

# // BRIDGING THE CONTEXT GAP THROUGH COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

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- **To make progress on the 'context matters' discussion, we need to move beyond general statements while still learning from our collective experiences to improve practice**
- **A promising approach is systematic comparative research across cases that explores the interaction between interventions and selected contextual factors to understand how and why things worked (or did not) to understand how and why things worked (or did not)**

## Have we stalled when it comes to context?

If you've worked in the transparency and accountability field for long enough you will probably have sat in meetings and presentations and read how-to notes that all ended with the same message: context matters. And, like us, you might ask yourself: 'OK, context matters, but now what?'

A debate has been going on for some time now over the role of context in transparency and accountability programmes. Strategies, operations, and research in the T/A field tend to relate - often implicitly - to one of the following two approaches:

- Either: success will come from the discovery of generalizable best practices and their implementation at scale across different contexts;
- Or: interventions are entirely context-specific and need to be conceived of and designed on a case-by-case basis. Yet this sort of thinking seems to have reached its limit. As Archon Fung and Steve

The challenge is big - do we really need to build a solution from scratch?

Often we think that we are the first or only ones to confront a problem. Yet the debate about context has many older incarnations in the field of governance and beyond. In economic development, for example, scholars and practitioners have engaged in significant debate over a set of best practices from the 1990s that became known as the 'Washington Consensus.' While some of the debate that unfolded has focused on whether or not the Washington Consensus was the right set of best practices, others have taken the view that successful economic development policies are not generalizable but rather need to be tailored to the local economic and political context (e.g. [Rodrik 2008](#)). For more on the debate around best practice versus best fit in the governance field in particular, see [here](#). While there is still much work to be done in tackling the issue of context in transparency and accountability programmes, we can avoid reinventing the wheel by paying attention to debates and insights that have come before in different, but related areas of work.

Kosack noted in a recent literature review, the [state of the art is frustrating](#).

Most smart decision-makers and implementers we come across know that **there are no 'magic bullets' that work across all contexts**. Yet we can still learn from each others' experiences, if not to get things completely right, at least to minimize the risk of things going wrong. Doing so requires some guidance as to what went right

## DICTIONARY:

1. *Context*: For practical purposes, we understand context as the array of factors that are outside the control of those designing, implementing, or evaluating a strategy, tactic, or intervention. We presume that the factors that make up the context can be unpacked and systematically analysed. For a deeper dive into context and contextual political analysis see the [Oxford Handbook on Contextual Political Analysis](#).



or wrong in a concrete situation and what might be done similarly or differently at a different time or in a different place. However, the current debate is not getting us there.

Many of us consider that it is time to move this debate forward. **We need to focus on the needs of the field, embrace the challenge, and take some calculated risks.** It is difficult to find a middle ground that acknowledges the important role of context and allows for the discovery of

**Luckily many practitioners and researchers are already thinking and acting on these issues.** They have systematically explored concrete aspects of context such as sectoral dynamics (e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)), interactions between branches of government ([here](#)), the political economy of decentralization ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), the role of electoral institutions ([here](#)), the media environment ([here](#)), and different international environments ([here](#) and [here](#)).

### What are 'types' and 'typologies?'

According to Collier et al., a 'type' is simply 'an analytic category', one that may or may not be 'situated in and defined by a typology.' A typology is 'an organized system of types that breaks down an overarching concept into component dimensions and types.' Among other uses, Collier et al note that typologies can be useful for 'delineating a subset of cases' and 'synthesizing findings.' (For more from Collier et al on how types and typologies can be usefully put to work, see [here](#) and [here](#).)

Typologies can help us figure out which cases certain findings apply to and therefore when it is appropriate to apply lessons from one case to another. Our view is similar to Brian Levy's, who has said that 'we have no intention to suggest that, by grouping countries into categories, one can summarize the whole of any country's development evolution. The point is not to replace 'one size fits all', faith-based development prescription, with a simplistic 'four sizes fits all' pluralism ... we need to keep our minds open. But I am hopeful that the distinctions among the categories are sufficiently vivid that they can help us move beyond the analytical defeatism implied by 'every country is unique' (see [here](#)). We are not calling for types and categorizations for their own sake or on any terms, but when they add conceptual, methodological, or other value to our goals.

### Let's not reinvent the wheel

We don't need black and white either/or options, but a constructive middle ground that we can explore together. We want to innovate through bridging and collaboration, not build from scratch.

DID YOU KNOW THAT THIS IS AN OLD DEBATE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES?

How about doing some *silo-busting*<sup>3</sup> and checking out some classic articles [here](#) and [here](#).

