

//FROM OPENNESS TO REAL ACCOUNTABILITY: THE ROLE OF MSIs

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- **Despite the growing popularity of MSIs there are a number of basic questions that MSI supporters and stakeholders must answer about how these instruments contribute to more responsive and accountable governance, starting with thinking about how technical transparency outputs influence the political dynamics of government accountability.**
- **A nuanced understanding of the political dimensions of governance reform will provide deeper insights into the role of MSIs in contributing to government responsiveness and accountability, and how to best support and leverage these initiatives at the global and national levels.**
- **There is a need for more systematic analysis of how MSIs interact with national political contexts and dynamics to inform the strategies of pro-accountability actors and external supporters.**

The past decade has seen a proliferation of international Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) addressing public governance issues. These MSIs bring together actors from government, private sector and civil society to tackle diverse governance challenges, from governing natural resources extraction to promoting participatory budgeting. Examples include the [Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative](#) (EITI), the [Construction Sector Transparency Initiative](#) (CoST), the [Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency](#) (GIFT), and the [Open Government Partnership](#) (OGP), to name a few. In essence, these initiatives seek, through various modes of operation, to promote improved government transparency, responsiveness and accountability. They form a subset of a larger universe of international MSIs that address a broader range of issues, from reducing conflict diamonds to ensuring fair labor standards, often focused on governing trade or other commercial activities.

This growth demonstrates the popularity of MSIs as a response to complex governance challenges that have proven difficult to address through other efforts, both international and locally led. Yet the rapid expansion of MSIs with these goals raises critical questions about the role of such mechanisms in addressing challenges related

to government transparency, responsiveness and accountability. Activists, funders, and others have begun to ask whether and how MSIs generate on-the-ground impact.

The Evolving Dialogue on MSI roles and impact.

The Transparency and Accountability Initiative (T/AI) has been supporting an ongoing dialogue about the role of MSIs to address government transparency and accountability. T/AI has convened diverse stakeholders in a series of conversations and workshops addressing these issues:

The first, a round table discussion in 2013, brought together diverse actors involved in OGP, EITI and other international initiatives to explore how MSIs contribute to change on the ground (including consolidating [what we already know](#)). Jonathan Fox, professor at American University, reflected on the discussion [here](#).

In 2014, T/AI, along with several other institutions and supporters, brought together another group of individuals working on diverse MSIs. The workshop sought to promote shared learning and collaboration across these diverse

initiatives. Reflections from several participants can be found [here](#) and a summary report [here](#).

In February 2015, T/AI [organized a workshop](#) to further explore evidence and learning in MSIs addressing governance issues. Participants discussed the 'state of the evidence' of MSIs, wrestled with the challenges these initiatives faced, and discussed priorities and opportunities for continued learning – and how to [put all this into practice](#).

Before going further, it's important to emphasize that both the [aid community](#) and [social scientists](#) continue to affirm that responsive and accountable governance is a key factor in long-run prosperity. Nevertheless, across the globe, governance reform and improvements have been [slow and partial](#). Furthermore, democracy in many countries [remains shallow](#). Efforts by external organizations to support governance reform have met with [very mixed results](#), particularly [efforts to promote transparency and accountability](#), which often focus on [technical aspects of governance](#) (for example see [here](#)).

MSIs respond to these challenges by creating new frameworks that brings actors together to address problems that have not proven amenable to other interventions. However, the rapid expansion of MSIs in the governance sector raises basic questions. MSIs as a response to governance challenges may simply be the next 'fad' driven by the limited success of other external interventions. Furthermore, MSIs may share similar shortcomings with other external efforts to promote responsive and accountable governance, notably in addressing the political underpinnings of this challenge. A broad spectrum of actors working on transparency and accountability issues has increasingly emphasized that these challenges are [inherently political in nature](#) (as is [poverty more generally](#)), and that we thus need to be [thinking and working politically](#) to contribute to meaningful and sustainable improvements (which [external funders have often struggled to do](#) over the past decades). Thus, the central question may be: *How do political dynamics affect the possibilities achieving more responsive and accountable governance through MSIs?*

Thinking about this question requires closer examination of several features of MSIs, which I will discuss in turn.

