



// CIVIL SOCIETY
4 DEVELOPMENT

// CONFRONTATION AND COLLABORATION

Archon Fung and Stephen Kosack

Very few people in the world of transparency and accountability would claim that there is an automatic, one-to-one connection between the provision of information on one hand and the production of good things like governmental accountability, better public services, or less corruption, on the other.

The question is how transparency is connected to accountability? What are the mechanisms that connect increased information to good governance outcomes?

Perhaps the most familiar view is that information empowers and emboldens citizens to confront predatory or inept officials. The now iconic success of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) is an example of this model. In its early days, the MKSS helped villagers in Rajasthan extract budget information from secretive governments and organized public meetings to show dramatic leakages and thefts from the public treasury (An early account of this period is in Rob Jenkins and Anne Marie Goetz, 'Accounts and Accountability: Theoretical Implications of the Right-to-Information Movement in India', *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 20 No. 3 (1999).)

This is a compelling model, but dramatically different from another more recent example that is quickly gaining recognition and inspiring replication. Beginning in 2004, a team led by Martina Björkman and Jakob Svensson fielded a health intervention in Uganda in which they distributed information about local clinics and health conditions to community members and health care workers. Based on this information, the community developed action plans to improve the quality of its health services. The team found that their intervention greatly increased the use of health care, reduced child mortality, and increased child

weight. (See Martina Björkman and Jakob Svensson, 'Power to the People: Evidence From a Randomized Field Experiment on Community-Based Monitoring in Uganda'. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* Vol. 124 No. (2) (2009), 735-69.)

Both these interventions relied on transparency to improve governance. But the mechanisms at work in the Uganda intervention are dramatically different from those in the MKSS. The MKSS relied on confrontational, adversarial strategies that developed countervailing power to discipline the traditional and formal power of corrupt officials and local notables. In contrast, the community members in the Uganda case developed ways of collaborating with health workers to improve health care and its outcomes.

One question now faced by the field of Transparency and Accountability is how to conceptualize and navigate the different paths of confrontation and collaboration. At one level, the problem appears simple. If local officials are willing to act as partners for governance improvement based on information that arises from a transparency effort, then collaborate. If they are not, then confront.

This easy logic is of course more complicated on the ground, because accurately discerning the willingness of officials to act as partners requires extensive, nuanced local knowledge. It may also be possible to make resistant officials more willing to cooperate (or vice versa) through strategic action and program design. More fundamentally, activists, funders, and even researchers may have biases that prevent them from recognizing when one or the other is desirable, or even possible. The very name that the field has adopted - Transparency and Accountability - already

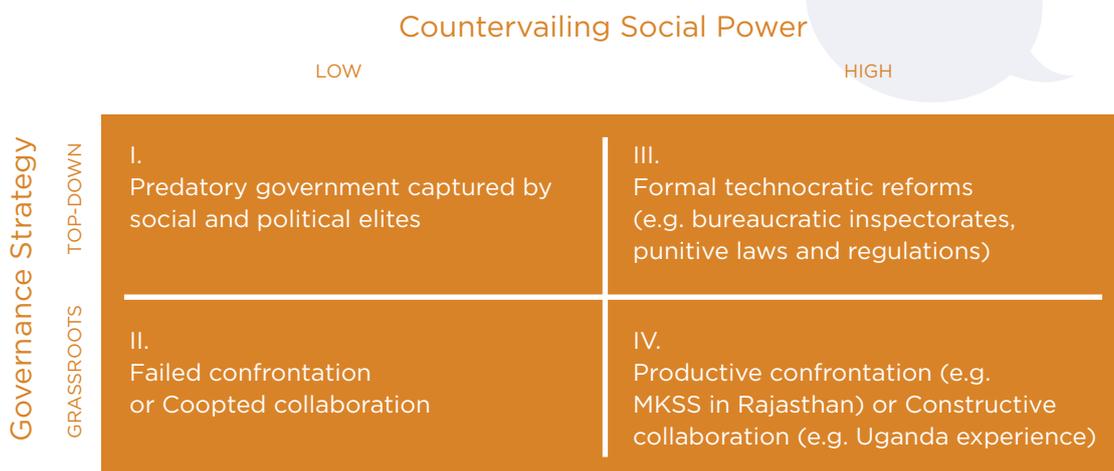
connotes a tilt toward confrontation. The distinction between confrontation and collaboration raises additional questions about political strategy, and institutional design more broadly. (Several years ago, one of us tried to think through the implications of some of these issues for participatory democrats in an essay entitled “Countervailing Power in Empowered Participatory Governance.”) If transparency activists sometimes downplay the possibilities for cooperation because they are focused on accountability, enthusiasts of participatory governance have often been accused of being obtuse about questions of power and the need for conflict. For the sake of both transparency and participatory governance, practices of confrontation need to complement – that is, work in synergy with – practices of collaboration.

