



Briefing Paper

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Citizens' Voice and Accountability: Understanding what works and doesn't work in donor approaches



Lessons and recommendations emerging from a joint donor evaluation

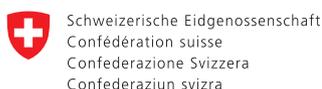


Introduction: Why Citizens' Voice and Accountability Matters

The quality of governance is recognised as one of the central factors affecting development prospects in poor countries. Citizens' voice and government accountability ('CV&A') are important dimensions of governance. Citizens' capacity to express and exercise their views effectively has the potential to influence government priorities and processes, including a stronger demand for responsiveness, transparency

and accountability. Governments that can be held accountable for their actions, for their part, are more likely to respond to the needs and demands articulated by their population.

For the purposes of this evaluation, the term 'CV&A' has been used as short hand to capture the dynamic relationship between the citizen and the state. While donors' use and understanding of the terminology varies, the core principles underpinning CV&A, including participation,



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inclusion and transparency, have emerged as priority issues in international development, with donors engaged in an expanding universe of interventions related to CV&A. Such interventions cover a broad spectrum of issues and areas, varying considerably in along several dimensions, including among others:

- the level at which support is provided within a given country (e.g. municipal/provincial/national level)
- actors supported (from various state entities to civil society groups)
- thematic focus (e.g. Public Financial Management and audit functions of the state, empowerment of women and minority groups, and local governance)
- type of donors involved (bilateral and multilateral)
- levels of monetary support (from relatively modest amounts to millions of dollars)
- mode of implementation (e.g. mainstreaming vs. targeting CV&A support)
- timeframe (from a few months to several years)

To date, there have been only limited attempts to evaluate donor interventions to support CV&A. A joint evaluation commissioned by a group of donors represents an effort to bridge that gap (see Box 1).¹ The evaluation was

intended to deepen understanding of what works and what does not work in donor support to CV&A, and to uncover the reasons why, drawing on experiences from seven case studies. This Briefing Paper highlights some of the key conclusions emerging from the evaluation as well as broader implications and recommendations for improved donor practice.

Conclusions emerging from the evaluation findings

i) Entry points for CV&A interventions and the limitations brought about by context

The evaluation finds that donors are generally sensitive to the importance of context in deciding how to support CV&A. Context shapes the main entry points that donors have used for their CV&A work, for instance, supporting existing formal institutional frameworks in countries where these are (relatively) reliable (Benin, Indonesia, Mozambique), using political junctures or events where other opportunities do not exist (Bangladesh, DRC, Nepal), building on decentralisation processes (Bangladesh, Benin, Indonesia, Mozambique, Nepal, Nicaragua) where these are underway, and providing sector support (Mozambique, Nepal).

However, context awareness is not enough.

Box 1: Brief description of the parameters of the evaluation

This evaluation was commissioned by a group of seven bilateral donors led by the UK (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK) between 2006 and 2008. In the first phase of the evaluation, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) prepared a literature review and an analysis of 90 CV&A donor interventions; and developed and piloted an Evaluation Framework and its accompanying methodology in Benin and Nicaragua. In the second phase, the donors commissioned five additional case studies, including Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Indonesia, Mozambique, and Nepal.

The evaluation was not intended to be an exhaustive assessment of donor support for CV&A. The pilot and country case studies were based on a limited number of individual donor-supported interventions (between 7 and 11 interventions per country) selected from a longer list, and interventions of other key bilateral and multi-lateral donors active in CV&A were not considered for the most part. The different country cases were also chosen for pragmatic reasons rather than on the basis of a rigorous comparative methodology, and they were undertaken within a compressed timeframe. The small size and limitations of the sample on which the evaluation is based suggest that this evaluation can only provide a partial view of what is otherwise a very broad CV&A universe, and the discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations should be appreciated with this important caveat in mind.

The synthesis report used the DAC evaluation criteria implicitly to guide the analysis, focusing in particular on issues of relevance, effectiveness and sustainability. The report also sought to assess the effects or impact of CV&A interventions, although this was more difficult, given the nature of the interventions: most interventions are relatively new and therefore have not yielded many results to date, and the focus of the synthesis report was on the level above that of a single intervention (that is, it looked at interventions in the aggregate to see if they revealed particular patterns or issues at that higher level). Issues related to the efficiency of interventions were not addressed, mainly because of the lack of sufficient data.

Donors must also understand the complex interplay between formal and informal institutions as well as underlying power relations and dynamics (see Box 2). These relationships and dynamics significantly influence the nature of the political and socio-economic contexts in which CV&A interventions take place.

ii) Greater emphasis on voice than on accountability

In this evaluation we have seen a greater focus on voice interventions than on accountability ones, partly in response to context. In some cases donors are unable or unwilling to work on accountability related issues that are based on direct engagement with the state (e.g. Nepal). For instance, some relatively strong and non-aid dependent states, such as Indonesia, have been reluctant to work on accountability issues with donors. In other contexts, as in the DRC, the almost complete failure of the state to provide basic services has led to increased donor reliance on civil society actors. Moreover, there has been a mushrooming of civil society organisations and other forms of societal mobilisation over the past 15+ years, enabling donors to identify non-state partners to work with.

