OPENING GOVERNANCE

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Introduction: Opening Governance – Change, Continuity and Conceptual Ambiguity

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Abstract Open government and open data are new areas of research, advocacy and activism that have entered the governance field alongside the more established areas of transparency and accountability. This article reviews recent scholarship in these areas, pinpointing contributions to more open, transparent, accountable and responsive governance via improved practice, projects and programmes. The authors set the rest of the articles from this *IDS Bulletin* in the context of the ideas, relationships, processes, behaviours, policy frameworks and aid funding practices of the last five years, and critically discuss questions and weaknesses that limit the effectiveness and impact of this work. Identifying conceptual ambiguity as a key problem, they offer a series of definitions to help overcome the technical and political difficulties this causes. They also identify hype and euphemism, and offer a series of conclusions to help restore meaning and ideological content to work on open government and open data in transparent and accountable governance.

1 Introduction

In the field of governance, the sub-field of transparency and accountability has evolved and grown apace since its beginnings at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It has multiplied and spread in terms of geographical reach, thematic specialisation, methodological experimentation, budget size and complexity. Open government and open data have moved to centre-stage, as newer, distinct but related areas of research, advocacy, activism and aid programming, involving both governmental and non-governmental actors not only in aid-recipient countries but also beyond the frame of development aid.

In 2010 the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) led a review of the Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives focused on transparency and accountability (T&A) work to date in the world of development aid (McGee and Gaventa 2010). The intervening five years have been busy ones for transparency and accountability, open government and open data actors of all kinds in most countries around the world. The Open Government Partnership (OGP), an international platform aiming to support champions of open government working

to make their governments more accountable and responsive,[1] was launched in 2011 by eight countries and has since expanded to 69. Development aid funding to these areas has continued to grow.[2] Key philanthropic and public donors in the T&A field have designed and launched dozens of relatively long-term, complex multi-stakeholder initiatives providing support and facilitating learning for the promotion of citizen engagement and open, responsive, accountable governance. In one such programme, the £26 million initiative Making All Voices Count (MAVC),[3] IDS leads a large and ambitious Research, Evidence and Learning component as part of a fund management consortium with Hivos (the consortium leader) and Ushahidi.

Five years on from that Review of the Impact and Effectiveness of T&A Initiatives, we present this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* on 'Opening Governance'. It brings together eight contributions written by researchers and practitioners in 15 countries, five of them focusing on research supported by Making All Voices Count. Approaching the contemporary challenges of achieving transparency, accountability and openness from a wide range of subject positions and professional and disciplinary angles, these articles collectively give a sense of what has changed in this fast-moving field, and what has not. As such, this *IDS Bulletin* is an invitation to all stakeholders to take stock and reflect.

Having worked for many years in the fields of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and innovation for international development (Edwards) and governance, transparency and accountability (McGee), we have assembled this *IDS Bulletin* from the particular vantage point we have occupied since June 2013, leading the Research, Evidence and Learning component of Making All Voices Count. This position means playing a role as founder-members of a fund management consortium that constitutes a microcosm of the diverse actors and perspectives operating in the realm of tech-for-T&A; continuous exposure to a maelstrom of ideas and projects pitched to the consortium by prospective grantees; and engagement with a range of donors who each bring their particular emphasis to the programme's nature and direction. As such, MAVC might be considered, on many levels, an 'essentially contested space',[4] wherein the meanings that drive action are under continuous and negotiated construction.

In this introduction to this *IDS Bulletin*, we aim firstly to review the most relevant scholarship from the past five years, pinpointing its potential and actual contribution to the cause of more open, transparent, accountable and responsive governance via improved practice, projects and programmes. Secondly, we introduce specific examples of recent practice and research presented in the articles comprising this *IDS Bulletin*, setting them in the context of the fluid backdrop of ideas, relationships, processes, behaviours, policy frameworks and aid funding practices from 2010–15, of which Making All Voices Count forms part. Finally, drawing on both our review of scholarship and the contributing authors' content, we attempt to draw some conclusions about the still-burning questions

and the still-salient weaknesses that continue to limit the effectiveness and impact of work in the field. We do so with a view to accelerating the resolution of those questions and weaknesses and thereby contributing to improvement in effectiveness and impact.

2 Looking back...

Conducted in 2010 at the height of the boom of this sub-field of aid and development work, the Review of Impact and Effectiveness of T&A Initiatives uncovered the prevalence of untested assumptions and weak theories of change in projects, programmes and strategies. It is worth citing at length:

> Why are theories of change needed? At the most basic level, the lack of a theory of change can inhibit the effectiveness of an initiative by causing a lack of direction and focus; but also can make impact assessment or progress-tracking elusive or impossible. In particular, it can make it difficult to analyse retrospectively the existence or nature of connections between the ex post situation and the inputs made by the intervention (McGee and Gaventa 2010: 18).