The reason is that a background of balanced power – between potentially predatory officials and organized communities – makes successful local collaboration a lot more likely. When corrupt or predatory officials are threatened with real sanctions from various forms of ‘countervailing’ social and political power, they will be more likely to cooperate

in developing local health improvement plans. In the absence of such countervailing power, what begins as collaborative governance may well become cooptation or another form of domination.

Assuming that advocacy organizations and social movement groups can generate meaningful countervailing power, one broad question is how that power can best be used to increase accountability and good governance. The most familiar route is to construct top-down accountability mechanisms such as independent commissions, inspectorates, or tougher anti-corruption laws. This was the main response to the movement around Anna Hazare in India in 2011. A quite different course is to deploy countervailing power to create levers for grassroots organizations to press for accountability or pursue collaborative governance strategies at the local level. The Right to Information law in India followed this kind of strategy.

These four possibilities and their predicted implications – high/low countervailing power and top-down/grassroots governance – are shown in the figure below.



An important question for future study is which of the contexts and strategies depicted in this diagram will be more or less likely to increase accountability. Our intuition is that the strategies in cells I and II are likely to fail, while the strategies in cell IV are most likely to succeed because they incorporate both balanced power between the grassroots and government officials, and local, grassroots knowledge about appropriate strategies for engaging those officials. Others may argue in favor of cell III, however, to the extent that reforms that originate within the institutional structure of the state have a better chance of being effective and sustainable. Still others may make the case that effective reforms are limited to those rare cases in which there is activity in both cells – where technocratic initiative and expertise meets grassroots energy and experience.



// THE FIVE WORLDS FOR TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Archon Fung and Stephen Kosack

How can providing information lead to more accountable and effective governance? In the [previous post](#) we discussed two possibilities: the confrontational approach, in which information empowers citizens and communities to prevent public officials from misbehaving; and the collaborative approach, in which information allows communities and officials to work together, solving problems to make government and its services work better.

This is a complicated choice, but it is hardly the only one involved in designing effective transparency and accountability programs. Another, equally important choice is whether to target public officials at the local level or at higher levels of government (such as provincial or national levels). That is, the frontline providers of government goods and services or the policymakers and politicians who oversee them.

This choice is one with which the field of transparency and accountability has grappled for more than a decade. It is at the root of one of the field's most influential frameworks: the "long" and "short" routes of accountability in the World Bank's 2004 World Development Report *Making Services Work for Poor People*. In the short route, citizens engage directly with those who provide public services, to press for the improvement of those services. In the long route, citizens use their political power – voting or advocacy, for example – to press policymakers and politicians to use their positions of oversight to make government services more efficient and effective.

Furthermore, to be effective transparency policies must provide information that meets a number of criteria. It must be: salient and valuable to citizens – users of government services or those in the civil society who want to improve their lives – and useful to

those citizens, in that it helps change their behavior or decisions in ways that trigger improvements in governance. But triggering those improvements also requires action by the disclosers or objects of the information: they must be sensitive to the information, so that they are affected by its disclosure; and the disclosure of the information must lead them to improve their performance rather than resist or strategically game disclosures to obscure any underperformance. (These criteria are explored in greater depth in *Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency*, by Archon Fung, Mary Graham, and David Weil.)

