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Addressing failure in ICT-enabled 'citizen voice – government responsiveness' interventions: unpacking core assumptions and essential components

Vanessa Herringshaw

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About the author

Vanessa Herringshaw is former Director of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, Director of Advocacy and Capacity Building for the Natural Resources Governance Initiative, and Head of Economic Policy for Save the Children UK. Now a freelance consultant, she can be contacted at ness.herringshaw@gmail.com.

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Summary

This programme learning report presents and discusses findings from Making All Voices Count, a grant-making programme that has supported tech for accountable governance initiatives and research. It focuses on ICT-enabled 'citizen voice-government responsiveness' interventions, especially feedback platforms in the global South.

Such interventions are premised on a core idea: that by better channelling inputs from citizens to government (e.g. feedback, needs, ideas, preferences), such ICT-enabled 'citizen voice' will generate or strengthen constructive and practical reactions from government ('response'), usually in ongoing ways ('responsiveness').

However, Making All Voices Count highlights that many such interventions do not deliver on such expectations. In analysing why, this paper draws on three comparative studies of a range of citizen voice-government responsiveness interventions from the MAVC portfolio (Fox and Peixoto 2016; Hrynick and Waldman 2017; Welle, Williams and Pearce 2016). All three clarify the need to unpack what might seem like very basic assumptions and the core components essential to their success.

In particular, such voice-enhancing interventions are often designed on the assumption that enhancing voice will increase government willingness to respond to citizens. But these studies indicate that usually this does not appear to happen through ICT-enabled feedback platforms. When government willingness is already there, ICT-enabled voice can help build capacity to respond. But generally, unless pre-existing government commitment to respond is in place, voice through the platforms will not create it, and response rates will remain low. This is a serious challenge to the theories of change of many such initiatives, whether stated or not.

To assist in planning effective future interventions – or determining why different interventions are more or less successful – the paper unpacks core components that need equal and careful attention. It highlights the need to distinguish between 'individual citizen' and 'collective civic' voice; to unpack the 'black box' of different entities and actors within government; to distinguish between the willingness versus the capacity of all the key actors, (of citizens and government at a minimum, and often also intermediaries and donors); to address how these will fluctuate over time. It presents a summary table of core components to assist with such planning and analysis.

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We need to understand why such voice interventions often do not deliver

on expectations, and to explore what needs to be done differently.

About this programme learning report

Making All Voices Count has been a grant-making programme supporting tech for accountable governance initiatives, which in this paper are defined as "projects, programmes and campaigns which use information and communications technologies (ICTs) in initiatives intended to increase transparency and improve government accountability to citizens" (Brock, Shutt and Ashlin 2016: 4). Making All Voices Count also supported research about what works in accountable governance, and why.

This paper's author, Vanessa Herringshaw, was invited by Making All Voices Count to review and reflect on the programme's research findings on government responsiveness in tech for accountable governance initiatives. This programme learning report, one of three reflective pieces she has written,[1] presents and discusses findings from the programme's research publications, as well as from other governance literature, using them to illuminate assumptions about citizen voice and government responsiveness, and suggest approaches to inform and improve future practice.

Introduction

Within the governance arena, many ICT-enabled interventions focus on raising citizens' voices with government. They aim to make it easier for citizens to feed in their views, needs, ideas or complaints by giving them the digital means to do so. And they try to help governments to hear those voices, for example by feeding them to relevant departments, or by aggregating and visualising what they are saying.

One assumption underlying these approaches is that the right to voice is important in and of itself. But equally important is a different core assumption – that governments will respond to that voice; that input from citizens ('voice') will generate constructive and practical reactions from government ('response'), usually in ongoing ways ('responsiveness').

But increasing evidence shows that many such citizen voice interventions do not bring results for citizens. This has broader implications beyond the waste of resources on specific projects. Where citizens do engage but results are not forthcoming, it may also result in citizen cynicism and mistrust of both

government and NGO intermediaries – and make future engagement more challenging.

We need to understand why such voice interventions often do not deliver on expectations, and to explore what needs to be done differently. This paper centres on an area of focus that has enjoyed some of the deepest conceptual and empirical comparative analysis to date: ICT-enabled voice and feedback platforms in the global South that aim to encourage and project citizen voice to government-related service providers with the goal of improving service delivery.

In particular, it draws on three significant comparative studies; one analysed seven such projects in the rural water supply sector (Welle *et al.* 2016), one focused on seven interventions in the health sector (Hrynick and Waldman 2017) and one compared 23 feedback platforms across a range of sectors (Peixoto and Fox 2016).

