



Discussion Paper

In search of the game changers

Rethinking social accountability

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Key messages

- The Mwananchi programme experience in six African countries over five years shows that a more nuanced and iterative approach to context analysis is essential to building successful social accountability development programmes.
- Social accountability programming requires a multi-actor approach. Incentives to increase diversity of actions and mutual accountability from these actors would go far in supporting collective action that brings about real change to citizens.
- Crucially, time should be invested in identifying and supporting interlocutors with the skills, networks and attributes to really 'change the game' in the specific context rather than offering generic support.
- Successful multi-actor approaches require greater innovation and flexibility from donors. This will involve rethinking all aspects of programme design and delivery, including how we understand the local context, power structures, funding modalities, looking for results and timeframes.



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Acronyms

BCA	Baseline Context Analysis
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DFID	Department for International Development
GTF	Governance and Transparency Fund
Eoi	Expressions of Interest
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation

MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NCO	National Coordinating Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSC	National Steering Committee
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
WGA	World Governance Assessment

Introduction

When citizens engage with their governments and hold them to account, countries achieve better developmental and democratic outcomes. In most state-society contexts in Africa today, organisations or individuals facilitate this engagement by acting as interlocutors of change (for a definition, see Box 1). It is therefore important that external support for these organisations or individuals incentivises, rather than undermines, this role – something that is unfortunately rare in current aid practices.

This paper is based on the authors' reflections on the design and implementation of the Mwananchi Programme, drawing on their roles as programme manager/lead researcher, and evaluator (see Box 2). In identifying lessons from the Mwananchi experience, the paper speaks to a number of current debates and concerns regarding the effectiveness of 'Voice, Empowerment and Accountability' programmes and projects (Combaz, and Mcloughlin, 2014). The last two decades have seen a rapid growth of investment in initiatives aimed at empowering ordinary

citizens to hold governments directly to account. At the same time, these initiatives work to persuade governments to allow this development, as a way to improve public service delivery and to strengthen democracy (Robinson, 2005; Gaventa, 2004; McNeil and Malena, 2010). This trend is anchored in changes to donor arrangements for aid effectiveness, initially around the principles of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which developed further through the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action, the 2011 Busan Partnership Agreement for Effective Development Cooperation and the 2014 Mexico City High Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation. This trend is also prominent in the post-2015 sustainable development discussions (UNDP, 2013). These agreements emphasise the inclusion of diverse actors, including civil society organisations (CSOs), the private sector and citizens themselves as active contributors to development policy and implementation. There is also an explicit commitment to greater transparency and



Marketplace in Accra, Ghana. Photo: © Olaloluwa/IITA.

Box 1: What are interlocutors?

Interlocutors' are the organisations or individuals with the 'game-changing' characteristics that are necessary to address, or contribute to, a specific collective action problem. The collective action problem determines the 'game-changing' characteristics and, therefore, we cannot claim that an organisation is an interlocutor without it being embedded in the action and context.¹

accountability as key ingredients for realising this inclusion and improving results delivery.

In translating these aspirations into practice, reviews show that much donor support is provided to non-state actors through intermediaries, who manage large portfolios of support (Tembo and Wells, 2007; DANIDA, 2014)¹. These intermediaries include private sector consultancy companies, international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local CSOs, multilateral agencies, and local foundations. The use of intermediaries is seen as *'increasing the potential for outreach, diversity, disbursement, mutual accountability and managing for results as well as donor harmonisation and alignment'*, this is assumed to flow from relations *'based on contracts with clear performance/success criteria and management structures that address conflict of interest/principal agent issues'* (Scanteam, 2007). An additional driver is that indirect support passes many of the transaction costs onto the intermediary rather than the donors, who are under pressure to do more with fewer staff. However, we are not able to find any rigorous cost-benefit analysis on this matter.

There is an increasing emphasis on delivering results in international development, and as such, there is great interest in learning more about how programmes can be designed and implemented to maximise impact. Recent studies have raised concerns over the persistent failure to achieve intended results in development practice. Some of the main concerns raised include the following:

- Most support takes place at the national level, with less focus on community-based organisations (CBOs) and rural CSOs (Foresti et al, 2007).
- There is little work being done with membership-based organisations, yet these are often the most common avenues for people to become active on issues and are thus potentially important channels by which citizens can engage with the state (Foresti et al, 2007).

Box 2: The Mwananchi Programme

The Mwananchi Programme was supported by the Department for International Development (DFID) Governance and Transparency Fund (GTF). It ran from 2008-2013 and was led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). The programme aimed to strengthen citizen engagement with local and national government in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia. The authors both know the programme well from different perspectives. Fletcher Tembo, at the time an ODI Research Fellow, was the Mwananchi Programme Director and was instrumental in conceiving, designing and implementing the programme. Jennifer Chapman, an independent consultant, led the teams undertaking both the mid-term and final programme evaluations, using an interactive approach with project stakeholders at both the global and country levels.

- Social accountability is promoted as one single process with common features. This includes the assumption that citizens can be, and want to be, principals with state actors as their agents, ignoring the politics of collective action (Booth, 2012).
- Most interventions focus on civic engagement with government bureaucracies, including the executive and mainstream civil service. Fewer interventions focus on the accountability of horizontal mechanisms, such as parliaments, political parties, public complaints commissions, anti-corruption bureaus, electoral commissions, or human rights institutions (Tembo and Wells, 2007).
- *Which* intermediaries are selected to manage donor funding is also an issue. One study found that the donors most frequently chose international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) from their home country (Scanteam, 2007). Although the study did find that private consultancy companies or consortia are being increasingly used, it raised some questions as to whether these are the best agents for strengthening local civil society.
- The increasingly focused nature of aid has implications for the independence, vibrancy and pluralism of civil society. The Paris Declaration of Aid Effectiveness agenda, and the urge to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), have led to some CSOs to express concern that donors are pushing them towards becoming project contractors rather than partners in development. Similarly, the level of funding passing through multi-donor funds in some countries means that

1 Tembo, F. (2013: 7-8).

CSOs, or groups that do not fit within their priorities, can find it harder to access funding. Further, concern has been expressed over a possible ‘flock mentality’ that may lead to multiple donors wanting to fund the same thing at the same time, thus reducing possibilities for innovation and risk (Scanteam, 2007).