TO MSI OR NOT TO MSI? As a starting point, we need criteria that suggest when MSIs are an appropriate strategy to address governance problems, and when they may not be. In other words, MSIs are a hammer in our toolbox, but how do we know which challenges related to governance are nails? Or does having a hammer in hand make us see all governance problems as nails (which has happened [with other popularized tools as well](#))? At the national level, various analyses (political economy, social network, power) can help reveal the incentives and political calculus underlying governance challenges, and provide insight into the potential of an MSI framework to contribute to meaningful change. After all, getting actors to sit at the table is of little use if their interests and incentives fundamentally diverge or when power imbalances and barriers to effective participation severely hamper citizens and citizen organizations. [More robust political analysis](#) might help pro-reform actors better evaluate the benefits and costs of supporting or engaging in MSI processes versus other potential avenues of change. Recent [debates in the EITI community around the participation of Ethiopia](#), despite government action that undermines effective civil society organization in that country, highlight the need to understand whether too much emphasis is being put on MSI strategies in contexts that are not conducive to such frameworks.

Should we really expect voluntary measures to improve responsive and accountable governance in countries in which these problems are deep features of the political system, in the absence of a broader approach to addressing the political will necessary for such changes?

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH GOVERNANCE? Understanding and framing governance problems necessarily shapes the responses to those issues. Many scholars examining national and international governance challenges have described them in terms of weak or shallow democracy (sometimes referred to as polyarchy - essentially rule by elites, featuring periodic elections) and specifically frayed relationships between governing authorities and the majority of citizens, driven by deep (and often deepening) economic and other power inequalities. This includes a shrinking of the space and rights related to civil society engagement around public issues.

However, international MSIs addressing public governance issues often focus specifically on transparency issues (sometimes framed as 'open government' which can be a rather fuzzy concept itself). Moreover, although MSIs spaces and processes, both at the international and national levels, are deeply political, the outputs of MSI mechanisms are most often technical: reports on payments, a plan to institute a new formal government procedure or policy (or website), contractual documents. Seeking to strengthen more responsive and accountable governance through a focus on technical transparency outcomes may well be intentional¹ in order to attract and maintain the participation of powerful actors, such as corporations, external donors and national governments, but it has real implications for the universe of potential approaches that are considered, and what is left out. This can be seen in the focus on open data and the discourse around closing feedback loops. Transparency efforts are vulnerable to open washing and data dumping, or even of generating meaningful information but without the means to leverage greater accountability.

If MSIs focus primarily on transparency, then other elements of the accountability ecosystem² (for example, effective electoral mechanisms or legal protections for civic activism and social mobilization) must be considered and addressed by pro-reform actors as well. The danger is that national actors are also drawn to concentrate narrowly

on transparency issues, because that is where international attention and support is focused. The broader implication could be the shift in the discourse around governance reform towards an (over)emphasis on transparency. This would contradict the growing understanding of complex relationship between transparency and more responsive and accountable governance. Power dynamics and political incentives are at the core of governance issues, particularly related to government responsiveness and accountability.

Is the current focus of many MSIs on technical transparency reforms contributing to real gains in accountability, or have MSIs converged on the lowest common denominator on which involved actors could agree, limiting their contribution to national accountability struggles?

HOW DO WE THINK MSIs CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE? MSIs, like other efforts to promote change, are built around a hypothesis or theory of change (TOC) about how they will contribute to the achievement of their goals. These proposed causal pathways may be explicitly stated or implicit in the MSIs structure and operation. How do MSIs in the governance sphere articulate their role in contributing to change? Do they, like many other interventions to improve governance, base their theories of change on questionable assumptions, or lack a change hypothesis altogether? Actors involved in or supporting MSIs need to better understand how these mechanisms seek to achieve their broader objectives, and how MSI contributions intersect with a broader (and more complex) system of actors, institutions and enabling and constraining conditions related to government accountability.

