Increasing citizen voice and government responsiveness: what does success really look like, and who decides?

Vanessa Herringshaw

PROGRAMME LEARNING REPORT

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Acknowledgements

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Summary

Narratives in the field of information and communications technology (ICT) for governance are full of claims, of either enormous success or almost none. But understanding 'success' and 'failure' depends on how these are framed. Research supported by Making All Voices Count suggests that different actors can seek very different goals from the same ICT-enabled interventions – some stated, some not.

This programme learning report proposes two important dimensions for framing variations in visions of success for ICT-enabled governance interventions: (1) the kind of change in governance systems sought ('functional', 'instrumental', 'transformative' and 'no change'); and (2) the vision of the ideal citizen–state relationship. It applies this framing to three areas where ICTs are being used, at least on paper, to encourage and channel citizen voice into governance processes, and to improve government responsiveness in return: participatory policy- and strategy-making; participatory budgeting; and citizen feedback to improve service delivery.

In terms of the kind of change in governance systems sought, much of the rhetoric touts the use of ICTs as inherently 'transformative'. However, findings suggest that it has mostly been deployed in 'functional', 'instrumental' and 'no change' ways. That said, the possibility of ICT-enabled 'transformative' change appears somewhat higher when citizens have more direct control over outcomes, and more online and offline processes are mixed and used in ways that foster collective, rather than individualised, inputs, deliberation and answerability.

In terms of the vision of the state–citizen relationship, the findings show great variation in outcomes sought regarding the kinds and levels of participatory democracy, who this should benefit, the ideal size of the state, and the desired stability of actor groups and decision-making structures.

The evidence suggests that the use of ICTs may have the potential to support change, including transformative change, but only when the political goals of key actors are pre-structured to support this. The choice of ICTs does matter to the effectiveness of this support, as does the way in which they are used. But overall, ICTs do not appear to be inherently 'generative' of change. They are, rather, 'reflective', 'enabling' or 'amplifying' of existing political agendas and levels of commitment.

The recommendations of this report focus on the need to understand deeply and face the realities of these varying agendas and visions of success at the start of intervention planning, and throughout implementation as they evolve over time. This imperative should remain undiminished, regardless of any rhetoric of the inherently transformative or 'democratising' nature of ICTs, and of interventions to strengthen citizen voice and government responsiveness more broadly.

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About this programme learning report

Making All Voices Count was a grant-making programme supporting 'tech for accountable governance initiatives', which 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 report'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 is one of three pieces she has written for the programme.[1]

Introduction

Narratives in the ICT-for-governance field are full of claims for either enormous success, or almost none. But understanding 'success' and 'failure' depends on how they are framed. Looking at the findings from research supported by Making All Voices Count, the reality seems to be that different actors can seek very different outcomes from the same ICT-enabled interventions. These visions of success can be seen as variations within two important dimensions:

1. *The kind of change in governance systems* that is being sought. There are several distinct kinds of change,[2] which range across:

   - *'functional'* change – improving existing governance systems, especially service delivery, in ways that frame citizens as relating to governance processes as 'users', where their role is mostly limited to giving feedback on how well service delivery is working

   - *'instrumental'* change – also focused on improving existing governance systems, but here, citizens are framed as 'choosers' of services and priorities, and are thus expected to give a little more input than 'users'; this is often limited to choosing from the presented options only

   - *'transformative'* change – changing governance systems themselves, i.e. the relationships, processes and rules. This can potentially be at all levels and in all activities of government, typically within frameworks that stress mutual rights, responsibility and accountability. Citizens are seen as relating to governance processes as 'makers and shapers', i.e. not just choosing from what is offered, but changing the rules, setting the agenda and even changing the balance of power

   - *'no change'* – not seeking any change in reality, whatever the rhetoric might be. This includes instances where ICT-for-governance programmes are initiated on the surface, but there is no real intention to make an actual change; the aim may be to 'game' the process for gains that include legitimacy, resources or profile.