Long route or short route; confrontation or collaboration?

We propose that one key to answering this question lies in the political-economic context within which a transparency program unfolds. Often the word "context" is used to indicate the difficulty of understanding a mechanism or generalizing a result. But we have in mind something quite specific: those features of the political economy that make information effective through different mechanisms. We offer a basic, if perhaps simplified, typology of five such contexts – five 'worlds' of transparency and accountability.

In many ways, the easiest context is that in which citizens have an exit option. When parents or patients can choose between more than one clinic or school, competition creates a kind of short route accountability in which users can vote with their feet, using the information provided through transparency to switch to higher performing providers.

But the transparency and accountability community generally deals with environments in which there is only one provider. This is when choices between long and short routes

and collaboration and confrontation become necessary. The choice involves assessing the individual providers, policymakers, and politicians, each of whom vary in their willingness to respond constructively to information about underperformance, and the incentives and constraints of the political environment in which these individuals are embedded. Depending on these features of the environment, designers of T/A programs may be operating in one of five worlds. Each implies a different mechanism by which transparency might improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services.

Competition, Collaboration, and Confrontation: Five Worlds Facing Transparency Interventions.

Political Context

Accountability Path

	COMPETITION/ CHOICE	WILLING OR ACCOUNTABLE INDIVIDUALS	UNWILLING OR UNACCOUNTABLE INDIVIDUALS
SHORT ROUTE (DIRECTLY TARGET FRONTLINE PROVIDERS)	World 1 (market mechanism)	World 2 (collaboration with frontline providers)	World 3 (confrontation with frontline providers)
LONG ROUTE (TARGET PROVIDERS INDIRECTLY THROUGH POLICYMAKERS AND POLITICIANS)	[N/A]	World 4 (collaboration with policymakers and politicians overseeing providers)	World 5 (confrontation with policymakers and politicians overseeing providers)

In each world, the mechanism by which transparency improves accountability and ultimately public services is different:

1. When public services compete, users can choose from more than one provider. In this world, transparency helps users make better choices among these providers.
2. Where there is little competition, but individual public service providers appear willing to engage in reforms, the contribution of information is to enhance the efforts of these providers. Information about actual practices and outcomes can help collaborative problem solving between community members and providers in which both develop more effective delivery practices.
3. Where there is little competition and service providers appear unwilling to engage in reforms, the role of information is to provide clarity about the main areas of underperformance and enhance the capacity of beneficiaries to pressure providers to increase their performance. The goal is to shift from a balance of power between citizens and providers in which providers are able to ignore the costs to citizens of their underperformance to one in which providers find it difficult to ignore these costs.
4. In a world of little competition, where service providers appear unwilling to engage in reforms but policymakers and/or politicians are willing to engage, citizens or their champions can avoid the difficulties of pressuring providers directly by collaborating with politicians and policymakers at a higher level in the reform project. In this world, the prime users of information need not be citizens themselves; they may be CSO advocates and policymakers. The role of information is to show how exactly public services are underperforming, so as to empower reform-minded policymakers or their allied advocates in civil society to craft policies such as incentives or sanctions to reduce frontline provider absenteeism.
5. Finally, in a world of little competition, where neither providers nor policymakers appear willing to reform – by far the most difficult one for T/A interventions to make a difference – the potential contribution of information is to mobilize broad-based social action that will ultimately change the incentives of policymakers

and, thereby, providers. In this world, the role of information is to reveal the underperformance of public services, so as to trigger collective action by citizens or civil society to incentivize or punish either providers or policymakers and politicians – for example, through social protest or at the ballot box.

Successful transparency programs are likely to be those that use their assessments of which world they are operating within to plot the path of least resistance through the short and long routes of accountability, with a mix of collaboration with allies and confrontation with those who stand in the way of improvement.

