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LEARNING REVIEW

MAKING ALL VOICES COUNT

A GRAND CHALLENGE FOR DEVELOPMENT

Learning for change in accountable governance programming

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FRONT COVER IMAGE: GERIC CRUZ. PARTICIPANTS AT THE MAKING ALL VOICES COUNT LEARNING EVENT, MANILA, 2016

Introduction

This short paper provides an introduction to some of the different kinds of learning that are important in implementing and monitoring accountable governance programmes. It discusses how Making All Voices Count makes sense of learning, outlines the aims and approaches of the programme's learning strategy, and sketches some of the different types of learning that it is drawing on to move towards its goal of transformative change in governance. It begins with a short learning dictionary that defines some of the terms used. It goes on to discuss some of the key areas of learning in accountable governance programming, and what enables and constrains learning, before reflecting on how challenges can be overcome. Finally, it includes a set of tools intended to support accountable governance practitioners engaged in learning.

Learning dictionary

We define some of the words that are used in this document, and in the field of institutional learning and change. Many of these phrases have more than one meaning; in setting out our definitions here, we are not saying that these definitions are 'correct', but providing clarity about how we use them.

Types of learning

Operational learning aims to understand the political contexts and power factors that cause the problem the programme is trying to address; to understand how change tends to happen; to understand the particular needs and realities of the people who are expected to use a solution to this problem; and to consider if or how existing evidence of what does or does not work is relevant to the solution proposed.

Contextual learning is operational learning that is sharply focused on a particular place at a particular time.

Evaluative learning takes place during programme implementation and aims to understand if and how a programme is working or not, for people in different contexts, and to use this analysis to refine the theories of change and action that underpin the programme.

Evidence-based learning uses knowledge from research that is defined as 'robust' according to criteria that include being subject to critical review.

Experiential learning is based on critical reflection of practitioner experience or monitoring data.

Single-loop learning helps us analyse how we do what we do.

Double-loop learning helps us analyse why we do what we do and how we could do it better, and helps us question our assumptions in order to consider whether we're doing the right things.

Other terms

Accountable responsive governance – the obligation of government actors to take responsibility for their actions. Accountable governance can happen when citizens raise their voices, and public institutions respond to them by adjusting their policies and practices.

Critical – involving skilful judgement about truth or merit.

Citizen engagement and voice – citizen engagement happens when people raise their voices to communicate their concerns and priorities, leading to the possibility that government institutions will respond to their needs and demands. When this happens, governance becomes more accountable.

Data – knowledge collected for reference or analysis; can be qualitative or quantitative.

Government responsiveness – the extent to which a government listens to the concerns and priorities of citizens, and to which its policies and institutions respond to the needs of citizens and uphold their rights.

Innovation – broadly speaking, a 'new idea, device or method', but this is also often viewed as the application of better solutions for meeting new requirements or unarticulated needs.

Knowledge – facts, information and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject.

Tacit knowledge – unwritten and unspoken human knowledge, based on emotions, experiences, insights, intuition, observations and internalised information.

Explicit knowledge – articulated knowledge which is expressed and recorded as words, numbers and codes, and which is easy to communicate via oral and visual media.

Lesson – a new piece of learning that is the result of an analytical process of a broad sample or a set of experiences, which explores what happened, how it happened, why, and what must be done as a result.

Life-world – all the immediate experiences, activities and contacts that make up the world of an individual or corporate life.

Reflective practice – the ability to reflect on an action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning. This enables recognition of the paradigms – assumptions, frameworks and patterns of thought and behaviour – that shape our thinking and action.

Tech for accountable governance initiatives – projects, programmes and campaigns which use information and communications technologies (ICTs) in initiatives intended to increase transparency and improve government accountability to citizens.

Theory of change – an approach for adaptive management used in development programmes. It combines mapping of the intended sequence and outcomes of a programme with critical thinking about its context, stakeholders and the assumptions that have been made about why change happens.

Transformative change – change that completely alters something's character, so that it is improved.

Learning in an accountable governance programme: Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count makes grants to support innovations and technologies that have the potential to transform governance, and supports research about what works in accountable governance, and why. This work covers three areas.

- *Backing innovative ideas and technologies for accountable governance and scaling up successful initiatives – through grant-making, brokering, engagement and technical support in programme countries.* For example, in South Africa, the programme supports a non-governmental organisation to bring citizen feedback into health service monitoring using a web-based feedback tool; in Nigeria, it supports an open data and social media platform for tracking budgets and public developmental projects.
- *Building an evidence base on what works in tech for accountable governance initiatives, what does not, and why – through research, and learning from practice.* For example, the programme has supported a study of water supply monitoring systems involving ICTs in Timor Leste and Uganda, and research into how marginalised communities in Kenya and South Africa use tech in transparency and accountability (T&A) initiatives.
- *Catalysing global, regional and national attention and action around innovation for citizen voice and government responsiveness – through sharing research and learning.* This includes convening its own learning events and contributing in research and policy spaces convened by others.

Learning is central to the approaches and activities of the programme, as Making All Voices Count Director Fletcher Tembo explains (Making All Voices Count 2016: 45):

> "'Learning' implies a continuous examination of our assumptions, asking difficult questions and seeking answers both from ongoing practice and from intentionally designed, evidence-based research … It includes learning from mapping processes and interventions at different levels in the accountability ecosystem, and using this learning to create vertically integrated and strategic influence at these different levels. *Our learning can help us to achieve transformative change that is moving towards more sustainable, powerful, fulfilling and democratic systems and actor behaviours.*"

Questioning our assumptions in order to consider whether we're doing the right things leads us towards learning how we can do things better. Learning is not always simple or straightforward. Making All Voices Count is a complex programme, involving diverse stakeholders who are engaged in both practice

and research in different contexts. They include three implementing partner organisations and numerous funded partners ranging from academics to tech developers to accountable governance practitioners. They work in many different countries, in contexts ranging from rural villages to capital cities.