2. *The vision of the ideal state–citizen relationship.* This may include positions on a range of spectra, including:

   - the kind of state sought, particularly the *kind and level of participatory democracy* and who this should benefit – from direct democracy, representational democracy and patronage systems to no democracy / autocracy – either for public good or personal gain

   - the ideal *size of the state*, ranging from large to minimalist

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1   See also: Herringshaw (2017a, 2017 b).
2   These definitions largely originate in the work of Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) and Gaventa (2004), and are used in the Making All Voices Count event report written by Edwards, Brock and McGee (2016). The 'no change' agenda is this author's addition. It is noted that there may also be additional aims / kinds of change sought by some actors, which move beyond 'no change' into the deliberately 'manipulative and controlling' (e.g. the use of 'citizen voice–government responsiveness' interventions to identify and monitor anti-government activists, their manipulation by trolls and bots to distort public opinion). These are not covered here, since they did not feature heavily in the Making All Voices Count literature, but early investigations suggest they should be on the analytic agendas of key players in future. See, for example, Treré (2016).

• the desired *stability of actor groups and decision-making structures*, from static, often institutionalised groups and processes expected to continue over long time frames, to fluid, ever-changing networks expected to arise and dissolve as issues and contexts change.

Based on findings from research supported by Making All Voices Count, this report explores these varying visions of success and their implications in three fields where ICTs are being used, at least on paper, to encourage and channel citizen voice into government and governance processes, and to improve government responsiveness in return. These three fields are: participatory policy- and strategy-making; participatory budgeting; and citizen feedback to improve service delivery.

Participatory policy- and strategy-making: citizen involvement to set overall direction and rules

This is perhaps the area where differences in the aims and visions of success come into sharpest relief. These differences can be seen in the 'what', the 'how' and the 'who' of decision-making.

At the most 'transformative' end of the spectrum, ICT-enabled participatory policy- and strategy-making:

• addresses the big policy and strategy decisions, such as strategic social, economic and political priorities, who owns and controls resources, and how decisions get made

• involves processes that allow for intense discursive and propositional engagement by citizens, rather than shallow 'clicktivism'

• includes genuine responsiveness by governments to citizen inputs, and the full disclosure of how and why these inputs are incorporated or not

• involves, vitally, processes which ensure that all citizens have the genuine means to participate – including proactive outreach to the most marginalised groups – and that all views are equally valued.

But what might appear to be 'transformative' processes on paper can be easily be made 'instrumental', 'functional' or even 'no action' if the content concerns marginal issues, the participative processes are shallow, government responsiveness is weak and opaque, and / or ultimate decision-making remains in the hands of the elite, established few.

To explore these variations, it is useful to look at three examples with markedly contrasting outcomes, taken from the multi-country *Voice and Chatter* study of ICT-mediated citizen engagement: the 'Decidem Barcelona' open city government developments in Spain, and two national policy-making processes from Brazil.

Spain

Barcelona is a strong member of the Open Source City movement. It launched its ambitious online participation platform, Decidem Barcelona, in February 2016 with the plan that it "become[s] the axis of all decision making of the city, where the citizens have a personal profile through which they can propose, engage with, and monitor all the activities, topics etc. that they might be interested in" (Peña-López 2017: 6). The aim was to use open, collaborative processes both to design the platform and in policy and planning decision-making, and to mix both online and offline face-to-face deliberations, where results from the latter are fed into the portal. It has been used as a supporting tool, for example to draft the city's 2016–19 strategic plan.

In terms of the vision of the state–citizen relationship, this approach is very much based on a 'direct democracy' model and on diminishing the role of intermediaries, both in government and outside, in favour of direct, individual engagement. Some are also seeking to move away from static or stable definitions of roles and groups, to "rhizomatic, autonomous self-organisation of citizenry" (Aragón et al. 2016: 6) and 'liquid democracy', where citizens and civic groups come together temporarily to work on particular proposals and issues, but without establishing formal partnerships (Peña-López 2017).

It is vital to note that the movement and platform developed in the wake of the '15M' protests of May 2011, which arose from deep disillusionment with traditional politics. According to Peña-López, the protests fomented "horizontal communication, extra-representative and extra-institutional ways of organising … weaving a dense but distributed network of activists" (2017: 3). Some of these activists formed

new political parties and, in 2015, were elected into eight municipal governments, bringing their hacker and direct democracy ethos with them. It is this existing political context that seems to have driven the use of technology for 'transformative' change aims.