From Transparency to Accountability in the Five Worlds

SERVICE PROVISION CONTEXT	CONTRIBUTION OF INFORMATION	ACCOUNTABILITY ROUTE	COLLABORATION OR CONFRONTATION	EXEMPLARY TRANSPARENCY INTERVENTION
1 COMPETITION BETWEEN PROVIDERS	Inform individual choices	Short	[N/A]	Comparative provider performance rankings
2 PROVIDERS WILLING OR HAVE EXISTING INCENTIVES TO ENGAGE IN REFORM	Feed collaborative problem solving	Short	Collaboration	Citizen Report Cards or Community Score Cards followed by deliberative community meetings
3 PROVIDERS UNWILLING TO REFORM, COMMUNITY TRIES TO PRESSURE THEM	Increase pressure and accountability on service providers	Short	Confrontation	Social audits, followed by naming and shaming, social protest
4 PROVIDERS UNWILLING, POLICYMAKERS WILLING TO ENGAGE IN REFORM	Enable policymakers to enact top-down reform	Long	Collaboration	Social audits, Absenteeism studies, Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys followed by top-down accountability and/or community advocacy
5 PROVIDERS AND POLICYMAKERS UNWILLING	Build countervailing power to increase accountability	Short and long	Confrontation	Social audits, Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys, followed by community mobilization

// TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY INTERVENTIONS: MAKING SENSE OF THE EVIDENCE

Archon Fung and Stephen Kosack

Do transparency and accountability interventions work? In recent years, there has been a flood of rigorous evaluations of T/A interventions that seek to improve public services through transparency. Several show eye-popping improvements in the delivery of services and development outcomes, often at far less cost than other methods. Others, however, show little or no effect. This mixed picture frustrates those who see astounding potential in transparency and hampers its adoption as a tool by the broader governance-reform community. This frustration is apparent in recent reviews by [J-PAL](#) and [McGee and Gaventa](#).

Undoubtedly a number of factors lie behind the lack of a clear pattern to the evidence. In our [we](#) noted two in particular.

The first is context. Put simply, there is no reason why T/A interventions *should* have the same effect wherever they are implemented. Transparency is likely to translate (or not) into accountability in different ways – that is, through different mechanisms – depending on the context. Sometimes information helps citizens make better choices among competing providers; sometimes it helps citizens and providers work together to improve the provision of services; sometimes it allows citizens to put pressure on providers or politicians who are reluctant to make improvements. Our previous post described five “worlds” or service provision contexts in which information is likely to work differently.

The second factor is the usefulness of the information that transparency provides. Not all information is equally useful to citizens who hope to improve a service. Our last post emphasized four criteria for information useful to improving a service:

1. the information must be salient and valuable to users of a service;
2. the information must help users change their decision or behavior;
3. service providers must be sensitive to the information; and
4. service providers must respond constructively.

Context and usefulness help us make better sense of the evidence about the effects of T/A interventions. We examined 66 previously conducted studies. Among these we found 16 interventions that were evaluated experimentally – 15 by randomized controlled trials and one by a natural experiment. Of these 16, 11 reported a positive effect (mostly individual-level outcomes in health or education); five were unsuccessful.

Two of the interventions were performed in our “World 1” – the world of **competitive services**, in which users can choose from more than one provider of public services. World 1 is relatively straightforward for transparency: all the intervention needs to do is give users good information so that they can make better choices among available service providers. Both of these interventions were successful.

As far as we could discern from the studies themselves, none of the interventions saw themselves as operating in World 2, where **individual public service providers appear willing to engage in reform efforts**. Information in such cases can help providers make improvements through the “short route” of accountability, perhaps by fueling collaborative problem solving between them and community members.

The lack of interventions in this world is probably related to the difficulty of discerning in advance how willing providers will be. In fact, some of the most successful interventions did rely on collaboration with providers, among them the [Björkman and Svensson study in Uganda](#) we highlighted in our [first post](#). But these studies either found providers to be more willing to make reforms than they had anticipated, or were able to induce providers to be more interested in making reforms over the course of the intervention. These interventions still tried to trigger the “short route” of accountability, but in environments where there was **little competition and service providers appeared (at least initially) to be unwilling to engage in reforms**. That is, in our “World 3”. In total, we classify 10 of the 16 interventions as taking place in this world.

