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MAKING ALL  
VOICES COUNT

PRACTICE PAPER

A GRAND CHALLENGE  
FOR DEVELOPMENT

# Budget oversight and accountability in Nigeria: what incentivises digital and non-digital citizens to engage?



Natalia Herbst and Oluseun Onigbinde

**budgIT**

**IDS** Institute of  
Development Studies

## Authors

**Natalia Herbst** is a consultant to Making All Voices Count. She holds an MA in development studies (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex), a degree in international studies (Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Argentina), and was awarded a Fulbright Young Leaders scholarship. She has worked in research and public policy for the Government of the City of Buenos Aires in Argentina. Her main areas of expertise include international cooperation with a focus on South–South engagements, emerging powers, sexual and reproductive health and rights, sexual diversity, and social accountability and health, with a focus on Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Oluseun Onigbinde**, a graduate of engineering from the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria, co-founded Nigeria's civic tech organisation BudgIT in 2011. He is a recipient of the Ashoka Fellowship, Future Africa Awards, Bloomberg Media Journalism Fellow, Quartz Africa 30 Innovators Award and Aspen New Voices Fellowship. He sits on the ONE Africa Policy Advisory Board and has also worked with International Center for Journalists on rethinking health journalism in Nigeria.

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# Summary

This practice paper reports on practitioner research conducted by BudgIT – a social advocacy organisation in Nigeria. It aims to discover if access to information leads to empowerment as well as demands for accountability; and whether demands for accountability necessarily lead to the greater responsiveness of public institutions.

As a pioneer in the field of social advocacy combined with technology, BudgIT aims to simplify the topic of public spending for citizens with the aim of increasing transparency and accountability in government. Opening up the budgets of economies such as Nigeria's continues to be a challenge, and most citizens remain in the dark on how the budget is formulated and executed. One obstacle is citizens' lack of access to information on budgeted projects within their communities; while a budget containing lots of technical jargon means that most Nigerians are unable to understand the budget and are, therefore, limited in their ability to monitor its progress. As a countermeasure, BudgIT provides access to simplified budget data for citizens in urban and under-served communities, with the aims of raising awareness of their right of access to this information, and encouraging their action on monitoring projects and demanding better service delivery.

BudgIT designed a research project that focused on two groups of citizens: those with access to digital information in urban areas or 'digital citizens'; and those without access to digital tools – usually rural-based with relatively low levels of education – or 'non-digital citizens'. This was based on the belief that every citizen – irrespective of their literacy level – has a right to know how public funds are spent.

Through its platform, Tracka, BudgIT works to ensure the completion of projects. Through citizen groups, it also tests the links between fiscal transparency, citizens' and institutional engagement with the legislature to demand accountability, and the responsiveness of public offices in service delivery. This paper shares evidence from BudgIT's research, and documents a reflective conversation on the implications of its findings for future efforts to improve accountability in Nigeria.

## Key themes in this paper

- Digital and non-digital citizens' engagement in accountability processes
- Connection between access to simplified information and demand for accountability
- Citizens' and public servants' civic education
- Online and offline access to information
- Budget knowledge prompting action to track development projects
- Incentives to contact representatives and demand accountability in service delivery

# Setting the scene for practitioner learning

Making All Voices Count is a citizen engagement and accountable governance programme. Its Research Evidence and Learning component, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), focuses on building an evidence base on what works in technology for voice, transparency and accountability, how it works, and why (McGee et al. 2015). The programme's practitioner research and learning grants give transparency and accountability practitioners funds and mentoring support to provide them with the space and capabilities to explore key questions that will enable them to better implement their governance projects. Most, but not all, of these practitioners are using tech-enabled approaches. This real-time applied research contributes to project learning and improved practice.

The practitioner research and learning grants support grantees to form their own learning and judgements, and the programme's series of practice papers is part of this process. Practice papers document the process of practitioner research and learning from the perspectives of both the grant recipients and the programme. They are co-produced, and intended to prompt critical reflection on key learning questions that arise from the process of the research.

