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Shifting Power? Assessing the Impact of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives

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Rosie McGee and John Gaventa

Summary

Accountability and transparency initiatives have taken democratisation, governance, aid and development circles by storm since the turn of the century. Many actors involved with them – as donors, funders, programme managers, implementers and researchers – are now keen to know more about what these initiatives are achieving.

This paper arises from a review of the impact and effectiveness of transparency and accountability initiatives which gathered and analysed existing evidence, discussed how it could be improved, and evaluated how impact and effectiveness could be enhanced. This paper takes the discussion further, by delving into what lies behind the methodological and evaluative debates currently surrounding governance and accountability work. It illustrates how choices about methods are made in the context of impact assessment designs driven by different objectives and different ideological and epistemological underpinnings. We argue that these differences are articulated as methodological debates, obscuring vital issues underlying accountability work, which are about power and politics, not methodological technicalities.

In line with this argument, there is a need to re-think what impact means in relation to accountability initiatives, and to governance and social change efforts more broadly. This represents a serious challenge to the prevailing impact paradigm, posed by the realities of unaccountable governance, unproven accountability programming and uncertain evidence of impact. A learning approach to evaluation and final impact assessment would give power and politics a central place in monitoring and evaluation systems, continually test and revise assumptions about theories of change and ensure the engagement of marginalised people in assessment processes. Such an approach is essential if donors and policy makers are to develop a reliable evidence base to demonstrate that transparency and accountability work is of real value to poor and vulnerable people.

Keywords: Accountability, transparency, impact assessment, evaluation

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CSO	Civil society organisation
CV&A	Citizen Voice and Accountability
DFID	UK Department for International Development
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
FoI	Freedom of Information
GTF	Global Transparency Fund
IETA	Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NPM	New Public Management
PFM	Public Finance Management
T&A	Transparency and Accountability
TAI	Transparency and Accountability Initiatives

Introduction

Accountability and transparency initiatives have taken democratisation, governance, aid and development circles by storm since the turn of the century. Many actors involved with them – as donors, funders, programme managers, implementers and researchers – are now keen to know more about what these initiatives are achieving. Different pressures and interests lie behind different actors' curiosity, but the consensus is clear: it is high time that we understood better the impacts and effectiveness of transparency and accountability initiatives (hereafter TAIs).

This paper arises from a review of the impact and effectiveness of TAIs, conceived and conducted in response to this challenge.[1] Based on an extensive gathering and detailed analysis of available literature and documentation, the review drew conclusions and formulated recommendations as to how the state of the evidence can be improved and how impact and effectiveness can be enhanced. The present paper takes the discussion further, by delving into what lies behind the methodological and evaluative debates currently surrounding governance and accountability work. These debates rehearse earlier methodological wars between advocates of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research and evaluation. We argue that these methodological wars, as well as often generating more heat than light, are overshadowing issues of power and politics that are fundamental to accountability work.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 locates contemporary social or citizen-led TAIs in a historical and institutional context. Section 2 sets out the scope and limitations of this paper, key concepts and definitions, and the range and nature of aims, claims and assumptions that characterise these initiatives. In Section 3 we present in summary form the available evidence on the effectiveness and impact of TAIs and identify overarching principles relating to the importance of context and to the actors, factors, interfaces and relationships involved in accountability and transparency processes. Section 4 very briefly sketches out the approaches and methods currently employed to assess impact in this field and the key methodological challenges arising. This leads us to the argument, set out in Section 5, that existing understandings of impact are inadequate in this field and need revising to bring the politics back into accountability. Section 6 reflects on the impact assessment needs generated by this more politically-informed understanding of accountability impact and identifies some important new avenues for resolving them. Section 7 concludes.

1 Transparency and accountability initiatives: a genealogy

Transparency and accountability (hereafter T&A) have emerged over the past decade as key ways to address both developmental failures and democratic deficits. In the development and aid context, the argument is that through greater accountability, the leaky pipes of

[1] The Review on the Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives was commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). It aimed to inform the governance programmes of DFID and other members of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, a donor collaborative that includes the Ford Foundation, HIVOS, the International Budget Partnership, the Omidyar Network, the Open Society Foundations, the Revenue Watch Institute and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The review's outputs consist of a synthesis report and five sector-specific background papers on transparency and accountability initiatives in service delivery, public budgets, freedom of information, natural resource governance and international aid. All outputs are available at www.transparency-initiative.org/workstream/impact-learning.

corruption and inefficiency will be repaired, aid and public spending will be channelled more effectively, and development initiatives will produce greater and more visible results. For scholars and practitioners of democracy, following the twentieth century wave of democratisation it is time for democracy to 'deliver the goods', especially in terms of material outcomes, and democratic accountability can help it do so. For many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements, demanding and securing accountability is a path to people's empowerment, or at least to enhanced effectiveness in responding to the needs and voices of those they claim to serve.

Development, democracy and empowerment are obstructed, the argument goes, by a series of accountability failures. The traditional ways of delivering political and bureaucratic accountability, such as intra-government controls or elections, are increasingly found to be limited in scope. Administrative bottlenecks, weak incentives or corruption in state-centred political and bureaucratic accountability mechanisms restrict their effectiveness, particularly from the perspective of poor and marginalised people, who need them most but who lack the means to work round such obstacles (World Bank 2004).

In response to the inadequacy of traditional political and bureaucratic forms of accountability – also referred to as state-side, supply-side or institutional – an array of mechanisms and approaches has emerged in which citizens can hold states to account in ways other than elections and bureaucratic procedures (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006; Joshi 2008). Supplanting or supplementing traditional forms, these 'demand-side' initiatives are led by citizens and social actors. They engage with more powerful actors located either within the state or in private sector entities contracted by the state, across a range of interfaces which are social rather than political, institutional or bureaucratic. These interfaces go beyond the formal democratic institutions of elections, recall of representatives or internal government audits, although they sometimes serve to trigger these political and institutional mechanisms (Claasen and Alpín-Lardiés 2010; Houtzager *et al.* 2008; McNeil and Malena 2010).

Variously termed 'social', 'citizen-led' or 'demand-side' accountability, this emerging field combines initiatives designed to improve transparency and access to information with other ways of holding to account the state and its agents (for example often private-sector service providers). We refer to them collectively as TAIs. They have fast moved into the mainstream of development and aid, to the point where 'accountability' and 'transparency' are at risk of becoming buzzwords (Cornwall 2007), full of euphemism and normative resonance but emptied of their original meaning.

The field has evolved as multiple subfields which overlap in aspects of principles, origins and TAI methods or approaches. TAIs in the service delivery sector often purport to increase accountability by increasing transparency and access to information, and/or by citizen or user oversight of the formulation and execution of budgets as they relate to public services. Elements of social accountability in service delivery therefore overlapped from the start with developments in the freedom of information (FoI) sector,[2] which themselves originated in accelerating interest in promoting participatory forms of democracy from the 1980s onwards. By the late 1990s a drive to improve public finance management the world over was leading to the rapid development and spread of budget accountability and transparency as a sector in its own right, overlapping with service-delivery accountability work in its objectives and approaches. Public finance management (PFM) concerns apply to the management of international aid as much as public funds generated through tax revenue, so a strand of PFM-oriented aid accountability and transparency also evolved, sharing many of the same principles, approaches and methods as TAIs in the service delivery, FoI and budget sectors.

[2] We note that Freedom of Information is no longer the favoured terminology of many actors working in this sphere, who now tend to refer to it as (the right of) Access to Information. Nonetheless we use Freedom of Information in keeping with the language of the Review on which this working paper draws.

This aid accountability and transparency strand has converged – in name, if not always in emphasis – with the NGO and humanitarian accountability discourses and practices arising throughout the 1990s and 2000s in official and NGO aid agencies in response to concerns about the fundamental inequality of aid relations. In yet another concurrent development, interest in T&A has extended to the natural resources sector, where methods have been borrowed and adapted from the budget field and other purpose-built approaches developed. The past five years have seen the rise of what might be termed 'ICT4Acc': a wave of TAIs across this full range of sectors that deploy information and communication technologies such as the Internet, mobile telephony, Global Positioning Systems and social media. The very latest development has been mounting concern in the climate change sector about huge volumes of international climate funding pouring into mitigation and adaptation funds without a sufficient purpose-built architecture in place to govern their use. This is leading climate change actors to borrow models and ideas from the international aid sector, the governance of which is known to be far from perfectly accountable and transparent (Eyben 2006; Hayes and Pereira 2008). Consequently, attempts are underway to develop suitable climate change TAIs (E3G Research Team 2010).[3]

A decade on from their inception, there is much to suggest that TAIs are increasingly being used within an aid efficiency or development efficiency paradigm, in an attempt 'to stop the leaky pipes', with scant attention to underlying issues of power and politics. Many TAIs focus on the delivery of development outcomes narrowly conceived, neglecting or articulating only superficially the potential for deepening democracy or empowering citizens, over-emphasising the tools to the detriment of analysis of context, forms of mobilisation and action, and the dynamics behind their impact. Many of them focus on achieving 'downstream' accountability – the efficient delivery of policies and priorities – bypassing the question of how incorporating citizen voice and participation at earlier stages of these processes could have shaped the policies, priorities and budgets 'upstream'. Perhaps most urgently, there is a general vagueness surrounding TAIs' impact and effectiveness which, unless addressed, threatens to undermine support for them in an increasingly stringent financial and political environment.

