MAKING ALL
VOICES COUNT

A GRAND CHALLENGE
FOR DEVELOPMENT

Innovations to engage youth in accountability work in Liberia

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Blair Glencorse is Executive Director of the Accountability Lab. The Lab works in communities to make governments more accountable and to open up civic space using the arts, media, culture and technology. Blair is also the co-founder of the first co-working and innovation space in Liberia and of both TEDxMonrovia and TEDxBamako, and an expert on anti-corruption with the World Economic Forum. Blair speaks regularly on issues of community engagement, leadership, citizen participation and governance. His work has been published in *The New York Times, Foreign Policy* and *The Guardian,* among other renowned media.

Heather Gilberds is a PhD candidate in Journalism and Communication at Carleton University in Canada. Her research focuses on media, citizen feedback and aid accountability in Liberia. She has more than a decade of experience as an applied researcher in the fields of information and communications technology for development (ICT4D), rural radio, and transparency and accountability. She has contributed to the Making All Voices Count research programme as a research adviser with the Accountability Lab, as well as through her work with Farm Radio International.

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Summary

This practitioner research was carried out by the Accountability Lab, a civil society organisation that works with youth in Liberia around transparency and accountability. The research aimed to assess the organisation's efforts to engage in an adaptive learning process, and to interrogate its efforts to improve Liberia's accountability 'ecosystem'.

In Liberia's post-conflict context, there is a new generation of young people coming of age who did not experience the conflict, which stretched from 1989 to 2003. The Lab considers this an opportunity to engage with them in new ways and support them to become actors in a process of building positive accountability dynamics.

Accountability Lab's research took a multi-method approach that included citizen surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews. Through this process, the Lab was able to gain insights into how to improve their efforts within the local Liberian context. This included insights into strategies for reaching citizens outside the capital, Monrovia; how and with whom to expand their networks and partnerships to create local hubs in the interior; and how to engage their local staff in research processes.

The research also shed light on Liberia's accountability landscape, finding that efforts to build governance have so far focused on institution-building, creating laws and institutions that do not always match local norms and culture. In response to this, the Lab developed a people-centred strategy proposing to train champions and create networks that can positively affect mindsets and change behaviours, embedding accountability and transparency in local culture progressively over time.

The paper ends with a reflective conversation with Accountability Lab's Executive Director and Research Adviser. They discuss what the research revealed about the accountability landscape in Liberia, their work with youth, and innovative tools such as an accountability incubator, the use of information and communications technology (ICTs) in fragile settings, and balancing long-term processes that build trust with more immediate accountability needs.

Key themes in this paper

- Transparency and accountability in post-conflict settings
- The use of arts and culture to open up spaces for accountability engagement
- Youth-centred initiatives
- Bridging the demand and supply sides of accountability in centralised political systems
- The use of ICTs for data collection
- The limitations of ICTs in reaching vulnerable populations in fragile contexts

Contents

Setting the scene for practitioner learning

Making All Voices Count is a citizen engagement and accountable governance programme. Its Research, Evidence and Learning component, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), focuses on building an evidence base for what works in technology for voice, transparency and accountability, how it works, and why (McGee, Edwards, Minkley, Pegus and Brock 2015). The programme's practitioner research and learning grants give transparency and accountability practitioners funds and mentoring support to provide them with the space and capabilities to explore key questions that will enable them to better implement governance projects. Most, but not all, of these practitioners are using tech-enabled approaches. This real-time applied research contributes to project learning and improved practice.

The practitioner research and learning grants support grantees to develop their own learning and form their own judgements, and the programme's series of practice papers is part of this process. The practice papers document research and learning from the perspectives of both the grant recipients and the programme. They are co-produced, and intended to prompt critical reflection on key questions that arise from the process of the research.

This practice paper focuses on Accountability Lab's practitioner research, which generated evidence about the organisation's work as part of their adaptive learning process. The grant allowed them to produce insights about the local accountability landscape, young people's understanding of accountability processes, the role of cultural and artistic spaces to enable conversations about accountability, and how the Lab can adapt its work to improve impact. The research was one of the inputs for the organisation's new strategy for 2017–2020 (Accountability Lab 2017), which proposes a stronger focus on individuals who can become key agents of change in the decades to come.

