

# WHY ISN'T TECH FOR ACCOUNTABILITY WORKING IN AFRICA?

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Expanding mobile networks and falling costs could transform communication between African citizens and governments. So far, however, attempts to harness new technologies to improve transparency and accountability in Africa and elsewhere have had disappointing results. What is going wrong? Research suggests that an important reason for this failure is a poor understanding of technologies and limited skills in developing and using them.

It seems that civil society organisations (CSOs) and governments often 're-invent the flat tyre': experimenting with new tools without finding out what has been tried (often unsuccessfully) before. They also do not follow best practices in how to source, develop and test technologies to ensure these are 'fit for purpose'. Decision makers should focus on building an effective innovation ecosystem with better links between technologists and accountability actors in both government and civil society to enable learning from successes – and mistakes.

## INTRODUCTION

New technologies offer new opportunities to improve transparency, accountability and communication between citizens and their governments. The potential of new technologies has been recognised for more than a decade. The [Open Government Declaration](#), signed by 11 African states,

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Those with responsibilities in creating the innovation ecosystem, including funders, should focus on building a supportive innovation ecosystem.
- 2 Funders should shift their focus from supporting short-term pilots to building institutions capable of success over time, and invest in strengthening links between initiatives and disseminating learning resources across the continent.
- 3 Those who are leading and managing innovation initiatives – in government and CSOs – should focus on getting better and smarter at managing the innovation cycle.
- 4 Research suggests the following 'rules of thumb' will lead to better outcomes: acknowledge what you do not know, think twice before building a new tool, get a second opinion, test technologies in the field, plan for failure, budget to iterate, and share what you learn.

claims that ‘people all around the world are demanding more openness in government’.<sup>2</sup> International donors invest millions in projects aimed at citizens’ monitoring government service delivery, making government information more easily available through ‘open data’ portals and increasing participation in governance processes.

In South Africa a leading anti-corruption organisation has used online and mobile platforms to **gather public votes** to contribute to the selection of the national ombudsman. In Kenya government services such as police stations and clinics have been **mapped** to identify mismatches with needs. Collectively, these initiatives have been labelled ‘technology for transparency and accountability’ (T4T&A) or ‘civic tech’. Increasingly, such initiatives are **reported on globally** and funding has grown. Between 2013 and 2017 major international donors came together to create a **challenge fund** for projects such as these, supporting over 100 initiatives and research projects in 13 countries in Africa and Asia.

This interest is a response to dramatic changes in the communications environment in the Global South, namely:

- expanding mobile networks in terms of geographic coverage and speed;
- declining costs of mobile data; and
- falling costs of ‘smart’ mobile devices.

Together, these changes offer the possibility of transforming the two-way flow of information and communication between governments and citizens. In Africa, where communications infrastructure has been the poorest in the world and communications costs have been unaffordable for the majority, this opportunity is particularly significant.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE PROVES ELUSIVE**

The reality is that if T4T&A were a Grade 10 learner, her school reports over the last decade would have said: ‘Not performing to her potential.’ Results so far have been less than spectacular, and much less than hoped for. Global surveys of T4T&A<sup>3</sup> have described many interesting initiatives but few examples of successful impact or effectiveness at scale.

### **WHAT IS NOT WORKING?**

At a gathering of Africans working in T4T&A in Johannesburg in 2015, a Kenyan activist asked: ‘After 10 years of using technologies in transparency and

accountability, why isn’t what we are doing making a large-scale impact?’ Research has pointed to a number of weaknesses.

### **BROKEN LINKS IN THE ACCOUNTABILITY CHAIN**

One weakness is initiatives’ untested assumptions about the link between transparency (for example, publishing government budget data) and accountability (citizen groups’ using this data to hold elected representatives accountable).

### **WEAK UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL, POLITICAL CONTEXTS**

Another weakness is a lack of understanding of the anticipated users of the technologies (often citizens, who are expected to engage via mobile phones). There have also been questions surrounding government actors’ ability or willingness to respond to feedback from citizens.