Against this backdrop, learning means different things to different people – who are more and less powerful within the programme – and is used to create changes of different kinds in different spaces.

The rest of this section discusses how Making All Voices Count makes sense of learning, outlining the aims and approaches of its learning strategy, and sketching some of the different types of learning that it uses to move towards its goal of transformative change in governance.

The Making All Voices Count learning strategy

The learning challenge for Making All Voices Count is to capture and harness the diverse knowledge that it generates to create change in governance, while also evaluating programme effectiveness and ensuring that working practices constantly evolve to improve it.

Early in the programme, four interrelated areas of learning were sketched out to provide an architecture for achieving this: (1) operational learning for programming; (2) learning for policy influence and engagement; (3) learning for coalition-building; and (4) building a learning culture within the programme. A range of different activities was planned to support learning in each area, as shown in Table 1 on page 7.

These areas and activities provide the environment for different kinds of learning, with potential for creating change at different levels: the individual, the group, the project, the initiative, the programme, the community of practice and beyond.

Why learn?

It is helpful to divide the reasons for learning in accountable governance programmes into two related types: evaluative and operational.

- *Evaluative learning* aims to understand if and how a programme is working or not, for people in different contexts, and to use this analysis to refine the theories of change and action that underpin the programme.
- *Operational learning* aims to understand the political contexts and power factors that cause the problem the programme is trying to address; to understand how change tends to happen; to understand the particular needs and realities of the people who are expected to use a solution to this problem; and to consider if or how existing evidence of what does or does not work is relevant to the solution proposed.

For Making All Voices Count, a particularly important aspect of operational learning has been *contextual learning*, used to develop country-level theories of change to inform project design and adaptation in each of the programme's focus countries. To develop effective tech for transparency and accountability (T4T&A) projects, this kind of contextual learning demands both detailed understanding of state–citizen relationships and the willingness and ability of government to respond, and an understanding of the needs of tech users. The lessons generated from contextual learning can then be used to develop locally relevant learning questions in projects, and in turn to contribute to programme-level evaluative learning that looks beyond individual projects.

Table 1 Areas of learning in Making All Voices Count

Learning area	Objective	Learning activities
Operational learning for programming	Foster learning that improves the operations and performance of Making All Voices Count-funded partners, and capture and spread that learning to others involved in similar and relevant activities.	• Developing and using theories of change as learning tools • Mentoring and practitioner research grants for funded partners • Face-to-face and virtual peer-learning events • Project monitoring and reporting • Competition and pitching events that include mentoring
Learning for policy influence and engagement	Harness and translate the learning the programme generates to influence the broader field of T&A.	• Funding and supporting research on knowledge gaps in the T&A field • Research outputs • Online dialogue • Webinars • Blogs and popular articles • Staff participation in policy debates and events
Learning for coalition-building	Enable organisations and individuals in the programme countries to learn about and explore innovative ways of improving the relationship between citizens and states.	• Mentoring • Brokering and learning events to involve and inspire stakeholders • Tech hubs, communities of practice, and a virtual South-to-South lab
Building a learning culture within the programme	Encourage critical curiosity and a cross-programme culture of learning to ensure continuous learning and reflection on what works and what does not, and the reasons for this, to tackle the gap between evidence and programming in the T&A field.	• Regular sharing of questions and insights • Action research and reading • Internal learning events

What kind of knowledge?

All types of learning involve acquiring and reflecting on knowledge. In Making All Voices Count, two types of knowledge are particularly important across its range of contextual and evaluative learning activities.

- *Experiential knowledge* is based on practitioner experience or monitoring data. Experience can be, and should be, made into evidence through systematic, critical reflective processing.
- *Evidence-based knowledge* is based on research defined as 'robust' according to criteria that include being subject to critical review.

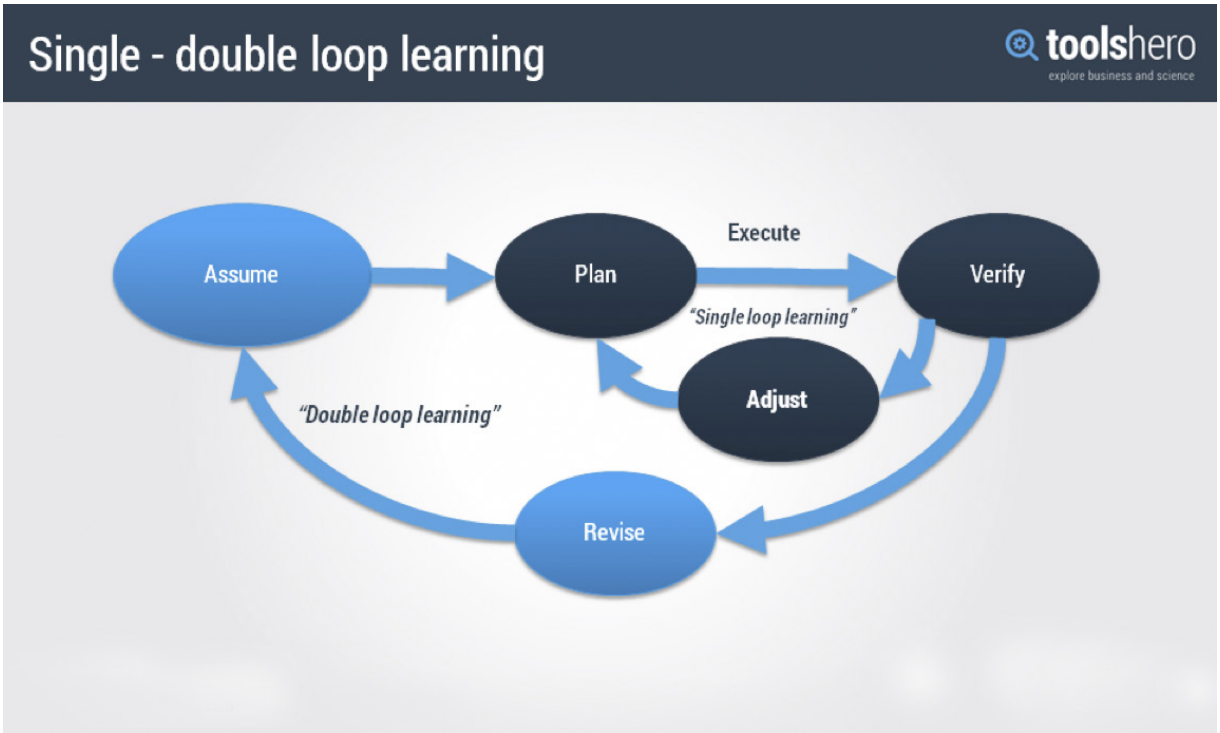
Experiential and evidence-based knowledge are used differently: evidence-based knowledge is particularly important for policy influence and engagement, for example, while experiential knowledge – which has been critically reflected on – forms the foundation for evaluative programme learning. But they are also valued differently by different actors, within and outside Making All Voices Count, who are not equally powerful. These differences create tensions about learning that can block the pathway to transformative change.

