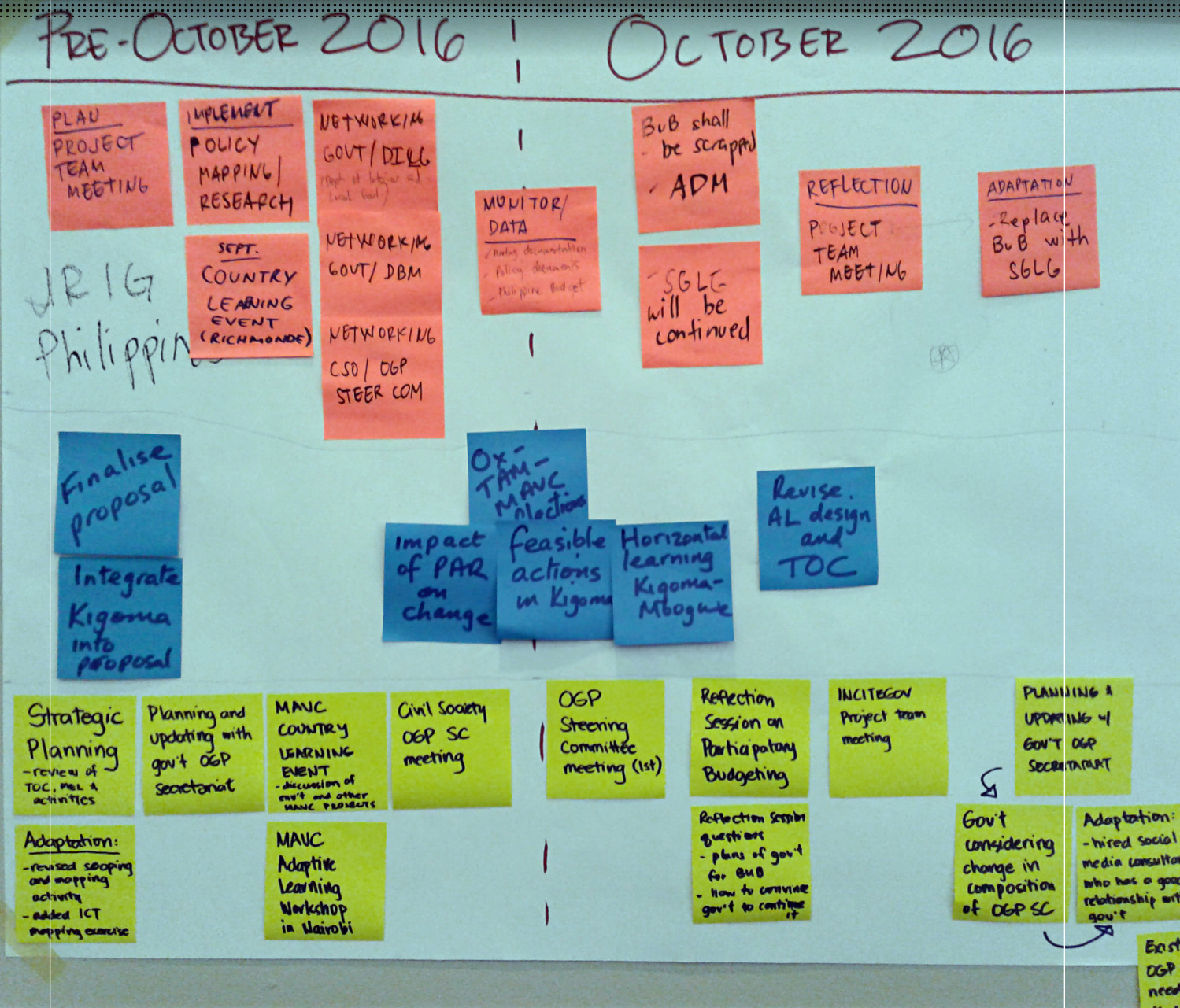


Learning to Make All Voices Count: lessons for OGP, donors, and practitioners



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Summary

This brief reviews the evidence from **Learning to Make All Voices Count** (L-MAVC), a programme funded by **Making All Voices Count**, and implemented in collaboration with **Global Integrity**. L-MAVC intended to support six **Making All Voices Count** grantees, working in five countries, in co-creating and applying a participatory, learning-centred, and adaptive approach to strengthening citizen engagement in governance processes in their contexts, including with respect to the **Open Government Partnership** (OGP).