T/AI is seeking to advance this challenge in relation to OGP, through a research collaboration with Global Integrity.

NOTES & DICTIONARY

- 1- Richard Calland has called this 'tactical technocracy', and noted its benefits and limitations [here](#); MSI practitioners have discussed the tension between formal technical outputs and the inherently political nature of the MSI process.
- 2- *Ecosystems*: Accountability ecosystems include diverse actors, institutions, processes and contextual features that shape government responsiveness and accountability. Systematic approaches to accountability suggest analysis and targeted strategies that facilitate leveraging of multiple actors and efforts across scales of governance to address the range of relevant components of government responsiveness and accountability necessary to effectively and sustainably improve specific service delivery and/or rights protections.

TOCs also reflect a specific understanding of the challenge they seek to address. As discussed, the public framing of governance challenges with respect to MSIs are tilted towards technical aspects around transparency, without an acknowledgement of the contentious political dynamics responsive and accountable governance entails. For example, the current discourse around 'open government' is contributing to an [emphasis on open data, e-government](#), and other technical aspects of governance. Even some [efforts to raise questions](#) about open government don't adequately acknowledge and grapple with the political dimensions of achieving transparent and accountable government.

Yet MSI practitioners and other actors engaged in these processes readily acknowledge the political nature of even seemingly-technical outputs and requirements. How to square this circle? Narrowly technical approaches to governance challenges could lead to [isomorphic mimicry](#), where public institutions, laws and processes look right, but fail to ensure responsive and accountable governance.

The [Global Integrity Report](#) has helped capture this dynamic, reporting select countries' legal framework versus actual implementation.

This is even more likely if MSI 'success' and 'impact' is framed exclusively in terms of quantitative outputs (e.g. government data made available, percentage of ambitious OGP commitments, changes in governance rankings) rather than intermediary points in the 'long game' of democratic reform, [that are often harder to measure](#). A more politically-aware TOC can inform a more nuanced monitoring and learning strategy that will help MSIs supporters know what is important to really pay attention to and how to respond.

Do the Theories of Change (and actual processes) of MSIs addressing public governance problems expand the possible pathways and arenas to addressing these challenges, or limit them to more technical approaches focused exclusively on transparency?

MSIs, CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZENS. MSIs create spaces and processes at the national level for civil society engagement, but the real possibilities of influencing change through

Thinking and Working Politically in Transparency and Accountability

As argued in this Think Piece, governance challenges are fundamentally political in nature. Addressing political problems requires politically-informed solutions. What does this mean for actors working to strengthen government transparency, responsiveness and accountability? T/AI has been exploring this issue and seeking to provide ideas and practical guidance through:

- Explorations in [TALEARN, a community of practice](#) seeking to deepen impacts of work on transparency and accountability
- A [think piece](#) exploring how thinking and working politically can be integrated into funding and practice
- [A webinar](#) with the Global Partnership for Social Accountability on thinking and working politically beyond theories of change
- A [series of blog posts](#) exploring thinking politically in the transparency and accountability sector

these are questionable. CSOs engaged in MSIs may be constrained by problem statements TOCs, processes and agendas that have been defined externally. Can civil society question the assumptions, raise new priorities (such as [justice](#) and inequality) and promote alternative visions for change, such as raising issues of rights, justice or inequality? Participation by social actors in governance arenas [can lead to real influence, or cooptation and placation](#), often determined by [whether participatory processes have real 'teeth'](#) (actual decision making power, rather than simply consultation) and if citizens can organize to build up '[countervailing power](#)'. Just having a seat at the table is not enough, and civil society needs to critically appraise MSI processes, evaluating both opportunities and opportunity costs (see [here](#) and [here](#)). This is particularly true when governments are increasingly closing the space for civil society engagement. In such cases MSIs could provide opportunities for continued CSO activism, or be used by authorities to distract from their increasing restrictions on citizen rights.