## DICTIONARY:



- 2. Transformatively fit:* On the concept of transformative fit and why it matters, check out [this](#). In a nutshell, an intervention probably needs to fit and harness the context to get a shot at success, but if it fits the context too much, it runs the risk of reproducing the status quo we are trying to change over time.
- 3. Silo-busting:* The T/A field is full of silos, i.e. networks, organizations, groups, systems, processes etc. that operate in isolation from others. Taking a cue from [Martin Tisne](#) we think of silo-busting as the work that aims to bridge, connect, and even eliminate that fragmentation so that we work together more often.
- 4. Corporate governance:* is defined by Gourevitch and Shinn as "the structure of power within each firm that determines who allocates money: who gets the cash flow, who allocates jobs, who decides on research and development, on mergers and acquisitions, on hiring and firing CEOs, on subcontracting to suppliers, on distributing dividends or buying back shares or investing in new equipment" as well as "who takes the blame for corruption, misuse of funds, or poor performance." They note that different corporate governance outcomes reflect public policy choices that shape incentives.

For a useful road-map, check out Simon O’Meally’s [report](#) and [our recap](#) of a recent TALEARN community conversation on this topic.

We don’t need to reinvent the wheel. But since much of this thought and action is still stuck in sectoral or geographic silos, a wider conversation is needed so that we can learn from each other.

### Do we need more research on context?

So what information is there that can help us figure out when and where T/A interventions pay off? There is no lack of research on transparency and accountability. Cross-national quantitative analyses, experimental analyses, and individual qualitative case studies are (or are becoming) relatively abundant in the academic and policy literature and seem to get the bulk of available funding. But comparative research into when, where, and why interventions work is less common ([McGee and Gaventa 2011](#)).

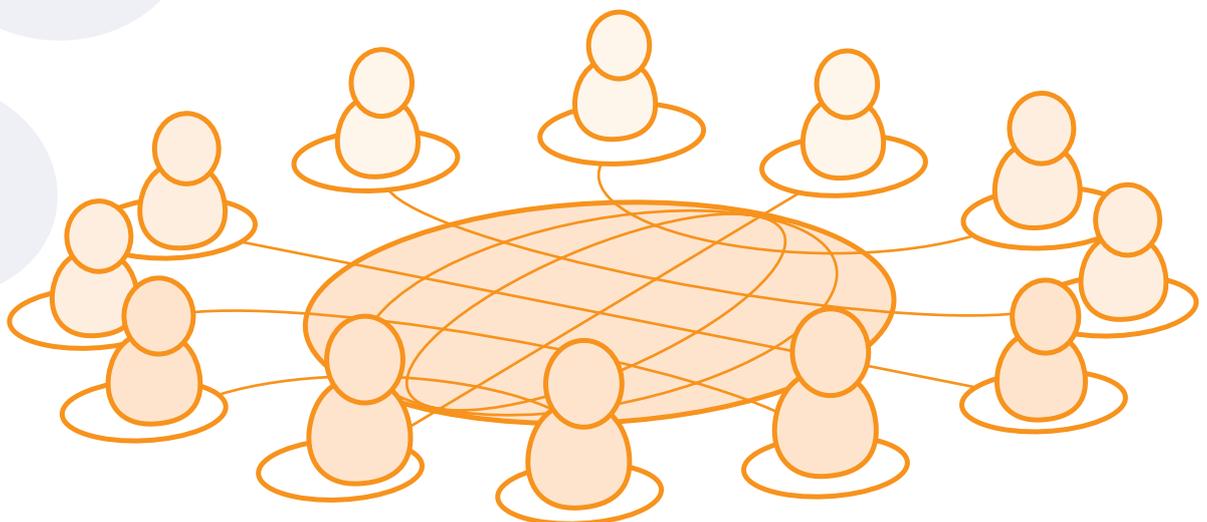
Yet comparative contextual research appears timely for where the field currently stands and where it seems to be heading. Our point is not to push a particular methodology for its own sake – we have supported and continue to support an ‘open’ methods approach (hat-tip to Lily Tsai for the label). We are thinking in terms of bridging research and practice

through theoretically informed, problem-driven learning and research, rather than methods, labels, or organizationally-driven agendas. (For other calls in this direction, see [here](#) and [here](#).)

We choose this route because we have found much inspiration in research that identifies salient features of particular cases and compares how variations in context affect programme outcomes.

Consider the following examples:

- Want to understand the reasons behind different types of *corporate governance outcomes*<sup>4</sup>? It may be important to look at the types of coalitions that form in society among management, owners, and workers in different political-economic contexts ([Gourevitch and Shinn 2005](#)).
- Interested in why strong access to information laws are adopted in some places but not others? Consider looking at the structure of the media or the relationship between the legislature and the executive ([Michener 2010](#)).
- Want to understand why disclosure rules are effective in some cases but not others? It may be worth studying the workings of targeted disclosure cycles ([Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007](#)).
- Scratching your head about how to get better governance and development outcomes throughout the service delivery chain? You may need to consider the nature of the territorial regime and which level of government is responsible for different components of the chain ([Guerzovich and Giraudy 2011](#) and [Croke](#)



2011).