This paper summarises a conversation about youth-centred accountability initiatives in Liberia between Natalia Herbst, Blair Glencorse and Heather Gilberds. Following a presentation of the research and its findings, they reflect critically on Liberia's accountability landscape, the role of arts and culture in opening spaces that can lead to pro-accountability environments, and what the Accountability Lab has learned about engaging in practitioner research.

Accountability Lab's engagement in Liberia

Accountability Lab has various locally registered chapters around the world. Accountability Lab Liberia aims to build a new generation of active citizens and responsible leaders across the country. The team supports change-makers to develop and implement positive ideas for integrity in their communities. By enabling people to generate the knowledge, skills and networks needed for accountability, it focuses on unleashing positive social and economic change. Considering

accountability a dynamic process, the Lab moves away from a 'one-size-fits-all' model for improving accountable governance. By working at multiple levels, the Lab's activities look to shift accountability dynamics in Liberia in a number of ways, such as: securing political and community buy-in; mobilising citizens to become involved in civic actions; shifting mindsets and perceptions related to corruption and integrity; and bringing diverse stakeholders together to share in a

common vision for transformation.

Accountability Lab conducted an impact assessment between August 2016 and March 2017 as part of a Making All Voices Count practitioner research and learning grant. In order to gather more precise and robust data on the Lab's impact in Liberia, including ways to improve, a survey was completed by diverse stakeholders and the data was triangulated with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. All surveys were completed anonymously, and the interviews and focus groups were conducted by a consultant who was not known to stakeholders. During interviews, the evaluator asked respondents whether they would like to remain anonymous or preferred their statements to be attributed. These efforts helped to minimise 'courtesy bias', thereby improving the robustness of the findings.

In 2016, Accountability Lab Liberia worked in three main areas:

1. **INTEGRITY IDOL LIBERIA**
   2016 was the second year of a campaign to 'name and fame' the country's most honest public servants. Integrity Idol is a participatory, locally aired TV show that publicly supports a network of honest government officials. The campaign promotes the idea that the state is not monolithic, and creates heroes of those working to build accountability. It also aims to inspire a new generation of Liberians to enter public service, and to help local reformers share ideas, build coalitions and actively collaborate to improve governance.

2. **ACCOUNTABILITY INCUBATOR**
   Through the accountability incubator, the Lab helps young civil society change-makers (or accountability entrepreneurs – 'accountapreneurs') develop the tools, skills, networks, outreach efforts and funding streams they need to build sustainable, effective programmes for accountability, integrity and open governance. The Lab recruits diverse individuals with good ideas to participate in the incubator, which in 2016 included: building new approaches to improving reporting and transparency in the media (The Bush Chicken and Accountability & Us[1]); mobilising citizens to engage in issues related to accountability through music (Hip Co Accountability Network), film (Liberia Film Institute) and art (LIVArts); and building community trust and promoting peace through grassroots mediation (Community Justice Teams).

3. **ECOSYSTEM-BUILDING**
   The Lab works to make connections between accountability change-makers to build a collective movement for better governance. In Liberia in 2016, a core part of this was developing the iCampus – Liberia's first co-working, community and innovation space. Targeting individuals and organizations working on issues related to governance and technology in Liberia, iCampus connects social innovators, provides strategic networking opportunities, training opportunities and facilities, and fosters partnerships. It is also the local affiliate of the OpenGov Hub space.

   Source: Gilberds 2016: 3

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[1] Accountability & Us is a radio show through which the host focuses on the accountability of the media, fact-checking news and holding editors and journalists to account on air.

Assessing Accountability Lab's impact

A number of challenges and limitations emerged during the impact evaluation of Accountability Lab's work. It was difficult to achieve the desired response rates to surveys asking for qualitative and quantitative data. Additionally, while in the areas where fieldwork was conducted the samples were representative, the Lab was unable to sample all their desired locations due to a variety of problems such as impassable roads during the rainy season. There was also difficulty interviewing some stakeholders due to travel schedules – in particular, senior government officials – and there were problems in recruiting survey respondents using a web-based survey, given internet connectivity issues. For this reason, paper surveys were also used to collect data during Lab events. While this improved response rates, some of the survey respondents had limited prior exposure to the Lab, and therefore may not have been in the best position to provide a reliable assessment. As a result of these limitations, the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation must be seen as indicative of larger trends and impacts, rather than robustly representative of the local accountability landscape. Nonetheless, a wide variety of respondents representing different groups was involved in the research, including citizens, civil society actors, journalists, government officials and Liberian academics.

