OPENING GOVERNANCE

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IDSBulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

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Joseph Pearce works to raise the standards of knowledge, evidence, practice and policy at the intersection of monitoring water and sanitation, and information and communications technologies (ICTs). With the International Water and Sanitation Centre, he supports government-led national monitoring systems in Ethiopia and Tanzania. He is on the Executive Steering Committee of the Rural Water Supply Network and coordinates their 'mapping and monitoring' topic. He led the design and development of the open-access software *Water Point Mapper*.

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Introduction: Opening Governance – Change, Continuity and Conceptual Ambiguity

Rosie McGee and Duncan Edwards*

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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When Does ICT-Enabled Citizen Voice Lead to Government Responsiveness?

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Abstract This article reviews evidence on the use of 23 information and communications technology (ICT) platforms to project citizen voice to improve public service delivery. This meta-analysis focuses on empirical studies of initiatives in the global South, highlighting both citizen uptake ('yelp') and the degree to which public service providers respond to expressions of citizen voice ('teeth'). The conceptual framework distinguishes two roles played by ICT-enabled citizen voice: informing upwards accountability, and bolstering downwards accountability through either individual user feedback or collective civic action. This distinction between the ways in which ICT platforms mediate the relationship between citizens and service providers allows for a precise analytical focus on how different dimensions of such platforms contribute to public sector responsiveness. These cases suggest that while ICT platforms have been relevant in increasing policymakers' and senior managers' capacity to respond, most of them have yet to influence their willingness to do so.

1 Introduction

Around the world, civil society organisations (CSOs) and governments are experimenting with information and communications technology (ICT) platforms that try to encourage and project citizen voice, with the goal of improving public service delivery. This meta-analysis focuses on empirical studies of initiatives in the global South, highlighting both citizen uptake ('yelp') and the degree to which public service providers respond to expressions of citizen voice ('teeth'). The conceptual framework is informed by the key distinction between two distinct genres of ICT-enabled citizen voice – aggregated individual assessments of service provision and collective civic action. The first approach constitutes user feedback, providing precise information in real time to decision-makers. This allows policymakers and programme managers to identify and address service delivery problems – but at their discretion. Collective civic action, in contrast, can encourage service providers to become more publicly accountable – an approach that depends less exclusively on decision-makers' discretion about whether or not to act

on the information embodied in feedback. This conceptual distinction between two different ways in which ICT platforms mediate the citizen–service provider relationship allows for a more precise analytical focus on how different dimensions of these ICT platforms contribute to public sector responsiveness.

This study begins with a conceptual framework intended to clarify the different links in the causal chain *in between* ICT-enabled opportunities to express voice (platforms) and institutional responses. In other words, how and why are these platforms supposed to leverage responses from service providers? The answers turn out not to be so obvious. Our approach was informed by a close review of the available evidence, primarily quantitative, about experiences with 23 ICT platforms in 17 countries.[1] This focus on unpacking causal chains is informed by two factors. First, the broader literature on the drivers of accountability increasingly emphasises using causal chains to address the analytical puzzle of how to distinguish how and why citizen action may or may not lead to public sector response (Fox 2014; Grandvoinnet, Aslam and Raha 2015; Joshi 2014; Peixoto 2013). Second, analysis revealed that we do not see a generic type of platform leading to a generic type of response. Instead, we see key differences in the institutional (not technological) design of the interface that may be relevant for voice, citizen action and institutional response. The evidence so far indicates that most of the ICT platforms that manage to leverage responsiveness somehow directly involve government.

While ICT-enabled voice platforms vary widely across many dimensions, this analysis emphasises several differences that are hypothesised to influence both citizen uptake and institutional response. These include the degree of public access to information *about* the expression of voice – does the public see what the public says? Does the ICT platform document and disclose how the public sector responds? They also include institutional mechanisms for public sector *response* – do the agencies or organisations take specific offline actions to prompt service providers' response? As a first step towards homing in on these variables, this article maps the 23 platforms studied in terms of various empirical indicators of these distinct dynamics. This exercise is followed by a discussion of propositions that may or may not link voice to institutional response.

Note that this study does *not* focus on two ways in which service delivery agencies use ICT that are very relevant for understanding their full array of relationships with users. First, many public agencies are using mobile phones and social media to disseminate information efficiently. However, if those interfaces are one-way ('inside-out', or 'top-down'), then they do not 'count' as ICT-enabled citizen *voice* for the purposes of this study. Second, agencies can use ICT for internal administrative reforms that can bolster their capacity to respond to citizen concerns – by reducing the discretionary power of front-line providers through increasing the capacity of managers to monitor service provider performance, as well as by helping consistently track whether and

how problems are being addressed. This study covers evidence of institutional response to ICT-enabled systems for *users* to exercise voice, rather than the broader set of cases of relevant e-government initiatives.

2 The conceptual map: unpacking digital engagement

The broader analytical context for this article involves three simultaneous trends in the literature on the role of information in leveraging public accountability. First, the number and diversity of practitioner-led digital engagement for service delivery initiatives continues to grow, involving both effervescent experimentation and efforts to scale up. Experimentation with social accountability tools has been growing within the portfolios of both large public and private aid donors for the past decade, and some involve ICT. For instance, many World Bank projects with 'identifiable beneficiaries' now include some kind of feedback mechanism, and citizen engagement has become a policy framework which includes the use of ICT (World Bank 2014a). Major private donors, such as the Omidyar Network and Google, are also making significant investments to encourage 'civic technology' – in both the global North and South. New donor partnerships are also encouraging experimentation with civic technology in very low-income countries, led most notably by Making All Voices Count.[2]

Second, while growing media coverage of ICT-enabled voice platforms is often enthusiastic, social science research on the dynamics and impacts of these initiatives lags far behind, and the limited existing evidence does not yet support unqualified optimism.[3] This study is distinctive in that it draws on a recent round of unusually comprehensive empirical studies that involve both large-scale surveys and access to government agency data. This new research suggests that the key dynamics that drive both voice and institutional response may be different from some of the widely held impressions projected by the media, donors and platform developers. Take, for example, the case of the Kenyan urban water agency's MajiVoice (see also Welle, Williams and Pearce, this *IDS Bulletin*), a large-scale user-feedback system widely presented as an ICT-enabled voice platform. Recent surveys find significant evidence of institutional response, grounded in an effective complaint tracking system – yet three quarters of the complaints are filed in person, 21 per cent by phone and less than 3 per cent by Short Message Service (SMS) or online (Belcher and Abreu-Lopes 2016, forthcoming).

Third, the focus on the potential for citizen voice to improve public service delivery involves at least four distinct yet overlapping arenas of practice – the open data movement, open government reforms, anti-corruption efforts and social accountability initiatives. In spite of the apparent new policy consensus that all these good things go together, in practice, the limited synergy between these distinct approaches suggests that the whole is still not greater than the sum of the parts (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). Most of these governance reform approaches rely heavily on the potential power of information to stimulate voice, yet they assign information different

roles. There are several conceptual challenges involved in specifying the causal mechanisms that may link voice and institutional response – aside from the empirical questions involved (documenting uptake is more straightforward than institutional response). The first analytical challenge is to disentangle voice from responsiveness. Much of the first wave of research on ICT-enabled voice platforms focuses primarily on citizen uptake (e.g. Gigler and Bailur 2014), without clear evidence that the feedback loop actually closes. In practice, the concept of the feedback loop is often used to imply that uptake (e.g. citizen usage of crowd-sourced platforms to report feedback) *necessarily* leads to positive institutional responses. In other words, there is a high degree of optimism embedded in the way the concept tends to be used. In contrast, the framework proposed here avoids this assumption by treating the degree of institutional response as an open question.

The second conceptual challenge is to specify the relationship between the role of ICT-enabled voice platforms and the broader question of the relationship between transparency and accountability. In spite of the widely held view that 'sunshine is the best disinfectant', the empirical literature on the relationship between transparency and accountability is far from clear (Fox 2007; Gaventa and McGee 2013; Peixoto 2013). The assumed causal mechanism is that transparency will inform and stimulate collective action, which in turn will provoke an appropriate institutional response (Brockmyer and Fox 2015; Fox 2014).[4] In this model, both analysts and practitioners have only just begun to spell out the process behind that collective action (Fung, Graham and Weil 2007; Joshi 2014; Lieberman, Posner and Tsai 2014). In light of widely held unrealistic expectations about the 'power of sunshine', convincing propositions about the causal mechanisms involved need to specify how and why the availability of an ICT platform (1) would *motivate* citizen action and (2) *why* the resulting user feedback would motivate improvements in service provision. After all, decision-makers' lack of information about problems is not the only cause of low-quality service provision.

Third, the relationship between ICT-enabled voice platforms and the transparency/accountability question is complicated by the fact that, in practice, a significant subset of those platforms does not publicly disclose the user feedback. Yet if citizen voice is not made visible to *other* citizens, where does its leverage come from? Such feedback systems aggregate data – by asking citizens to share their assessments of service provision – but if the resulting information is not made public, then it cannot inform citizen action. In these systems, if users' input is going to influence service provision, voice must activate 'teeth' through a process *other* than public transparency – such as the use of data dashboards that inform senior managers' discretionary application of administrative discipline.

These conceptual propositions suggest that it is relevant to distinguish explicitly between two different accountability pathways that link voice and 'teeth' – shorthand for institutional willingness and capacity to respond (Fox 2014). In *downwards accountability* relationships, service

Table 1 **How does voice trigger teeth? Upwards and downwards accountability**

	Primary causal mechanism	
Voice pathway	Upwards accountability	Downwards accountability
Individual user feedback	From front-line service providers to managers and policymakers by identifying problems and triggering administrative action	
Collective civic action		From public sector to society, by bringing external pressure to bear and raising the political cost of non-responsiveness

Source Authors' own.

providers are held accountable by citizen voice and action. The arrow of answerability points downwards, insofar as it is driven by the potential political cost to policymakers of not responding to a publicly visible concern. In contrast, in *upwards accountability* relationships, front-line and middle-level service providers are held accountable to senior policymakers and programme managers, who use the user information to take administrative action. The arrow of answerability points upwards. In this approach, the incentives for policymakers to act on user information are less clear. Clearly, both mechanisms can operate together, but they are empirically and analytically distinct (see Table 1).

Based on these conceptual propositions, this review of 23 ICT-enabled voice platforms distinguishes between two different types of citizen voice, 'user feedback' and 'civic action'. While these two approaches can overlap in practice, they are analytically distinct. Their common denominator is the use of dedicated ICT platforms to solicit and collect feedback on public service delivery. The differences between them involve three dimensions: (1) whether the feedback provided is disclosed; (2) through which pathway individual or collective citizens' preferences and views are expressed; and (3) whether these mechanisms tend to promote downwards or upwards accountability. Note that this analytical approach differs from the World Bank's current policy framework, which considers user feedback to be a variant of 'citizen engagement' (World Bank 2014a). The approach proposed here, in contrast, does not treat the adjectives 'citizen' and 'civic' as pure synonyms (though they overlap). We use *citizen* (as in 'citizen voice') to refer to individual, non-public actions, while *civic* refers to public, collective actions.[5] The two approaches are potentially mutually reinforcing and in practice, some voice platforms combine them (see Figure 1).

With regard to the first dimension, we will assess cases in terms of the extent to which the feedback provided by individuals is publicly disclosed or not, thus enabling citizens to potentially act to hold governments

Figure 1 **Unpacking user feedback and civic action: difference and overlap**
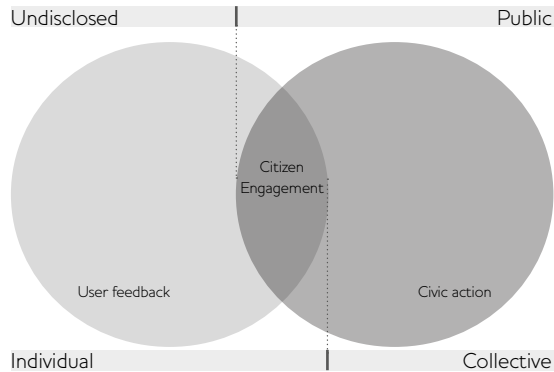
Source Authors' own.

accountable. Citizens' capacity to hold governments accountable depends, among other things, on the accessibility of publicly available relevant and actionable information (Fung, Graham and Weil 2007). In this respect, whether the feedback provided by citizens on service delivery is publicised or not is directly related to the extent to which citizens can hold governments accountable for their performance and actions. Thus, a first distinction between user feedback and civic engagement is that, while a growing number of ICT platforms collect input from individuals, only user feedback that is made public counts here as civic engagement (in Figure 1, this is the area of overlap between the two circles, involving both individual feedback and public disclosure).

For instance, in the case of the Punjab Proactive Governance model, the government solicits feedback via mobile phones on the quality of services provided on a large scale, on an ongoing basis (Bhatti, Zall Kusek and Verheijen 2015). However, the feedback provided is not disclosed to the public, only to senior policymakers, as it is intended to inform internal administrative monitoring processes. This process does not contribute to citizens' ability to *act* based on the feedback. In contrast, Uruguay's Por Mi Barrio is a mobile and web-based platform that enables Montevideo's citizens to report problems like vandalism and breakdowns of public infrastructure. The problems reported, and the actions taken in response by government (e.g. repaired, or not), are displayed on a map on the public website. Not only is the government able to act on citizen reports, the publication of the feedback makes it possible for citizens to hold governments accountable.

The second dimension that we use to categorise platforms assesses the mechanisms by which citizens' views and preferences are expressed – either individually or collectively. Individualised mechanisms refer to those that do not involve collective action, yet the feedback provided by a single individual is expected to trigger a response, possibly through aggregation in order to identify problem areas in public service delivery.

Box 1 Whose voices are they?

Whose voices are expressing themselves on ICT-enabled governmental service delivery feedback platforms? What kinds of bias may be involved? ICT platforms can potentially select for some kinds of responses over others. This can happen in at least two distinct ways – differential access to communication of feedback, and categorisation of user input that pre-selects for certain categories.

First, the subset of citizens who engage with ICT systems may or may not represent the concerns of those citizens who lack ICT access, such as rural women or people without access to formal education. This is the case with UR's U-Reporters, one quarter of whom are government employees (Mellon, Peixoto and Sjoberg 2015), and who under-represent the low-income, rural citizens who are most in need of public services. Indeed, the whole notion of user feedback suggests that the target group is limited to those citizens who ostensibly should have access but have problems in practice – such as those who have a water connection, but lack water. This implicit framing excludes those who are not included in water systems, clinics, schools or public security in the first place – and therefore not considered 'users'.

Second, as citizen concerns are input into government agency data systems for aggregation and transmission upwards to senior managers, administrative legibility requires them to be categorised into lists of pre-existing categories, which may also select for some kinds of citizen priorities to the exclusion of others – as in the case of issues that are priorities for low-income urban women, as Ranganathan found in her study of e-redressal systems in Karnataka (2012). To sum up, the framing of the main questions addressed in this study – whether or not ICT service delivery feedback platforms lead to uptake, and whether or not such voice in turn leads to service delivery response – does not address two relevant questions: whose voice is projected, and how inclusive the feedback agenda is.

This is the case, for instance, of web-based citizen reporting initiatives such as Por Mi Barrio, FixMyStreet in Georgia and I Paid a Bribe in India. In these cases, each individual report of very specific service issues needing attention is assumed to be enough to lead to a governmental response. In contrast, collective mechanisms refer to those in which it is the magnitude, nature and intensity of the aggregation of citizen concerns that is expected to trigger governmental action. Examples of platforms for collective voice include online petitions such as Change.org and mobile and web-voting in Brazil's state-wide Rio Grande do Sul participatory budgeting (PB) process. In both initiatives, it is the collective
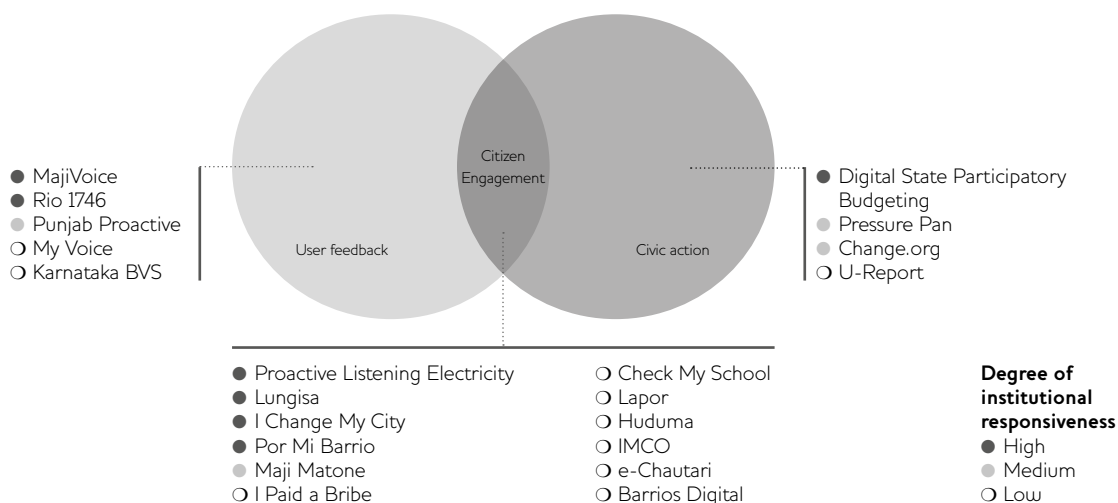
mobilisation around a cause or preference that is intended to trigger government responsiveness. The core of the technological platforms that support these mechanisms lies in the reduction of transaction costs for collective action that can address policy agenda-setting, in contrast to reacting to policy outputs. This collective dimension, we argue, is what gives the character of 'civic-ness' to ICT-enabled voice platforms, insofar as they enable individuals to engage in collective action – or at least to address public concerns. In contrast to feedback systems that receive individual reactions to specific service delivery problems, ICT platforms that enable the public aggregation of citizens' views have more potential to constitute input into the setting of broader policy priorities. This potential civic agenda-setting contribution goes beyond the conventional understanding of feedback, in which the agendas that citizens are supposed to respond to are set from above (see Box 1).

Thus, our conceptual distinction can be summarised as follows: citizen feedback initiatives provide feedback from individual clients of services. Where such feedback is not publicly disclosed, the causal pathway to governmental response is via upwards accountability, from front-line and mid-level public servants to senior managers and policymakers. Conversely, civic engagement refers to mechanisms where the feedback is publicly disclosed, which allows for collective action and downwards accountability to also take place. Figure 1 illustrates our conceptual model.

On the left side of Figure 1 (light grey) feedback is individual and undisclosed, which we can describe as a typical case of governmental user-feedback platforms. On the right side (dark grey), citizen voice is simultaneously collective and disclosed, meeting the two criteria for our definition of civic engagement. At the intersection point, however, we find platforms that both collect individually specific feedback *and* make those inputs public (sometimes also reporting whether and how the government responds). This overlap involves the fact that, while individualised feedback mechanisms are not designed to spur online collective action *within* the platform itself, the fact that the feedback is publicised may inform and facilitate collective action – offline as well as online. This may be the case, for instance, when the sum of individual feedback in a certain platform, such as FixMyStreet, reveals to the public the patterns of failure in a certain service, or in certain locations. In this case, even though the platform is not specifically designed to support collective action, the disclosure of evidence of patterns of failure in a given service may support well-targeted collective action to address service delivery problems.

Figure 2 presents the diagram populated with the cases we analyse in this study. The platforms that generated a high degree of tangible response from the service delivery agencies are indicated in black (7 of 23). High responsiveness to citizen voice is measured here as tangible service delivery agency action, registered in more than half of cases. In eight cases, user uptake was high – though only three of these were also among the eight cases of high responsiveness.

Figure 2 Mapping citizen voice platforms and degrees of institutional responsiveness

- ● MajiVoice
- ● Rio 1746
- ● Punjab Proactive
- ○ My Voice
- ○ Karnataka BVS

Citizen Engagement

User feedback

Civic action

- ● Digital State Participatory Budgeting
- ● Pressure Pan
- ● Change.org
- ○ U-Report

- ● Proactive Listening Electricity
- ● Lungisa
- ● I Change My City
- ● Por Mi Barrio
- ● Maji Matone
- ○ I Paid a Bribe

- ○ Check My School
- ○ Lapor
- ○ Huduma
- ○ IMCO
- ○ e-Chautari
- ○ Barrios Digital

Degree of institutional responsiveness
- ● High
- ● Medium
- ○ Low

Source Authors' own.

As shown in Figure 2, approximately a quarter of the cases are found in the user-feedback category, another quarter in the civic action category, and 14 of 23 at the intersection between those two, called citizen engagement here. The cases in the user-feedback category are mostly web- and mobile-based systems for collecting citizen views on the provision of services in a specific sector, such as electricity, water and health. Here the service provider plays either a passive or an active role in the collection of feedback. In the first role, the citizen voluntarily initiates the contact to report an issue with public services via mobile- or web-based systems – sometimes in combination with offline, face-to-face citizen attention windows (as in the case of MajiVoice in Kenya). One large-scale example in this category is Lapor, Indonesia's complaints handling system, which allows citizens to submit their reports on issues ranging from teacher absenteeism to damaged roads through a number of channels which include SMS, mobile apps and social media.

The user-feedback category also includes a second mechanism by which data is collected, which we call 'proactive listening' – also called 'proactive feedback' by its practitioners (Bhatti, Zall Kusek and Verheijen 2015; Masud 2015). Here, government service providers proactively reach out to citizens in order to gather feedback from them on the quality of services received. This mechanism is best illustrated by Punjab's Citizen Feedback Model, where a system generates SMS and calls to public service users in order to ask them about satisfaction with the services received and potential corruption incidents. The Punjab government has deployed this approach on an unprecedentedly massive scale, with more than 6 million outreach calls so far. Recent large-scale surveys of service users have found that these outreach efforts actually reached and received responses from 15 per cent of citizens called

(Bayern 2015; World Bank 2015). EDE Este, an electricity distribution company in the Dominican Republic, also does large-scale, proactive surveys of its service users. The initiative combines a traditional complaints handling mechanism with proactive outreach to users. This online/mobile phone platform allows citizens to report problems with electricity services, ranging from malfunctioning connections to bribe requests by maintenance crews. Following the handling of the complaint (e.g. re-connection of electricity), the company proactively re-contacts a random sample of users to gather feedback on the quality of services provided. The feedback received is systematically used to inform sanctions (e.g. administrative procedures) and rewards (e.g. performance-related wage bonuses for company workers). Since its implementation in 2011, the initiative has recorded growing resolution rates of reported issues, with close to 100 per cent of the feedback provided indicating good or excellent levels of satisfaction.[6] The average of instances of disrespectful treatment of clients registered at the beginning of the project was drastically reduced, and reported cases of corruption fell by 70 per cent.

The majority of platforms make their citizen feedback public (18 of 23). Out of the five that do not disclose the feedback, two are governmental and three involve donor agencies in collaboration with governments. Conversely, all of the CSO-driven initiatives publicise the input given by citizens. This finding makes particular sense if one considers the *directionality* of accountability relations. User-feedback initiatives (i.e. not disclosed) are more likely to be implemented by governments or donors, where service providers are held accountable to a higher authority (upwards accountability). Conversely, given that CSOs have few means to hold providers directly accountable, they rely essentially on downwards accountability mechanisms, where the driving force of institutional responsiveness – at least hypothetically – is the exposure of the behaviour of service providers *vis-à-vis* citizens. No pattern seems to emerge when looking at disclosure of feedback and institutional responsiveness, however. In user-feedback initiatives (where feedback is not disclosed and there is no collective action), the four cases are equally split between low and high levels of institutional responsiveness. A similar pattern emerges when examining citizen engagement initiatives: public disclosure of feedback does not seem to lead – *per se* – to increased responsiveness from providers.

In 14 cases, the provision of input through the dedicated platform is complemented by some type of offline action to prompt governments to respond and/or to monitor government responsiveness. This is the case, for instance, of the Rio Grande do Sul PB process, in which citizens are periodically elected to monitor the implementation of investments prioritised through a voting process (Spada *et al*. 2015). In MajiVoice, the responsiveness of the water service agency is actively monitored by the members of the Water Services Regulatory Board, which can trigger legal actions against service providers when they fail to meet pre-established quality standards (Belcher and Abreu-Lopes 2016,

forthcoming). Yet, offline action does not seem to ensure responsiveness by itself, as illustrated by the cases of e-Chautari in Nepal and Barrios Digital in Bolivia. However, among the 14 cases, the evidence is insufficient to verify that the intensity and regularity of these offline actions varies.

In the category of civic action initiatives, where response involves online collective action, we find four different cases, with varying degrees of institutional responsiveness. The Rio Grande do Sul Digital PB process has a high level of institutional responsiveness, while the online petition platform Change.org and the Brazilian initiative Pressure Pan both have medium levels. A possible explanation of the different responsiveness levels is the difference in institutional design. Digital PB in Rio Grande do Sul is a governmental initiative mandated by state legislation. As such, all of the citizen-generated social investment proposals that are approved through the participatory process are officially included in the state's budget, with a number of them effectively carried out by the state government.[7] The other two initiatives are platforms that allow any citizen to initiate collective action to petition or exert pressure on the government to take an action towards any public agenda. This open-endedness means that the platforms can launch both some actions that trigger extensive uptake and mobilisations, and many that fail to generate follow-up. This potential for a large denominator, in terms of the total number of initiatives, would affect the overall percentage of petitions that trigger responsiveness. Indeed, some data seems to suggest the importance of mobilisation capacity: online petitions on Change.org are substantively more likely to be successful when sponsored by an organisation (World Bank 2015), and citizen campaigns through Pressure Pan are three times more likely to succeed when receiving mobilisation support from Pressure Pan's staff. This evidence resonates with the proposition that the effectiveness of digital technologies in social mobilisation depends on offline structures of organisation and influence (Fung, Gilman and Shkabatur 2013). Finally, we find the widely recognised case of U-Report (UR) in Uganda, with low level of institutional responsiveness, which we shall discuss later.

