Project Briefing

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Citizen voice and state accountability: towards theories of change that embrace contextual dynamics

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Key points

- Enabling citizens to influence government accountability is a complex process involving political dynamics at the citizens' interface with state institutions

- Developing explicit theories of change (ToCs) from the start of programme planning helps planners delve into complex citizen–state dynamics

- Fusing political economy analysis and outcome mapping tools can help develop a deeper understanding of these dynamics to generate more effective ways to achieve outcomes

The development industry is increasingly pushing practitioners to achieve results, and to do better in demonstrating what works, what does not, and explaining why. There is a growing interest in going beyond the measurement of results to being able to understand the basis for success or failure. Consequently, the development of explicit theories of change (ToCs) is starting to be viewed as central to this process, as a key part of what constitutes 'rigour' in impact evaluations. These ToCs explain the central processes or drivers that generate change for individuals, groups or communities (Funnell and Rogers, 2011).

Citizen voice and accountability (CV&A) project interventions produce and reproduce diverse outcomes that are not amenable to linear models of ToCs. These projects often involve a wide range of actors who pursue their aims according to different incentives and interests. In neo-patrimonial contexts, social actors are embedded in a complex web of formal and informal interactions that are difficult to disentangle and explain. This complexity increases when multiple external incentives, interests and influences are taken into account.

This paper uses a critical analysis of CV&A cases from the Mwananchi Governance and Transparency Fund (GTF) programme to examine how citizen voice and accountability happens in different governance contexts. The GTF is a one-off funding mechanism created by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) as part of its implementation of the 2006 White Paper 'Making Governance Work for Poor People'. The ODI GTF works in six African countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia.

The analytical framework used in this paper draws on the well-known tools of outcome mapping (OM) and political economy analysis (PEA). It provides a new way to develop ToCs to navigate the context-dependent dynamics of citizen engagement and state accountability in the pursuit of results.

How voice and accountability happen in different contexts

Context: everyday governance

Evaluations of CV&A projects consider the understanding of context to be one of the core building blocks of success. This implies that any useful ToC must be informed by an understanding of how a particular context shapes interactions between state and citizens. However, the experience of the Mwananchi programme suggests that initial contextual analysis – obtained through such tools as the World Governance Assessment (WGA) and Strategic Governance and Anti-Corruption Assessment (SCAGA) – fails to reveal the dynamics of 'everyday governance' (Blundo and Le Meur, 2008).

Specific citizen–state actions reveal the true nature of bargains and negotiations for access to power and resources. Some of these become tipping points for the institutional changes that are needed if citizen voice is to influence state accountability. Understanding context involves finding ways to drill down to the particular incentives and interests of the actors involved, and how they shape citizen–state negotiations and outcomes in the provision of public goods around real issues and in real time.

Mechanisms

The Mwananchi GTF experience demonstrates that culture, as shown in words, symbols and postures, informs CV&A interface interactions. However, culture is not static: it is subject to continuous and multiple tensions created from within (and without) by interest groups – including the marginalised – as they try to influence those in social, economic and political power. The pathways to change, therefore, include

Box 1: Examples of social accountability tools

The Masindi District Education Network (MADEN) in Uganda uses suggestion boxes to mobilise children's voices for discussions and lobbying with local education institutions and the Ministry of Education.

In Malawi, radio listening clubs (RLCs) provide communities and service providers with an interface mechanism across a generic range of public services (e.g. schools, health clinics and water). In this case, the community is seen to consist of citizens with different capabilities to speak with service providers. Speaking through recorded messages before actual face-to-face meetings with government authorities enables many of the 'would have been silent' community members to have a say, and helps the authorities to hear them. This approach has produced positive changes on health services in a project in Malawi.

In Zambia, a similar interface is achieved through 'call-in' radio programmes, where media organisations such as Yatsani Radio help communities and service providers interrogate issues without having to meet face-to-face. This mechanism enhances citizens' voices by providing a platform that avoids cultural and other power impediments. Many organisations are now trying to explore social media mechanisms to achieve the same ends.

mechanisms that transcend verbal and physical interactions between citizens and state actors, and that factor in diverse citizen identities, categorisations and representations.

Social accountability tools such as community scorecards, citizen report cards and suggestion boxes often produce positive results (Box 1). Their effect on changing the rules of the game about whose voice is represented, who benefits from policy, and the accountability of state institutions depends, however, on the kinds of engagement mechanisms that the tools provide for different citizen groups and types of service providers in different contexts.

The sustainable provision of mechanisms for citizen–state engagement can be challenging because they rely on external funding. Mechanisms may also undermine local government institutions when their evolution does not merge with state processes such as decentralisation.