### **Build it and they will come**

More broadly, many initiatives have been criticised for a ‘build it and they will come’ approach, which fails to engage with the incentives, needs, attitudes and aptitudes of those actors within government and among citizens without whom no accountability process can work.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE WEAKNESSES OF T4T&A AS A SOCIAL AND TECH INNOVATION PROBLEM**

The social and political context of engagement with government and non-government actors is vital for success. Recent research in Kenya and South Africa<sup>4</sup> – two of the countries with the best and most widely used mobile technology in Africa – suggests that there is an underlying set of problems in the way T4T&A initiatives are approaching their desired results. These problems need to be understood and addressed if T4T&A initiatives are to move from high potential to high performance.

The study was unusual in that it examined the *processes* that organisations went through in selecting and applying new technologies to transparency and accountability problems. Confirming previous research, it found that the end results often disappointed. However, it also offered some insights into how the attitudes and approaches of the decision makers may have led to these outcomes and evidence-based suggestions on changes in approach.

### **THE TECHNOLOGIES ARE NOT WORKING**

In the 38 T4T&A initiatives studied, researchers found

that fewer than one-quarter of the managers were happy with the technologies they had chosen or developed. In almost half of the cases the target audience also failed to use these technologies on the scale anticipated. Many subsequently considered or chose alternative tools.

Most of them had learnt from the experience, and identified problems in the way they had gone about selecting, developing and using the technologies they chose. One said,<sup>5</sup>

We had no major challenges [in selecting the technology]. But, when we used it, that's when we found out the challenges.

Very few participants said that, in a similar situation, they would go about choosing technologies in the same manner again. Among the changes they would make, they mentioned doing more user research, finding more tools to compare, and devoting more resources to engage with the tools' intended users.

Some comments from the study are revealing:

Maybe if we already knew the tools and how they worked, we could have made better choices the first time around about which platform [to use, or have chosen] a different tool.

And,

We really feel like we need more information to make good decisions [next time]. Data that actually is focused on the target community: what kinds of forms of technology are there, what's really used, what for. That would really help us.

#### **T4A INNOVATORS ARE RE-INVENTING THE FLAT TYRE**

One surprising finding was how often organisations built or commissioned their own digital tools from scratch. Out of the 38 cases studied, 21 had built their own custom tools from scratch – often without researching whether an existing one would do the job. Those who took this approach ran up against many challenges – extra costs; extensive delays; difficulties in managing technical suppliers or partners; and disappointment when tools failed to meet expectations or were not widely used. This inclination to invent a new technology was especially surprising given that most of the organisations studied were not 'tech' organisations and were not experienced, skilled or knowledgeable in developing or applying new technologies.

#### **GETTING HELP DID NOT ALWAYS HELP**

Many organisations that did not have significant technical expertise did seek technical help. This often meant sourcing a service provider. However, many found the relationships with these service providers difficult and, ultimately, unsuccessful. One reason for this may have been that as clients, the organisations were unable to provide the right information to brief the providers and were not knowledgeable enough about the technical development process to ask the right questions. One said,

Well, how do I put this? Me and technology, we just don't get along. But I was supposed to lead this project. So actually, the leading criterion for me, was to get a provider who could make my life extremely easy, so I didn't have to plan out and operate everything.

#### **MOVING FROM HIGH POTENTIAL TO HIGH PERFORMANCE**

Based on the evidence from the South African and Kenyan study and previous reviews, if T4T&A initiatives are to improve their performance they need to improve their capability to innovate.

Innovation is difficult for any organisation. It is not always easy to choose between the many available technologies. Differences are not transparent. The effects of those differences and their relevance to an initiative's aims may be uncertain. It may not be clear how the introduction of new technologies into existing transparency and accountability processes affects those processes. So any attempt at improving outcomes needs to start with the recognition that getting better at innovation is going to take time and effort.

The good news is that there is plenty of evidence from practice and research on the conditions required for innovation to succeed.