The fact that these TAIs are 'social' and 'citizen-led' rather than political or bureaucratic in nature should not eclipse the deeply political nature of the stakes and potential impacts of 'social accountability'. Joshi traces the origins of social accountability to two 'ideological streams'. One is New Public Management (NPM) which, in keeping with its intellectual heritage of rational choice theory and methodological individualism, gave rise to a notion and practice of downwards accountability to 'service users as individual consumers who could choose to use these mechanisms or, alternatively, exit in favour of other providers' (2011: 4). Insofar as the NPM-inspired approaches 'take on' empowerment at all, they do so in a limited and technical way, restricted to empowering the consumer through better information, ignoring any constraints posed by aspects of the socio-political reality of the 'consumers'.

The other stream is the 'deepening democracy' school of thought which advocates the direct participation of citizens in governance and, broadly speaking, includes the promotion of social movements and their claims to services as rights (Avritzer 2002; Fox 2007a; Fung and Wright 2004; Gaventa 2006). The rights-based and direct democracy approaches emphasise, in contrast to the NPM-inspired approach, collective demands for accountability and its 'public good' qualities, as well as the importance of coherence between the aim of promoting rights and democratic values, and the methods and approaches used for doing so (see for example Ackerman 2004).

[3] Given the purview of the review on which this paper is based, our charting of these developments reflects principally what was going on in the global South, stimulated, mirrored and supported by Northern donor countries' aid programmes, but many of the approaches mentioned were also introduced and continue to operate in the global North.

The World Development Report 2004 (World Bank 2004), by identifying service delivery failures as accountability failures, placed social accountability centre-stage. It advocated direct interaction between service users and providers to address these failures: a 'short route to accountability' that looked more promising than the 'long route' of elected representatives and public officials seeking accountability from providers on behalf of users. This gave impetus to the approach to social accountability that originates in NPM ideology, which treats the public as users or consumers and addresses accountability problems with technical and managerial solutions.

Further impetus has been given to NPM-style, efficiency-focused TAIs by the global financial crisis with its consequences of public spending cuts and increased stringency in aid budgets, as well as by the persistence of corruption in the management of aid and public spending. NPM-inspired approaches therefore continue to proliferate. But concerns over a perceived de-politicisation of social accountability are growing, not least thanks to the growing awareness in some quarters that increasing state accountability is about shifting the power balance between the state and citizens. As Newell and Wheeler point out, it is a myth that accountability is apolitical and technocratic: 'Particularly when there are resources at stake, accountability reforms challenge powerful interests that benefit from lack of transparency, low levels of institutional responsiveness, and poor protection of citizens' rights' (2006: 3). A new understanding of the politics of accountability underpinning these social accountability and transparency initiatives is beginning to emerge (Fox 2007b), markedly different from the 'widgets' approach which tends to '[depoliticise] the very political processes through which poor people access services' (Joshi and Houtzager forthcoming: 2).

This is happening at the same time that the 'turn to evidence' is exerting pressure on aid donors and programme implementers to demonstrate results in all they do and base their programming, funding and intellectual stances on 'hard' evidence. With governance, accountability and transparency work now constituting a substantial portion of the programmes of many such actors, the search is on for credible, reliable ways to assess TAIs' effectiveness and impact. Some headway has been made in two directions over the past few years. On the one hand, specific implementing agencies have started developing ways of assessing the impact of their own governance programmes by innovating with indicators, methodological approaches or theories of change. On the other hand, scholars have begun grappling with the general questions of what we do and do not know about the impact of TAIs and how we can improve our knowledge.

2 The scope of this paper

This working paper is based on one such scholarly effort, a review of the impact and effectiveness of TAIs commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in 2010. This review looked at both effectiveness and impact. Effectiveness was defined as the extent to which initiatives are successful at achieving their stated goals, for example whether a FoI initiative was well-implemented and made information more readily available. Impact was defined as the attainment of the initiative's further-reaching or 'second-order' goal, for example whether the institution of a complaint mechanism about a public service leads to improved service delivery or a citizen monitoring initiative to greater state responsiveness, and thereby to improved development outcomes. In this paper we focus principally on the bigger challenge of assessing the impact of TAIs, treating effectiveness as somewhat easier to demonstrate and as a necessary but insufficient condition for impact. Assessing impact poses a number of challenges in all quarters of the development and social change field, and particular challenges in this one where expected outcomes and

impacts are rarely visible, tangible or countable. Some of these challenges are the subject of this paper.

The research was carried out between May and August 2010, led by a team at IDS with participation of researchers in the US, South Africa, Brazil and India. For each of the five sectors covered in depth (service delivery, budget processes, FoI, natural resource governance and aid), specialist researchers scanned published and unpublished literature on T&A programmes and initiatives in the sector, and in some cases interviewed key informants. Sector reviews were supplemented by a more general review of the literature on the impact and effectiveness of TAIs, as well as two regional background notes to give further insights from literature and experience in south Asia and Latin America[4]. Researchers had access to project documentation of the DFID-supported Governance and Transparency Fund (GTF) and obtained a limited amount of programme and project documentation from other sources.

2.1 Sizing up the evidence base

An initial scan of the T&A literature to date revealed a large mass of very diverse literature, but almost no 'meta-literature' on issues of impact and effectiveness of TAIs. The literature which did address impact and effectiveness – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, and to varying extents – was widely scattered. This being the state of the evidence available, we framed our study to start by describing and systematising the available evidence (amounts and kinds of evidence documented, methods and indicators used), moving on to drawing conclusions on analytical questions (explanatory factors, strategies, structural and organisational features and conditions) and concluding by identifying on the one hand ways to improve on current practice and on the other, further research needed.

Box 1 Questions guiding the research

- What do we know about the impact and effectiveness of TAIs?
- How do we know it? What are the approaches used and methodological challenges encountered?
- What factors make a difference? What institutional and political factors shape the impact of citizen-led initiatives for improving T&A?
- What knowledge gaps are there for future research?

The review was conducted under constraints of time and resources. We cannot claim we were exhaustive in our identification of sources, nor can we claim to capture in this paper all the considerable advances made in thinking and writing on this subject since the review was completed in late 2010. We will have missed some studies; some of those we reviewed would stand up to deeper analysis; and our coverage of the issues reflects the unevenness of the material as well as time constraints. Most initiatives we looked at are located in the global South, with a few exceptions. Our work did not attempt to evaluate any TAIs; rather, it sought to draw broad lessons about effectiveness and impact. Nor did we attempt to review intra-governmental or internal organisational accountability approaches, and only mention these insofar as they interlink with, or are complemented by, citizen-led initiatives.

[4] These were prepared by Peter Spink on Latin America, and by PRIA in Asia. Two regional reviews of experience with and lessons from social accountability in Africa have recently been published: Claasen and Alpín-Lardiés (2010) and McNeil and Malena (2010).

2.2 Concepts and definitions

If we lack a meta-literature on the impact of TAIs, we have a considerable meta-literature to draw on about the meaning, nature and practice of T&A. While not attempting to review this in its entirety here, we now sum up key debates and conceptual lenses that have been applied to the field, insofar as these are relevant to our purpose. In so doing, we establish the parameters, definitions and conceptual underpinnings of this paper.

Transparency is generally regarded as a key feature of good governance, and an essential prerequisite for accountability between states and citizens. At its most basic, transparent governance signifies 'an openness of the governance system through clear processes and procedures and easy access to public information for citizens [stimulating] ethical awareness in public service through information sharing, which ultimately ensures accountability for the performance of the individuals and organisations handling resources or holding public office' (Kim *et al.* 2005: 649). According to Transparency International, transparency is a 'characteristic of governments, companies, organisations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information rules, plans, processes and actions' (Transparency International 2009: 44).

Defining accountability is more complex. Tisné states:

> Broadly speaking, accountability refers to the process of holding actors responsible for their actions. More specifically, it is the concept that individuals, agencies and organisations (public, private and civil society) are held responsible for executing their powers according to a certain standard (whether set mutually or not).
> (Tisné 2010: 2)

By general consensus, accountability ideally involves both answerability – the responsibility of duty-bearers to provide information and justification about their actions – and enforceability – the possibility of penalties or consequences for failing to answer accountability claims (Goetz and Jenkins 2005). In fact, much of what we call accountability reflects only the weaker category, answerability. While citizen-led or public initiatives often involve 'soft' peer or reputational pressure, they rarely involve strong enforceability.

Other commonly held distinctions are between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' forms of accountability, the vertical referring to that between citizens and the state, and the horizontal to internal checks and balances between various branches or organs of the state (O'Donnell 1998). Midway through the most recent wave of democratic transitions, in the late 1990s, recognition of the limited accountability generated by (vertical) electoral participation focused attention on new measures of horizontal accountability, involving oversight of state agencies by independent public agents or ombudsmen (Malena *et al.* 2004). Concurrently, 'participatory development' was making headway – at least at a theoretical level – in international development discourse (Ackerman 2004), and interest was growing in citizen-led forms of accountability through which citizens exercise voice beyond the channels associated with elections. Goetz and Jenkins (2001) expand on horizontal and vertical notions of accountability, identifying new 'hybrid' forms they call 'diagonal' accountability relationships.

Goetz and Jenkins (2005) also stress the important distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* accountability. Focusing on effectiveness and impact points us towards this distinction between what occurs in practice and what is set out in law or intent, and invites us to explore the relationship between them. Relatedly, while some take the 'accountancy' approach of treating accountability as a set of *rules and procedures* which can be monitored and audited (Newell and Wheeler 2006), others see it as a set of *relationships,* which necessarily involve

power and contestation (Eyben 2006, 2010; Groves and Hinton 2004). Fox, for instance, discusses 'the arena of conflict over whether and how those in power are held publicly responsible for their actions' (2007b: 1–2). This arena, which he terms 'accountability politics', cannot be reduced to a set of institutional mechanisms or a checklist of procedures. It is mediated by formal institutions but not determined by them; an arena of contestation, not a tool for efficiency and effectiveness.