What depth of learning?

Understanding the causes of problems and effective ways of solving them is an important aspect of learning in organisations. The concept of single- and double-loop learning (Argyris and Schon 1974) provides a useful way of distinguishing between different depths of problem-centred learning.

Single-loop learning helps us analyse how we do what we do, while double-loop learning helps us analyse why we do it and how we could do it better, and questions our assumptions in order to consider whether we're doing the right things.

The change that comes from single-loop learning is applied to our actions, while the change that comes from double-loop learning is applied to our assumptions about why we act:



Source: van Vliet (2014)

- *Single-loop learning* answers the question: can we improve the thing that we are doing? This kind of learning is common for those involved in tech projects, who constantly test platforms and adjust or correct them as they get feedback.

- *Double-loop learning* answers the question: are we doing the right thing? This kind of learning usually happens later in a programme or project, when there has already been time to make slight adaptations as a result of single-loop learning.

Most of the individual and group learning in Making All Voices Count so far has tended to focus on single-loop learning at the project and institutional level.

For example, Ushahidi, one of the programme's implementing partners, uses a spreadsheet of 'milestones and lessons learned' to identify operational issues that trigger action and change. This is part of a learning culture that questions whether the organisation is doing things right.

As yet, though, there has been little opportunity in the programme to use factors identified as hindering projects (through single-loop learning) to pose the double-loop learning questions that will contribute to transformative change. Such strategic thinking requires not only adequate time, but also a culture of openness and trust to contribute to transformational change.

What helps learning, and what presents challenges?

Finding the curiosity and commitment that are needed to develop "the practice and discipline of questioning everything" (Faustino and Booth 2014: 17) is not always easy. This section brings together some lessons from the implementation of Making All Voices Count about what has helped learning, and the places where challenges have been encountered. These lessons are organised under each of the four areas of the programme learning strategy, and each begins with a reminder of the objectives and learning activities in that area.

Operational learning for programming

Objective

Foster learning that improves the operations and performance of Making All Voices Count-funded partners, and capture and spread that learning to others involved in similar and relevant activities.

Activities

Developing and using theories of change as learning tools; mentoring and practitioner research grants for funded partners; face-to-face and virtual peer-learning events; project monitoring and reporting; competition and pitching events that include mentoring.

What helped learning?

- A funded partner building on the experience of their peers to identify what worked in mentoring, and having the confidence to seek a mentor that was a good fit with their needs.

- Funded partners finding creative ways to document learning that decentralised the responsibility for capturing lessons.
- Internal learning feedback loops worked well when accountability relationships between different programme staff were clear.
- Nurturing trusting relationships and creating safe spaces for raising questions.
- Joining up learning from different events – such as a hackathon, and a learning and inspiration event – with country plans.
- A think piece on using communities of practice as a key brokering and engagement strategy included a summary of progress and reflections on factors that helped and hindered effectiveness; this proved useful and was communicated effectively within the programme.
- Monitoring visits and community of practice events offered useful opportunities for learning.
- Sticking to consistent, well-defined terms helped everyone get 'on the same page'.

What were some of the challenges?

- It can be difficult to find mentors for funded partners with the right technical and relational expertise, who will be available when you need them.
- It is important to understand the diverse policies and expectations of multiple donors, especially with respect to project monitoring and reporting.
- Guidelines and learning questions for learning processes help foster structured learning and critical reflection, and good internal communication is needed. It is sometimes difficult to achieve all these in every situation where learning is expected.
- Lack of clarity about the difference between experiential and evidence-based learning, and which is most useful in any particular situation.

Learning for policy influence and engagement

Objective

Harness and translate the learning that the programme generates to influence the broader field of T&A.

Activities

Funding and supporting research on knowledge gaps in the transparency and accountability field; research outputs; online dialogue; webinars; blogs and popular articles; staff participation in policy debates and events.

What helped learning?

- Adaptation of the research grant-making model to help funded partners be much more explicit about their learning questions helped to improve research outputs.
- Finding a comfortable balance between 'academic voices' and 'experiential learning' allowed researchers to apply lessons to practice and policy.
- Applying practical lessons from programme learning events to project practice.

What were some of the challenges?

- Applying more theoretical or abstract lessons from programme learning events to project practice.
- A perception that not enough experiential learning was being shared at programme learning events, and theoretical voices were too dominant.
- Lack of clear responsibilities for communicating, packaging and regularly sharing research findings within the programme.