#### **COMMIT TO LEARNING**

Organisations that embark on T4T&A initiatives should start by recognising what they do not know and what they need to know to succeed. Evidence suggests that these knowledge gaps fall into three broad categories: understanding technologies (eg, what is available, what they can and cannot do); understanding the actors involved in the T4T&A process (including knowledge of their digital and mobile practices and competencies); and understanding the accountability processes (what

aspects of these processes are susceptible to change and intervention, how changes in these processes might be expected to produce outcomes, and why).

A commitment to learning, and to applying that learning, also implies a longer-term perspective on any particular initiative – that it should help to strengthen the capabilities and capacities of the organisation and be applied in new (and hopefully more successful) initiatives in the future.

### INNOVATION IS A PROCESS, NOT AN EVENT

Thomas Edison famously discovered 10 000 ways of how not to make a light bulb before he discovered the one that worked. All the best practice models currently employed in software development emphasise that it is an iterative process. The first version is never the final version. Google, the world's most successful search engine, included the qualifier 'beta' on its landing page until only a few years ago. Following this best practice requires planning and budgeting, something many T4T&A initiatives and their funders do not do.

### YOU DO NOT NEED TO INVENT SOMETHING NEW TO ACHIEVE TRANSFORMATIVE INNOVATION

Inventors have a high tolerance for risk-taking and failure. This tolerance is not one that most governments and CSOs share in their institutional cultures. But innovation, even transformational innovation, does not have to involve inventing new technologies. It can entail using existing technologies in new ways or new spaces.

### BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING AND PRACTICE

Successful tech innovation often takes place not within isolated institutions but within innovation networks or communities. In many parts of the world you can find physical collaboration spaces, or areas of cities where tech innovation is taking place. In these communities information and experiences are shared through formal and informal interaction. If T4T&A is going to develop and improve, much stronger networks capable of sharing learning, expertise and experience need to emerge at local, national and international levels.

### CONCLUSION

Research continues to show that the potential of applying new communication and information technologies to improve transparency and accountability and extend participation in governance is not being reached. To

improve outcomes, innovators working in CSOs or government need to change how they work, by adopting best practices in social and technological innovation. At the same time, those with decision-making power in the wider innovation ecosystem, including donors and governments, need to change their models of support. These changes require an understanding that innovation is a long-term process that involves a commitment to learning and improvement within organisations and between organisations. Currently, there appears to be too much focus on a product-based search for inventions.

### ENDNOTES

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- 2 From the Open Government Declaration of the Open Government Partnership, declared September 2011, New York, <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/open-government-declaration>, accessed 4 May 2017.
- 3 See Avila R et al., *Global Mapping of Technology for Transparency and Accountability*, Open Society Foundation, 2010, [https://globalvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/TechforTransparency\\_Summary.pdf](https://globalvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/TechforTransparency_Summary.pdf), accessed 25 April 2017; McGee R & R Carlitz, 'Learning Study on the Users in Technology for Transparency and Accountability Initiatives: Assumptions and Realities', IDS (Institute of Development Studies), 1 October 2013, <http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/learning-study-on-the-users-in-technology-for-transparency-and-accountability-initiatives-assumptions-and-realities>, accessed 25 April 2017; McGee R & J Gaventa, 'The impact of accountability initiatives', *Development Policy Review*, 31, 2013.
- 4 De Lanerolle I, Walker T & S Kinney, 'Sometimes It Is About the Tech: Choosing Tools in South African and Kenyan Transparency and Accountability Initiatives', IDS & the engine room Research Report, March 2016, [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/10283/The\\_Engine\\_Room\\_Tool\\_selection\\_Research\\_Report\\_full.pdf?sequence=9](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/10283/The_Engine_Room_Tool_selection_Research_Report_full.pdf?sequence=9), accessed 25 April 2017 .
- 5 All quotes in this briefing are from participants in the study reported on in De Lanerolle I, Walker T & S Kinney, op. cit. The researchers have developed an online interactive guide to choosing and using technologies in accountability and transparency to help organisations plan and make decisions. See Alidade, <https://alidade.tech>, accessed 25 April 2017.

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