- As official donors withdraw from directly facilitating civic engagement with the state, some consider that this potentially transfers risk to local civil-society grantees. One report found that CSOs ‘often find donors an important source of assurance in respect of advocacy on politically sensitive issues’ and direct support from donors can help CSOs avoid the accusation of being partisan (Tembo and Wellls, 2007).
- The implications of a sometimes narrow interpretation of the renewed emphasis on ‘results’ at the outcomes and impacts level, and how cost-effectively these results have been achieved (Tembo, 2012).

To start addressing some of these concerns, in order to have meaningful impact on institutions and what they deliver for citizens, we argue that there is a need to identify and support interlocutors of change that are fit for the contexts in question, rather than offering generic

support to CSOs, media or other ‘demand-side’ actors.² However, adopting this approach means rethinking all aspects of programme design and delivery, including how we understand the context, who owns the programme components, funding modalities, and setting or anticipating timeframes for different actions. This has considerable implications for the way transparency and accountability initiatives are funded. For instance, it leads us to reflect on how organisations which provide support in a given contextual landscape are identified. Often, organisation choice and funding mechanisms are geared to traditional project delivery models that tend to focus on quality of proposal presentation. This makes the identification of potential interlocutors challenging.

In our Mwananchi experiences with trying to address these issues and promote working with ‘interlocutors’, we came across a number of critical dilemmas and tensions. This paper seeks to draw out suggestions for addressing these tensions and inherent dilemmas, with a view to engaging others in the discussion. Ultimately, we believe that this approach could translate ambitious development goals, such as poverty eradication or improving social accountability, into practice.

2 The generic approach also makes it difficult to distinguish between indigenous organisations and NGOs, with NGOs mostly exhibiting characteristics of the ‘development market place’ where accountability is much more upwards to donors than downwards to local constituencies (Banks et al, 2013).

1. What are interlocutors and why are they important?

The importance of context in development programmes is well acknowledged, and our experience with the six differently governed African countries over the five-year Mwananchi implementation strongly attests to this. Increasingly, new tools are being developed to understand context in order to inform the design of social accountability programmes and projects (Foresti, et al, 2007; O'Meally, 2013; Tembo, 2013) or to nuance what works under different contexts. There is also an increasing understanding that social accountability is more of a political than a technical challenge, hence the need to think and act politically (Rocha Menocal, 2014). However, the Mwananchi experience took this understanding further and sought to locate context as inclusive of how individuals and groups think about themselves as citizens. In this case, the argument is that individuals or groups have different contextually situated social and political identities, which affect how they express themselves to different types of authority within their society (Tembo, 2013; Fowler, 2013). Currently, most contextual analyses and guidelines for social accountability project design and implementation focus more on the external expressions of both citizens and the state (see for instance, Guerzovich, 2014).

Understanding context helps to situate forms of citizenship and statehood. This in turn, will make it possible to understand how different forms of citizen activism, civic energy³ and state actions are energised and sustained. For state actions, this is partly a form of political settlement, albeit at a micro-level given that most social accountability projects concentrate on the local and sub-national levels.

The Mwananchi experience showed that specific interlocation moments or processes that catalyse improvements in social accountability exist within these contextual dynamics. Accountability emerges and develops as part of social capital building relationships.

There is, therefore, an emphasis on the 'social' rather than 'legal', although legal accountability can reinforce social accountability (Tembo, 2013; Ostrom, 2005). Interlocation happens when particular actors with some kind of political entrepreneurship skills relevant to the context are able to set up or facilitate the right relationships, conditions and spaces⁴. We call these actors 'interlocutors'. The catalytic role that they exhibit is frequently played by CSOs. Some of these organisations are well placed, whilst others need to grow into this role through capacity development strategies. However, the role can also be played by other actors within society, such as the state or private sector, as long as they have the necessary interlocutor characteristics⁵.

The idea is that these catalysts identify a collective action problem, and they then draw in other relevant actors to address the problem, forming what Fox (2014) calls 'coalitions of pro-accountability forces across the state-society divide, acting to offset anti-accountability forces'. Thus interlocutors are organisations or individuals that are able to bring together various other players - including rural NGOs, CBOs, and decision-makers - to contribute to finding solutions to specific collective action problems. In this process, these other players also end up being actors within the evolving accountability relationships.

A major lesson to be emphasised from Mwananchi is that project actors should be chosen for the characteristics which they possess, which are required to change the rules of the game in a collective action situation. In other words, given that what determines whether an action (or actions) is 'game-changing' relates to the specific collective action problem in question, it follows that until there is a clear idea of the problem and the game-changing characteristics are defined, selecting organisations or individuals to be involved in a project may not be beneficial and could even impede change. The ideal procedure should be to understand the

3 Thanks to Biekart and Fowler (2013) for these terms.

4 Political entrepreneurship here refers to 'the ability to read the political dynamics (on both the citizen and state sides) and to seize opportunities for manoeuvre as they come and go; the ability to draw in the better placed actors to engage with their existing skills, credibility and reputation; and deliberately marginalising or even withdrawing other actors from engagement when their role is not or no longer needed' (Tembo, 2013: 43).

