



# Information and Accountability:

— Preface to Evidence Syntheses of Within-Government and Citizen-Government Accountability Pathways

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The Learning from Evidence series documents a learning process undertaken by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative to engage with and utilize the evolving evidence base in support of our members' transparency and accountable governance goals. We are pleased to have partnered with MIT's Governance Lab and Twaweza on this initiative. This series comprises a variety of practice- and policy-relevant learning products for funders and practitioners alike, from evidence briefs, to more detailed evidence syntheses, to tools to support the navigation of evidence in context.

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Report designed by TAI. Cover photo courtesy of [Lindsay Bremner](#).

# Information and Accountability: Evidence Syntheses of Within- Government and Citizen-Government Accountability Pathways

## Preface

### WHY THE THREE PATHWAYS TO ACCOUNTABILITY?

These evidence syntheses were conducted in collaboration with the Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI) to explore evidence relevant to common programmatic areas for TAI donor members.<sup>1</sup> As a first step, we mapped out the TAI members' theories of change onto a common framework, which resulted in the Pathways to Change Map (see Appendix 1). The map categorizes the most common actors, behaviors, and relationships to help illustrate possible pathways to accountability.

This map is not a representation of all possible causal pathways in the transparency, accountability, and participation (TAP) field, but it does cover a large portion of TAP initiatives funded and implemented globally. The map illustrates some of the more common assumptions under which governance programs operate, including the fundamental premise that transparency — that is, the provision of key information — can lead to action by a range of accountability actors and therefore result in accountability behavior by a variety of government officials. In these evidence reviews, we unpack such assumptions for three specific pathways to accountability.

We selected these pathways for the evidence reviews based on the existence of recent reviews for them (e.g., as is the case in the pathway of information to citizens as voters) and based on the salience of the pathways to TAI members. As a result, we emerged with three specific pathways to examine:

- **Pathway 1 (Norms and standards):** What is the impact of international norms and standards on the actions of accountability actors?
- **Pathway 2 (Within-government accountability):** What is the impact of information provision on the actions of within-government accountability actors?
- **Pathway 3 (Citizen-government accountability):** What is the impact of information provision on the actions of citizens holding unelected officials accountable?

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1. At the time of this review, TAI members included Hewlett Foundation, Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Omidyar Network, and the UK Department for International Development.

In exploring the three pathways, we emerged with a suite of learning products (see Box 1). We first looked at evidence linking taxation to accountability and found scarcity of both evidence and theory on this topic. Thereafter, we turned to the three pathways of main interest to TAI members. For the first pathway on norms and standards, we found no evidence, which constitutes a major gap. In this report, we synthesize our evidence reviews on the second and third pathways. Generally, we find there is a need to expand the evidence base to more sectors and contexts. Most studies focus on health and education interventions; there is very little evidence from agriculture, water and sanitation, security, and other sectors. Evidence is also concentrated in countries with relatively high bureaucratic government capacity (Brazil, China, India, Pakistan, and Uganda); we need research from a wider range of contexts with varying characteristics — e.g., contexts with low bureaucratic capacity or contexts with informal institutions for sanctioning.

Regarding the application of evidence, we argue for a “solutions in context” approach in which existing evidence informs learning from similar governance contexts, where accountability actors and pathways are likely to match. General effectiveness assumes that there are magic bullets that will work equally well in a range of contexts, but this is less likely for social and political phenomena resulting from complex processes that vary across time and space.