Based on a variety of data collection strategies, the Lab produced the results presented in the next section as well as recommendations on how to strengthen their work in Liberia.

Raising awareness and building social movements

The stakeholders involved in the different stages of data collection largely agreed that the Lab's activities are influencing public awareness of accountability issues – such as corruption, transparency and open government – and are shifting citizen perceptions and catalysing grassroots movements to advocate for positive reforms as a result. They asserted that the Lab's emphasis on using creative tactics and innovative tools is changing the conversation about accountability in Liberia by catalysing a movement around good governance that does not criticise government officials nor create divisive narratives. Rather, its impact stems from its ability to tap into the creative potential of citizens and the overwhelming desire for a unified, accountable Liberia.

Supporting citizen participation in accountability and transparency

At the same time, there is mixed evidence of the impact that social innovators and activists supported by the Lab are having through their enterprises. While some initiatives arguably have greater reach, their impact is 'thin' – raising awareness of accountability and related issues among tens of thousands of young Liberians, but not significantly altering accountability dynamics, at least in the short term. However, other initiatives supported by the Lab have limited reach but 'thick' impact where their activities directly improve people's lives and transform communities.

Accountapreneurs reported that the Lab's incubator programme is helping them increase their reach and impact, and develop the business skills necessary to sustain and expand their enterprises. However, feedback indicates that the general skills training they access as part of the incubator programme could be restructured to provide more tailored support to match participants' needs. The accountapreneurs further highlighted that the seed funding mechanism is not sufficient for them to work full-time on their projects.

In addition, while the Lab places a clear emphasis on sustainability, some accountapreneurs have not been able to secure significant additional financing, which emphasises the need to connect these social innovators and activists more directly to potential sources of capital.

Catalysing accountability ecosystems

One of the demonstrated strengths of the Lab's approach is its ability to bring unlikely actors such as artists, musicians, film-makers and citizen journalists into the accountability ecosystem. A campaign approach creates space for the involvement of diverse actors across different levels. Through its high-profile and well-attended events, these unlikely change-makers come into direct contact with government officials, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and funders. Evidence suggests that these ecosystems are self-perpetuating and sustainable.

However, some of those interviewed as part of this research expressed doubt about the totality of Accountability Lab's activities in Liberia being greater than the sum of its parts, and encouraged the Lab to engage more directly and more strategically in building networks and ecosystems. There is room to further articulate how diverse activities contribute to the overall theories of change (set out in Accountability Lab 2017). The Accountability Lab team has already recognised the challenges to ecosystem-building and has begun to redirect efforts in this respect by, for instance, creating an Integrity Idol network and developing the iCampus.

Key insights about building accountability in Liberia

1. *Vertical integration is key*: By working at different levels within government, civil society and non-institutionalised social movements, the Lab's approach is building strategic linkages at different levels of power and influence to drive change.

2. *A focus on individuals rather than projects helps build self-perpetuating coalitions across sectors*: By focusing on the level of the individual and finding and promoting 'positive deviants' and social innovators, the Lab is supporting the establishment of coalitions across sectors as these individuals move vertically and laterally between government, civil society and social movements. This approach helps build enabling environments for accountability by supporting capacity development for accountability champions who move within and through various spheres of influence.

3. *Shifting social norms is an important part of efforts to address corruption and build accountability*: Campaigns intended to shift values and change thinking around corruption and integrity through popular culture and art are central to the Lab's work. By addressing the rationale behind behaviours that lead to endemic nepotism and corruption, the Lab is taking on an important and often overlooked component of building accountability over time.

4. *Ecosystem-building is essential to supporting the change agendas of social innovators*: One of the issues facing social innovators is how to connect their initiatives to wider social change efforts. Bringing change agents together and building partnerships across sectors helps amplify and reinforce these efforts, thereby increasing their reach, impact and sustainability.