5 The emphasis on 'interlocutor characteristics' is key here because it helps to distinguish this approach from the commonly referred 'champions of change' within organisations. The idea of 'champions of change' tends to focus on personalised attributes that somehow only a few people have, while the idea of 'interlocutors' puts emphasis on 'functional characteristics' that are useful for the moment in question. This means that these characteristics are possible for any actor that chooses to act in a way that makes change possible, and are possible to enhance even among the seemingly 'non-champions'.

collective action situation first (using political economy analysis and other tools) and then to draw in organisations or individuals with the requisite characteristics to make change happen. With this understanding it is clear that categorisations and representations (Tembo, 2003) of ‘civil society’, media and other actors might make life easier for funders, but they are not so useful for designing strategic accountability programmes.

However, it is true that taking an open approach to working with whichever actor has the right game-changing characteristics has its inherent dilemmas and challenges. For instance, we found that some of the non-traditional interlocutors were not as amenable to using the current granting frameworks and project packaging (this is explained further in Box 3).

The current funding frameworks are best designed for CSO-type organisations. This strongly suggests that until the development industry is able to innovate in order to support various actors directly, CSOs and media organisations will continue to play the interlocutor role in social accountability projects, with the ability to draw in other actors to various aspects of the project. Thus, social accountability programming is not about delivering everything through a single organisation nor a single organisation doing everything by itself.

The next section focuses on how to identify and support potential interlocutors. We promote a new approach, which

Box 3: Supporting interlocutors in Mwananchi

Initially it was intended that the Mwananchi Programme support package would be open to all kinds of organisations that could be effective interlocutors in a given context. However, in practice, almost all of the grantees were CSOs or community radio stations. This was mainly because these actors were the most appropriate, and risks were minimised, given the Mwananchi project approach and funding structure. For example, if the programme decided to directly fund traditional leaders or Members of Parliament, the political characteristics of these institutions might have introduced substantial fiduciary risk that would not be easily mitigated. It was realised, however, that it is still possible to work with non-CSO interlocutors when they are invited to engage with various aspects of projects managed by the CSOs or media organisations.

goes beyond identifying and supporting only the project implementers. However, it is important to also note that these organisations or individuals may not see the opportunities of working in this way, and hence may need considerable support to develop the required skills and capacities.

2. How to identify and support interlocutors

In any given country context we find three, broadly categorised, interlocutor types: those that manage the country programmes, those that implement the projects, and those affected by the situation (and are therefore helping others in the same situation)⁶. Although it is possible to discuss contractor organisations at the international level, we limit the discussion here to country-level interlocutors. These are implementing organisations that are helping others but are themselves not directly part of the situation in question. This is where the Mwananchi experience was most pronounced.

2.1. What kind of country level interlocutors are needed and how to find them?

Like many current approaches to donor programme management, Mwananchi had local organisations (usually CSOs) leading the process of selecting intermediary organisations and providing them with grant management and capacity development support. However, Mwananchi adopted a selection process for these organisations (called ‘secretariats’ in some country programmes), and for identifying the specific role that they played (see Box 3). From our reflection on these processes and organisations, we would argue that effective country level intermediaries need to have specific attributes and skills that are not necessarily found in the organisations or consortia frequently set up to manage multi-donor funds. These attributes are elaborated below.

- **Legitimacy:** Given the potentially controversial nature of some of the interventions, the intermediary organisation needs to be trusted and seen as legitimate and non-partisan by all stakeholders. Donors are not necessarily in the best position to identify such organisations. This may be better carried out by informed individuals in country. In most of the Mwananchi countries, a national process with broad stakeholder engagement was used to select a National Steering Committee (NSC) made up of respected national individuals from a range

of backgrounds. The advisory board made the final decisions on which organisation would play the role of intermediary with the grantees (for more detail see Box 4). Whilst this process was not without its challenges, it did go some way towards ensuring that the intermediary organisation was seen to be legitimate and non-partisan.

- **Local ownership:** To maintain credibility and legitimacy, and ensure that interventions are appropriate to the local context, social accountability interventions must be locally owned. To ensure local ownership, Mwananchi engaged in initial stakeholder dialogue, discussing and identifying national social accountability priorities; established an advisory board; and selected local intermediary organisations. It was also important that there was a high level of programme flexibility, which allowed meaningful local decisions on the work focus. All of these elements were undoubtedly valuable to the process. However, in some cases local-stakeholders were not used to this level of consultation or decision-making, and there is a risk of creating unrealistic expectations among those that were consulted.
- **Range of capacities:** Identifying and supporting interlocutors requires the intermediary to have much broader skills than those needed for traditional portfolio management. At the national level it was important that the intermediary organisation⁷ either had, or was able to bring in, grant and relationship management skills; was able to understand action research, could support capacity development; and acted as a critical support system. This meant that the individuals employed had to have an adequate understanding of the key social accountability issues within the country and the kinds of skills and knowledge required to meet the grantees’ needs. Additional attributes required included: political astuteness, local knowledge and linkages with relevant networks (so that they could identify the appropriate interlocutors), facilitation skills, and ability to assess risk. The key lesson from Mwananchi in this regard is that, if national coordinating organisations are to work as effective interlocutors, they may require as much

⁶ It is possible to also categorise implementing organisations into two or three further levels, depending on the way they work. For instance, the implementing organisation might be a network which then sub-contracts work to its members and the network members might themselves have membership organisations, which actually do the work.

⁷ In the Mwananchi Programme these were referred to as National Coordinating Offices (NCO).

Box 4: The national process in Mwananchi

The Mwananchi Programme was designed to allow for considerable local ownership and flexibility; this enabled country programmes and specific projects to be ‘fine-tuned’ to fit the local context. This ‘designing to the local context’ approach is vital, and was raised as a key point by multi-donor fund implementers at a learning event in Nairobi. During the event, the usefulness of the ‘best practice’ concept was challenged and the alternative of ‘best fit’ suggested (Tembo, 2012). Local ownership, flexibility and adapting to the local context were all strongly supported by the action research approach used by the Mwananchi Programme. At the national level, the emphasis was largely on understanding and designing to the context and developing local ownership. This helped to guide the process of identifying and working with a selected number of grantees who were then supported to become grassroots interlocutors around their priority issues.