Brazil

Two initiatives in Brazil, which are a little further back in recent history, offer important lessons. In 2009, the Ministry of Justice wanted to develop the 'Marco Civil' or 'Internet Bill of Rights' using, in part, digital means to strengthen citizen participation in its development. With an academic partner (the Centre for Technology and Society of the Getulio Vargas Foundation), it created an online open blog space to do this at two stages: to provide input to inform the drafting of the text before it was written; and to comment on the draft bill. The Ministry also held offline meetings.

In 2011, the Ministry of Culture wanted to reform the Copyright Law. Inspired partly by the Marco Civil example, it too developed an online deliberative space to allow public comment. This was only for the second phase (i.e. to provide comments on the draft bill).

Both platforms were, at first, seen as successful in facilitating citizen participation, at least by those able to use the technology. But what is most striking about these two examples is that although their technical features varied somewhat, much more important were the broader political processes going on beyond the platforms, as in Spain.

In the Marco Civil case, "the draft text prepared by the executive officials [of the Ministry of Justice] was altered at the stage it was debated in Parliament – as elected officials bowed to pressure from Internet intermediary and creative industry lobbies to water down key provisions of the draft bill" (Gurumurthy *et al.* 2017a: 36). But the bill was passed, and was still seen as coming as least 'halfway' towards meeting the demands from citizens, voiced through the online consultation.

However, in the Copyright Reform case, just as the first draft bill (based partly on the online consultation) was about to be tabled, a political shift occurred and the Minister of Culture was replaced. The new Minister ordered another round of 'consultations', and participation through the platform was made much more difficult; this now required the completion of complex registration forms, and every proposal had to be backed by a justification based in local or international legislation. Though the ICT-enabled platform gave a veneer of consultation, contributions

on this second round of consultations were, unsurprisingly, a mere 2% of those for the first. Ultimately, no new law was enacted. This seems a strong case of a 'no change' agenda coming in halfway through the overall process.

These examples, although only from two countries, demonstrate the range of possible outcomes from ICT-enabled participatory policy-making that Loureiro *et al.* (2016) outline: from 'no change', i.e. government hearing what citizens say but not acting; through 'functional' and 'instrumental' responsiveness, i.e. governments listening and acting on what they hear within prescribed limits; to some degree of 'transformative' change, involving co-creation between citizens and govern, which Loureiro *et al.* (2016) label 'concertation'.

The examples show that online processes can indeed improve participation, especially if they are designed to foster collective deliberation, openness is hard-wired into them and they are combined with offline consultations whose content are also made public. Then, they have the potential to deliver some of the following practical results (see Kira, Ruiz and Valente 2017):

- bringing new ideas to the debate, ideally including those from new voices

- making different stakeholders' positions clear and public, by identifying actors and their opinions

- helping new communities to form

- helping to legitimise positions where there is new consensus

- overcoming bureaucratic barriers

- archiving knowledge online

- making text available for the construction of other texts, such as legal drafts

- improving debates, if the mechanisms are designed and run to foster two-way and simultaneous debate, both between citizens, and between citizens and government.

But the Brazil examples also highlight that however online processes are initially framed, they may not be the key decision-making fora, or determine the ultimate results. Here, the key factors determining whether policy developed online reflected citizen input and was acted upon were still the agendas and unity of civil society and, even more importantly, the agendas and commitment of powerful actors within and outside government.

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Participatory budgeting: citizen involvement to plan and allocate public budgets

Like participatory policy- and strategy-making initiatives, ICT-enabled participatory budgeting initiatives also vary in their stated aims and approaches. In reality, many are structured to be largely 'instrumental', i.e. they are about getting the existing system to work better, by getting citizens' contributions and giving them responsibilities. There is the potential to be slightly more 'transformative' where there are spaces for new groups to form and significant budgets are up for allocation. But generally, they are most often linked to participatory state–citizen models that are framed as representational democracies, where state agents frame the inputs that citizens can give and retain the right to make any final decisions.