In terms of the institutional actors that drive the voice initiatives, 12 are led by CSOs, six by governments, and five by donors. Out of the seven initiatives with high levels of responsiveness, four are government-led and three CSO-led. Civil society and governments seem equally capable of creating platforms and processes that engender responsiveness. However, the three CSO high-response initiatives all share a common trait in that they involve partnerships with government. In other words, in *all* of the cases of high institutional responsiveness, the government is either leading the process or plays the role of a partner. However, not all of the initiatives involving government–CSO partnerships led to high levels of institutional responsiveness, as illustrated by the cases of I Paid a Bribe and Check My School, both of which had low percentages of issues raised by citizens that led to documented agency responses. Seen together, these findings seem to suggest that while partnership

with government is not a sufficient condition for the responsiveness of CSO-led initiatives, it may well be an enabling one. Finally, while the initiatives showing medium and high degrees of institutional responsiveness involve both CSO and government-driven efforts, we find no donor-driven platforms that led to institutional responsiveness. While we do not claim our sample to be representative and the results may be skewed due to the small number of donor-driven cases analysed, these patterns suggest future research paths, focusing on the role that different drivers may play in institutional responsiveness.

When examining uptake, citizen use of platforms (an output) should not be equated with institutional responsiveness (an outcome). This sample includes significant cases that combined high uptake with low responsiveness. The case of UR, UNICEF's social monitoring system for young Ugandans, provides compelling evidence for this point. Created in 2007, this SMS-based platform runs weekly polls with registered users on a broad range of issues (e.g. child marriage, access to education). To inform public debate, the results of the polls are widely disseminated through the project's website and diverse mass media outlets, including a variety of formats such as newspaper articles, radio shows and even a documentary broadcast on major Ugandan TV channels. Members of Parliament (MPs) are UR's main policy audience. Aligned with a vision of real-time data collection to inform policymaking that goes beyond sending weekly newsletters with poll results to MPs, UNICEF also provides MPs with access to the platform to reach out to their audiences. The number of registered users (U-Reporters) has grown steadily since its launch, recently reaching more than 299,000 (Bayern 2015; World Bank 2015). UNICEF describes UR as a '"killer app" for communication towards achieving equitable outcomes for children and their families' (UNICEF 2012). This enthusiastic view of UR has resonated in development circles, with the free SMS-based platform currently being rolled out in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Nigeria and Mexico.

Uptake is not a problem for UR in terms of numbers, and it leverages the potential of mobile phones as a means to 'listen at scale'. However, 47 per cent of UR participants have some university education and one quarter are government employees, raising questions about whose voices are being projected (see Box 1). Furthermore, until recently very little was known about the extent to which UR's take-up was translated into any type of institutional responsiveness. A new detailed evaluation of UR finds no systematic evidence of UR affecting policy, let alone MPs' behaviour in terms of representation, legislation and oversight (Berdou and Abreu-Lopes 2015). UR emerges thus as a significant case that illustrates the need to separate uptake (as an output), from institutional responsiveness (as an outcome).

To conclude the discussion of these empirical findings, one of the most noticeable patterns is the existence of numerous digital engagement initiatives that meet dead ends despite different pathways – at least in

the relatively short run. The majority of the 23 cases studied led to low levels of institutional responsiveness, with 11 reporting medium to high levels (defined conservatively as leading to at least 20 per cent response rates). Notably, the multiple dead ends do not seem to be motivated by the absence of any one specific factor. None of these variables appear to be a *sufficient* condition for institutional responsiveness, suggesting that none of these factors can be considered as a 'magic bullet'. The findings suggest multiple pathways to institutional responsiveness – involving the convergence of multiple, mutually reinforcing factors. If one factor does stand out, however, it is government involvement, insofar as four of the six cases of government-led voice platforms were associated with high rates of service delivery responsiveness.

3 Conclusion

This study reviewed cases of ICT-enabled voice platforms where evidence of institutional response was available. As suggested in our introduction, in the 'yelp' feedback loop model, proponents tend to assume that user feedback to identify service delivery problems is sufficient to induce service providers to respond. This review of the evidence from 23 ICT-enabled platforms finds that this implicit market model, in which (individual) demands for good services produces its own supply, is not sufficient to leverage institutional response. That leaves open the question of what determines the 'supply' of institutional responsiveness, and how ICT-enabled voice platforms can make a difference.

The determinants of service provider agency responsiveness to citizen feedback can be understood as involving both willingness and capacity. The first refers to intent and motivations, the second refers to the leverage provided by institutional tools to translate that into actual practices. In some cases, institutional design[8] and a strong sense of commitment to organisational mission at the top encourage willingness to respond. In these cases, the key role of ICT platforms is to bolster capacity to respond – as with MajiVoice's water provision in Kenya. Some policymakers may come from professions with a strong sense of mission, while others may be more concerned about the potential political risk associated with dissatisfied citizens. Systematic collection of feedback, if it reveals both the depth and breadth of citizen concern, can appeal to either set of motivations – professional commitment to mission, or political risk aversion. These two sets of *motivations* for responsiveness do not appear to be directly influenced by ICT voice platforms.

In contrast, the determinants of senior manager *capacity* to respond to citizen voice are different. Platforms' institutional and technical design features will determine the precision with which user problems are identified, which is crucial to identify *which* service providers are responsible. The cases studied suggest that it is crucial for user complaints to be routed to entities *within* the service providing agency that have some incentive and capacity to respond. Specifically, experiences with the most high-impact platforms, such as the Dominican electricity agency and MajiVoice in Kenya, suggest that direct links

between governmental feedback reception systems and internal work order systems greatly increase policymakers' capacity to determine whether and how complaints have been resolved, which appears to be a necessary condition for effective institutional response. Similarly, two of the most successful CSO platforms – Por Mi Barrio in Uruguay and I Change My City in India – are connected to existing governmental service provider complaint systems. These are examples of the institutional questions that play crucial roles as intervening variables that shape whether or not voice triggers teeth to act. The proposition that emerges here is that regardless of their motivations, policymakers with a commitment to bolstering institutional responsiveness should in principle have an incentive to: (1) institute tracking systems that directly link complaints to institutional responses and (2) to publicly disclose both citizen feedback and data regarding institutional response – in order to both inform and validate subsequent citizen action, and to potentially 'name and shame' non-performing units with their agency.

To conclude, 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 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.

In summary, ICT platforms can bolster upwards accountability if they link citizen voice to policymaker capacity to see and respond to service delivery problems. This matters when policymakers already care. Where the challenge is how to get policymakers to care in the first place, then the question is how ICT platforms can bolster downwards accountability by enabling the collective action needed to give citizen voice some bite.

Notes

1 This also included an international platform, Change.org. The data analysis in that case referred to a total of 132 countries (World Bank 2014b).

2 Making All Voices Count is supported by DFID, USAID, Sida and the Omidyar Network.

3 The current enthusiasm – among development stakeholders and the media – over the potential of technology in citizen participation in the

developing world is reminiscent of the wave of optimism surrounding such initiatives in Europe over the past decade, despite the significantly less favourable conditions of developing countries. Even in Europe, with generous funding and a more favourable institutional and technological context, most experiences present limited results at best (see, for instance, Prieto-Martín, de Marcos and Martínez 2011; Susha and Grönlund 2014; Diecker and Galan 2014).

4 Note that this widely assumed causal mechanism does not distinguish explicitly between two different kinds of accountability – preventative (reforms that make *future* transgressions more transparent) and reactive (answerability and the possibility of sanctions).

5 Note that this usage differs somewhat from the dichotomy between 'individual action = user/client/beneficiary' and 'collective action = citizen'. The terms as used here recognise that citizens can express voice as individuals, but suggests that for citizen *action* to be considered civic it should be public and collective (though possibly anonymous – as in the case of voting). For a comprehensive discussion, see Cornwall (2002), among others.

6 Virgilio Reyes, summary of statistics sent to author, personal communication, 17 November 2014.

7 We do not assess, however, levels of budget execution.

8 In the case of MajiVoice, for instance, degrees of responsiveness can be explained by the modality of contracts between government and service providers (renewable upon performance) as well as the creation of an oversight structure to monitor government response. See Belcher and Abreu-Lopes (2016, forthcoming).

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ICTs Help Citizens Voice Concerns over Water – Or Do They?

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Abstract Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are widely seen as a new avenue for citizens to hold service providers and government to account. But if citizens live in rural Africa, Asia or Latin America, are they able and willing to report on service delivery failures? And are service providers or government officials willing to listen and respond? We explore these questions using an analysis of recent ICT reporting initiatives to improve rural water sustainability. The findings demonstrate that models where a service provider is committed to responsiveness and designs an in-house fault-reporting and maintenance system show greater responsiveness and accountability to users than crowdsourcing models where users are encouraged to report faults. This raises the question of whether ICT is transformative, or whether service improvement simply hinges on making service provision designs more accountable.

1 Introduction

A key challenge in the rural water supply sector is to render existing water services more sustainable for citizens. Current data suggest that across sub-Saharan Africa, over a third of rural water supply systems are in disrepair. There have been many attempts to enhance sustainability through increased accountability. In the last decade, information and communications technologies (ICTs) have become more prominent as a way of encouraging citizens to report on broken-down water points, thereby increasing repair rates. While some of these initiatives are well documented, there has not yet been a systematic analysis of the potential role of ICTs in enhancing service sustainability, or of the specific factors that inhibit or facilitate such changes. This article, based on research funded under Making All Voices Count (MAVC)[1] and carried out by WaterAid, the International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) and Itad, intends to contribute to closing this knowledge gap. We argue that ICTs do not necessarily increase accountability, but are rather a means to an end; whether accountability and sustainability are improved depends on who deploys ICTs, and how.

We review the literature on the potentials and pitfalls of ICTs in improving the accountability of service delivery in international

development, before presenting the specific context of rural water supply, the problems of making services more sustainable, and the current enthusiasm for using ICTs to achieve this. Our key findings are based on a comparative analysis of eight ICT initiatives which shows what facilitates or inhibits successful repairs based on ICT reporting. These findings are complemented with in-depth analysis of one case study, the Mobile Phones for Water (M4W) initiative in Uganda, which examines how a newly introduced ICT-based reporting system changed local accountability dynamics. We conclude that crowdsourcing may not be the most appropriate route to social accountability in rural water supply, that social accountability mechanisms are unlikely to address flaws in existing service delivery models, and that ICTs may be overrated as a 'silver bullet' for increasing responsiveness and accountability in service delivery.

2 ICTs in the quest for improving social accountability in service delivery

In the area of service delivery, the 2004 World Development Report *Making Services Work for Poor People* (World Bank 2003) has shaped the way we frame accountability relations between citizens, service providers and policymakers. It suggests two avenues for increasing accountability in service delivery: the 'short route' of direct interaction between citizens and providers to improve services, and the 'long route' of citizens putting pressure on policymakers who influence service delivery. In this context, the term 'social accountability' refers to 'the set of tools that citizens can use to influence the quality of service delivery by holding providers accountable' (Ringold *et al.* 2012: 7), and the responsiveness of policymakers and providers towards citizens. It includes interventions to inform citizens about the services they are entitled to, and interventions to enable citizens to report and redress their grievances if things go wrong.

The use of ICTs has transformed communications. Between 2000 and 2012, mobile phone penetration has grown rapidly across the world, with the highest growth rate −from 1 per cent to 54 per cent − registered in sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the lowest penetration rate (GSMA 2012). This increase notwithstanding, mobile phone access varies widely between countries, and network connectivity remains problematic, particularly in remote, rural areas.

Scholars disagree over the potential for more accountable governance provided by new technological possibilities (Fung, Gilman and Shkabatur 2013). While technology-focused scientists highlight the transformative power of new technologies for democracy, political scientists are more sceptical, drawing attention to underlying incentive structures and the role of institutions in influencing how transformative ICT innovations can become in opening up existing social accountability mechanisms. Incremental models of ICT engagement are seen as more likely to lead to transformative changes in politics (Fung *et al.* 2013). In a similar vein, scholars who investigate the role of

ICTs in the governance of service delivery are cautious about equating technology with greater transparency and accountability (Avila *et al.* 2010), and call for a better analysis of the underlying factors affecting political changes (Bailur and Gigler 2014).

3 Social accountability in rural water supply

A key challenge in rural water supply is the number of water points that quickly fall into disrepair. While access to water supply has increased considerably over the last 20 years, now covering 89 per cent of the world population (WHO/UNICEF 2014), approximately one third of rural water supply systems in sub-Saharan Africa are non-functional at any given moment (Foster 2013; Rural Water Supply Network 2009).[2] The reasons for this are manifold (Harvey and Reed 2004; WaterAid 2011), but a key factor is the prevailing service delivery model of community-based management, under which most rural water supply infrastructure is provided by national governments, donor organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but subsequent management is the primary responsibility of the users (Lockwood and Smits 2011).

The water sector, traditionally dominated by a focus on technical solutions, has witnessed growing concerns about governance as key to improving services (Plummer and Slaymaker 2007). While some early discussion of water sector governance did not progress beyond establishing basic principles (Rogers and Hall 2003), other contributors explicitly drew attention to unpacking the politics of service delivery (Cleaver and Franks 2008) and tabled the lack of accountability and responsiveness to citizens (Tropp 2005) as a key obstacle. Increased attention to water sector governance is reflected in the growing use of social accountability mechanisms[3] to hold governments to account (Velleman 2010) and the introduction of conceptual frameworks for analysing accountability relations and governance failures (Jacobsen *et al.* 2013; Plummer and Slaymaker 2007). Despite growing interest in social accountability tools, their impact is not yet well understood; Joshi's (2013) review of transparency and accountability across different service delivery sectors finds mixed success.

In the water sector, there is strong enthusiasm for using ICTs to facilitate a wide range of service-related activities. Innovations range from using ICTs for inventories and infrastructure monitoring, to monitoring and reporting on service provision, billing and payment systems (CoWater International and University of Cape Town iComms 2014); the potential for using ICTs to improve governance and accountability is also widely discussed (Dickinson and Bostoen 2013; Hutchings *et al.* 2012; Pearce, Dickinson and Welle 2015; Pearce, Welle and Dickinson 2013).

On the ground, ICTs are increasingly explored as an avenue for citizens to receive information about services and to report service delivery failures, using technologies including community radio, short message services (SMS), mobile-based calls, mobile phone applications, websites and interactive mapping. However, there are still technical barriers for

mobile network access in rural areas, meaning that mobile networks are periodically down, or that people need to travel to connect (Dickinson and Bostoen 2013). Furthermore, some caution that the political space provided for citizens to hold policymakers to account via ICTs may in reality be limited, and be strongly dependent on the wider political context (Wesselink, Hoppe and Lemmens 2015).

So what really is the potential of ICTs for improving social accountability between citizens, service providers and policymakers? To help answer this question, we present findings from comparative analysis of ICT-based reporting mechanisms in improving the sustainability of rural water services, and a case study that examines how the introduction of an ICT-based reporting system in Uganda affected social accountability dynamics between users, local handpump mechanics and government staff in Kabarole District.

4 Findings from comparing eight ICT initiatives

Our study compared eight ICT initiatives from an original list of over 50.[4] The eight cases, summarised in Table 1, all aim at improving water service sustainability. Two (Sistema Informasaun Bee no Saneamentu (SIBS) in Timor-Leste and Re-imagining Reporting in Bolivia) target sector budgeting and planning rather than specific water scheme repairs, while three others cover urban rather than rural users. The scope of the initiatives varies widely – from 50 water kiosks in one town, to a whole country. The initiatives also differ in their ICT-based reporting methods: while several rely predominantly on crowdsourcing – water users or their representatives sending failure reports – others rely on either the service provider, government or NGO staff collecting data on a regular basis.

Table 1 **Key characteristics of ICT initiatives**

Initiative	Rural/urban	Crowdsourcing or led by government, NGO or service provider	Data collected periodically or related to specific incidents	Scope
M4W, Uganda	Rural	Crowdsourcing	Specific incidents	Eight districts
MajiVoice, Kenya	Urban	Crowdsourcing	Specific incidents	Two cities
Maji Matone, Tanzania	Rural	Crowdsourcing	Specific incidents	Three districts
Next Drop, India	Urban	Crowdsourcing	Specific incidents	Three cities
SIBS, Timor-Leste	Rural	Government-led	Periodically	National
Re-imagining Reporting, Bolivia	Rural	NGO-led	Periodically	Six municipalities
Human Sensor Web, Zanzibar	Urban	Crowdsourcing	Specific incidents	50 water kiosks in one town
Smart Handpumps, Kenya	Rural	Service provider-led	Periodically	66 handpumps in one district

Source Welle *et al.* (2015).

	Smart Handpumps	M4W	Maji Matone	MajiVoice	SIBS	Re-imagining Reporting	Next Drop	Human Sensor Web
Outcome 1: Successful ICT reporting	1	0[6]	0	1	1	1	1	0
Outcome 2: Successful ICT report processing	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0
Outcome 3: Successful service improvements	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0

Source Welle *et al.* (2015).

We investigated three related outcomes that we saw as essential building blocks to achieving water service sustainability: successful ICT reporting, successful ICT report processing, and successful service improvements through water scheme repairs. Table 2 shows the patterns of success (marked as '1') and failure (marked as '0') for each outcome across all eight initiatives. Below, we discuss some of the key factors for success or failure that also provide insights on social accountability relations.[5]

The results for successful ICT reporting show that three of the five initiatives based on crowdsourcing were not successful in reporting, and that only two crowdsourcing urban initiatives were judged successful in reporting. Key factors preventing successful reporting among the unsuccessful crowdsourcing initiatives included contextual factors such as poor internet connection and problems with charging phones, as well as factors directly linked to the design of the initiative, such as citizens preferring alternative ways of reporting a problem to the proposed mechanism of sending a relatively costly SMS. In the case of the Human Sensor Web, which operated in the urban environment of Zanzibar town, mobile phone reception and charging phones was not a problem. Instead, the initiative was hampered by low levels of trust and low expectation, based on previous experience, that the service provider would make improvements, which proved a disincentive to sending text messages (McCall, Martinez and Verplanke 2013). This was mirrored by supporting NGO Daraja's analysis of the reasons for the failure of Maji Matone in Tanzania, which shows that low expectations and prevailing apathy – as well as worries over being identified when reporting failures – were key obstacles to sending mobile-based failure reports (Daraja 2012). All initiatives that were unsuccessful in ICT reporting experienced challenges with the 'social design' – the consideration of social context when designing an ICT mechanism (Hutchings *et al.* 2012) – of their crowdsourcing. While changing from

SMS to mobile-based calls would overcome some of the social design challenges, lack of trust, prevailing apathy and fear of identification are harder to overcome, because they emanate from the wider cultural context in which these initiatives operate. Holding service providers or government to account via failure reports may not be appropriate in such contexts; instead of being transformative, the use of crowdsourcing as a reporting mechanism for rural water supply breakdowns may ultimately be counter-productive.

When comparing the results for successful ICT report processing, a key difference between the successful and unsuccessful initiatives was whether the operational costs were largely met by the service provider or government agency, or by a third party such as the NGO or research project supporting the initiative. We interpreted the incorporation of report processing costs by the provider or relevant government agency as a proxy indicator for the agency's ownership of the initiative. In relation to social accountability, this provides an indication of the service provider or government agency's commitment being responsive to citizens.

A high level of service provider responsiveness is demonstrated in the model used by the Smart Handpump initiative: a mobile phone chip built into the handpump handle sends regular reports about the level of pumping activity to a local maintenance provider. As soon as the data show an unexpected downtime, the maintenance provider can follow up with the responsible water user committee. This reporting model places the onus for action on the maintenance provider rather than on citizens. Importantly, the initiative includes an innovative maintenance model that facilitates swift follow-up of handpump breakdowns. The financial contributions from a number of water points are clustered to provide a sufficient level of funding, akin to an insurance where individual contributions are pooled to reduce individual risk. The maintenance provider can use these contributions to cover report processing and repair costs across the clustered water points (SSEE 2014).[7]

The achievement of successful rural water supply repairs[8] was linked to several of the classic factors in rural water supply sustainability: availability of sufficient funds, spare parts, access to a mechanic and clarity about operation and maintenance procedures among all actors (Harvey and Reed 2004; WaterAid 2011). For ICT initiatives that relied on the predominant sector model of community-based management, these were contextual factors, whereas for initiatives that included a maintenance model, they were factors directly under their control. The four successful initiatives were Smart Handpumps, Maji Matone, MajiVoice and Next Drop. A potential reason for Maji Matone's success in repairing schemes (two thirds of all reported breakdowns were repaired) was the close follow-up by district water engineers, who received a copy of each failure message. The other three successful initiatives – Smart Handpumps, MajiVoice and Next Drop – were also successful in ICT reporting and ICT report processing. The key characteristic that distinguishes these three initiatives from the rest is the leading role of the

service provider in all three of the outcome processes: ICT reporting, report processing and scheme repairs. This model relies on a high-level, demonstrated commitment to responsiveness from the service provider to its clients via better reporting and maintenance services. In comparison, the crowdsourcing initiatives – M4W, Maji Matone and Human Sensor Web (HSW) – all failed in successfully reporting failures via mobile phones. The social accountability model where citizens hold the service provider or policymaker to account via reporting water point breakdowns, service interruptions or poor quality, were not immediately successful. In the next section, we disentangle how ICT-based reporting impacted on accountability relations between water users, water user committees, handpump mechanics and district water offices for the case of M4W in Kabarole District, Uganda.

5 ICT reporting and social accountability dynamics under M4W in Kabarole, Uganda

The M4W initiative aimed to increase the functionality of rural drinking water supply through the reception of timely information. If a water supply system is broken down, a user sends a text message, which is forwarded to tell the relevant handpump mechanic to go to the site. The district water officer has access to the online database system and is responsible for keeping track of reports and associated repairs. Once a repair is completed, the officer marks the report as closed on the online database. The pilot project ran in eight districts in Uganda between 2011 and 2014 under a partnership between Triple-S, WaterAid, Makerere University and the Ministry of Water and Environment. According to an IRC policy brief (Abisa 2014) the M4W online database recorded 1,561 mobile phone-based failure reports between 2011 and 2014, of which 24 per cent resulted in repairs.[9]

The aim of the MAVC follow-up study was to investigate further the dynamics between users, water user committees, handpump mechanics and the district water officer that resulted in breakdowns being reported either via M4W, or through alternative means. Specifically, we wanted to understand the willingness and ability of citizens to report using M4W and the impact of the M4W reporting system on accountability relationships between these different stakeholders. The research team visited eight water points with reported breakdowns; five of them were reported through M4W (although only two reports could be found on the online database) and three were reported using alternative mechanisms. Our findings show similar results to an earlier research study of M4W conducted in Lira District (McGee and Carlitz 2013).

5.1 Accountability between water fetchers and water user committees
Under M4W's crowdsourcing reporting mechanism, any water fetcher or concerned citizen could, in theory, use their mobile phone to report a fault. But in practice this hardly happened. Instead, all four M4W reports that we investigated were made or initiated by a member of the water user committee or a local political leader. One hurdle was that an SMS to the M4W system needed to contain the identification code of the water

point, generally kept by the water user committee. Unique identification codes had originally been displayed on handpumps but many of them quickly peeled off. In addition, three of the eight visited communities had a strict process in place whereby individual water fetchers were not supposed to contact a handpump mechanic directly but to report to the water user committee, possibly reflecting a power imbalance between water fetchers and some committees that wish to maintain authority over reporting. In the other visited communities, water fetchers also generally preferred reporting to the committee for logistical reasons: water user committee members were more likely to have phones, were able to assess the water point breakdown further, could check about existing funds for repair and, based on this, call the handpump mechanic to negotiate about price. Our findings indicate that the M4W reporting system did not change the accountability relationships between water fetchers and their committees or introduce a new dynamic in the reporting process.

5.2 Accountability between water user committees and handpump mechanics
All water user committees visited reported good relationships with their handpump mechanics, and that there had been no problems in responding to breakdowns prior to the introduction of M4W. The handpump mechanics were well known in the area, with several also holding local political leadership positions. Most water user committees preferred calling or visiting the handpump mechanic to sending an SMS via M4W, which they saw as introducing some insecurity and delay to getting a response. In comparison, calling or visiting the handpump mechanic enabled the committee chair to further explain the problem, get potential cost estimates and agree a time for a follow-up visit. This was confirmed by the fact that several water user committees followed up with phone calls to the mechanics after an SMS had been sent. One committee chairman also stated that he would not use M4W again in the future, even though he understood how it worked, because it was more costly to send an SMS, as well as lengthening the mechanic's response time. From this perspective, the introduction of a non-instantaneous communication method between water user committees and handpump mechanics made communication between them less dependable, and did not aid accountability; it could also be argued that accountability relations between water user committees and handpump mechanics were already good, and did not need strengthening.

5.3 Accountability between water user committees and local government
Five of the eight water user committees interviewed were aware that they could call on the sub-county government (and via this route, the district water officer) to hold the mechanic to account if he did not respond, or if the repair was beyond his capacity. However, due to limited resource availability for repair works at district level and a large backlog of major repair works, the district water office needed to prioritise borehole rehabilitations that were part of the district work plan, and thus did not have any capacity to spontaneously respond to major repair requests identified through the M4W reporting system. While the majority of the interviewed committees assumed that the

sub-district government or district water office would be able to assist with major repairs following up on an M4W report, this was unlikely to be the case. It appears therefore that M4W did not facilitate a greater accountability relationship between the district water office and water user committees, as the budgeting process for water point repairs was not aligned with M4W. This was confirmed when examining the relationship between handpump mechanics and the district water office.

5.4 Accountability between handpump mechanics and the district water office

The handpump mechanics generally took the M4W system very seriously. Three out of the four mechanics interviewed believed that the district water officer would follow up with them if they did not respond quickly to an M4W report and mark the repair on the online database. This was confirmed by the handpump mechanics' encouragement of water user committees to log any breakdown report on the database system via an M4W report, and three of the four mechanics reporting that they had logged all completed repairs on the database. This strong accountability from the side of the handpump mechanics needs to be seen in relation to the local political context. Several mechanics, while not employees of the government, did hold local political leadership positions and/or were running as candidates for the upcoming elections; they were keen to demonstrate their value to the communities they served and to the district water office.