The underlying problems at the roots of most T&A initiatives examined were conceptual vagueness and poorly articulated normatively-inspired 'mixes':

> [T]he evidence on the effectiveness and impact of TAIs is characterised by confusion on both theoretical and empirical planes. This seems to be due not to weak capacity for distinguishing, for instance, intermediate from final outcomes; but to weak incentives and precedents for spelling them out (*ibid.*: 36).

In parallel to the IDS review of T&A initiatives, a review was conducted of the 'new technologies' that had begun to emerge in the field (Avila *et al.* 2010). It concluded that 'there is a dangerous potential to diminish technology for transparency and accountability as an approach without greater rigor' (*ibid.*: 20). Even while highlighting ways in which technologies could enhance activities in the field, the researchers issued several warnings:

> Despite early successes, […] many efforts still lack credibility and could be counterproductive. Some projects are launched without sufficient knowledge or expertise to design an effective methodology or conceive of and execute a feasible strategy. Terms and labels such as 'demanding accountability' or 'exposing corruption' tend to be very loosely thrown about.

> Technology for transparency and accountability tools do not necessarily have to be sophisticated to succeed, but they need to be designed intelligently and with an eye towards local context. […]

> Technology for transparency and accountability efforts must be careful to avoid exacerbating societal inequalities by disproportionately empowering elites (*ibid.*: 20–3).

Since 2010 some encouraging indications have emerged that the more sobering findings of the IDS Review about untested assumptions and weak theories of change in the T&A field have had positive influences on subsequent funding decisions, research agendas and practice.[5] In the same period, two other significant developments have taken place. Firstly, within the T&A field, what could be viewed in 2010 as a trickle of 'new technologies' for T&A has turned into a flood, substantially reconfiguring methods, practices and understandings of T&A work. Secondly, in a separate but closely related field, T&A's younger relatives 'open government' and 'open data' have burst onto the scene of governance and T&A aid programmes, an offshoot of the broader movement to articulate the notion of 'open development', spearheaded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) from 2008 onwards (Smith *et al.* 2008; Smith and Reilly 2013).

Both our 2010 findings about T&A initiatives and Avila *et al.*'s about 'new technologies' for T&A suggest that, among other things, both areas suffer from the phenomenon of 'buzzwords and fuzzwords'. Cornwall and Brock (2015) coined this term for words in today's development lexicon that are deliberately imprecise and confusing, often in a euphemistic sense, and that 'combine general agreement on the abstract notion that they represent with endless disagreement about what they might mean in practice' (Cornwall 2010: 2). As open government and open data have moved towards centre-stage, this malady has soared to epidemic proportions, with all that this implies (Brennan 2015). And malady it is: Cornwall and Eade (2010) tell us that the phenomenon of buzzwords and fuzzwords tends to create false impressions of universal meaning and commitment, close the non-initiates out of the conversation, numb the critical faculties, shroud concepts in euphemism and disguise their normative origins. Add to these ills the issue of unclear theories of change, and this sector has a twofold problem of conceptual ambiguity. On the one hand, conceptual ambiguity clouds the conception of initiatives so that it is hard to demonstrate their impact, and on the other conceptual ambiguity generates a false sense that we are all pulling together in one common, unproblematic endeavour.

Countering the conceptual ambiguity, various strands of critical reflection have emerged among a small number of scholars and practitioners. Some are sympathetic to the view that openness ushers in countless new possibilities and serendipity, but are motivated by the need to get better at demonstrating impact. Some are suspicious of so much 'openness' rhetoric and want to disentangle the wishful thinking from the actual practice so as to clear the way for a more politicised and explicitly normative treatment of open data, open government or more open models of governance.[6] Others, engaged in recent critical aid debates, are alive to the role that the international aid machinery may have played in forcing complex aspirations into simplified assumptions and linear, project-shaped models, and apply the broader aid critiques to the T&A field.[7]

Bringing to bear their empirically- and historically-informed perspectives – which often pre-date the wave of tech optimism that currently engulfs the field and obscures judgement – the critics unpack the meanings of transparency, accountability, open data, open government and open governance, and their actual – rather than euphemistically assumed – relationships to each other. Some strands of this growing critique started in the T&A arena and extended into the open government/open data arena over time; some started in the open data, open government, or open development arenas or the tech-for-T&A movement but cover similar ground to critiques of T&A work; but whatever the direction, the longer-standing T&A-focused critiques have much in common with the newer 'openness'-focused ones.

These critical debates have begun to lay bare how imprecise and overblown the expectations are in the transparency, accountability and openness 'buzzfield', and the problems this poses. Below we review the critical debates more or less chronologically, rather than by trying to disentangle the threads of a necessarily interwoven and overlapping set of positions.

As early as 2008 'Open ICT4D' had emerged as a hypothesis and an exploration of the implications of incorporating openness into ICT4D practice (Smith *et al.* 2008). The same researchers, based at IRDC in Canada, moved on to a fine-grained specification of 'open development', framing the tendency as a paradigmatic challenge to development as we knew it, rather than the introduction of technologies and widgets designed to lever open existing development, aid or governance activities or debates (Smith and Reilly 2013).