This practice paper focuses on the work of BudgIT – a civil society organisation in Nigeria that uses technology to encourage citizen engagement with institutions, leading to service improvements and wider societal change. The research shared here explores BudgIT's theory of change to determine whether access to information leads to greater empowerment and demands for accountability, and if demands for accountability necessarily result in the greater responsiveness of public institutions.

This paper also summarises the authors' views on technology-based and non-technology-based interventions for budget oversight and accountability. The three questions it sought to answer are shown in Box 1.

Beyond a presentation of the research, its findings and key messages, this paper shares a conversation between Oluseun Onigbinde of BudgIT, who implemented the research, and Natalia Herbst of Making All Voices Count, who together reflect critically on the diverse pathways and incentives for engagement in demanding accountability by both 'digital' and 'non-digital' citizens in Nigeria.

## Box 1. Research questions

1. What right tool is best to engage different citizens on public finance, considering their literacy set and understanding of governance?
2. Does information about public finance, accessed via an array of tools, spur citizen engagement?
3. Does citizen pressure increase accountability and, ultimately, public project delivery?

*Source: BudgIT's research proposal to Making All Voices Count*

## BudgIT's approach to citizen engagement in budget oversight and accountability in Nigeria

Opening up the budgets of resource-driven economies, such as Nigeria's, can be a herculean task. The Nigerian budget is a thick document containing technical jargon, which makes it complicated for citizens to

understand. With the profits from the country's oil and gas industries shared disproportionately across society, closed budgets perpetuate in an opaquely managed state.

*BudgIT provides citizens in urban and under-served communities in Nigeria access to budget data, raising awareness of their right of access to this information and encouraging their action on monitoring projects and demanding better service delivery. This paper describes practitioner research focused on two groups of citizens: those with access to digital information, and those without access to digital tools.*

Most citizens do not know how the budget is formulated and executed so are, therefore, unable to monitor the progress of projects within their communities. One of the challenges is the lack of citizens' access to information about what local projects are planned within the budget, such as the construction of rural roads, schools and clinics, and the distribution of mosquito nets.

To address these difficulties, BudgIT provides citizens in urban and under-served communities in Nigeria access to budget data, raising awareness of their right of access to this information, and encouraging their action on monitoring projects and demanding better service delivery.

This paper describes practitioner research focused on two groups of citizens: those with access to digital information, and those without access to digital tools. The objective of the research was to determine the effectiveness of BudgIT's work in: i) raising awareness by providing clear information; ii) testing whether this increases citizens' demand for greater accountability, especially around the delivery of local projects; and iii) determining whether this, ultimately, leads to improved service delivery.

## Research process

BudgIT tested its theory of change (Figure 1) under different conditions to determine if access to information leads to empowerment and demands for accountability, and if demands for accountability necessarily lead to the greater responsiveness of public institutions. BudgIT uses a range of tech tools to simplify the budget for citizens, with the aim of raising the level of transparency and accountability in government. The organisation developed one tool, Tracka, that enables users to track capital projects in rural communities and mobilise citizens to make contact with their elected representatives on the delivery of local projects. This is motivated by the belief

that every citizen – irrespective of their level of literacy – has a right to know how public funds are spent. This is why BudgIT uses every means and channel available to simplify information and provide more accessible information.

This research tested the impact of BudgIT's work, and explored how to build a sustained movement through which citizens can hold their government to account. This is critical to the organisation's longevity, as the research has provided new insights on how to deliver budget information to more people leading to efficient service delivery.

As a Making All Voices Count grantee, BudgIT devised a research project that focused on two groups of citizens: those with access to digital information in urban areas or 'digital citizens'; and those without access to digital tools – usually rural-based with relatively low levels of education – or 'non-digital citizens'. Participants were surveyed on their incentives to act on the kind of budgetary information provided through infomediaries such as BudgIT.