Accountability and transparency can occur after the fact – *ex post* – or can be conceived as *ex ante*, when rules, procedures and plans are made transparent and accessible in advance of their execution. Positions diverge on whether accountability is solely about monitoring how already-made decisions are implemented, or whether it also needs to feature in how decisions are made, with a view to giving citizens scope for involvement before decision-point. A sub-literature points to intersections and linkages between *ex post* and *ex ante*, and to participation 'downstream' and 'upstream' in the accountability process. Houtzager *et al.* (2008), for instance, argue that citizens are more likely to be involved in monitoring the implementation of government programmes if they have also been involved in shaping them in the first place.

Current usages of 'citizen-led' and the closely-related term 'social accountability' are subject to some terminological looseness. We use both terms, drawing our definitions from three sources. Malena *et al.*'s (2004) definition of social accountability deliberately avoids too narrow a focus that might eclipse the vital roles that state actors and institutions can play in making citizen-led initiatives work:

> Social accountability can be defined as *an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability.* Mechanisms of social accountability can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both, but very often they are *demand-driven* and operate from the bottom-up.
> (Malena *et al.* 2004: 3, our italics)

Houtzager and Joshi emphasise the collective nature of social accountability as a defining feature, when they define it as 'an ongoing and collective effort to hold public officials and service providers to account for the provision of public goods which are existing state obligations, such as primary healthcare, education, sanitation and security' (2008: 3). Still more recently, Claasen and Alpín-Lardiés fuse other analysts' various emphases on the social and the citizen, stating that social accountability 'is about how citizens demand and enforce accountability from those in power' (2010: 3).

2.3 Aims, claims and assumptions

Only recently are studies emerging that assess effectiveness or impact. Much of the literature on T&A is descriptive, particularly the practitioner literature. The academic literature from the political science and governance fields tends to be more conceptual, although some studies analyse the dynamics of implementation. Many of these focus on the *effectiveness* of a single case: that is, whether a particular initiative was adequately implemented. There are few comparative studies that look across various cases to discuss the degree of effective implementation and explain it.

Yet the assumptions and claims made for the T&A agenda point beyond the proximate question of whether they are effectively implemented, or even the intermediate question of the approaches' relationships to one another. The aims and claims of TAIs extend further, to impacts involving enhanced wellbeing, democratic governance, citizen empowerment and

aid efficiency. It is useful at this point to distinguish between the different aims, claims and assumptions embodied in TAIs: in order to discuss the impact of TAIs - what they *have achieved* – we need to be clear about their aims – what they *sought to achieve*.

At the simplest level, some attempt to improve standards of accountability and transparency as ends in themselves, and others do so as a means towards second-order objectives. At a more sophisticated level, there are three arguments commonly put forward for social accountability as a means to certain ends, neatly summarised in one of the few reviews of literature on the subject (Malena *et al.* 2004):

- *Social accountability improves the quality of governance:* As citizens' disillusionment with the quality of democratic governance in North and South increases, they move 'beyond mere protest' and formal electoral participation 'toward engaging with bureaucrats and politicians in a more informed, organised, constructive and systematic manner', thereby increasing 'the chances of effecting positive change' (Malena *et al.* 2004: 5). This is often referred to often as the 'democratic outcomes' case for social accountability.
- *Social accountability contributes to increased development effectiveness*: Given the difficulty, inability or unwillingness of governments to deliver essential services to their citizens – especially the poorest – enhanced accountability initiatives that allow greater articulation of citizens' demands and increased transparency of public decision-making increase the effectiveness of service delivery and produce more informed policy design (World Bank 2004; Malena *et al.* 2004: 5). This is often referred to as the 'developmental outcomes' case.
- *Social accountability initiatives can lead to empowerment:* 'By providing critical information on rights and entitlements and soliciting systematic feedback from poor people, social accountability mechanisms provide a means to increase and aggregate the *voice* of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups' (Malena *et al.* 2004: 5, emphasis in original). This is sometimes referred to as the 'empowerment case'. Some analysts see it as one variant of the 'democratic outcomes' case, in that the empowerment of disadvantaged groups to exercise their voice effectively, so that power relations are re-constituted to their advantage, is a defining characteristic of 'deep' – as opposed to formal electoral – democracies. Fox's definition of accountability politics cited above speaks directly to the empowerment case for accountability.

Other claims focus specifically on transparency:

- *Access to information (via transparency initiatives) is a right*: As such it is an end in itself, and also a 'leverage right' capable of delivering further ends. However, the state machinery leading from the exercise of this right to the effective redress of public grievances – those actions beyond the procedural provision of information and citizens' use of it – is under-researched as yet (Jayal 2008).
- *Increased transparency in state decision-making can facilitate greater accountability to citizens:* While transparency is instrumental to achieving higher standards of accountability, two misconceptions about their relationship are common. The right to information is often mistaken for accountability itself, rather than understood as an instrument for the broader goal of securing accountable governance (Jayal 2008). Also, transparency is assumed to produce accountability. Yet how information accessibility affects accountability and improves the quality of governance is still poorly understood (Bellver and Kaufmann 2005). Recent innovations in citizens' legal rights to information and participatory budgeting and community development processes have tested the extent to which 'transparency on decisions […] go[es] hand in hand with transparency on consequences' (Prat 2005: 869). More judiciously stated, transparency is a necessary but insufficient condition for accountability, and does not automatically generate it: as

> Fox points out, transparency initiatives which 'mobilise the power of shame' have no purchase on the shameless. Fox suggests that key questions to ask are '*under what conditions* can transparency lead to accountability? [...] What *types* of transparency manage to generate what *types* of accountability?' (2007a: 664–5, emphasis in original). In any case, besides this instrumental value of potentially generating accountability, transparency often has an inherent value.

Finally, some of the claims made for TAIs focus on the relationships between transparency, accountability and participation. A few sources shed light from an empirical perspective on how one contributes to the other, but these are scant: most analytical and practical work addressing these approaches remains in silos. As Fox reminds us, 'transparency, accountability and participation reforms need each other, they can be mutually enforcing – but such synergy remains exceedingly rare' (2007a: 354) – even in practice, let alone in studies of practice. Houtzager and Joshi (2008: 4–5) argue that TAIs that build on participatory approaches of citizen engagement, for example in designing a policy, are more likely to generate state responsiveness to citizens' demands because in such circumstances citizens have a higher incentives and capacity for engagement and have interfaces with the relevant institutions via their prior participation. While other work suggests that these connections might be correlations rather than solid causal links (Mansuri and Rao 2004), a recent study of the outcomes of citizen engagement shows that participation does have an impact – usually but not always a positive one – on the measurable democratic and developmental outcomes arising from citizen engagement (Gaventa and Barrett 2010).

A few recent studies have begun to critically interrogate the aims, claims and assumptions underlying 'citizens' voice and accountability' (CV&A) initiatives. Rocha Menocal and Sharma (2008) in their evaluation of a large sample of CV&A initiatives supported by European bilateral aid agencies, find that donor assumptions of what citizen voice and accountability can achieve in terms of broad developmental outcomes are often too high:

> The need to link intervention logic directly with *contribution to MDGs* for CV&A work can be tortuous and artificial [...]. Donors are encouraging the practice of results-based management of projects but still place too much emphasis on counting participation and wanting evidence of contribution to MDGs. There needs to be more effort made to establish a middle ground of identifying attitude and behaviour indicators which are a direct outcome of CV&A activities.
> (Rocha Menocal and Sharma 2008: 34, emphasis in original)

The task is however more complex than merely assessing how far initiatives fulfil the expectations and meet the claims explicitly made for them. From the explicit assumptions and expectations, we need to disentangle some implicit and embedded assumptions, and unsubstantiated or under-specified elements. These needs resonate with what others (e.g. White 2009) have described as a 'theory-based' approach to evaluation, advocated by its supporters for evaluating voice and accountability interventions because of its stress on 'explain[ing] the implicit assumptions, logic and mechanisms behind complex development interventions' and 'contribut[ing] to a better understanding of the causal/impact chains' (O'Neil *et al.* 20007: vii). Yet overall, the review on which this paper is based found that much of the current evidence base relies on untested normative, positivist assumptions and under-specified relationships between mechanisms and outcomes. It is also noteworthy that virtually none of the literature gathered explores possible risks or documents negative effects or arising from TAIs, although some begins to note these at an anecdotal or speculative level.

All the T&A sub-literatures covered in our review contain abundant examples of the assumption that transparency leads to accountability (Joshi 2011; Carlitz 2011; Calland

2011; McGee 2011; Mejía Acosta 2011), especially those that involve complex networks of stakeholders, accountability relationships and oversight mechanisms. As Joshi summarises with reference to service delivery:

> the assumed link leads from awareness (through transparency and information) to articulating voice (through formal and informal institutions) and ultimately accountability (changing the incentives of providers so that they respond in fear of sanctions). Yet, this chain of causation is seldom explicitly examined. In fact, many initiatives are focussed at increasing transparency and amplifying voice, without examining the link of these with accountability.
> (Joshi 2011: 6)

In addition, much of the literature reveals conceptual vagueness on whether accountability and/or transparency were 'means to an end' or 'ends' in themselves (Carlitz 2011; Mejía Acosta 2011; McGee 2011). Much of the empirical work is based on poorly articulated, normatively-inspired 'mixes', that draw unevenly from the concepts of transparency, accountability, good governance and empowerment.