Key strategic recommendations

- Link activities and objectives to changing perceptions of accountability
- Develop strategies for assessing the longer-term impact of activities on accountability dynamics
- Continue to expand strategic networks
- Develop a modular rather than structured approach to incubation for social innovators and activists
- Expand the Lab's programmes to Liberia's counties by developing hubs or nodes to reach a greater number of citizens

Source: Gilberds 2016: 19–20

The Lab's practitioner research process: defining the research questions and methods

Natalia Herbst:

Your research questions try to understand what approaches are used in Liberia to improve governance. But you also try to ground that understanding in what different actors at different levels think about accountability, in order to better understand approaches to overcoming barriers to a more accountable governance ecosystem (Gilberds 2016). What led you to ask these questions?

Blair Glencorse:

Having worked in Liberia for many years on these issues, we felt there is not a good understanding about what accountability is from people and institutions working on the topic. The pathways toward change in terms of accountability were not well understood, and the tools people use were not necessarily the ones that were receiving the right kind of support. Communities were not engaging in the kinds of initiatives that can lead to collective efforts. They were approaching accountability in a piecemeal way, which makes it very difficult for their efforts to become greater than the sum of their parts.

Natalia:

How did you plan your research process?

Heather Gilberds:

We had different stages. The inception period included meetings between Accountability Lab headquarters, myself and the team in Liberia, in which we wrote the research questions as a collective process. From there, we carried out background research and a desk review prior to doing fieldwork, to see how our research correlated with previous work on governance reform and citizen engagement. After that, we carried out a field data collection process which included a citizen survey to understand respondents' perceptions of what governance means, and to understand different approaches to transparency and accountability. Then we carried out focus groups with citizens in three counties, which were followed by key informant interviews including civil society activists, government ministries, commissions, the media, private sector representatives and scholars. So, we used a collective, multi-method approach to get an in-depth grasp of the landscape.

Natalia:

Can you describe how your methodology evolved, adapting to the context you were researching?

Heather:

Our research scope became broader than we had initially envisioned, based on two key changes. First, we ended up interviewing more people, because we saw there were many actors working at different levels in governance reform in Liberia, and we considered it important to hear from people on all those levels. This created challenges for the data analysis due to the amount of information we ended up collecting. Also, we added a citizen survey when we realised it was important to contrast the interview findings with a broader analysis of perceptions around these issues. Trying to rely on quantitative metrics in Liberia is quite difficult because of logistical challenges, and surveys are not always frequent, especially outside Monrovia. In the local culture, people get together and talk about issues in depth, so it is not common for them to express their ideas in a survey format. So I think we were missing the mark in terms of what people are used to responding to.

Blair:

We were also initially more optimistic about the kind of reach we might have, as we wanted to work nationwide. In practice, logistical challenges

There is far too much emphasis in institution-building around governance and accountability, and not enough attention to shifting mindsets, norms and behaviours.

– including the rainy season and budget – meant we could work only in four counties. But we could reach representative samples of respondents where we did work. Including the survey provided us with a better understanding about what people were feeling, although surveys are difficult to do in Liberia. One reason for this is that there have been few efforts in the past to close the feedback loop through surveys with communities. It has been a very extractive process in the past, and as a result, people are less willing to engage. One thing we've done with this research is go back to communities to report what we heard from them and try to discuss how they think it may be useful. I would add that it was informal conversations that provided the most useful grounding and context, as people tended to hold back less than in other facilitated spaces like focus groups. This means that the best research comes when those leading it adapt a continuous learning mindset - being ready to learn and iterate continuously, not only in spaces that are created for that process.

Insights into Liberia's accountability landscape

Natalia:

One of Accountability Lab's goals is to build a new generation of Liberians who can collectively shift norms, behaviours, and decisions in a way that can ensure integrity in the future. What do you identify as the main challenges to this in Liberia's current accountability landscape?

Blair:

One challenge is there is far too much emphasis in institution-building around governance and accountability, and not enough attention to shifting mindsets, norms and behaviours. Structures and frameworks about accountability may be in place, but because they don't correspond to behaviours, relationships and incentives among citizens, they don't always work very well.

Related to this, but at a deeper level, there is an absence of trust in Liberia that makes development very difficult. That is the consequence of a very complicated history and civil conflict, which led to patronage systems, because decisions are made based on personal understandings and access. The difficult socio-economic situation and high levels of poverty also mean that people have personal concerns and it can be hard to develop collective efforts for change. This in turn makes broad-based efforts to build a movement for accountability difficult to get off the ground.