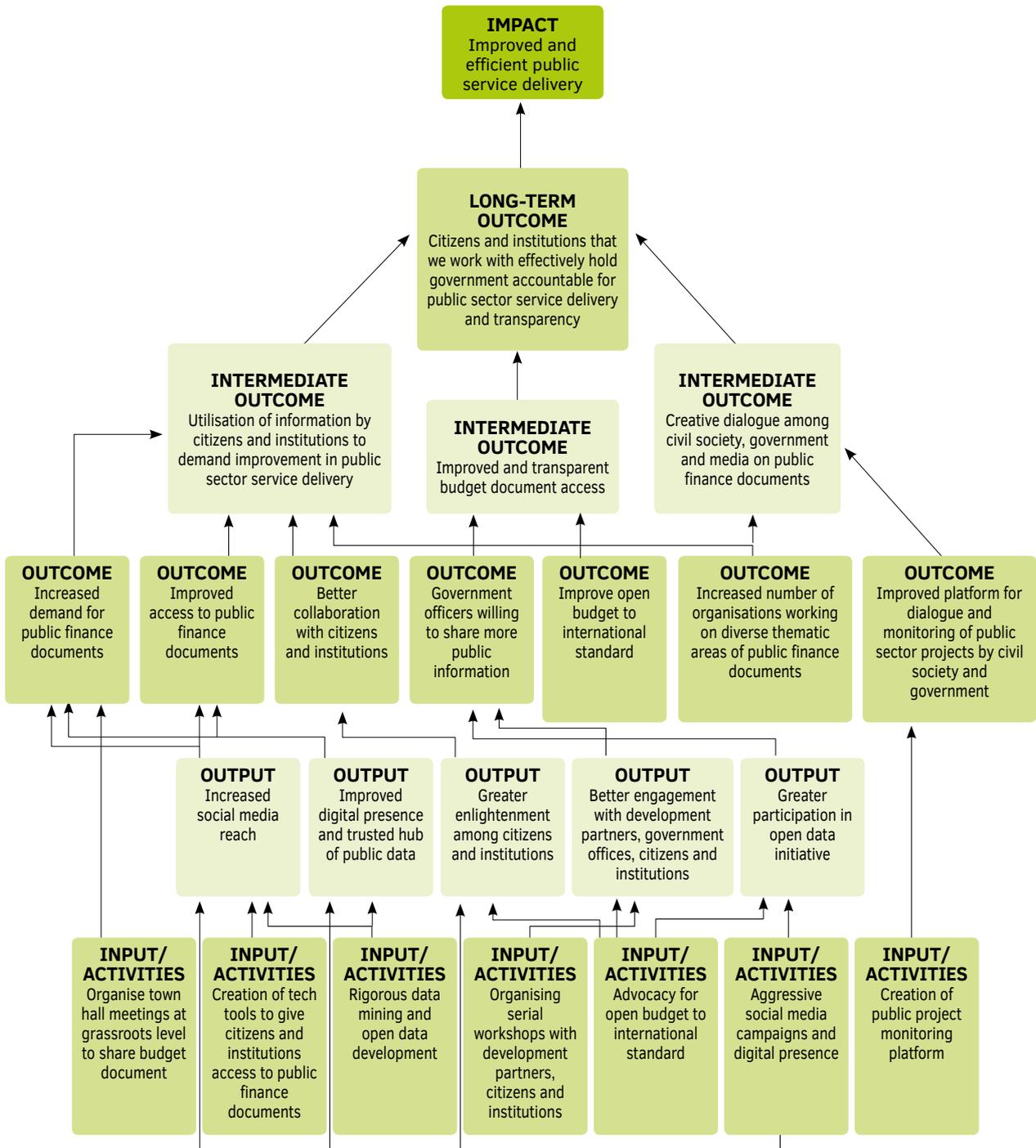
The survey was sent electronically to the digital citizens and was divided into three sections. The first part gathered respondents' personal information, such as their age, gender, profession and level of education. The second part focused on their access to budgetary information – their level of understanding and ability to apply the information to follow up on public projects relevant to their communities. The third part provided an overview of BudgIT's work to supply increased access to budgetary information; understand the public's view of the simplified contents; and test whether it leads to an increase in citizen demand for government accountability.

The questionnaire for the non-digital citizens included the same questions that were printed and distributed within the focus communities.<sup>1</sup> As before, these questions were designed to elicit candid responses to

<sup>1</sup> The research was carried out in 10 communities in five different states: Cross River, Edo, Ogun, Ondo and Niger. The choice of the states was based on geographical spread as well as a balance of governing political parties.