Their messages resonated with some open data advocates. Gurstein (2011) reflects from within the open data movement on whether open data is about enabling effective data use for everyone, or in fact all about 'empowering the empowered'. Pointing out that 'the most likely immediate beneficiaries of open data are those with the most resources to make effective use of the data', he unmasks both 'empowerment' and 'open data' as buzzwords, with a normative resonance that tends to brook no questioning or resistance. He is at pains to state that his position is:

> […] not to argue against 'open data' which in fact is a very significant advance and support to broad–based democratic action and empowerment. Rather it is to argue that in the absence of specific efforts to ensure the widest possible availability of the prerequisites for 'effective use' the outcome of 'open data' may be quite the opposite to that which is anticipated (and presumably desired) by its strongest proponents (*ibid.* 2011).

Soon after, Yu and Robinson (2012) problematise 'the new ambiguity of open government' and 'open government data' with reference to the technical, bureaucratic and policy context of the USA in the 2000s. They note that even one of its foremost proponents feels with hindsight

that the concept of open government would have been better framed as two related but distinct issues: government transparency on the one hand, and public sector innovation on the other (*ibid.*: 204).[8] Davies and Bawa (2012) tease out the meaning of the compound 'open government data', setting it in the historic context of evolving and diverse 'visions of openness', and highlighting how 'open government data' is riddled with perils as well as ripe with promise. Bates (2012) drives home the ideological undertones beneath Davies and Bawa's warnings, naming the risk that 'open data movements [get] co-opted as part of a neo-liberal project of state deregulation rather than acting in the interests of social progress and democratic futures' (Davies and Bawa 2012). The meaning, risks and claimed outcomes of open government data are further critiqued by Heusser, who recognises not only the constraints on the *effectiveness* of open government data initiatives, but that at best their *outcomes* and *impacts* are contributions made alongside other factors and actors, rather than achievements that can be singly attributed to any particular open government data initiative (Heusser 2012).

Responding to Yu and Robinson, Peixoto (2013) argues that 'open data', as a form of transparency, does not lead to public accountability anywhere near as often or as systematically as the prevailing rhetoric suggests. Without what he calls the 'publicity' and 'political agency' conditions being satisfied, it will not do so. He defines the publicity condition as 'the extent to which disclosed information actually reaches and resonates with its intended audiences' (*ibid.*: 204) and the political agency condition as 'mechanisms through which citizens can sanction or reward public officials' (*ibid.*: 206).[9] Seen thus, open data is not equivalent to open government, and does not in and of itself open up governance. Peixoto argues that the conceptual ambiguity which characterises the open data field is both a weakness and a strength:

> [...] a single policy [in this case, open data initiatives] is often designed and implemented by actors pursuing multiple goals intended to produce different effects. Thus, while these policies may represent government officials' opportunistic pretense for accountability, they may also be supported by democratically minded reformers who view open data – and the current enthusiasm around it – as an opportunity to advocate for greater accountability reforms. The dismissal of these initiatives as examples of authoritarian manipulation therefore risks undermining reformers' efforts for change (*ibid.*: 213).

Carothers and Brechenmacher, writing in 2014, dissect the relationships between accountability, transparency, participation and inclusion:

> Accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion represent vital embodiments of the opening to politics that occurred in development work in the 1990s. They bridge three distinct practitioner communities that emerged from this new direction – those focusing on governance, on democracy, and on human rights.

But consensus remains elusive. Democracy and human rights practitioners generally embrace an explicitly political understanding of the four concepts and fear technocratic or purely instrumentalist approaches. Governance specialists often follow a narrower approach, applying the core principles primarily to the quest for greater public sector effectiveness (2014: 1).

Despite the aura of a 'unified agenda' which enfolds these four approaches, they argue that aid agencies pursue the conceptual bundle while actually putting very different emphases on its four constituents. For instance:

> […] enthusiastic proponents of the growing transnational movement for accountability and transparency view these issues as a potentially transformative advance of the governance agenda and one that naturally connects to burgeoning efforts to harness new Internet and communication technologies for development ends. Other practitioners have a long-standing commitment to participatory development and/or socioeconomic inclusion – two domains of assistance that pre-date the more recent rush of attention to accountability and transparency and that have undergone various permutations over the past decades (*ibid.*: 12).

The result, according to Carothers and Brechenmacher, is a field full of distortions: shallow practice, inconclusive debates about the place of each of the four principles, uncertainty about their instrumental value and their transformative impact, and resistance on the 'recipient side' – developing country government actors who embrace the concepts rhetorically but lack the political will to ever translate them into substantive political reform (*ibid.*). Their findings are reinforced by de Gramont whose key message is that domestic and external reformers' attempts to improve governance 'must move beyond a search for single-focus "magic bullet" solutions toward an integrated approach that recognizes multiple interrelated drivers of governance change' (2014: 1).

