The Impact of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives

John Gaventa and Rosemary McGee[*]

[*] John Gaventa (jgaventa@stfx.ca) and Rosemary McGee (r.mcgee@ids.ac.uk) are Fellows in the Participation, Power and Social Change team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex. Professor Gaventa is currently on leave from IDS, and is Director of the Coady International Institute and Vice President International Development, St. Francis Xavier University, Canada.

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Transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) 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 issue of Development Policy Review arises from a study of the impact and effectiveness of transparency and accountability initiatives in different development sectors. It analyses existing evidence, discusses how approaches to learning about TAIs might be improved, and recommends how impact and effectiveness could be enhanced.

Key words:

1 Introduction

Transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) 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 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 for improving the state of the evidence and enhancing impact and effectiveness.

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[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 collaboration 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, all of which are available at http://www.transparency-initiative.org/workstream/impact-learning.

This article is organised as follows. Section Two provides a background to social accountability. Section Three discusses the range of aims, claims and assumptions underpinning TAIs. Section Four summarises what we know about their effectiveness and impact and Section Five discusses how we know what we know – the methodological approaches behind assessments of their impact. Section Six pinpoints factors that seem to determine impact, and Section Seven concludes with a summary of gaps in current knowledge and practice, and recommendations as to how these can be addressed.

2   Transparency and Accountability Initiatives: a genealogy

Transparency and accountability (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 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 the poor and marginalised people who need accountability 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

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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 who 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 (often, for example, 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 TAI field has evolved as multiple sub-fields with overlapping principles, origins and methods or approaches.

Service delivery is perhaps the field in which TAIs have been longest applied. The introduction of accountability took root as a central theme in service delivery when the 2004 World Development Report (WDR) identified service delivery failures as accountability failures. Showing how the 'long route' to accountability – via elected politicians and public officials through to providers – was failing the poor, the WDR advocated strengthening the 'short route' – direct accountability relationships between users and service providers. A spate of subsequent work examined ways to do this by amplifying voice and increasing transparency. This has spawned many innovations, ranging from more institutionalised forms of co-governance to particular TAIs such as Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys, citizen report cards, score cards, community monitoring and social audits.

By the late 1990s, moves to improve public finance management the world over led to the development of budget accountability and transparency as a sector in its own right. It spread rapidly, and several driving factors have made budget work the best-developed field of citizen-led T&A: the 1990s democratisation and good governance agenda, the political

momentum gathering around 'participatory budgeting' which originated in Porto Alegre in the mid-1980s, a spreading recognition of the centrality of state budgets in reflecting government policy preferences, and donors' growing interest in budget transparency as general and sectoral budget support have grown within their aid portfolios.

An array of citizen-led budget TAIs has developed, relating to various stages of the budget process, from the revenue phase, to planning and execution, to audit and ex-post oversight. Central among these approaches are participatory budgeting (Goldfrank, 2006); sector-specific budget monitoring (eg. gender budgeting, children's budgets); public expenditure monitoring through social audits, participatory audits and tracking surveys; and advocacy for budget transparency (eg. the International Budget Partnership (IBP)'s Open Budget Index). Many of these initiatives focus 'downstream' on how public funds are spent; less work focuses on T&A in revenue-generation, although this growing with recent work on tax justice, the 'Robin Hood Tax' initiative and exposure of tax havens. Large global networks such as the IBP and Revenue Watch Institute have sprung up to build capacity, test and advocate for new approaches, and share learning between the many budget groups emerging around the world.

The way TAIs in the service delivery and budget fields increase accountability is often by increasing access to information. Elements of social accountability in service delivery therefore overlapped from the start with developments in the Freedom of Information (FoI) sector[2.]. While FoI advocacy has a long history, support for FoI legislation has accelerated in the past twenty years, with the number of countries with legislation in place exploding from 12 in 1990 to around 80 today (Calland and Bentley, this volume). The FoI field is thus well-developed, and a broad range of arguments are advanced in favour of it. At one level, it is a basic 'lever' (Calland and Bentley, this volume) at citizens' disposal for holding states to account and pursuing other rights, and can be crucial for delivering deeper and more participatory forms of governance. At another level, attainment of FoI can be understood as an end in itself, which alters the balance of power between the right-bearer and the duty-bearer.