Learning for coalition-building

Objective

Enable organisations and individuals in the programme countries to learn about and explore innovative ways of improving the relationship between citizens and states.

Activities

Mentoring; brokering and learning events to involve and inspire stakeholders; tech hubs, communities of practice, and a virtual South-to-South lab.

What helped learning?

- Communities of practice in some countries have enabled new relationships to develop and learning beyond the project level to take place.
- The most successful community of practice, in South Africa, was sustained by a strong and mature civil society, one experienced in fighting for citizens' rights.
- Structured facilitation of communities of practice helped achieve double-loop learning.
- A community of practice structure that involved regular sharing and learning sessions for funded partners, regular engagement with external stakeholders, and citizen engagement meetings.
- Community of practice events hosted in rotation by different funded partners.
- A charismatic champion for communities of practice, who ensured momentum was maintained.
- International brokering events can nurture potential coalitions, and have had some success with nurturing single-loop learning.

What were some of the challenges?

- Apart from the communities of practice, there has been relatively little documentation of group or organisational learning within alliances and coalitions.
- Using brokering events to move beyond the 'talking shop', where skills, ideas and problems are shared, but there is little critical thinking about larger challenges.
- A tension between learning from grant-making for discrete social accountability projects, and integration with more political approaches that tackle root causes, can squeeze the space for learning about creative ideas that might work.

Building a learning culture within the programme

Objective

Encourage critical curiosity and a cross-programme culture of learning to ensure continuous learning and reflection on what works and what does not, and the reasons for this, to tackle the gap between evidence and programming in the T&A field.

Activities

Regular sharing of questions and insights; action research and reading; internal learning events.

What helped learning?

- Structured facilitation that challenges programme staff to critically reflect on assumptions.
- Enthusiasm for learning opportunities.
- Use of visual and creative methods.

What were some of the challenges?

- Learning is often not the most important priority for programme staff and partners; bureaucratic protocols and accounting systems sometimes contradict its importance.
- Opportunities to engage in substantive sharing and organisational learning are essential to a learning culture, but it is not always easy to provide for a decentralised programme.
- Power dynamics at learning events can influence learners' experiences, sometimes in a negative way.
- At the outset, the lack of a shared understanding about the aims and definitions of learning from managers in different parts of the implementing consortium.
- Lack of clear opportunities and spaces for double-loop learning.

Overcoming learning challenges in complex governance programmes

Encouraging learning in a complex governance programme like Making All Voices Count involves many challenges. Those touched on in this report include:

- multiple stakeholders with different learning agendas, leading to overlapping learning systems that sometimes contradict one another
- power relationships that shape who participates in learning, and whose knowledge counts
- communication failures that prevent the transmission of learning from discrete projects across the whole programme
- lack of clarity about learning goals for different programme stakeholders at different stages of the project cycle
- the inherent uncertainty involved in innovation and political transformation.

Overcoming these challenges in programme design needs:

- a shared language of learning, and combinations of activities that generate systematic, sequential information on context, and provide a chance to reflect on assumptions and adapt activities
- a systematic learning focus from the outset, which outlines the learning roles and responsibilities of staff in different parts of

the organisation
- enough time to engage in learning
- specific opportunities to link lessons from different parts of the programme
- an agreed process of sharing learning from early projects, so that it shapes the design of new projects.

To these factors can be added the lessons from a 2014 workshop of monitoring, evaluation and learning professionals, who discussed the experiences of several successful complex programmes, many of which dealt with accountable governance (IDL and the Policy Practice 2014). They reflected on the key common ingredients needed to achieve shared learning and adaptation.

- Theories of change that provide evaluators, managers and frontline implementers with a regular means to review and revise their approaches.
- Monitoring, evaluation and learning being an ongoing and in-house process – with external support if necessary – to enable tighter feedback loops between monitoring and changing strategic and operational direction.
- Political shrewdness, with senior managers buffering programme staff from donor demands and mechanistic reporting requirements by finding creative ways to deliver evidence and results to their funding bodies.
- Using creative tools and approaches, such as stories of change, outcome mapping, reporting failure, political and power analysis.

Tools for learning 1: asking the right questions

Good questions are at the heart of learning, but finding the right question is not always easy. What kind of questions are useful for evaluative and operational learning that leads to change? Those that ask 'how?', 'why?' and 'so what?' are particularly important.

Questions for evaluative learning

In Making All Voices Count, evaluative learning is focused on accountable governance initiatives that use tech – particularly the programme itself, and the projects it funds. It asks what is working in these initiatives, what is not working and why – and what this implies for the next stage of action. Overarching questions for evaluative learning might include:

- What is being learned about this project and its context?
- What data exists and what does the data say about what is happening?
- What is new in the context – are there new actors, new windows of opportunity? What new factors need to be considered?
- How should the strategy be adjusted?

People involved in a project may need prompting to reflect on these questions, and systematically record their reflections. The box below gives some generic examples of secondary questions that can be used to help encourage reflection and action through clarification, probing and analysis.

Questions that prompt reflections for evaluative learning

Clarification

- What has happened?
- How do you see it?
- What makes you say that?
- What else can explain the situation?

Probing

- What is the difference between the current situation and the way you assumed it would be?
- Can you explain why?
- What is the difference between the current situation and the way you would like it to be?
- Can you explain why?
- Who else matters in this process?
- Can you give an example?

Analysis for action

- If all decisions rested on you, what would you do now?
- What would help or hinder you in doing this?
- What are your options for action?
- What other possibilities exist?
- Where could you get more information about this?
- Who else might have an interest in this?
- What assumptions are you making?
- What obstacles do you envisage?

Systematically recording the answers to questions creates an evidence base for evaluative learning.