To avoid these dangers, projects have attempted to link to decentralised government structures through which information on public service provision is expected to flow between the grassroots and the national level. However, decentralised structures have been found to be dysfunctional, and often co-exist with parallel structures set up by ruling parties to exert their direct election-oriented influence at local level. Strengthening dysfunctional local structures becomes, in effect, a process of indirect contest with the ruling party, seen as 'the government'.

As a result, many different kinds of community-based mechanisms of engagement with state institutions do not fall easily into one institutional pathway. Success depends on trying to identify mechanisms that work for different issues and purposes, and negotiating the politics of working with government institutions through different incentive structures.

Incentives and interests

One key factor in the success or failure of CV&A initiatives is finding the right incentives to mobilise and aggregate citizens' voice while also generating incentives for engaging state institutions. Citizens do not simply wait to be organised to engage in governance issues, even though they confront these issues in their daily lives. Some may already be in conflict with the state through arbitrary divisions (for instance, party or ethnic lines) drawn over time.

In many societies, politics has resulted in community apathy, demonstrated not only when people do not vote during elections but also by their limited participation in government activities despite their high levels of need. Citizens weigh any external intervention according to their own perspectives of the benefits and risks of engagement. Therefore, civil society organisations (CSOs) use various kinds of incentives to mobilise citizen engagement, which also vary from one context to another.
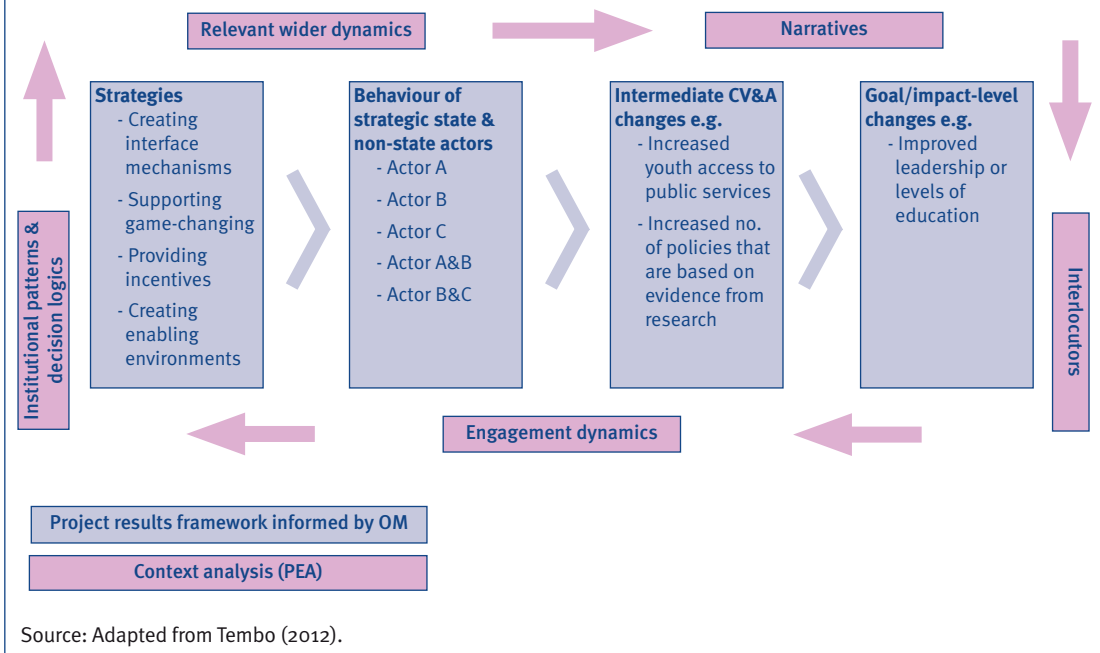
The same applies to working with state actors, where there are also varied incentives for engagement or disengagement. For example, engagement is seen to be enhanced when there is compelling evidence to respond. But what constitutes 'compelling evidence' differs from one context – and one issue – to another.

The Basic Needs project in Ghana succeeded in influencing the Mental Health Bill by using research-based evidence presented in a photo book that documented the everyday lives of people with mental health issues, and possible actions to help them. Although there were also a number of government-led events (for example, a presidential visit to Accra Psychiatric Hospital), giving the photo book to the right strategic actors made a difference. In essence, the evidence provided helped to change the discourse, as well as the understanding of the urgent need to work on mental health issues in Ghana.