Participation by CSOs in MSI processes may imply a narrower set of advocacy strategies, and 'crowd out' other approaches, for example those based on grassroots mobilization or explicitly political action

(potentially unruly in nature). MSI involvement could also be part of a top-down and bottom-up strategy or more nuanced, holistic and multi-scalar campaigns by pro-reform coalitions of actors. Fundamentally, MSIs need civil society participation for legitimacy, but citizen organizations need to engage with these initiatives on their own terms and as part of their own strategies. Many CSOs that receive external funding may feel pressure (explicit or implicit) to stick with MSI processes – particularly if one of their donors also funds the MSI – despite the costs of time and resources, and an organization’s own priorities and agenda.

Furthermore, it is also important to understand the character of civil society representation in MSI processes. Often citizens are represented only by professional NGOs that are based in capital cities and conversant in donor priorities, international best practices and technical issues, rather than by social organizations composed of and accountable to citizens themselves. This unbalanced and unrepresentative civil society ‘monoculture’ can mean that MSI processes and objectives may have little to do with citizens’ priorities and needs.

Do MSIs increase civil society leverage to influence the political calculus of those in power and achieve real accountability, or do NGOs negotiating at an extreme imbalance of power vis-à-vis government elites fail to constitute real countervailing power to shift the fundamental rules of the game, as any meaningful improvement in government responsiveness and accountability entails?

MSIs AND NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES. MSIs bring together diverse actors at the national (and international) level to seek solutions to complex governance problems. But how do MSI mechanisms interact with national political institutions, processes and context? Many MSIs create parallel spaces for decision making and action, deliberately isolated (or perhaps insulated) from national political routes of decision making, for example via parliamentary legislation or electoral mechanisms. We need to better understand how MSI processes interact with or influence indigenous institutions and mechanisms. They might bolster them, by giving citizens and pro-reform actors alternative fora to advance their claims. Or they could undermine national political processes, by seeking to promote technical solutions

separate from political dynamics of struggle and decision making. MSI TOCs need to articulate their role in promoting change vis-à-vis national governance institutions, political processes and other contextual factors. National and international actors working to support governance reform need to analyze how MSI processes and dynamics intersect with a broader ecosystem of national and international mechanisms and efforts, and adopt strategies that reflect these complexities.

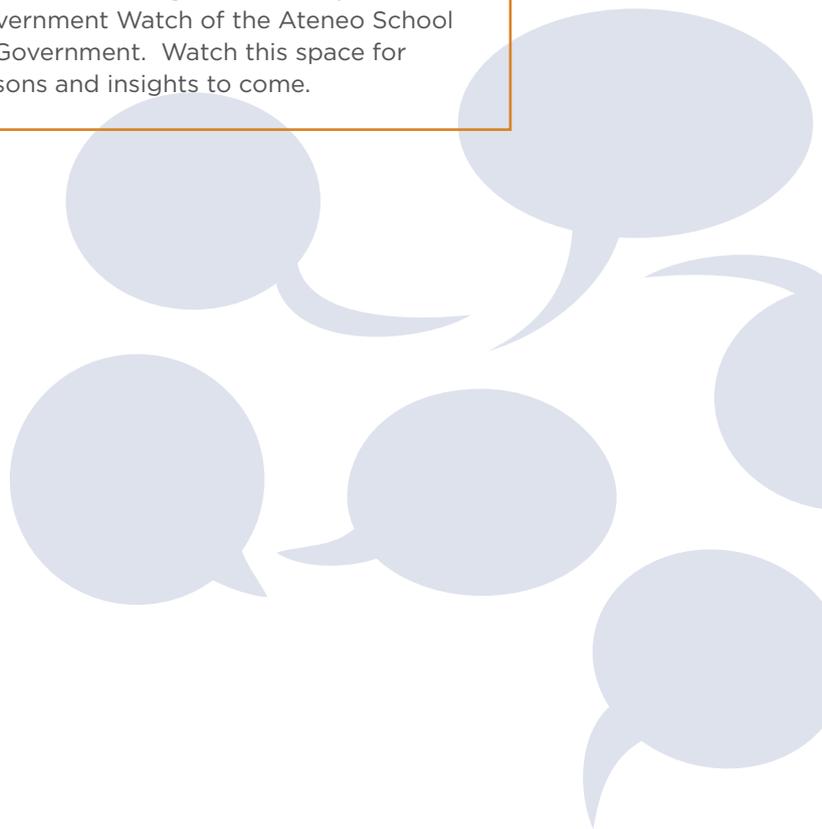
How can MSIs contribute to strengthening national institutions and processes vital for accountable governance, such as weak or absent institutional checks and balances, unrepresentative political parties, and elections that are driven by patronage and vote buying, and if these factors are not addressed, can MSIs achieve the governance improvements they seek (or even make meaningful advances)?