Source: Adapted from INTRAC (2011)

Different types of questions also have an impact on the depth of evaluative learning that is produced, and the type of change that might result. Single-loop learning questions, considered during project implementation, will result in adjustments to project activities, while double-loop learning questions may result in changes to the way the whole project is framed, or whether it is done at all or replaced by something else.

A single-loop line of questioning that Making All Voices Count-funded partners might consider during project implementation include:

- Have we been able to make an accountable governance innovation accessible?
- Does the innovation work? If not, how can we make it work better?
- Are people using our innovation? If not, why not? Do we need to change a function, or publicise it better?

A double-loop line of questioning for the Making All Voices Count programme might be:

- Are we doing the right thing?
- Are any or all of the projects creating any significant change in the nature of citizen–state power relations, as is assumed in the theory of change?
- If not, why not?
- What does this tell us about our assumptions?
- How can we adjust our assumptions to respond to this?

Questions for operational learning

Questions for operational and contextual learning are slightly different to those used for evaluative learning. They aim to understand the political contexts in which T4T&A initiatives like Making All Voices Count aim to support transformative change in governance. These questions are directed at how change tends to happen, what the people who might use the initiative want and need, and to consider past experience of what works in a place.

A useful approach to developing contextual questions for accountable governance initiatives is to divide the context into different domains that influence how change happens. O'Meally (2013) identifies six such domains that are important for social accountability, and presents a comprehensive range of questions for each. These form the basis for the domains and questions shown in Table 2, which have been adapted to provide a starting point for developing context-specific informative questions for tech for accountable governance initiatives.

Table 2 Domains and contextual questions for tech for social accountability initiatives

Domain	Examples of contextual questions
Civil society	• What form does civil society take and how vibrant is it? • What is the level of technical and organisational capacity among civil society organisations (CSOs)? • Are CSOs willing and able to act as pro-accountability forces? • Which CSOs are seen as legitimate representatives of citizens, and by whom? • What is the nature and strength of pro-accountability networks? • How willing and able are citizens to undertake social accountability initiatives? • What is the role of the media and how independent is it? • What is the current use of ICTs in civil society?
Political society	• What is the capacity of powerful elites, political parties, elected officials and bureaucrats to respond to or foster social accountability? • What kind of pro-accountability networks are there in politics and how strong are they? • Are political and civil rights and laws respected and enforced? • What are the formal mechanisms of accountability within the state and how well do they work? • What is the current use of ICTs in politics?
Inter-elite relations	• Which elites are represented among political power-holders? • Given the character of elite power, what are the windows of opportunity for accountability actions? • Are there any incentives for political elites to address social accountability claims? • Who is excluded from power?
State–society relations	• What is the history and present relationship between state and citizens in terms of bargaining about public services? • What are considered legitimate and illegitimate uses of public resources by citizens and state actors? • Is there any recent experience with social accountability activities? What does this say about the skills and tactics of civil society activism, and the way the state might respond?
Intra-society relations	• What are the barriers that citizens face in acting as change agents through social accountability? • Who is excluded from engaging on the grounds of social status? • How does social conflict, past and present, affect potential collective action for social accountability? • What is the current use of ICTs by different social groups?
Global dimensions	• How do donor agencies relate to social accountability activities? Are they supportive? • How are international actors held accountable for their actions and impact?

Source: Adapted from O'Meally (2013)

Tools for learning 2: using a theory of change

Theory of change is a tool commonly used in the management of development projects and programmes. It is often presented in the form of a diagram, showing programme strategies, outcomes and intended impacts, with an accompanying narrative summary that discusses the assumptions that have been made about how it will create change.

From a technical perspective, theory of change is a management tool, a way of mapping the logical sequence of an initiative – from its activities, through its outputs, to the changes it seeks to bring about.

But from a learning perspective, it is a framework for an ongoing process of reflection, an analysis that highlights and constantly questions underlying assumptions about how and why change might happen as an outcome of the initiative (Vogel 2012). According to James (2011), when theory of change is used as a learning tool, it:

- locates a programme or project within a wider analysis of how change comes about
- draws on external learning about development
- articulates our understanding of change, and challenges us to explore it further
- acknowledges the complexity of change, and the wider systems and actors that influence it.

Why use theory of change as a learning tool? Although different organisations will have different motivations, purposes include improving the operation of an initiative by readjusting strategy, improving understanding of the place where it operates, financial accountability, building and sustaining trust, and as a foundation for lobbying and advocacy (Valters 2015).

Learning a common language

For a large and complex initiative like Making All Voices Count, one way of seeing a theory of change is as an overarching framework that includes all the language of ideas and concepts that programme stakeholders need to learn in order to develop a common understanding of what they are doing. For Making All Voices Count, this includes:

- the differences between functional, instrumental and transformative governance programmes (see *Transforming governance: what role for technology* and *Bridging and bonding*)
- the differences and links between different types of grants, and approaches to competitive grant-making (*Making All Voices Count strategy synthesis*)
- the governance systems, political economy and technology infrastructure in each country context where the programme works
- existing evidence about what does and does not tend to work in T&A initiatives
- ongoing debates about different kinds of evidence and learning
- donor accountability requirements.

Questioning assumptions

The concept of assumptions is a central element of using theory of change as a learning tool. In this context, an assumption is something that is accepted to be true before something else can happen. The box below shows an example of an intended impact and a set of assumptions about it from the Making All Voices Count theory of change.

Impact and related assumptions from the Making All Voices County theory of change

Impact

People, including those who are poor and marginalised, are able to engage public and private institutions and call them to account about rights and other issues that matter most to citizens.

Assumptions

- Citizens are willing and able to exercise their agency.
- Governments perceive that it is in their interest to be held to account by, and be responsive to, citizens and their intermediaries.
- Citizens and their intermediaries find it worth their while, and safe, to engage with governments.