Modes of interlocution

The pathway of change that enables citizens to hold their governments to account depends on the availability of specific mechanisms, spaces and incentives. Therefore, the interlocution process – a way to make this work for poor people – focuses on how to build engagement through finding appropriate

Figure 1: Model for using political economy analysis (PEA) and outcome mapping (OM) to develop a more realistic CV&A results framework

| Relevant wider dynamics | → | Narratives |

Strategies
- Creating interface mechanisms
- Supporting game-changing
- Providing incentives
- Creating enabling environments

Behaviour of strategic state & non-state actors
- Actor A
- Actor B
- Actor C
- Actor A&B
- Actor B&C

Intermediate CV&A changes e.g.
- Increased youth access to public services
- Increased no. of policies that are based on evidence from research

Goal/impact-level changes e.g.
- Improved leadership or levels of education

Institutional patterns & decision logics

Interlocutors

Engagement dynamics

Project results framework informed by OM

Context analysis (PEA)

Source: Adapted from Tembo (2012).

incentives for CV&A within relevant platforms and spaces. Interlocution, as a process, means that an organisation may succeed or fail to change the rules of the game, depending on the contextual dynamics at work. An organisation (or individual) is an interlocutor only when it is an active game changer in the given context, and not just because it works in that context. Consequently, we need to go beyond nominal categories of CSOs or media organisations, and look at exactly what they do in each given context.

A model for ToCs in dynamic contexts

Figure 1 shows how we could bring together the process of understanding different contexts and their dynamics to inform the development of a results framework. The model draws on PEA to understand the contextual dynamics, and on OM to develop the results chain. It is expected that the model will help CV&A programmes develop and deepen their ToCs.

In Figure 1, the outer cycle refers to the context, which draws on PEA. The inner sections represent the project results framework, which draws partly on OM. The idea is that CV&A programme teams need to build on a good ongoing analysis of contextual dynamics in order to design and implement projects with a greater chance of realising results. For example, Democracy Sierra Leone (DSL), a Mwananchi grantee, is engaging members of parliament (MPs) to help change mining rules. With a better understanding of how MPs make decisions, DSL makes informed choices between focusing on MPs as individuals and the political parties to which they belong.

This framework (implementing an iterative context analysis and developing a more realistic results framework within it) will incrementally improve ToCs around specific issues and contexts.

Using PEA to analyse contextual dynamics

The **first step** of analysis explores the wider dynamics at the national and sub-regional levels that are relevant to the CV&A interventions. This is where the foundational governance factors and the rules in use are captured (for instance a country's constitution and how it shapes relations; citizens' general confidence in government decision-making, etc.).

The **second step** focuses on narratives specific to the governance issue in question (e.g. narratives about the allocation of national budget to various sectors). Here, the analysis aims to locate narratives in the population of stakeholders involved: it describes local organisations' and citizens' stories of how various outcomes come about in that context. Through these narratives it is possible to compare policy as a written discourse, to policy as interpreted and lived within government and by non-state actors including citizens. It is also within these narratives that dividing lines are used to articulate the relationship between society and the state. Narratives change in relation to new pressures, some of which emanate at the local level and some at the national level.

From the narratives, it is possible to draw out which actors have the potential to be game changers on a specific governance issue (known as 'interlocutors'): this is the **third step** in the analysis. Such an approach differs from identifying actors simply because they work within the relevant sector (for example, individuals working in a particular government ministry).

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Exploring engagement dynamics – the **fourth step** – attempts to map out the behaviour of interlocutors of change who might influence strategic actors to change the rules of the game in a particular policy orientation or sector. Most social accountability processes use tools such as citizen report cards (CRCs), to focus on the behaviour of public office holders as well as citizens. OM can help to sharpen the use of these tools by helping to articulate interlocutor behaviours (relationships and activities) that are expected to be in place for desired outcomes to be achieved. The **fifth step** of analysis, exploring institutional patterns and decision logics, deals with the behaviour of interlocutors identified during the mapping process. The focus during this step is to establish which institutional patterns are effective and which ones are not, in order to uncover relevant institutional and individual decision-making processes and patterns. It is important to observe and analyse patterns over time, because behavioural change is dynamic and subject to multiple incentives. Observations over a long period may prevent coincidental correlations. The results of this analysis need to be reviewed in the light of the foundational governance factors, described during the first step of analysis, and hence the cyclic nature of the context analysis shown in Figure 1.

Implications

- Social accountability makes a difference where generic government policies fail to engage with citizens.

- Theories of change for citizen voice and action need to be built on robust learning strategies, so that the question of 'how did we get here?' informs many more of the answers to the question 'how do we get from here to there?'
- Civil society organisations, media and other non-state interlocutors of change that work on social accountability projects need continually to revisit their actions by asking the question 'what can change rules of the game in this context?' and, by implication, 'who is a game changer on this issue?'. This reappraisal would lead to significant re-orientations of actors and investments.

Conclusion

It is not possible to develop a specific 'off-the-shelf-and-run-with-it' theory of change for CV&A programmes in different contexts. ToCs need to be subjected to a continuous process of construction and deconstruction to improve knowledge on what works and what does not, and the circumstances according to which such changes take place. This paper has provided one model for adopting such an approach, so that results are achieved by understanding the complexities of the required change.

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