Most of the critical literature referred to above focuses on the relationships between just two or three areas of the 'buzzfield' – open data/open government, or open government data/tech-for-T&A, or openness/transparency. A new contribution by Fox to the critical debate in 2014 had a broader range but a more specific objective: it applied historic insights on the social and political dynamics of transparency and accountability more broadly to a close re-reading of the available evidence of impact (Fox 2014). The evidence Fox reviews comes from mainly non-tech-enabled T&A initiatives and efforts by citizens to open up governance by engaging with budgets and policies over the previous decade, a mixture of the diverse emphases highlighted by Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014), and a combination of strategies and tactics, ranging from the provision of open information through transparency advocacy to collective action for accountability. A fundamental distinction emerges between 'tactical' and 'strategic'

approaches to the promotion of citizen voice to contribute to improved public sector performance. Tactical approaches are 'bounded, localized and information-led'; strategic approaches in contrast 'bolster enabling environments for collective action, scale up citizen engagement beyond the local arena and attempt to bolster governmental capacity to respond to voice'. Fox's re-reading of the evidence shows that while 'the tactical approach has led to mixed results […] strategic approaches are more promising' (2014: 35). In particular:

> […] information alone often turns out to be insufficient. More innovation, experimentation and comparative analysis will help to determine what *kinds* of information are most actionable for pro-accountability stakeholders, as well as the channels for dissemination that can motivate collective action, empower allies and weaken vested interests […]

In the specific case of ICT-led accountability initiatives, Fox notes that these are increasingly 'framed in terms of "closing the feedback loop" – in other words, getting institutions to listen to citizen voice. Yet in practice, this institutional response capacity often remains elusive and feedback loops rarely close' (*ibid.*: 35). To attain higher impact in social accountability initiatives, Fox concludes, it is necessary to identify and enhance synergies between what he calls 'voice' (citizen voice), 'teeth' (governmental capacity to respond to voice) and 'bite' (impact, in the form of government responsiveness).

In a further careful review of cases of ICT-enabled citizen voice where evidence of institutional response was available, Peixoto and Fox (2015)[10] take this analysis further. As well as pinpointing many factors of initiative design and socio-political and institutional context that affect the likelihood of ICT-enabled citizen voice leading to government responsiveness,[11] two of their findings stand out in relation to earlier debates summarised above. Firstly,

> […] *both* public disclosure of feedback and public collective action may be crucial for generating the civic muscle necessary to hold both senior policymakers and frontline service providers accountable. In other words, civic engagement, in addition to information, […] drives *downwards* accountability, from state to society (*ibid.*: 22) (emphasis in original).

Secondly, while institutional response is found to be determined by both willingness and capacity,

> […] the empirical evidence available so far about the degree to which voice can trigger teeth 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 influence their *willingness*. Where senior managers are already committed to learning from feedback and using it to bolster

their capacity to encourage their agencies to respond, ICT 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. The question remains, how can ICT-enabled voice platforms become more effective at changing the incentives that influence whether or not agencies are willing to respond to citizens? (*ibid.*: 23–4).

Collectively, these sources go a long way to offering clarity in respect of certain basics which might, on first glance or to the non-initiated, appear to be semantics – or pedantics. In relation to 'openness', 'open government' is different from 'open data'; 'open government data' might be data that makes government as a whole more open, or government data that is readily accessible and reusable, with quite different implications; and the ambiguity surrounding these three interrelated concepts is such that '[t]oday, a regime can call itself "open" if it builds the right kind of website – even if it does not become more accountable or transparent' (Yu and Robinson 2012: 59). In relation to more traditional spheres of T&A but also relevant to 'open' initiatives, transparency does not automatically lead to accountability; information will not generate state accountability to society without the pressure added by public collective action; and citizen voice enabled by ICT platforms may achieve institutional responsiveness where the problem is weak capacity to respond, but will not when the underlying problem is a lack of political will.

These finely textured and dispassionate recent analyses of the conceptual apparatus of transparency, accountability and openness, and of the practical effects and impacts of conceptual fuzziness, generate evidence-based clarity and insights. Used well, they can provide the foundations of more viable theories of change and compatible theories of action for activities conducted in the name of open data, open government and open government data. They can help to dispel the fuzz that has obscured the differences between the product- and artefact-focused endeavours ('open data', 'open government data' and largely 'open government'), and the more process- and relationship-focused endeavours that aim to transform governance systems and behaviours by opening them up to a wider range of participants contesting and reconfiguring power dynamics. As potential antidotes to conceptual fuzziness and recalibrators of expectations among scholars and practitioners of accountability and governance, they are much-needed.

So are their messages permeating the discourses and aspirations that underpin global-level policy initiatives related to open data, open government and the opening up of governance? And have they begun to filter through into clearer, more realistic programming and project design at the micro-level, and from there to enhanced impact? In what follows, we look critically at the range of contemporary examples of policy initiatives, programming and practice discussed in the contents of this *IDS Bulletin*, in the light of this current state of knowledge.