The district water officer, on his part, however, did not regularly check the M4W system to ensure that repairs were being made in response to M4W breakdown reports. For him, the ministry's reporting requirements – paper-based, and not aligned with M4W – were paramount.[10] At the same time, the district water officer also explained his reluctance to follow up M4W reports with handpump mechanics because of the lack of resources for fuel or allowances to support them in their work. So, while the responsiveness from the district water officer to the handpump mechanics based on M4W was weak, three out of the four interviewed handpump mechanics nonetheless felt that their accountability to the office had increased by using the M4W system. A hindrance to increasing accountability between handpump mechanics and the district water office was the lack of integration with the government's reporting and incentive system.

6 Conclusion

These findings indicate that crowdsourcing initiatives focused on supporting water fetchers and their representatives to hold service providers or policymakers to account, were not transformative. The comparative case study highlighted that ICT reporting via crowdsourcing in rural areas was hindered by contextual factors such as connectivity and mobile phone charging problems. But the success of these initiatives was also hindered by cultural barriers on the side of the users, including fear of identification and lack of confidence that service providers or government would respond to reports.

Box 1 **Findings from the Sensors, Empowerment, Accountability (SEMA) research project in Tanzania**

In Tanzania, a research project led by the University of Twente developed an ICT-based failure report design where community water and sanitation committees would send water scheme status reports to district water offices, elected local councillors and civil society organisations. However, the sector government stakeholders at the other side of the negotiation table argued that these reports provide technical information that was not appropriate for stakeholders outside the administrative structure. The Ministry of Water reportedly also considered that reports should be provided by village executive officers rather than user committees, in order to integrate reporting with the lowest governmental administrative structure. This small insight into the negotiation process between the project researchers and government officials highlights that the introduction of a mobile app as part of an official reporting procedure is highly dependent on the wider political context. Introducing a reporting procedure with the potential to open up governance is subject to the political power holders who sit at the negotiation table. The mobile app itself becomes a means to an end, rather than being transformative in itself.

Closer investigation of the M4W initiative also showed that the idea that any concerned citizen could send a water point failure report did not really take hold among water fetchers, and accountability relationships between water fetchers and user committees remained unchanged. If anything, the M4W system made reporting to handpump mechanics more cumbersome, and might have alienated committees from mechanics, had existing relations not been strong.

The positive change that stands out is the increased feeling of accountability from the side of the handpump mechanics. But this was not replicated by stronger responsiveness from the side of the district water officer for whom the sector's paper-based reporting system remained more important than M4W.

These findings are reflected by a growing body of evidence from the sector which includes the Daraja blogs (2012), and more recently an action research project in Tanzania (see Box 1) which concluded that 'public crowdsourcing in the context of empowerment and accountability regarding public services is not a viable approach in Tanzania at the present time' (Wesselink *et al.* 2015: 72).

The findings from our studies also show, albeit in different ways, that ICT initiatives focused on tools to hold government to account encountered a number of obstacles that they could not overcome. In particular, 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. This lack of responsiveness needs to be interpreted with the wider sector context in mind: the predominant rural service delivery model gives water users the main responsibility for operating and maintaining their systems. Any ICT initiatives that aim to improve rural water supply sustainability also need to tackle the accountability relationships that underpin the model of community-based management. This finding is significant in that it is potentially applicable to social accountability mechanisms in service delivery more widely.

Finally, the three ICT initiatives that were successful in ICT reporting, report processing and water scheme repairs, showed a substantial increase in the service provider's commitment to being responsive to water users. Putting the two urban initiatives to one side, it is the Smart Handpump model that stands out as the most promising model in increasing rural water supply sustainability via ICT reporting. However, it is not the ICT mechanism that is key to the potential success of this initiative. Instead, it is the innovative maintenance model linked to the ICT reporting mechanism that gives this initiative a potentially transformative character. This is an important lesson for the designers of ICT-based social accountability mechanisms: 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. In the case of the Smart Handpump initiative, this was a social accountability mechanism where the service provider takes overall responsibility for receiving failure reports *and* for ensuing repairs or service improvements.

Notes
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1 Making All Voices Count is supported by DFID, USAID, Sida and the Omidyar Network.
2 Region-wide figures on sustainability are not available for other parts of the world.
3 Popular tools include citizen and community score cards, and community and water point mapping.
4 Selection criteria: relevance of objectives to improving water service sustainability; availability of documentation or interview data on success and failure.
5 We cannot list here how we defined success and failure, and all the factors of success and failure that were considered, but they are in the full report of the research (Welle *et al.* 2015).
6 The M4W initiative was originally judged successful in ICT reporting because of project documentation that 1,561 SMS were received between 2011 and 2014. However, our follow-up study showed that the actual number of messages was substantially lower, and that some had been sent during training events. As a result, the outcome achievement was changed to '0' in this report.

7 The financial model was still being tested by the handpump initiative at the time of writing.

8 Re-imagining Reporting and SIBS were excluded from this analysis because they aimed at improved budgeting and planning for rural water supply rather than specific rural water scheme repairs.

9 However, field research revealed some inconsistencies between reports logged on the online database and reports from the field.

10 Handpump mechanics are also required to submit paper-based reports of completed repairs to the sub-county government every three months, leading to a duplication of efforts. The paper-based reports are passed on to the district water office as part of their reporting to the ministry.

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When Does the State Listen?

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Abstract In this article, we look at four cases of key historical policies in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania to examine how states engage with citizen voices. The policies all took place in contexts of political change and major junctures of democratisation. We identify three kinds of moments when the state listens: hearing moments, when it engages with citizen voices but does not change the way it acts; consultation moments, when it engages with citizen voices through two-way dialogue, resulting in one-sided action; and concertation moments, when coalitions between reform-minded officials and politicians and organised citizen voices engage in two-way dialogue and action for accountable governance. Concertation moments occurred when there was a shared sense of urgency and a common goal across state and non-state actors, and despite different understandings of accountable governance. But concertation moments are also laborious and temporary, part of larger, ever-changing policy processes, and often states revert to consultation or hearing.

1 Introduction

The focus of the Making All Voices Count (MAVC) programme[1] is the narrowing of the state–citizen communication gap. State–citizen communication is an important element of social justice – the fair distribution of opportunities, privileges and wealth within a society. Growing social inequalities, lack of proper public services, and denial of basic human rights all act to widen existing gaps between states and citizens. Key to bridging these gaps is ensuring not only that citizen voices are heard, but also that government has the capacity and incentive to listen and respond. Much of the literature on accountability focuses on citizen voices, but there is a need to bring more of the state back into the equation. Turning MAVC on its head, we chose to look at the state and see when and how it listens, to which actors; and why, at times, it chooses not to listen. In other words, we chose to look for instances of accountable governance, when the state can be accountable and responsive to citizens' voices.

We interviewed key actors across the state–citizen spectrum involved in landmark social justice policy processes across four countries – Ghana

(national health insurance), Kenya (digitalisation of governance), South Africa (social protection) and Tanzania (primary education) – trying to trace moments in policy creation, revision and implementation when the state listened. We chose these cases as they happened at major junctures of the democratisation process of these four countries: the first democratic transfer of power in Ghana; the first elections under the new Kenyan constitution, in the aftermath of the ethnic electoral violence of 2007–08; the first elections under universal adult suffrage in South Africa; and the first multi-party elections in Tanzania.

We noticed some similarity in the conditions that made groups and individuals within the state more receptive to collaboration, even challenge, from civil actors. One was a common sense of urgency, a sense of public and political pressure to drastically change old policies, or come up with new ones. The other was the sense of a common goal for an accountable, responsive state – even if different actors understood this in different ways. What we noticed as we delved further into these four cases was that the state listened more at moments when actors from both within and outside the state met to discuss, collaborate, confront and act.[2] We label these 'concertation moments', when state actors and citizen groups meet to go beyond dialogue and try to fix society; not to be confused with 'consultation moments', when state actors listen to citizen groups and act, nor with 'hearing moments', when state actors hear but do not listen.

In the following section we explain further what we mean by concertation moments, before presenting the four case studies and analysing the outcomes of the state listening or not to its citizens.

2 State responsiveness: hearing, listening, concerting

Behind many accountability interventions is the assumption that since information is power, citizens armed with information can make public officials more accountable, reducing corruption and mismanagement, and leading to more accountable, responsive and effective governance (Kosack and Fung 2014). But outcomes of the causation chain which is assumed by this underlying hypothesis are rarely examined (McGee and Gaventa 2011), and while there is significant work on accountability, relatively little of it is theoretical or conceptual. Fox (2015: 353), however, proposes a series of conceptual propositions to inform attempts to increase the impact of social accountability strategies, emphasising the potential synergy between (citizen) voice and 'teeth', the state's capacity to respond. We still know less about the teeth, and more about the voice. There is a need to bring more of the state back into the equation, and not see it as a problem only (Coston 1998); it has the power to support as well as to impede social accountability (Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg 2015). Fox (2015) calls for boosting both public responsiveness and citizen engagement, and we concur with his argument that voice alone is not sufficient (Fox 2007).

There is a wide spectrum of state responses to accountability (Blair 2011), from opposition through indifference to accommodation; but we argue that governments also hear, and listen, and 'concert'.

Concertation moments happen when there are coalitions between reform-minded public officials and organised and empowered constituents; they are what Fox (2007) calls the social foundations of accountability. These moments go beyond political concertation – when political parties across the spectrum of dialogue agree on a common goal; beyond social concertation – when employers and employees, mediated by the state, agree on common goals; and beyond corporatism. Concertation moments involve most of the old actors present in these three sociopolitical organisational forms, but also new actors with new public expectations, ruly and unruly, at times using new forms of engagement to 'fix' society, to 'concert' it through dialogue and public action. This happens when all key actors are brought together, building consensus through a series of negotiations (Coston 1998) – not necessarily a common feat.

We further differentiate state responsiveness between hearing, listening and concerting. The state hears when it engages with citizens, but it does not change the way it acts, paying lip service to 'openness' and e-governance without changing low levels of responsiveness. The state listens when it engages with citizen voices by consulting them – or arranging for some entity to consult them on its behalf – in a two-sided dialogue, but one-sided action. Finally, concertation moments happen when state actors and citizen groups engage not only in a two-way dialogue, but also act together.

3 Case studies

Our case studies illustrate the circumstances under which concertation moments happen, where coalitions between organised and empowered constituents and reform-minded public officials attempt to concert society; but we also discuss processes where they fail to occur. In light of Joshi and Houtzager's (2012) observation that most studies on accountability do not look at the longer trajectory of state–citizen relationships (they forget the history), nor at the networks that underpin specific social accountability initiatives (they forget the social), nor at activities outside the initiative that can influence outcomes (they forget the context), we try to touch on all these aspects as we describe our case studies.

3.1 Ghana: concertation and consultation for universal health care

Since the early 1990s, democracy in Ghana has consolidated. An array of parties has contested six elections, although two – the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) – have dominated parliament and the presidency. Keeping these political actors in shape are an array of active civil society organisations (CSOs) and a vibrant media. Ghana signed up to the Millennium Development Goals and adopted a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper to access debt relief, which in turn had some influence on government actions regarding public goods. Democratic development, coupled with pressure from donor agencies, helped shape political transformation in the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The health sector was affected by these changes. In the mid-1980s, as a result of structural adjustment, Ghana introduced a payment system for health care at the point of service (known as 'cash-and-carry'). This excluded people from accessing health care if they could not afford it. Within a decade, the ill-effects of the system were widely felt, and the media carried frequent reports of people dying for lack of medical care, patients being refused entry to hospitals, and even stories of babies and their mothers detained in health facilities, unable to pay. With the media and CSOs raising their voice on the woes of the system, the lack of universal health care became a central point of debate during the 2000 general elections. Alongside the media and civil society were an array of actors that had piloted health insurance schemes, including bureaucrats from the Ministry of Health (MoH) that had been involved in feasibility studies, faith-based groups that had started insurance schemes in private hospitals, and bilateral donors that had implemented community-based mutual health insurance schemes.

The NPP made the end of cash-and-carry a rallying point of their electoral campaign, which proved important in their electoral victory in 2000. Lacking a clear direction for the structure and financing of the health insurance they aspired to implement, President Kufuor set up a task force to support and advise the MoH on the development of a National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS). Members of the task force were either considered to have some technical knowledge on the subject, or to be important stakeholders. Most were MoH bureaucrats, but there were also representatives from trade unions and the now-defunct Ghana Health Care company. Many of these actors served as catalysts for the development of NHIS by providing useful lessons for what became the structure of health insurance. Two issues, though, were highly contentious within the task force: how the state should find the money to pay for the scheme, and whether it should be a centralised single-payer social health insurance system or a decentralised community-based health insurance system. The task force eventually settled on a hybrid arrangement that became the draft policy for wider public consultations, and the Minister of Finance proposed using a portion of value-added tax and deductions from social security pensions. Unions protested these costing mechanisms until eventually the NPP – pressed for time to pass the NHIS law before the 2004 elections – allowed union members to enrol for free.

As the draft policy proceeded towards stakeholder consultations, the chair of the task force and the Minister of Health were both replaced. The new incumbents brought new people – other bureaucrats from within the MoH, and different 'expert' consultants – into the task force, and some of the original members left because of deviations from the agreed hybrid arrangement and political differences with the new members. According to the new chair, after listening to the views of various stakeholder forums, the task force had to change the original policy draft. The NHIS Act was eventually passed into law and implementation begun in 2004 before the elections. The ruling

NPP party were returned again, and vigorously continued NHIS implementation of the scheme with the gradual addition of districts.

In 2006 the new Minister for Health suspended all services of the scheme and commissioned a financial audit. This came as a result of general complaints from the public and local board members of the district health insurance schemes across the country concerning the operations of scheme managers and start-up consultants (Agyepong and Adjei 2008; NHIA 2008). The audit findings suggested some mismanagement in some districts and, as implementation continued, more challenges appeared (Gobah and Zhang 2011). The NDC promised to fix these problems and review the scheme to provide further coverage for basic care for all if voted into power. When it won the 2008 elections, it appointed a new director to start the process of resolving the challenges and eventual review of the law. This director commissioned a consulting firm to examine the policy and legislative review of the scheme and hold a series of strategic meetings with several actors. They conducted three validation meetings across the country, to deliberate on and validate the legislative proposals. During the review, the NDC remained silent about NHIS funding arrangements, unable to fulfil one of its electoral promises of ensuring a one-time payment of premiums for all. An array of CSOs, health-care practitioners, trade unions, faith-based organisations and academics are all demanding that the government deal with the challenges associated with the scheme. Barely a year before the next elections in 2016, the Minister of Health has commissioned a(nother) seven-member technical committee to review the implementation of the NHIS and recommend ways to improve the scheme.

3.2 Kenya: engaging the state through e-government
Kenya's 2013 election was won by the Jubilee Alliance. Calling themselves throughout the campaign 'the digital team', and their opponents – the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD) – the 'analogue' team, they promised Kenyan youth, the majority of both the electorate and the unemployed, that their digital revolution would boost employment and fight corruption. Yet many of their information and communications technology (ICT)-related policies were already present before 2013: the Government of Kenya's Vision 2030 had highlighted the critical role ICTs play in economic development, and aimed for them to generate 8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP); the development of the Universal Service Fund Act, to universalise access to ICTs throughout the country and improve public goods; and the 2010 Constitution, which states that ICTs are to play a key role supporting service delivery, making civil servants' actions transparent and accountable, and create jobs. Two years later, the government has a plethora of e-government platforms including a website publicising what they do and an e-citizen platform. In addition to these initiatives, all ministries have some online information; county governments are shifting to digital; one-stop shops (Huduma centres) have opened for those who need individualised IT support; and there is an open data platform where census data and government reports are uploaded. Government leaders also make use of social media platforms on a daily basis.

While many Nairobi inhabitants – including students, entrepreneurs and professionals – use e-government services online, many others across the capital and beyond it are either not aware of these platforms, or lack access to the internet and broadband connectivity. And even for those citizens who are able to access the government's e-services, the experience is not always easy. For instance, much of the online contact information provided on different ministry websites is inactive and the demand for services in Huduma centres is much greater than the supply.

E-platforms have not only the potential to provide citizens with access to public services and information, but also the spaces to enable and promote democratic engagement. Yet, only a minority of Kenyans engage with a bureaucrat or a public official through an online platform. And although politicians are seen to listen more when citizens hold public demonstrations, public outrage in the social media has of late made them aware of citizen demands. Indeed, there is a growing number of young Kenyans who have taken up social media platforms to raise critical issues in the government, such as the (mis)use of government funds and corruption.

Within the state, it seems that bureaucrats and public officials are less enthusiastic about the use of ICTs for citizen engagement. Their view is that citizens do not know how to engage: they use ICTs less for dialogue, and more for either complaints or demands. All they hear on their e-platforms are criticisms and opposition to their actions or behaviour. Bureaucrats – in a twisted understanding of what demand-driven is – say that it is for the public to develop the interest of e-platforms, because otherwise they would in future have no choice if they wanted those services. They feel, having set up these platforms, that it is now the citizen's responsibility to use them. Bureaucrats recognise that they have, at times, to listen to citizens, as this is an agenda spearheaded by the president. Yet, they often appear to listen to more powerful actors instead: the telecom industry (important partners in ICT project implementation), donor agencies (who support their initiatives), as well as unions and consumer associations. One of the bureaucrats we interviewed observed that while citizens do not know what voice and mode to engage the government with, politicians do not help the situation, since they too do not know how to listen to their constituents.

Politicians interviewed refuted this point, arguing that they do know how to listen. In the words of one MP, the problem is that 'citizens do not know how to engage with their leaders'. Meant to be key actors in the new era of e-governance, many politicians are fully and explicitly aware that most of their constituents cannot access it, and need other forms of engagement, such as *barazas* (public forums), if they are to engage at all with their representatives. Politicians often also bear the brunt of fierce personal criticism through e-governance spaces, and sometimes simply do not like to hear what citizens have to say. For instance, when a group of youths formed a WhatsApp platform to engage with their local MP, so much of the discussion was personal

criticism and negative feedback that the MP was put off from listening to their underlying, wider problems.

In Kenya, politicians and bureaucrats are interested in using ICTs to boost economic growth and get procedures in place to improve service delivery, but are less interested in using them to improve the larger processes of governance. The shift from passive citizens accessing public services to that of active citizens engaging the government requires a concerted effort on all parts. Yet, government's measures to enable active citizen engagement fall short of listening to citizens. When citizens are making themselves heard, government actors often do not listen because they do not like the sound of what people are saying to them: that they have massive needs for very basic services, and that they do not like to see powerful government figures waste public funds while their needs go unsatisfied.

3.3 South Africa: when policy champions move away

One of the largest-ever single collaborative efforts between South Africa's Department of Welfare and civil society was the restructuring of the country's social grant system. Social grants have always been part of South Africa's welfare system, dating as far back as the early 1900s. Under apartheid a state maintenance grant (SMG) was provided, but most of the recipients were white. In the transition from apartheid to a democratic government, the Department of Welfare drafted its 1997 *White Paper for Social Welfare*, delineating a new vision for extending social welfare. It looked beyond merely keeping the poor above the poverty line towards a vision of developing communities and empowering the poor to thrive, to weaken their dependence on government transfers. It acknowledges that the government cannot do away with poverty and income equality alone, and emphasised the need for civil society to facilitate much of the change. State and civil society together made a strong case for replacing the SMG with the Child Support Grant (CSG), the first welfare tool to de-racialise the welfare system and support those in need.

The policy champions behind these changes were led by Francie Lund (Chair of the Lund Committee on Child and Family Support, which assisted with the conceptualisation and implementation of the CSG), Geraldine Fraser Moleketi (Minister of Welfare), Leila Patel (Director General of Welfare), and a host of actors from the apartheid resistance movement, social workers' associations, unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Both Lund and Patel had extensive experience in academia prior to their involvement with the Department of Welfare and were also trained as social workers earlier in their careers. Moleketi, on the other hand, had little knowledge of welfare but was highly respected within the Tripartite Alliance (between the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party, and the Congress of South African trade unions) that made up the ruling government in 1994.

After the end of apartheid, the mass unity that was needed to fight against an oppressive regime diverged, as did the interests of the various actors involved in welfare. The champions involved in the conceptualisation and implementation of progressive social grant policies left shortly after the White Paper was passed in 1997, leaving a gap in technical expertise in the Department of Welfare.[3] Their absence led to a gradual departure from the original vision and momentum. While policy champions are unlikely to stay in the tiers of government over a number of decades, ensuring the success of a policy promoting developmental social welfare ideals would have required at least some actors prepared to maintain the original vision. Alternatively, new champions need to come up with new ideas on social change in welfare.

A shift towards developmental social welfare policy requires not only significant technical and managerial support, but also – most critically – an understanding of the landscape of welfare in South Africa. In 1994, the Department of Welfare included a number of technical experts who had both a foundation in theory as well as practical implementation through their social work background. They also consulted a number of experts in the field to develop new welfare policies. While the administrative capacity and infrastructure of the welfare system is well established today, technical expertise and innovation is limited. In addition, the window of opportunity to change policy is unlike that which existed 20 years ago. South Africa's social welfare system has produced a number of positive outcomes through social grants, but there seems to be a lack of urgency. Politics ultimately determine which services are funded, and social grants – seen as a 'vote-catching' tool – make the government unlikely to move resources away to other areas requiring funding. The critical success factors for policies such as the CSG being implemented include credible leadership, diverse practical expertise in the areas that drive change, strong administrative capacity, and the confidence of politicians (Patel 2014). The DSD leadership today is far less consultative, academia works independently from government – often criticising government actions from afar – and NGOs have limited capacity to advocate change as they are often subcontracted to and financially dependent on the state through their service provision activities.

After the regime change in 1994, poverty levels in South Africa declined, mostly due to the impact of the social grant system (Van der Berg 2010). Yet while social grants have moved individuals out of poverty, inequality remains persistently high. When the champions of the White Paper left, so too did their teams, and with that key advocates of the developmental welfare model were lost. Policies such as the CSG had very detailed implementation plans, but welfare services overall were less detailed. Today, South Africa's welfare budget favours social assistance in the form of cash transfers. Over the past 20 years, policymakers have been unable – or unwilling – to shift from the notion of poverty reduction to a vision of inclusive growth that reduces income inequality.

3.4 Tanzania: when the state does not like to listen

Since 1995, the year that Tanzania held its first multi-party elections, the government has come up with three policies for reaching universal primary education (UPE), one of Tanzania's aims since Independence. By the end of the 1970s, the state – through a determined effort that involved allocating a serious proportion of its national budget to education, increasing the number of schools and teachers, making primary schooling compulsory and free – almost attained UPE. But it could not afford to sustain this effort and, with pressure from the international financial institutions (IFIs), from the early 1980s it decreased the overall percentage of GDP allocated to education, shifted its educational policy towards cost-sharing, and introduced enrolment fees (URT 1993).

Education was a contentious and highly debated topic in the run-up to the first multi-party elections. To revitalise the education sector, the government released its *Education and Training Master Plan*, a centrally-planned policy with input from academics and donors. Although there was an expectation by CSOs that this policy would increase the participation of citizens in making key decisions in the education sector, neither CSOs nor citizens were part of the process of formulating this policy. Government officials, including those who were in charge of the sector at the time, felt that the policy recognised the importance of expert views of the problems facing the education sector, and that it clearly stated future directions and what was needed to take education in the planned direction. CSOs, though, were quick to highlight that the quality of education remained poor because the government did not involve citizens and other education stakeholders in the sector.

The government could only afford to implement changes in primary education five years later, when through its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper it became eligible for debt relief. With heavy involvement from donors and IFIs, channelled financially and ideologically through the Millennium Development Goals, the government created in 2001 the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP). This included an increase in teacher recruitment, investment for new buildings, the abolition of school fees, and the empowerment of school committees. Under PEDP, donors agreed to come together and fund education as one entity, rather than a myriad of projects. But citizen involvement was limited to consultations, especially during the planning stages. As PEDP progressed, CSOs started flagging that drastic increases in the quantity of teachers were coming at the expense of quality: the newly-hired teachers had not been trained properly; students were not progressing to secondary education; and the focus on publicly-funded primary education was happening at the expense of publicly-funded secondary education. Parents that could afford to shifted their children to the private sector, accelerating the creation of a class-based two-tier education system (HakiElimu 2008).

While in the early 2000s the initial increase in school enrolments made citizens happy with the state of education in Tanzania, by the end of

the decade there was a growing discontent. By 2008, PEDP was halted, and the government started a series of consultations with different stakeholders, including many of the CSOs that had been more vocal about changing the education and training policy. The 2014 Education and Training Policy Plan came out in 2014, but there was little sense that the comments of those consulted were reflected in the final document. According to some who participated, they were called into certain meetings to provide inputs towards a new planned education and training policy, but few of the things that they suggested were reflected in the final document. As the issue once more became a media discussion point in pre-election year, the president launched another consultation after the launch of the report. It is not clear at this stage how, or whether, the final policy document could be revised to incorporate stakeholders' comments, given that it has already been launched.

The relationship between the Tanzanian state and CSOs has been one of 'pointing hands' at each other. Discussions with both government officers and CSOs working on education suggest that there is an antagonistic relationship between the state and CSOs. Government officials do not like to listen to CSOs because they feel that they know what the problems with education are, and that they know how to solve them. While acknowledging that CSOs have a positive role in highlighting some of these problems, they are not happy with the fact that CSOs release their findings and critiques to the public through the media – with whom government officers and politicians also have an antagonistic relationship – rather than to government first. Public officials would prefer it if CSOs identified research priorities with government departments responsible for education; if research is done in collaboration with the government, they will own the findings and thus make implementation easier. The high number of CSOs in the education sector puts forth a multitude of proposals, with which the government has neither the time nor the capacity to deal. On the other side of the equation citizens that attended public meetings state that they do not raise issues as they claim the government rarely listens to their voices, especially on policy (REPOA 2012). CSOs add to this view by saying that their voice is 'out there', but it never appears in official documents.