THE OPPORTUNITY OF MSIs. National political processes alone have often proven weak and ineffective, with periodic elections failing to bring representative political parties to power and state checks and balances unable to ensure government accountability. Thus, many funders and other supporters have seen international MSIs as an approach to gaining some purchase on complex governance challenges in contexts of shallow democracy, fragile governance and shrinking spaces for civic activity by citizens and NGOs (as well as in countries with more established democratic frameworks). Indeed, MSI processes have produced tangible outcomes (accessible data about revenues and budgeting, mechanisms of citizen reporting about service delivery, information about inflated government contracts, etc.) and intangible benefits (building trust among actors with diverse interests, keeping governance issues on the public agenda). At their best, MSIs contribute resources (including global norms and standards) and spaces that pro-reform actors (in government, civil society and private sector) can leverage to contribute to the longer-term process (or struggle) of democratizing governance and politics, and may even tip the balance in their favor. But for MSIs to be meaningful

contributors to change, pro-reform actors need to [analyze these approaches and processes](#), especially how they fit within a broader accountability ecosystem of institutions, actors and processes, and the deficits and gaps in those systems. And MSIs entail opportunity costs as well, as their priorities may dominate national discussions and their processes may substitute for other avenues of pursuing change, for example efforts to broker broader coalitions of pro-reform actors from the communities up to the national level.

Many MSIs are at a critical stage, consolidating their gains while pushing to demonstrate real contributions that matter. Yet support for these initiatives can be fickle, and as quickly as they have risen to prominence, MSIs can become yesterday's fad. It is urgent that actors seeking to use MSIs to promote responsive and accountable governance think more critically about how these instruments can contribute and how to leverage them most effectively. Considering whether and how MSIs might assist democratic change in a systematic and politically informed way will help us to better achieve meaningful and sustainable impacts.

more integrated, systematic approaches, in collaboration with Jonathan Fox, the International Budget Partnership, and Government Watch of the Ateneo School of Government. Watch this space for lessons and insights to come.



WHATS NEXT?

These are challenging and potentially fundamental questions for MSIs stakeholders to wrestle with. T/AI will continue to delve deeper into the issues raised and seeking to provide some critical insights through the following projects:

- T/AI is collaborating with researchers Brandon Brockmyer and Jonathan Fox to consolidate and synthesize the available evidence on MSI effectiveness and impact. This synthesis report will present the 'state of the evidence' on international MSIs addressing public governance challenges, as well as pointing to important research questions and gaps.
- T/AI is partnering with Global Integrity to carry out comparative case study research looking at how OGP processes are playing out on the ground in several countries. Key questions will be around how actors are leveraging OGP spaces and resources to advance accountability aims, the role of political context, and the relationship between OGP processes and the national governance ecosystem.
- T/AI is working to explore accountability ecosystems and support learning by actors working on governance issues through

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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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