World 3 is trickier for T/A interventions. The goal is to induce providers to improve by making it more difficult for them to ignore the costs of their underperformance; meeting this goal often means shifting the balance of power between citizens and providers. Unsurprisingly, the 10 interventions in this world had a mixed record: six were successful; four were not. Yet the six successful studies show that the short route can lead to improvements even where providers seem unwilling to join in reform efforts.

Another three interventions took place in “World 4” – where there was **little competition and service providers appeared unwilling to engage in reforms, but policymakers and/or politicians were willing to engage**. Where providers are reluctant to reform,

citizens or their champions can sometimes avoid the difficulties of pressuring providers directly by working through the “long route” of accountability: collaborating with politicians and policymakers at a higher level. All three of these were successful.

The final intervention targeted “World 5”, the most difficult of all five, in which there is **little competition among providers and where neither providers nor politicians and policymakers appeared willing to reform**. Although this intervention was successful for a few months, it soon provoked a backlash from those policymakers whose oversight it required. The intervention (evaluated in Banerjee, A.V., E. Duflo, and R. Glennerster. 2008. “Putting a Band-Aid on a corpse: Incentives for nurses in the Indian public health care system.” *Journal of the European Economic Association* no. 6 (2-3): 487-500) used a timestamp to inform officials when nurses were absent from work, so their pay could be docked. But local administrators undermined the intervention by allowing nurses to claim an increasing number of “exempt” days.

While the number of evaluations in our survey is small, the pattern is relatively clear: interventions that take account of their context generally have a better chance of succeeding. Both interventions that leveraged a competitive environment (World 1) succeeded, as did all those that relied on top-down pressure from allies in the long route. Those in the most difficult worlds – 3 and 5 – naturally had more trouble, but we wonder if those in World 3 that had difficulty putting pressure on reluctant providers would have had more luck if they had tried the long route. These interventions may also have suffered

from a different problem altogether: the *salience* of the information. One of the World 3 interventions did in fact encourage citizens to use the long route; they just simply didn't. Other unsuccessful interventions tried to increase parents' involvement with the school or school-based management committees, but had difficulty generating parental interest and participation.

Our review also looked at some of the characteristics of the interventions themselves, and in particular the information they provided. There are several notable patterns:

1. Most interventions that focused on service provider inputs (such as absenteeism or financial resources) were successful; most of those that focused on outputs (such as test scores, whose connection to observable inputs may have been unclear to users) were not.
2. Most interventions did not recommend or imply clear actions for citizens to take in response to the information they were given; however, those that did (for example, attending a community meeting) were largely successful.
3. All but one of the unsuccessful interventions presented only absolute information on performance (for example, test scores), rather than comparative information that allowed users to see how their providers were performing relative to other villages or to national standards.
4. The interventions that presented both *objective* and *subjective* information (for example, both medical stocks and citizens' perceptions of waiting times at clinics) were successful.
5. All of the unsuccessful interventions provided information only about the performance of the provider, not about the rights of citizens. Only three successful studies provided information only on the performance of providers, and two of them were studies of interventions in world 1, in which, again, information on provider performance is useful to users for selecting better providers.

None of these patterns should be considered definitive – again, we have only 16 experimental evaluations. And none should be considered a silver bullet, sufficient in isolation to make an otherwise unsuccessful intervention successful. But as a whole they

suggest that interventions are more likely to be successful when they provide information that is clearly understandable and salient to citizens (for example, by showing how the performance of their providers stacks up against their neighbors, or against their rights); that makes clear the problems with the service inputs, not simply problems with its performance, which may have myriad causes; and that recommends a clear course of action for improving those problems. Paying attention to these characteristics of useful information, in combination with a clear sense of the context or “world” in which that information is delivered, may help improve the effectiveness of future interventions.



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