We described Mwananchi’s approach to ensuring a deep understanding of the context as Baseline Context Analysis (BCA).^{*} This is an extensive process and, as a result, it took close to two years to set up the Mwananchi Programme in most countries. The BCA involved a thorough inception phase, which included: conducting a governance assessment using the World Governance Assessment (WGA) tool; consultation with a wide range of actors in each country (such as government, private sector, civil society, and media); and conducting a stock-take of existing and past social accountability projects. These BCA elements provided the evidence for a multi-stakeholder group, led by a governance expert identified from a local think tank, to discuss, identify and prioritise the social accountability issues around which each of the country programmes were designed. The issues were the basis for drafting calls for Expressions of Interests (EoI) and then proposals, except in Ethiopia where the issues identified were used to find organisations to work with directly.

During the inception phase (the BCA phase), the programme also established a management process to strengthen local ownership and effectively channel funding to interlocutors for grassroots interventions. This approach involved the selection of a National Steering Committee (NSC), by the multi-stakeholder group. The NSC was made up of eminent persons with good standing in the country.

It was the NSC that put out calls for applications to be the lead organisation - the National Coordinating Organisation (NCO) - which was effectively the intermediary organisation. The NCO in turn acted as a secretariat to the country programme, managing selection processes, funds and facilitating and monitoring the local organisations’ projects. The idea was to reinforce local accountability (through the initial multi-stakeholder group) as opposed to putting out a call for EoI and proposals for an organisation to act as a national managing agent that then, because it ‘wins’ the programme, ends up being accountable to external funders rather than local stakeholders. It was also envisaged that the NSC and NCO, set up through this kind of process, were more likely to be seen as legitimate and credible organisations and individuals in a given country context, rather than if donors had identified them using an open call for proposals.

In practice, the evaluation confirmed that the NSCs were important in getting the commitment of very experienced and high profile people in the respective countries. However, the programme did face challenges in making full use of their engagement and in developing meaningful local accountability. At times the NSCs were very useful, but they had to be carefully facilitated by the national coordinator with the right amount and kinds of information. When the NSC had a clear role, such as assessing grantees and awarding grants, as it did initially, it was more actively engaged. However, once the decision had been made to keep working with the same grantees, in some countries it appeared to lose momentum.

^{*} Conceptually, this term was used to reflect our attempt to combine what is normally known as ‘situation analysis’, which focuses on understanding what is going on in a given context, with ‘baseline data’ collection, which is about establishing the benchmarks around which changes resulting from interventions will be monitored.

operation support as the grantees. In countries where working in a flexible and adaptive manner is not the norm, to do so effectively will require the deliberate and planned support and mentoring of the intermediary. In order to provide the support needed it is important that the lead agency or donor assesses and monitors the organisational culture and capacity of the intermediary.

- **Longevity:** Whilst any social accountability intervention is likely to have a defined shelf life, the interlocutors, and the webs of relationships that are established through an approach like Mwananchi’s, are likely to start to show returns only by the end of a standard five-year programme. In order to ensure that benefits

are sustainable and do not end with the programme, it helps to use existing national organisations as the intermediaries who have missions aligned with the social accountability objectives.

While some of the NSCs contributed significantly to the programme, it was also clear that establishing an NSC on its own did not provide for local accountability. Indeed, given the accountability of the NCO to ODI for funding, it is not clear exactly what form this local accountability could have taken. Some countries trialled getting the NSC to sign off on grantee reports, but this proved an inefficient and unsuitable approach to developing local accountability. In practice,

NSCs played an advisory, rather than an accountability function. As they were all busy people, the NSCs needed strong incentives to remain involved. Incentives were not necessarily monetary, but could be opportunities to get involved in initiatives they cared deeply about, or developing their own knowledge and capacity. This shows that incentive structures within countries play a critical role in moving towards national management arrangements that are useful for identifying interlocutors of change, as well as providing necessary accountability in managing projects.

Ultimately, the local or downward accountability that this approach attempted to create very much depended on local politics and the extent to which collective developmental action prevails over other societal differences, including between the state and civil society. In societies where suspicion overrides developmental drivers, agencies have to work much harder on cultivating transparency and accountability, beyond technically sound systems, and might have to use external accountability to build local accountability incrementally.

2.2. Identifying project level interlocutors

Identifying interlocutors and then systematically monitoring changes emerging from their work is difficult to do through a blueprint baseline study (Barnett, 2013). In many African countries one of the long term impacts of development aid has been the ‘professionalisation’ of civil society; organisations that are able to apply for grants using donor-preferred language and to deliver projects according to grant criteria are more likely to survive. Thus NGOs and CSOs often apply with projects designed to fit donor criteria, rather than projects designed to address the main concerns of local communities. At the same time, and for similar reasons, much of civil society is not well rooted within local communities.

In the Mwananchi Programme it was evident that most local organisations recruited consultants who were experts at proposal writing to draft the initial EoI. If the consultants write the EoI and proposal without fully understanding the organisation they are writing for, or the context, there will be a discord in articulation of the issues between the project proposal and the implementing organisation. In essence, it is the quality of consultant that is actually assessed rather than the organisation per se. In other words, we would argue that an open call for EoI is likely to identify organisations that are skilled in writing applications or delivering projects, which are not necessarily those geared towards a more nuanced and facilitative approach.