*This research tested the impact of BudgIT’s work, and explored how to build a sustained movement through which citizens can hold their government to account.*

Figure 1. BudgIT theory of change



***BudgIT confirmed that simplified budget information does incentivise citizens with varying levels of literacy and across different groups to engage with public finance (particularly budget monitoring).***

the key objectives of this research. They were issued after a review period of four weeks to examine how the respondents had acted having been given increased access to budgetary information.

Based on its experience, research and participants' replies in the surveys (see Table 1), BudgIT confirmed that simplified budget information does incentivise citizens with varying levels of literacy and across different groups to engage with public finance (particularly budget monitoring). It also discovered that this newfound interest led to increased action from citizens in tracking projects costed within the

budget and demanding accountability. However, BudgIT observed more enthusiasm and engagement among non-digital citizens at the grassroots level, than among digital citizens. Lastly, BudgIT asked whether citizen pressure increases accountability and, ultimately, service delivery, and concluded that greater transparency and citizen access to data do not automatically lead to greater accountability. Instead, there have to be incentives for officials to prioritise funding for public projects and to respond to queries in a timely manner.

**Table 1. BudgIT's findings on citizen engagement based on simplified information – survey results**

	Digital citizens (%)		Non-digital citizens (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Gender distribution of survey respondents	76.5	23.5	63.5	36.5
Agrees simplified information motivates the tracking of projects	97.3		98.0	
Visited a project in the budget pamphlet provided by BudgIT	49.1		68.3	
Agrees tracking the development of projects increases accountability	99.0		91.6	
Contacted representatives at the National Assembly	12.1		39.8	
Received an answer from the representatives contacted	9.5		7.6	

Source: BudgIT (2017)

*Technology itself does not resolve critical issues around public matters; but it allows us better access to people, and allows people better access to information. In terms of its contribution to accountability, technology supports civic education which is weak in Nigeria.*

## What is the role of technology in budget monitoring?

### Natalia Herbst:

What prompted your research questions?

### Oluseun Onigbinde:

We realised there was a lack of practitioner research in our field of work, and considered it important to test the impact of our intervention. Having worked in transparency initiatives for years, this was a step forward in realising whether our projects work and how, by producing evidence.

### Natalia:

Why and how did you choose 'digital' and 'non-digital' citizens as your case studies?

### Oluseun:

BudgIT is strong on social media, so we used this advantage to compare how budget oversight initiatives work online and offline. We wanted to look at which group of citizens was more receptive to simplified

information, and which engaged more in tracking projects and contacting their representatives once they received this information. We planned to adjust our work and focus based on this evidence. And we wanted to reassess where our work has the greatest impact.

### Natalia:

What are the challenges that tech use in budget oversight aims to overcome? What does tech help you to do? And how does this contribute to accountability?

### Oluseun:

For us, the main benefits of technology are reduced costs and the speed of distributing information. Technology itself does not resolve critical issues around public matters; but it allows us better access to people, and allows people better access to information. In terms of its contribution to accountability, technology supports civic education which is weak in Nigeria. It also prompts citizens' engagement in demanding greater accountability.

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## Exploring citizen engagement based on simplified information

### Natalia:

In common with many IT-enabled systems, your research shows a gender disparity among the citizens who engaged with the intervention. In the case of digital citizens, women accounted for just 23.5% of participants, while they accounted for 36.5% of non-

digital citizens. Why do you think women participated less than men in your project? Do you think that digital interventions have the potential to address these gender imbalances in pro-accountability participation in Nigeria?

*There is a weak understanding of what constitutes accountability, among the public, as well as among public servants who don't believe that citizens should be telling them what to do.*

#### Oluseun:

Particularly at the grassroots level, women tend to stay at home more. Most of our initial engagements were with women. As we issued the surveys, we tended to have more contact with men who have greater decision-making power both at home and in their communities within Nigeria's current social structures. Most of the community meetings especially in the Northern part of Nigeria had no women's representation at all. We need to put more effort into reflecting how technology and cultural reorientation can address these gender imbalances.

#### Natalia:

Your research suggests there is more enthusiasm for accountability among non-digital citizens than among digital citizens. Do you see these as different forms of accountability? What does accountability look like to a non-digital citizen and what does it look like to a digital citizen in today's Nigeria?