- Interested in knowing whether citizen report cards are likely to work where you are? You may need to consider whether the political will actually exists to use the information to improve service delivery (O’Meally 2013).

These diverse examples have one thread in common. They come from theoretically grounded, careful, systematic comparisons across cases. They can inform the adaptation of strategies and operations we are working on – even if they have not been formally ‘translated’ for practitioner use.

We are encouraged by these insights, and many voices in the T/A field are calling for more research like this, that systematically unpacks how different types of interventions interact with different elements of context (and allows us to accumulate elusive knowledge). Our colleagues at the [Transparency for Development Project](#), the [Omidyar Network](#), the [Global Partnership for Social Accountability](#), [E-GAP](#) and the [International Budget Partnership](#), for example, are starting to think and work in this direction. They are starting to systematically compare methods from the social sciences to compare different types of T/A interventions from around the world and learn from their relative effectiveness.

### The real world is tough - it needs more contextual research

Today we often pay attention to knowledge gaps. But generating knowledge often takes more time and occurs more obscurely than we realize. Often there is more work in the pipeline than we are aware of. We think this may be the case with research into context.

Many T/A researchers and practitioners are realizing that they will not deliver successful interventions unless they get ‘how-to’ decisions right in dynamic, complex contexts. This has implications

for thinking about research questions and designs that will be relevant today and in the future.

For example:

- Many of the examples mentioned here show that contextual factors can help or hinder agents in getting the outcomes they want. However, ingenuity in adapting to different types of structures makes agents more able to effect change (see e.g. [Guerzovich 2010](#)). Over time, this ingenuity can reshape the context itself. So both context and agency matter – let’s not get stuck in another round of structural vs. agency-based explanations.
- Let’s focus on figuring out how and why interventions work in some places and at some times and not others. That is, the relationship between ‘causal mechanisms’<sup>57</sup> and contextual elements. What aspects of the context affect whether a particular theory of change works as expected?

For examples of this kind of analysis in the field see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

For more food for thought see the note on the next page.

## DICTIONARY:



5. One way to understand a causal mechanism, such as policy feedback effects or coordination, is as a portable concept that defines those delimited classes of events that change relationships among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations ([Tilly and Goodin 2006](#); see also see [Elster 1989](#), [Hall 2003](#), and [Hedstrom 2008](#)).
6. A *collective action problem* is a situation in which there are multiple individuals who would benefit from a certain action, but the associated cost makes it unlikely that any one individual can or will undertake it on their own. Mancur Olson has been influential in suggesting that individuals in any group that is attempting collectively to provide a public good (those that are not excludable from any individual whether they participate in its production or not) will have incentives to take a ‘free ride’ on the efforts of others, consuming the good but not contributing to it. If all individuals act according to this incentive, the public good will not be produced (see [Olson 1965](#)).

What do you think of [Duncan Green's suggestion for Twaweza](#)? Map the results of its current work on a 2x2 diagram (individual action → collective action interventions ; state - civil society driven interventions) to push its learning and action forward.

## Looking back to move forward

Some researchers may be worried about the pitfalls and lack of perspective of old-fashioned methodologies. As one of our friends creatively put it: we are not calling for a repeat of the fashion of the 1960s. However, we are aware that artists and designers often innovate by giving the past a new twist. We are interested in 21st-century problems - and we are sitting on a pile of untheorized, untested evidence about big questions you care about ranging from development and power to different forms of institutions, as well as methods that make sense for them. So, don't worry about a revival of the past, getting caught up in the technical specifics this early on, or imagining a new silver bullet! We know that there is a growing array of approaches and tools (e.g. [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) that can help us unpack causal mechanisms and context.

## We are acting now, join us!

We think we can move forward, if we continue to bust silos in a strategic, constructive way. We do not claim that this approach will work for everyone or for every decision funders or implementers need to make. 'Decision-makers' is a very broad category: some make decisions about investing in a field, others about portfolios, others about tweaking the design of a concrete activity. But will this approach move us beyond the unsatisfactory status quo? Join us in helping us answer this question!

There are many reasons why innovation in this direction is more difficult and more rare than it should be. One is the lack of an organized network that links those who produce, fund, and use (or could use) context-sensitive, systematic comparative research on transparency and accountability. **Practitioners rarely come together. Neither do they have the incentives or resources to work hand in hand, share information, and build on each others' approaches. Examples of interaction and collaboration between researchers in fields that are related but distinct (such as [this body of work](#)) are even rarer.** Without a 'safe space', incentives to innovate, and solid links between researchers, funders, and practitioners, valuable comparative research might not be funded, produced, or used in the field.