Whilst Mwananchi did call for EoI from potential grantees (see Box 4), it also put great effort into ensuring that the call reached beyond the ‘usual suspects’. This was achieved through widespread publicity and by making it

clear that non-standard applications would be considered. The applications received were then assessed with an emphasis on innovation and having a clear grassroots constituency, rather than deliverability or quality of writing. Potential grantees were encouraged to develop their proposals further during a workshop that supported them to think much more critically about their theory of change and how they might work with other actors. The selection approach resulted in some organisations receiving donor funding for the first time. For example, an organisation in Ghana was selected because it wanted to use an old practice called ‘Belandan Bo’ where the status and voices of tribal ‘queen mothers’ are used to help the government increase access to education for girls in the community. As a general observation, most selected organisations had generally struggled to secure funding because they could not fit their priorities into existing donor frameworks in the standardised professional manner.

Standard development frameworks are traditionally bogged down in funding requirements and structures; few organisations think about change in terms of social accountability, dialogue platforms and allowing diversity in the roles of different interlocutors. As such, programmes designed from this new thinking will have to work with interlocutors on a journey of collaboration and accompaniment. On this journey, the national level coordinating organisation (discussed under 3.1) supports interlocutors to think more critically about how change can happen in their local context, and then draws in others on areas that they do not themselves have the expertise to handle. If this is the case, the challenge then becomes identifying the organisations and/or individuals to act as national level catalytic organisations that:

- Have the drive to make change within their communities.
- Have the potential to bring other people to the table to try to solve collective problems.
- Have, or can develop, the capacity to creatively work within the confines of the particular funding system in order to meet the non-negotiable donor requirements⁸.
- Are working on an issue that has the potential to shift, through a process of constructive engagement within the programme timeframe.

In an attempt to resolve the dilemmas and tensions associated with identifying organisations, it is necessary to have a good mix between: open bidding processes (which help to secure expressions of ‘demand’ from organisations); a rigorous understanding of the context; and a transparent analysis of organisational characteristics. More weight should be given to the latter two criteria. Even more important is that flexibility is provided to the implementing organisation after the selection process, coupled with

⁸ As we will argue later in this paper, donors should also adapt their funding systems to make it easier for organisations to work as catalytic interlocutors. However we recognise that certain forms of upward accountability are necessary.

Box 5: How Mwananchi identified project level interlocutors

The Mwananchi Programme found it challenging to identify project level interlocutors. In all programme countries (except Ethiopia), organisations were identified using an open call for EoI. Organisations were therefore selected by category and their definable characteristics. In hindsight, a more nuanced process would be more appropriate. To get around this, Mwananchi supported the selected organisations over a period of time, and engaged them through a ‘mentoring’ type of capacity development* in order to develop the interlocutor behaviour to suit the issue and context.

The BCA is an important tool for identifying interlocutor organisations and for designing an effective support mechanism. In hindsight, Mwananchi did not use the BCA effectively to develop an understanding of potential interlocutors. For instance, we conducted stock-taking exercises on past and existing social accountability initiatives in each Mwananchi country, which resulted in a wealth of annotated lists of projects, tools, and organisations – this process could have been used to develop project baselines (see Barnett, 2013), using an evidence-based understanding of what works and what does not, considering the organisational characteristics that contributed to successes.

* This capacity development support took the form of ODI visits, as well as the deployment of ‘in-country governance experts’, who were working with ODI to be the ‘insider-outsider’ sparring partners of grantee organisations.

appropriate funding levels and modalities. This is because EoIs and proposals cannot define exactly how things will play out in practice. Whilst prospective grantees in Mwananchi were given support to ensure their project ideas were well thought out and clear, they were also given great flexibility and agency in determining their priorities and project design. The flexibility to design projects that fit the grantees’ analysis of local priorities led to initiatives that were able to focus on issues of relevance to local communities, rather than externally driven agendas. It also led to great grantee commitment to the work, who tended to put their best staff on the projects and mobilised additional local resources such as volunteer time.

2.3. Supporting project level interlocutors

In addition to the challenge of identifying the right actors with the potential to be effective interlocutors, is the issue of *how* they can work to achieve the intended results (how to get from here to there). This question precedes that of ‘how to support change’, which unfortunately becomes the preoccupation of most external intervening agencies.

It is important to note that transferring funding to grassroots organisations - often the main preoccupation within development interventions - actually played a fairly minor role within Mwananchi. This is not to downplay the importance of funding, indeed, the final evaluation findings suggest that Mwananchi succeeded partly as a result of most grantees being able to cross-subsidise the work from other resources (Chapman et al, 2013).

However, large amounts of funding does not automatically result in high quality outcomes. In fact, it may complicate local ownership, project flexibility, and might promote perverse incentives in project design (Bano, 2012). In Mwananchi, the grantee organisations (the potential project level interlocutors) were offered two or three

support packages over the project life, each with relatively small project funding. Some of the non-financial, important elements in the Mwananchi Programme, included:

- **Encouragement to take an action research approach.** Grantees engaged in regular cycles of facilitated group reflection and work adjustment. Within these cycles, grantees were encouraged to think about their theory of change and fine tune their work according to lessons learned. The ODI introduced Outcome Mapping to the grantees, which helped them to explore the necessary behavioural changes of different actors necessary for ‘changing the game’. Project managers were also encouraged to reflect and monitor progress around change. Grantees were encouraged to identify opportunities to extend or deepen their work, and many, but not all, took advantage of this. There was no single model used by grantees to scale-up work from the micro-level, rather they were supported to find the best avenue to fit their project. For example, in Ghana some grantees scaled up their local level work to have national policy impact. Others developed horizontally to influence decision-makers in a neighbouring district, or diagonally, moving from work at the community level in one region, to work at a regional level in another. The flexibility to scale up projects in a responsive manner was partly due to the innovation of ‘Project 11’, which provided additional funding for grantees to take advantage of emerging opportunities (see Box 6).
- **Considerable capacity-development** in areas such as monitoring and evaluation, use of evidence, and the application of new methods of communication. A key approach to capacity development was on-going mentoring/intellectual accompaniment by a ‘local governance expert’⁹. The expert was able to see the bigger picture and challenge grantees in a supportive manner

about their approach and understanding of the issues. In most countries the main focus of this accompaniment was developing and using an appropriate approach and process, asking the right questions in order to learn from what went well and what did not go well, as well as examining the context to develop reflective practice, rather than focusing on pre-determined outputs or results.