However, there is the potential for these processes to aim more towards a 'direct democracy' model, with fewer intermediaries and citizens expressing direct opinions and choices. But the impacts may be limited when these can be characterised as 'islands' of direct democracy within a broader 'sea' of representational democracy, where citizen involvement is only permitted in relatively small and prescribed areas of local and municipal government budgets. It should also be noted that although such models can relate to representational or direct democracy on paper, both may be operating among the realities of political and other patronage systems operating at different levels.

When looking at the impact of ICT-enabled participatory budgeting interventions, evaluations often focus on 'citizen voice'. This includes consideration of inclusion (i.e. who can and cannot participate) and the quality of participation (e.g. whether it includes one-way inputs or two-way discussions, and 'thin' or 'thick' engagement) (Leighninger 2016). But to assess whether such interventions are bringing 'functional', 'instrumental', 'transformative' success or 'no change', two other factors – which are seemingly obvious, but often more neglected – also need consideration: whether the government actually responds to / acts on the inputs given by citizens (so that final budget priorities actually reflect citizen views); and whether new processes, mindsets, power configurations or even rules are left in place as a result of the planning process.

It is illuminating to explore these factors and kinds of success in relation to the longstanding practical example of participatory budgeting in Indonesia, where it is known as *musrenbang* and has been operating

since 2000, becoming formalised in 2004. Research by Kota Kita, an Indonesian non-governmental organisation (NGO), summarised by Feruglio and Rifai (2017), compares six municipalities and shows that where there is willingness in governments to respond and citizens to participate, 'instrumental' success has been possible in terms of citizens as 'choosers', influencing the allocation of assigned budgets. However, any 'transformative' changes to power structures remain limited, partly because the government retains the vast majority of decision-making power, and partly because it remains difficult for citizens to track the extent to which their inputs are incorporated into budgets and fulfilled in terms of actual spending.

ICT has added value to the *musrenbang* by enabling digital mapping of citizen needs, which Kota Kita undertakes as an intermediary and feeds into budget deliberations. But so far, citizens' participation is mostly achieved offline. "Generally speaking", write Feruglio and Rifai, "initiatives that seek to channel participation through the Internet are not being used because of low digital literacy and Internet use". Even when citizens have been given online options, so far "they overwhelmingly chose phone calls or direct interaction, rather than online methods or even SMS" (2017: 12).

So technology is currently supporting participation to some extent. But the researchers suggest that the basic structures of the budget process, especially the clarity of budget ceilings and allocations at the neighbourhood level, are more crucial in reflecting genuine government commitment to local control, and to enabling real local decision-making and monitoring of outcomes.

Long experience of participatory budgeting in Indonesia generates particularly important learning about the vital importance of considering dynamics over time and scale. Participation using technology is a new norm that is still evolving and still being contested. It is likely that the dynamics of ICT use will change as younger, more tech-savvy citizens enter the fray. This might prompt a rapid lean towards digital processes, and this is when care is needed to ensure the technology is additive: that its use does not undermine existing participation and response processes by replacing existing ones, which are collective, discursive and face to face, with those that are individual, input-only and online-only. Negotiation, social capital and trust all matter (Gurumurthy *et al.* 2017b and c).

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But, at the same time, Feruglio and Rifai note two other trends: an evolution in participatory budgeting in Indonesia "from a substantive and truly democratic process to a merely procedural one" (2017: 8), as it has been formalised and spread across the country; and a disillusioned youth moving away from engagement in formal governance processes. With donor and NGO attention being redirected away from participatory budgeting, now that that has been codified in policy, future impact seems to rely on the level of genuine commitment – of governments and of citizens – to real participatory processes and impacts. It does not appear that technology 'creates' this willingness or commitment. So where will the driver for this come from in future?

Citizen feedback to improve service delivery via reporting platforms

ICT-enabled platforms to encourage and channel the sharing of citizen feedback to government to improve service delivery have been a key area of e-governance initiatives to date. Though the rhetoric and aims of many implementers may be for 'transformative' impact, most platforms are actually structured to be largely 'functional'; citizens are only given the option to give feedback on how services are operating as 'users', not 'choosers' between options, let alone 'makers and shapers' of the services. Such approaches are most often linked to state–citizen models that are framed as representational democracies or even benign autocracies, where state agents frame and delimit the kind of inputs that citizens can make, undertake the analysis, and make the decisions.