Two sets of lessons emerge from the experience of L-MAVC. First, supporting citizen engagement and government accountability in subnational contexts, and localising OGP in ways that matter to citizens, is not straightforward. Doing so successfully entails engaging with, navigating and shaping political and power dynamics in those contexts, and iteratively adapting to emerging lessons and challenges. Second, the effectiveness of adaptive ways of working depends in part on the extent to which they offer opportunities for cross-context peer learning, support the regular collection and use of data, and are themselves adaptive.

These lessons have implications for the broader community of actors working to support governance reform, including OGP and its partners, donors and multilateral institutions, and practitioners and policy-makers. If these actors are to contribute more effectively to reforms that affect citizens' lives, substantial changes – with respect to the nature of support provided to domestic stakeholders, grant-making practices, and practitioner approaches – may be warranted.

Introduction

Background

An increasingly compelling body of evidence suggests that governance reform is inherently political and complex, and that reform efforts are most likely to be successful when:

- local stakeholders are at the forefront of defining governance challenges, developing and implementing solutions, and pursuing sustainable change; and
- those stakeholders have the flexibility to learn and adapt as they go, especially when working in complex political contexts (see, for example, Levy 2011; Andrews 2010; Grindle 2005; Halloran 2014; Ladner 2015; Derbyshire and Donovan 2016).

The Open Government Partnership (OGP), donors and multilaterals, and social accountability practitioners across the world are among various constituencies attempting to harness and actualise emerging insights about the nature of successful governance reform. But each of these groups faces challenges as they do so.

OGP, a multi-stakeholder governance initiative comprising 74 countries, is confronting two challenges in particular – first, ensuring that a higher proportion of ambitious commitments in OGP National Action Plans (NAPs) are effectively implemented, and second, making sure that commitments contribute to solving problems that citizens care about (Pradhan 2017).

Most **donors and multilaterals**, despite having expressed interest in, and support for, more adaptive programming, continue to apply traditional project management approaches to their governance work. These approaches prioritise accountability and compliance, and often de-emphasise real-time learning and adaptation (World Bank 2017; Derbyshire and Donovan 2016, e.g.).

In consequence, **practitioners** are often boxed in by donor requirements, without the flexibility to learn about, and adapt to, the complex political contexts in which they work (De Weijer and Hauck 2015).

How might these challenges be overcome? What would it mean, in practice, for domestic reformers to take a politically engaged, learning-focused, and adaptive approach to governance reform? How would external actors go about supporting such an approach? And how might adaptive programming complement existing OGP processes, contribute to efforts to close implementation gaps, and deliver reforms that affect citizens' lives?

The programme

The Learning to Make All Voices Count Initiative (L-MAVC), a programme funded by Making All Voices Count (MAVC) and implemented in collaboration with Global Integrity, attempted to explore and address these questions. Over 12 months, Global Integrity partnered with MAVC staff and six MAVC grantees in Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, Indonesia and the Philippines, to design and operationalise a participatory, learning-centred and adaptive programme management methodology that aimed to:

- help grantees strengthen citizen engagement with governance processes, and OGP, in their contexts; and
- generate evidence on how external actors – including OGP, donors and multilaterals, and practitioners – might accelerate the emergence of transformative governance reforms.

Global Integrity worked with each grantee, helping them to apply cycles of adaptive learning to their projects. Bilateral support was supplemented with quarterly reflective peer learning workshops that brought all grantees together in the same physical location.

L-MAVC generated a wealth of evidence on how to more effectively make progress towards open governance, on the value and limits of learning-centred, adaptive approaches, and on how such approaches might be supported in practice. The lessons from L-MAVC are particularly relevant for OGP, donors and multilaterals, and social accountability practitioners, and offer guidance to these constituencies as they try to strengthen their effectiveness, and contribute to sustainable, transformative, reforms.

Learning from the Evidence

The Open Government Partnership

Lessons from L-MAVC

Five lessons from L-MAVC, taken together, are particularly relevant for OGP and its partners:

Lesson 1.1: Effectively supporting citizen engagement with, and use of, OGP requires different approaches in different contexts.