4 Voice, responsiveness and political competition

These cases all illustrate the limitations as well as the potential of citizen engagement and of the role of changing coalitions within government. Across all cases, actors within and outside the state had a common sense of urgency to make health care or education universal, to increase the access of welfare to a previously marginalised population, or to use new technologies to fight corruption and create jobs. They also shared a sense of aiming for a common goal, for an accountable responsive state, even if different actors understood it differently. Each case happened during a political moment in each country's recent history when citizens were also more assertive, willing to engage directly with government officers and politicians. These citizens made use of the

political enabling environment to collectivise and coordinate citizen voice with reforms that could increase public sector responsiveness, what Fox (2015) calls a strategy for pro-accountability change. As seen elsewhere (Srinivasan 2014), increased citizen voice does not always translate into increased services; in vibrant democracies there needs to be a political competition for votes aligned with pressure from citizen groups for universal rather than targeted service provision. But while in all cases there was an increase in citizen voice and political competition, concertation moments emerged in some cases but not in others.

We can see concertation moments in the initial policy formulation in both the Ghanaian and South African cases, with task forces composed of reform-minded public officials and politicians together with empowered citizen groups, not only sitting together and discussing possibilities, but also acting together and drafting policies. Over time, there is a shift in Ghana when government changes, and the new ruling party opts to hire a consultancy firm and starts listening instead of concerting.

In South Africa the situation goes a step further, when policy champions either go away or are co-opted by the state, and shift from being advocates to being those who deliver policy, and the state goes from concerting with citizen groups to hearing them. Although it had a short concertation moment, with a coalition government drafting a new constitution, Kenya's case is punctuated by moments of listening and hearing, where a lot of concertation and consultation appears to be politics for show, rather than authentic engagement from the side of the state. Finally, Tanzania is the only case where we do not see any concertation moments. The country has its listening and hearing moments, but most of the time it seems the state firmly believes it knows how to run the show and does not need to engage with citizens, except to consult with them after the drafting of policies. The Tanzanian case is also the only one of these where there was no change in government, meaning the political actors were the same before and after the democratic shift.

5 Concluding remarks

There are few instances of strong citizen voice making a significant difference in policy processes in sub-Saharan Africa. We looked at key historical policies across four countries at major junctures of democratisation to see how actors within and outside the state interacted for accountable governance. We divided this interaction into three kinds of moments: concertation, consultation and hearing. We see concertation moments as synergies between citizen voice and the state's capacity to respond (Fox 2015), where coalitions bridge the state–society divide to attain some aspect of accountable governance. We also noticed that political competition is an important element but that, like citizen voice, political competition alone is not sufficient to achieve accountable governance.

Concertation moments, though, are not permanent. For instance, in both Ghana and South Africa there was a concertation moment during

policy design, but it got lost during implementation. Concertation needs to be ongoing, and needs to be a process: a strategy more than a tactic (Fox 2015). Yet, as we see in our cases, many times state actors prefer consultation rather than concertation: they do not believe citizen voice is knowledgeable in 'matters of the state', they do not like to hear what these voices are saying, or are simply practitioners of politics for show. Yet they still 'engage' with these voices to claim legitimacy in national and international eyes, using even passive listening as a rubber stamp to authenticate policy processes with the mark of 'citizen participation'. This is why, when researching accountable governance, we need to differentiate between hearing, listening and concerting.

Notes

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1 Making All Voices Count is supported by DFID, USAID, Sida and the Omidyar Network.
2 In the sense intended by Arendt (1958).
3 Now known as the Department of Social Development (DSD).

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'You Have to Raise a Fist!': Seeing and Speaking to the State in South Africa

Elizabeth Mills

Abstract Since joining the Open Governance Partnership in 2011, South Africa has been committed to addressing the 'grand challenge' of open governance through improving public services, creating safer communities and increasing accountability. This article contrasts this supranational commitment to open governance with accounts of citizens' everyday engagement with the state at a micro-level. Based on a year of multi-sited ethnography, the article highlights the value of bringing people – in this case, HIV-positive citizens living in Khayelitsha, Cape Town – into focus through a series of visual participatory processes in which they share their experience of public service provision and engagement with the state. The article reflects, first, on how citizens 'see' the state in relation to service delivery and, second, on how they 'speak' to the state as members of civil society. It offers an understanding of how citizens themselves perceive 'open governance' in their everyday lives.

1 Introduction: South Africa's commitment to open government

Open government policies no longer refer to those that only promote accountability. New modes of citizen engagement and new efficiencies in government services now share the spotlight with the older goal of governmental accountability, which once had this felicitous phrase all to itself (Yu and Robinson 2012: 202).

In 2015, South Africa became the co-chair of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), an initiative launched in 2011 to encourage governments to become more open, accountable and responsive to citizens (see McGee and Edwards, this *IDS Bulletin*, and the OGP website).[1] Growing from eight countries in 2011 to 66 countries in 2015, the OGP has an ambitious international agenda that chimes with evolving political theory and policy approaches to technology, governance and citizenship. Eligibility to join the OGP is determined by a country's performance in four key areas: fiscal transparency, access to information, public official asset disclosure and citizen engagement. Although eligible in principle, the extent to which South Africa's

engagement in the OGP actually represents an ambitious national agenda for open governance remains far from clear.[2]

In 2013, following contested consultations with civil society organisations (CSOs),[3] the South African government made a commitment to addressing the 'grand challenge' of open governance by adopting an OGP Action Plan.[4] Specifically, it made a commitment to strengthening public integrity by improving public services, creating safer communities, effectively managing public resources and increasing accountability (IRM 2013).[5]

While first coined in the 1950s, the concept of 'open governance' has recently gained momentum in political theory and policy as a result of shifts in technological innovation and the corresponding generation of data; understanding the relationship between technology and open governance has gained importance in international political and policy discourse. As highlighted by McGee and Edwards (this *IDS Bulletin*), there is a risk of burdening the term with diverse, even contradictory, theoretical and practical meanings.

International initiatives, like the OGP, lend themselves to a critique of the disjuncture between on one hand the conceptual and policy rhetoric of 'open governance', and on the other, its practice (Mosse 2005). One could argue – and some have (Hill and Hupe 2002) – that global initiatives are valuable in themselves because they serve as a reflection of an inevitably flawed national government's visible commitment to move 'in the right direction'. But there is a risk that *solely* highlighting the disjuncture between the rhetoric and practice of 'open governance' at a macro-level, we not only miss the boat for learning how to make productive 'open governance' strategies work in difficult settings, but we might also be missing a key point – the people.

Based on 12 months of multi-sited ethnographic research,[6] this article proposes that there is value in bringing people – in this case, HIV-positive citizens of Khayelitsha in Cape Town, South Africa – into focus, and in understanding how citizens themselves perceive the limits and possibilities of 'open governance' in their everyday lives.

This article cannot, and does not seek to, comment on South Africa's performance in the OGP. Instead, it firstly links the centrality of service delivery in South Africa's vision of 'open governance' in the OGP to the centrality of service delivery in the overarching narrative through which citizens describe 'seeing the state' in the research. Service delivery is not the only aspect of open governance, but in South Africa, it is a vital component in the effort to address the country's stark socioeconomic inequalities.

Secondly, it contrasts the OGP's statement that collaboration between governments and civil society is a key component of 'open governance', with citizen narratives of a strained relationship between state and civil society. The ethnographic research traces this tension at a micro-level in Khayelitsha, with a focus on 'speaking to the state'. In doing so, the

findings offer reflections on governance linked to service delivery and civil society engagement, from people who have worked as activists for decades in a range of CSOs spanning the apartheid and post-apartheid eras.

2 Everyday citizens in Khayelitsha

The ethnography reported in more detail below reflects the value of understanding 'everyday citizenship' as it is lived and embodied in the most quotidian sense (Cornwall, Robins and von Lieres 2011; Robins, Cornwall and von Lieres 2008), speaking to a more nuanced understanding of particular contexts or states of citizenship as they unfold across time and in very different spaces.

> Rather than seeking a unified definition of citizenship that covers all dimensions of human action, entitlement and belonging, we are interested in the everyday, and often highly contingent and improvisational, negotiations and performances through which people define and pursue their desires and aspirations (Cornwall, Robins and von Lieres 2011: 8).

Cornwall and colleagues articulate two pertinent imaginaries – how citizens see the state (Corbridge 2005) and how states see citizens (Scott 1999) – that generate the 'mutually constitutive nature of the citizen–state relationship, and the extent to which different kinds of states make different kinds of citizenship possible' (Cornwall, Robins and von Lieres 2011: 8). There is very little research on governance and citizenship that explores the extent to which these imaginaries shape what it means to be a citizen. As such, this article draws on findings from visual participatory research with HIV-positive citizens living in Khayelitsha, to explore the ways in which they see and speak the South African state – the same one that has signed up to the OGP's principles of open governance.

Khayelitsha ('new home' in isiXhosa) is a semi-formal housing area that lies across 45km of Cape Town's Metropole district. Like the majority of the people I worked with, most of Khayelitsha's residents have migrated from the Eastern Cape to access better health care, education and employment opportunities. The mix of formal and informal housing makes it difficult to gauge the total population;[7] the most recent reliable estimate, published by the City of Cape Town in 2005, indicated that Khayelitsha's population was 406,799 (DPLG 2005), of whom 45.6 per cent were aged between 15 and 34. More than half (57.4 per cent) lived in informal cardboard and corrugated iron homes, and nearly a third (30 per cent) in formal brick homes. A large majority (71.8 per cent) earned below the official Household Subsistence Level.[8]

Khayelitsha has long been a site of political resistance. It was also the first place that antiretroviral (ARV) treatment was provided to South Africans through a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) trial in 2001 (Robins 2005). My ethnographic research took place a decade after the MSF trial and South Africa's historic struggle to access life-saving ARVs through the public health sector.[9] It brings to the fore the precarious

nature of everyday life for people living in Khayelitsha, linked to the absence of vital state resources and public services, which reflect a far longer history of structural violence and inequality. 'Open governance' could serve as a powerful counterpoint to the form of 'closed governance' that was modelled during apartheid, but would require the state to put the principles it subscribes to as a member of the OGP into practice in places like Khayelitsha.

Although South Africa joined the OGP in 2011, neither I nor many of the people I worked with later in Khayelitsha knew about or used the term 'open governance'. Our work cannot therefore be described as an 'ethnography on open governance'. Instead, it reflects a series of ethnographic accounts of citizens' perceptions of the state in their lives that speak to the main 'commitments' made by South Africa through the OGP.

3 Background to the ethnographic research

Over the course of 12 months in 2010 and 2011, I conducted multi-sited ethnographic research in South Africa and Brazil.[10] In this article, I reflect specifically on my engagement with a group of women living in Khayelitsha who had, as activists, fought to access the life-saving ARV treatment that would enable them, and the almost 6 million other South Africans who were HIV-positive, to live a long life with HIV (NDOH 2011). Together, between 2001 and 2009 they had engaged with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) at the height of the struggle for ARVs, calling for the democratically elected government to fulfil its constitutional contract with its citizens and ensure their right to life, and to health, through the provision of these essential medicines (TAC 2010). When the TAC began in 1998, this struggle for ARVs represented a fundamental 'opening out' of governance, in which citizens mobilised across the country to compel the post-apartheid state to provide better access to health resources and services (Chigwedere *et al.* 2008; Fassin 2007; Robins 2005). Building on strategies – including songs and dances – of the anti-apartheid era, TAC's activist cadre called on the state to 'listen' to the needs of its citizens in light of the country's hard-won democracy.

I drew on Susan Whyte's (2009) approach to health research and her observation that comparative ethnography offers a way to move out from a narrow focus on health in order to anchor people's lives in their social, economic and political relations (*cf* Whyte, Van der Geest and Hardon 2002). A multi-sited approach to conducting ethnography enabled me to trace the networks that linked women's experience of health, and of life, to the broader politics of service provision in post-apartheid South Africa, and to international policy dynamics that played a role in South Africa's capacity to provide these services and resources to its citizens.

Using visual methods, like participatory photography, body mapping and participatory film, it became evident through the ethnography that the struggle for life in South Africa was not simply about the struggle for life-saving medicines. At that time, when South Africa had the

largest ARV programme in the world (NDOH 2011), I found that the struggle to live on ARVs was contingent on a broader set of struggles including access to employment, education, water, safe toilets and electricity. While the core concerns of the people I engaged with had opened out beyond access to medicines, the perception that the post-apartheid government should 'listen' to the basic needs of its citizens was still strongly emphasised. In fact, as I discuss below, the people I worked with in Khayelitsha suggested that because the government had been democratically elected, its leaders had a mandate to listen to civil society, and its members.

4 Seeing and speaking to the state

The first part of the ethnography presented in this section reflects on how the people I worked with 'saw the state'. Given the presence of historic socioeconomic inequality in Khayelitsha's corrugated iron houses and under-staffed health centres, many 'saw' and 'spoke to' the state's poor delivery of basic services. This was evident through their participation in CSOs that were fighting for better service delivery, and through their narratives of how the absence of proper services fundamentally undermined their sense of dignity and their hope for a responsive and accountable post-apartheid government. Their narratives reflect the struggles of citizens and CSOs to hold the South African government to account in delivering basic services.

The second part of the ethnography presented below describes a series of snapshots of citizen (dis)engagement, and outlines some of the ways that citizens and CSOs 'speak to the state'.

These accounts centre on the micro-level interactions between citizens and the state that I observed, and frame them in a larger concern with engaging with civil society actors in ensuring governments are truly 'open'.

4.1 'When [President] Zuma came': seeing the state

Walking through Khayelitsha one day, Yandisa pointed to the sandals on my feet and told me to wear tougher shoes. By way of explanation, she pointed down to the ground we were standing on. It took me a bit of time before I saw the cables; they were camouflaged by sand and snaked along the gravel road. In some places the flex had been worn down by car tyres, the sun or people's shoes, and tiny wires bundled out into the sand. My eyes adjusted to reading the sand and I learnt to discern the character of the cables quickly enough to miss walking over the live wires; I also started wearing thick rubber-soled shoes. I was privileged to be able to purchase this degree of safety. Most of the people with whom I worked, however, were not. South Africa's OGP commitment to promoting socioeconomic rights comes down to the very soles of people's feet, when the failure of the state to provide essential services like safe electricity, becomes an everyday risk walking to and from one's home.

Miriam, who lived two minutes' walk from Yandisa's home, told me about the neighbour who lived in the house between them. Her child had gone out in the middle of a thunderstorm to collect water from

the tap shared by all of Nkanini's residents. On the way to the tap the child had stepped on one of these worn-down cables, screaming in shock; when the mother ran out to pull him away, she was electrocuted. The neighbours rushed out to try and help her, but she really needed emergency medical attention and by the time the sluggish ambulance arrived, she had died. The government refused to sufficiently subsidise electricity costs through its national company, Eskom.

These accounts reflect the cost of the state's absence in the presence of these wires: electricity was too expensive for most people in Khayelitsha to afford and so some residents chose to pay people to siphon illegal electricity lines away from the neighbouring wealthier suburb into their homes. Illegal electricity, however, came at a cost that was experienced by everyone who was connected – often not by choice – along the winding routes that these lines followed across their roofs, along their roads, and sometimes under their feet.

The participatory photography processes I facilitated generated many photographs in which people saw the state in large piles of rubbish that collected in the roads, and siphoned around people's homes. Sibongile had, for example, taken a series of photographs in which she had 'seen the state' in the open field just over the road from her home. Through these photographs she told me about President Zuma's visit to her neighbourhood, as part of the African National Congress' (ANC) election campaign.

Over the course of many photographs, I watched an unfolding picture in which two different imaginaries of the state ran alongside each other. The first imaginary of seeing the state was, quite literally, of seeing President Zuma arriving to speak to a group of supporters at the rally. In these photographs, we see, first, the supporters waiting for his arrival; this is followed by a set of photographs of bodyguards surrounding President Zuma as he walked to the stage to, eventually, address the assembled supporters. Sibongile watched this visit unfold with her two children, all watching this spectacle from a distance and recording it with her camera. She said, 'These are the pictures I took when Zuma came. My street actually. He passed by my house. I was standing by the gate. It was kind of like amazing, the president passing by my house. I couldn't capture a full picture of him, you know everyone coming to see the president.' For Sibongile, who felt a tremendous distance and barrier between her and the state, this physical proximity was almost overwhelming – and yet the proximity was a mirage, an electoral gimmick, as her photographs of rubbish went on to illustrate.

Her photographs captured another powerful picture of the state and inadequate service delivery, as she pointed to the large open rubbish dump that featured in the foreground of the photographs that she had taken documenting President Zuma's visit. She explained to me that the municipality had stopped collecting rubbish from her neighbourhood, and so she and her neighbours had started piling their rubbish on this

site during the week. Each Saturday they would burn the rubbish in the morning, but on this day they had postponed the fire until President Zuma left because the smoke would have sullied the slick preparations. I asked Sibongile if she was going to vote in the elections, and she said, quite strongly, 'Yes, my grandmother fought hard for the ANC; I will only ever vote for them myself. But I don't think they will do anything to make my life better.'

Sibongile's concern with sanitation was reflected in the many photographs of various kinds of public toilets – sometimes broken, or locked – that were scattered around Khayelitsha. Yvonne took a photograph showing that each toilet has a lock on it. Even where public toilets had been constructed, therefore, many people were unable to use them if they had not negotiated with their neighbours to claim – with a lock – a particular cubicle. The women I worked with were particularly concerned about their safety at night because of the numerous accounts of women who were raped when using the toilets. An interim measure, one that was still not acceptable but that was preferable to public toilets, were small portable toilets that had a detachable waste-carrier. Yandisa and Miriam each had one of these toilets in their homes. Yandisa said, showing me the second photograph on the left hand side, that these toilets were an indication that, 'This government does not want dignity for us.'

The OGP highlights dignity as one of its core values. The above accounts suggest that the women with whom I worked 'saw the state' in its absence, in its failure to provide basic services, and therefore in its failure to meaningfully transform its citizens experience of socioeconomic inequality. This inequality, experienced in the stench of rotting rubbish and unserviced toilets, undermined any sense that the state respected the women's dignity.

Yandisa's sentiment that 'the government does not want dignity for us' was echoed by thousands of other people a few months after my fieldwork, at a march in Khayelitsha that was organised by a CSO called the Social Justice Coalition. The march was held on Freedom Day – a day that marks South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. On this day, in 2011, almost 2,500 people queued outside a set of public toilets in Khayelitsha to draw attention to the government's failure to provide basic services and explicitly link the struggle for freedom and democracy in 1994 with the struggle for basic rights and services in 2011. The role of civil society in holding governments accountable is foregrounded in the OGP's mission statement, and it is also echoed in South Africa's 'grand vision' of service delivery. The following section on 'speaking to the state' turns to explore how South African citizens – and civil society more broadly – view the potential for engaging with the state around these core concerns linked to service delivery and the democratic governance.

4.2 'My vote must speak for me': speaking to the state
In May, a week after the municipal elections, Thandeka and I were walking down Queen Victoria Street in central Cape Town. Not only did the name of the street speak to the colonial legacy of South Africa,

but the memorialised 'Slegs Blankes/Whites Only' bench that we passed outside the High Court was a reminder of South Africa's more recent history and the struggle for ARV treatment that had played out in that court room. When we met earlier that day, the first thing she did was to show me the indelible black stain on her thumbnail – a sign that she had voted. I asked her why she had chosen to vote. She replied, 'I voted for my treatment.'

Thandeka's stained thumb pointed to a set of beliefs held by all of the women with whom I worked in the core group. On the whole, they conceived voting as part of an array of citizen practices, like marches and civil disobedience campaigns, that were necessary to make the government listen. Throughout my fieldwork, when people – including those who had not been AIDS activists – spoke about why they were going to vote, the word most often used in their explanation was 'voice'. For example, Witness said, 'It is said that your vote is your voice.' Bongiwe, similarly, said, 'I vote so that I have the right to speak out; the right to voice out my opinion… My vote must speak for me.'

Khayelitsha's streets offered a slightly different story. These stories, spray-painted on walls or scrawled over posters near Khayelitsha's Magistrate's Court, reflected a disdain towards the electoral system and towards the leading party. One message encouraged people to boycott the elections and it had been pasted on the walls of clinics, streets, taxi ranks and bus shelters. The locations of these messages speak to the conjunction past and present, with messages written along a wall bordering a street named after one of South Africa's most prominent anti-apartheid activists, and the founder of the Black Consciousness movement, Steve Biko. The frustration held in the graffiti on the walls also spoke to a sociospatial intersection: the history of the struggle for democracy signified by Steve Biko's name, and the presence of an overburdened judicial system, ran along the walls where people had expressed their frustration with the failure of the government to meet their needs, and provide the basic services that, in principle, are guaranteed in the constitution and reflected in South Africa's OGP action plan.

Over time, but especially around the time of the provincial elections, I heard how many of the people I spent time with believed that voting would not generate positive change. Instead, they explained, voting was a matter of principle, an assertion of a hard-won right that extended beyond the struggle for ARVs to the struggle for democracy. For example, Nozuko said, 'I vote because it is free to vote; before Black people never got the chance to vote. They were just decided for. For me it's good to make a contribution by voting.' Also looking towards a history in which voting was limited to the white population, Nomphuthumo said, 'I am a South African citizen. Before [under apartheid] things were hard… Now where we stand, things are better.'

When we spoke about specific articulations of 'voice' that were necessary to make the government listen, the people I spent time with in

Khayelitsha, including the former HIV activists, spoke about the role of civil society and collective public action through strikes and marches as mechanisms for 'showing a fist' to the government.

Ntombentsha is a 30-year-old HIV-positive woman who echoed the majority of participants' assertions on how to make the government listen when she said, 'People strike, burn tyres, or go to parliament with posters… When people *toyi toyi*,[11] the government ends up responding to them.' *Toyi toyi*, as a way to express discontent in public spaces, echoes activist strategies under apartheid; when challenged by the apartheid police, the activists would argue that they were simply singing and dancing. Because the songs were predominantly sung in local languages and not in English, the apartheid police did not understand the political content and were unable to justify intervention. *Toyi toyi*ng and amended protest songs were also characteristic of the marches that the TAC organised to challenge the post-apartheid government, especially during the height of the government's AIDS denialism (see Robins 2010). *Toyi toyi* as a form of collective action, and a way to speak to the state, sustained its anti-apartheid legacy in the marches I observed and participated in during my fieldwork. As Noncedo, a 47-year-old HIV-positive woman, notes, 'In this time it's like those old days… where people were burning tyres. You see, we are going back to the past because every time we want the government to listen we have to do action instead of just talking, you need to show a fist!'

This section suggests that 'voice' itself is highly nuanced. On the one hand, democracy has engendered tools through which people can articulate some of their concerns. Under apartheid, public marches, for example, would have been banned. However, the struggle for services – and for the dignity that is tied into these services – suggests a distinction between having voice and being heard. As discussed above, many of the people I worked with felt entirely unheard. At worst, this calls into question the depth and sincerity of the government of South Africa's commitment to OGP values. At best, it shows what a very long hard journey it is going to be for South Africa to put those values into practice in a way that is experienced or even perceived by people like Bongiwe or Witness.

5 Conclusion

As South Africa takes on the leadership of the OGP, the government has been dogged with allegations of corruption, fiscal mismanagement and poor services. In July 2015 a group of CSOs submitted an open letter to South Africa's government representative on the OGP.[12] They outlined numerous issues, including concerns about secret government surveillance of activists, proposed censorship regulations, the Regulation of Gatherings Act that seeks to limit the right to protest, and secrecy about large-scale state-funded procurement. The signatories said that if the government did not address their concerns by the time South Africa takes over as chair of the OGP, they would launch an official complaint.

This article suggests that these contemporary concerns around South Africa's performance on the OGP reflect a longer history. The space of Khayelitsha speaks to this history and the role that citizens have played to call for a more 'open governance' that addresses historic socioeconomic inequalities through effective service provision, and that pays attention to the concerns raised by citizens and CSOs about the absence of these services. The ethnographic research offers a historical perspective on some of the limits of South Africa's rhetorical commitment to 'open governance' at an international level.

By paying closer attention to the everyday experiences of citizens in Khayelitsha as they saw and spoke to the state, this article seeks to push back against the danger of dislocating 'open governance' policy language from people's everyday encounters with the state, or its absence. In doing so, these historical ethnographic accounts offer three overarching observations, on service delivery and civil society engagement, that bear relevance to the present as South Africa prepares to take on the leadership of the OGP in 2015.

First, the core concerns raised by citizens when 'seeing the state' centred on poor service delivery in Khayelitsha. In failing to provide services, the state is complicit in eroding citizens' sense of dignity. As a core value in the OGP, dignity is closely linked to the practice of open governance. There is a striking dissonance, then, in South Africa signing up to this core value on the international stage, while denying so basic a degree of dignity to its citizens at a local level.

Second, the different articulations of voice that emerged in the ethnographic accounts of citizens 'speaking to the state' suggest that citizens, in their everyday lives, have an ambiguous relationship with the state. While many remained committed to voting in elections, they also expressed a sense of dislocation from the state, embodied by the difficulties that they experienced in finding avenues to be 'heard' when communicating their everyday struggles through engaged action. These concerns speak to the limits of South Africa's rhetorical commitment to 'open governance' through meaningful engagement with civil society at an international level in the OGP, and its struggle to follow through on its own national policy commitments to 'listen' to its citizens at a domestic level. They also speak to the limits of political parties as ways for representing citizens to the state.

Finally, the findings underpin the value of shifting away from a narrow focus on the provision of essential medicines to a recognition that health and wellbeing are connected to a broad array of public services and resources (see Marsland 2012; Le Marcis 2012). Conversely, ill-health and ill-being, including a lack of dignity, need to be understood as fundamentally linked to the myriad socioeconomic inequalities that shape most South African's lives. Citizens' accounts provide a set of micro-level observations on the direct implications of the government's attempts to follow through on the supranational principles of 'open

governance' that it has committed to through the OGP and through its constitution and public policies at a domestic level.