#### **Box 1: Learning from Evidence Series**

These learning products are part of the Learning from Evidence series undertaken by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative to engage with and utilize the evolving evidence base in support of our members' transparency and accountable governance goals. The Learning from Evidence series includes the following evidence products:

1. Transparency and Accountability Initiative. (N.d.). Pathways to Change Map. Available online: <http://www.transparency-initiative.org/how-we-work/>
2. Tsai, L.L., Toral, G., Read, B., & Lipovsek, V. (2018). Taxation and Accountability in Developing Countries: Does Taxation Motivate Citizens to Hold Government Accountable? If So, How Is Taxation Increased and Tax Evasion Decreased? Washington, DC: Transparency and Accountability Initiative. Available online: <https://mitgovlab.org/results/taxation-and-accountability-in-developing-countries/>
3. Tsai, L.L., Morse, B.S., Toral, G., & Lipovsek, V. (2018). Effect of International Standards on Accountability Behaviors. Washington, DC: Transparency and Accountability Initiative. Available online: <https://mitgovlab.org/results/effect-of-international-standards-on-accountability-behaviors/>
4. Lipovsek, V., & Tsai, L.L. (2018). How to Learn from Evidence: A Solutions in Context Approach. Washington, DC: Transparency and Accountability Initiative. Available online: <https://mitgovlab.org/results/how-to-learn-from-evidence-a-solutions-in-context-approach/>
5. MIT Governance Lab. (2018). Information and Non-Electoral Accountability: Evidence in Context. Available online: <https://mitgovlab.org/results/information-and-non-electoral-accountability-evidence-in-context/>
6. Tsai, L.L., Morse, B.S., Toral, G., & Lipovsek, V. (2019). Information and Accountability: Preface to Evidence Syntheses of Within-Government and Citizen-Government Accountability Pathways. Washington, DC: Transparency and Accountability Initiative.
7. Tsai, L.L., Morse, B.S., Toral, G., & Lipovsek, V. (2019). Information and Accountability: Evidence Syntheses of Within-Government and Citizen-Government Accountability Pathways. Washington, DC: Transparency and Accountability Initiative. Available online: [https://www.transparency-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/information-and-accountability\\_evidence-reviews.pdf](https://www.transparency-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/information-and-accountability_evidence-reviews.pdf)

The three pathways provide one framework to understand existing evidence on how information affects government accountability. Taking a step back to consider how we learn from evidence is critical to ensuring that practitioners, donors, and researchers can advance the state of knowledge and practice in the transparency, accountability, and participation field. In conducting these reviews, we considered not only what the evidence says, but also how it should be interpreted, weighed, and applied. Our ultimate aim is to produce information and knowledge that is useful and relevant to both practitioners and scholars, to mutually inform the governance agenda.

## High-Level Findings

### HOW DOES ACCESS TO INFORMATION AFFECT GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY?

Many studies look at how information affects vote choice and what influences citizens to vote elected officials in or out of office. We often hope that elected officials will monitor and sanction the behavior of unelected officials (e.g., bureaucrats, civil servants, or frontline service providers). But are there effective ways in which citizens and government actors can directly hold unelected officials accountable? In this review, we examine existing evidence<sup>2</sup> from 2007 to 2016 to understand how information can be used by different actors — citizens, governments, and civil society — to hold unelected officials accountable.

We also describe the quantity and quality of existing evidence. We define quality using two dimensions: believability (studies that explain their method of causal analysis and levels of confidence and uncertainty) and usefulness (studies that identify and explain causal mechanisms and why context matters). With this lens, we examine the evidence along three pathways linking information to accountability and then reflect on how current knowledge can inform future initiatives. Based on these reviews, we make several overarching reflections.

Quantity of evidence is thin and “lumpy.” First, and most notably, the evidence base is thin and disproportionately concentrated in particular regions, countries, and sectors. Despite an exhaustive search process, we identified just 43 studies that assess the impact of information on government accountability. Of these 43 studies, 26 were in the education and health sectors, and 25 were from just three countries — India, Indonesia, and Uganda. Moving forward, we need studies from a wider variety of contexts and policy areas to understand the scope conditions that govern whether and when information is effective at improving governance outcomes.