The findings of all three papers point to two major conclusions.

The first is that for 'voice and feedback' to produce

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1 See Herringshaw (forthcoming) and 'Are you doing what's needed to get the state to respond to its citizens? Or are you part of the problem?'

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results for citizens, government willingness is one of the most important factors. Stated in this way, this might seem obvious. But 'voice- enhancing' interventions are often designed on the (often unstated) assumption that 'voice' will *generate* government motivation to act. But these three studies indicate that usually this does not appear to happen through ICT-enabled feedback platforms. When government willingness is already there, ICT-enabled voice can help build capacity to respond. But generally, unless that pre-existing government commitment to respond is already there, voice through the platforms will not create this willingness, and therefore will not work in terms of actually bringing responses for citizens. This finding is a serious challenge to the theories of change of many such initiatives.

This points to the second conclusion - the need for us to unpack all the basic assumptions and core underlying components needed for citizen voice to result in increased government responsiveness. Findings indicate that those interventions that do not do this, or over-emphasise some and neglect others, are vulnerable to failure.

This paper aims to help identify these core underlying components essential to the success of citizen voice–government responsiveness interventions.

It should be noted that this paper does not focus on key aspects of the technologies used for these ICT-enabled interventions. This is for two reasons. Firstly, this has already been addressed by other Making All Voices Count publications (e.g. de Lanerolle, Kinney and Walker 2016; Wilson and de Lanerolle 2016) and outputs.[2] Secondly, this is a deliberate attempt to focus attention on underlying strategic issues and components that need deep consideration whatever technology is employed.

Unpacking assumptions about how 'citizen voice' will generate 'government responsiveness'

A basic model can be used to describe many ICT-enabled 'voice and feedback' interventions: if the technology succeeds in encouraging and projecting voice to government, government will respond.

But there are many components and causal assumptions packed inside this apparently simple model. The findings from the three studies show that to successfully plan effective future interventions, and / or to determine why different interventions are more or less successful, it is necessary to separate and assess each.

Separating voice, processing and response and the causal links between them

The first level of unpacking required is to separate:

- *citizen voice* – input and feedback on service success and failures, needs, ideas and complaints

- *government processing* of the inputs they receive – analysis and channelling of the input, and preparation for response

- *government response / responsiveness* – delivery of initial and ongoing response to the specific inputs.

Again, it might seem obvious written in this way that all these components need equal and careful attention since all are needed for voice to result in response. This is especially so at the planning stage of any intervention – when analysing how, and the extent to which, each of these components can realistically be expected to function individually, and to connect effectively to the others.

But in reality, there has typically been much more focus on generating voice than on processing and response. This may also be reflected in, or driven by, performance measures that focus on citizen uptake alone. The comparative studies showed empirically that different projects were more or less successful in these different components, and that success in one did not automatically generate success in another. Overall, Welle *et al.* summarise a vital finding: "The focus on the ICT-based reporting side did not manage to overcome the lack of responsiveness from the side of the service provider or government" (2016: 50–51).

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*Voice, processing and response are all necessary for voice and feedback
interventions to actually lead to government response, and that focus
and pre-analysis needs to be equally on the conditions for government
processing and responsiveness as on those for citizen voice.*

This highlights that all these components are necessary for voice and feedback interventions to actually lead to government response, and that focus and pre-analysis needs to be equally on the conditions for government processing and responsiveness as on those for citizen voice.

Thinking about individual versus collective voice and responsiveness, among citizens and within government

Citizens: individual citizen voice vs collective civic voice and action

Peixoto and Fox (2016) draw attention to the differences between voice and responsiveness interventions that adopt individual versus collective approaches in the ways that citizen inputs are sourced, analysed and responded to.

In purely individual approaches, citizens give their inputs separately, in isolation from other people, usually through a digital interface. The government processing and response systems deal with each issue individually. If there are progress reports, these are to the individual, atomised citizen on the status of their issue only. Such a system relies largely on 'upward' or 'internal' accountability, i.e. on senior government staff overseeing effective response to inputs.

In collective approaches, individual citizen inputs might be aggregated to give a broader picture and identify wider trends and gaps. Spaces and processes may be created to facilitate joint input from citizens, and / or for government to co-create solutions and responses with citizens – both may combine on- and offline mechanisms. Reports on government responsiveness to inputs may also be aggregated and analysed to identify trends in who is responded to, and who is not, and where the overall gaps remain. The publishing of inputs, processes and responses creates the possibility of 'downward' or 'public' accountability of government to citizens.

