What does the evidence tell us about the effectiveness and impact of public governance MSIs?

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Transnational multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) are changing the ways in which civil society participates in public governance reform. Civil society organizations in Brazil worked with the government to improve public access to information as part of their commitment to the Open Government Partnership (OGP). A multi-stakeholder group in Liberia worked to pass a natural resource revenue transparency law as part of their commitment to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). A similar group assembled by the Construction Sector Transparency Initiative (CoST) in Guatemala successfully convinced the government to annul a large and inefficient public works contract for the reconstruction of the Belize Bridge in Guatemala City.

While most of the world's numerous MSIs involve using voluntary standards to encourage socially and environmentally responsible private sector behavior, MSIs for governance reform focus on the public sector. But how exactly are these MSIs supposed to work? And how much has actually been achieved?

Advocates suggest that by facilitating communication and collaboration between government and civil society, MSIs tap into the technical, social, and political information necessary to address today's most challenging governance problems. Through a virtuous cycle of participation, information disclosure, and accountability, MSIs provide empowerment, opportunity, training, and support to reformers across all sectors of society.

However, skeptics point out that MSIs also involve risks:

- The proliferation of actors and standards can overwhelm the capacity of governments and civil society groups and limit their ability to participate effectively.
- Given that 'barriers to entry' are intentionally low, the process might be blocked or coopted by entrenched interests and used to bolster the legitimacy of closed and undemocratic regimes (“open-washing”).
- Although MSIs ostensibly increase access and standing for constituencies not represented in traditional interstate forums, most MSIs were created by traditionally powerful actors, and may reproduce structural imbalances that favor them.
- Perhaps most important of all, the process by which information disclosure might lead to public accountability – so fundamental to the success of public governance MSIs - turns out to be quite complex and far from inevitable.

Given the exciting possibilities and troubling risks of public governance MSIs, we need to know more about how these initiatives define, track, and interpret their effectiveness and impact. What kinds of evidence are out there? What can it tell us about strategies for success? And what can it tell us about shared challenges?

On February 11, at the Effectiveness of Multi Stakeholder Initiatives workshop here in Washington DC, Jonathan Fox and I will present our initial findings from a review of over 300 documents covering five public governance MSIs: EITI, CoST, OGP, GIFT, and OCP. We looked at strategy documents, comparative case studies, large-N quantitative studies, and even a few cross-initiative comparisons. While MSIs are still quite new, we found some fascinating overlap in terms of what they've been able to accomplish, where they still face challenges, and what they've learned so far. We're looking forward to sharing our findings with you and look forward to a great discussion!