In studies purporting to focus on citizen-led TAIs, the citizen side of the accountability dynamic is poorly described. Citizen participation tends to be under-theorised, unforthcoming on questions such as which citizens it refers to, whether they were active prior to the creation of the mechanism, where they get their information and how they act upon it, on which issues they mobilise, and whether they are well-behaved or antagonistic toward state institutions. Too few studies draw out these important components of the roles citizens play and the dynamics of their impact, thus affording only superficial understandings of the role of citizen and civil society participation in the logical chain leading to accountable outcomes (Joshi 2011; Carlitz 2011).

Rarely spelt out, either, is the 'hierarchy' or framework of objectives or outcomes related to a particular TAI (Calland 2010; Carlitz 2010; McGee 2011). Some TAIs pursue forms of transparency or accountability as goods in themselves which do not need to be justified in terms of their contribution to any higher purpose. Some pursue immediate short-term changes as steps towards longer-term impact, but the ultimate (or sometimes even the proximate) objective is not always spelt out in the initiatives themselves or assessments of them. In some sectors, such as aid transparency and natural resource governance, T&A work is too recent to have achieved or demonstrated any long-term impacts, but where short-term outputs or intermediate outcomes are detectable, they are not always framed as intermediate steps within a further-reaching logic.

To sum up, the literature available generally does reflect the three kinds of expected impact – developmental, democratic and empowerment-related – outlined above, and/or more specific impact claims. But it also reveals how many initiatives are not underpinned by a clear articulation of exactly what outcome or impact is sought, or of how the actions and inputs contemplated are expected to generate that outcome or impact. That is, the assumptions underlying the causal chain, from inputs to outcomes and impact, are absent, vague or only implicit. Some whole sectors of T&A work appear to lack coherent and cohesive theories of change, notably service delivery and aid accountability (Joshi 2011; McGee 2011), while in other sectors, particular TAIs appear to lack them. Thus, while the broad claims made for TAIs may be intuitively and logically appealing, few initiatives provide concrete evidence of advancing them.

3 Effectiveness and impact of TAIs

Existing evidence shows that under some conditions, some TAIs create opportunities for citizens and states to interact constructively, contributing to five kinds of outcome:

- better budget utilisation
- improved service delivery
- greater state responsiveness to citizens' needs
- the creation of spaces for citizen engagement
- the empowerment of local voices.

3.1 What we can say about TAIs' effectiveness and impact

In Table 3.1 we present findings by these five types of outcome. We opt to use these rather than 'developmental', 'democratic' and 'empowerment'. This is partly because the five are more specific. It is also because the categories of 'developmental', 'democratic' and 'empowerment' are not watertight: some of these five outcomes which on first glance clearly have material developmental outcomes act can have significant democratising implications too – take better budget utilisation, for example. Others which seem to be pre-eminently democratic outcomes can have significant developmental and also empowerment implications – for instance, greater state responsiveness.

Table 3.1 Outcomes of TAIs

Findings, by types of outcome	Settings and sources of evidence
Better delivery of services	
Citizen report cards can have considerable impact on local service delivery in some settings.	India (Ravindra 2004)
Community monitoring of services, when combined with other factors, can contribute to more responsive delivery of services, such as increased teacher attendance in schools.	Uganda, India (Björkman and Svensson 2009; Duflo *et al.* 2008)
Social audits can contribute to exposure of corruption and enhanced effectiveness in programme implementation.	India (Singh and Vutukuru 2010)
Participatory budgeting initiatives can – but do not necessarily - contribute to multiple outcomes, including improved public services.	Multiple, but largely Brazil or Latin America (Goldfrank 2006)
Budget monitoring initiatives can contribute to enhanced resources and efficiency in expenditure utilisation.	Multi-country case studies (Robinson 2006)
Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys, when combined with public information campaigns, can contribute to reduced leakages and thereby to improved delivery of services, though other studies point to additional causal factors. While the main source is a study in Uganda, other studies, such as in Tanzania, show less impact.	Uganda, Tanzania (Reinikka and Svensson 2005; Sundet 2008)
Community-based FoI strategies, which go beyond simple information and disclosure, can be instrumental in leveraging other rights, such as those related to housing and water.	South Africa (ODAC 2010)
The International Aid Transparency Initiative and related initiatives such as public data bases, 'infomediary' ventures and civil society campaigning can contribute to stronger aid tracking and thereby potentially to better aid delivery and improvements in aid-funded services. It is too early in the history of these relatively new initiatives to conclude whether they enhance aid effectiveness more broadly.	Multi-country (Martin 2010)

Better budget utilisation	
Public Expenditure Tracking surveys, when made public and linked to *public information campaigns*, can contribute to reducing leakages in delivery of service sector budgets locally.	Uganda (Reinikka and Svensson 2005)
Complaint mechanisms about service provision can contribute to reduction of corruption, by linking citizens directly to managers who can then hold managers to account.	India (Caseley 2003)
Social audits can contribute to exposure of corruption and greater effectiveness in programme implementation.	India (Singh and Vutukuru 2010)
Participatory budgeting initiatives can – but do not necessarily – contribute to multiple outcomes, including re-direction of resources to poor communities.	Multiple, but largely Brazil or Latin America (Goldfrank 2006)
Budget monitoring initiatives can contribute to improved budget transparency and awareness, as well as enhanced resources and efficiency in expenditure utilisation.	Multi-country case studies (Robinson 2006)
Budget advocacy initiatives can contribute to better management of earthquake reconstruction funds (Pakistan) and changes in budget priorities (South Africa).	Pakistan, South Africa (IBP 2010a, 2010b, 2010c)
Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys when combined with public information campaigns*,* can contribute to reduced leakages, though other studies also point to other factors. While the main source is a study in Uganda, other studies, such as in Tanzania, show less impact.	Uganda, Tanzania (Reinikka and Svensson 2005, Sundet 2008)
The Right to Information legislation in India has been found through 'Peoples' Assessments' to contribute to perceptions of satisfaction in a range of areas, including decline in corruption and curtailing wasteful public expenditure, exposing misuse of power and influence, and redressing grievances.	India (RAAG/NCPRI 2009)
Aid transparency initiatives are credited with contributing to a decrease in corruption in aid-recipient countries, though this is based on a number of assumptions and estimates not yet tested.	Multi-country (Christensen *et al.* 2010)
Greater state responsiveness	
Community scorecards monitoring service delivery can contribute to better user satisfaction.	India (Misra 2007)
Freedom of Information can contribute to improved government decision-making, public understanding, and increased trust between government and public.	UK (Hazell and Worthy 2009)
Freedom of Information requests can contribute to responsiveness of public officials, though not always, and highly dependent on status of person submitting request and civil society pressure.	14-country study (OSJI 2006)
The World Bank Inspection Panel, designed to make World Bank lending more transparent and accountable, led to a variety of impacts including policy reforms and withdrawals of Bank funding for certain projects. The Panel also contributed to some negative or more perverse effects, such as backlash against claimants and risk aversion in Bank lending. This case is about institutional responsiveness, with an inter-governmental institution as the accountability-bearer, rather than state responsiveness at national level.	Multi-country (Clark *et al.* 2003)
Building spaces for citizen engagement	
Information provision about education-related entitlements has been found by one study to have little impact by itself on the level of engagement with school systems by citizens claiming accountability. In another study, when tied to a community–based information campaign, positive impacts were found.	India (Bannerjee *et al.* 2010, Pandey *et al.* 2009)
Participatory budgeting initiatives can – but do not necessarily – contribute to multiple outcomes, including new civic associations and strengthened democratic processes.	Multiple, but largely Brazil or Latin America. (Goldfrank 2006)
Freedom of Information can contribute to improved public understanding, enhanced public participation, and increased trust.	UK (Hazell and Worthy 2009)
The Right to Information campaign in India led to new legislation and widely mobilised constituencies to use information for developmental purposes.	India (Jenkins 2007)
Community-based FOI strategies, which go beyond simple information and disclosure, can be instrumental in leveraging other rights, such as those related to housing and water.	South Africa (ODAC 2010)

The Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)'s self-evaluation credits it with building a platform for public engagement.	African EITI countries (Eads and Kråkenes 2010)
The World Bank Inspection Panel, designed to make World Bank lending more transparent and accountable, led to policy reforms favourable to more public involvement and changes in staff's perceptions of WB compliance and responsiveness, but also to some backlash against claimants, which could close down spaces for citizen engagement.	Multi-country (Clark *et al.* 2003)
Downward aid accountability mechanisms by NGOs can lead to an internalisation of principles of the NGO, sharing of power with partner organisations (the 'citizens' or accountability claimants in this case).	Multiple countries linked to ActionAid and Concern (David *et al.* 2006; Jacobs and Wilford 2010)
Empowerment of local voices	
Budget monitoring initiatives can contribute to improved budget transparency and awareness.	Multi-country case studies (Robinson 2006)
The Right to Information campaign in India led to new legislation and widely mobilised constituencies to use information for developmental purposes.	India (Jenkins 2007)
The Right to information legislation in India has been found through 'Peoples' Assessments' to contribute to perceptions of satisfaction in a range of areas, including decline in corruption and curtailing wasteful public expenditure, exposing misuse of power and influence, and redressing grievances.	India (RAAG/NCPRI2009)
The EITI can contribute to the public's capacity to analyse fiscal policy in countries which previously lacked transparency.	Multi-country (Rainbow Insight 2009)
Downward aid accountability mechanisms by NGOs can lead to the sharing of power with partner organisations.	Multiple countries linked to ActionAid and Concern (David *et al.* 2006; Jacobs and Wilford 2010)
The *Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative* risks the negative effect of empowering elite groups, technocrats and policy makers with new information, rather than empowering broader public stakeholders, who are more likely to use it to shift power balances rather than entrench them.	Nigeria (Shaxson 2009)

As Table 3.1 shows, there are a number of studies which do begin to suggest that TAIs can make important differences to the various kinds of outcome of interest, at least in certain settings. However, we must also caution against hastily drawn general conclusions from the existing evidence base, for a number of reasons.