Each L-MAVC grantee began the program aiming to strengthen citizen engagement in OGP, and make government more responsive to the challenges local citizens face. As grantees engaged with their contexts, worked with partners to better understand the problems they intended to tackle, and adapted to emerging lessons, challenges, and shocks, their strategies for pursuing their aims evolved substantially. To make OGP helpful to subnational reformers, grantees had to develop bespoke models for localising OGP in their particular contexts. Over time, grantees iteratively adjusted their localisation models, and their operationalisation, so that they fit the particular conditions of local contexts.

The performance of grantees' localisation models is a direct result of how well tailored they are to the context in which they were developed. For example, the Filipino models depend on the existence of a highly professionalised civil society and a highly institutionalised multi-stakeholder OGP process, among other factors. As such, they would likely have fit poorly in the districts in which our Tanzanian partners worked.

Indeed, the presence (or absence) of institutionalised multi-stakeholder OGP processes is especially important for understanding how localisation models emerged during grantee projects. The multi-stakeholder institutions governing OGP in the Philippines and Indonesia, and the interest of those institutions in deepening the reach and inclusiveness of OGP, including at the subnational level, were instrumental to grantees' development and operationalisation of localisation models in those contexts.

Lesson 1.2: Participatory adaptive learning can enable more effective pursuit of political transformation, especially in volatile and/or complex environments.

The experiences of L-MAVC grantees illustrate the importance of learning and adaptation in governance processes, including those associated with OGP. Structured, systematic processes of learning, reflection, and adaptation, using rigorously collected data on problems, politics, and progress towards outcomes, and incorporating beneficiary perspectives, strengthen the ability of pro-reform actors to respond to both unexpected changes and emerging lessons in complex environments.

Each grantee encountered contextual changes – from political transitions to environmental disasters to unexpected shifts in local power relationships – that required adaptations in thinking and programming. These adaptations were possible because of the structure of L-MAVC. Regularly gathering and reflecting on data, including with the participation of local partners, enabled grantees to quickly identify changes and lessons in the complex conditions in which they were working, and make strategic adjustments when necessary.

Lesson 1.3: Making the political personal is key to building resilience amid political transitions.

Many of the countries in which our partners work have recently experienced political transitions, which resulted in the emergence of increasingly populist, authoritarian-tinged politics. In many cases, these political transitions could have doomed grantee projects.

These developments required our partners to adjust how they engaged with government. By identifying key government stakeholders, mapping their incentives, and then leveraging coalitions to shape those incentives – by making the political personal, and tailoring political engagements to particular individuals and their individual circumstances – our colleagues were able to successfully adapt to and overcome potential challenges presented by transitions, and improve the scope and depth of subnational participation in open government processes, including OGP.

Lesson 1.4: To support progress towards more open governance at the subnational level, including through the OGP, tech platforms must be informed by and account for the challenges, needs, and interests of users working in local, political ecosystems.

Several of our partners in L-MAVC initially planned to use the power of civic technology – from cell phone apps to online dashboards to social media campaigns – to help beneficiaries learn about OGP, and support action to open governance. Over the 12 months in which we were working, however, grantees realised they needed to revisit their assumptions about the usefulness of tech in the contexts in which they were working.

Grantees found that off-the-shelf tech solutions, especially when designed in isolation from the highly specific, highly political contexts in which pro-reform actors work, were unlikely to help local users tackle concrete problems. In order for tech to be helpful, grantees needed to integrate it with a strong understanding of local context and the problems potential users faced. Grantee experiences therefore suggest that tech can indeed help solve a highly complex puzzle, but is rarely, if ever, the solution to governance challenges by itself.

Lesson 1.5: Structured, cross-context peer reflection and learning is key to supporting adaptation within specific contexts, and enabling projects to strengthen their effectiveness.

Global Integrity hosted four peer learning workshops over the course of L-MAVC, bringing together representatives of all grantee organisations in the same location.