The empirical findings of Peixoto and Fox (2016)

on the impacts of aggregation, publishing of data on inputs and responses, and combining of on- and offline processes are all mixed in terms of generating government responsiveness. None alone is sufficient to guarantee government responsiveness in contexts where those with power within the government are uncommitted, but they are still necessary for downward accountability to citizens to even be a possibility. Much seems to rely on the capacity of intermediary organisations to act as social mobilisers, both online and offline. Hrynick and Waldman's study (2017) also seems to suggest that offline collective mobilisation is crucial in developing the commitment of both government and citizens before interventions begin. And once established, offline collective mechanisms that continue to build relationships and trust between citizens, intermediaries and government seem vital as interventions progress, when inevitably difficult failure reports from citizens and other unexpected political developments can threaten to derail initiatives.

Government: opening the black box and exploring 'champions' and 'bureaucraft'

No government is a monolith. Yet, often interventions do not take the time to 'open the black box' and to explore the dynamic between individuals and groups within it, acting instead as if government is a single entity and its reactions to citizen inputs are predictable in linear ways. Clearly this is not so. Rather, 'government' is a complex collection of individuals and groups, each motivated and constrained by varying and complex arrays of formal and informal norms, incentives and relationships. And of course these actors, and the forces operating on them, constantly change over time.

Past authors have explored issues like the impacts of variations in the loyalties of senior bureaucrats (de Graaf 2010) and how bureaucrats listen (Stivers 1994). Yet unpacking how the behaviour of government actors affects accountability initiatives remains an under-explored area. Research by Joshi and McCluskey (forthcoming) highlights some of the key questions and concerns to be explored here, and what key government champions need to navigate

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the complex waters of government processes using their 'bureaucraft'. Practically, voice–responsiveness interventions demand keen intelligence on the range of key government actors (both individuals and groups) essential to their success, and should continue investing in tracking this as it inevitably evolves over time.

Separating willingness from capacity among key actors

To act, an individual, group or organisation must have both the *willingness* (i.e. the commitment and motivation / belief it is worth doing so) and the *capacity* to do so (i.e. the information, resources, authority, systems and accepted norms of practice that enable action). The studies suggest it is important to distinguish and examine both features for all key actors involved in voice-responsiveness interventions.[3]

Government willingness vs. government capacity to respond

We noted in the Introduction that all three comparative studies found that a focus on government willingness to respond is absolutely key. Peixoto and Fox (2016) emphasise that government willingness is a necessary prerequisite for responsiveness to happen: "The empirical evidence available so far … indicates that service delivery user feedback has so far been most relevant where it increases the *capacity* of policymakers and senior managers to respond. It appears that dedicated ICT-enabled voice platforms – with a few exceptions – have yet to increase their *willingness*. Where senior managers are already committed to learning from feedback and using it to bolster their capacity to get agencies to respond, ICT platforms can make a big difference. In that sense, ICT can make a technical contribution to a policy problem that to some degree has already been addressed" (2016: 36).

This is perhaps the most surprising, key and uncomfortable finding. Often, such voice-enhancing interventions are designed in the belief that voice and feedback will increase government motivation to act. But these studies indicate that usually this does not appear to work through ICT-enabled feedback platforms. Generally, unless that pre-existing government commitment to respond is already there, voice through the platforms will not create this willingness, and therefore will not work in terms of actually bringing responses for citizens.

Other findings emphasise two related points. Firstly, it is necessary to go beyond the rhetoric of willingness to look for concrete commitments, especially the allocation and spending of resources, and the integration of the platforms into existing formal systems. This willingness is usually reflected in the direct involvement or leadership of key government actors in the more successful initiatives. Peixoto and Fox (2016) state that "the findings suggest multiple pathways to institutional responsiveness … If one factor does stand out, however, it is government involvement." They go on to say: "in *all* the cases of high institutional responsiveness, the government is either leading the process or plays the role of a partner" (2016:35).

Secondly, government willingness is vulnerable to change over time as political and management leaders come and go. Mitigating such predictable and unpredictable changes requires investment in developing cross group / party and wider support wherever feasible. This takes time and resources.

Government capacity and institutional design

Findings show that though government willingness and commitment is a necessity, it is not a guarantee of success; reporting, processing and response systems still need careful institutional design. In particular, they appear to work best when the information they generate is carefully integrated into formal, and ideally already existing, government systems, and further incentivises action. Examples included:

- channelling information into those parts of government with the mandate (and resources) to respond
- linking reporting to government budget processes and cycles
- integration into existing monitoring and response systems – mixing citizen reporting with government monitoring, including checking on resolution rates
- integration into reward and sanction for government actors and contractors
- backing by formal laws and policies – to reduce the chances of reversal over time.