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[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.

One application of FoI legislation is to the governance of natural resources such as land, water, forests, fish stocks and minerals. Most approaches involving citizens in governing natural resource use are micro-level and take forms such as fishery and forestry committees, monitoring and advocacy on mining or land use. Rising concern over the 'resource curse' as a development and governance problem has generated new mechanisms for establishing transparency and accountability in extractive industries, often at national and international levels. These include the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which seeks to secure verification and publication of company payments and government revenues from oil, gas and mining. Other groups such as the Bank Information Centre and Revenue Watch Institute also campaign for disclosure (for example, through the Publish What You Pay campaign), monitor the implementation of the EITI and seek to extend these approaches into new areas such as forestry.

Concerns about the management of public finances, already referred to in relation to budget TAIs, apply as much to the management of international aid as they do to public funds generated through tax revenue. Hence a strand of aid accountability and transparency has also evolved, sharing many of the same principles, approaches and methods as TAIs in the service delivery, FoI and budget sectors. This aid accountability and transparency strand has converged – in name, if not always in emphasis – with the accountability discourses and practices arising throughout the 1990s and 2000s in official, NGO and humanitarian aid agencies in response to concerns about the fundamental inequality of aid relations.

The past five years have seen the rise of 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 in aid and development are increasingly being used within an efficiency paradigm, with scant attention to underlying issues of power and politics. Many TAIs focus on the delivery of development outcomes, neglecting or articulating only superficially the potential for deepening democracy or empowering citizens, over-emphasising tools to the detriment of analysis: of context, of forms of mobilisation and action, and of the dynamics behind potential impact. Many of TAIs 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' (Joshi, this volume: 2). 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 consumer's socio-political reality.

The other stream is the 'deepening democracy' school of thought, which advocates the direct participation of citizens in governance and, broadly speaking, includes the

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[3] Given the scope 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.

promotion of social movements and their claims to services as rights (Avritzer, 2002; Fox, 2007a; Fung and Wright, 2003; Gaventa, 2006). In contrast to the NPM-inspired approach, the rights-based and direct democracy approaches emphasise 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).

As already noted, the 2004 WDR placed social accountability centre-stage by identifying service delivery failures as accountability failures (World Bank, 2004). The impetus that this WDR gave to NPM-inspired social accountability has been further boosted 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 and 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.

This special issue of Development Policy Review 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[4]. The review looked at both effectiveness and impact. It defined effectiveness 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) and impact 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 article.

3   Aims, Claims and Assumptions

An initial scan of the T&A literature to date revealed little meta-literature on issues of impact and effectiveness of TAIs. The literature which did address impact and effectiveness -

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[4] 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. The review was conducted under constraints of time and resources. We cannot claim to have been exhaustive in our identification of sources, nor 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 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.

sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, and to varying extents - was widely scattered. This being the state of the evidence, 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.

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 (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001 and 2005; Newell and Wheeler, 2006; Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006; Arroyo and Sirker, 2005; Claasen and Alpin-Lardiés, 2010; Fox, 2007a; Houtzager et al., 2008; McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006; World Bank, 2004). 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).

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.

Conceptual debates on accountability and transparency range far and wide, but our focus here is on the newer and closely-related concepts of 'citizen-led' and 'social' accountability. Both are subject to some terminological looseness. 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 on-going 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). While social accountability has emerged as a core concept in the accountability field, only recently are studies emerging that assess its effectiveness or impact. 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 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 them: in order to discuss their 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 TAIs attempt to improve standards of accountability and transparency as ends in themselves, and others do so as a means to attain 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:* Citizens' disillusionment with the quality of governance moves them beyond electoral participation 'toward engaging with bureaucrats and politicians in a more informed, organised, constructive and systematic manner' (Malena et al., 2004: 5) - often referred to often as the 'democratic outcomes' case.
- *Social accountability contributes to increased development effectiveness*: Given the difficulty, inability or unwillingness of governments to deliver essential services, service delivery effectiveness and policy design are improved by citizens' clearer articulation of their demands and more transparent public decision-making (World Bank, 2004; Malena et al., 2004: 5) - often referred to as the 'developmental outcomes' case.
- *Social accountability initiatives can lead to empowerment:* By providing information on rights and soliciting 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) - sometimes referred to as the 'empowerment case'.