Lastly, there are a lot of logistical challenges: for six months of the year it is very hard to reach many areas of the country because of the rain, so travel and communication tends to be expensive. Without spending time meaningfully understanding what people in large parts of the country understand accountability to be, it is extremely challenging to develop a movement to support it.

Heather:

One of the main findings from the research is that young people in Liberia feel very disenfranchised and far from power. They don't feel they can change things in Liberia, which was very striking. They could describe with great clarity Liberia's challenges and the problems with the government,

but they had a lot of trouble coming up with solutions they can be a part of.

Natalia:

What have you learned about how to overcome these challenges and about innovative ways to help young people do this?

Heather:

In relation to the youth-related challenge I mentioned before, our goal is to improve accountable governance in a way that speaks to youth. A focus on high-level governance reform doesn't speak to most people in Liberia, so one of the things the Lab is trying to do is to shift this conversation to make it more relatable to young people interested in these topics. The shift relates to changing mindsets and social norms. We found that many people accept everyday corruption, even if they are angry about it. One of the things we are trying to do is problematise this in a way that relates to their everyday lives, and show that this is a systemic issue that will require collective action. This includes changing not only the language but the approach to interactions with young people.

Natalia:

One of Accountability Lab's aims is to work even more outside of Monrovia (Gilberds 2016). How does the culture of lack of accountability differ in rural and urban contexts?

Blair:

I think part of it is the point Heather made about the distance between reform and policy at the central level and the lives of citizens generally, and particularly in rural areas. Liberia is very Monrovia-centric, with a centralised decision-making structure. This means patronage flows towards the centre. There is a process of decentralisation being talked about and to some degree begun, but this remains a decentralisation of functions – not a meaningful devolution of power. Stakeholders in power at the centre are resistant to change. The information flow to and from rural areas is also minimal; there are parts of the country in which cell phone coverage is almost non-existent. There are very large dichotomies in development terms between rural and urban, and little focus on rural accountability by many organisations.

Heather:

There is a huge gap in the provision of basic services and education between the capital and rural areas. This is exacerbated by aid flows, which tend to concentrate in the capital and adjacent areas, which are easier to access and have particular strategic interest for the government.

In the more far-flung counties where aid and government services rarely reach, people feel very detached from decision-making. There is a real need to expand work in those areas.

Natalia:

What have been the main challenges so far to expanding your work outside the capital? And which allies could help the Lab overcome them?

Heather:

The Lab has made efforts to expand its programmes to hard-to-reach counties and it has been incredibly challenging. We tried to reach rural communities for Integrity Idol, and it did not go as well as expected because of some of the challenges we've mentioned.

Blair:

Our team needs to build better networks in these areas to overcome this, and spend more time in these areas. In the long run, we would like to set up regional hubs that would allow us more permanent presence in these counties, and establish relationships with local media – particularly radio – so that people know more about how greater accountability can lead to meaningful changes in their lives. All this comes back to funding at some level – it is incredibly expensive to work outside Monrovia, and being a small organisation with big ideas, it is always a challenge to find the money to equal our ambitions.

Heather:

There is an important opportunity to partner and build networks with local organisations. There are lots of civil society organisations at different levels of capacity, which tends to decrease the further you get away from the capital. There is a need to fund basic capacity-building with these organisations in order to frame them into a network. They will be key actors in building the regional hubs.

This kind of approach can lead to all sorts of new ideas, as it breaks away from the typical dynamics and discourse around aid and accountability, in which donors tend to be quite risk averse.

What role for youth and arts in transparency and accountability?

Natalia:

In which ways do you consider youth-centred pro-accountability spaces can complement the work of traditional civil society organisations in the field?

Heather:

I think there is a real opportunity because of the large proportion of Liberians considered to be youth. In Liberia, the conception of youth is variable, but the Lab works mainly with young people aged around 18 to 35. Unemployment and a sense of disenfranchisement are high in Liberia. We see this is an opportunity to develop opportunities through social enterprise, and support young people to think about how they can come up with an idea, secure funding, and implement it in their communities. This can build accountability and lead to some sort of income.