***Most studies show positive impact, but we need to be careful about generalizing global impact, due to incentives for reporting significant effects as well as the “lumpiness” of the evidence.*** Our reviews show that increased information had some form of beneficial impact on over half of the outcomes measured across all studies — but it is critical to note that this result does not lend itself to easy interpretation. It should not be taken as evidence that informational interventions are typically effective or ineffective. Studies with positive impacts are more likely to be published (or written) than those without, leading to upward bias in the reported effects. In

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2. We limit our search to developing countries, excluding the developed or “global north.” For the full criteria of evidence, please refer to Appendices 1A and 1B.

addition, researchers may spend fewer resources collecting data on outcomes they do not think will be affected by the intervention, also leading to upward bias in the reported effects. Thus, subtle or difficult-to-measure impacts often go unmeasured, which can lead to downward bias in the reported effects. These limitations, of course, afflict all literature reviews and meta-analyses, and ours is no exception.

Rather than focusing on “average” impacts across all existing studies, we argue that a more productive approach is to focus on the contextual conditions that appear to influence whether and when information is effective, drawing on both qualitative insights from the literature and analysis of hard data on impacts across studies. For a practical illustration of this approach, refer to our “How to Learn from Evidence: A Solutions in Context Approach” memo (Lipovsek and Tsai 2018).

***For both within-government accountability and citizen-government accountability, transparency and information provision seem to be most effective in contexts that have actors and mechanisms to implement top-down sanctioning.*** Both a greater number of studies and a higher percentage of significant effects for both within-government and citizen-government accountability are concentrated in developing contexts that have actors and mechanisms to implement top-down sanctioning — i.e., where higher levels of government show some willingness and capacity to punish poor performance at lower levels.

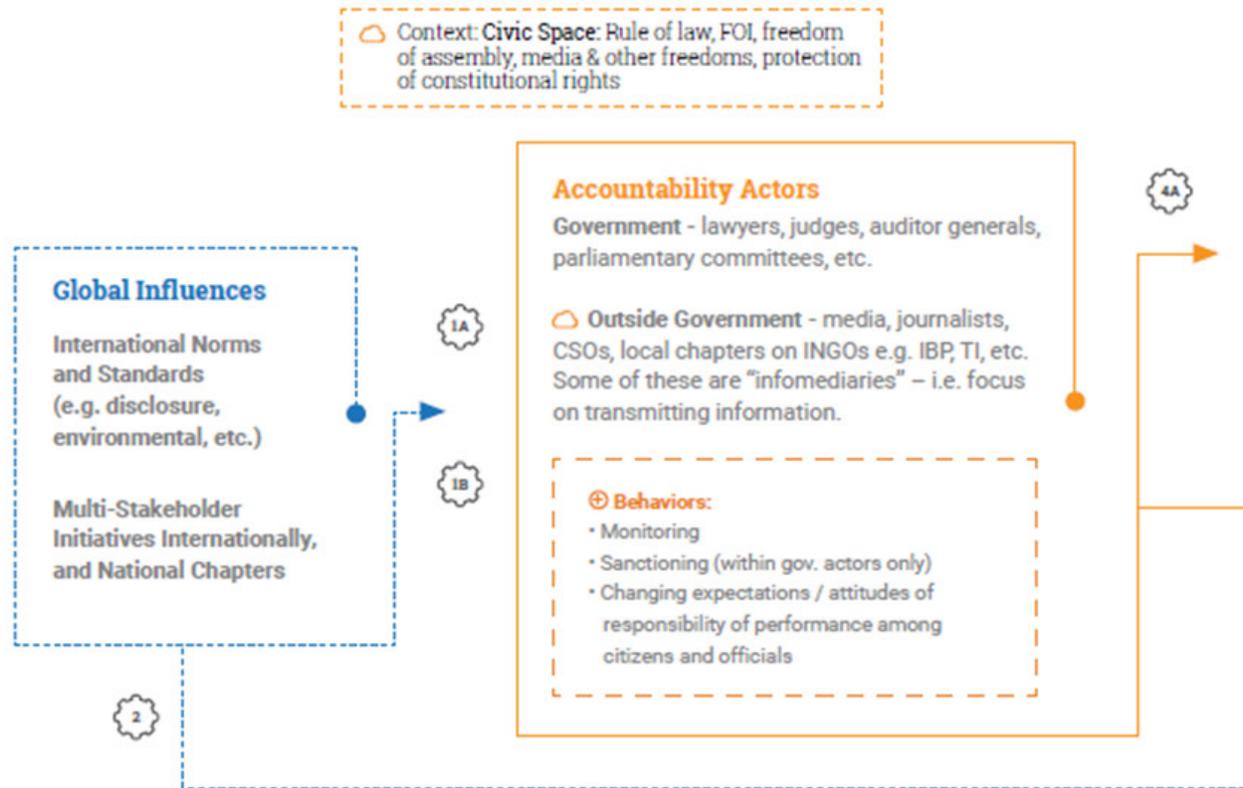
***Transparency and information provision may be more effective at stimulating citizen-led accountability when citizens have strong individual material incentives to monitor service provision, and when providers have the ability and resources to improve performance.*** Results from studies on citizen engagement are consistent with the idea that information is most likely to be effective when (1) citizens have strong material incentives to monitor and/or sanction government actors in pursuit of improved service delivery and (2) providers have the ability to respond to these pressures.

