant to their situation.³
- Based on our findings, we have identified six rules of thumb designed for organisations choosing technology tools for technology for transparency and accountability initiatives (T4TAIs), and four recommendations for donors and others seeking to support organisations to choose tools (above).

³ This study involved 38 initiatives spread across different contexts, using a broad set of technologies to meet a variety of objectives. Our comments are made with this diversity in mind. Not all the participants may share our perspectives; even understandings of what successful tool adoption looks like.

About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. This Grand Challenge focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The field of technology for Open Government is relatively young and the consortium partners, Hivos, Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Ushahidi, are a part of this rapidly developing domain. These institutions have extensive and complementary skills and experience in the field of citizen engagement, government accountability, private sector entrepreneurs, (technical) innovation and research. Making All Voices Count is supported by the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and Omidyar Network (ON), and is implemented by a consortium consisting of Hivos, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Ushahidi. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

Research, Evidence and Learning Component

The programme's research, evidence and learning contributes to improving performance and practice and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and Technology for T&A (Tech4T&A). The component is managed by the Institute of Development Studies, a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communication with over thirty years' experience of developing knowledge on governance and citizen participation.

About funded partner

the engine room (theengineroom.org) researches and supports the safe and effective use of technology in advocacy. This involves a combination of applied research, generating evidence and providing direct strategic and material support to activists and organizations using data and technology in their work. The **Network Society Lab** at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (networksocietylab.org) researches the diffusion of Internet and mobile technologies and their social, economic and political effects in Africa. **Mtaani Initiative** is a Nairobi-based community-driven organisation that fosters civic engagement and collective action on governance and anti-corruption issues, centred at collaborative space and social enterprise Pawa254 (pawa254.org).

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