Blair:

There is a whole generation coming of age now that didn't experience the war, which finished in 2003. In the next few years, there will be a cohort of young Liberians thinking very differently to those before them and who are better connected, more creative and more willing to challenge the status quo. They will be more globally oriented than anyone before them, and develop a creative energy that is different.

We are also bringing together different types of young people, which is uncommon in Liberia. This means combining different languages, which enriches the collective understanding and impact

of the work. Over time, we also hope to work with young reformers within government as well as civil society. This will allow us to build bridges between people inside and outside government systems in a way that is not happening now, and that can combine demand- and supply-side solutions.

Natalia:

What have you learned about using creative spaces and arts as tools to link different levels of accountability and create positive ecosystems?

Blair:

Arts are a very useful tool for building accountability. Films and music make sense in a place where literacy can be very low. It makes the messages accessible, as long as they are authentic. If there is any sense these media are being co-opted for particular aims, it undermines the potential acceptance of the messages. We try our best to make sure we operate through equal partnerships and an understanding of collective goals. We try our utmost not to fall into the patron-client relationships that unfortunately typify so much of international aid.

Another thing we realised is that this kind of approach can lead to all sorts of new ideas, as it breaks away from the typical dynamics and discourse around aid and accountability, in which donors tend to be quite risk averse. We can try new ideas, learn from those and adapt as they evolve. It leads to collaborations and new relationships which are different, and could have a huge impact over time if we can help them grow.

Heather:

In Liberia, the youth are quite sceptical of traditional aid approaches; this came up particularly during the Ebola crisis. Bringing in these arts-based movements speaks to the youth in a way that is different from business as usual, getting them involved in ways they wouldn't otherwise participate.

Accountability Lab's experience in relation to broader trends in the transparency and accountability field

Natalia:

Did your research provide any insights about the role of ICTs in creating improved governance environments?

Heather:

In a lot of countries in Africa, there is a tendency towards using ICT solutions to expand the reach of development solutions, and I think many of them don't work. This is particularly true in the case of Liberia, where there is a very low level of internet penetration even within the capital. People outside Monrovia don't have much access to smartphones. There is potential to try and leverage ICT approaches to make citizens more engaged and create digital networks, but I think that needs to be supported very strongly by non-digital approaches in this context. Initiatives that are too ICT-focused could lead to more exclusion than inclusion in Liberia.

Blair:

In our research, the best use of ICTs was for data collection, which is not always the way in which ICTs are thought of in relation to impact for civic engagement. We used a simple mobile-based app to collect data. It was useful as a learning tool to integrate knowledge and in which we could train our volunteers easily. But in terms of the broader use of technology for accountability, I would agree with Heather. There are very few tools that can actually create meaningful change without much broader and deeper work offline to build the relevant constituencies, ideas and energy for change.

Natalia:

Literature on transparency and accountability (T&A) suggests that the creation of positive governance environments requires long-term processes, and iteration of pro-T&A experiences that progressively incorporates what is learned (Joshi 2014; O'Meally 2013). Working with young people allows for the possibility of supporting champions who will be able to work in this field for several decades. Can you offer any insights into this kind of iterative learning from your work alongside the accountapreneurs at Accountability Lab? What kind of response do you receive from them when presenting accountability processes as a long-term matter?

Blair:

There are challenges to learning in Liberia. As an organisation, we try to incorporate adaptive learning (Accountability Lab 2017; Glencorse, Yealue, Jeke, Reese and Kpelewah 2017) from which we've come to understand a number of things. For example, the incubator works best when it focuses not on the best ideas, but on the best people. The best ideas in the world won't go anywhere if their proponents are not committed. But we can work with the most enthusiastic people to develop their ideas over time; and it is these people who will continue to push for accountability

Online and offline accountability tools only work in politically enabling environments.

long after they have been through our programmes. The second thing we learned is that accountability is political rather than technical, of course. Online and offline accountability tools only work in politically enabling environments. We need to understand the political dynamics that can create spaces for innovative ideas to flourish and be sustainable. This means continual political economy analysis, relationship-building, reflection and network development to ensure that we know when, how and with whom efforts to build accountability might work.

Thirdly, it can't be just demand side. Our incubator has mostly focused on civil society, and as I mentioned before, we are working to progressively engage more government representatives – to support reformers within the system and connect them with change-makers who go through the incubator. Integrity Idol has been a great way to begin this process and the network that it is creating is increasingly powerful.