The ethnographic accounts bring people's lives into focus, moving beyond an analysis of the disjuncture between supranational commitments on the OGP and domestic policy. They are a step towards a dialogue that advances constructive avenues to hold governments to account for implementing the principles of 'open governance'. It is dialogue – between states, citizens and civil society – that appears to be central to the framing of the OGP, and this framing implies that these actors are required to collaborate with each other if the principles of open governance are to be positively advanced. In South Africa's case, this might entail measures to ensure the state does a better job of listening to its citizens and its civil society; and in turn, it might mean that in order to be heard, citizens do not feel the need 'to raise a fist'.

Notes

1 www.opengovpartnership.org.

2 Independent biannual progress reports are produced for each country by the OGP's Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM). South Africa's most recently published IRM report notes that of the eight commitments it made in its action plan, South Africa had only successfully fulfilled one – the commitment to set up an anti-corruption forum and anti-corruption hotline.

3 CSOs challenged the extent to which the OGP was genuinely consultative, and claimed that they were given a very tight deadline to respond to calls for engagement and that the final action plan was largely shaped by internal government consultation (IRM 2013).

4 The OGP Action Plan also detailed eight commitments against a set of targets to measure progress.

5 Specific measures included strengthening corruption-combating instruments and mechanisms for meaningful citizen engagement in service delivery improvement, and an accountability management framework for public servants.

6 Here, 'multi-sited' refers to fieldwork that works across scale, with women living in Khayelitsha, the activist organisation they had worked with, the actors and activists in Brazil to whom South Africa had looked during the struggle for antiretroviral drugs, and national and international policy actors who made decisions about these women's ability to access basic services.

7 There are at least 22 residential sub-sections comprising older formal areas (with basic brick homes), as well as newer, informal areas.

8 http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1021&id=city-of-cape-town-municipality.

9 This struggle was led by the Treatment Action Campaign, also initially based in Khayelitsha.

10 Ethics approval for this research was secured from the University of Sussex's Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee. I conceptualise ethnography as co-constructed through the relationships I formed with people and institutions in the course of my fieldwork. The

methods I used emerged from these relationships and I therefore refer to the people who form the core of this ethnography as 'the people I worked with' and not as 'participants' or 'respondents'.

11 A Southern African dance used in political protests in South Africa.

12 www.r2k.org.za/2015/07/27/is-the-sa-government-open/.

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The Right of Access to Information: Exploring Gender Inequities

Laura Neuman*

Abstract The right of access to information is a fundamental and universal right, necessary for economic empowerment and the fulfilment of other rights. However, the recent study discussed in this article demonstrates that women are not able to exercise this right with the same frequency, ease and rate of success as men. The article examines the issue of gender inequity in the exercise of the right of access to information by exploring the legislative framework underpinning the right for women, detailing the value of information for women, describing the principal obstacles that propagate information asymmetries, and exploring potential responses to advance a more universal right to information.

1 Introduction

> In a society where the rights and potential of women are constrained, no man can be truly free. He may have power, but he will not have freedom.
> *Mary Robinson, Former President of the Republic of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Salokar and Volcansek 1996)*

Access to information is a fundamental right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and critical for the exercise of other basic socioeconomic and political rights. Yet in many countries, full enjoyment of the right of access to information – and its myriad potential benefits – is limited in half the population. This situation becomes even bleaker when considering poor or indigenous women, or those living in rural areas. Failure to engage in gender-sensitive policymaking, entrenched traditional cultural mores, and long-standing obstacles – such as illiteracy, household responsibilities, immobility, and lack of awareness and capacity – have all played a role in creating gender asymmetries in the exercise of the right to information. Paradoxically, while women may be least likely to demand and receive access to information, they are perhaps the most in need of it. Information is a potent ingredient in assuring that the benefits of open government are felt by all.

This article seeks to explore the legislative framework underpinning the right of access to information for women, detail the value of information for women, describe the principal obstacles that propagate gender inequities, and explore potential responses to advance a more universal right to information.

It is striking how little attention has been paid to the gendered dimensions of the right of access to information. Therefore, as the title suggests, this article and the studies recently conducted by the Carter Center and its partners are designed to be the beginning of a discussion, creating the start of a mosaic to which it is hoped that many others will contribute additional texture and details.

2 A web of adversity

Although some progress has been made since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted 35 years ago, women around the world continue to lag behind men in terms of power, wealth, education and opportunities. As we enter the second century of celebrating International Women's Day, gender equality remains a distant goal.

In many countries, especially in the global South, women continue to face the double burden of income generation and caring for the family. The number of female-headed households is increasing,[1] partly as a result of male out-migration from rural areas, and the effects of civil conflicts. In almost all countries, female-headed households are concentrated in the poorer social strata and often have a lower income than male-headed households (Chant 2003).

Half the world's working women – 600 million workers – are subject to vulnerable employment, trapped in insecure jobs, often outside the purview of labour legislation (UNDP 2014). When women have paid employment, they earn on average between 10 and 30 per cent less than men for work of equal value (Staszewska 2015). Economic opportunities for women remain limited. In Africa, 70 per cent of agricultural workers are women, and they produce 60–80 per cent of food for domestic consumption, while men grow more lucrative cash crops (Wakhungu 2010). Nevertheless, studies indicate that women invest up to 90 per cent of their income into their families and communities; while for men the figure is 30–40 per cent (UNF 2012).

Girls are still less likely than boys to attend primary school, and for those that do attend, the dropout rate is higher (World Bank 2009) and this trend continues in secondary education. Globally, this has led to high female illiteracy rates – approximately two thirds of illiterate people are women (FAO, IFAD and ILO 2010). In the area of health, the situation is even more alarming. In developing regions, women's risk of dying from maternal causes is 14 times higher than in developed countries (WHO 2014), and women remain the fastest growing group of adults infected with HIV through sexual intercourse (UNAIDS 2014). Lack of

access to basic care and medications, abhorrent gender-based violence and human trafficking complete this distressing picture.

Finally, in the areas of participation and voice, women remain in the minority. There are only 18 female world leaders and only 22.5 per cent of parliamentarians are women (Kent 2015). Quotas and political party systems remain at odds as women strive to find a place in electoral democracies but, as Goetz (1998: 247) observes, 'mechanics of participation – essentially a series of highly technical and legalistic negotiations, and conversations between men… exclude the majority of women'.

Women in many parts of the world are faced with a web of adversity. Although various tools are applied to addressing these myriad challenges, insufficient focus has been given to the powerful part that information can play. Genuine access to information can help women make more effective decisions about education, health care and agricultural production, participate more fully in public life, confront corrupt practices, and help bridge gender gaps.

Though recent years have witnessed a plethora of research and programming related to voice, participation and empowerment of women, access to information has been an implied rather than explicitly identified core ingredient for success despite the inequities in women's exercise of the right. While a number of the obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to information detailed in this article are not unique to women, they affect them more, particularly if they are in developing countries. Unfurling and examining gendered asymmetries will inform critical discussion of the impediments facing women in their exercise of the right to information, and encourage effective solutions to be applied.

3 Legislative framework

Access to information is well-established as a fundamental human right under Article 19 of the Declaration of Human rights, which states that 'Everyone has the right to… seek, receive and impart information'. This same language is repeated in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the regional Human Rights Conventions also echo the right to information. In 2006, in the case of *Claude Reyes vs Chile*, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found that Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights recognises a general right of access to information, and that states must provide a system for exercising that right. The case was instrumental in cementing the notion that access to information is a fundamental human right.

The Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights have adopted clear statements and declarations on the right of access to information. The more recent Open Government Declaration, part of the Open Government Partnership, pledges to increase the availability of public information, 'promoting increased access to information and disclosure about governmental activities at every level of government'

(OGP 2011). Finally, there are now over 100 countries around the world with a statutory right to information, and additional states with constitutional mandates or administrative provisions.

Complementing the body of conventions, statutes and jurisprudence on the general right of access to information are a number of covenants and declarations that provide the beginnings of a gender-sensitive mandate for the free flow of public information. CEDAW was adopted in 1979, and has been ratified by 187 countries.[2] CEDAW affirms principles of fundamental human rights and equality for women, prohibiting discrimination and establishing an agenda for action. While CEDAW does not articulate a general right of access to information for women, it does make specific mention of women's right to educational information on health, wellbeing and family planning (UN Women 1979). Moreover, one could conjecture that the basic principles of CEDAW are themselves premised on the free flow of information.

At the Third World Conference on Women, held in Nairobi in 1985, the delegates focused on equality, development and peace. The Nairobi Report (UN 1986) calls on states to establish governmental machinery for disseminating information to women on their rights and entitlements concerning health, education, markets and conflict, and ensuring that it reaches them.

The Platform for Action that emerged from the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, aspires to advance key strategies to empower women and calls on states to remove continuing barriers. The Beijing Declaration commits governments to design, implement and monitor policies and programmes that are gender-sensitive and to ensure that a gender perspective is reflected in all policies and programmes (UN Women 1996). Notably, in Article 35, representative governments stated their determination to 'ensure women's equal access to… information', and the Platform for Action is peppered with references to women's needs for information, to increase productive capacity, access health and education rights, to engage in technological advances, and to effectively defend against human rights abuses.

Unfortunately, while the legal right of access to information and the prohibition of gender-related discriminatory policies and impacts may be well-established, claiming women's right to information is another story.

4 Access to information and women's economic empowerment and rights
A free flow of information has been propagated as key to transparency and greater accountability, particularly vertical accountability between citizens and government. But for accountability to flourish, adequately developed mechanisms of sanctions, access to justice, sustained media and civil society engagement and transparency measures (such as the right of access to information) must also be present. Thus, whether as a means of inducing democratic or social accountability or as the fulfilment of a fundamental human right, access to information is essential.

If information is a cornerstone of accountability, participation and citizen voice, then women are in great need of it, not only as a theoretical right, but also as one that can be practically exercised and that leads to real transformation. With access to information, women would be afforded a new instrument to contribute to overcoming the gender disparities and traditional constraints that have historically kept them disempowered and disenfranchised.

Empowerment of women can take many forms, and it is often described as social, economic or political. Social empowerment focuses on one's place in society, and one's power to change it, while political empowerment relates to equity of representation in political institutions (Eyben, Kabeer and Cornwall 2008). Economic empowerment, on the other hand, largely concerns the issue of resource and asset ownership and management. While access to information is relevant for all three forms of empowerment, this article will focus on information for economic empowerment and the protection and promotion of human rights.

There is growing consensus on the need to empower women economically in order to improve their local and global status. Through greater economic empowerment, women's rights can be realised and broader development goals achieved (Government of Canada 2014). According to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 'economic empowerment is one of the most powerful routes for women to achieve their potential and advance their rights… Discrimination against women is economically inefficient. National economies lose out when a substantial part of the population cannot compete equitably or realise its full potential.' Moreover, 'women who are economically empowered contribute more to their families, societies and national economies. It has been shown that women invest extra income in their children, providing a route to sustainable development' (Golla *et al*. 2011: 3).

Additionally, economic empowerment helps women to participate more fully in public life. As income and agency increases, women's beliefs and understanding related to issues such as education, health, marriage, family, politics and the economy can deepen, enabling them to take more control of their lives and make more informed decisions. Furthermore, economic empowerment helps to bridge gender gaps and shift power more closely toward equilibrium. And a meaningful right to 'actionable' information is critical for women's economic empowerment.

With information, women can more effectively: engage educational opportunities for themselves and their children; understand and invoke their rights to land; and access capital and make informed decisions related to starting a business and farming. As Hillary Clinton, former US Secretary of State, noted at the 2011 Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, 'we need to correct the problem of information asymmetry – making sure women are informed about opportunities for trade and orienting technical assistance programs so they serve women as well as men' (Lemmon 2011).

Table 1 **Examples: economic empowerment themes**

Education	Are women able to access information on education policies and school budgets?
	Are women able to access information on curriculum, staffing, materials and nutritional programmes?
	Are women able to access information about scholarship and educational opportunities?
	Are there vocational training programmes available to women?
Land	Are women able to access information on land policy?
	Are women able to access information on their rights to own/inherit land?
	Are women able to access land titles?
Business	Are women able to access information on government procedures for starting a small business?
	Are women able to access policies and procedures for licensing?
	Are women able to access policies and procedures for government-sponsored loans?
	Are women able to access information relevant to their trade or market of interest?
Agriculture	Are women able to access information about prices?
	Are women able to access information about government-sponsored programmes for seeds and fertilizers?
	Are women able to access information about water for irrigation and related water policies?

Source Carter Center (2014).

With more equitable access to information, a greater number of women would be aware of and be able to protect their other fundamental rights – to live free from violence, to make informed health decisions, and to advocate for the protection of their labour rights (Carter Center 2015). Greater information can also help both to reduce violence and to empower women to act when violated or abused. For example, in 2013 the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Article XIX began a project to collect data on sexual violence against women in the metro system of São Paulo, Brazil through access to information requests. When it published articles in major newspapers to bring attention to this violation of women's physical integrity, there was a spike of almost 200 per cent in the rates of women who reported having experienced this type of violence (Article XIX n.d.). While decisive actions are now required by authorities to remedy these violations, access to information played a crucial role in enabling women to come forward.

Sexual and reproductive health depends, at least in part, on behaviours that are affected by access to information. For instance, an in-depth study of four countries in sub-Saharan Africa found that more than 60 per cent of adolescents did not have adequate information about how to prevent pregnancy and more than one third did not know where to get effective contraceptives. Young women are at a disproportionately higher risk for some sexually transmitted infections and globally there are almost twice as many young women than men living with HIV (Amnesty International 2014). Better access to information for women could have a positive impact on reducing transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and increased agency around childbirth.

Finally, access to information can allow women to combat corrupt practices, thus supporting and benefiting from the principles of open governance. Research has demonstrated that women are more vulnerable to, and impacted by, corrupt acts than men. From sexual exploitation in the form of a bribe, to reduced access to decision-makers, to resources intended for poor women being skimmed away because of lack of awareness, women are particularly impacted by corruption (Goetz 2008). Yet accountability systems also often replicate gender biases; 'for women', argue Goetz and Jenkins, 'being at the margins of political life has translated into being, in many contexts, invisible to accountability institutions' (2004: 158). Without information, women are less effective in serving as watchdogs, holding government to account and influencing priorities and decision-making. In the cycle of political accountability, there must be access to full and accurate information at each step of the decision-making process or efforts to engage and influence will fail.

Despite the clear benefits of access to information for women, the next section reports on a recent Carter Center study that demonstrated the significant legal, cultural and structural barriers that continue to exist to inhibit women's exercise of the right to information in Liberia and Guatemala.

5 Obstacles to women's exercise of the right to information
In 2014 and 2015, the Carter Center and local partners conducted an innovative research study in Liberia and Guatemala[3] to demonstrate the information asymmetry between men and women, identify obstacles that women face which may impede access to critical information, and determine women's particular information needs for greater economic empowerment and protection of rights. The study was designed to test the hypothesis that women are unable to exercise the fundamental right of access to information with the same frequency, ease and rate of success as men, and to ascertain the primary obstacles women face in accessing information.

The multi-method research study reviewed secondary data, and collected primary data through interviews with community leaders, experts, public servants and 'customers' at public offices; and through non-participant observation of access-to-information practices in relevant

government ministries and agencies. Local researchers collected data from pre-defined locations, assuring a mix of rural and urban and different tribes/indigenous peoples. The data sets were triangulated to develop preliminary findings, which were shared in the study locations for validation. This process allowed participants to discuss limitations and to consider follow-up questions based on the initial analysis of the data, thereby contextualising the findings. All data sets were reviewed through a quality assurance process to ensure the validity and reliability of the data for final analysis, and then analysed for existing and reoccurring patterns. The findings reflected the perceptions of those interviewed and illustrated trends, but without statistical sampling may not be fully representative.

In advance of the study, the lead researcher (Neuman) suggested that 'the seven Cs' (capacity, cash, childcare, confidence, control, consciousness and culture) are the most frequent challenges to women's exercise of the right to information (Carter Center 2012). Findings from Liberia and Guatemala confirmed this assertion, but with the important addition of one 'F': fear.

5.1 Liberia
In Liberia, local researchers interviewed 541 men and women from four counties, and from the City of Monrovia (Carter Center 2014). Those interviewed were asked whether women are able to exercise the right to information with the same facility (frequency, ease and rate of success) as men. As depicted in Figure 1, 78 per cent of male and female community leaders perceived that women do not access information at the same rate as men, 62 per cent of the experts agreed, but 58 per cent of the civil servants felt that there was no differential access.

Figure 1 **Are women able to access information with the same frequency, ease and rate of success as men in Liberia?**
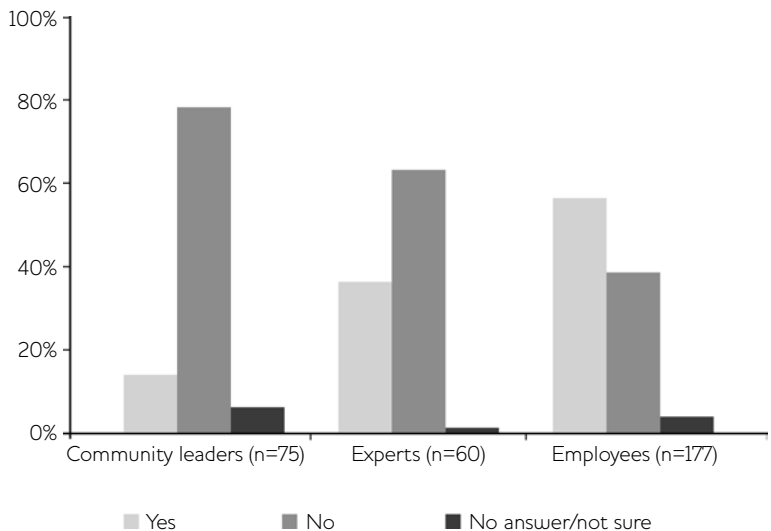
Source Author's own.

In Bomi and Nimba counties, 100 and 93 per cent respectively of the community leaders felt that women are not able to access information with the same facility as men. Only Lofa county had less than 50 per cent of community leaders indicating a perceived inequity. However, during the validation exercise in Lofa, the 42 participants noted that these findings did not reflect the realities on the ground.

During the interviews, community leaders also were asked to think of a time when they personally tried to access information at a government agency or authority's office, and to reflect on the result. Many community leaders – 47 per cent – indicated that they encountered difficulties or did not receive the information they needed; 7 per cent received the information but encountered some difficulty or delay; and only 20 per cent were able to access the requested information.

With relation to the obstacles, community leaders were provided with a list of 18 potential barriers to consider and offered the opportunity to identify any additional barriers to women exercising their right to information. Participants were requested to consider each barrier individually and assess whether that barrier was a small one, that some women may be able to overcome, a large barrier that was nearly impossible to overcome, or not a barrier at all. Once the magnitude of each barrier had been assessed, the community leaders were asked to select the three greatest barriers facing women in accessing information in their region.

When potential obstacles were mentioned, 87 per cent of the community leaders indicated that confidence to make a request was a large barrier that is nearly impossible to overcome. Community leaders also felt that illiteracy (85 per cent) and that 'not knowing where to go/ how to ask' (77 per cent) were large barriers that are nearly impossible to overcome. On aggregate, the most frequently identified barriers facing women in the exercise of their right to information across all five regions were illiteracy, fear of asking, not knowing where to go, issues of time and responsibilities and lack of mobility.

Expert respondents confirmed that lack of education and the prevalence of illiteracy are major barriers to women in exercising the right to information. In addition, they felt that cultural and traditional practices, as well as lack of awareness, were among the largest obstacles. Notably, 27 per cent of the expert respondents felt that women were largely disinterested or had an 'inferiority complex'. This contradicted the responses from female community leaders and accounts from the validation exercises.

Perhaps the most striking evidence and narrative came from the non-participant observation, a source of primary data, which included the in-country research team developing a list of public agencies related to economic empowerment and rights. All site visits to the selected agencies took place within a four-week period, with multiple visits (three per agency) at various times of the day and week. In-country researchers noted whether men or women were obtaining information,

and what barriers to access were observed. They witnessed women who were seeking information and services being derided, questioned, embarrassed and often just ignored.

5.2 Guatemala

In many respects, the Guatemala findings are similar to those in Liberia. Five *departamentos* and Guatemala City served as the research sites, with a total of 614 interviews conducted and 47 agencies observed. In Guatemala, the majority of community leaders and experts perceived that women are not able to access information with the same frequency, ease or rate of success as men. Paradoxically, the civil servants indicated that there was no differential access.

The study found overwhelmingly that women face great challenges and myriad barriers in accessing government-held information critical for economic empowerment and the protection and fulfilment of fundamental rights. Although, perhaps predictably, public employees were more hesitant to conclude that inequities or asymmetries exist in accessing publicly held information.

When community leaders were disaggregated by gender, more women than men indicated an asymmetry of information flow. When Guatemala City and Chiquimula are removed from the aggregate – thus leaving the regions that are predominantly indigenous – the perception of inequities is even more dramatic with more than 73 per cent of the respondents feeling that women are not able to access information with the same facility as men. In the *departamento* of Quiche, a highly indigenous area in the Western Highlands, almost 90 per cent of the community leaders identified gender inequity. They noted that 'because of a lack of empowerment and because of fear, women do not ask' and 'the culture of *machismo* of the husband and the [public] office run by men, if a man comes in he is treated better'. These observations support the perception that women are not able to access information with the same facility as men.

Contrary to the findings in Liberia, when women in Guatemala are able to enter the public agency, they often experience success in getting information. However, the non-participant observation and validation exercises highlighted that those women who successfully solicit information in public agencies are generally either very well-connected politically, or accompanied by a man. Participants in the validation exercises emphasised that challenges to access may not lie primarily at the agency level. Indeed, interview responses suggest that many women face familial obstacles to leaving the home to seek information. This is not surprising in a country where 80 per cent of the men feel that women should ask their permission to leave the house (Terán 2015).

When the 18 potential barriers were listed, 58 per cent of the community leaders indicated that illiteracy is a large barrier which is nearly impossible to overcome. The community leaders also felt that

Figure 2 **Are women able to access information with the same frequency, ease and rate of success as men in Guatemala?**
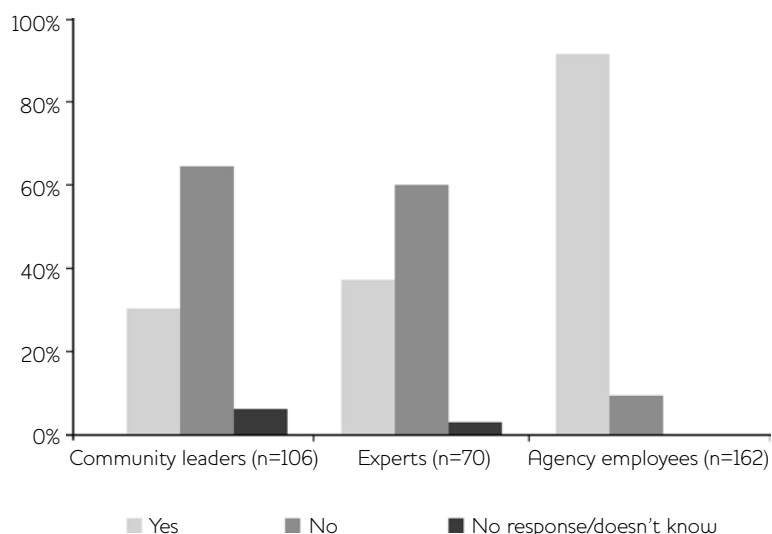
Source Author's own.

'distance to the public office' and 'fear of asking/fear of reprisals' were large barriers which are nearly impossible to overcome. With regard to fear, the validation participants across the six study locations were nearly unanimous that in many cases women fear both their families and the authorities. Elements of discrimination, racism, *machismo* and trepidation born from the recent history of civil war were reflected when community leaders noted 'fear' as a nearly impossible obstacle to overcome.

On aggregate, the most frequently identified barriers facing women in the exercise of their right to information across all five regions were illiteracy, fear of asking, not knowing where to go, issues of time and responsibilities and lack of mobility.

When ranking the critical challenges facing women, community leaders identified the following: poverty, inconvenient access/lack of time, illiteracy, lack of awareness of the law, and *machismo*.

As with Liberia, the category 'inconvenient access/lack of time' includes a number of previously disaggregated but related obstacles, including too busy, lacking time to request information, lack of access to transport, inability to access an agency because of distance or because of the burdens of childcare or domestic responsibilities. The responses included in the composite category of 'poverty' were those which cited problems such as lack of money to pay for transportation, lack of money for food when travelling to make a request, lack of money for childcare, and lack of money to pay for photocopies. When reflecting further on poverty as an obstacle for women accessing information, researchers made several insightful observations based on their

interactions with study participants, including that often the lack of resources is not only monetary resources, but also the opportunity cost of attempting to access information instead of taking care of another need perceived as more crucial for basic survival. Additionally, they observed that poverty is viewed as a systemic issue working in concert with the political status quo to impede empowerment of women.

Overall, the findings from the women and access to information studies demonstrate the hypothesis that women are not able to access information with the same facility as men. Further, they confirm that the seven Cs, plus fear, do seem to be the main obstacles to women's full exercise of their right to information.

6 Potential solutions for advancing equity

In light of the study's findings, and with particular emphasis on the identified obstacles, there are a number of creative responses that could effectively advance the right of access to information for women. At the international level there are clear opportunities for raising awareness of the issue, such as explicitly including women's right to information in the governance and human rights agenda, and encouraging governments to make gender-sensitive openness commitments. The Sustainable Development Goals have various targets focused on gender equity and governance, including access to information. This affords a unique opportunity to create indicators that combine these objectives and to develop relevant indicators to serve as a roadmap and evaluation tool.

Moreover, there are presently 66 country members in the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a voluntary compact to improve transparency, accountability and citizen participation. Many of these countries are in the process of either implementing their openness pledges or making new commitments. To date, less than a dozen commitments out of the thousands made have specifically focused on the benefits of improved governance and civil space for women. Through the OGP mechanism, partner countries could be supported to make gender-specific obligations, particularly related to access to information, to ensure women's participation in national committees, and to review all of their commitments through a gender-sensitive lens.

