



Governance Channels Sub-Strategy

MARCH 2018 | David Sasaki

GOAL

We will support research, innovation, and advocacy that strengthen the effectiveness and inclusiveness of new and existing channels for citizens, media, and civil society to help governments improve the delivery of public services.

LINK TO STRATEGY

Our 2016-2021 strategy notes that “norms for increased transparency are being complemented by expectations about greater citizen participation and engagement,” but that “citizens typically have few avenues to communicate directly and effectively with government representatives.” Parliaments represent the voice of constituencies in policymaking while official auditing bodies oversee implementation by government agencies, but few channels beyond the ballot box “exist for affected citizens to act collectively and express their views effectively.” Our fourth strategic goal is to “build and strengthen channels that provide citizens constructive ways to engage with all levels of government.”

PRIORITY AREAS OF GRANTMAKING AND LEARNING

We aim to strengthen active citizenship through channels that enable both “frontline service accountability” and “political accountability.”¹ Frontline service channels enable “regular

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1. This distinction is similar to the “short route” and “long route” to accountability described in the World Development Report 2004, “Making Services Work for Poor People.” We recognize that frontline service accountability and political accountability are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing.

citizens” to demand increased responsiveness from the service providers and institutions they interface with directly: school directors, administrators, doctors and nurses at hospitals, and even the meter reader at the local utility.

However, while there is some evidence that significant gains can be made through greater compliance in the local provision of services², they are frequently constrained by resources and political will. A newly elected politician may promise to improve health care or expand access to clean water, but her promises are seldom fulfilled without political accountability — the oversight of media and watchdog organizations. We will support governance channels that address both frontline service accountability and political accountability, and in the best of cases, are able to bring the two together.³

There is increasing consensus among researchers and theorists that new governance channels are most effective at bringing about improved service delivery where there is political will among public officials and an active, coordinated civil society.⁴ Therefore, we will support organizations that operate in reasonably favorable environments.

We will support organizations that clearly frame their goals while prioritizing learning and adaptation in their implementation. Prospective grantees should be aware of existing research relevant to their work and will have a track record of executing their vision. Organizations that work in national or subnational contexts should have a savvy understanding of sociopolitical context, and will have a record of elevating the lessons they have learned to inform international discussions. International organizations should have partnerships with local actors built on experience, trust, shared incentives, and aligned strategic goals.

Frontline Service Accountability

The first three areas of grantmaking represent three conceptualizations of active citizenship. Legal empowerment represents a rights-based conception of citizenship in which it is the duty of citizens to know their rights and use the legal system effectively with the help of public interest lawyers. A global network of over 1,000 affiliate organizations⁵ is working to build a movement of public interest lawyers who assist individuals and communities in using the legal

2. See “Power to the People: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment on Community-Based Monitoring in Uganda” by Martina Björkman and Jakob Svensson and “Dictator games in the lab and in nature: External validity tested and investigated in Ugandan primary schools” by Andrew Zeitlin and Abigail Barr.

3. For example, the media and advocacy groups can play a role in comparing what governments commit to at international fora with what citizens report on the ground. There may be an opportunity to generate synergies between citizen action, independent media, and more autonomous public oversight institutions like audit bureaus and evaluation agencies.

4. See “Participatory Governance Reform: A Good Strategy for Increasing Government Responsiveness and Improving Public Services?” by Johanna Speer; “Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement” by Gaventa & Barrett; and “Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?” by Jonathan Fox.

5. <https://namati.org/network/meet-the-network/>

system to demand their legislated rights to services such as water, education, and health. By identifying common obstacles experienced by citizens to access quality services, paralegals can help shape an advocacy agenda to bring about changes to improve service delivery.⁶

Civic monitoring platforms represent a consumer-based conceptualization of citizenship in which users of public services such as hospitals, schools, water, and sanitation use customer service-like mechanisms to seek a response to their complaints and suggestions. Such platforms offer citizens an opportunity to seek redress to individual problems with their public services. They offer service providers and regulators citizen input on how to improve their performance. And they offer journalists and advocacy organizations access to data that could reveal patterns of blockages to access services. By the beginning of 2018, we expect to have initiated research that applies the application of behavioral science principles to reporting platforms to identify interventions that increase the retention of users, diversify participation, and incentivize responsiveness by relevant authorities at public service providers such as water utilities and school administrators.

Participatory budgeting (PB) represents a conceptualization of citizenship that demands the most from citizens. It asks participants to (a) be aware of the priority issues facing their communities; (b) deliberate with their neighbors about competing needs and opportunities to address those needs; (c) understand government rules and regulations; and (d) monitor the implementation of projects selected by participants. Despite these demands, PB has spread to over 1,300 cities since it first began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989. It is the most common commitment by governments in the subnational pilot of the Open Government Partnership and its global expansion has outpaced the evidence of its impact. We shouldn't expect our relatively modest resources to transform a process that was established nearly three decades ago, but there may be opportunities to support research, innovation, and iteration that advances the impact of participatory budgeting — for example, by testing attempts to attract more diverse participation and by using technology to establish ongoing feedback loops that enable participants to effortlessly track the implementation of projects they voted for.