I think young people understand that changing accountability dynamics is a long-term process and realise they will have a role to play for a long time. Equally, they need support and for things to change now, so we constantly need to find a balance between long-term efforts and short-term impact. There are moments when building accountability can become more feasible – when dynamics change or political space opens up – and we need to be agile enough to help individuals take advantage of these moments. We've had fewer issues in this regard with the youth coming into the incubator than with donors who don't tend to have a long-term mindset. This has made it difficult to raise money for the incubator, as it doesn't always seem to fit in donors' timelines and results matrices.

Heather:

There are two groups of young people we can talk about: the ones who come to the incubator, and a second tier which is less involved with the work of the Lab. This less-engaged group are more often looking for the quick fix, because they have pressing needs. That is why we identified the need to work even further on the demand side, to change mindsets about how governance reform happens and understand what the entry points for ordinary citizens are, as there is a lot of scepticism from the general population.

Natalia:

Your research shows that some of the projects supported by the Lab have a greater reach with 'thin' impact, while others have limited reach and 'thick' impact. Based on this evidence, has the Lab reflected on what kinds of goals or messages are better suited to maximise the impact of both bigger- and smaller-reach initiatives?

Blair:

Our new strategy (Accountability Lab 2017) tries to reflect on this. Integrity Idol, for example, is one of our key ways of engaging in terms of 'thin impact'. The messages are broadly understandable, the tone is positive, which prevents political pushback, and it uses tools and language people are familiar with in their everyday lives.

The thicker engagement takes more time, and requires deeper amounts of trust. It needs more attention, financial capacity and human resources. One way we've been working in this respect is through the iCampus/OpenGov Hub, with the aim of creating a community in which people can engage, learn and collaborate. This is much more than a physical space; it is an environment and a community in which we can support these thicker types of engagement that can lead to much deeper change over time.

Heather:

The thinner approach does a lot to shift mindsets and get people engaged. However, there is not much scholarly evidence to show whether that makes an impact in the long term. We are trying to combine these approaches that engage a lot of people but may not have a big long-term impact

Impact is not just about attribution and to show our work to donors, but to reflect about system-level changes that the Lab can help to bring about.

with the deeper approaches that Blair is describing. We also work with key reformers in government and with the Open Government Partnership, for example. These can have a long-term impact and can shift policy over time, which is still difficult to quantify. We consider there is a real need for both, as expressed in the new strategy.

Natalia:

Your research points to areas in which Accountability Lab could improve its work, including developing themes, measuring impact and deepening the iterative work to create system-level change. Who do you think may be the Lab's main allies in this work?

Blair:

We are beginning to develop thematic incubators. So far we have worked with people who understand accountability broadly, which means that ideas coming through the programme have focused on accountability for everything from corruption to women's rights. Now we are developing an incubator that will focus very specifically on ideas for accountability around natural resource governance. This may build more coherence between the ideas and bring in a new set of partners, including government ministries (mining and energy, for example) and the Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. We can tap into the community that has been working on these issues previously to establish conversations and bring new ideas.

In terms of impact, accountability is not always easy to measure and causality is difficult to prove, but this is a critical piece of the puzzle. We have to learn how to work iteratively and adapt activities accordingly (Accountability Lab 2017). One thing we did recently, for example, was to hold Liberia's first 'failure fair' at iCampus to discuss what doesn't work in development and support the conversation about how failure can be used as a learning process.

We have also developed public calls to talk with community members about failure and adaptive learning. We think, as an organisation, that we understand learning as one of our key performance indicators. The aim is not to be successful as an organisation as much as to help to build the field, in the ways we can, to increase collective impact.

Heather:

One thing we've discussed is the need to have a formalised learning strategy. It is always very difficult for organisations in this field to show impact because it is so gradual and it is so difficult to identify attribution, as there are so many players and interventions. We aim not just to understand how the Lab activities are faring, but also, to show how the Lab and other actors' actions are contributing to a larger process of change. I think that's an important shift that this commitment to learning will help bring about. Impact is not just about attribution and to show our work to donors, but to reflect about system-level changes that the Lab can help to bring about.

Natalia:

One of your main insights suggests a focus on individuals rather than projects in order to build coalitions across sectors. Could you share more about the strengths and weaknesses you see in this strategy?