Ultimately, the government must have the capacity and resource allocation necessary to be able to respond if voice platforms are to produce impact for

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3 For a framework for more in-depth exploration of the aims and visions of success for voice–responsiveness interventions, stated and unstated, see Herringshaw (2017).

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In looking at the social design of ICT reporting systems, it is necessary to look at both the capacity and willlingness of citizens to voice their views.

citizens. As Welle *et al.* eloquently state, "Putting the user's reporting preferences at the centre of the ICT design may be missing the point unless the wider design supports a more responsive service delivery model" (2016: 15).

Citizen and civic voice: willingness and capacity

The framing that separates *willingness* and *capacity* was suggested by Peixoto and Fox (2016) but only with regard to explaining varying levels of government responsiveness. However, looking at the findings of Welle *et al.* (2016) and Hrynick and Waldman (2017) suggests that this distinction may also be useful in looking at why citizens do or do not use ICT voice platforms. In looking at the 'social design' of ICT reporting systems (i.e. their consideration of social context), it is necessary to look at both:

- *citizens' capacity* to voice their views: issues like access to and control over mobile devices (especially for women), connectivity, literacy and numeracy, digital literacy, time demands and costs of messaging

- *citizens' willingness* to voice their views: issues like worries over being identified when reporting service failure, low levels of trust, low expectations of response, prevailing apathy, preference for existing relationship-based reporting processes and power imbalances

between individual users and user committees.

Welle *et al.* conclude that in contexts where the challenges listed above that affect willingness to report are acute, then "holding service providers or government to account via failure reports may not be appropriate in such contexts; instead of being transformative … (they) … may ultimately be counter-productive" (2016: 46).

Intermediaries and donors: willingness and capacity

Building on the points above, Hrynick and Waldman (2017) find that when intermediary organisations are attempting to introduce ICT-enabled voice platforms, those with long-term, established relationships with the different parties on the ground have a higher chance of success. But even then, this only works if the structure and duration of the intervention process allows them to invest in understanding, building and maintaining offline relationships and trust with all the core actors and the flexibility to navigate and re-focus as learning happens and dynamics change. This depends on the willingness and capacity of the intermediaries to work this way. Where a donor is funding the process, this is turn will often depend on their willingness and capacity to fund this way. If such funding and ways of working are not feasible, ultimate failure seems much more likely, either early on, or over time as the political context inevitably evolves.

Checklist of core components and key questions for investigation within each

Table 1 is a summary of the core components discussed that are needed for voice–responsiveness interventions to result in government responsiveness to citizen inputs, with sub-questions to support investigation and planning at the start of interventions, and / or evaluations of progress with implementation.

Table 1 Checklist of core components for voice-responsiveness interventions

	Citizen voice and civic action	Government action	
	Inputs	Processing	Response / responsiveness
Performance	**Scale of inputs:** The extent to which citizens use the intervention mechanism to express themselves.	**Scale of throughput:** The extent to which citizen inputs actually go in the right form to the right parts of government with the authority, systems, resources and incentives to respond.	**Scale of response:** The extent to which government responds in ways that address the issues raised by citizens. **Scale of responsiveness:** The extent to which they maintain this consistently over time.
	Additionality: The extent to which extra voice is raised compared to existing mechanisms - is it adding to, substituting for, or crowding out, existing mechanisms?	**Additionality:** The extent to which the speed and efficiency of processing is improved.	**Additionality:** The extent to which the government responds to citizen issues more, and in more appropriate ways, than it did before the new interventions.
	Inclusion: The extent to which the new mechanisms reduce or widen exclusion – who uses them and who is left out?	**Inclusion:** The extent to which all inputs are processed.	**Inclusion:** The extent to which government promotes inputs from all citizens and responds to all voices, including those of the most marginalised.
	Content: The extent to which citizens can use the new mechanisms to raise the issues of primary concern to them.	**Content:** The extent to which the process can assist government in identifying issues of primary concern to its citizens.	**Content:** The extent to which government uses the new mechanisms to respond to the issues of primary concern to its citizens, shifting its own agenda as needed.
Structure	**Individual voice:** The extent to which on- and offline spaces are structured to allow individual inputs. **Collective civic action:** The extent to which on- and offline processes mobilise collective inputs and / or foster collective action, and / or foster co-response with government.	**Upward accountability within government mechanisms:** The extent to which internal monitoring, sanction and reward systems foster consistent responsiveness to citizen inputs. **Downward, public accountability:** The extent to which the aggregation and publishing of information on inputs, processing and responses leads to external monitoring, sanction and reward systems that foster consistent responsiveness to citizen inputs.	
Foundations and design	**Willingness to give inputs:** The extent to which citizens are sufficiently motivated to overcome any barriers to giving input, e.g. levels of trust and fear or repercussions, expectation of response, levels of apathy, preference for existing relationship-based input processes, power imbalances with gate keepers etc.	**Willingness to respond:** *Current leadership and champions* The extent to which those with the power needed to bring change express their commitment and use their power consistently to support progress over time. *Resource commitment* The extent to which available resources are committed to essential processes from internal budgets. Cross-group support: The extent to which support is embedded in different groups and at different levels, in ways that allow initiatives to survive changes in leadership and / or staffing.	
	Capacity to give inputs: The extent to which citizens have what they need to give inputs, e.g. information, awareness, access, connectivity, skills (literacy, numeracy, digital), time, mobility, resources.	**Capacity to respond:** *Design* The extent to which design and systems are in place with the potential to enable citizen inputs to go in the right form to the right parts of government with the authority, systems, resources and incentives to respond. *Embeddedness* The extent to which processing and response systems are integrated into formal systems including planning and budget cycles, and legal frameworks.	
Enablers	**Intermediaries and funders** **Willingness and capacity:** The extent to which there are intermediaries with the long-term relationships and trust with key actors needed to help bring them together, and to navigate inevitable phases of challenges and transitions.		