Source: Making All Voices Count theory of change

When a theory of change is used as a learning tool, it provides regular opportunities to reflect on assumptions like these, which are embedded in both the logic of a programme or project, and the world views of those implementing it. As such, it can support both single- and double-loop learning. In practice, on one hand this means undertaking operational and contextual learning to identify gaps around different pathways to change that an initiative is following. But on the other, it means regularly revisiting the theory of change and making iterative, step-by-step adjustments (Valters, Cummings and Nixon 2016).

For example, the projects that Making All Voices Count funds aim to trigger changes in the attitudes and behaviours of citizens and state actors, and power relationships between them. Using a theory of change approach can support funded partners to think through the feasibility of their project design by revisiting:

- the 'problem' the project is trying to fix: the current state of citizen–state relationships and the root causes of them; this means engaging and re-engaging with analysis of context, in particular the ways that power influences the attitudes and behaviours of government actors, service providers and citizens
- the end goal - the meaningful change the programme wants to see
- assumptions about the changes in information flows, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that would need to take place in order for the goals to be achieved.

What is needed?

What is needed to use a theory of change for learning? Valters (2015) notes the importance of

- beginning a theory of change learning process not with a tool, a toolkit or a guidebook – but with an open discussion with a partner about what they do and why they do it

- a skilled facilitator working repeatedly with an organisation to co-produce learning
- regular spaces for reflection, often best achieved by building learning objectives related to the theory of change into the project cycle.

Valters also points out that complex development programmes involve numerous people with different identities – in the case of Making All Voices Count, from donors to implementers, and funded partners to ordinary citizens engaging with accountability processes – all of whom could become learners using a theory of change approach. It is important to be selective; once the basic layers of the programme have been unpacked through the theory of change, "then it can be decided where an adaptive learning approach can gain most traction, and for whom" (Valters 2015: 9).

What is reflection?

Regular spaces for reflection are an important part of using a theory of change as a learning tool. Reflection – the process of giving a matter serious consideration, or thinking about our experiences with the intention of learning from them – is an essential ingredient in a structured process of learning. The box below highlights some of the different aspects of reflective thinking.

Aspects of reflective thinking

Reflection is a type of thinking aimed at achieving better understanding and leading to new learning. All of the following are important aspects of the reflective process.

- **Making sense of experience** – we don't always learn from our experiences, but reflecting on them can help us actively try to 'make sense' or find the meaning in them. This should lead to learning.
- **Standing back** – it can be hard to reflect when we are caught up in an activity. Reflection provides a way of 'standing back' from emotions and quick judgments, in order to develop a clearer view or perspective.
- **Repetition** – reflection involves 'going over' something, often several times, in order to explore what happened from different points of view.
- **Deeper honesty** – reflection is associated with 'striving after truth'. Through reflection, we can acknowledge feelings or thoughts we might have chosen to ignore at the time, particularly if we felt unsure or worried about what others might think.
- **Weighing up** – reflection involves being even-handed, or balanced in judgement. This means taking everything into account, not just the most obvious things.
- **Clarity** – reflection can bring greater clarity, like seeing events reflected in a mirror. This can help at any stage of planning, carrying out or reviewing activities.
- **Making judgements** – reflection involves an element of drawing conclusions in order to move on, change or develop an approach, strategy or activity.

Source: Adapted from Effective Learning Service (2014)

Tools for learning 3: power and learning

Power lies at the centre of any process of learning for change. In Making All Voices Count, efforts to implement the programme's learning strategy in all four of its key areas – programming, policy influence and engagement, coalition-building, and creating a learning culture – are mediated by relationships of power between different actors. These relationships shape both learning within the programme, and what can be learned from its attempts to create more accountable governance in the countries where it funds the innovation and scaling of tech initiatives, and research into what works and why.

To engage in transformative learning in both these arenas, Making All Voices Count and other programmes like it need to make a power lens central to everything they do.

Power in internal programme learning

Evaluative learning – which considers whether a programme is working or not, and uses this learning to adjust strategy – takes place through the medium of relationships between programme staff. In the field of development aid and social change, such relationships are often characterised by unequal power dynamics, influenced by a range of factors that include wealth, age, race, gender and expertise. Any evaluative learning process which assesses how well a programme is functioning has to navigate power dynamics; to create change, it sometimes has to challenge them.
Collaborations are required for successful internal learning, but building bridges and relationships across groups from different life-worlds can prove challenging. It demands learning champions who are able to read and manage power relations within programmes, to help staff in different locations navigate power in order to develop a shared understanding of what the programme is doing and how it is doing it.

For example, the Making All Voices Count implementing consortium includes both researchers and practitioners. Debates about how to make experiential, contextually informed knowledge into evidence on which action can be based is an ongoing challenge and area of work. On the one hand, Making All Voices Count aspires to be bottom-up and encourage locally led innovative ideas and learning questions, but on the other it wants them to be informed by contextual learning. The tensions that arise when trying to manage debates about what knowledge is 'good enough' are not easily resolved, and demand a high level of trust between programme staff, as well as a shared understanding of programme goals.

Taking account of power in informative learning

T&A initiatives challenge the status quo of power relations by trying to influence relationships so that the voices of all kinds of

citizens are listened to, heard and taken into account. Making All Voices Count, for example, aims to change attitudes, behaviours and power relationships between citizens and state actors by using innovation and technology. As such, examining the distribution of power and resources in a given situation is key to the informative learning that underpins its projects. For example:

- Projects designed to ensure the representation of citizen voice need to map information flows to identify the different mediators who have power and can shape the way that voice is expressed – and then think about how these can be influenced to include more opportunity for voice.
- Projects designed to ensure government responsiveness at different levels need to map the power relations between different government departments and services providers to identify where leverage can best be applied.

There are a number of useful diagramming methods that can be applied to the essential step of analysing power relations as part of a contextual learning exercise. They involve a range of different understandings of power, summarised in the box below, which can guide an analysis of how power shapes governance relations.