Other claims focus on transparency. Access to information via transparency initiatives is seen as a right, an end in itself (Jayal, 2008) and also a 'leverage right' capable of delivering further ends (Calland and Bentley, this volume). Increased transparency in state decision-making can facilitate greater accountability to citizens. However, the right to information is not accountability in itself but is instrumental to it, and transparency does not automatically produce accountability but is a necessary but insufficient condition for it; certain types of transparency can generate certain types of accountability under certain conditions (Fox, 2007a).

Finally, some of the claims made for TAIs focus on the relationships between transparency, accountability and participation. A few sources shed empirical light on how one contributes to the other, but these are scant (Fox, 2007a; Houtzager and Joshi, 2008). While other work suggests that these connections between transparency, accountability and participation 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 critically interrogate the aims, claims and assumptions underlying 'citizens' voice and accountability' initiatives (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008). The task is more complex than merely assessing how far initiatives meet the claims explicitly made for them. From explicit assumptions and expectations, we need to disentangle implicit and embedded assumptions and unsubstantiated or under-specified elements. These needs resonate with what others (eg. 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., 2007: vii).

Overall, our review found that much of the current evidence relies on untested normative, positivist assumptions and under-specified relationships between mechanisms and outcomes. Much of the empirical work reviewed is based on poorly articulated, normatively-inspired 'mixes', that draw unevenly from the concepts of transparency, accountability, good governance and empowerment. 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 (Joshi, 2011; Carlitz, 2011; Mejía Acosta, 2011; McGee, 2011).

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, this volume).

Rarely spelt out, either, is the 'hierarchy' or framework of objectives or outcomes related to a particular TAI (Calland and Bentley, this volume; Carlitz, this volume; 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. 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, this volume; McGee, this volume), while in other sectors, particular TAIs appear to lack them. Thus, while the broad claims made for TAIs may hold intuitive and logical appeal, few initiatives provide concrete evidence of advancing them.

4   Effectiveness and Impact of TAIs

What can we say about TAIs' impact? 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.

In Table 1 we present findings sorted by these five types. We opt to use these rather than the categories '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 mutually exclusive: some of these five outcomes which on first glance clearly have material developmental dimensions can have significant democratising implications too (eg. better budget utilisation). Others, which seem to be pre-eminently democratic in nature, can have significant developmental and also empowerment implications (eg. greater state responsiveness).

Table 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	South Africa (ODAC, 2010)

to housing and water.	
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	India (Misra, 2007)

satisfaction.	
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	Multiple countries linked to ActionAid and Concern (David et al., 2006; Jacobs

'citizens' or accountability claimants in this case).	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/NCPRI, 2009)
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 *EITI* 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 1 shows, a number of studies 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; this 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 under way 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).

Most work to date tends to focus on the *effectiveness* of the initiatives themselves. Less has been able to show 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 to begin to assess overall trends – there are simply not enough good impact studies.

5   How is the Impact of TAIs Assessed?

The evidence above has been gathered using a range of approaches and methods. They are shown in Table 2, along with a specific example of each method's application.

Table 2: Methods for assessing the impact of TAIs[5]

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)

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[5] The various methods, methodological designs within which they are deployed, and their strengths and weaknesses for the assessment of TAIs, are discussed in greater depth in McGee and Gaventa, 2011.

Experimental approaches, eg. 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)

Confusion around the terminology used to describe T&A research and evaluation methodologies makes it difficult to identify mutually exclusive categories to compare different designs and approaches. A few studies reviewed in the aid transparency, budget and FoI 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 and Bentley, this volume). On a smaller scale, but valuable for its 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).