The frank and honest exchanges that took place at these two- to four-day workshops contributed to the emergence of a small international learning community, which itself became a place for mutual support and dialogue about difficult challenges, and enabled constructive exchanges that furthered grantees' capacity to successfully overcome those challenges. The critical, but supportive, perspective offered by external voices – all of whom were applying the same adaptive approach – helped grantees identify gaps in their project logic, uncover new lessons, and discover potential adaptations that they could apply to their work on OGP.

Implications of L-MAVC, for OGP

OGP is developing various approaches to improving the implementation of NAP commitments, and making sure that those commitments contribute to solving problems that citizens care about. These approaches include a still-in-development menu of support options for country-level reformers, guidance for multi-stakeholder collaboration on OGP processes, and the recently expanded Subnational Pioneers Program. All of these are promising, and may help pro-reform actors to leverage OGP more effectively, and deliver changes that affect citizens' lives.

The lessons from L-MAVC indicate that the OGP Support unit, the OGP Steering Committee, and OGP partners could build on and strengthen these ongoing efforts in three ways:

- Firstly, expand the provision of systematic learning and adaptation support to local OGP champions

Participation and multi-stakeholder collaboration are at the heart of the OGP model. But the evidence from L-MAVC suggests that the limited range of individuals, organisations and agencies that participate in OGP may limit the initiative's reach and impact. All L-MAVC grantees confronted this dilemma in their work and, through a structured process of iterative learning and adaptation, figured out how to support subnational citizen engagement with OGP.

The experience of L-MAVC grantees suggests that OGP and its partners can do more to help local champions support citizen engagement and work more effectively in their own contexts. Data-driven, citizen-centred, reflective and adaptive learning support – focused on supporting the development and implementation of specific action plan commitments – would help OGP champions to shape and more effectively engage with power and political dynamics, respond to unexpected changes in contextual conditions, and incorporate emerging lessons into their ways of working. The OGP Support Unit and its partners might benefit from further exploring how to help subnational pioneers, especially in civil society, undertake participatory learning journeys.

- Secondly, provide more, and deeper, opportunities for structured comparative peer learning

The evidence from L-MAVC indicates that comparative peer learning can help local actors uncover blind spots, develop new tactics, and improve their effectiveness in their own contexts. Structured, comparative exchanges that build on

the learning journeys described above would enhance the peer learning support that OGP already provides to its partners. Bringing together reformers that are leveraging OGP to tackle similar issues, but applying different strategies, and working in different contexts, would provide opportunities for comparing experiences, sharing lessons, troubleshooting challenges, and generating insights.

- Thirdly, OGP and partners might do well to advocate even more for the development of country-level OGP multi-stakeholder forums, and for the inclusion of subnational commitments in national action plans

The experience of L-MAVC suggests that OGP and its partners might strengthen the platform's effectiveness if they build on existing efforts to support multi-stakeholder collaboration, and do even more to advocate for joint ownership of national level OGP processes. This might mean more strongly encouraging and / or supporting the incorporation of multi-stakeholder forums – featuring government and non-governmental representatives – to guide the development and implementation of national action plans. Such forums can, as demonstrated by those in the Philippines and Indonesia (and many other OGP countries), provide a wedge for strengthening subnational engagement in OGP.

Advocacy for these kinds of forums should, however, be undertaken very cautiously, and done in ways that fit with the needs and interests of OGP reformers working in political contexts. Externally driven advocacy for joint ownership could, if done without appropriate sensitivity to local conditions, and without local ownership, result in the emergence of formal institutions that mimic the features of multi-stakeholder forums in other contexts, rather than in the development of institutions that actually support effective consultation and collaboration at country level (Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2010).

Partners working in countries that already have institutionalised OGP processes might also do well to encourage the inclusion of subnational commitments in national action plans. Doing so may in some cases, as shown by the experience of L-MAVC grantees in Indonesia and the Philippines, open up space for broadening and deepening the reach and relevance of reforms linked to OGP.

Future research examining the links between national OGP processes and subnational OGP work might also be worth considering. This kind of

research – which the Support Unit might support or contribute to – could shed additional light on whether and how multilevel OGP processes can more effectively combine to support transformative reform, and inform efforts to strengthen multi-stakeholder forums.

Donors and multilaterals

Lessons from L-MAVC

Three lessons from L-MAVC are especially relevant for donors and multilaterals that are considering whether and how to integrate adaptive programming:

Lesson 2.1: Traditional donor procedures can affect partners' ability to learn and adapt, even, or especially, in the context of adaptive programming.