Political Accountability

Journalism: Public interest journalism can amplify the voices of citizens in political debate while monitoring the promises of politicians and holding the powerful to account. We will explore how a rapidly evolving media landscape could amplify underrepresented citizen voice, track the implementation of policy commitments related to service delivery, and investigate public financial management. We will explore innovations in digital media and accountability efforts through community radio⁷.

6. See “What Do We Know About Legal Empowerment” by Laura Goodwin and Vivek Maru of Namati.

7. See Reboot’s report [“People-Powered Media Innovation in West Africa: Accelerating development & good governance in the new media landscape”](#)

Access to information laws and open data portals related to public services: This is the governance channel that we have supported the most so far, and we can point to some success stories⁸. We will continue modest support of this channel through platforms that encourage greater use of access to information laws,⁹ and open data indexes¹⁰ that work with local partners to incorporate data into their journalism, monitoring, and advocacy campaigns.

Co-creation: A number of initiatives¹¹ have launched over the past decade that bring together government reformers with civil society organizations to develop shared plans for improved public administration and service delivery. Additionally, some governments have explored innovation fellowship programs¹² that bring representatives of civil society into government to develop an innovative new service within the government structure. We will continue to support and learn from platforms that aim to advance innovation and accountability through co-creation between government and civil society.

There is a spectrum of involvement of “regular citizens” in the above channels. Participatory budgeting and paralegals explicitly target non-elite citizens. Citizen complaint platforms, while dependent on internet access and basic tech literacy, increasingly aim to reach underrepresented users. On the other hand, the use of media, technology, access to information laws, and open data portals is more limited to civil society organizations and activists. On the far end of the spectrum, the Open Government Partnership is a platform to make commitments that establish new governance channels or strengthen existing channels, but it does not attract the participation of “regular citizens” who aren’t already involved in civil society.

Our priority areas of learning focus on how we can support the strengthening of relatively new channels that enable citizen voice to influence governance beyond the ballot box. We are also mindful of the worrying trend of factors that inhibit citizen participation, including censorship, surveillance, violence against journalists, and the persecution of activists and civil society organizations. We will work with partner funders to support their efforts to defend civic space.¹³

8. See Article 19’s use of Mexico’s access to information law to hold health care providers to account in rural Chiapas.

9. See mySociety’s partnership with InfoLib in Liberia to design an access to information service based on Liberia’s constitutional reform.

10. Open Knowledge’s Global Open Data Index will merge with the Web Foundation’s Open Data Barometer in 2018.

11. Including the Open Government Partnership, the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, the Sustainable Development Goals, and What Works Cities.

12. See Reboot’s guide to “implementing innovation” based on one such fellowship program in Mexico.

13. See Why the Space for Civic Engagement Is Shrinking by Chris Stone of Open Society Foundations.

We also recognize that the social contract between governments and citizens is less clear and more fragile for refugees and “stateless persons” without citizenship¹⁴. In addition, young people are often alienated from public services because they’re not treated as full-fledged citizens. These are issues we are not well positioned to take on directly; we will continue to follow the work of Namati and other grantees that secure citizenship rights through advocacy and accountability.¹⁵

GOVERNANCE CHANNELS THAT WE WON’T PRIORITIZE

We will not prioritize new grants to organizations that focus solely on the following activities, even though we recognize that they are important components to the larger accountability ecosystem and our grantees may decide to engage in these areas to further their strategic goals. Again, our funding aims to support strong organizations rather than particular tactics.

Social movements: We are not well positioned to respond to the quickness and agility with which social movements, which are crucial to social change, usually take shape — often in response to key events.¹⁶

Social audits: With a few exceptions, social audits are divorced from mandated responsiveness by relevant government authorities and are difficult to sustain once funding has dried up.

New citizen surveys: Another crucial source of information to amplify the voices of constituents and shape an advocacy agenda, the citizen survey area is already well funded and quickly evolving with the adoption of social media.

Civic tech without government buy-in: This can lead to participation fatigue and disillusionment with democracy when governments don’t respond.

LEARNING QUESTIONS

Existing research addresses each of the following questions and subquestions. With the help of consultants and our grantees, we aim to support work that builds on what is already known. Over the next four years we will address the first two learning questions, though ultimately we

14. See Kate Reed Perry’s essay on “[Is It Time to Retire the Word ‘Citizen’](#)”

15. See <https://namati.org/ourwork/citizenship/>.

16. Some scholars [distinguish](#) between “invited spaces,” where participation is institutionalized as part of a larger system of decision making, and “invented spaces,” where activists participate outside of those institutions, often demanding for changes to the system itself. Invited spaces risk elite capture in which the powerful know how to game the system. We recognize that invented spaces are often more successful at involving underrepresented communities. Despite these limitations, as a private foundation based in California, we are not well positioned to support the fast-moving dynamics of informal, local political organizing. At best, we can contribute to an “enabling environment” that facilitates easier, more effective community organizing.

are working toward the third — how to improve services and development outcomes. We intend to update this document each year with new research that contributes additional insight to the questions below.