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 realistically can be measured
- Issues of *ethics* and *positionality:* the question of whose knowledge counts in impact assessment, and the *situated* nature of knowledge.

The range of methods in Table 2 may seem fairly wide, but a study commissioned by DFID's Research and Evaluation Division (Stern et al., 2011) claims that, 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). The study also 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. 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.

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 further the complex factors which contribute to their success and navigate those better in the design and implementation of the initiatives.

6   Factors That Make a Difference

Despite the unevenness and limits of the evidence base, some common factors apparently shape the impact of TAIs. Grasping these involves understanding accountability work not only as formal mechanisms and tools – widgets, in the words of Joshi and Houtzager (forthcoming) – but also as relationships between state and society, infused with power dynamics and patterned by attitudes and behavior.

Context is crucial. It determines which T&A objectives are feasible or desirable in the first place, and which initiatives are appropriate in pursuit of them. How transparency, accountability and citizen engagement inter-relate in a given case is contextually shaped: for instance, greater accountability may not be achieved by transparent information alone but may require media competition, citizen capacity to process the information and the resources to act on it (Kolstad and Wiig, 2009). Impact depends not only on internal effectiveness, but also on the initiative's interaction with external factors. The impact of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, with the city's long history of citizen engagement and (at the time of the innovation) a political leadership highly committed to its success, sets it apart from other contexts which lack these conditions.

Thus, enquiring into the impact of TAIs in a de-contextualised way is not very useful. We need to ask the more nuanced question of which factors, both enabling and disabling, shape the possibility of TAIs achieving their stated goals in a particular context. This connects impact to both the broad context in which the initiative unfolds, and its underlying theory of change.

Major existing studies of impact of voice and accountability work[6], as well as pointing to various contextual factors, also highlight characteristics of the state and of 'civil society' or the citizenry, and specific dimensions of accountability relationships. Space constraints preclude detailed consideration of these studies' findings here: suffice it to say that overall our findings echo the factors highlighted by these previous studies. On the state or 'supply' side, three important explanatory variables emerge:

- Our review revealed little evidence of impact of TAIs in non-democratic settings, but did show some impacts in emerging democracies and fragile settings. This appears consistent with Goetz and Jenkins (2005)'s finding that the **level of democratisation** significantly shapes which strategies emerge in a given setting and how far they succeed. Essential freedoms of association, voice or media enhance the prospects of impact.

- A political environment that favours a balanced supply- and demand-side approach to accountability is critical to TAIs' success (Joshi, this volume; Carlitz, this volume; Calland and Bentley, this volume). Where the state is willing to adopt accountability provisions, the utility of these depends on them being fully institutionalised and having 'teeth'. Champions inside the system can help citizen-led TAIs succeed, but may find themselves constrained by systemic and institutional factors. To borrow a phrase from Malena (2009), citizen participation and pressure are needed to get from political won't to **political will** – but 'political will', an oft-used and insufficiently explicit term, needs further unpacking.

- Democratic space and committed state actors or political leadership may not be enough to bring about the desired changes. Also relevant are the broader political economy and prevailing **legal frameworks and incentive structures** within which political representatives and state functionaries operate (Mejía Acosta, this volume; McGee, this volume).

On the citizen side, three further factors emerge:

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[6] O'Neil et al.'s (2007) review of bilateral donor agencies' voice and accountability programmes; Malena et al.'s (2004) overview of World Bank-supported accountability programmes; Agarwal et al.'s (2009) review of World Bank social accountability initiatives; Goetz and Jenkins (2005); Mulgan (2003).

- For increased transparency to have an impact, citizens must be able to process, analyse or use the newly available information. Their **capabilities** can be strengthened by an active media; prior social mobilisation experience; coalitions; and intermediaries who can 'translate' and communicate information (Joshi, this volume; Calland and Bentley, this volume; Carlitz, this volume; McGee, this volume).

- TAIs appear to gain traction from being linked to **other mobilisation strategies** like litigation, electoral pressure or protest movements; and through invoking collective rather than individual action. Paradoxically, a multi-stranded or collective approach also makes it harder to isolate the impact of any one factor or actor alone (Joshi, this volume; Calland and Bentley, this volume).