L-MAVC was, from the start, an innovative programme, explicitly set up to help grantees learn and adapt as they supported citizen engagement with OGP. However, and despite its intent, L-MAVC suffered from several administrative challenges, from high staff turnover at MAVC and delays in the disbursement of funds to grantees, to rigid project timelines (which were in large part a result of the impending closure of Making All Voices Count). These challenges meant that, in some cases, grantees' efforts to learn and adapt were delayed as they waited for funding tranches and / or administrative approvals from MAVC. To overcome these issues, grantees took advantage of their good relationships with internal MAVC champions – especially country engagement developers – and Global Integrity. In mobilising the support of these partners, grantees were able to navigate the constraints the MAVC bureaucracy sometimes imposed, and successfully implement their projects.

Lesson 2.2: Data – on problems, politics, and progress towards outcomes – is the fuel that powers reflective learning, adaptation, and effectiveness.

The experience of L-MAVC is a testament to the importance of regularly collecting and reflecting on data in adaptive processes. Time invested in gathering and reflecting on data on three particular issues – problems, politics, and progress towards outcomes – is time well spent, especially when facing challenges that are fundamentally political in nature. By iteratively

generating rich, qualitative information on their contexts – often in collaboration with local partners – through problem analyses, stakeholder and power-mapping exercises, and assessments of progress towards their desired outcomes, grantees were able to regularly interrogate their assumptions, identify emerging challenges and lessons, and make strategic adjustments throughout L-MAVC.

Lesson 2.3: Support for adaptive processes must itself be adaptive, and responsive to the needs and capacities of those putting learning and adaptation into practice.

At the start of L-MAVC, Global Integrity, MAVC, and the L-MAVC grantees co-created: a common template that would guide grantees' application of the adaptive learning methodology at country level; a standardised management process for submission of progress reports and financial documents; and a general schedule for subsequent learning workshops.

As we put these elements in place, we gradually realised that changes were needed. So we adapted, and continued doing so over the life of the programme. Grantees reported that these adaptations helped them to be more effective. The experience of L-MAVC therefore suggests that modalities of support that are meant to encourage learning and adaptation among country level partners can, and do, benefit from the application of data-driven, participatory learning, reflection, and adaptation to their own ways of working.

Implications of L-MAVC for donors and multilaterals

The evidence from L-MAVC suggests that donors and multilaterals would do well to accommodate more adaptive programming, with a view towards enabling the local learning and action that can improve the effectiveness of governance projects and programmes.

To do this more intentionally and systematically could mean:

- emphasising the 'L' (learning) in monitoring, evaluation, and learning

The vast majority of grants require recipients to develop monitoring and evaluation plans that focus on whether planned outputs and predefined targets were achieved. Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems of this sort set aside questions about whether 'impact' is a useful concept in complex, dynamic systems – in which causality is rarely linear, and never simple.

Traditional MEL plans tend to subordinate learning. If captured at all, learning tends to occur at the end of projects and programmes, when it's too late to use.

With the insights described above, donors might consider de-emphasising the 'E' in MEL, and instead encourage grantees to focus on, and rigorously document, the 'L'. A learning-focused MEL system would help grantees gather information on the context in which they're working, regularly assess power and political dynamics, and explore and revise their assumptions about how change happens. It would focus on outcomes, not outputs, and provide space for regular, data-driven, and participatory reflection, so that grantees figure out, as they go, what mix of strategies and activities are likely to support progress towards those outcomes. Grantees could then make strategic adjustments throughout a project and / or programme.

Further, and as part of emphasising the 'L', donors might consider ways of actively encouraging implementers to learn about, adapt, and apply perspectives generated in other contexts to their own systems, while also supporting the generation and synthesis of collective insights to inform the field, along with evidence on whether and how donor-financed programmes contribute to change in complex contexts. This might help donors, over time, adapt their funding strategies for maximum impact.