#### Oluseun:

We realised that people at the grassroots – or non-digital citizens – of society take more action, as they have less economic and social choice. For example, if the government doesn't provide a particular service, grassroots people cannot afford to go to the privatised market, which limits their options for low-quality public services. This gives them more impetus to act upon the information they receive. By contrast, in urban settings – within which digital citizens are typically located – there are more alternative choices in the private market, which makes demand for accountability weaker. Accountability depends on continuous feedback between elected officials and their constituencies and on citizens demanding that officials use their power to make a difference.

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## Exploring the Nigerian accountability landscape

#### Natalia:

Literature on transparency and accountability suggests that an increase of information per se is insufficient to increase accountability, and that whether it leads to increased accountability is highly dependent on the context – particularly the political context (Gaventa and Barrett 2012; Gaventa and McGee 2013; Joshi 2014). Your research points to a very low response to citizens who contacted their representatives based on the information facilitated by BudgIT. What contextual factors – in Nigeria's governance landscape – may have contributed to this low response?

#### Oluseun:

I think this can be attributed to three main factors. Firstly, the current political season: elections drive

incentives for feedback and, because there was an election recently and politicians are no longer competing, they have fewer incentives to respond. A second factor is Nigeria's weak fiscal structure that is tied to the price of oil. Because the price of oil has dropped, the government's funds have been reduced and politicians have fewer resources. This constrains their ability to respond to demands. The third and final factor is the local incentives system, which is affected by poor civic education. There is a weak understanding of what constitutes accountability, among the public, as well as among public servants who don't believe that citizens should be telling them what to do. This, combined with the electoral cycle, means that during election campaigns politicians engage with citizens more and listen to their demands for accountability, which are sometimes ignored once the politicians take office.

*At times, digital citizens report receiving too much information from different sources, which may complicate their move towards taking action. They appreciate simplified information, but still may not take the steps required to engage. The information therefore also needs to be more engaging, so that it prompts citizens to take the critical next step from being interested to doing something about it.*

**Natalia:**

What could potentially overcome these obstacles? And what role does technology play in this?

**Oluseun:**

I think before talking about budget, transparency or accountability in Nigeria there is a need to strengthen the bedrock of all these, which is civic education, both of citizens and public servants. Citizens should be incentivised to look for information by themselves, but they currently don't feel entitled to do so. Political leaders also need to change how they see their responsibility towards their constituencies.

At national level, there is a need for much more transparency; and the role of technology here is broad. What's important in every context is to see what works, what is appropriate/preferred, and the level of education within the different social groups. There is not a 'best' technology – our priority is to investigate which technology is better for each group we are trying to engage with. Social media have great potential for us as they have a low cost of engagement, and response times are faster than through other mass media we use, such as radio or television. Social media are also outside the control of the state which can constrain traditional media. The important element is to explore the best way to engage with particular groups of people from different backgrounds.

**Natalia:**

While over 90% of your survey respondents agree that simplified information motivates them to track the budget's projects, there is an important gap between that figure and the number of citizens who engaged in project tracking (49.1% in the case of digital citizens, and 68.3% for non-digital). Have you explored this gap? Do you have any ideas about what causes it?

**Oluseun:**

One issue creating this gap is the weak civic education mentioned earlier, which leads to an incomplete understanding of the role of citizens in the demand for service delivery. Another key aspect is that people tend not to track projects individually, but as a community. So, in the surveys, while only a single person reports doing the tracking, this is later conveyed to the community and is seen by citizens as a collective engagement.

At times, digital citizens report receiving too much information from different sources, which may complicate their move towards taking action. They appreciate simplified information, but still may not take the steps required to engage. The information therefore also needs to be more engaging, so that it prompts citizens to take the critical next step from being interested to doing something about it.

Possible actions are outlined in our pamphlet which starts by recommending contacting elected representatives in parliament. We have seen apathy among citizens due to their disappointment with the government. Therefore, the simplification of information is key for citizens to ensure that their understanding of the budget increases the possibility of action, despite this disappointment.