Concepts of power

Faces of power

- Visible – the formal and observable exercise of power
- Hidden – power or bias exercised from behind the scenes, through the control of agendas and who is invited to participate in different spaces
- Invisible – deliberate thought control, or more unseen social norms, beliefs and structures that condition the domination of less powerful people

Forms of power

- Power over – authority, control or domination
- Power within – dignity, self-worth and confidence
- Power to – agency, or the ability to act
- Power with – collective action

Realms of power

- Public – workplace, meetings
- Private – household, family
- Intimate – relationship to and control over body, sense of self-worth

Spaces of power

- Closed – decision-making behind closed doors
- Invited / open – where select groups are invited to observe or participate
- Created / claimed – those excluded demand to be included, or create their own decision-making spaces

Source: Adapted from Pettit and Mejía Acosta (2014), who provide an excellent summary of terms in power analysis and political economy analysis, and fully reference their origins.

Hidden and invisible power in citizen voice and government responsiveness

Although getting a picture of visible power is an important aspect of contextual learning about accountable governance, it is learning about the subtle dynamics of hidden and invisible power that are key to a deeper understanding of how change can happen, or can be stopped from happening.

Questions that have emerged from Making All Voices Count for learning about hidden power in a given space are:

- How do government actors use hidden power – in the form of language, and the top-down control of agendas – to squeeze out spaces for meaningful participation in invited spaces?
- Who is holding the hidden power to control the agenda in any given situation, and how can they be targeted?
- How does hidden power influence whose opinions are valued, sought, listened to or heard in this space? Who is not here, and who is not bothering to express an opinion?
- Do the new technologies we have introduced have any impact on the hidden power that prevents the effective implementation of participatory and inclusive approaches?
- How will hidden power effect particularly vulnerable and /or marginalised groups, and influence the extent to which they can access proposed interventions.

Questions that have emerged from Making All Voices Count for learning about invisible power in a given space are:

- How do social norms influence people's behaviour in invited spaces? For example, a project in South Africa found that decades of oppression meant that people had internalised the idea that their voices did not count.
- Will invisible power influence people's engagement in a socially sensitive initiative? For example, a project in Liberia found that people were unlikely to report on family perpetrators of violence, regardless of the technology they were offered.
- How do social norms make it difficult for marginalised people to engage, and explain why they may not want to?
- How does invisible power influence whether people think they will be listened to or heard, or whether they will be at risk for expressing voice?

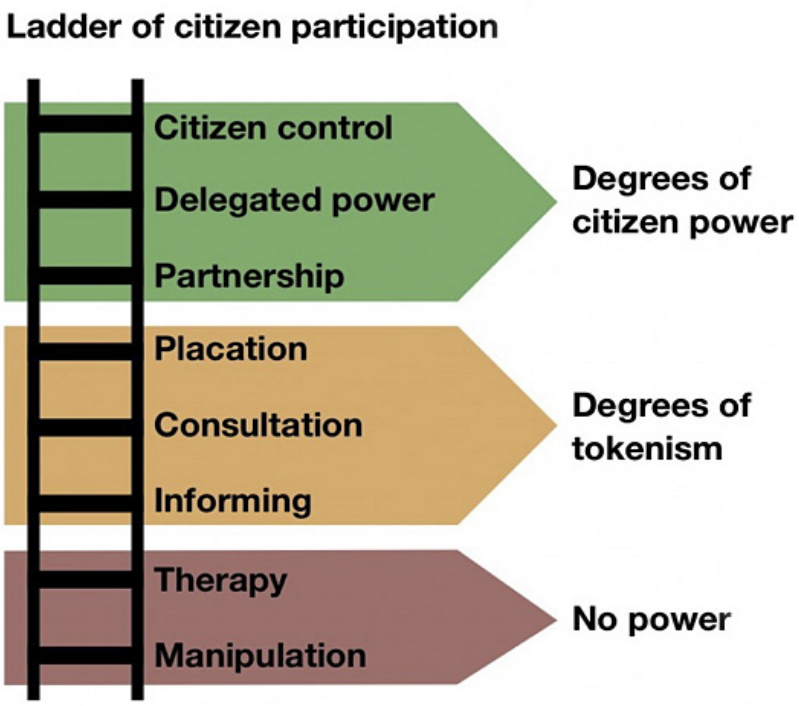
Tools for learning 4: unpacking participation

'Participation' is a term that is often used in the context of responsive and accountable governance, particularly when considering what happens when citizens raise their voices and public institutions respond to them. It is also an important concept when thinking about the role that tech can play in citizen engagement. Learning effectively about the dynamics of these governance processes means breaking down the multiple meanings of participation.

So what do we mean by participation? It can take diverse forms, and many scholars have defined different types of participation according to what kind of outcome results. Here, we discuss two typologies of participation that are particularly useful tools for learning about what happens when participation takes place in governance processes, and about the circumstances that allow transformative governance to take place.

The ladder of citizen participation

The ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein 1969), originally developed to analyse the role of citizen participation in planning, has been widely adapted and applied in many sectors, including health, education and democracy. It has eight steps, each representing a different level of participation. Each step explains the extent of citizen participation and how much power citizens have to determine the outcomes of the governance process they are engaging with.



Source: Julian (2013), based on Arnstein (1969)

The ladder is a useful tool for interpreting what is meant when programmes and policies refer to 'participation'. Arnstein uses the terms 'the powerful' and 'citizens' as shorthand, but emphasises that neither are homogenous entities, and that each grouping contains actors with more or less power.