Even in this minimalist interpretation of what citizens' roles in service improvement should be, a key challenge has been getting significant levels of citizen use of such ICT-enabled reporting platforms. Predictably, it has been most difficult to include the most marginalised and least powerful – those that might most need to use them to get a productive response from government (see Hrynick and Waldman 2017).

Strategies to overcome this suggest the need for an extensive mix of online and offline outreach, to understand the barriers and try to overcome them. But there are absolute limits to this where potential users have a powerful negative sense of the agendas of government: where they fear reprisal for reporting failures, or where they justifiably lack trust that the government or service provider will actually respond to their inputs (see Welle, Williams and Pearce 2016).

Where citizens are willing and able to give voice, where government willingness to respond already exists, and where the social and institutional design of both the citizen-voice and government-response mechanisms match and integrate into the existing social and institutional systems, such ICT-based reporting platforms have been shown to produce functional improvements, by increasing citizen voice and 'closing the feedback loop' – generating actual responses to citizen inputs (see Peixoto and Fox 2016; Welle *et al.* 2016).

However one challenging finding from the two empirically based comparative studies cited above, is that the majority of interventions failed in linking stronger citizen voice to stronger governance responses: only three of the seven interventions in the rural water sector, reported on by Welle *et al.* (2016) achieved improvements in both citizen reporting and government response; and only seven of the 23 interventions in Peixoto and Fox's study achieved "tangible service delivery agency action in more than half of cases" (2016: 30).

But an even more shocking finding is that both analyses conclude that strengthening citizen voice through these platforms does not seem to improve government responsiveness unless the government actors are already motivated to respond. For Welle *et al.* (2016), this is reflected by the finding that successful initiatives required government service providers to play core roles in running and funding the reporting, processing and response mechanisms, whereas externally run crowdsourcing models were much less successful.

Peixoto and Fox (2016) find that, in the majority of cases, the use of citizen voice as feedback has yet to influence the *willingness* of government policy-makers and senior managers to respond to citizen reports. It works only to build their *capacity* to do so where this willingness *already exists*. In other words, these kinds of voice platforms do not seem to incentivise or motivate increased government responsiveness, but rather, as Peixoto and Fox say, "make a technical contribution to a policy problem that to some degree has already been addressed" (2016: 36). This is a serious challenge to the theories of change of many ICT-enabled voice and feedback platforms.

Where individual citizens' reports and government responses / non-responses are published, this might be expected to strengthen the pressure for downward

These findings strongly suggest the need to fully investigate, understand and be realistic about the change agendas and levels of genuine commitment among government actors, both before investing in ICT-enabled feedback platforms and throughout implementation.

accountability to citizens. So it is even more surprising to find that the empirical results show no pattern when looking at the relationship between the disclosure / non-disclosure of feedback and government responsiveness. As Peixoto and Fox note, "public disclosure of feedback does not seem to lead – *per se* – to increased responsiveness from providers" (2016: 32).

It appears that pre-existing levels of government willingness to respond are key in terms of achieving a functional impact from voice feedback platforms, i.e. tangible improvements to service delivery. This fosters the realisation that for reporting platforms to achieve even limited functional impacts where this willingness does not exist, it may be necessary to invest first in other transformative interventions – ones that increase government willingness to respond to citizens.

These findings strongly suggest the need to fully investigate, understand and be realistic about the change agendas and levels of genuine commitment among government actors, both before investing in ICT-enabled feedback platforms and throughout implementation. This may include the need for concrete indications of such commitment, such as the investment of government resources and the integration of new approaches into core government systems. For a framework to examine the core components required in interventions to strengthen citizen voice–government responsiveness, see Herringshaw (2017a).

Understanding underlying agendas may be especially important when they include a drive towards a minimalist state and an increasing role for the private sector in service delivery. Aside from governance systems and state–citizen relations, some actors' visions of success may have more to do with accessing markets and gathering free or cheap market research, especially where the private sector retains control of the information from and about service users (see for example, Gurumurthy *et al*. 2017a and b).