The available evidence of impact is uneven and sparse, considering the amount of attention and donor funding focused on this field. Studies seem to be slightly more robust in sectors which have a longer history, especially service delivery and budget transparency, but even here there is much to be done. In newer areas, such as the emergent sector of aid transparency, where some key initiatives are currently unfolding, there is even less of a knowledge base from which to draw general conclusions about impact and effectiveness. The FoI sector is rather anomalous – while work in this area has been going on for some time, there are surprisingly few studies which illustrate its impacts, which might reflect the preponderance of initiatives in this sector that pursue FoI as a right in itself, of self-evident worth, rather than as an outcome that needs to be demonstrated. In some cases, the initiatives reviewed are very new, and accompanying impact studies are still underway or just beginning, making it too early to detect or explain resulting impacts. Many of the studies focus on only one initiative in one locality, precluding general conclusions, or permitting tentative conclusions based only on limited anecdotal evidence. As seen in the table, the studies of impact that we were able to locate are not at all evenly spread across the globe but are concentrated in certain countries or regions, such as India (service delivery) or Latin America (budget processes).

Of available work to date, most tends to focus on the *effectiveness* of the initiatives themselves. Less has been able to how the links from the initiatives to broader development, governance and empowerment goals. At the intermediate level, some studies – but remarkably few – shed light on assumed connections between transparency, accountability

and citizen engagement, assumptions which, explicitly or otherwise, are at the heart of all of this work. Many initiatives do not show a clearly articulated theory of change, making it more difficult to trace whether these assumptions actually hold true. Where we find positive evidence in one setting, this is often not corroborated – and sometimes even contradicted – by findings in another setting where different, or even similar, methods have been used. The evidence base is not large enough – there are simply not enough good impact studies – to begin to assess overall trends.

3.2 Context as crucial

If the available evidence is not conducive to definitive, evidence-based generalisations of the kind '*x* type of TAI produces *y* types of impacts*',* it does at least afford some insights into factors that shape the impact of TAIs. Foremost among these is that any evaluative discussion of the impact of TAIs must be located within a broader discussion of the context in which they are applied. Context matters so much, in a range of ways, that there is no general evaluation model that can be applied across all contexts (McGee and Gaventa 2011; O'Neil *et al.* 2007).

First, the context will affect which T&A objectives are feasible or desirable in the first place, and which strategies or initiatives are appropriate to use towards them. As McGee (2011) points out in her review of aid transparency, for instance, open e-government style initiatives or online aid-transparency campaigns may work in some settings but do not make sense in many contexts where these tools are not easily usable or accessible to ordinary citizens. Similarly, in a review of TAIs in Asia, PRIA (2010) shows that in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, where institutions of democratic governance and citizen awareness of rights are emergent, TAIs were mainly led by donors or NGOs, whereas in India – an older democracy with a very active civil society – community based associations played a much more active role.

Second, contextual factors will affect the inter-relationships between the three core concepts at stake: transparency, accountability and citizen participation or engagement. As the evidence repeatedly argues, transparency of information does not automatically lead to greater accountability, but may also depend on other factors, such as higher media competition, capacities to process the information and the political motivation and resources to act on it (Kolstad and Wiig 2009).

Third, even where similar initiatives are undertaken, their larger impact is dependent not only on their internal effectiveness, but also on their interaction with broader external factors. For instance, the impacts of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, which has a long history of civic engagement and – at the time of the innovation – a political leadership highly committed to its success, may not occur in a replica conducted in another context which lacks these conditions.

Due to these challenges of generalisation, our conclusion after reviewing the literature is to suggest that an approach which only asks the question of the impact of TAIs in an abstract or de-contextualised sense has limited value. A more nuanced question is needed: What are the factors – enabling and disabling – that shape the possibility of TAIs achieving their stated goals in a particular context? Such an approach binds the analysis of impact both to the broad contexts in which TAIs exist, and to the theory of change underpinning their application in a particular setting.

3.3 Actors, factors and interfaces

Our review of secondary literature on accountability and transparency turned up several inventories of factors relevant for impact, concurring in many respects.

In their review of bilateral donor agencies' voice and accountability initiatives, O'Neil *et al.* find that 'voicing demands can strengthen accountability, but it will not on its own deliver accountable relationships' (2007: 4–5). They identify political contexts, existing power relations, the enabling environment, the nature of the state and its institutions and the social contract between the state and citizens as key variables that explain the successful impact citizen-led initiatives can have on state accountability. An overview of World Bank-supported initiatives by Malena *et al.* (2004) bears some resemblance to the above – with key factors for success including political context and state capacity being mentioned – whilst also offering a few additions: access to information, the role of the media, civil society capacity, state-civil society synergy and the institutionalisation of accountability mechanisms. In addition to those factors identified by Malena *et al.* (2004), a more recent World Bank review of social accountability initiatives pointed to the importance of a combination of mechanisms that incentivise or reward good behaviour as well as those that sanction unaccountable behaviour (Agarwal *et al.* 2009).

A similar set of factors is explored in explaining the impact of participatory budgeting initiatives. Goldfrank (2006) for example, notes the diverse degrees of success of these initiatives but also identifies certain pre-conditions that seem to account for success, including political will, social capital, bureaucratic competence, small size, sufficient resources, legal foundation and political decentralisation (see further discussion in Carlitz 2011).

A few sources pinpoint a smaller number of factors as really crucial for success. For example, Goetz and Jenkins identify, above all, a high-capacity and democratic state as the key enabling factor for 'new accountability initiatives', whilst recognising the critical importance of several other factors (2005). In an important 'stocktaking' of social accountability initiatives in Asia and the Pacific, Arroyo and Sirker (2005) isolate two relatively novel factors that contributed to the success of TAIs – inclusion, and advocacy and communication strategies. They find that initiatives that were highly inclusive avoid elite capture of processes or participatory mechanisms and contribute to more sustainable citizen engagement. Initiatives that prioritise the public dissemination of information about the TAI itself and its findings seem to be more successful than those that do not. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are held to be uniquely placed to spearhead the creation of new forms of vertical accountability via inclusive and well-communicated advocacy-based initiatives.

Perhaps even more fundamental to understanding the relative success of TAIs is analysing the level of authority or degree of power the 'account seeker' has over the 'account holder' (Mulgan 2003), or to put it another way, how the 'two pillars' of accountability – answerability and enforcement – relate to each other in a given initiative. Enforceability is obviously stronger than answerability. While we sometimes see these two working in tandem, this is not always the case (Schedler 1999: 4). Without the sanctions offered by legitimate state authority, many citizen- or donor-led initiatives may demand and achieve answerability but lack any means of enforceability. Conversely, without pressure being applied by actors located outside the state, state-based accountability mechanisms might not swing into action and respond to the democratic, developmental and empowerment needs of the citizenry. An important factor in shaping impact, therefore, is the interaction between answerability and enforceability in a given initiative.

Most prior secondary literature and our own review point to the importance of looking at factors of success on 'both sides of the equation' (Gaventa 2004) – that is, at the nature and capacity of state supply or responsiveness on the one hand, and the nature and capacity of citizen voice, or demand, on the other. For instance, in reference to work on transparency Calland and Neuman (2007) argue:

> Whatever the underlying reason for establishing a transparency regime, after a decade of proliferation of access to information laws, with around seventy countries now enjoying a legislated right to information, it is clear that the stimulus of both a supply of information and a demand for it is the key to meeting the policy objectives. This supply-demand intersection is a fundamental part of our hypothesis for effective implementation and use of the law […] Notwithstanding the emphasis on the 'supply side', ensuring the success of an [Access to Information] law is a matter of co-responsibility. Not all the burden lies with government: citizens, civil society and community organisations, media, and the private sector must take responsibility for monitoring government efforts and using the law. Without an adequately developed demand side, the law is likely to wither on the vine. In other words, the demand and supply sides must match, and where they intersect will determine the quality of the transparency regime.
> (Calland and Neuman 2007: 3)

In general, this finding is in keeping with other recent studies which show that the impact of citizen engagement is not based in state or society variables alone, but also in their interaction (Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability 2011; Unsworth 2010; Fox 2007a). On the basis of our review, can we now specify more precisely the key factors to explore in looking on both sides of the equation and at the linkages that hold the equation together? Box 2 presents the factors we identified on the state or supply side as important explanatory variables of the impact of TAIs.

Box 2 State- or supply-side factors that shape the impact of TAIs

Level of democratisation: While some analysis exists of TAIs' impact in emerging democracies and fragile settings, the review revealed little evidence of impact of TAIs in non-democratic settings. To echo the findings of Goetz and Jenkins (2005), the level of democratisation is highly significant in understanding which strategies emerge in a given setting and the extent to which they succeed. In a regime lacking the essential freedoms of association, voice or media, citizen-led TAIs do not have the same prospects for success as in societies where these conditions exist.