3 Looking at what's in front of us...

The first two articles in this *IDS Bulletin* make fresh contributions to clarity of concept and design. Peixoto and Fox (this *IDS Bulletin*) review prominent, 'unusually comprehensive' and rich empirical data on 23 ICT platforms for citizen voice to improve public service delivery, almost all dating from the previous five years. More than half (12 out of 23) of the initiatives rest on the 'implicit market model' based on individual demand (citizen voice) for good-quality services producing its own supply. These 12 achieved 'low government responsiveness', which according to Peixoto and Fox's classification means a response rate lower than 20 per cent. Their findings show that pushing on an open door opens it further: the successful tech-for-TAIs succeed because they enhance the effectiveness or impact of something already going on (political will that is already there, or service providers who are already acknowledging their own accountability). Tech-for-TAIs in themselves, as currently being designed and implemented, do not appear to achieve accountability impact – they do not unlock locked doors or open closed ones. The study testifies to the persistence of poorly articulated theories of change that fail to specify realistic causal pathways at the outset. It gives clear pointers as to how to design theories of change and action to have a chance of achieving high government responsiveness. If the designers and implementers of future tech-for-T&A initiatives do not utilise them, it will not be because the evidence is not there, which raises the need to look more broadly than the (simplistic, linear) assumption that evidence, once made available, gets translated into action.

In many of the initiatives Peixoto and Fox review, the 'problem' is treated as technological and informational, not as political, institutional or cultural. In this they are similar to the eight recent tech-enabled initiatives for enhancing the sustainability of rural water supply[12] reviewed by Welle *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*). In the study they write about, Welle *et al.* specified and tested for three dimensions of success using a Qualitative Comparative Analysis approach: successful ICT reporting, successful ICT report processing, and successful service improvements through water scheme repairs. Only three out of eight initiatives analysed were successful in all three dimensions so counted as successful overall.[13] In many of the cases analysed, the technologies, if taken up, obstructed the smooth workings of socioculturally embedded ways of resolving water supply problems – so they were often not taken up. Like Peixoto and Fox, Welle *et al.* show, firstly, that tech initiatives which push on open doors succeed but ones which push on closed or locked doors don't; it is not the technology that leads to the accountability impact but the agency, organisational, institutional and cultural aspects of the context. Secondly, the approach of crowd-sourcing,[14] prominent in many of these initiatives, tends to bring in information on functionality, which in itself does not affect transparency, accountability or the sustainability of rural water supply. Crowd-sourced initiatives are often not taken up, i.e. people (crowds) do not actually report anywhere near as often as it is assumed will happen, for a range of reasons, some of which are clearly evidenced – for example fear of identification as trouble-maker, or a lack of expectation or trust that it will lead to anything.

These two painstaking analyses that enhance conceptual clarity and extend our knowledge of what makes tech-for-TAIs work, are followed by a cluster of articles about voice, listening and responsiveness in diverse processes of opening governance. Loureiro *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) review four instances of what they call state–citizen 'concertation' over extension of access to basic services in four African countries. Irrespective of the context, change goal or strategy, all four cases hinge on new openings within the respective polity which create new conditions for social or citizen-led accountability claims to gain purchase – similar to the notion of political opportunities in the social movements literature (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). They trace the political actions, relationships and dynamics that opened up chinks for citizens to re-shape at least the social distribution aspect of governance, if not the very fabric of governance itself. Doing so illuminates the important difference between the open quality of *products* or artefacts – for instance, data, or a government web portal – and the opening up of governance *processes* to new voices, actors and influences. From Loureiro *et al.*'s historical perspective, it is clear that openings close in the absence of efforts to keep them open, especially if circumstances turn unfavourable.

Situated within the fraught politics of service provision in post-apartheid South Africa, Mills' research (this *IDS Bulletin*) unpacks citizen perspectives on a state that champions 'open government' on the international stage. It serves as a reminder of the distance that separates the realities of poor and marginalised people from global-level policy initiatives, discourses and commitments, even those that purport to integrate marginalised perspectives and redress marginalisation. Such is the distance that residents of Khayelitsha, a semi-formal socially and economically marginalised township in Cape Town, appear almost naive in their belief that 'because the government had been democratically elected, its leaders had a mandate to listen to civil society, and its members'. Recognising the potential that '"[o]pen governance" could serve as a powerful counterpoint to the form of "closed governance" that was modelled during apartheid', Mills points out that this would 'require the state to put the principles it subscribes to as a member of the OGP [Open Government Partnership] into practice in places like Khayelitsha'. Read from a viewpoint sympathetic to the government, the article shows how much easier it is for government to 'talk the talk' globally through committing itself to opening up environmental data and establishing an anti-corruption complaints hotline, than to 'walk the talk' domestically through holding itself even minimally answerable to the marginalised majority of citizens. Read from another perspective, especially the concluding comments on the CSOs' letter of complaint to the South African government, the article attests to government 'open-wash', seen by some South African activists to occur with the complicity, or at least the complacency of the Open Government Partnership.