The idea that the use of ICT-enabled platforms can transcend the need for such government willingness, or routinely produce it where it is lacking, is squarely challenged by the careful findings of the three studies cited here.

Conclusions and recommendations

One of the key finding of the studies, that government willingness (or 'political will') is essential to bringing change where government responsiveness is needed, is hardly new. Much has been written on this outside the ICT-for-governance /accountability / rights fields (see, for example, Blair 2011, Marquette and Pfeiffer 2009, Malena 2009, and Brinkerhoff 2000). But somehow, this learning seems to have been put to the side in designing many ICT-enabled voice and feedback platforms. The idea that the use of ICT-enabled platforms can transcend the need for such government willingness, or routinely produce it where it is lacking, is squarely challenged by the careful findings of the three studies cited here.

Other findings point to the need to carefully separate and unpack the willingness and capacity, not just of governments, but also of citizens (to act alone and collectively), intermediaries and donors. Acting on these findings would require those seeking to design, implement or fund voice–responsiveness mechanisms to:

1. Ensure adequate understanding and building of levels of government willingness before doing anything else

- Too often the focus of voice–responsiveness interventions is actually on citizen voice alone, or government rhetoric of commitment is taken at face value in the hope that citizen voice will nudge it into more action. The evidence shows that, on the contrary, feedback platforms alone will rarely create this willingness, and therefore will rarely generate responsiveness unless this government willingness is already, and genuinely, there.

- Understanding which government actors are key and their varying levels of willingness needs strong investment of time, money and skills before planning starts on any ICT-voice platform.

- Building government willingness will usually take long-term, multifaceted and flexible approaches that build relationships of both pressure and trust between citizens, intermediaries and governments.

2. Take enough time to understand both citizen willingness and citizen capacity to voice their inputs, individually and collectively

- Once it has been established that there is government willingness to respond to voice, then is the time to really analyse and understand the willingness and capacity of citizens to give their individual inputs, and / or to speak and act collectively.

- Even if the government is willing, if there are significant citizen issues of fear, lack of trust or preferences for non-digital ways of giving inputs, these need to be overcome, where feasible, before any ICT-enabled platform proceeds. If this is not possible, a voice / feedback platform will be inappropriate.

3. Address the likelihood that government willingness will fluctuate over time

- Even successful platforms can flounder if government willingness drops. Intermediaries must try to ensure as broad a base of multi-party, bureaucratic and wider support as they can from the start, supported by funding that understands the need to invest in such processes as much as tools.

In summary, in terms of government willingness to be responsive to citizen voice, it is necessary to invest in really understanding that willingness before design begins, to invest in creating it where it does not exist, and maintaining it during implementation where it does.

Finally, this paper has focused on ICT-enabled voice and feedback platforms to improve service delivery. However, it is likely that the analysis, findings and recommendations may also be applied usefully to other interventions that aim to strengthen the flow of citizen voice into government and to improve government responsiveness. For example, the checklist of core components (p. 9) may provide practical guidance during the planning and evaluation of participatory budget, policy and strategy-making processes.

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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.

Making All Voices Count is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Omidyar Network, and is implemented by a consortium consisting of Hivos, IDS and Ushahidi.

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).

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