- The development of a **community of practice** between the various country grantee partners and the building of strong, positive relationships at all levels. The community of practice proved valuable in terms of idea-exchange, encouragement, and networking. This was notably different to the atmosphere of competition between CSOs that can be engendered by donor funding. The development of good personal relationships at all levels was critical to success. Among other things, relationships are key to transforming attitudes of staff in local organisations, moving away from a ‘box ticking’ approach. Relationships are also key to the innovativeness and growth of organisations in dynamic contexts, how they factor in political changes, apply new tools and learn to work together with other organisations doing similar or related work.
- This package of support was aimed at developing skills, ways of working and relationships to support the grantees to be effective interlocutors in the long term, not just for the duration of the funding cycle. It is likely that much of this will not only directly show returns in the interventions funded by Mwananchi, but should

Box 6: Project 11

Project 11 (so called because there were originally 10 projects in each country) provided a pot of funding that would enable grantees to maximise the impact of their work by responding to unexpected opportunities. Grantees or NCOs could apply for Project 11 funding by submitting a proposal to the Mwananchi advisory board. This innovation:

- Allowed grantees and NCOs to seize emerging opportunities that could not have been foreseen.
- Acted as an incentive for grantees to think about the bigger picture, plan joint work, consider opportunities for scaling up and be innovative.
- Provided opportunities for working with interlocutors other than CSOs through a mechanism that was more flexible than grant-making.

This kind of flexible funding is of great use in advocacy and policy work and is a fairly simple innovation that could easily be adopted elsewhere.

improve future grantee work. In countries where working in a flexible and adaptive manner is not the norm, to do this effectively requires planned support and mentoring; it may also require similar support to the intermediary/ country level coordination organisation or secretariat.

Box 7: Capacity development in Mwananchi

Little of the capacity development provided in Mwananchi was formal training. Support given to grantees was primarily through ongoing mentoring and accompaniment. ODI played an important role in providing an initial conceptual framework and supporting both learning and lesson development. This support helped build the capacity of grantees in a range of areas including: mobilisation skills, stakeholder mapping, strategic partnerships, political analysis, networking, media relations, communications, and evidence use. More tangible skills, such as financial management, report writing, communications, developing proposals and the use of various social accountability tools (e.g. community score cards) were also supported.

Outcome Mapping was introduced to all grantees and was deemed to be particularly useful in building grantee capacity in planning, monitoring and adaptive management, as well as analysis of their specific theories of change. However, it did not necessarily enable an analysis of the differential programme impacts on various groups of people, such as women, children or people living with disabilities.

There were areas where the capacity support did not work so well, and there was considerable variation between grantees in terms of their skills in, and understanding of, strategic evidence collection and use. This was a key area within the original theory of change, and was an area where some of the NCOs might have required their own mentoring in order to effectively support grantees. Another area in which Mwananchi did not work so well was the systematic strengthening of grantees accountability to communities. However, there were some positive examples of this, especially among the membership-based projects such as the Centre for the Coordination of Youth Activities (CCYA) in Sierra Leone.

9 The Mwananchi Programme experimented with the use of governance experts who provided conceptual and theoretic support to the grantees and the NCO. Where it worked well, the combination of in-country programme management and vigorous or critical in-country intellectual and conceptual analysis provided a fertile environment for action research and developing the reflective practice of the grantees. This would not necessarily have to be provided by a ‘governance expert’, but the concept of country-led critical analysis has proved to be a useful one.

3. How can development partners work differently?

It is clear from the Mwananchi experience that social accountability programmes need to be flexible and adaptable over time. The focus of future accountability interventions should be on developing a clear understanding of the contextual dynamics in play. This means creating an environment in which project design is an iterative process and where no single organisation is solely responsible for project implementation. Thus, donors¹⁰ looking to fund social accountability interventions using the interlocutor model will need to take into consideration a number of factors.

3.1. Results orientation

Mwananchi showed that, in practice, managing for results in social accountability interventions operating in complex environments means identifying the *right* country-level coordinating organisations and project level interlocutors. They should then be supported to work in facilitative ways, to find room to manoeuvre, and to evolve into social accountability institutions and practices that best suit the contexts in which they are working. This ability should be considered a project success, in the same way that more conventional logframe indicators, such as policy



Women queue for family planning services, Malawi. Photo: © Lindsay Mgbor/DFID.

¹⁰ This term refers to ‘donors’ as a concept that is widely used in international development, as well as to the international organisations they select to manage international funding portfolios.

change, are considered successes. Whilst many, if not most, development practitioners would agree with this statement in principle, in practice, it runs counter to the way that most projects and programmes are expected to be planned and implemented. For donors this would imply more rigour in thinking through their own broader theories of change (which might, for example, mean examining their own assumptions about the role of interlocutors); understanding the local context sufficiently to make intelligent choices about who to engage with in initial processes; and less demand for pre-set specific objectives and targets.

Crucially, it also means understanding that progress is long-term, and a narrow focus on short-term results may not be helpful - and if it leads to focusing on the wrong things or indicators to achieve those results, it could even be counter-productive.