Level of political will: Political will and a political environment that favours a balanced supply- and demand-side approach to accountability are found to be critical to TAIs' success (Joshi 2011; Carlitz 2011; Calland 2011). This assertion needs further unpacking, as 'political will' is an oft-used but insufficiently explicit phrase. The right to and dissemination of information is an important indicator that the environment might be propitious for citizen-led accountability, but it does not guarantee it. The state may be willing to adopt various accountability provisions, but the commitment to genuine accountability must be called into question if these are not fully institutionalised or have no 'teeth'. 'Champions' and allies on the inside of the system can help citizen-led TAIs succeed, but these allies may find themselves restricted by broader systemic and institutional factors. These two illustrations show that while central to successful social accountability, political will is complex and, to borrow a phrase from Malena (2009), citizen participation and pressure are needed to get 'from political won't to political will'.

Enabling legal frameworks, political incentives and sanctions: If the existence of democratic space and committed state actors or political leadership are not enough to bring about the desired changes, this directs our attention to the political economy more broadly and in particular to the prevailing legal frameworks and incentive structures within which political representatives and state functionaries operate. In the field of natural resource governance, Mejía Acosta (2009, cited in Mejía Acosta 2011) points out in the case of Ghana that members of Parliament and CSOs have actively demanded greater transparency in the allocation of natural resource revenues but find that structural constraints limit the scope for reform. Alleged corruption scandals are taken to the Attorney General but this office lacks the necessary financial and political autonomy from the Executive to affect any reforms. In relation to aid transparency, McGee (2011) reviews studies that highlight how broader political accountability considerations such as electoral costs and sanctions for misuse of aid affect the degree to which more transparent aid information is likely to change supply-side behavior.

Box 3 lists what appear to be the most important explanatory variables on the citizen or demand side:

Box 3 Citizen- or demand-side factors that shape impact of TAIs

Capabilities of citizens and CSOs to take up opportunities TAIs offer: If citizens are not able to process, analyse or use information gained through greater transparency, the increase in transparency may have little impact. These capabilities can be strengthened by the presence of an active media; prior or ongoing social mobilisation; coalitions; and the ability to use evidence effectively, including possibility through intermediaries or 'infomediaries' who can 'translate' and communicate information to those affected (Joshi 2011; Calland 2011; Carlitz 2011; McGee 2011). Studies also point to the risk that available information may be captured by elite groups, technocrats or policy makers and used to their own advantage rather than to make them more accountable, or to deepen inclusiveness (Mejía Acosta 2011).

The degree to which TAIs form part of multi-stranded and collective strategies*:* Much work now shows that TAIs gain traction from being linked in with other mobilisation strategies, such as advocacy, litigation, electoral pressure or protest movements; and through invoking collective rather than individual action. Paradoxically, a multi-stranded or collective approach seems to contribute to effectiveness and impact while also contributing to the problem of not being able to isolate the impact of any one factor or actor alone (Joshi 2011; Calland 2011).

Engagement of citizens in the 'upstream' as well as the 'downstream' stages of governance and policy processes: Many TAIs focus on the role of citizens in the implementation of policies that were formulated without any citizen engagement. But when citizens are engaged in formulating the policies, they are more likely to engage in monitoring them; and also, citizen engagement in policy formulation can arguably have a greater accountability impact than an *ex post* monitoring role. For instance, citizen involvement in budget allocation can bring about more change than citizen monitoring of the execution of a budget that comes as a given (Carlitz 2011).

As is plain from Boxes 2 and 3, these two sets of explanatory factors identified as significant on the state side and the citizen side of the accountability equation respectively do not exist in isolation from one another. They are interdependent, mutually constructed and in practice

divided by only very hazy lines. State-based accountability mechanisms may stimulate citizen action; citizen action may stimulate state responses. As Joshi puts it:

> Accountability or transparency mechanisms that have the potential to trigger strong sanctions are more likely to be used and be effective in improving responsiveness […]. Without the threat of effective sanctions (and resulting impacts), citizen mobilisation is difficult to sustain in the long run. Social accountability mechanisms have impact when they can trigger traditional accountability mechanisms such as investigations, inspections and audits.
> (Joshi 2011: 12)

Or, as McGee points out in relation to aid transparency, 'collaboration between state and government officials and civil society 'infomediary' and campaigning organisations has been essential to their conception and inception, remains essential to their effectiveness and will prove essential to their future impact' (2011: 14). Recognition of the role played by state-society collaboration is at the heart of multi-stakeholder approaches such as the EITI, the Medicines Transparency Alliance and the Construction Sector Transparency initiative. Key to these, Calland argues, is 'getting the right people around a table' (2011: 18).

Moving beyond the simple state-society dichotomic model, Fox argues that we must develop a much more nuanced view of 'the positioning of each accountability agent' and not view either side as homogeneous or monolithic (2007b: 340–41). Moving across a horizontal plane, he distinguishes between three sources of change: from 'inside the agency' involved (i.e. the relevant government office), from 'outside the agency and inside the state' and from 'outside the state'. On a vertical plane, he highlights how demands for accountability can arise variously 'from above', from 'shared state-society spaces' and 'from below'. 'Above' is not synonymous with state actors – donor and international financial institutions often act as accountability agents from above – and 'below' is not synonymous with NGOs and people's organisations, but can include whistle-blowers in the local administration or pro-reform allies within the state.

More nuanced approaches such as those proposed by Fox, as well as other cutting-edge thinking on governance and state-society relations, would suggest that many of the 'supply-demand' or 'voice-response' dichotomic visions on which TAIs are based may be too simplistic: the boundaries are in fact blurred (Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability 2011). This points to the need to deepen our understanding of the diversity and inter-dependence of state and society accountability actors, but also to bring the TAI arena new thinking on governance to inform further research on TAIs what makes them work. Box 4 summarises the most relevant recent perspectives on governance.

Box 4 New thinking in governance which needs to be applied to understanding how transparency and accountability work

The 'networked governance' approach (Witte *et al.* 2005; Hajer and Versteeg 2005) takes governance to be a set of cross cutting state and non-state **networks and coalitions**. How are such networks for accountability formed, and how do they work in practice, both formally and informally? Private sector and corporate actors are clearly part of complex governance networks and relevant to accountability questions – where do they come into accountability debates, traditionally framed as about relations between state and society? Applying networked governance perspectives to accountability reveals that change may come from many directions, affecting the behaviour and culture of multiple actors, not just the state.

Secondly, a networked governance perspective holds that in a world of more globalised governance, accountability cannot be understood through looking at any one level of

governance but needs to be grasped as the vertical integration or interaction of accountability actors at **multiple levels**. As Fox argues 'local accountability reforms do not necessarily "scale up" to influence higher level decision-making, while national accountability reforms do not automatically "scale down"' (2007a: 342). Similarly, accountability coalitions and campaigns, whether for monitoring or advocacy, must also become more vertically integrated for success (Fox 2007a; Gaventa and Tandon 2010), yet our review of literature has revealed little insight into the nature of interactions across scale and level in TAIs.

Thirdly, governance debates are turning towards **'bringing the political back in'** (see, for example, DFID 2010). While one approach to TAIs sees them in instrumental or technical terms, with assumptions that certain inputs (initiatives) will lead to other outputs and outcomes, in fact their success often depends on how these are mediated through power relations, and the interactions involved are often highly political. Yet we have very little evidence, for instance, on the interaction of civil-society- led or even state-initiated TAIs with parties, electoral politics or other powerful actors, or on the how the dynamics of TAIs are affected by broader political economies and regimes.

In sum, while we can gain some clues from existing studies on factors that make a difference to the impacts of TAIs, in general far more needs to be understood about how change happens by and within them, drawing especially from more recent thinking on governance and state-society relations that goes beyond traditional 'state-civil society', 'supply-demand' and 'voice-responsiveness' dichotomies. A more sophisticated understanding of the factors that make a difference and the interfaces at which changes happen would in turn inform the theories of change that guide the strategies and designs of new TAIs, as well as refreshing the nature of evidence and indicators that are collected to understand their impact.

4 How are the effectiveness and impact of TAIs assessed?

The impact of TAIs currently tends to be assessed using a range of approaches and methods.[5] Those identified in the IETA review are shown in the table below along with a specific example of each method's application.

During the course of the review it became evident that confusion around the terminology used to describe T&A research and evaluation methodologies made it difficult to identify mutually exclusive categories to compare different designs and approaches. A few studies reviewed in the aid transparency, budget and freedom of information fields, for example, deliberately mix qualitative and quantitative methods in their design. These sometimes go under the broad label of 'surveys', but are in fact more complex methodological designs, harbouring widely varying data collection methods. The most diverse we encountered, located in the FoI field and used to assess the progress and impact of India's Right to Information legislation, combines activities as diverse as survey questionnaires, focus group discussions and FoI claims filed in action-research mode – all on a scale of tens of thousands of participant-respondents (Calland 2011). On a smaller scale, but valuable for its

[5] This range of methods seems fairly wide, but a study commissioned by DFID's Research and Evaluation Division and conducted by Elliot Stern *et al.*, ongoing at the time of writing, claims that actually – even if a wide range crops up in a wide-reaching review - a few methods dominate the field of impact evaluation of 'complex' programmes, which includes transparency and accountability programmes and initiatives. This study points to some of the same problems that our report highlighted, in terms of the scant use of mixed methodological designs, reasoned choices of methods or elaboration of theories of change firmly rooted in programme attributes (Stern *et al.* 2011).

deliberately mixed methodological design as well as its comparative perspective, is Robinson's (2006) study on civil society budget advocacy (see Carlitz 2011). There is also the well-contextualised mixed-design African Development Bank (2009) comparative study on debt relief and social service outputs (see McGee 2011).