Neuman (this *IDS Bulletin*) reports on a study of how far access to information is, *de facto*, gender-equitable. Her focus follows on from the recognition of access to information as a key enabling condition

in any viable theory of change for accountability and a core aspect of more accessible and open governance (McGee and Gaventa 2010; Calland 2010). Her findings indicate the need to address inequities in the 'lower-order' aims of the theory of change if the 'higher-order' aims of state accountability to citizens – of *both* sexes – are to be achievable. Neuman's research is a compelling contribution to the wider move to establish greater clarity about what actually happens in the tucks and interstices of pro-accountability theories of change. In this case it transpires that well into the twenty-first century, systematic bias still excludes women disproportionately from realising the basic 'enabling' right to information, and that OGP processes have so far apparently failed to address this. The article and the study it reports on is also a reminder that wherever divides, inequities and biases exist, opening up products, processes and spaces *without introducing measures to counter these biases* – whether digital divides, urban bias or male bias – will reproduce and reinforce them.

Many of the prevalent theories of change at work in the T&A and open government space include assumptions as to the degree to which citizens' voices are mediated and represented and the means by which this happens. Notwithstanding the critical literature on the concept and origins of 'civil society' particularly in aid-dependent countries (Lewis 2002; Chandhoke 2007; Howell and Lind 2009; von Lieres and Piper 2014), the architects and implementers of TAIs often take it that civil society organisations (CSOs) will play the crucial role of representing the views of different sections of society. But what about contexts where there is a schism between CSOs and the citizens they are assumed to represent? Otieno *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe the emergence in Kenya of Bunge La Mwananchi (the Peoples' Parliament). Bunge La Mwananchi grew out of poor and marginalised people's frustration with a professionalised civil society, which they felt did not represent them but instrumentalised them to further its own agendas. But *bunge*, like the 'civil societies' in the critiques of Lewis (2002), Chandhoke (2007) and others, suffers from divisions within, and its energy ebbs and flows as issues surface, get confronted and move on. The Kenyan government rushed to join the OGP in 2011–12 as an early and enthusiastic entrant. Its Action Plans have strongly emphasised open data and e-government systems while the government was mired in political and financial corruption scandals. As the spaces being opened up in governance do not offer equal openings to all, spaces like *bunge* are being created autonomously by citizens. As ever with autonomously created spaces, the dangers are of the co-option of the movement or its key members, and of *bunge* members being listened to only by each other, never by government actors.

Our final two contributions look at the muddier and darker sides of technology as applied to T&A and openness. In Wilson and de Lanerolle's exploration (this *IDS Bulletin*) of the processes by which the designers and implementers of TAIs choose technology tools, they find that many of these actors, by their own account, struggle to make successful tool

choices. Many do not do sufficient research to understand the intended users of the technology they choose, and fail to consider the breadth of technology choices available to them. They find that 'in many cases, tools are chosen with only limited testing of their appropriateness for the intended users in the intended contexts, despite widespread recognition among practitioners, funders and researchers that such an approach is prone to significant efficiency and sustainability risks' (page 114, this *IDS Bulletin*). What, then, is driving these apparently perverse practices? It would seem that those designing and making technology choices within TAIs not only suffer from the 'buzzwords and fuzzwords' syndrome, but are also blind to the tacit contextual knowledge of their intended users. This tacit knowledge might be critical not only for successful selection of appropriate technologies but also for setting aside euphemism and applying critical faculties to ascertain whether the initiative is looking to address the right problem, or indeed, whether there is a problem at all, or just a technology solution in search of a problem. When designers use themselves as user 'proxies' for testing a technology, is this due to lack of funding to test it properly, or failure to appreciate that their own positionality and knowledge may differ from those of the people who most stand to benefit from enhancements in government openness or accountability? Does any responsibility lie with the funders supporting these initiatives? Is practice being distorted by tech fetishism on donors' parts, or an obsession with innovation for openness?

In earlier work, one of our contributors, Jonathan Fox, pointed out that '[o]ne person's transparency is another's surveillance. One person's accountability is another's persecution. Where one stands on these issues depends on where one sits' (2007: 663). The capability and capacity to utilise the new opportunities for opening up governance presented by new technologies quite definitely depends on where one sits. In many cases the financial and technological capacity of the state (or other powerful actors behind the state) to surveil and persecute citizens is far greater than those of citizens attempting to use technology to hold the state to account. Treré (this *IDS Bulletin*) challenges the pervasive tech-optimistic bias underlying many TAIs, which attribute to technologies inherently democratic and emancipatory qualities. He does so by exploring how the Mexican government – co-Chair of the Open Government Partnership 2013–15 – used technologies to undermine its citizens' attempts to challenge and hold it accountable for its actions. The picture that emerges is of a government with one hand on the OGP table flourishing newly-opened data, and the other in the shadows below the table, brandishing robots to control and repress citizens. Treré argues that, 'citizens have to struggle against increasingly sophisticated techniques of control and repression that successfully exploit the very mechanisms that many consider to be emancipatory technologies' (page 136, this *IDS Bulletin*). While technologies *may* offer new opportunities for citizens to interrogate government data and information and to mobilise to demand accountability, let it not be forgotten that technologies can also be used to suppress accountability demands and violate human rights.