In Mwananchi it proved useful to emphasise process rather than downstream results, constantly questioning what worked, why the grantee was carrying out a particular intervention, and whether modifications were required. This runs counter to many donor expectations that proposals for new projects or programmes will explicitly state the benefits¹¹. For social accountability interventions, the danger of asking such questions at the proposal stage is that it leads to promising too much, capturing the easy wins, the so called 'low hanging fruit', and unrealistic expectations of complex work where the intervention is only ever going to be one factor among many. It can also set up a bias against locally defined and developed proposals and towards professional proposal writers who are not necessarily well-linked to the work on the ground. Accountability should be primarily to a local audience - as ultimately this leads to more appropriate and effective outcomes, which in turn is a better use of the taxpayers' resources.

A common assumption is that the extent to which programmes or projects will deliver results can be assessed through judging the strength of the results chain or theory of change set out within a logframe. In Mwananchi, questioning the rigour of a grantee's underlying theory of change and supporting them to strengthen it proved to be positive. However, this was done as part of the implementation process and was not something to get right

from the outset. Requiring that everything is clearly defined from the start biases against action research and emergent processes, which proved to be successful in Mwananchi. Assessment of proposals should focus more on the processes, the commitment of the potential grantee to the particular intervention, the connectedness of grantees to their constituents, and the openness of potential grantees to learn and adapt. *These* should be the priority elements in assessment guidelines and scoring matrices used by voice and accountability programmes.

3.2. Time scales

There was some pressure from the donor to get the Mwananchi Programme up and running and showing results at an early stage. There was also some tension over the cost in time and money of the inception phase. The evaluation found that a less rigid baseline methodology could have saved some time and expense¹². However, it takes time and money to undertake thorough consultations, to build relationships and structures, and to fine-tune programmes to a country context. Pushing for results too early can undermine longer-term impact, relationships, trust-building and impact. Graph 1 shows the initial investment in Mwananchi¹³.

3.3. Flexible funding

Whilst we stress the importance of taking time at the start of a programme to understand the context and build relationships, there is no doubt that this start-up phase did limit the actual time spent by grantees on the interventions. In most cases the grantees were beginning to achieve higher level results as the five years of funding came to an end.

Development partners could significantly increase the value for money of social accountability investments if they were able to build in more flexibility and allow for programme extensions where there is a likelihood of significantly deepening the initiative's impact¹⁴. Where this is not possible, development partners should actively look for alternative opportunities and make recommendations for the extension and/or scaling up of successful social accountability programmes when funding is coming to an end.

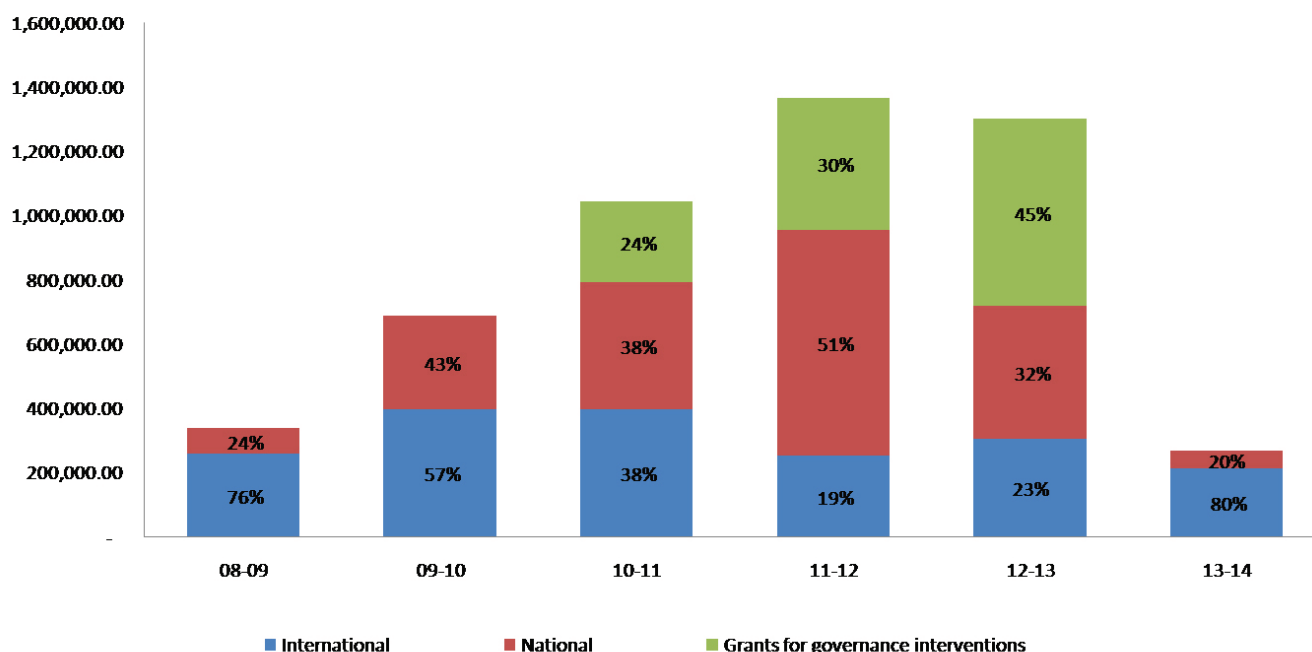
11 One presentation from a DFID staff member on 'Value for Money' stated that project proposals need to explain in what ways 'funding will offer the maximum benefit for the resources requested'.

12 The mid-term review raised questions about elements of the approach, particularly the tools used to develop the baseline using the World Governance Assessment (WGA) methodology, which a number of informants considered too 'academic' and lengthy'.

13 It is important to note that financial year 2008-2009 in the graph refers to the period between August (when the contract was signed) and March 2009, and not a full year. In addition, some of the factors for the delay during the 2008-2009 period were internal to ODI because ODI had never managed an 'implementation-focused' project like this one, and had to set up appropriate financial systems to manage the funds. A typical INGO might have had the programme up and running more quickly using their existing systems both at the international and country levels.