Conclusions

Findings from Making All Voices Count suggest that the aims and outcomes for ICT-enabled citizen voice–government responsiveness interventions can vary greatly within the two framing dimensions suggested here.

Firstly, in terms of the *kind of change in governance systems sought*, though much of the rhetoric of ICT use touts it as inherently 'transformative', in reality, it has mostly been deployed in 'functional', 'instrumental' and 'no change' ways. That said, findings from research supported by Making All Voices Count seem to suggest that the possibility of ICT-enabled transformative change is somewhat higher when citizens have more direct control over the outcomes, and when online and offline processes are mixed and used in ways that foster collective, rather than individualised, deliberation, monitoring and answerability.

Secondly, in terms of the *vision of the ideal state–citizen relationship*, the findings show great variation in the kinds and levels of participatory democracy sought and who this should benefit, the ideal size of the state,

and the desired stability of actor groups and decision-making structures. Along both dimensions, sometimes the desired outcomes are overtly stated, sometimes not.

What stands out from all this is the conundrum of cause and effect: do the key elements for change come from the processes of participation generated by the use of ICTs? Or do they lie as preconditions that must already be in place, arising from other political dynamics and not connected to the ICT-enabled process, to allow the latter to work in transformative ways?

The evidence from the research reviewed for this report points more towards the latter: that the use of ICTs may have the potential to support change, including transformative change, but only when the political goals of key actors are pre-structured to support this. The choice of ICTs does matter to the effectiveness of this support, as does the way in which they are used. But overall, ICTs do not appear to be inherently 'generative' of change. They are, rather, 'reflective', 'enabling' or 'amplifying' of the existing political

ICTs do not appear to be inherently 'generative' of change. They are, rather, 'reflective', 'enabling' or 'amplifying' of the existing political agendas and levels of commitment of citizens, to some extent – but also of powerful actors within and outside government.

agendas and levels of commitment of citizens, to some extent – but also of powerful actors within and outside government.

The need to understand and face the realities of these varying agendas and visions of success is vital to any citizen voice–government responsiveness intervention, as is tracking their evolution over time. This imperative should remain undiminished, regardless of any rhetoric of the inherently transformative or 'democratising' nature of ICTs.

Recommendations

In terms of implications for future programming, research and funding, these findings suggest the need for the following:

- Much more robust analysis and realism about the different change agendas and visions of success of all the actors key to any accountability initiative, and those who hold sway over them – the stated and the unstated. Really understanding these agendas is likely to entail significant investment, both before any intervention is planned and while tracking it with keen intelligence over time.

- Where genuine commitment to strengthening citizen voice and government responsiveness exists, stakeholders may benefit from exploring the extent to which they can design any initiative or process to incorporate more 'transformative' – or at least more 'instrumental' – aims and approaches into their initiatives, rather than more typical but limited 'functional' impacts. This could happen by involving citizens in the design of processes, as well as their implementation; by building spaces for 'thicker' and less prescribed inputs from citizens, which give them a role in agenda-setting and a space for collective interaction, discussion and community formation (while avoiding 'atomising' citizens and their power); by giving citizens more direct control over resources and outcomes; and by building direct answerability from governments into a mix of online and offline spaces.

- Conversely, where pre-existing government willingness and commitment are in doubt, activists and funders may benefit from greater caution about any theory of change where the use of ICT to channel citizen feedback or voice is expected to 'nudge', let alone create, greater or more sustained commitment and willingness from government. There is a need to realise that the evidence suggests this is extremely difficult to achieve where counter political forces are at work.

- To work well, citizen voice–government responsiveness interventions require a great deal of mutual understanding, trust and ongoing negotiation between the key actors essential to their success. Greater investment is needed to clarify and build these shared agendas at the start, and to maintain them over time in the face of inevitable challenges. The scale of investment in the online and offline time, spaces and processes needed to achieve this may be on par with, if not more than, that spent on any online tool or platform development and implementation. Such investments may need to be heavy up front, well before ICT design, and they are likely to need to continue throughout implementation as actors change and the context evolves.

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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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