- Which governance channels and tactics most effectively encourage citizen participation in identifying and improving service delivery challenges?
 - Are citizens sufficiently aware of the service delivery responsibilities of their government? Does greater awareness motivate greater participation?
 - Which platforms connect individual grievances, such as a lack of medicine at a public hospital, with collective action, such as an advocacy campaign demanding better oversight of medical supplies?
 - Which factors motivate or inhibit participation by underrepresented citizens, including women, ethnic and religious minorities, the poor, and rural residents?
 - How does closing civic space and fear of reprisal affect citizen participation?
- Which governance channels and tactics most effectively elicit responsiveness from public officials?
 - When and why do public officials and service providers respond to citizen grievances?
 - When are confrontational versus collaborative approaches more successful at eliciting government action to address service delivery challenges?
 - How and why does the deployment of similar sets of tactics lead to different outcomes in different contexts? How do initiatives spread from one district to many, or from one sector to another?
- When public officials respond to citizen grievances, does service quality improve as a result?
 - Who benefits the most from increased access to services?
 - Are there any observable development outcomes as a result, such as improved health or learning outcomes?
 - When officials and service providers address grievances, to what extent does that lead to a higher willingness to pay for services among citizens?

ASSUMPTIONS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- We will support innovation, research, and advocacy of governance channels that build on what has already been funded and researched. We will contribute to the research agenda on governance channels.

- We recognize the limits to the replicability of effective governance channels in differing political, historical, and sociocultural contexts.¹⁷ What works in, say, a parliamentary system with a diverse media market may not work in a presidential system with a media monopoly. We will prioritize governance channels that are relatively adaptable to multiple contexts so as to contribute toward an enabling environment that facilitates citizen participation and the oversight of service delivery.

We will start by focusing on governance channels that facilitate greater, more effective communication between citizens and their *local* governments, since it is local government that typically oversees service delivery and is best positioned to respond to citizen grievances. However, substantive change to service delivery by local governments is constrained by their relative lack of resources and legislative influence. We aim to support channels with local governments that also have the potential for national-level awareness and coalition building around common grievances.

- We recognize that most governance channels have not attracted representative participation from women, ethnic minorities, the poor, and rural residents. As such, there is a risk that our support of governance channels could strengthen the political voice of the already-empowered at the expense of those who are not. We will support work on governance channels that is intentionally inclusive and prioritizes the participation of citizens who are underrepresented in political discourse and government oversight.
- We will prioritize organizations and initiatives that are designed with the input of intended users. We will refrain from funding channels and platforms that assume “if you build it, they will come.”
- We recognize that addressing individual grievances is not enough for transformative change of public service delivery. Strengthening governance channels must go hand-in-hand with coalition building, advocacy campaigns, and strategic partnering with government auditing institutions.

WHAT WILL ALL THIS LOOK LIKE IN FIVE YEARS?

Imagine you live in Nakuru, Kenya, where you work as a hairdresser to support yourself and your three children. You listen to the news on the radio every morning and at least one conversation with a client about politics comes up daily. Your three children go to public school, and at least once a year you’re asked to pay school “fees.” Lately, the teachers only

¹⁷ Francis Fukuyama’s “Political Order and Political Decay” (summarized here by Duncan Green) emphasizes the importance of minding the context of each country’s unique journey of political development and not succumbing to standardized approaches to measure or improve governance.

show up around 75 percent of the time. You're considering putting your eldest in private school. A new public hospital was built last year, but it still takes just as long to be seen by a doctor or nurse. And your access to water is cut off at least once a week. You've heard that local factories are using more than their allotted water quotas.

You vote in most elections, but it's hard to judge candidates based on what they say they'll do rather than what they've actually done. Now, imagine that you have three other ways to express your opinions and grievances to the government: Every year, you could help decide what gets funded via participatory budgeting. When your water isn't working, you can report it via text message and demand a response to get alerted when it will be restored. And, if for some reason it isn't restored, you then have access to a paralegal who can help guide you and your neighbors to take legal action to secure your constitutionally guaranteed right to water.

Will you use all of these channels? Probably not. But together they contribute toward an enabling environment in which you have more options to demand better services in your life should you want to. And, perhaps most importantly, they will help connect you to fellow citizens who are suffering from the same issues, leading to the formation of a community monitoring and advocacy group that meets regularly.

It will almost certainly take more than five years for the residents of Nakuru to have access to all three channels. Alternatively, perhaps only one of the three channels will truly take off through an iterative process of adoption and adaptation. Either way, we can contribute toward research, innovation, and advocacy so that reformers entering government who want to strengthen citizen participation and improve service delivery are better informed about how to implement effective, inclusive governance channels.