***Evidence on causal mechanisms is limited.*** We find that most of the interventions covered in the research address only one or two steps in the causal pathways from information to government accountability. For example, many studies of citizen accountability focus on whether information provision increases citizen monitoring, but few look at what happens as a result of the monitoring — that is, whether citizens also take steps to sanction poor performers or whether higher levels of government sanction as a result of the citizen monitoring. In another example, many initiatives provide information about actors’ duties or the outputs that they produce, but few provide information about government actors’ levels of effort or their rights and duties. As a result, we have a limited understanding of which levers on the chain from information to accountability are most effective at improving governance outcomes.

Transparency and Accountability Initiative: Pathways to Change Map, <http://www.transparency-initiative.org>

## Pathways to Change Map

This represents critical causal pathways common to TAI donor members' theories of change. It is in no way a representation of pathways to change for the TAP field as a whole.

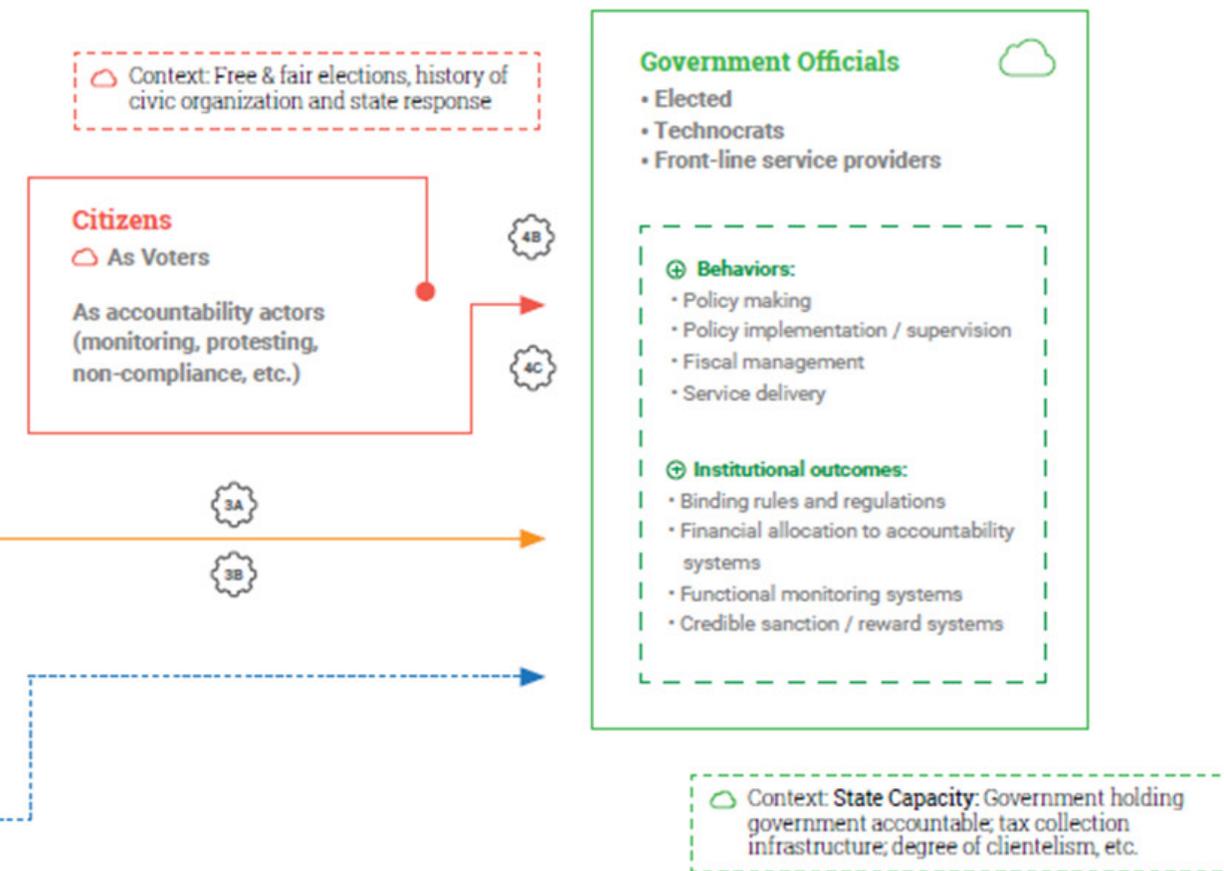


1a) What is the evidence that providing information or data produced by (inter)national bodies influences or enables accountability actors within the government to monitor government performance, sanction or reward performance, and manage expectations of citizens (and government) of their duties, responsibilities, and performance standards?

1b) What is the evidence that providing information or data produced by (inter)national bodies influences or enables accountability actors outside the government to monitor government performance, sanction or reward performance, and manage expectations of citizens (and government) of their duties, responsibilities, and performance standards?

2) How do governments officials directly use information or data that is produced by (inter)national without going through any other accountability actors. (ex: ministries making data open/available and instating a FOI mechanism directly as result of the Open Government Partnership?).

