The Transparency and Accountability Initiative recently convened a meeting that gathered a group of funders, civil society organizations, and researchers from all over the world—over 50 people in total. The idea was to start working together on issues of impact and learning in the field of transparency and accountability and to launch a community of practice to sustain this work over time.

### An inspiring meeting

The first goal of the meeting was to create a safe space for such diverse stakeholders to tackle tough and persistent issues limiting progress in the field. This entailed inspecting incentives and barriers to learning and exploring how to leverage learning to maximize impact.

For three days, we worked together intensely. We discussed the challenges that we each face in our practice and in our relationships with each other. We formed “practice groups” around five priority issues:

- **The transparency-participation-accountability nexus**: how to better understand and leverage the connection between transparency, participation, and accountability
- **The issue of context**: how to analyze the context of interventions to understand how and why they do or do not transfer successfully to new contexts
- **Methods and learning from failure**: how to choose the right methods, metrics, and approaches to analyze interventions, evaluate impact meaningfully, and learn from both successes and failures
- **Incentives for learning**: how to shape funding relationships and institutional structures to promote learning within and across organizations
- **Learning how to learn**: how to embed learning methods and processes at the core of our organizations and networks

The discussions were intense, the atmosphere trustful but charged, and the participants energized. Everyone felt that something special had happened.

### Taking it forward

The second goal was to lay the foundation for a community of practice to advance the field. Whether this goal was fully achieved will depend on whether the group harnesses the energy generated to forge an ongoing learning partnership. Such communities can be difficult to sustain beyond the enthusiasm of the first meeting, as people go back to the demands of their daily responsibilities. In this case, a number of key ingredients seem to be in place:

- **Sense of urgency**: The meeting revealed a shared sense that this is an urgent task. After 20 years, it is time to figure out when and how we have impact and to apply this knowledge in our strategies and operations. We really need a safe place for funders, CSOs, and researchers to work this out together. Otherwise, systemic disincentives to leverage our collective learning will keep limiting our impact.

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1. The Transparency and Accountability Initiative is a donor collaborative working to expand the impact and scale of transparency and accountability interventions. Current members include the Hewlett Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, Omidyar Network, DFID, HIVOS, the International Budget Partnership, and Revenue Watch.
- **Group learning plans:** After working on their issues, the five practice groups presented plans of activities through which they would make progress. They committed to keep going for a year at least.

- **Internal leadership:** A number of members have come forward to provide joint leadership in taking the community through its first year.

- **Institutional support:** The Transparency and Accountability Initiative will act as sponsor and provide logistical support to the community at least until August. They are placing this commitment as a priority on their budget request for 2013-2016.

For this year, we plan to hold regular web-conferences and online discussions, both for specific groups and for the whole community. Activities will include working on specific cases, discussing hot topics, and producing collective resources. We will also invite others to join us.

In February 2014, we aim to hold another event where group leaders and active members will consolidate our learning and launch the new year of activities.

**Our aspiration**

We seek to promote critical thinking about what initiatives work and do not work, when, where, and how—in order to strengthen the field’s knowledge base. We believe that working as a community of practice will far exceed the effectiveness of any single organization’s attempt to produce knowledge alone. We hope to see the learning of our community produce the following kinds of stories:

- Funders find new ways to collaborate in supporting complex systems of interventions
- CSOs discover critical factors they can leverage to link transparency and accountability
- Researchers gain insights from the field to frame their research projects

We want to achieve greater impact by placing learning at the core of our practice. We expect to change the way we design interventions, assess our work, negotiate reporting requirements, create incentives to learn from both successes and failures, and maximize impact collectively. This has the potential to be transformative.