Blair:

Our new strategy (Accountability Lab 2017) develops the idea of focusing on accountability agents ("accountapreneurs"), not accountability actions or organisations per se, which is very different to traditional approaches in this field. We connect these individuals in ways that allow them to build coalitions for change, strengthening their collective identity. We know they will not stay in the same place throughout their careers; the idea is to make sure, as they transition across organisations, that they can collaborate in meaningful ways to build accountability. We feel it represents the core of what needs to happen if we are to shift accountability dynamics over time.

We are in a position to be more flexible than other organisations but this is an idea that is more difficult to 'sell' than projects with short-term outputs. If we can gather more feedback and tell more stories, we can begin to show how this approach leads to positive change over time.

Heather:

It is central to our idea that people move between different positions and sectors, from government to civil society, the media and the private sector. If we support the individuals as they move, they can influence the different organisations they are part of at different stages of their careers.

Engaging in practitioner research

Natalia:

How did you manage the demands of embedding practitioner research in a practice and advocacy organisation? Can you identify any ways that your practice changed as a result of what you learned?

Heather:

One of the difficulties was getting staff on board. Research tends to be removed from their daily work, so there is an effort to be made in helping them understand the value of the research so they can have a sense of ownership. One thing the Lab did that helped was an initial inception workshop that included the Accountability Lab Liberia staff to discuss why this was important and what was expected from them. Another thing we did was train the Lab's volunteers to carry out the data collection, which gave them a sense of ownership of the process.

Blair:

A Making All Voices Count grant was a very useful opportunity to introduce data collection and learning into everything we do. We trained the staff and volunteers on the data collection app, which we now use in all of our events. We worked on the kinds of questions that need to be asked to get useful feedback; and learned how to compare pre- and post-activity feedback so that the data produced is comparable.

More broadly, beyond just the tactics, we had a space to discuss the value of decision-making based on robust evidence. The process has also helped us build our networks through the data collection process, and reaching back to

communities to report our results and findings has helped strengthen those relationships.

Natalia:

What advice would you give to other organisations thinking about engaging in youth-centred accountability initiatives?

Blair:

We would highlight that this work needs to focus on individuals, that there needs to be an understanding of the political nature of the transparency and accountability process, and that the messages need to be as positive as possible. From an organisational perspective in Liberia, the right team is also critical. We have managed to bring in people with multidisciplinary backgrounds that can tap into youth networks and can relate messages to their peers. It is important to meet young people where they are rather than where we want them to be – working within the relevant cultural spaces.

Natalia:

At the end of your Making All Voices Count practitioner research process, can you reflect on how you see the future of Accountability Lab's alumni in the next decade?

Blair:

We hope the outlook and prospects are positive, even if moving slowly in the right direction. We expect the participants in our programmes to be better prepared, have more knowledge and better networks to think and work politically around

these issues. Some more than others – as in any group – will move more quickly. But it doesn't take a huge number of people to begin to change the way decisions are made in a country the size of Liberia. In the course of ten years we could train, network and resource 200 activists in civil society and another 50 or 100 government officials. If they all begin to get into positions of influence, they can meaningfully shift policy and make changes that could transform the way decisions are made. Already we are seeing some useful changes being made by the Integrity Idols, too, who are already in positions where their efforts can shift accountability dynamics.

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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. It focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

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Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's Research, Evidence and Learning component, managed by IDS, contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the fields of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A).

About Making All Voices Count Practice Papers

The Research, Evidence and Learning component has produced a series of practitioner research and learning grants to support a range of actors working on citizen voice, T&A and governance to carry out self-critical enquiry into their own experiences and contexts. The main output of each grant is what the practitioner learns and applies to their own practice. Practitioners can also decide to produce their own written outputs. The purpose of the practice papers, written on completion of each grant, is to capture the essence of that learning process through a reflective dialogue between programme staff and funded partners, to share with a wider audience of peer practitioners and policy-makers.

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About Accountability Lab

The Accountability Lab is building a new generation of active citizens and responsible leaders around the world. The Lab supports change-makers to develop and implement positive ideas for building integrity in their communities. By enabling people to generate the knowledge, skills and networks needed for accountability, this unleashes positive social and economic change.

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