Table 1 **Definitions**

Open[ing] Governance	Governance broadly speaking is the relationship between citizens and their governments and the processes in which they interact. Open[ing] governance means [working towards] governance relationships and processes that are transparent, accountable and participatory, and which allow the perspectives, needs and rights of all citizens to be addressed, including those most marginalised by power relations (authors' own elaboration)
Transparency	Transparency 'means that information is freely available and directly accessible to those who will be affected by decisions and that enough information is provided in easily understandable forms and media' (Suk Kim *et al.* 2005)
Accountability	'[A] perpetual struggle when power is delegated by the many to the few in the interests of governability' (Goetz and Jenkins 2005: 1–2). 'It implies an institutionalised (i.e. regular, established, accepted) relationship between different actors. It may be formal or informal.' (T/AI, www.transparency-initiative.org/about/definitions)
Open Data	'Open data is data that can be freely used, re-used and redistributed by anyone – subject only, at most, to the requirement to attribute and share-alike' (Open Knowledge Foundation, http://opendatahandbook.org/guide/en/what-is-open-data/)
Open Government Data	'Open government data is open data produced or commissioned by government or government controlled entities' (OKF, opengovernmentdata.org)
Open Government	Open Government, although the term is often used loosely to denote the digitalisation of government information and services, refers to government institutions and mechanisms characterised by: ● 'Transparency: the public understands the workings of their government; ● Citizen engagement: the public can influence the workings of their government by engaging in governmental policy processes and service delivery programs; and ● Accountability: the public can hold the government to account for its policy and service delivery performance'. (Global Integrity, www.globalintegrity.org/2012/05/working-definition-opengov/)

Source Authors' own.

4 … and looking forward
The conceptual ambiguity that was shown in 2010 to be plaguing this field is alive and well. It can be detected even in the bosom of the Open Government Partnership,[15] although in some corners of the OGP its existence and problematic nature is acknowledged (see, for example,

Khan and Foti 2015).[16] It causes technical problems because it hinders attempts to demonstrate impact; and political problems because it clouds the political and ideological differences between projects as different as open data and open governance. So what is to be done?

First, what do we do about 'these words [that] appear to convey one thing, but are in practice used to mean something quite different, or indeed have no real meaning at all' (Eade 2010: viii)? One thing we can do in this article is promulgate received and respected definitions and usage of each, in the hope that others will follow these and thus reduce the 'fuzz'. Table 1 does so, drawing on the classics in the published literature and the authoritative organisational and online sources.

And what do we do about buzz? By stoking the debates and promoting the evidence on these obstacles and differences in this article, we hope to have made a small contribution to rekindling momentum in T&A impact debates, and to restoring meaning and ideological content. In particular, we hope to rescue the transformative potential of the project of opening up governance relationships and processes to instil fairer power dynamics among and between citizens and their states. In this buzzfield awash with the flood of aid dollars and the mud of hype and euphemism, it is this project that has been most at risk of conceptual dilution and elision.

In relation to T&A impact debates, on the basis of the secondary evidence reviewed in this article and the contributions to this *IDS Bulletin*, we can point to some clear conclusions.

- Political will is generally a necessary but insufficient condition for governance processes and relationships to become more open, and is certainly a necessary but insufficient condition for *tech-based approaches* to open them up. In short, where there is a will, tech-for-T&A may be able to provide a way; where there isn't a will, it won't.

- Opening governance relationships and processes is a much more complex and demanding task than opening government-related products, artefacts and services.

- Data, once opened, will probably stay in the public domain forever, whereas openings in governance tend to close – one of the tricky peculiarities of achieving, demonstrating and sustaining impact in governance programmes. Technologies, which might have interacted with other factors to lever governance spaces open, can contribute to holding them open. But they will not achieve this by themselves in the absence of conducive sociocultural, organisational and political factors including of a critical mass of committed citizens, and reformers in government, along with the right enabling and incentivising factors.

- There is now more compelling evidence than ever before about how to design a T&A initiative, tech-based or not, in a way that

maximises the chances of achieving government responsiveness. Some of the evidence that has existed for some years has not made it into contemporary practice. This points to a gap between generators and users of evidence, which needs to be closed by the various learning-focused actors in the sub-field, including ourselves in our roles as the Research, Evidence and Learning team of Making All Voices Count. That is, it becomes a responsibility of researchers in the field to ensure the evidence they produce or process is 'open' (freely available and accessible) to the practitioners who design and implement the initiatives.