*We also now believe that the longevity of our work depends on us putting more emphasis on our follow-up, once we have provided simplified information.*

## The challenge of embedding practitioner research in advocacy efforts

### Natalia:

How did you manage the demands of embedding practitioner research in an advocacy organisation? Can you identify any ways that your practice changed as a result of what you learned?

### Oluseun:

Thanks to the support of our mentor and the team at the Institute of Development Studies,<sup>2</sup> we were able to complete our first practitioner research project and understand how best to engage with the two types of citizens.

Producing evidence on the impact of our work also led to an expansion in the number of states in which we work, and helped us to realise that we need to further simplify the information we provide to make the routes for action simpler for citizens. In particular, we learned more about non-digital citizens, which has allowed us to increase our work with this group.

We also now believe that the longevity of our work depends on us putting more emphasis on our follow-up, once we have provided simplified information. In addition, we need to engage with public officials more about how they liaise with their communities on accountability issues. We believe that citizens are relevant for more than just the election season, and plan to work with the President of the Senate to provide up-to-date feedback on the status of constituency projects.

### Natalia:

You mentioned the work with your mentor and the team at the Institute of Development Studies. Can you comment on what it was like to work with them?

### Oluseun:

Working with Ciana-Marie Pegus and Marika Djolai was very helpful. We had never done any research work in the past, and because of this we struggled to define the research questions, methodology and how to measure the outcomes. Having the opportunity to consult with a mentor was very enriching for us. If we were to have another research grant in the future, we would benefit from having this type of support again. Working with a mentor helped us to build the skills we lacked, which we can now include in our upcoming work. Having a specialist on hand definitely made the process more valuable.

### Natalia:

What are the key messages from the research? What do you consider to be their key limitations?

### Oluseun:

One of the key messages of our research is citizens' positive response to simplified information. They appreciate it, and express interest in public finances if data is presented in a way they can grasp. This helps them to become more aware and keener to take action to demand accountability in service delivery.

For us, it was really important to see the ways in which the information could be better utilised. While simplification was critical, both platforms (digital and non-digital) can work well to engage citizens in demanding accountability. The main take-away is not whether a particular tool works, but that simplified information helps engage citizens. This information can be shared via different platforms. Thus, instead of limiting ourselves to a particular tool or platform, these should be defined based on the context and particular

<sup>2</sup> BudGIT's grant was managed at the Institute of Development Studies by Ciana-Marie Pegus, and Marika Djolai acted as mentor for the research.

*The main take-away is not whether a particular tool works, but that simplified information helps engage citizens.*

citizens' needs, as well as their responsiveness to different platforms. Simplifying and increasing citizens' access to information – independently of the platform through which it is communicated – is key, with the platforms being adapted to the context, as technology alone cannot solve access issues everywhere.

### Natalia:

At the end of your Making All Voices Count practitioner research and learning process, can you reflect on how you see the future of budget oversight and its effect on accountability in Nigeria?

### Oluseun:

Citizens are becoming progressively more empowered and prepared to engage with accountability. They engage more with initiatives that challenge authorities and demand information. They are also focusing more at the sub-national level, not only on the federal government. Oil prices remain important with regard to the demand for accountability. With oil prices going down, people have become more active in demanding better quality public services as they see the resources allocated to providing these services decrease. However, now that people are more aware and more engaged, the trend of increased accountability can be expected to continue irrespective of the fluctuations of the oil price.

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### About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. It focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

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

### Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's Research, Evidence and Learning component, managed by IDS, contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the fields of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A).

### About Making All Voices Count practice papers

The Research, Evidence and Learning component has produced a series of practitioner research and learning grants to support a range of actors working on citizen voice, T&A and governance to carry out self-critical enquiry into their own experiences and contexts. The main output of each grant is what the practitioner learns and applies to their own practice. Practitioners can also decide to produce their own written outputs. The purpose of the practice papers, written on completion of each grant, is to capture the essence of that learning process through a reflective dialogue between programme staff and funded partners, to share with a wider audience of peer practitioners and policy-makers.

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 Email [info@makingallvoicescount.org](mailto:info@makingallvoicescount.org)  
 Twitter [@allvoicescount](https://twitter.com/allvoicescount)

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