3a) What is the evidence that information or data is used by accountability actors inside the government (e.g. judges, parliamentarians, anti-corruption agencies, etc.) to hold government officials (includes elected, technocrats, front line service providers) accountable through sanctions or legal action?



3b) What is the evidence that information or data is used by accountability actors outside the government (e.g. media, journalists, lawyers, CSOs, etc.) to hold government officials (includes elected, technocrats, front line service providers) accountable by monitoring, changing expectations of responsibilities, or scrutinizing performance?

4a) What is the evidence that providing information or data influences citizens to behave as accountability actors (citizens monitoring, protesting, non-compliance), and do they act as individuals or in collectives? In particular, does citizen behavior include the use of the information itself (e.g. motivating action, clarifying operational steps, used as evidence, etc.)?

4b) Do citizen accountability actions result in changes in government officials?

4c) How do citizens exercise their voice as voters?

Note: Institutional-level outcomes are deliberately distinct from individual behavioural outcomes.

**MIT Governance Lab (MIT GOV/LAB)** is a group of political scientists focusing on innovation in citizen engagement and government responsiveness. MIT GOV/LAB collaborates with civil society, funders, and governments on research that builds and tests theories about how innovative programs and interventions affect political behavior and make governments more accountable to citizens.

**Transparency and Accountability Initiative** is a collaborative of leading funders of transparency, accountability and participation worldwide. It envisions a world where citizens are informed and empowered; governments are open and responsive; and collective action advances the public good. Toward this end, TAI aims to increase the collective impact of transparency and accountability interventions by strengthening grantmaking practice, learning and collaboration among its members. TAI focuses on the following thematic areas: data use for accountability, strengthening civic space, taxation and tax governance, learning for improved grantmaking.

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