Table 4.1 Methods for assessing the impact of TAIs

Method used to assess impact of TAIs	Example
Quantitative survey	*Service delivery:* Assessment of impact of citizen report cards on Bangalore public sector performance (Ravindra 2004)
Experimental approaches, e.g. randomised control trials	*Service delivery:* Random testing of demand-led vs. top-down interventions in education in Madagascar (Lassibille *et al.* 2010)
Qualitative case studies	*Aid transparency:* Assessment of workings of World Bank Inspection Panel (Clark *et al.* 2003)
Stakeholder interviews	*Natural resource governance:* Evaluations of EITI (Rainbow Insight 2009)
Participatory approaches	*Freedom of Information:* 'People's Assessment' of progress of India's Right to Information law (RAAG/NCPRI 2009)
Indices and rankings	*Budgets:* Open Budget Survey of International Budget Partnership (www.openbudgetindex.org/)
Outcome mapping	*General accountability and transparency :* Accountability in Tanzania (http://www.accountability.or.tz/home/)
'Most Significant Change' approach	*Anti-corruption:* DFID GTF programme by Transparency International (Burge 2010)

The span of methodological approaches and methods used to assess the effectiveness and impact of TAIs reflects broader experience to some extent. Impact evaluation as a whole is recognised to be more established in economic, health and educational interventions than in governance-related programmes. The former tend to deliver more easily observable and countable outputs and outcomes, and seem to afford greater insights into the 'return' on donors' investments (Blattman 2008).

Where the list of methods above diverges from experience in other fields (including some other areas of governance work) is that innovative approaches such as Outcome Mapping (Earl *et al.* 2001), 'Most Significant Change' (Davies and Dart 2005), narrative techniques (Eyben 2008) and participatory approaches (Jupp *et al.* 2010), despite having much to offer here, are only just starting to find their way into the T&A field.

Tensions and debates characterise methodological strategies and choices in the field of TAIs. Many of them arise in other fields of development or social change initiatives too, but in relation to T&A work they have hardly been articulated, let alone systematically explored. The principal methodological challenges and issues are:

- The *amount and quality of evidence* currently available, and relatedly the limited availability of *comparators* or *counterfactuals*
- Untested assumptions and poorly articulated *theories of change*

- Tensions between observing correlation and demonstrating *causality, attributing impact* and *establishing contribution* made by one among several actors in complex and not entirely controllable contexts
- The challenges of developing suitable *indicators* and baselines**,** especially given that what we want to measure (eg people's perceptions of what constitutes improvements in governance) may differ from what can realistically be measured
- Issues of *ethics* and *positionality:* the question of whose knowledge counts in impact assessment, and the *situated* nature of knowledge.

None of the qualifications and caveats we have raised about the state of the evidence base, we hasten to add, constitute arguments *against* T&A. But they do constitute arguments that a more robust evidence base is needed to make the case convincingly, and they do raise questions about whether existing initiatives are as effective as they might be. To deepen the quality of the evidence base, we must grapple with the methodological challenges of assessing such initiatives. To increase the impact of TAIs, we need to understand and further the complex factors which contribute to their success and navigate those better in the design and implementation of the initiatives. To wrap these dual challenges into one phrase: how can demonstrable impact be enhanced?

5 Redefining accountability impact to bring the politics back in

It is argued by Michael Quinn Patton, and supported by our research, that the real gold standard in evaluating development initiatives is the appropriateness of the design for the questions posed (Quinn Patton 2011; Lucas and Longhurst 2010; Khagram and Thomas 2010). In evaluations driven by the imperative to demonstrate results to funders, research designs that seek to isolate the effects of a variable – the TAI itself – so as to answer questions about how much of the desired impact happened as a result of the TAI, may be deemed appropriate. But the quasi-experimental or experimental methodological design suitable to answering this question – would probably not elucidate on why, how or what else might have happened or did happen. Alternative methodological designs are preferable if we wish to learn about the complex connections between variables, the social and political dynamics and transmission belts by which impact is being attained and how this impact – political in nature – could be enhanced. Such questions direct us towards what is known as a 'theory-based' approach to impact evaluation (White 2009; Stern *et al.* 2011), an appreciation of complexity thinking and methods such as qualitative case studies, in-depth interviews, ethnographic studies or participatory methods.[6]

The methodological dilemmas currently voiced by governance and accountability impact assessors relating to qualitative versus quantitative data, deductive versus inductive approaches and positivist versus constructivist methods, echo earlier methodological wars between advocates of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. The answer for the governance impact assessors is the same one that helped to defuse those earlier wars and can be summed up in this statement from the IE4D collective: 'No one approach is

[6] These approaches do not evade the issues of selection bias and lack of counterfactual which drive the current fashion for designs that use experiments; they just deal with these challenges in a different way. Selection bias can be countered in qualitative case studies by using randomisation in selection of interviewees or focus group participants, or using research quality strategies such as triangulation; the lack of a counterfactual may be dealt with not by setting up a 'control' but by detailed analysis of context and local political economy, by working inductively, by using contribution analysis or via triangulation and comparison of evidence within and across cases (Khagram and Thomas 2010).

inherently more rigorous than another. Rigor depends upon both *appropriate* designs – selecting methods based on evaluative purposes and contexts – and successful implementation that meets accepted standards of quality' (IE4D 2010: 1, emphasis in original).

The trouble is that these methodological paradigm battles tend to obscure vital issues underlying accountability work, which are about power and politics, not technicalities. Besides the question of what methodological approach to use in assessing TAIs' impact, two other aspects need to be addressed, which hitherto have received far less attention than the methodological conflicts but which arose as crucial findings in our review. Firstly, all TAIs unfold within complex, non-linear, contextually specific social and political processes and it is these complex contexts and processes that they seek to change. Secondly, while all TAIs are based on some theory of how they will bring about these changes, the theory is often implicit or invisible, which confounds efforts to assess impact and learn in the process. It is the complexity, non-linearity and fluidity of the context and process which make it so vital to establish with clarity the theory of change (or causal pathway, or programme logic) behind the initiative. Often, it is not even made explicit whether a given TAI's ultimate aim is to contribute to developmental, democratic or empowerment ends; and the route by which the implemented actions taken are expected to produce the hoped-for impacts consists of a series of unstated and untested assumptions. By far the most common assumption is that transparent, accessible information will generate accountable policies and budgets and responsive, accountable state behaviour – an assumption that in fact glosses over a number of leaps.

There is a terminological difficulty and a risk inherent in promoting a stronger focus on theories of change. If conceived as part of a technical results-based management paradigm, theories of change are at risk of becoming the next log-frame – today's must-have development accessory that qualifies development initiatives as workable and unlocks the funding sources. The very language of theories of change is alien and off-putting to many realist development practitioners and evaluators who see their assumptions constantly called into question as non-linear, complex realities unfold around them. To them, a 'theory of change' – or a theory of anything – may sound too fixed and restrictive, or simply irrelevant, and 'causal pathway' or 'programme logic' may be more friendly terms.

Call them what we will, at the most basic level, the lack of a theory of change can inhibit the effectiveness of an initiative by causing a lack of direction and focus. It can also make impact assessment or progress-tracking elusive or impossible. In particular, it can make it difficult to analyse retrospectively the existence or nature of connections between the *ex post* situation and the inputs made by the intervention, and thus reduce the possibility of learning. To return to our definitions of impact and effectiveness, this means that even the effective implementation of the initiative may be hard to demonstrate, and that it will be harder still to demonstrate links between it and any apparent impact. Past work on assessing and learning from social change efforts (reviewed in Guijt 2007 and Taylor *et al.* 2006) sets out a range of reasons why theories of change are necessary, while also eschewing the narrow linear results-based accountability paradigm. All their reasons are ultimately focused on increasing the impact of interventions via 'grasp[ing] what is really happening beneath the surface [amid] the confusing detail of enormously complex social change processes' (Guijt 2007: 30). Top practitioners in the T&A field note additionally that the process of collective articulation of a theory of change by the stakeholders in the prospective initiative offers critical opportunities for 'negotiation and contestation', ultimately delivering a more relevant, workable and sustainable initiative (Rajani, pers. comm.).[7] To reinforce these points about the importance

[7] Comment made by Rakesh Rajani at Reference Group meeting of the project 'Review of the Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives', 17 September 2010, IDS.

of an underpinning theory of change we have set out elsewhere a series of probes or pointers that can be used followed in evaluating current TAIs or designing or implementing new ones (McGee and Gaventa 2011: 7).

A lifelike example will help to illustrate these points. Consider the case of an African NGO that wants government spending to be fairer to rural and socially marginalised populations. It pursues this aim by lobbying for budget proposals to be published on government websites. The causal pathway that could lead from the lobbying (the input) to the output (the published budget proposal) to the outcome (changed budget allocation and execution) might be something like this:

- The NGO works with the NGO umbrella organisation to lobby members of the government and civil servants
- The budget proposal document is eventually published – that is, the transparency initiative has been effective, but it has not yet had its desired impact of increasing accountability to rural and marginalised populations
- Concerned organisations, citizens, parliamentarians and journalists access it online They put pressure on the Finance Ministry's executive and budget office to change current budget allocation patterns
- The budget office responds to the diverse pressures and changes budget allocations
- The resulting budget proposal is actually executed as set out in the proposal, with proportionately more spent on rural and marginalised populations.