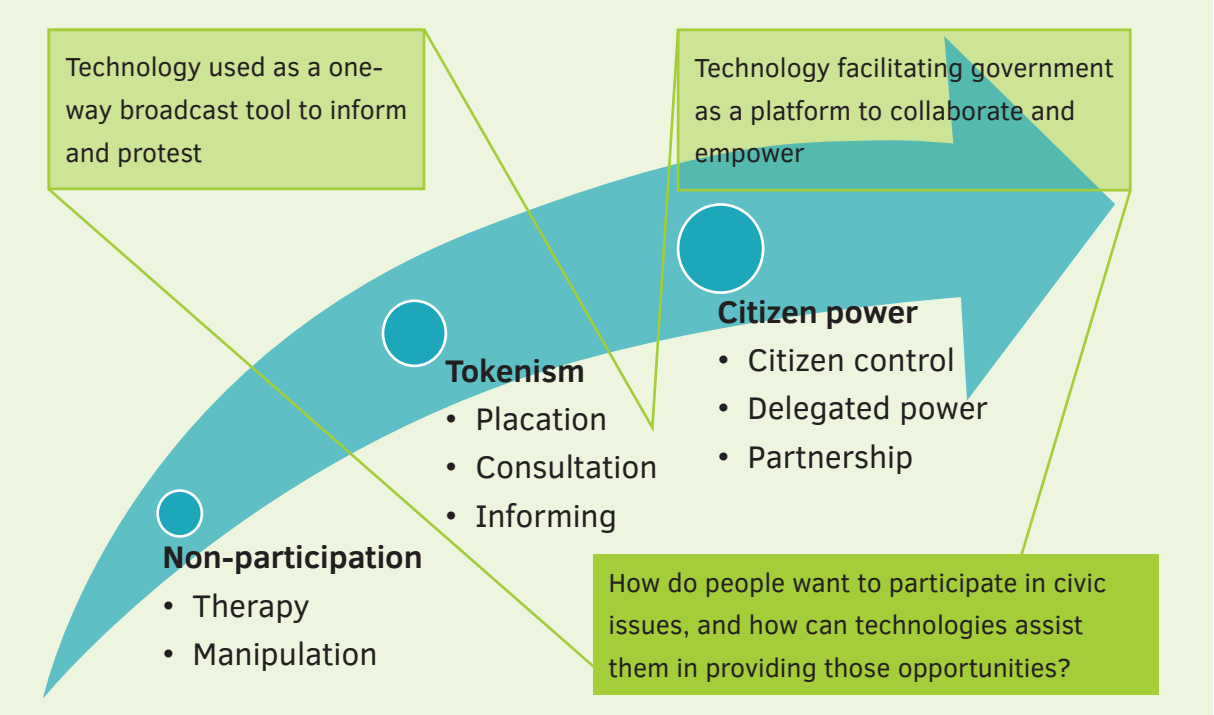
At the lower end of the ladder, manipulation and therapy are forms of participation where there is no transfer of power towards citizens. They are used by more powerful actors to impose their agendas by educating or 'curing' participants.

Towards the middle of the ladder, tokenistic participation happens when participants can hear those in authority and be heard by them, but do not have the power they need to ensure that their ideas are taken up or acted on.

At the higher end of the ladder are different forms of participation in which citizens have more power to change the status quo. Their voices are heard, they are able to negotiate, and – at the very top of the ladder – they hold full power and responsibility.

Sometimes, using a ladder approach to reflect on what is happening when participation takes place implies an assumption that it is always better to work towards moving 'up' the ladder in a given situation. But this is not always the case; sometimes, it may not be appropriate or safe for there to be a maximum level of citizen participation. Using a ladder of participation as a learning tool is less about aiming for a particular type of participation, and more about understanding how participation happens, then asking what dynamics of power are at play in shaping the possibilities for change.

What might using a ladder of participation look like in the context of learning about a tech for accountable governance initiative? The diagram below shows how Arnstein's ladder might be used to reflect on what kind of participation is happening in a project when an innovative approach is applied and scaled up, to ask about how the way that technology is used is related to the level of participation that takes place.



Source: Adapted from Holmes (2011)

The forms and functions of participation

A second typology of participation can also help to frame learning about what is happening in accountable governance initiatives. White (1996) distinguishes four forms of participation: nominal, instrumental, representative and transformative. She reasons that each form has different functions, and argues that actors 'at the top' (more powerful) and 'at the grass roots' (less powerful) have different perceptions of and interests in each form.

1. **Nominal participation** is often used by more powerful actors to give legitimacy to development plans. Less powerful people become involved in it through a desire for inclusion. But it is little more than a display, and does not result in change.
2. **Instrumental participation** sees community participation being used as a means towards a stated end – often the efficient use of the skills and knowledge of community members in project implementation.
3. **Representative participation** involves giving community members a voice in the decision-making and implementation process of projects or policies that affect them. For the more powerful, representative participation increases the chances of their intervention being sustainable; for the less powerful, it may offer a chance for leverage.
4. **Transformative participation** results in the empowerment of those involved, and as a result alters the structures and institutions that lead to marginalisation and exclusion.

There are overlaps with the ladder of participation, but White's work helps us to think about hidden agendas and the dynamic relationships between more and less powerful actors. Discussing the differences or compatibilities between bottom-up and top-down interests can lead to a clearer understanding of the politics of participation. The actors at the top may talk about participation, but intend to maintain the status quo. It is only in transformative participation that the power holders are in solidarity with the less powerful to take actions and shape decisions.

This framework has clear overlaps with transformative governance, and the potential to frame learning about accountable governance processes. As with the ladder of participation, White emphasises that this framework needs to be seen as something dynamic, and that a single intervention can include more than one form of participation.

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Background to this learning review

This learning review was written to condense some of the insights from an unpublished internal report, written by Cathy Shutt in 2015. The tools for learning have been added as resources for practitioners involved in learning about accountable governance programming.

About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. It focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

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Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's research, evidence and learning component, managed by IDS, contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A).

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