14 There is an opportunity here too for progressive governments to absorb these projects into their programmes, as models of practice for mainstreaming 'citizen-oriented' projects, such as the design and implementation of Constituency Development Funds.

Figure 1: Mwananchi expenditure by year



Source: Mwananchi final evaluation report, Chapman et al., 2013

Box 8: Mwananchi value for money

The evaluation considered that Mwananchi delivered good value for money. However this could have been increased by adjusting the ratio of set up costs and time to programme costs and length. In other words, the project came to an end too early to capitalise on the initial set up investment of just over £1 million, 20% of the total project budget. This is not to say that the initial programme design should have included a longer project, but that once it became evident that Mwananchi grantees were beginning to deliver higher level results, greater funding flexibility that then allowed Mwananchi to continue for a few years longer would have likely delivered significantly greater value for money. Whilst much of the work that started under Mwananchi will continue with funds from elsewhere, this stop-start funding is not efficient and risks community disengagement.

staff time to develop, and in practice it was not useful, or used, for managing the nuances of the programme. Neither was it useful for the evaluation. In Mwananchi, the push for aggregated data and results scoring was particularly unhelpful. Another danger of using the logframe for monitoring is that it focuses on a certain type of results (the more quantifiable) and does not monitor the building blocks needed to ensure that results will be achieved in the long term, such as building effective working relationships and trust. Mwananchi experimented with merging logframes and Outcome Mapping. This accommodated the more behavioural and process types of results as well as the ability to aggregate results from outcome descriptions at various levels to the kind of indicators picked up in logframes.

Mwananchi also highlighted the importance of flexibility over outcome timescales. Flexibility can be combined successfully with an expectation of rigour in analysis, but to do this effectively has implications for staff time from both the grantee and the intermediary, which must be budgeted for.

3.4. Project management: monitoring

Mwananchi highlighted a number of limitations of the logframe in terms of assessing and monitoring social accountability programmes. These issues are not new, yet despite many years of critique, the logframe remains the preferred tool for many donors to plan and monitor the programmes they support. The evaluators were of the opinion that the logframe in Mwananchi took a lot of

3.5. Cost structures

In the five-year Mwananchi Programme, just over a third of the total cost over the five years was incurred at the international level. This was considerably more than the donor's original guidance for maximum cost ratios. This may be explained, in part, by the amount of money spent at the national and international levels relating to learning. Whilst Mwananchi had an unusually strong emphasis on

learning, partly because it was run by an international research organisation, its success has shown the importance of emphasis on learning at all levels. This can mean more money being spent at national and international levels. Some of the international costs were due to this specific focus on research, but much of the international costs were due to the work to develop a community of practice (8% of total spent), followed by networking (5%), both of which supported learning at all levels.

The Mwananchi financial data suggests that it is not possible to judge the effectiveness of a programme by a simple ratio assessment of where money is spent, as both the nature of the programme and the organisations involved influence where money is required. Furthermore, multi-country social accountability programmes require skilled personnel and input, and are bound to incur significant international costs if the benefits of being multi-country are to be realised. As costs at the international level tend to be relatively high due to high fixed cost structures, it is important to closely track what is being spent at different levels. This analysis provides the basis for questioning whether these expenses are justified, and to decide if releasing more for work at other levels would improve the effectiveness or not.

The implications of this for donors are that budgetary restrictions and cost structures should be considered and assessed on a case by case basis. It is also suggested that these cost ratios should be explicitly examined during periodic reviews to ensure that restrictions are not compromising the quality of the work and that money is not being spent at the international level that would be more effectively spent at national or local level.

Another reason for taking care with prefixing budgetary ratios is that trialling innovations in social accountability in a range of contexts should be expected to evolve and change over time as lessons emerge.

Box 9: How budget restrictions can undermine adaptive management and evaluability

In Mwananchi, budget management and administrative restrictions made it more difficult to adjust plans and to track or analyse how money was actually spent. The evaluation found that efficiency, management and financial systems would have been improved if grantees had the option to carry over funds from one year to the next, or if funds could be moved between budget lines. This would have allowed also for greater transparency and lesson learning around how money was actually invested, and value for money.

Mwananchi was expected to set out its budget against the original logframe. This was found not to be optimal as the logframe and outputs evolved and changed over time, whereas the budget lines remained fairly constant. The evaluators concluded that the programme evaluability would have improved if the initial budgets had been more descriptive in terms of the kinds of activities to be funded, rather than the rigid budgets built around the original logframe. Using this approach, the evaluation could better track how money was expended, even if the logframe or outputs evolved over the course of the programme.

4. Conclusion

This paper advocates for an approach to social accountability programming that supports interlocutors to bring together different actors, rather than a single organisation delivering all aspects. Donors and managing agencies need to design funding windows and project management processes that provide incentives for multi-actor approaches to project delivery, allowing CSOs to become strategic interlocutors.

If we are to see international development practice shift towards using intermediaries to support social accountability projects, an enabling environment that identifies and supports ‘game-changing’ interlocutors is required. This will ultimately increase outreach,

disbursement, mutual accountability, managing for results, and donor harmonisation or alignment. A persisting emphasis on achieving excellence in contract performance and fund management risks undermining the development of an enabling environment for change. Local organisations will try to mirror the ‘contractual behaviour’ and ‘management culture’ of intermediaries, with the wrong incentives potentially coming into play.

The future of social accountability development lies in finding the balance between improving management of aid through contracts, and providing the necessary flexibility and innovation at the grassroots level, where catalytic actions are the ones that bring real change.



Women's empowerment network, Kono, Sierra Leone, 2012. Photo: © Mwananchi-Africa.

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