Such a strategy can be problematic, however, without a parallel effort to build the effective-

Box 2: Defining institutions

Formal institutions refer to clearly defined (written) laws, rules, and regulations stretching from the constitution to simple procedures governing the work of minor bureaucrats and private employees.

Informal institutions, on the other hand, refer to *unwritten* rules, norms, expectations, and processes. These institutions include, for example, social and cultural norms, clientelism and corruption, for example. They are understood locally, but they tend to be somewhat difficult for those not socially integrated into the setting to comprehend (or work within).

ness and capacity of state institutions to address growing demands and expectations. It also skirts the issue of the need to engage with both government institutions and civil society organisations in order to create the channels for voice that can lead to greater accountability.

Where donors have engaged in efforts to address both voice and accountability in the same intervention (see Box 3) the results are clearly beneficial. These kinds of interventions provide an important corrective to the assumption that greater voice will automatically lead to increased accountability. Interventions that target both state and non-state actors may prove more fruitful in terms of strengthening the quality of the relationship between state and society than interventions that only target one or the other side of the CV&A equation.

Box 3: Examples of interventions that target both voice and accountability

State institutions intended to empower citizens to hold their government to account, such as parliaments, ombudsmen and anti-corruption/human rights/electoral commissions (e.g. Bangladesh, DRC).

Participatory processes that engage civil society and government actors in the same CV&A intervention. These include mechanisms like public hearings, consultations and audits (e.g. Nepal and Indonesia), as well as multi-stakeholder fora which worked well in Indonesia to bring together different actors from civil society and the state to advise the local government on community-based resource management.

Policy processes that have facilitated greater citizen awareness and created a more direct channel for questioning policy-makers, such as the Participatory Poverty Analysis in the DRC and planning and budgeting processes in Indonesia. At the local level, development and planning mechanisms based on participatory approaches are also key CV&A mechanisms (e.g. Bangladesh, Mozambique, Nepal).

The media is a crucial CV&A interlocutor for citizens and the state. Efforts to strengthen the professionalism and capacity of the media alongside regulatory mechanisms are fundamental to building the media's role in CV&A (e.g. Benin, DRC, Nepal).

iii) Effects of CV&A interventions have remained limited and isolated

This evaluation sought to assess changes CV&A interventions have helped to bring about along four dimensions: changes in practice, behaviour, policy, and power relations. The evidence suggests that some CV&A interventions have generated positive outcomes, mostly related to changes in behaviour and practice, such as raising citizen awareness and of encouraging state officials to be more responsive, especially at the sub-national level (see Box 3). In particular, when interventions have been targeted explicitly towards marginalised and socially excluded groups, such as women and ethnic minorities (e.g. Mozambique, Nepal), they have been useful in empowering such groups. The same can be said of the work that donors have undertaken with non-traditional civil society groups like social movements and trade unions (e.g. Bangladesh), as well as religious organisations (e.g. Indonesia). However, this kind of focus has been the exception rather than the rule in the interventions included in the evaluation.

In terms of policy impact, the evaluation identified a few instances in which CV&A work contributed to the passing of certain legislation in country (e.g. Benin, Nepal). Yet, such examples have remained isolated. In addition, based on the evidence, changes in power relations have proved much more difficult to come by.

iv) Understanding the limited effects of CV&A interventions: donor assumptions & power relations/informal institutions

An important part of the reason for the limited results that CV&A interventions have been able to achieve lies in donor expectations that are based on a set of assumptions that are not always realistic, including the following:

- An assumed automatic relationship between enhanced citizens' voice and improved government accountability.
- An assumption that citizens' voice represents the interests, needs and demands of a homogenous "people".
- An assumption that more effective and efficient institutions will naturally be more transparent, responsive and ultimately accountable.

- A related assumption that CV&A interventions can be supported via a traditional focus on capacity building of formal institutions.
- An assumption that democratic processes necessarily lead to improved developmental outcomes (including poverty reduction).

As evidence from the evaluation suggests, all these relationships tend to be more complex and challenging on the ground. In particular, informal relations, processes and institutions fundamentally shape how formal institutions operate. This makes the outcomes of CV&A interventions harder to predict as the influence of informal processes on formal institutions may limit or distort the impact of such interventions.

Additionally, voice is often treated as an unproblematic concept, without addressing the fundamental question of 'whose voice' is being heard. In reality, the voices of the poor are far from homogeneous – and these voices may not necessarily be complementary but actually compete with one another. In other words, not all voices are equal or equally heard. It remains unclear who is actually excluded by some of the spaces and mechanisms created to encourage 'voice' and 'participation', and it has proven particularly challenging for donors to reach the most marginalised and most remote, especially in rural areas.

v) Understanding the limited effects of CV&A interventions: donor design and implementation of CV&A interventions

There is a tension between the long-term processes of transforming state-society relations and donors' needs or desire to produce quick results. Donors need to be more realistic about what can be achieved in the shorter term.