At the national level, governments should follow the spirit of the access to information law in its ideal for universality, rather than just adhere to the letter of the law. This could imply undertaking increased proactive publication, utilising mechanisms such as kiosks in the marketplaces where women gather, developing local information liaisons that disseminate information to women in their communities, and using community radio, to ensure that information reaches women without the need to invest time or travel long distances to access information. Review of access to information statutes should be undertaken to safeguard against provisions that would unwittingly have a discriminatory impact on women – removing, for example, requirements to show an identification card, which many women around the world are not issued with, or to make a request in writing.

In addition to disseminating information to women, public agencies should be encouraged to develop information that is meaningful to women, and to increase the amount of data disaggregated by gender. Finally, civil society organisations (CSOs) with female constituencies must become more active in raising awareness about the value of access to information for women, supporting solicitations, and developing protection mechanisms for requesters akin to a defence of human rights agenda.

With concerted efforts, governments and CSOs can reverse the information asymmetry and ensure that women are able to exercise their fundamental right to information with the same facility as men. When armed with the power of information, women will benefit more fully from the values of openness, accountability and meaningful participation, and will use the information for economic empowerment and the fulfilment and protection of rights. A free flow of information to women will transform lives.

Notes
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1 Rural households headed by women: sub-Saharan Africa, 31 per cent; Latin America and the Caribbean, 17 per cent; and Asia 14 per cent (FAO n.d.).
2 See https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails. aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8-b&chapter=4&lang=en.
3 The Liberia and Guatemala studies were completed in 2014 and 2015 respectively. A third country study is ongoing in Bangladesh and will be completed in early 2016.

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Men and Women of Words: How Words Divide and Connect the Bunge La Mwananchi Movement in Kenya

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Abstract How does a movement for social justice, whose members are mainly drawn from the lower economic strata of society, build and sustain its power in the face of co-option, and social and geographical division? Members of the Bunge La Mwananchi movement in Kenya explored this question using action research. The movement carves spaces for debate and activism in the urban public sphere accessible to the unrepresented masses. The authorities leave these spaces mostly unmolested, in part because co-option by politicians and civil society organisations is as effective at wrong-footing the movement as mass arrests and riot police would be. The research reminded the members that the movement's power has always lain in its efforts to reach across internal divisions of ethnicity, gender, class and geography. As the research connected the debaters in one site with those in another, it demonstrated how communicative enquiry works to create solidarity within this most grass-roots of movements.

1 Introduction

> I'm one of the people who started Bunge La Mwananchi. We had numerous challenges from the then government. We were arrested many times but we did not give up. At some point, the movement had gone silent until in 2002 and in 2003, it was fully revived. We have not had a downtime in its operation since then. Kibaki's government elected in 2002 gave us a lot of hope in having a better country since it had taken in a number of people from the movement. We felt that the citizen would be more powerful since there was support from the government. Bunge La Mwananchi started getting a name then. However, this was short-lived. Those we had set our hopes on were absorbed in the system and did not advance the course of the movement (Bunge La Mwananchi organiser).[1]

Gacheke Gachihi, a long-time organiser for Bunge[2] La Mwananchi[3] (BLM), the People's Parliament, describes it as a movement whose

aims are to bring about 'a Kenya where citizens enjoy unfettered sovereignty to organise to free themselves from all forms of oppression and domination' (Gachihi 2014). It is a social movement[4] that conducts its business in open parks, bus stands, markets, community centres and newspaper stands. A vocal grass-roots organisation, with no formal membership required, it is made up of whoever chooses to be part of it. The majority of its members come from the lower socioeconomic strata of Kenyan society (Kimari and Rasmussen 2010). Its leaders (spokespeople, organisers, activists) emerge from within its membership. These are Eric Hoffer's 'articulate minority', the men and women of words whose eloquence, ideas, organising capabilities and energy drive them to lead discussions, mobilise action, plan campaigns, lead demonstrations and think up and deploy slogans with style and passion (Hoffer 1951: 104; Nasong'o 2007). It is a movement that offers its members a space not otherwise open to them to listen, exchange ideas, propose and act on public affairs. Formal civil society organisations (CSOs) – registered and funded by governments, foundations, charities and the private sector – do not appear to BLM members to offer such a space for the real participation of the lower economic classes. The formal political system likewise does not invite them in on equal terms.

The people's parliaments occupy spaces that are autonomous and open, carved out of the intermediate geographies of the official and private propertied city by the presence and commitment of unrepresented people. This article looks at how the movement loses and gains power, as its men and women of words are dragged outwards by the centrifugal effects of money and social division, and pulled inwards by their commitment.

The movement thrives on discussion; indeed it was founded in the face of prohibitions on free speech about public affairs at a time when public talk, especially from low-paid formal and informal sector workers, unemployed, homeless, street workers and students was strongly repressed by the ruling Kenya African National Union regime. It grew in the streets of Nairobi's city centre in the early 1990s, emerging from street gatherings such as the 'Kafiri Movement' in Aga Khan Walk, at a time when President Moi's hold on power was being challenged by rising social unrest (Murunga and Nasong'o 2007: 9). Activists on street corners began organising political education for Nairobi workers on themes of African liberation. The movement itself first appeared in the late nineties, carving out a physical space for public discussion on two facing benches in Jeevanjee Gardens, a public park in the centre of the city, whose worn-out grassy squares, shady trees and time-worn statue of Queen Victoria had just been saved from the developers' bulldozers by public activists (Kimari and Rasmussen 2010). A few years later the space and the talk took on the name of Bunge La Mwananchi, 'the People's Parliament', as debates in the park took place on two facing benches with a speaker between, modelled on African village parliaments (Gachihi 2014). Such parliaments are usually to be found under a tree whose shade defines a set of procedural rules of inclusion, debate and decision (Brocklesby, Hobley and Scott-Villiers 2010). The

name not only draws on Africa's great past, but also characterises the movement's appeal to an irony-appreciative section of Kenya's poorer and more radical-idealistic elements by referring to the present constitutional parliament at City Square in Nairobi.

> By claiming to be a parliament for the people, the movement critiques the real parliament for not representing the ordinary Kenyan people, a critique that they act out in their daily practices (Kimari and Rasmussen 2010: 153).

Debates in the early days were enriched by older activists who had been in contact with the Mau Mau revolt of the 1950s and, according to Gachihi at a research analysis session in Nairobi in July 2015, their presence 'helped to shape the consciousness of the young generations' towards the rightfulness of and necessity for oppressed classes to struggle for a fair share of voice in building the nation. The street debates contributed to a massive change in national consciousness, and a change of government in 2003. A coalition of opposition parties, backed by many in civil society, took power.

While this heralded an opening of the public sphere to many whose voices had once been silenced, the new government also absorbed many of the men and women of words who had once been activists (Murunga and Nasong'o 2007). Nevertheless, the Jeevanjee site continued to attract a daily gathering of citizen debaters and new *bunges* (as they are called) claimed public spaces in Nairobi's informal settlements – the slums of Mathare, Kibera, Githurai and Huruma Kiamaiko – and in public spaces in the centres of other cities and towns – Mombasa, Kisumu, Eldoret, Nakuru and Kakamega. Each one took on its own name: for example, Bunge Mashinani (the Grass-Roots Parliament) in the Mathare slums, or Bunge La Wamama Mashinani (the Grass-Roots Women's Parliament) in east Nairobi, or Bunge La Mwananchi Kaptembwo (the People's Parliament at the bus station in the centre of Nakuru town). The BLM movement offered the potential for broad public participation in political affairs. Nearly 30 years later, the movement is still alive and kicking.

2 Action research method

The article draws on the findings of a short action research study carried out in Nairobi and Nakuru between May and July 2015. Led by two BLM long-time organisers, David 'Cidi' Otieno and Gacheke Gachihi, with support from action researchers Diana Muthoni Ndung'u and Nathaniel Kabala, and with some provocation from Patta Scott-Villiers at the Institute of Development Studies, the team joined BLM activists in a number of different sites for discussions about solidarities and fault lines in their movement. In Nairobi, we targeted Bunge La Mwananchi Jeevanjee, which is considered (by some) the epicentre of Bunge La Mwananchi countrywide, Bunge Mashinani in Mathare and Bunge La Wamama Mashinani in Huruma Kiamaiko, both in the east of Nairobi. In Nakuru County, the study focused on Bunge La Mwananchi Kaptembwo.

We began by identifying issues among ourselves, drawing out the main concerns of the two BLM organisers about movement growth and influence and setting them against theories of civil society, social division and the public sphere. Then the Kenyan team members went out and listened to what BLM members were talking about in all the selected sites. We also conducted interviews with onlookers, passers-by and local business owners and workers. In the way of action research, each day of listening and interviewing leads to new understandings which in turn raises new questions. These we posed to active and passive members within the *bunges* in the study, in group discussions and one-on-one interviews. This, in turn, led to a larger debate which the BLM activists organised to bring together members of Bunge La Mwananchi Jeevanjee and Bunge Mashinani in Mathare, to establish how the members of the two *bunges* view and cooperate with each other, provide the space for renewal of ties, and observe what could be learned from such an initiative.

3 Solidarity and political opportunity

BLM is a movement that prides itself on its success in bridging the politicised tribal divides in the country. During the ethno-political bloodshed of the post-election period of 2007/08, BLM members resisted politicians' calls for division and engaged in the *bunge* parliaments side by side, reinforcing the movement's sense of identity and cohesion and emphasising its determination to tackle the real political issues of the day, including inequality, unemployment and violence.

Today, Jeevanjee Gardens continues to be a space in which discussions on issues ranging from national and county politics to entertainment and sports are open to all-comers. Sometimes there is more than one grouping, each discussing different things, and at other times when there are burning issues, one large gathering forms the *kikao* or sitting.[5] At this and the other *bunge* sites the discussions sometimes coalesce into action: deputations to local authorities or joining demonstrations organised by activists from within or without. Members like to see the sittings as a neutral space, where, unlike other street corner political spaces, anyone can come and discuss any issue without fear of being victimised for party, tribe, class, gender, disability or ideology.

> *There are different bunges in the city but what we have at Jeevanjee is unique. When you go to City Hall, you need to be focused on one thing. You need to be supporting someone politically. It is the same with the bunge at Aga Khan Walk. Bunge La Mwananchi at Jeevanjee Gardens accommodates everyone across the political divide, social class and any other interest* (Bunge Jeevanjee participant).[6]

The debates at Jeevanjee Gardens tend to be concerned with non-local, national or international issues. The park and its surrounding cafés and small restaurants are often the places where protest campaigns are discussed and coordinated, in liaison with national lobbying groups and other movements such as Pawa 254 (an activist hub that

does much of its debating and organising online). The *bunges* in the informal settlements like Bunge Mashinani tend to debate and act on local issues. Many of these issues, such as extra-judicial killings and rape, are addressed case by case, often with help from an activist with a high public profile called in from Jeevanjee or one of the human rights organisations. Bunge La Wamama Mashinani, the women's *bunge*, was formed so that its members could speak specifically about women's issues, because they were not getting adequate airtime in the male-dominated spaces. *Bunges* in other towns in Kenya discuss national issues as well as local ones, but not being in the capital, they lead fewer national campaigns. Each of these *bunges* has a different unwritten rule about its way of operating, different capabilities for action and different powers to resist dissolution or co-option. The movement has done much to open a once closed public sphere to marginalised voices from the grass roots and it faces the difficulties of channelling grass-roots decisions into political action with ever-renewed determination.

The 'Unga Revolution' in 2010 was a high point for BLM. It was a year of intense debate and repeated protests at a time when the sharply rising price of *unga* (maize meal) was a burning issue. The call came out from the grass roots and was picked up by the *bunge* at Jeevanjee, whose members and contacts in other campaigning groups helped organise demonstrations and media stunts with wide participation of men and women from across Nairobi and other cities (Musembi and Scott-Villiers 2015). People felt that the BLM movement achieved national influence then. Media coverage was strong and government appeared to be concerned for its image in relation to class, poverty and hunger. Analysing it, the discussion groups pointed out that people from all walks of life were personally affected by the price rises. *Unga* is one of the most important staples in Kenya and the quadrupling of the price of the daily meal highlighted the rapidly rising cost of living, even to those on higher incomes. Even the middle classes seemed to have woken up, albeit temporarily, to the callousness of a political system that seemed unaffected by millions of citizens with not enough money to eat. 2010 was the year of the enactment of Kenya's new constitution and the country was in an ebullient mood; its people and politics had achieved something extraordinary. Middle and lower classes alike, working through or alongside the mobilising structures offered by BLM, and inspired by a new sense of optimism and opportunity, combined their repertoires of protest and campaigned for a right to reasonably priced food in a colourful outburst of contention.[7]

> *The biggest moment for BLM is Unga Revolution. It happened in 2010 after a famine that struck most parts of this country. We were concerned that the common people would not be able to afford food because the price was too high. It also came at a time when a chief from Turkana had been sacked by the government for reporting that a number of people from his location had died from hunger. The Unga Revolution was a success because of the unity that was portrayed during the period. There were only a few people who were involved during the planning. When they agreed on the issue, it was taken to the different*

neighbourhoods. The people there took up the issue and continued to mobilise their neighbours. They did not need to come to town. We decided to call it a revolution to get the government to listen since using the word 'food' would be too normal (Bunge La Mwananchi organiser).[8]

Other campaigns did not achieve the same degree of cross-class, cross-site solidarity. We heard of several instances where issues like rape in the informal settlements were taken up by small coalitions of local and Jeevanjee activists with local authorities, but the issues did not become the subject of sustained protest. In analysing what could be learned from this, discussion participants suggested that when an issue does not reach across the divide between rich and poor, its power is diminished. BLM members' efforts to tackle extra-judicial killings (young men in the slums shot by people in uniform) were at first similarly attenuated – the issues did not gain traction among members. The issue belongs only to people living in the rougher areas of town; sometimes the victims are petty criminals, or random individuals whose cadavers are put on garish display labelled as gangsters caught in the act of fleeing the scene of the crime. The media hints that these youth probably deserved their fate. It is no longer the year of the new constitution and the political atmosphere has changed to one that is more fearful of crime and terrorism, and less optimistic about justice. BLM organisers did have another card up their sleeves to strengthen solidarity – a card that we will return to in Section 5, when we consider how solidarity works in the face of the centrifugal forces that threaten to atomise the movement into small knots of people talking in isolated, rubbish-strewn urban nowheres.

4 Divisions: gender, class and geography
When the mobilising structure loses its articulation, the movement is unable to galvanise itself. We learned about how outside players divert debates and upset proposed activities. Members in the informal settlements explained instances where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) act specifically to reframe and reprioritise certain issues. It is common these days, according to Jeevanjee regulars, for powerful individuals who want to suppress the talk there on a particular issue to hand out cash to spoil the debates. They may introduce alternative issues or attract people away from the sittings with offers of short-term employment. There are examples where demonstrations are planned, only for some members of BLM to be paid to disrupt them. Police intimidation of BLM members is not uncommon and many of its most seasoned and courageous activists have had repeated spells in prison cells on unspecified charges.

The ability of Jeevanjee and the other *bunges* to resist these divisive manoeuvres is a key factor in the power of the movement. The *bunges* manage to resist tribalism (the naming of tribe as a beneficiary or a threat), perhaps because it is embedded in the movement's sense of itself. However, on the other social divisions there is more difficulty. Although most members recognise the divisions arising from gender, class and geography, their management of them has not always been so successful.

We will unpick these three problems in this section, before moving back to what the BLM people are doing when they are resisting divisiveness.

4.1 Gender

I come from a community where women are already marginalised. Amplifying their voice becomes even more difficult (Young woman, Mathare).[9]

A group of women formed Bunge La Wamama Mashinani (the grass-roots women's *bunge*) in Mathare, because of difficulties of timing and location in the male-organised *bunge*, but also because the debates in the other *bunges* tended not to focus on issues they cared about. Men in Bunge Mashinani agreed that women did not normally show up in their discussions. Some attributed this to a culture where women do not sit on the same platforms as men. Some organisers there have tried to address the problem by sharing information between the men and the women in their different spaces:

> *Personally, issues in this community are at heart. I often go out and meet many women, and even their bunge [Bunge La Wamama Mashinani] and listen out to them. I then bring those issues to our bunge where we also discuss. At our bunge, we discuss issues affecting everyone. Here in Mathare, information flows very fast. Issues that affect women here reach us* (Male Bunge Mashinani organiser).[10]

In Jeevanjee, there is similarly a gendered divide and, even though people are concerned, there are few initiatives to cross it: 'Women are not interested in sitting for the discussions. There was a day some young women passed here and said that what we always discuss is politics. I think that is why women never come and their issues are not represented too.'

4.2 Class and 'civil society'

In weighing up the relative problems caused by gender relations and those caused by co-option by donor-funded CSOs, women in Bunge La Wamama Mashinani concluded that they had begun to resolve the gender issue, but not the class co-option problem. While they felt that they could mobilise men in BLM to support them in their priorities, they felt powerless to deal with the CSOs, their money, their exclusive spaces and their sense of superiority and pity.

> *We [women] do not have the aim of getting money from the CSOs. They want to get funding from our work yet we are interested in amplifying the voices of the marginalised. They are using our voices for their own interests. We want to amplify women's voices for all generations. We feel betrayed by them yet we look at them. We end up being threatened by the government. That is the reason why the men have started their own bunge and they are very active. They got tired of being used by the CSOs. They want to amplify their own voices* (Bunge La Wamama Mashinani).[11]

Our discussion groups decided that some of the movement's greatest difficulties at present revolve around issues of money and class.

You realise that in Kenya there are two tribes. The rich and the poor. This is by my definition. If let's say you are poor, you are used by the rich and they will do anything to ensure that you remain poor because they are mostly the ruling class. They will not allow you to join them. They shall employ you and give you a little just enough for your survival so that you do not die. When you raise your voice, they will want to help you only to a certain level (Bunge Jeevanjee).[12]

After almost two decades of struggle for constitutional reforms that was largely led by what some BLM members describe as 'middle-class' civil society,[13] Kenya adopted a new constitution billed as one of the world's most progressive. Despite commitments to wide-ranging economic and social rights for citizens, many BLM members point out that five years later, nothing has changed for the lower economic classes. The hoped-for signs of change to conditions of poverty, marginalisation and rights abuse have yet to emerge. This has led to growing criticism, especially from younger members of the movement, of the performance of CSOs. They want to know why, when the country has reported year-on-year economic growth, there is rising hunger, joblessness and insecurity. BLM members question whether CSOs are really on the side of the grass roots at all.

While civil society in Kenya varies from local associations to large corporate NGOs and trades unions, BLM members are concerned that the civil society space related to the political public sphere has been colonised by middle-class leaders and ways of doing business. 'Middle class', they explain, is about money and power. The middle classes are separated from grass-roots interests materially and socially. It is not uncommon for a talented grass-roots organiser to be tempted to join an established organisation as a salaried worker and so begin to move away from the grass roots. Members believe that this is one of the reasons why, after 30 years of effort, citizens at the grass roots are still left out of national debates. They note that their issues and perspectives hardly find their way into CSO discourses and they feel they are caricatured in CSO documents and campaign slogans as a way to gain funds and notoriety.

BLM is unusual in Kenya in that it is a movement that is accessible to and largely led by people who are politically and economically marginalised. People see people discussing in public spaces and they join in, or existing members invite them in, or they experience injustice and seek a space for activism. In Mathare, being a member of Bunge Mashinani is a source of strength in the face of the provocations of slum life, but precarious incomes make sustained involvement difficult. Jeevanjee offers world-expanding discussions and sometimes protest, while also offering possibilities of income, a chance to try out for political leadership, or a step up into paid lobbying positions. In all the sites, when a person gets money they might leave the movement and not return.

Bunge Mashinani has really empowered people here. I know my rights and can go to the police station and report in case anything happens to me… I can go and call a person from the carwash to come and listen. However, if I do

not have money to give them, the next time I call them they will not come since they would have gotten some money if they stayed at the carwash (Bunge Mashinani).[14]

People come to Jeevanjee to get skills and strategies so as to seek seats in the national and county government. It is the best place to sharpen your political skills since you are free to speak your mind. You also meet with others who challenge you (Bunge La Mwananchi).[15]

The men and women of words who keep the movement linked and active also spin off into other activities. If living in the slums means not getting heard then moving into politics or NGOs offers the possibility of becoming an audible voice. A number of BLM activists who have the ability to speak well have joined politics or become members of registered campaigning organisations. But many of them appear to have ceased to speak for the grass roots.

We have these nominated members [who have joined politics] who are silent. We ask them what they have done since they were nominated to the county assembly and all they say is that they raise issues and bills to the county assembly. They however say that once their issues fail in the county assembly, they take them to the courts to look for solutions. This is not the way it should be. They should come back to us and tell us who stopped them and why (Young man, Nakuru).[16]

4.3 Geography

What is lost when a leader moves away from a *bunge* space? In their analysis the members concluded that solidarity was jeopardised, because communication across the *bunge* spaces diminished. It was natural for a single *bunge* to focus on its own affairs. So what keeps them part of a single movement?

I came to know BLM when there was effective communication. Whenever there was an issue, it could be communicated to the grass roots. I used to go to Jeevanjee for meetings. With time, I realised that I could not afford to go to town every day. This was not only me… We started meeting here [in Mathare] and discussed mostly on the constitution… With time, though, we started discussing [local] issues which were affecting the members of the community (Bunge Mashinani).[17]

People in Mashinani, Wamama and Kaptembwo all spoke of the inaccessibility of the *bunge* at Jeevanjee. Some said that they were not sure whether Bunge La Mwananchi still exists as a national phenomenon, others spoke of being unable to reach organisers, while others spoke of lack of knowledge regarding whom to approach for help with taking an issue forward. Nakuru members felt that Bunge Jeevanjee was acting as if it were at the top of a hierarchy instead of as one chapter among equals. In Mathare, Mashinani members explained their grievances against Jeevanjee:

There is no connection between Bunge Mashinani and Bunge Jeevanjee… We used to have support from Bunge La Mwananchi but now they do not come.

We do not have the backup that we need and the Member of Parliament would easily bring his own people to take over our conversation. If we had BLM there, he would be scared. I think they stopped coming because they used to have resources then and now they do not (Bunge Mashinani).[18]

The reaction in Jeevanjee to this criticism was mixed. They believed that issues that they discuss and take action on affect all marginalised people, but only after they reach Jeevanjee do the issues encompass a larger context. Some people from the margins felt that Bunge Jeevanjee was indeed superior to their 'local' *bunge* and ought to have been giving guidance. On the other hand, Bunge Jeevanjee members opined that the other *bunges* ought to carry out their activities independent of Jeevanjee, only to ask for advice when they get stuck. The BLM members in the informal settlements and in the towns outside the capital feel abandoned by Bunge Jeevanjee because they are only contacted when Bunge Jeevanjee has activities that require numbers of people. When faced with issues, each *bunge* now finds its own ways of solving problems and they rarely involve one another.

5 The counter-manoeuvres

The movement lives on and is once again gaining strength. As the research findings became part of the members' discussions at each site, more and more people saw divisions in the movement (whether arising from co-option, loss of key spokespeople to salaried jobs, or communication breakdowns) as interfering with their mission to confront social injustice. The discussions turned to asking what its active organisers were doing now. Otieno and Gachihi are doing action research. They have been working with *bunge* members from several sites across Nairobi to take a rigorous look at extra-judicial killings. In the process, the *bunges* have communicated to a new level. During the reflective action research with IDS on which this article is based, between one meeting and the next, members began to take action. Bunge Mashinani members came and spoke to Bunge Jeevanjee members and vice versa. These meetings concluded that the informal settlements are some of the most important sites for people's parliaments; the power base of the movement. They agreed on activities that would strengthen *bunges* at the grass roots. Jeevanjee members agreed to spend more time at other *bunge* sites in Nairobi. Relations between Jeevanjee and Nakuru also took a step forward.

Since we had the debate with Bunge Jeevanjee, things have improved. They call us to attend meetings with people and institutions that are important to us. Now, we do not have to know someone in Bunge Jeevanjee in order to reach any organisation. I feel we have the right contacts right now. We have attended many forums, which have opened our eyes. I think the meetings that we had with Bunge Jeevanjee opened both our and their eyes (Bunge Mashinani).[19]

Rachael is an organiser in Mathare. In 2015 she has a job as a leader of a government programme in the settlement, organising young people to labour at digging drains and constructing sanitation infrastructure in the valley. She is still a leader of BLM.

Everyone still knows that I am an activist who likes stirring things when they are not right… I still advance the struggle even within [the programme I am leading]. I still go for demonstrations when they are called. In the struggle, you look at the situation and know how to react (Rachael, Mathare).[20]

People like Rachael leave the space of BLM for other assignments. In her new position she has been able to meet new people. She fought for a social hall to be constructed. She has mobilised the community. In future she will come back and build the movement. It's not everybody who leaves, but many, they have memory – they will continue the struggle in their new space (BLM organiser).[21]

These counter-manoeuvres help to clarify the positive mechanisms that link the will to speak on public issues to the will to resist the inevitable forces that will try to reconfigure this unmediated voice. We see how spaces which could be just messy corners owned by no one, are subtly returned to order and power by reminders of what the movement's name means: a space of power that is not just anti-tribalism, but anti- any kind of negative discrimination. We see how communication across lines of social and geographic difference helps solidify a sense of a movement that has power, membership and scope. And we see that when an organiser moves out of the space and into another, she can still be in the BLM space, if she cares to be.

6 Conclusion

It may appear ironic that freedom of speech undertaken in public spaces, the very purpose and performance of the movement, is also its Achilles heel. It suggests that we need to do more to understand the processes by which unmediated public speech becomes influential; how it gains and loses power in movements for social justice. In our research together, members of the Bunge La Mwananchi movement learned what Nancy Fraser has already pointed out in her article criticising Habermas' ideal view of the public sphere – that class, gender and geography have profound effects from the inside as well as from the outside. They affect who is involved in a discussion, which issues are taken up, under what umbrella and with what effect (Fraser 1990). However, BLM activists counteract Fraser's argument that declaring a space devoid of social divisions 'is not sufficient to make it so' (1990: 60). When they act on declarations of anti-tribalism, anti-classism and anti-genderism, they remind the movement that this is its identity. By facilitating freedom of speech, not just in the random interstices of the city, but *across* these spaces, they build a tangible network of communication between masses of people and numerous places. When they manage to get members and supporters from the city centres to commit to connecting with and across the informal settlements, they are building a power to rival the formal institutions that try to ignore them.