None of the steps in a causal chain is a foregone conclusion. All involve assumptions and risks. The NGO could mitigate some of these, for example, by forming alliances with organisations that focus on social mobilisation in villages, or working directly or through coalitions to promote budget execution monitoring. The NGO might report to its international NGO funder in a quarterly report that the budget proposal is now available online. That might prove the effectiveness of the NGO's lobbying, but not its impact: for that, a very different impact assessment strategy would be required, almost certainly involving additional stakeholders.

This example reinforces the two points we have made above: that the relationship between T&A is not a given, and that an explicit theory of change is a necessary set of reference points for tracking how the inputs and activities lead to accountability outcomes. It also illustrates a third point. Every one of the steps set out in the example involves contestation and a degree of unpredictability given the unfavourable odds. Even those apparently most centred on practical and technical issues involve challenging power relations.

6 Assessing the impact of 'accountability politics'

Thus far, the arguments and suggestions we have put forward for clearer theories of change in TAIs have been quite technical. But what T&A work seeks to change is, in essence, power relations. The theoretical and conceptual work on political accountability that we have cited earlier posits an apparently simple, linear relationship between one actor or group of actors (accountability claimants, citizens), referred to as 'the principal' in formal theoretical language, who demand accountability; and another actor or group of actors within or close to the state (political representatives, state bureaucrats, public utilities companies contracted by

the state), formally referred to as 'the agent', who give an account. This apparently simple supposition is belied by the reality of citizen-led social accountability initiatives, as all practitioners know. At the heart of these is a power contest: resources are at stake, and the sought-after reforms challenge powerful interests that benefit from the status quo (Newell and Wheeler 2006). A more lifelike rendition of the workings of accountability initiatives is that they will contribute to significant, tangible, sustainable institutional impacts in favour of the marginalised only insofar as they change the balance of power within society and between society and state. There are various routes for getting there, and so far few have teased out the routes from empirical observation of TAIs in action.

Perhaps the most noteworthy contribution on the intersection of power and accountability is found in the work of Jonathan Fox.[8] On the basis of extensive action research and empirical analysis focused on processes of accountability and what he calls 'accountability politics', he proposes that successful TAIs are characterised by four elements:

- the activation of civil society, generating an interface with state actors or entry into a governance space;
- different players including reformers within state, 'horizontal accountability actors' in the executive, judiciary or legislature (parliamentarians), or non-state allies like media and academics are activated, and alliances form between them and citizens and CSOs;
- these horizontal accountability actors – to the extent that they are empowered and effective – and their allies among the citizens, disempower the vested interests that oppose T&A. This shift in the balance of power is dynamic, involving moves and countermoves by many parties for and against different kinds of accountability and transparency, in shifting alliances
- where leverage increases, civil society action is stimulated further, as partial success and positive signs of progress breed deeper commitment or spread of approaches and efforts.

None of these four elements is stable and none guarantees the others, but Fox posits that together they are what leads to sustained, tangible changes in institutional governance behaviour.

This is an important advance in understanding the impact of TAIs. In this political perspective on social accountability, what we look for as signs of impact differs from what we would look for in the case of a NPM-inspired social accountability initiative, let alone a formal political accountability mechanism such as local government elections. Whereas an impact assessment of a NPM-inspired initiative approach could look fairly straightforwardly for whether citizen engagement had led to reduced leakage and more efficient and effective delivery of services, this political perspective recognises that accountability processes are riddled with power and contestation which can affect and obstruct the unfolding of the theory of change at every step along the way.[9]

Fox's ideas can be developed and adapted further and need testing to see how widely or universally applicable they are given the contextual differences noted earlier. We would suggest that in taking them further, two elements will be useful. One is that participatory monitoring and evaluation approaches need to be re-visited and adapted to the specific task of enabling the relatively powerless to define what constitutes favourable change in balance

[8] Presented at the Transparency and Accountability Initiative workshop, 13-15 October 2010, San Francisco. For framework's origins see also Fox, J. (2007a) and Fox (2008).

[9] Joshi and Houtzager (forthcoming) deals with this same underlying issue, although less from the perspective of impact assessment than from that of conceptualising social accountability.

of power in their specific context. Indeed, some international NGO governance programmes are already experimenting with such approaches in their practice.[10]

The other element is the repertoire of power analysis frameworks and tools, which has expanded and become more practical in orientation since the power literature of the 1970s and 80s. These could be applied in the elaboration of baselines and theories of change for TAIs to lay bare what exactly the power contest consists of in each case, and therefore how to know whether it is being won. An example may be found in using the framework known as the powercube developed by Gaventa, Pettit and other colleagues.[11] The powercube approach suggests that power may be analysed across three dimensions – the 'spaces' in which power occurs; the forms in which it manifests itself and the levels of authority which are involved. Each interacts with the other, such that what looks like change in one dimension may in fact be limited or contravened by what is going on in other dimensions. For instance, while transparency mechanisms may appear to open up 'closed spaces' by making them more accessible and visible, and while new initiatives such as the EITI may create new 'invited' spaces for citizens to engage,[12] 'hidden' and 'invisible' forms of power may prevent these frameworks from being effective. Potential users of the frameworks may lack the resources to mobilise around them, or may lack the knowledge of their existence or of how to use them effectively. Or, while citizens may strive to monitor budgets at the local level, in fact the lack of transparency or accountability of budget processes at higher levels of governance may limit their prospects of bringing about real change. The assessment of the effectiveness of any TAI, in this approach, would ask how it is changing power relations across the spaces, forms and levels of power as an interactive whole, not simply look at what occurs within the formal boundaries of the specific initiative in question.

7 Conclusion

There is a mismatch between how we study the impact of accountability and what we know about the politics of accountability. Often wrongly identified as a methodological clash between the proponents of deductive experimental evaluations and inductive qualitative approaches, the mismatch is increasingly understood as being between an interest in impact assessment for demonstrating the proper use of funding and delivery of results, and an interest in impact assessment as a way to learn about how change happens and how to get better at working with change.[13]

A less recognised but at least as important mismatch, we conclude, is the series of contradictions that have arisen and sharpened in recent years between the essence of governance and accountability work as we now understand it, and the prevalent results-based mindset in the development aid arena. We know that governance programmes are messy and non-linear, involving reversals as well as gains, requiring the efforts of multiple stakeholders working in alliance or coalition to provide change over long periods of time in complex configurations of power which are highly context-specific, via contestation and political manoeuvring. Despite this, in attempting to demonstrate the results of this work we

[10] One of us (McGee, with Patta Scott-Villiers) has begun applying Fox's framework and participatory principles to the task of evaluating an international NGO accountability programme, Christian Aid's 'Power to the People' funded by DFID's Governance and Transparency Fund (McGee and Scott-Villiers 2011). We also know of interest and attempts to experiment with these approaches in CARE and Trócaire.

[11] See www.powercube.net and Gaventa (2006).

[12] See Mejía Acosta forthcoming for discussion of the impact of the EITI and other multi-stakeholder transparency and accountability initiatives in the natural resource sector, or http://eiti.org.

[13] To borrow a phrase from Reeler (2007). See Wallace *et al.* (2006) for more on this particular mismatch.

tend to base our efforts on linear, logical models of change, seek to attribute impact to single causes, measure symptoms rather than underlying problems, and press for quick returns on programme investments and 'value for money' – by someone's value-laden definition – in the assessment exercise itself.

Underlying the polarisations and controversies we have pointed to are issues of power and politics, not technicalities. Complex, political processes like citizen-led accountability initiatives require complex, power-aware ways of assessing their impact and understanding how it has occurred.

The implicit supposition of linearity in the accountability relationship distorts our approach to the challenge of understanding impact. Instead of asking 'how much of our desired impact did we achieve?', we need to ask, 'as a result of this initiative, what happened, how, why and so what?' and in particular, 'what happened to the power relations that needed to change?' This calls for programme designs to be informed by nuanced power and political economy analyses and painstaking baseline analysis of the power relations that prevailed at the outset, tools for regularly revising and updating that initial analysis, and indicators or milestones that capture the sorts of reconfigurations within the relevant actors in society – be they CSOs, advocacy NGOs, people's movements or social movements – and between them and the relevant actors in 'the state' – be it local government officials, the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, the Budget Office or the public service regulatory body.

Ultimately, to really understand the impact of a given TAI on power relations we might need to look for it not where and when the TAI is implemented, but in different spaces, distant places, or later episodes of the same officials' trajectory through their political or bureaucratic career or the same citizens' journey of mobilisation. We will also need to recognise – and help funding agencies to recognise – that in the contested arena of power and resources, a few steps forward will likely be followed by a hardening of resistance or a backlash which will set back progress towards impact.

These propositions require a re-thinking of what impact means in relation to accountability programmes and projects, and to governance and social change efforts more broadly. This challenge to the prevailing impact paradigm has significant implications for the questions driving impact assessments and, consequently, for their designs. The moment is hardly propitious for this, given the strictures imposed by current financial realities in both aid and research, the stress on aid effectiveness and contemporary methodological preferences. But the realities of unaccountable governance, unproven accountability programming in complex and varied contexts and uncertain evidence of impact all suggest that such a shift is nonetheless necessary. To evade it is to continue asking the wrong questions and getting partial or wrong answers.

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