- Many TAIs focus on citizens' **'downstream'** role in implementing policies that were formulated without their involvement. Citizens who were engaged further **'upstream'** in *formulating* the policies are more likely to engage in *monitoring* them; and engagement in policy formulation can arguably increase accountability more than *ex post* monitoring (Carlitz, this volume).

An important area of consensus in most recent work, reinforced by our own, is that while citizens' and states' characteristics are each clearly relevant, to understand the factors causing impact one needs to look at *both* sides of the governance equation (Gaventa, 2004). Features of their *interaction* may be more relevant still, as might the nature of the *boundaries* between them, which are increasingly understood to be blurred rather than clearly demarcated (Development Research Centre, 2011; DFID, 2010).

This points to the diversity and inter-dependence of state and society accountability actors, and urges us to bring into the TAI arena new thinking on governance to inform further research on what makes TAIs 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. It could shed much light on understandings of accountability, not least the notion that in a world of 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 or coalitions at multiple levels, including the private sector as significant but non-state actors.

Most promising are the recent tendencies towards 'bringing the political back in' to governance work (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, we can obtain some clues from existing studies on factors that make a difference to the impacts of TAIs, but more research is needed on how they engender change, 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. It would go further than enabling better demonstration of TAIs' impact: it would enable us to enhance demonstrable impact in practice.

7   Gaps and conclusions

While the evidence base on accountability and transparency may be underdeveloped, this does not mean that either it or TAIs themselves are not important. The methods and insights already emerging from this dynamic, relatively young but rapidly expanding field now need to be built on in order to deepen existing evidence.

Noteworthy in our review were the silos which currently characterise the transparency and accountability field. Both the literature and the key actors working in the fields of service delivery, budgets, information, natural resources and aid appear isolated from one another. From a practical and strategic point of view, there are synergies to be gained from developing more cross-cutting strategies and networks across these initiatives; and from an impact assessment point of view, far more comparative and holistic analysis is

needed of how the ensemble of TAIs now available can interact with one another to maximise the scope for change.

On the methodological side, the review suggests a number of strategies or innovations which could help to strengthen the quality and depth of the current evidence base. At one level, as argued previously, we need more of the same. A number of good, specific studies exist, using a range of methods, but there are not enough of these, across enough settings and methods, to begin to point unequivocally to overall patterns or to draw higher order conclusions. In addition, the state of the evidence could be improved in various ways: more systematic and rigorous design of the initiatives themselves; more early attention to holistic 'baseline' or initial context analysis, theories of change, sought outcomes and impacts; periodic updating of the context analysis; and the adoption of appropriateness (of the questions to which answers are sought) as the key criterion in selecting impact assessment methods.

The review also points to routes to enhancing TAIs' impact. Better insights are needed into the relationships between transparency, accountability, citizens' voice and participation, the conditions under which they interact positively, and what stimulates collective social action for accountability. The connections across various TAI 'fields' need to be strengthened to maximise learning. The black box of 'political will' that so often bars the way between TAIs and their sought impacts requires empirical unpacking.

At the conceptual level, we need firstly to move beyond simple dichotomies - such as supply and demand, and voice and response - and learn how to build cross-cutting conceptualisations that link civil society organisations, the media, champions inside government, private sector actors, researchers and others across these boundaries. Secondly, current cutting-edge work on governance must be brought to bear on T&A work. Thirdly, the concept of 'best practice' needs to be relegated in favour of sensitivity to context: working out why 'successful' initiatives succeeded, before rushing to scale them up or replicate them in other contexts. More investment is vital in the assessment and knowledge-building aspects of the T&A arena if it is to realise its considerable potential.

We end with a challenge. An overly technical approach to accountability relationships and their workings tends to obscure the 'accountability politics' (Fox, 2007b) that need to happen for TAIs to have a lasting and transformative impact. This proposition

has implications that go beyond effectiveness-enhancing measures and methodological refinements of impact assessment approaches. It calls for 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 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 misguided questions and getting partial answers.

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