Talk across class, gender and geography works easily at times of national inspiration, like it did in the year of the new constitution and the Unga Revolution. As inspiration turns to realism and talk between

people in different positions turns to mistrust and misunderstanding, then so fluid a movement can move into danger. Yet just at the point when we think that we can understand the patterns of voice and its susceptibility to co-option and division, we hear it rising again; using its own ability to connect by using questions, analysis and performance, to work out what might have been wrong and take steps towards renewal.

Notes

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1 Interview, Jeevanjee Gardens, 3 June 2015.

2 *Bunge*: parliament in Kiswahili, derived from the Ha language in Tanzania, meaning a place where elders discussed matters of state (Mbaabu 1985).

3 *Mwananchi*: citizen; a politically charged word, its original meaning is 'child of the country/land'. Political leaders often wield the term to mean dutiful, innocent, common, ordinary or average person, but also to imply a racial or indigenous specificity, i.e. an African person (Hunter 2015).

4 We understand a social movement to be 'a collective attempt to further a common interest or secure a common goal, through collective action outside the sphere of established institutions' (Giddens 1997: 511). The definition should encompass 'the distinctions not only between community and class or popular and elite movements but also between organised and unorganised, spontaneous or anomic movements, and, as such, it is rooted in concrete African social processes' (Nasong'o 2007: 20).

5 *Kikao*: a sitting under the shade of trees.

6 Participant in a focus group discussion with BLM members, Jeevanjee Gardens, 19 May 2015.

7 The elements of social movement theory used here are drawn from McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996).

8 Interview, Jeevanjee Gardens, 2 June 2015.

9 Interview with female human rights activist. Listening post at Mathare, 15 May 2015.

10 Interview with young man, focus group discussion with members of Bunge Mashinani, Mathare, 17 May 2015.

11 Interview with young woman, focus group discussion with Bunge La Wamama Mashinani, Mathare, 18 May 2015.

12 Focus group discussion with active Bunge La Mwananchi members, Jeevanjee Gardens, 19 May 2015.

13 Civil society is understood here in the way Nasong'o puts it: 'organised social life that is voluntary and self-perpetuating and though bound by a legal order, is beyond state control' (2007: 24). The civil society role in pushing for and influencing the content of the new constitution was substantial. After the first multi-party elections in 1992, which were won by the incumbent because the opposition was riven with division, the Kenya Human Rights Commission (a CSO) and 15 other organisations called for a push for constitutional reform – including of the electoral commission, security, public order, powers of the local administration, and

freedom of assembly and speech (*ibid*). As more and more organisations joined in, the constitutional reform process gained momentum until, 18 years later, a new constitution was made law.

14 Young man at *bunge* debate in Mathare, 17 June 2015.

15 Interview with *bunge* organiser, Jeevanjee Gardens, 2 June 2015.

16 Interview with young man, Bunge Kaptembwo, Nakuru, 23 May 2015.

17 Young man at debate between BLM and Bunge Mashinani, Mathare, 17 June 2015.

18 Young man at debate between BLM and Bunge Mashinani, Mathare, 17 June 2015.

19 Interview, Bunge Mashinani, Mathare, 1 September 2015.

20 Interview, Mathare, 20 May 2015.

21 Analysis session, Gigiri, 29 May 2015.

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Test It and They Might Come: Improving the Uptake of Digital Tools in Transparency and Accountability Initiatives

Christopher Wilson and Indra de Lanerolle*

Abstract Information and communications technologies (ICTs) and data play an increasingly visible role in transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs). There has been little research on how the selection of ICT tools influences the success of these initiatives. This article reports on research into TAI tool selection processes in South Africa and Kenya. Findings suggest 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 this carries significant efficiency and sustainability risks. We conclude by suggesting a strategy for increasing investment and effort in tool selection, in order to conserve overall project resources and minimise the risk of failure.

1 Introduction

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) and data play an increasingly visible role in transparency and accountability (T&A) programming. This might involve using social media to track parliamentary performance, mobile phones to conduct satisfaction surveys on public service delivery, reporting websites to document corruption, or radio to promote and facilitate political debate. Here, such processes are referred to as Technology for Transparency and Accountability Initiatives (T4TAIs).

T4TAIs have received significant attention in both the academic literature, and the grey literature of professional reports and programming guides (Ahmed, Scheepers and Stockdale 2014; Avila *et al.* 2010; Fox 2015; Gaventa and McGee 2013; Joshi 2013; McGee and Carlitz 2013; Slater 2014). This body of work presents examples of effective use of technology in the service of T&A objectives, but also raises concerns about the effectiveness and impact of T4TAIs. Some of the explanations for lack of success include a failure to sufficiently understand the users of technological tools (McGee and Carlitz 2013),

failure to account for contextual factors (Joshi 2013), and limited technical capacities or investment in project management (Slater 2014). The way that tool selection processes influence the success of T4TAIs is seldom addressed. This article presents some initial findings from a research project which aims to help fill that gap.[1]

The process of tool selection, and the dynamics influencing it, are important. Our research confirms that a very wide range of tools are used by T4TAIs including: social media platforms; off-the-shelf (OTS) software platforms such as Ushahidi or Frontline SMS, which can be applied in dramatically different contexts with little customisation; paid subscriptions to cloud services for managing data; hardware such as tablets for conducting surveys; or mobile apps and web interfaces which T4TAIs build or commission from the bottom up. The selection of the right tool for the job influences the implementation of accountability programming, and its potential for influencing T&A. The complicated processes through which these tools are selected involve different types of decisions (What kind of tool? Build or buy? Open source or proprietary?) and different models of decision-making (Top-down or bottom-up? With what degree of research, consultation or preparation?). Understanding tool selection processes is important for understanding how T4TAIs function, and the conditions that are associated with positive programming outcomes.

To better understand these dynamics, surveys and interviews were conducted with T4TAIs in Kenya and South Africa during 2014 and 2015. Findings suggest 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.

'Build it and they will come' is an established trope for describing a failure to anticipate user needs and realities in software development (Markus and Keil 1994), which has also been applied to software and content in a development context (Hatakka 2009), as well as within the T&A context specifically (McGee 2013). We discuss findings relevant to this trope, first by discussing what shapes success and failure of tool selection and tool driving projects. We continue by discussing uptake failure, which our research participants linked to project and tool selection failure. Finally, we discuss T4TAI strategies for mitigating uptake failure.

2 The process of tool selection
Study of T4TAIs, and new media research in general, has been dominated by a proliferation of case studies (see Fung, Gilman and Shkabatur 2010; Fox 2015; Ahmed *et al.* 2014; Avila *et al.* 2010; Gigler and Bailur 2014). These focus primarily either on whether ICT tools add value, or contextual and strategic components result in positive outcomes. However, the process through which ICT tools are chosen and

characteristics of 'successful' tool selection processes have not received significant attention (Fox 2015; Gaventa and McGee 2013; Joshi 2013).

Within the broader field of study considering philanthropic and social good initiatives, a handful of case studies explore the influence of specific factors on tool adoption (Merkel *et al.* 2007; TechSoup Global 2012; Zorn, Flanagin and Shoham 2011) and more consider technological diffusion rates and adoption dynamics within sectors (Kim 2014; Zorn *et al.* 2011; Hoehling 2013). There is also the 'grey literature': guidance produced by organisations for direct use by other organisations (Kwok 2014; Dederich, Hausman and Maxwell 2006; Denison 2008; Wakefield and Sklair 2011).

There does not appear to be any systematic study of the processes through which T4TAIs select technological tools for their work. The recent *Learning Study on the Users in Technology for Transparency and Accountability Initiatives* (McGee and Carlitz 2013) suggests that many T4TAIs build their strategies around untested assumptions about tool users; when these assumptions do not hold true in implementation, project impact and sustainability are both affected. Understanding and improving processes of tool selection could solve this problem. Tool selection is the opportune moment for strategic decisions that maximise tool adoption by users. McGee and Carlitz offer a number of recommendations to improve the design of T4TAI through better understanding of user needs and practices. Their study does not, however, explore the context in which such decisions are made, or the competing factors that influence tool selection. We conducted surveys and interviews with T4TAIs in Kenya and South Africa as a first effort to fill this gap.

3 The study and its methods

An online landscaping survey, disseminated via email, was conducted from December 2014 to January 2015, assessing the characteristics and perceptions of civil society organisations (CSOs) that actively use email and have a web presence. In Kenya, due to low responses, email distribution was supplemented by dissemination through the researchers' own networks. The online survey comprised 15–25 questions exploring: (a) CSO size, organisational structure, professionalisation and thematic focus; (b) how CSOs evaluate their own capacity and their enthusiasm for using technology in programming; and (c) the characteristics of a self-identified project that had a technology component. Responses were received from 247 South African organisations and 40 Kenyan organisations. This information was used to inform segmentation for research on tool selection processes in T4TAIs, and provided a preliminary population from which to draw the sample for the subsequent research.

Between January and April 2015, 38 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of 18 South African and 20 Kenyan T4TAIs that had recently selected or were currently selecting a tool for T&A programming. Interviews took the form of

open conversations, and interviewees were encouraged to present an organic narrative of tool selection processes, which emphasised those details and factors they felt were most relevant, in order to capture the nuanced dynamics influencing tool selection. Interviewers used a code sheet with 28 key indicators, and asked supplementary questions to collect data on those indicators if the respondent did not refer to them in their narrative unprompted. The indicators covered the respondent's motivations for adopting technology, the processes through which tools were identified, selected and implemented, and their perspectives on the implications of the selection process for the success of the project.

Though the small sample size clearly limits the degree to which our findings can be generalised, we believe that they provide useful insights into the processes of T4TAI tool selection and that, combined with insights from other literature and our own experience of T4TAI programming, they provide a sound basis for preliminary recommendations.

4 Findings
The research found that less than a quarter of the initiatives described the tool they had chosen as a success. Common problems included the tool not working as expected, low uptake by users, more lengthy development or modification time than anticipated, and struggles with finding or managing technical partners.

Organisations lacked knowledge in key areas: many started with little information on what they needed their tool to do, or on which tool could do what they needed. Very few had detailed knowledge about how tools worked before they chose them; although some had conducted research, it did not focus on tool availability or user needs. When we asked respondents what they would do differently if they ran the project again, one of the most common responses was 'know more about users or tools'. Below, we present our findings specifically in relation to the 'build it and they will come' phenomenon, which we found to be both common and significant in relation to outcomes of tool selection.

4.1 Success and failure in tool selection
To achieve a balanced assessment of whether tool selection and subsequent project implementation were successful, we relied on respondents' own definitions of success, identified during interviews, and on researcher assessments based on these definitions. Respondents commonly described success and failure in terms of achieving project targets or organisational objectives, and many did not clearly distinguish between the success of selection processes and success of projects.

Based on interviewees' self-assessments and researcher assessments, cases were classified as either successful, partially successful, unsuccessful or – if the project was too new to make a judgement – inconclusive. Where our classification differed to that of the respondent, it was usually because it was too early to tell, or there was no evidence of user uptake.

Very few tool selection outcomes were successful – by our analysis, only 3 out of 18 in South Africa, and only 6 out of 20 in Kenya (hereafter we will present this as SA: 3/18, KE: 6/20). Even in cases where it was not possible to determine success (SA: 5/18, KE: 1/20), early evidence offered reasons to be concerned. Excluding such cases, successful tool selection was found in less than a quarter of cases.

The prominence of failed tool selection within the sample reinforces anecdotal evidence and suggestions in the literature that many organisations undertaking T4TAIs lack the capacities and resources to make strong tool selections, and that this has a negative impact on programming outcomes (Merkel *et al.* 2007; TechSoup Global 2012; Denison 2008; Fox 2015).

The most commonly described indicators of successful tool selection, in order of incidence, were the overall success of the project the tool was part of, number of people using the tool, people using the tool in the way intended, and user feedback. One of the most common explanations of project failure was uptake failure, where the tool's intended users did not adopt or use it in the way, or to the degree, that the project anticipated. Other reasons reported included the chosen tool failing to work as expected or, in cases involving a bespoke tool, that the tool was not completed.

4.2 Uptake failure

Almost half the cases experienced uptake failure (SA: 5/12, KE: 6/12). These included the production of social media reporting systems which did not receive reports, SMS scoring platforms which did not receive SMS messages, mobile data collection tools which were deployed, but which did not meet the needs of enumerators during deployment, and a data portal which did not attract users due to an unsuitable user interface. In another quarter of cases (SA: 3/12, KE: 3/12) the organisation had little or no information regarding tool use. We classified the tool selection processes as unsuccessful in such cases, though this occasionally differed from respondents' own views, as discussed below.

There were only two cases where the tool was not used at all. In one, the interviewee cited the complexity of the task (developing a database query system for a large membership-based advocacy organisation) and the inability to find a suitable technical partner as primary reasons for complete uptake failure. In the other, the costs of deploying the tool were beyond the resources of the organisation.

4.3 Strategies to mitigate uptake failure: user research and trialling

Neither user research – here understood broadly as research conducted by T4TAIs on the people that they hope will use a tool – nor trialling – trying out tools with small groups prior to selection or deployment – were well-represented in our sample. Relatively few organisations conducted any form of research on their intended tool users (SA: 9/18, KE: 6/20) and even fewer tested out tools prior to selecting or adopting them (SA: 5/18, KE: 3/20). Trialling and research were especially rare

in cases where targeted users were a broad public, a characteristic also associated with high rates of uptake failure.

Our research offers some evidence that trialling and user research could be effective in preventing uptake failure. In both countries, those organisations that conducted user research were most likely to see their tools adopted. Prior experience of using a tool in a project context was even more strongly correlated with uptake success. Respondents described acquiring such experience through the use of tools in other programmes, or by testing and trialling tools. All but one organisation that trialled their tools succeeded, but of those that did not trial, most failed.

4.4 User research and trialling in a project context
The tool selection narratives provided by respondents both reinforced and complicated this positive correlation between research/trialling and tool uptake.

Respondents generally recognised the value of user research, and a lack of knowledge about tools and tool users was a frequently mentioned reason for project failure. Many saw that user research would have improved tool selection and project processes, but felt they didn't have the available human, financial or technical resources for research – or, indeed the time. As one respondent put it: 'This was a fast project, there was no time for research. The whole project was really an experiment.'

Some organisations already had extensive knowledge of and engagement with the communities of users they were targeting, but did not recognise the value of conducting additional, structured research. Less than half the initiatives conducted user research prior to tool selection or deployment (SA: 9/18, KE: 6/20), though many thought, with hindsight, that it would have been beneficial. Lack of general or specific research on tool users was regularly associated with uptake failure.

We found this perspective frequently repeated across the sample, despite dramatic variations in both the time and the resources that were invested in tool selection and implementation, and the degree of complexity of tool selection and implementation processes. This suggests that there is limited understanding about what structured user research is, or what value it can add.

Testing or trialling of tools prior to selection or deployment was rare (SA: 5/18, KE: 3/20), but those who had done it had become very strong advocates for trialling, and viewed it as central to success. As one respondent put it: 'You don't know something is good until you see and try it.' A few projects in the sample went through multiple iterations of both tools and project modalities, and described early failures as important learning experiences, performing much the same function as trialling would have. Aside from these projects, however, there seemed to be little awareness of how structured trialling could save some of the time and money costs implied by project failure and restructuring.

It is also worth distinguishing between projects that purchased or adopted an off-the-shelf (OTS) tool (SA: 7/18, KE: 9/18), and projects that 'built', commissioned or developed bespoke tools (SA: 11/18, KE: 8/16). Use of OTS tools included the use of social media to facilitate public discussions, use of a popular instant messaging application for communication between citizen monitors in different parts of the country, or the use of content management systems to develop and deploy websites.

Among a few of those who built their own tools, trialling occurred after initial builds and prior to deployment (SA: 3/7, KE: 1/8). Few of the OTS tools used were selected on the basis of research or trialling (SA: 3/7, KE: 2/8), and none on the basis of trialling more than one tool.

5 Discussion

Our overall finding that most tool selections were unsuccessful is clearly a matter of concern for our respondents, their donors and other stakeholders, and for other practitioners in the field of technology for transparency and accountability. Equally important is the perspective that uptake and project failure could have been avoided if research and trialling had been deployed.

We also found that trialling was more strongly correlated with success than research, supporting the view that trialling is a good potential strategy for practitioners.

5.1 What makes trialling particularly useful?

Trialling is an approach widely used in many software innovation processes, and is particularly emphasised in user- or human-centred design approaches (see, for example, ISO 2010). There is a strong practical and economic case for trialling. Practically, it enables assumptions about a tool's ease of use, effectiveness and appropriateness to be tested before deployment, reducing risk of failure, and helps determine whether a tool works for specific groups of users. Economically, late discovery of problems is usually more expensive to correct than early discovery.

Research using the diffusion of innovations (DoI) model has demonstrated that individuals often use trialling as a strategy to offset risks in adoption (Rogers 1995). This research supports the idea that trialling is an effective decision-making strategy because it enables the decision-maker to 'kick the tyres' and see if the tool does what they expect, but also because it enables the decision-maker to discover how the tool works in 'the real world'. This discovery is important because it aids understanding and addresses the usefulness, appropriateness and effectiveness of the tool, particularly when the decision-maker has not clearly articulated to themselves what exactly they expect. Surfacing issues in this way is difficult using other methods.

Respondents reported a number of discoveries about their intended users following a tool's selection that highlight how effective trialling

would have been. In one case, the organisation had extensive knowledge of its intended community of users, but it was only after deployment that they discovered that their target users in the area where the project was being deployed did not use their choice of media at all; trialling would have surfaced this issue quickly. Another respondent reported that it was only when the developer and the organisation deploying the technology went to the deployment location together that the developer realised that the tool would need to store data offline until mobile networks became available. This provides an example of a trial strategy surfacing something that the deploying organisation had not anticipated would be critical to the tool design and selection.

It could be argued that since many T4TAIs are described as pilots, that this is a form of trialling. We would argue though that these pilots do not qualify as trials in themselves because, as we have reported above, there is little systematic gathering of feedback from users to identify how – if the 'pilot' was to be the basis of further intervention – a tool should be modified or an alternative found.

5.2 Why do organisations trial so rarely?

In many cases, the organisations we interviewed did not choose a tool at all. Sometimes, a tool had already been selected by donors or foreign partners before our respondent became involved in the project. More often, they sought technical partners to work with at an early stage, and these partners took on all or most of the responsibility for identifying or building tools. As one respondent explained, their chosen partner dictated the choice of tool: 'To be honest – in terms of technology – we weren't really choosing at all.'[2]

Time and resource constraints were also frequently mentioned. Many respondents reported that projects involving technologies had taken much longer than they had expected, hoped or planned for. Trialling takes time, and as launch dates approach, initiatives may choose to skip this step to save time, even though they recognise its value. In some cases, trialling was simply not possible. One respondent explained that they had to order the equipment they needed online, and could not try it out prior to purchase.

It is also worth noting that the degree of resources, time and effort invested varied greatly among the research participants. Some projects were completed in a matter of weeks, with limited resources and little formal planning, while other initiatives involved substantial budgets, the hiring of additional dedicated staff and multi-year plans. With two exceptions, the cases which involved building tools from scratch were those which required the most substantial resources. Overall, there was not a clear relationship between resources deployed and success.

For some organisations, such constraints make trialling challenging, even sometimes unfeasible. However, we suggest two broader explanations relating to the organisations implementing T4TAIs that could help to

account for the lack of trialling and user research. These speak less to constraints, but rather to deeper questions of how organisations approach tool selection, and their understanding of the relationship between technology choices and user engagement.

5.3 Proxy errors and unknown unknowns

One explanation may be that T4TAI project managers regard themselves as reasonable proxies for their users. Rather than go into the field to anticipate user needs, they looked in the mirror. A number of respondents reported that though they did not conduct trials with potential users, they did try out the tool themselves.

We believe this is likely to be problematic for T&A work, and perhaps particularly for tool designers and project managers in developing country contexts. A software developer at an elite university near Boston who aimed to develop a social platform for American students may have been able to use themselves as a test case with great success, and might have had a lot in common with their intended users. A manager in an organisation based in an African capital city aiming to improve citizens' ability to hold their local government to account in a rural area may have much less in common with their intended community of users. Though our research did not include interviews with project managers based in developed countries that were selecting and developing tools for use in developing countries, it would be reasonable to assume that they may be even further removed.

In our research sample, there were many dimensions to this lack of commonality, from the relatively obvious questions of class, education and access to power and technology, to less obvious factors such as daily routines, cultures and attitudes. In South Africa, with its history of apartheid and very high Gini coefficient, these differences may be particularly acute.

We suggest that a related explanation may be that some managers and organisations may suffer from a problem of 'unknown unknowns'. We noticed that those organisations that conducted research and trialling were often those that already had quite extensive knowledge of how their targeted users currently use technologies. It could be that those who had less knowledge of their intended users also had less understanding of the importance of this knowledge gap. Conducting trialling or user research does not require much technical knowledge or skill, but the advantages of doing so may not be immediately obvious. Project managers tasked with selecting and implementing tools may not be able to realistically forecast the costs of research or trialling when buying, adapting or building a tool – or the costs of uptake failure.

The decision of whether to buy or build tools was critical for the participants in our research. Few respondents identified their organisations as 'tech', or described them as 'innovative' in their use of technology – and most stated that they had very limited technical knowledge or skills. But

most organisations also chose to build or commission the development of bespoke tools, rather than buying or adopting OTS tools. More surprising is that few of those who opted for 'build' over 'buy' conducted research on or trialled available existing tools before undertaking the challenging and complex task of creating a new tool.

On the face of it, this is unexpected. Developing new digital tools is a risky endeavour, even if tool selection and implementation involves little investment of time and resources, and even in well-resourced organisations (Tidd, Bessant and Pavitt 2005). A common approach to managing this risk is iterative and 'adaptive design' (Highsmith 2013), which involves budgeting and planning for an iterative cycle of versions that will succeed over time through testing. We encountered only one case of this approach in our research.

A number of respondents clearly recognised the value of iterative development. They had clear and detailed views on the shortcomings of the tools they had built or commissioned, but lacked the capacity, authority, financial resources or time to invest in further development.

6 Conclusion

We believe that the sample size in this study is large enough to represent a substantial portion of T4TAIs present in Kenya and South Africa. The samples included a diverse range of organisations – including both long-standing T&A organisations and tech-focused innovators – and the initiatives described by respondents cover a broad range of technologies. This research was in any case designed to bring issues and insights to the surface, rather than to test firm hypotheses. Our conclusions are therefore tentative. Further research exploring these organisations in greater depth, or applying comparable methods in other countries, would be useful to confirm or question our conclusions, and to produce additional insights.

In regard to the 'build it and they will come' phenomenon, our research supports earlier research findings. Avila *et al.* (2010), McGee and Carlitz (2013) and others have highlighted the need for better understanding of users if tools are to be used appropriately and successfully in T&A projects. We also note, however, the relevance of trialling strategies to mitigate the risk of uptake failure, and offer two common explanations for why T4TAIs fail to learn about users before selecting and deploying technological tools. Proxy errors, in which project managers or teams assume that they are themselves reasonable proxies for the target users of T4TAI tools, and lack of knowledge about the risks and costs associated with not understanding users, are especially common. These explanations highlight entry points for supporting more strategic tool selection and implementation by T4TAIs.

McGee and Carlitz recommend that 'in both design and implementation phases, actors involved in T4TAIs need to gather more information about potential and actual users' (2013: 30). Our research supports this

recommendation and also suggests the need for a further focus within the T4TAI community (both researchers and practitioners) on the user, in particular on trialling. We suggest two basic approaches that could be tested by practitioners in the field and evaluated by researchers.

1 **Test first.** Trialling during project planning helps understand the limitations of tools in context, and identify obstacles to user uptake. It takes a variety of forms. A commitment to documenting trialling methods could lead to shared learning across initiatives and organisations to develop best practice.

2 **Find or buy before building.** A systematic focus on identifying and trialling existing OTS technologies before building or commissioning the development of bespoke tools could lead to less tool selection failures and better use of limited resources. The risks of failure may be lower for initiatives employing OTS tools, and the costs of failure for strategies that purchase or adopt OTS tools are much lower than the costs of failure for bespoke tool development. Identifying and testing available OTS may require some kind of research, but our findings suggest that reaching out to existing networks or conducting simple web searches could be sufficient to identify potential OTS tools for many T4TAIs.

Together, these approaches suggest a strategy of increasing investment and effort in tool selection, in order to conserve overall project resources and minimise the risk of failure. According to such a strategy, T4TAIs should investigate and test tools before adopting them, and attempt to adopt OTS tools before developing bespoke tools. Such an approach also implies a handful of simple rules of thumb that T4TAIs can apply to strengthen tool selection processes and project impact.

- **Investigate what's already available.** Reaching out to peers, identifying existing initiatives with similar objectives, finding international email groups or simply searching the internet can be effective ways to find tools that are ready to use or purchase.

- **Compare multiple tools.** Trialling two or three tools and choosing the best can be an effective means of identifying hidden challenges to implementation.

- **Earlier is better.** Conduct research and trialling early in tool selection processes.

- **Expect to fail.** Uptake and project failure were very common among the T4TAIs we surveyed. Some learned from initial failure and improved their tools and projects in subsequent iterations, but allowing for such iteration requires planning and budgeting.

Lastly, lack of awareness among respondents regarding appropriate tool selection strategies and resources suggests a communication problem between T4TAI researchers and practitioners. As McGee and Carlitz

(2013) point out, though technology for transparency and accountability is a relatively new field or sub-field, evidence suggests that existing research is having insufficient impact on practice. Collaborative efforts such as the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, Research4Development, Making All Voices Count and the GovLab have taken preliminary steps to address this gap between research and practice in guides and online resources.[3] Such efforts should be supported and critically reviewed to determine their effectiveness in bridging this gap. More focused specific efforts (such as the Framework for Tool Selection being developed from the research reported here) should also be evaluated.