- operationalising flexibility in projects and funding models, including through building trust
- More flexible reporting and financial procedures would free grantees from onerous compliance requirements, and give them extra latitude to focus more of their scarce resources on identifying and responding to emergent features of their contexts. Stronger relationships, more regular check-ins, and more transparency on both sides would enable programme officers and grantees to work together to reflect, capture lessons, and adapt and justify changes to budgets and project plans as positive developments, when warranted, rather than as deviations or exceptions.
- reducing the prevalence of technical Requests for Proposals that limit local ownership and restrict space for learning and adaptation
- Requests for proposals (RFPs) – especially those developed by large institutional donors – often focus on solving problems that may be very different from the challenges local stakeholders

actually face in a given context, or that are framed in ways that don't align with local priorities. Applications and programmes that respond to those RFPs thus end up trying to address the issues donors have identified as important. This limits the ability of successful applicants to meaningfully address the real issues that affect citizens' lives.

Donors might therefore consider reducing or doing away with detailed RFPs. Instead, they could work with local stakeholders, helping them to submit proposals in which they describe processes for identifying, learning about, and solving local problems, including in partnership with intended beneficiaries. The L-MAVC application process, while imperfect, followed this general approach, with encouraging results.

Practitioners

Lessons from L-MAVC

Practitioners – northern and southern, INGOs and domestic CSOs – seeking to support governance reform amid complexity all too often find themselves in an in-between position of being deeply connected to the local contexts in which they work, fully mindful of and sympathetic to the realities on the ground, while simultaneously tasked with implementing systems and approaches that de-prioritise local needs and local problems. Practitioners are unlikely to find lessons 1.2 – 1.5 especially surprising. But systematically applying these lessons could help accountability practitioners work more effectively in complex contexts.

Implications of L-MAVC, for practitioners

Applying these lessons to practice would mean that practitioners:

- listen

Make sure that governance work is informed by, and done in partnership with, citizens and organisations living and working in the targeted context. The experiences from L-MAVC demonstrated repeatedly that local stakeholders

have the best perspective on which problems need solving, the relevant political dynamics, and whether and how efforts are contributing to desired outcomes. For change to be sustainable in the long term, the perspectives and values of those working at the grassroots need to be at the heart of reform processes.

- support local participation

Ensure that projects and programmes actively build in space for participation by the stakeholders they aim to support. The evidence from L-MAVC suggests that participation by local stakeholders can enable productive learning and adaptation that otherwise might not occur. Take advantage of opportunities for cross-context peer learning, should they exist. Pursue modes of development programming that encourage participatory monitoring and learning, and allow for strategic adaptation at regular intervals throughout a project or programme cycle.

- hold donors accountable

Try to make sure that reality, in all its messy complexity, is presented to donors. Mistakes are going to happen. So are failures. But documenting the full gamut of on-the-ground experiences, and carefully explaining adaptations made in response to emerging challenges, will help donors better understand – and communicate to the broader public, from taxpayers to policy-makers – the complex conditions in which reform efforts take place. More realistic, data-driven accountability may help donors and other external actors reshape their own accountability incentives, and enable them to better ensure that local change agents are at the forefront of efforts to open governance.

In the long term, applying the lessons described in this brief could help strengthen the impact and effectiveness of OGP, donors and multilaterals, and practitioners. Changes in line with the insights from L-MAVC could reshape the governance sector and development more broadly, unleashing domestic stakeholders to learn and adapt their way to sustainable, transformative reforms that fit in their contexts.

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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 field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A).

About Global Integrity

Global Integrity champions transparent and accountable governance around the world by producing innovative research and taking action to inform, connect, and empower civic, private, and public reformers seeking more open societies. Undergirding our work is the knowledge that governance reform is inherently political and complex, and that there are thus few, if any, cookie cutter solutions to governance-related challenges. As such, we acknowledge that any efforts to drive progress towards more open, accountable and effective governance must be led by local stakeholders, navigating and shaping the political dynamics in their own particular contexts.

We support local stakeholders, including both government and civil society, with our assistance in putting adaptive learning – a structured, data-driven, problem-focused and iterative approach to learning by doing, which engages with local political realities while drawing on experiences from elsewhere – at the heart of their efforts to design and implement effective governance reforms. This helps reformers close the gaps between policy commitments and implementation and contributes to better governance and development outcomes. Further, we seek to support and enhance the effectiveness of other key players in the governance arena by sharing the insights generated from our innovative and exploratory work with local partners.

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