In addition, there is an issue regarding the sustainability of CV&A interventions over time. Many of the organisations supported by donors, especially those aimed towards voice (including NGOs in particular) are highly aid dependent, and it is not clear how such groups are intended to become self-sufficient.

There is a growing pressure for donors to disburse greater funds with less staff. This means that large amounts of funding are going into interventions in ways that may often be beyond the absorptive capacity of the implementing organisations. CSOs are responding to donor objectives and agendas by

transforming their organisations beyond their core competencies, and their quality and effectiveness is being undermined as a result.

Finally, in terms of aid effectiveness, the evidence shows that donor coordination efforts in CV&A interventions are limited. There is a lack of strategic thinking and of a coherent approach in the development and management of programmes, resulting in on-going duplication, gaps and competition.

Core principles and recommendations for improved donor practice

Building on the analysis provided in the evaluation's synthesis report, it is possible to identify a few core principles aimed at improving donor practice in the area of CV&A:²

Core principle 1: Build or sharpen 'political intelligence' in developing CV&A policies and in undertaking CV&A interventions on the ground

Recommendations

- Undertake strategic political economy analyses of power and change in a particular country, context or sector, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the interaction between formal and informal institutions and of the incentives framework within which different actors operate.
- On that basis, analyse what the operational implications for CV&A interventions may be. Some donor agencies, notably DFID (UK) and Sida (Sweden), are already involved in this kind of analytical work, but a key challenge remains how to translate insights gained through such studies into practice.
- At a minimum, share lessons emerging from such work, so that donors may develop a common basis of understanding.

Core principle 2: Work with the institutions you have, and not the ones you wish you had

Recommendations

- Learn to live with the informal institutions and practices that continue to predominate, and often override, the formal ones in the settings they work in.
- Engage with these informal systems more

thoroughly and explicitly rather than ignoring them.

- Focus on how to best work 'with the grain' (i.e. what is already in-country) rather than on transplanting formal institutional frameworks from the outside.

Core Principle 3: Focus capacity building not only on technical but also on political skills

Recommendations

- Continue to support technical capacity building of both civil society and state actors, particularly at the local level.
- Pay more attention to the lack of substantial *political* capacity of both state and non-state actors, i.e. the capacity to forge alliances, provide evidence, contribute to the decision-making process, and influence others to make change happen.
- Take as the starting point the fact that such political capacity is likely to be shaped by the institutional and incentives frameworks within which actors operate.

Core principle 4: Place greater focus on CV&A mechanisms that address both sides of the equation within the same intervention

Recommendations

- Focus more systematically on strengthening existing mechanisms at the national level that can function to bring the state and the citizen together, such as parliaments, ombudsmen (e.g. human rights, anti-corruption and electoral commissions) and multi-stakeholder processes (e.g. participatory budgeting and local development processes).
- Do the same at the local level, so as to continue to strengthen institutions such as local development committees and consultative councils, without relying simply on supporting decentralisation processes to bring the state closer to the citizen.
- Support increased access to information by supporting legislation and the right to information. However, a focus on this formal right is not enough. Access to information should also be supported by improving the capacity of interested actors and watchdog

organisations to understand and utilise information correctly, and donors should work closely with domestic supporters of freedom of information laws to give them real teeth.

Core principle 5: Diversify channels and mechanisms of engagement and work more purposefully with actors outside donors' 'zone of comfort'

Recommendations

- Pay attention to issues of integrity, quality and capacity when selecting CSO partners to engage with (so as to avoid supporting what in the case studies were identified as 'brief-case' NGOs and other CSOs lacking legitimacy). This can be monitored by setting rigorous selection criteria, carrying out capacity assessments, and observing the CSOs more closely in their implementation of programmes.
- Make a bigger push to continue to work with non-traditional civil society organisations like religious organisations, trade unions and social movements. They often have close links and legitimacy with certain sections of the population that are otherwise hard to reach.
- Ensure that CV&A interventions include relevant and specific actions to promote voice and influence among excluded, marginalised and otherwise discriminated against groups (such as women and ethnic minorities). Choose representatives (either NGOs or non-traditional CSOs) that have close and demonstrable links with such groups.

Core principle 6: Improve key design and implementation features of CV&A interventions and aid effectiveness

Recommendations

- Establish more realistic expectations for CV&A interventions.
- Provide longer term and more flexible support, recognising that CV&A efforts can take a long time to bring about, aimed as they are towards changing entrenched attitudes, reforming long-established structures, and altering power dynamics.

- Be mindful to build in sustainability features and exit strategies into the design of CV&A interventions, including empowering partners.
- Improve donor coordination of CV&A initiatives beyond the basics of information sharing and basket funding.

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References and Endnotes

Endnotes

- 1 The findings and conclusions from the evaluation were captured in a synthesis report prepared by ODI in November 2008. All these documents are available at http://www.odi.org.uk/pppg/politics_and_governance/what_we_do/Voice_and_accountability/index.html
- 2 Again, the recommendations are based on the sample of interventions that constitutes the main body of evidence for the overall project. Given the limitations and constraints of the sample, these recommendations may not fully reflect the range of activities that donors are already undertaking, which were beyond the scope of the evaluation.

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