Our research also suggests that local networks may have a profound influence on tool selection practices, but that in Kenya and South Africa at least, they are not as well developed as some might suspect, both in terms of capacities and connectedness. Donors, practitioners and researchers all have different roles to play in supporting the development of such networks, which can have an immediate impact on the resources available to T4TAIs for tool selection processes.

More directly, our research has confirmed the importance of user research for successful tool selection processes and suggested that trialling strategies can be especially important. We have also suggested a handful of heuristics that T4TAIs can implement during the tool selection process, and which merit careful assessment by researchers and evaluators. We believe that this can make a significant contribution to systematic learning around failure and success of tools in the service of T&A programming.

Notes

*   The research on which this article is based was funded by the Research, Evidence and Learning Component of Making All Voices Count.
1   The research project was conducted by the authors with Sasha Kinney and Tom Walker.
2   Cape Town, South Africa, April 2015.
3   See www.transparency-initiative.org/, http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/, www.makingallvoicescount.org/ and http://thegovlab.org/, respectively.

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The Dark Side of Digital Politics: Understanding the Algorithmic Manufacturing of Consent and the Hindering of Online Dissidence

Emiliano Treré

Abstract Various strands of literature on civic engagement, 'big data' and open government view digital technologies as the key to easier government accountability and citizens' empowerment, and the solution to many of the problems of contemporary democracies. Drawing on a critical analysis of contemporary Mexican social and political phenomena, and on a two-year-long ethnography with the #YoSoy132 networked movement, this article demonstrates that digital tools have been successfully deployed by Mexican parties and governments in order to manufacture consent, sabotage dissidence, threaten activists, and gather personal data without citizens' agreement. These new algorithmic strategies, it is contended, clearly show that there is nothing inherently democratic in digital communication technologies, and that citizens and activists have to struggle against increasingly sophisticated techniques of control and repression that exploit the very mechanisms that many consider to be emancipatory technologies.

1 Introduction: coming to terms with techno-optimism within digital democratic participation

There is a shared tendency in different strands of the literature on civic engagement, digital activism and protest movements – as well as in reflections on the possibilities afforded by open/'big' data for increasing democratic participation – to view digital technology as the key to easier government accountability, and the panacea that can easily solve the various issues that plague the worn apparatus of contemporary public institutions. For instance, in recent years the literature on social movements and digital media technologies has often reduced diverse complex socio-technical configurations and cultural contexts to simple, easy-to-understand Twitter or Facebook 'revolutions'. At the same time, the technological developments enabling the publication of Open Data and the tools and capacities to engage with it have been at the forefront of techno-optimism in the transparency and accountability field. These developments hold the potential for making vast amounts

of government data – including budget and procurement information – widely available to huge numbers of citizens, who, as the hypothesis goes, will then be able to easily analyse and use the data to hold governments to account. However, various authors have started to unravel the ambiguities, promises and perils of the open government phenomenon (Davies and Bawa 2012; Yu and Robinson 2012).

Meanwhile, the 'big data' phenomenon has gained remarkable momentum across a wide range of industries and fields, as well as academia. Like many 'buzzwords' that have entered the contemporary debate, 'big data' refers to a plethora of interconnected social, economic and technological phenomena, with reflections about the benefits and challenges of analysing 'massive quantities of information produced by and about people, things and their interactions' (Boyd and Crawford 2012: 1) at their centre. The potential of large-scale data-gathering has been praised for its unprecedented revolutionary possibilities, which could include a decisive improvement in the ways citizens and governments interact.

Diverse voices have begun to question uncritical views of these phenomena, for example providing more nuanced reflections on the pitfalls and threats of 'big data' (Boyd and Crawford 2012; Couldry and Powell 2014; Crawford, Gray and Miltner 2014; Tufekci 2014). These authors contend that 'big data' is not merely a technological issue, but first and foremost a 'mythology' (Mosco 2014), an emerging world view that has to be interrogated, and critically engaged with, not incontrovertibly accepted and applauded. Thus, understanding 'big data' means exploring the consequences of the computational turn across multiple disciplines, and through the alterations it creates in the spheres of epistemology, ontology and ethics. It also means examining the limitations, errors and biases in the gathering and interpretation of these massive quantities of information, as well as access to it. In sum, it means untangling the processes at the core of our 'algorithmic culture' (Hallinan and Striphas 2014).

Other critical voices that tackle the limits, risks and threats of digital communication technologies in relation to democratic processes have emerged (Fuchs 2014; Dean 2005). Even so, most accounts of experiences and case studies related to the use and appropriation of digital technology in relation to civic engagement still put much emphasis on the use of online platforms to simply 'fix' feedback loops, allowing citizens to provide feedback on public services, and the predominant mood remains optimistic about the potential opportunities that technology can offer for citizens to hold governments to account. One of the key lessons of the Making All Voices Count programme[1] is precisely that the issue of accountability should be framed as a complex political problem, rather than a technical one. But, as has been shown in recent studies (Morozov 2013; Treré and Barranquero 2013), accountability has often been seen as a matter of simply 'finding the right technological problem-solving tool'. Furthermore, the controversial

question of obtaining government responsiveness has been usually treated in technology studies as a linear and straightforward procedure (McGee 2014), rather than as a process that entails dealing strategically with power relations that influence which voices will be heard, thus constituting a delicate dance between mechanisms that promote citizens' voice and efforts to change government behaviours. However, the voice of citizens does not speak in a vacuum, but rather within the boundaries and the limitations of contemporary neoliberalism, that systematically denies and undermines it (Couldry 2010).

Much of the current focus neglects the ways in which governments can and do use digital technology to survey and undermine citizens' attempts to hold them accountable. Instead, something that the recent National Security Agency–Snowden scandal made clear is that these technologies are used more to spy on us and limit our freedom, than to provide us with useful tools to improve the functioning of democratic institutions.

This article will try to counteract the techno-optimistic bias by providing and examining some examples that clearly illustrate the various complications emerging from the deployment of digital technologies by governments and parties, and appropriations by citizens and activists. The article will draw on a critical analysis of various contemporary Mexican social and political phenomena, and on a two-year-long multimodal ethnography that relies on the triangulation of different methodologies: 50 individual interviews with activists of #YoSoy132; four group interviews with protesters from Mexico City, Guadalajara and Querétaro; several short periods of participant observation during 2012 and 2013; and a qualitative content analysis of digital media and online platforms. Based on the exploration of the Mexican resistance scenario, this article will clearly show that digital platforms can be used by government and parties in order to create consent online, control and monitor citizens' activities, and undermine dissent on social media platforms. It also shows that the appropriation of digital communication technologies by activists, far from being a linear and unproblematic practice, is instead afflicted by everyday frictions, conflicts and struggles.

The article begins by describing the context of the 2012 Mexican elections and the *ectivism* phenomenon. It goes on to explore the algorithmic manufacturing of consent and undermining of dissent, focusing on the emergence of the #YoSoy132 movement and the perils of its digital media practices, in particular the so-called 'Cossío case'. Finally, it outlines some broader considerations for the study of digital politics and sketches future scenarios.

2 The 2012 Mexican elections
During the run-up to the 2012 Mexican general elections, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) – which governed for 70 years, prior to the election of the National Action Party (PAN) in 2000 – led in several polls. The PRI candidate was a young and attractive man, whose image dominated the media: Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN). As documented

by various investigative journalists (Tuckman 2012; Villamil 2010), for six years the Mexican media titan Televisa had crafted EPN's candidacy, at the same time as delegitimising his left-wing opponent Manuel López Obrador. The Mexican *telecracy* – the media television duopoly Televisa-TvAzteca, which controls 99 per cent of the market (Huerta-Wong and Gómez García 2013) – has been described as a 'wild power' (Trejo Delarbre 2004), capable of a powerful impact on political decisions. Before 2012, Mexican politicians had never considered politics through digital technologies to be a priority, relying instead on the powerful media propaganda apparatus provided by television as their main channel for campaigning (Espino Sánchez 2012).

2.1 The ectivism phenomenon

The 2012 elections witnessed what some saw as an explosion of digital politics, with politicians embracing social media to spread their messages and to engage in dialogue with citizens. But they mostly considered online spaces as sites for both the premeditated construction of consensus and the artificial, algorithmic construction of consent, rather than environments for reinforcing democracy through dialogue, participation and transparency.

Octavio Islas has framed this behaviour as 'authoritarian engineering' (Islas 2015: 1), the adoption by Mexican politicians of dirty online strategies which reveal their incapacity and refusal to develop political campaigns that can build a trustworthy base of sympathisers and followers in cyberspace, and the very opposite of citizen participation. A video posted on YouTube the day before the second presidential debate, *The Truth of Peña Nieto on Twitter*,[2] revealed the existence of organised groups of so-called PRI *ectivistas* ('ectivists'), dedicated to tweeting according to the instructions of EPN's campaign leaders, and trying to counteract, isolate or sabotage criticisms of PRI from civil society actors or other citizens. The film shows a campaign operator telling ectivists how to overturn hashtags negative to the campaign.

The ectivist phenomenon is controversial. The network was formed in December 2009, and ectivist leaders have always claimed to be nothing more than a network of independent young volunteers and PRI supporters.[3] But, as the online video shows, and as other researchers have demonstrated (Figueiras 2012), the organisation of an estimated 100,000 ectivists (Islas 2015) was used systematically during the PRI campaign to successfully spread and situate Peña Nieto's image on digital media platforms. In particular, the network was 'activated' during periods when Peña Nieto's public image suffered, for instance after his speech at the Guadalajara International Book Fair, when he was unable to accurately name three books that had influenced his life, and when the #YoSoy132 movement emerged. In order to counteract embarrassments and negative public image, Peña Nieto's media team intensified the directed online activities of the ectivists. Although one of Peña Nieto's campaign managers (who later became Secretary of Education) acknowledged[4] in May 2012 that 20,000 ectivists were tweeting without receiving any monetary compensation, many thousands of others were hired,

revealing the possibilities for impacting, distorting and manufacturing public opinion within digital environments that institutional parties with immense financial resources like the PRI have at their disposal.

2.2 The algorithmic manufacturing of consent

The use of digital strategies in Mexican electoral politics dates to the 2011 elections for the Governor of the State of Mexico, but the 2012 general election saw them refined and broadened. Studies of the social media strategies of Mexican politicians during the 2012 campaign find that intensified use of digital technologies did not correspond to an increase in democratic participation or dialogue between candidates and voters, but was instead constituted by a massive deployment of strategies including: the creation of false universes of followers; the use of software robots (bots)[5] to automatically generate tweets; and the hiring of trolls (people who tweet in favour of a candidate, and against their opponent); and ghost followers (empty accounts that boost a candidate's followers). By employing these strategies, candidates discarded the possibility of using digital technologies to include voters' feedback in their decisions, or incorporate democratic visions into their ways of doing politics (Ricaurte Quijano 2013). An article on the phenomenon in the MIT Technology Review (Orcutt 2012) discusses dangers of 'large-scale political spamming', and the need to develop countermeasures to prevent the expansion of this phenomenon to other political scenarios.

3 The algorithmic undermining of dissent

The algorithmic construction of consent goes hand-in-hand with the undermining of critical voices. As carefully documented by several bloggers,[6] EPN critics mobilising for the #MarchaAntiEPN (March against Peña Nieto) on Twitter were systematically attacked and blocked online. As Verkamp and Gupta (2013) demonstrate, dissident voices were 'drowned' on various occasions by orchestrated bot attacks. Since 2012, political activists and civil society organisations have denounced the dangers of these attacks, arguing that they criminalise protest and segregate dissident voices,[7] pointing out the need to act immediately to prevent more serious future threats. Unfortunately, political strategies that rely on digital technologies to artificially boost consensus have been enhanced in the years since the election, up to the point where they have become an essential component of the government's *modus operandi*, used repeatedly during 2013.[8]

One case is particularly illuminating, described by philosopher Carlos Soto Morfín as a clear example of techno-authoritarianism.[9] A study, commissioned by the news programme of a liberal Mexican journalist and carried out by social network and data-mining agency Mesura, exposed the massive use of bots to build an illusion of online support for a controversial energy reform (Aristegui Noticias 2012). Mesura documented the systematic deployment of bots to tweet and re-tweet in support of the reform, discovering that the time gap between the sending of a supportive original message and its re-tweeting was too short to be accomplished by a human being. Morfín, one of the authors of the study, concludes by

warning about the risks to which citizens are exposed in an era when the importance of digital politics is growing day by day, and when those in power have no ethical problems with manipulating public perception.

On 26 September 2014, a group of students departed the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College for a protest in the city of Iguala, about 130km away. They never arrived. Exactly what happened remains unknown, but we do know that at least three students were killed and another 43 remain missing. The Mexican government's official version is that the students were killed after being handed over to the *Guerreros Unidos* cartel on the orders of the mayor of Iguala, but investigations conducted by the Mexican critical magazine *Proceso* and the US publication *The Intercept* portrayed a darker picture of government complacency. After the event, several activists and citizens started to protest on social media, and the Twitter hashtag #YaMeCanse (I am tired) – which expressed the feeling of not being able to take any more violence or permanent insecurity – soon became the core for mobilising and spreading information. But journalist Erin Gallagher, who covers protests for the online magazine *Revolution News*[10] soon noticed something atypical in the search results for the #YaMeCanse hashtags: that they were flooded with tweets including the hashtag but no other content apart from random punctuation marks. The accounts that were tweeting this kind of empty content were bots: they lacked followers, and were tweeting automatically. The noise they created made it difficult for citizens to share information using #YaMeCanse, and the hashtag consequently dropped out of Twitter's trending topics. Mexican blogger and data-mining analyst Alberto Escorcia has discovered a reliable way of detecting bot accounts by examining the number of connections a Twitter account has with other users, and has been documenting the use of bots in Mexico to sabotage protests by preventing information from spreading, and to send death threats to specific activists. For example, since February 2015, anthropologist, activist and blogger Rossana Reguillo has received regular death threats on various social media platforms.[11] Particularly harsh attacks via Twitter lasted more than two months, and data-mining analysis of the Twitter campaign showed that bots and trolls were responsible for the majority of the attacks.

4 Another social media is possible? The #YoSoy132 movement

In the run-up to the 2012 elections, EPN's path to the presidency seemed unstoppable. But on 11 May, something unsettled his image as the only available option for Mexico. He arrived at the private, religious IberoAmerican University in Mexico City to give a lecture, an event that PRI expected to run in an uncomplicated way. However, during the candidate's presentation, several students began to question him about police repression and the killings that occurred when he was Governor of the State of Mexico. When EPN justified those violent repressions, tensions rose, and he had to leave the university surrounded by a security cordon.

Immediately after the event, PRI politicians described the students as violent, intolerant fascist thugs, going so far as to deny that they were

students. At the same time, the Mexican telecracy and the newspaper chain *Organización Editorial Mexicana* presented versions of the event which portrayed EPN as a hero who had survived a boycott organised by the Left. This biased coverage led 131 IberoAmerican students to publish a video on YouTube[12] in which they displayed their student credentials and read their out their names to the camera. This powerful act of reclaimed identity marked the start of the #YoSoy132 movement, when the phrase '131 students from Ibero' quickly became one of the trending topics on Twitter in Mexico, and other students began to join the protest, stating 'I am 132'. This led to the creation of the hashtag that went on to identify the whole movement. While the dirty digital strategies of institutional politics were dominating cyberspace, these students proved to the world that digital technologies could be used also to spread critical voices, mobilise support, organise protests and foster collective identification processes.

5 The digital perils of a networked movement

The celebratory literature that has developed around the #YoSoy132 movement proclaims the role of social media in the development of a 'fifth state' and in the birth of a 'Mexican spring' (Islas and Arribas 2012), and frames digital technologies as a powerful media alternative to the Mexican telecracy (Andión Gamboa 2013). My research depicts a different scenario, where everyday frictions and struggles, issues of exploitation, dataveillance and control – together with constant attempts at delegitimisation – continuously plague protesters' use of digital technologies. Activists' social media communications are constantly afflicted by clashes, struggles and discord. These divergences come to manifest themselves in terms of daily interactions as activists express concern and discomfort with integrating social media into protest practices. Issues of ephemerality and weak ties seep through movement interactions by raising questions of authority and belonging, played out in terms of conflicts over who has access to digital media, and what can be posted on social media platforms in the name of any given protest. These are illustrated by the Cossío case, in which a web platform was used to infiltrate the movement, gather data on activists and post two videos to try to undermine the reputation of #YoSoy132.

5.1 The Cossío case: web surveillance and video aggressions

In May 2012, a man named Manuel Cossío offered #YoSoy132 activists his digital expertise and a fully functional web portal, *YoSoy132.mx*. Only ten days after the emergence of #YoSoy132, Cossío entered the movement through one of its most prominent student activists, Saúl Alvídrez. While Alvídrez and other activists had already acquired the *YoSoy132.com* and the *YoSoy132.com.mx* domains, it was the *YoSoy132.mx* registered by Cossío that was finally adopted, thanks to Cossío's rhetorical skills in selling the movement his 'valuable, ready-to-go product'[13] during various assemblies and meetings. Announced as the official page of the movement by various activists on their Twitter feeds and Facebook pages, this professional-looking website, fully integrated with possibilities for access and interactions with other platforms like Google and Facebook,

was extensively adopted for debate, organisation, content spreading, and especially for the archiving of contributors' data. But, after a month of intense use of the website, something strange occurred. On 18 June, two YouTube videos appeared on the home page of the #YoSoy132 portal and in the YouTube account 'Yo Soy'.[14]

In the first video, we see in the background the fixed image of the face of Saúl Alvídrez, at the same time as we hear his voice and see yellow subtitles that report his words. The audio, clearly recorded without his consent, appears as a combination of various of Alvídrez' informal talks, in which a #YoSoy132 student speaks about the movement and relations with Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador (the leader of the Left), and other leftist figures, especially a collective of directors, investigative journalists and other critical intellectuals named 'México, Ahora o Nunca' ('Mexico, Now or Never').

The second video is entitled *La Verdad nos Hará Libres* ('Truth Will Set us Free') – a biblical quote, the motto of the IberoAmerican University, which was adopted as one of the principal slogans of the movement. Manuel Cossío speaks to the camera, reading a text where he expresses his profound disappointment on discovering that many leaders of the #YoSoy132 movement had been co-opted by left-wing politicians affiliated with the Party of the Democratic Revolution, such as Marcelo Ebrard, López Obrador and Alejandro Encinas.

Both of these online attempts at delegitimisation were the creation of Manuel Cossío Ramos, owner and manager of the *YoSoy132.mx* website. According to an inquiry carried out by the online investigative journalism website *Contralínea* in June 2013,[15] Cossío was an agent of the Mexican Secret Service, the Centre of National Watch and Security, whose mission was to infiltrate the movement, steal data through the use of the Web platform, and destabilise the power balances within #YoSoy132 before the elections. Activists of the movement, flooded with activities, internal struggles and frictions, and having to deal with organisational challenges in the immediate days after the eruption of #YoSoy132, trusted Cossío and fell into the government's 'digital trap'.

The two videos caused controversy and conflict: Alvídrez had to leave the movement and the Mexican telecracy took advantage of the event to insinuate that the videos represented clear proof that the Mexican movement had been manipulated from the beginning by the intellectuals of the Left. #YoSoy132 activists eventually realised that the platform was intended as a way to monitor, control and profile them and decided to migrate to another platform, *yosoy132media.mx*. This migration and the dangers related to the use of the other so-called 'apocryphal web pages' were officially announced on Facebook and spread through multiple Twitter accounts in order to inform citizens about the real intentions of Cossío and the nature of the fake portal; other users and supporters from the Mexican blogosphere also retweeted the information.

According to the *Contralínea* website, the platform was able to steal the information of more than 70,000 citizens with yet unexplored consequences for the Mexican resistance. But we still do not have clear figures and data on the scope and the results of this operation of sabotage and surveillance by the Mexican government, and we almost surely never will. The mechanisms of this kind of digital warfare remain opaque, secret and very difficult to decode. What this example clearly shows is the extent to which political control can use the technological platform through which opposition is carried out, stealing data and monitoring protest activities, controlling the information flowing through the platform, and exploiting it to compromise and destabilise the reputation of the movement. The same digital communication technologies that allow engaged citizens to organise, spread alternative information, and make the government accountable have been easily infiltrated and used against them.

6 Conclusions: the limits and future horizons of data activism

In contrast to celebratory accounts that in various disciplines and fields have conceived the increasing use of digital technologies as a way to make governments accountable, and solve most of the issues that plague contemporary political systems, this article, based on an exploration of social and political experiences of the Mexican context, has demonstrated that digital tools have been successfully deployed by parties and governments to manufacture consent, sabotage dissidence, threaten activists, and gather information without citizens' consent.

Nowadays, institutions and parties cannot only count on the traditional channels of propaganda, such as the powerful and biased mainstream media apparatus, but can also use their vast financial resources in order to hire crowds of sympathisers that can boost their image on digital platforms, deploy armies of bots and trolls that can be activated to sabotage dissent and hinder critical voices on social media, and infiltrate movements with imposter techies who can use websites to steal sensible activists' data.

Against these powerful strategies, activists have few digital weapons at their disposal, above all because they cannot count on huge economic resources. However, as we have seen throughout the article, some of them have started to use their technological skills in social network analysis and data-mining techniques in order to unmask and denounce these dirty strategies on various radical media outlets. Perhaps we can conceive of these tactics as 'counterprotocol practices' (Galloway and Thacker 2007) that use the same advanced technological tools that the powerful deploy to control us in order to make their strategies visible and accountable. This form of 'data activism' (Milan 2015) can empower citizens and activists in their quest for truth and accountability, but given the unbalanced distribution of power, these attempts remain feeble and seldom influence public opinion at the international level, or the effective counteraction of such dirty schemes.

Before singing the praises of digital communication technologies to make democratic institutions more accountable and reliable, we should recognise, understand and try to overcome the plethora of dangers and risks that are associated with them in the arena of digital politics. The algorithmic construction of consent and the artificial sabotage of dissent demonstrate that there is nothing inherently democratic in digital technologies. In order to guarantee that a plurality of critical voices is represented and can be heard, 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.

Notes

1 Making All Voices Count is supported by DFID, USAID, Sida and the Omidyar Network.
2 www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcy5uT4TygA.
3 http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2012/05/18/quienes-son-los-ectivistas-y-por-que-apoyan-a-pena-nieto.
4 www.sinembargo.mx/09-05-2012/228938.
5 A 'social bot' refers to a 'computer algorithm that automatically produces content and interacts with humans on social media, trying to emulate and possibly alter their behaviour' (Ferrara *et al*. 2015: 1–2). Some are benign, but many are designed for the purpose of harmfully manipulating social media discourse, for instance by artificially inflating the support of a candidate during the elections.
6 In Spanish, www.animalpolitico.com/blogueros-blog-invitado/2011/11/23/haz-patria-caza-un-bot/#axzz2pexR2Ru3; in English: http://thisisfusion.tumblr.com/post/22718557022/twittergate-mexico-pri-twitter-scandal.
7 www.sinembargo.mx/opinion/07-01-2014/20465.
8 See the following websites for a detailed list of cases where bots were systematically deployed in the Mexican context in the last few years: www.sinembargo.mx/opinion/07-01-2014/20465; http://loquesigue.tv/.
9 The expression techno-authoritarianism has been adopted in other contexts to refer broadly to uses of digital technologies that reinforce hierarchies, and leadership while pretending to enhance participatory democracy (Treré and Barassi 2015).
10 http://revolution-news.com/.
11 http://revolution-news.com/mexico-bot-campaign-of-death-threats-against-blogger-rossana-reguillo/.
12 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7XbocXsFkI.
13 Research interview with Laura, 11 April 2013.
14 www.youtube.com/watch?v=nj2HipB5a1c&list=UUg-S9Qre98WT9kDEb4hixKw and www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmuFHcyHSaA.
15 http://contralinea.info/archivo-revista/index.php/2013/09/08/yosoy-infiltrado/. These findings were anticipated by articles on the critical blog *SinEmbargo* and by the magazine *Proceso*, and further analysed on the *Revolución 3.0* blog.

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Glossary

ANC African National Congress
ARV antiretroviral
BLM Bunge La Mwananchi
CCNR Centre for Community Networking Research
CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CODESRIA Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
CORD Coalition for Reforms and Democracy
CSG Child Support Grant
CSO civil society organisation
DFID Department for International Development
DoI diffusion of innovations
DPLG Department of Local Government
DPRU Development Policy Research Unit
DSD Department of Social Development
EPN Enrique Peña Nieto
GDP gross domestic product
GSMA Global System for Mobile Association
ICRW International Center for Research on Women
ICT information and communications technology
ICT4D information and communications technology for development
IDRC International Development Research Centre
IDS Institute of Development Studies
IFAD International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFI international financial institution
ILO International Labour Organization
IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre
IRM Independent Reporting Mechanism
M4W Mobile Phones for Water
MAVC Making All Voices Count
MoH Ministry of Health
MP Member of Parliament
MSF Médecins Sans Frontières
NDC National Democratic Congress
NDOH National Department of Health
NHIS National Health Insurance Scheme
NPP New Patriotic Party
OGD Open Government Data
OGP Open Government Partnership
OKF Open Knowledge Foundation
OTS off-the-shelf
PAN Partido Acción Nacional [National Action Party, Mexico]
PB participatory budgeting

PEDP Primary Education Development Plan
PRI Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutional Revolutionary Party, Mexico]
REPOA Research on Poverty Alleviation
RWSN Rural Water Supply Network
SEMA Sensors, Empowerment, Accountability
SIBS Sistema Informasaun Bee no Saneamentu
SMG state maintenance grant
SMS Short Message Service
SSEE Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment
STI sexually transmitted infection
T4TAI Technology for Transparency and Accountability Initiative
T&A transparency and accountability
TAC Treatment Action Campaign
TAI transparency and accountability initiative
UCLA University of California, Los Angeles
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund
UPE universal primary education
UR U-Report
USAID United States Agency for International Development
UWASNET Uganda Water and Sanitation NGO Network
WHO World Health Organization

IDS
Institute of
Development Studies

IDSBulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

IDSBulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

'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.'