● The gap between recent evidence and contemporary practice also begs questions about the responsibilities and accountabilities of other actors in this field. Practitioners need to stop responding to tech hype and technology evangelism and start looking for robust evidence and careful analysis on which to ground their work. Funding agencies need to critically consider the disjuncture between the funding modalities they favour, and what we now know about what works. Aid modalities tend to favour relatively short-term, linear, discrete, tech-savvy interventions, 'tactical' rather than 'strategic' to use Fox's terms, oriented towards quick and attributable results. What we now know work better are relatively complex, strategic, multi-stranded, politically-savvy long-term processes, whose impacts might be about stopping the situation from getting considerably worse, rather than about 'fixing it' (Fox 2014).

On the question of restoring meaning and ideological content, it is clear that governance is a contested concept and refers to an essentially contested arena. The strategic value of 'umbrella concepts' is that even in an essentially contested area, they bring a lot of actors together behind a cause. The strategic value of 'consensual hurrah-words' (Chandhoke 2007) is that they mobilise unimaginable energy and passion. Over the past 15 years many and diverse actors have aligned themselves behind some ostensibly common causes related to openness, and the resulting movement attests to how this has focused energies and catalysed action. But while there are undoubtedly benefits from mobilising a wide range of actors, what happens when the actors start to recognise their diversity, sense that they are not pulling together but in parallel or even against each other, suffer disillusionment, lose interest, and abandon the common project, or even undermine it?

The ambiguity around the 'open' in governance today might be helpful in that its very breadth brings into the fold actors who would otherwise be unlikely adherents, and they end up committing themselves beyond what they initially envisaged. But if the fuzzier idea of 'open government' or the low-hanging allure of 'open data' displace the Herculean task of clear transparency, hard accountability (Fox 2007) and fairer distribution of power as what this is all about, then what started as an inspired movement of governance visionaries may end up merely putting a more open face on an unjust and unaccountable status quo.

Notes

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1 www.opengovpartnership.org/.

2 Transparency/Accountability Initiative, pers. comm., November 2015. It is unclear whether the growth has been entirely due to new funds, or could be due to funds formerly disbursed under a different label being re-categorised as 'T&A'. It probably indicates growing commitment and interest in either case.

3 See www.makingallvoicescount.org/.

4 We borrow here from Gallie's notion of an 'essentially contested concept', according to which a concept around which there is unity at the level of notions and ideals can nevertheless be enacted through a multiplicity of 'instantiations' or realisations (Gallie 1956).

5 To mention but two examples, the commissioning of accountability-focused realist research such as Westhorp *et al.* (2014); and the design and launch of Making All Voices Count itself, as an operational accountability programme with a focus on technologies and a substantial integrated research component.

6 As Leal (summarised by Cornwall in Cornwall and Eade 2010: 14) proposes needs to happen in relation to the concept and practice of participation.

7 For instance, the Big Push Forward (http://bigpushforward.net/); 'Doing Development Differently' (http://doingdevelopmentdifferently. com/) and the 'Thinking and Working Politically' community of practice (www.dlprog.org/research/thinking-and-working-politically-community-of-practice.php).

8 The foremost proponent referred to is Beth Noveck, who launched and led the first Obama government's Open Government Initiative as the US Deputy Chief Technology Officer for Open Government.

9 It is worth noting the considerable distance between this definition of political agency and others which emphasise collective action or critical citizen engagement with processes of institutions of governance undertaken from autonomous or invited spaces of citizen organising.

10 Not to be confused with Peixoto and Fox (this *IDS Bulletin*). The source referred to here is the full-length research report on which the Peixoto and Fox article in this *IDS Bulletin* is based.

11 In this their work complements an earlier, smaller-*n*, qualitative study by McGee and Carlitz (2013) that explores assumptions and realities about the take-up of tech-for-T&A initiatives – that is, about whether and when technological innovations get taken up by citizens and used to give citizens voice to start with.

12 Sustainability in the context of rural water supply refers to keeping water supply systems functional and adequately maintained to ensure uninterrupted supply. It is a core theme in the water and sanitation sector, due to the frequency with which rural water points fall into a state of disrepair.

13 The eight were not selected because they were successful but according to pragmatic criteria to do mainly with researchability.

14 Crowd-sourcing is 'the activity of outsourcing a task to a "crowd", which is generally a distributed group of often unknown participants. Rather than attempting to solve a problem through a company or organization, the low transaction costs of ICTs allow one to distribute the task for low costs and take advantage of the knowledge and creativity of interested individuals' (Smith and Reilly 2013: 27). Many technological innovations, in T&A and other fields, therefore work by sourcing inputs (often data or information, and in the T&A context often reports of things that are not working as they should) from an assumed 'crowd'.

15 Both the agenda and proceedings of the recent OGP Summit in Mexico in October used interchangeably the concepts of open government, open data, open government data and, increasingly, open governance. The agenda for the Mexico 2015 OGP Summit held 28–9 October 2015 can be viewed at http://ogpsummit.org/agenda.html.

16 A report published by the OGP's Independent Reporting Mechanism (Khan and Foti 2015) acknowledges firmly that open data is only part of the OGP picture and the need to mainstream open data with open decision-making and public accountability and to go beyond the low-hanging fruit is emphasised (*ibid.*: II).

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