TALEARN can take a different view to any individual actor. Tough, big picture problems like this are in its DNA. We are asking for help to join the dots. That's why at **TALEARN's [practice group on the issue of context](#), we decided to give the field a nudge to innovate candidly and collaboratively.**

TALEARN convened a series of related, partly overlapping meetings to delve into these issues on 11 and 12 November 2013 in London. We brought together a diverse, experienced group to help us shape a concrete agenda for action. See below for details about what came out of the meetings.

You may also want to catch up on our conversation about [the impact of international initiatives on the ground](#) - after all, international initiatives are often an important part of our context!

## So what happened in London?

Leni Wild and Pilar Domingo (ODI), Aranzuzu Guillan (U4), and Lily Tsai (MIT) kicked off our conversation about research into context. Aranzuzu, for example, discussed [how U4 is using comparative research](#) to help understand the questions of its main stakeholders about how and when joint work between supreme audit institutions and CSOs can strengthen accountability.

**As expected, some stakeholders were quicker to see the relevance of comparative research than others.** One colleague, who works at a donor agency, explained that she and her colleagues would find most useful research into the range of strategies and tactics that might help make politics work in different contexts. Other practitioners argued for in-depth research into particular contexts, particularly those most relevant to the settings in which they operate. **This only underscores the challenge we have in acknowledging the different, yet equally valid, needs and priorities of different stakeholders.** TALEARN has deliberately created a big tent so as to try bring these diverse perspectives together.

For a practitioner's view, see Edward Premdas Pinto's note on the [COPASAH Communiqué](#).

At the meeting, some academics stressed that it is difficult to get comparative research right, and we agree. Yet the need is still there. In the absence of this type of work, **colleagues are often forced to make decisions blindly or on the basis of marginally relevant research.** The London meetings identified one area in which other TALEARN practice groups (such as the [incentives group](#) and [methods group](#)) can help the context group, and that is in bridging the needs of CSOs and funders with the know-how and concerns of researchers. What might be needed is comparative research that tries to answer questions that are more relevant to funders and practitioners, but will less certainty than academic researchers are used to.

Is bridging going both ways? Are colleagues commissioning, designing, implementing, and using applied and action research and evaluation to bring in theoretical, methodological and empirical insights from their academic colleagues? If we are interested in politics and political economy (and many of those present were), are we drawing enough insight from political science research?

Lastly, with respect to incentives, the meeting highlighted an issue that our colleagues in [Cape Town](#) deemed the elephant in the room: **what are our incentives for learning what matters for improving transparency and accountability strategies and operations?** During the London meetings, we saw concrete requests for a new, bounded and comparative road to learning, but no strong replies. We had expected this to be a key challenge – those doing this kind of research are not well set up to fill this gap, and practitioners and funders have not helped to build bridges and incentives towards making it happen.

Here are some other colleagues' takes on the broader problem:

- Referring to another TA/I meeting, Jonathan Fox [makes a similar point](#) on the impact of international transparency and accountability interventions: "The main point here is that the comparative method is a broad logic of inquiry within which quantitative and qualitative approaches are merely tools whose

relevance depends on the question. Yet in the applied research world, this approach remains crowded out by the dominant qualitative-quantitative divide."

- A team of evaluation experts working on a DFID-commission review of approaches and methodologies in evaluations (of initiatives related to violence against women and girls in development and humanitarian contexts) recently set up a [blog](#) to share their experiences of what are for them "novel" methodologies: qualitative comparative analysis and process tracing. The blog candidly captures similar hopes and misgivings to those discussed in our London meeting. In light of the political and technical silos that people who use these methods find themselves in, it is not surprising that the evaluators find sharing their experience 'a tad scary'.

In short, we have identified a need to improve decision-making in transparency and accountability and a gap in the supply of knowledge to meet that need. We have started to unearth some of the ongoing reasons for this situation. It may be a *collective action problem*<sup>6</sup> that is making it difficult to fill this gap. **The question for everyone is: are we ready to take steps to address this failure, for instance by creating selective incentives<sup>7</sup> for those who contribute to producing the most needed research? If so, who will take the lead?**

## DICTIONARY:

- Olson proposes selective incentives as one way in which groups can solve the collective action problem. By providing specific benefits only to those who contribute to producing a public good, selective incentives increase the individual benefits of contributing so that they might outweigh the individual costs. This makes contributions more likely (see Olson 1965).

## \*THANKS TO:

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\*The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of T/AI's members

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Transparency  
ACCOUNTABILITY  
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