Over the last decade, accountability and transparency have emerged as critical ways to address both developmental failure and democratic shortfalls (Gavelin et al., 2009). This is based on the argument that through greater transparency and accountability, the ‘leaky pipes’ of inefficiency, corruption and poor development planning would be repaired, and in turn development initiatives would produce greater and more visible results (McGee and Gaventa, 2010).

Transparency International (2012) defines transparency as ‘being open in the clear disclosure of information rules, plans, processes and actions’. Greater transparency in the way public resources are raised and managed increases the ability to measure government performance and thus increases the responsiveness of providers (Kuriyan et al., 2011). Moreover, enhancing citizens’ access to public data and their awareness of government activities – combined with supporting citizen participation in the public decision-making process – enables citizens to hold governments accountable for their actions and also empowers citizens to make their own needs and demands known to government.

While ‘open government’ is normally associated with the act of opening government information and data to the public to allow for effective public oversight (Lathrop and Ruma, 2010), ‘open governance’ is a term that refers to the process of increasing the openness and transparency of government actions, increasing accessibility of government information, and making government more responsive to citizens’ ideas, demands and needs (Gavelin et al., 2009). It therefore describes the interface between transparency, citizen participation, government responsiveness and government accountability.

However, the relationship between these concepts is complex and often founded on a number of assumptions. Growing evidence indicates that transparency alone is insufficient, and only leads to greater accountability in interaction with and in relation to other factors – including that the citizen is able to receive, understand and use available information, that there exist mechanisms to hold the government accountable, and that there is political motivation and resources to act based on these processes (Lindstedt and Naurin, 2010). Creating an enabling environment for citizen participation is therefore one of the keys to the link between transparency and government accountability.

ICTs for open governance

Technology plays a unique and interesting role in the space of open governance initiatives, as many of these initiatives – including complaint mechanisms, public information or transparency campaigns, and public expenditures monitoring – are based on ICT (information and communication technologies) platforms. Open government falls under the umbrella of e-Government, or ‘the use by government agencies of information technologies that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses and other arms of government’ (World Bank, 2011). However, it more specifically implicates the use of ICTs by government agencies to facilitate transparency and open data and to enable citizens to interact, monitor, participate and give feedback in relation to that information.

ICTs provide a number of platforms for government–citizen interaction. Government websites enable wide information sharing about public procurement, budgeting and project spending and policies. Moreover, they can function as spaces where citizens can interact with government, for instance listing their complaints related to their government’s performance and administration. Technologies reduce the distance between the government service provider and the user and enable horizontal, downwards and upwards flow of information, thereby providing the potential for all parties to be transparent and accountable (Kuriyan et al., 2011).

ICTs also provide multi-platform opportunities for dissemination and interaction with information. Mobile phones open opportunities for bottom-up participation and citizen empowerment, enabling citizens to vote, report on government activities, submit complaints and have a voice in public decision-making. The internet and social media are also increasingly used to share information, to mobilise citizens, to create a two-way communication between...
citizens and government, to facilitate media to document abuses, fraud and corruption, and to hold government officials accountable for their actions or promises (Yamamichi, 2011). They provide real-time, popular platforms for citizen interaction and feedback, particularly among young people (United Nations, 2009).

Technology-based transparency efforts are noted for their speed in execution and stimulating change. Not only do ICTs smooth the transition from data transparency to information to action, but also they conflate each of these stages, so that it becomes a seamless iterative cycle (Joshi and Carlitz, 2010).

**Impact case studies**

The following case studies demonstrate how ICTs can make a great difference in: increasing government transparency; improving public service delivery through monitoring and feedback; and increasing citizen-led government accountability and responsiveness. Moreover, these case studies yield important lessons regarding prerequisite conditions and common strategies that facilitate open government initiative success in countries and contexts around the world.

**Information provision for increased transparency**

ICTs enable the provision of prompt and transparent information online, as well as the creation of visual or analytic tools that simplify complex information. Transparency Portals developed by governments around the world provide free and open access to government information and spending – thus promoting public accountability, decreasing corruption, and developing a sense of citizen ownership over government spending priorities (Fung et al., 2010). Other non-governmental websites, such as the Budget Tracking Tool in Kenya, enable citizen monitoring of government spending to help to combat corruption.

However, creating such websites is one step; citizens must also be able to access, understand and use this information. Adequate ICT infrastructure, broadband access and digital literacy are some prerequisite conditions. To this end, the Digital Doorway is an example of how rural, vulnerable, hard-to-reach and normally excluded groups can be empowered with ICT literacy and access to information. Even in areas without internet access or electricity, such computer access enables citizens to begin to use technology to access information and services. In the same way, Community Information Centres in India have improved access to information and to a variety of public services via kiosks in villages all over the country. Not only has this facilitated access in rural areas and decreased corruption, but also it has resulted in significant economic gains for local people.

**CASE STUDY**

**Transparency Portal (Brazil)**

Brazil’s Transparency Portal is a general gateway where budgetary information is presented in a user-friendly format and updated daily. Citizen awareness of the Portal and how to use it was promoted; citizens can interact with the Portal’s team through surveys, and can report misconducts and crimes through a whistle-blower channel.

**Impact:** The Portal has received international awards, including being recognised by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as one of the five best initiatives in the world related to corruption prevention. The number of citizens accessing the Portal has grown from 10,000 to 260,000 per month, and the media has made extensive use of the website in order to investigate corruption schemes and frauds involving federal resources (Sobrinh, 2011). Regional neighbours such as Peru, Bolivia and Chile have launched their own Transparency Portals, as have countries throughout Africa and Asia — including, recently, Sierra Leone, with support from the Commonwealth Secretariat.

**CASE STUDY**

**The Budget Tracking Tool (Kenya)**

Constituency Development Fund (CDF) money has been controversial in Kenya because it is under the control of Members of Parliament; there have been many instances of misuse and theft. The Budget Tracking Tool is a collaborative platform that allows citizens to view projects and expenditures of the CDF, allowing grassroots communities to see whether Members of Parliament are following through on their promises (Heacock, 2010).

**Impact:** The system gets 5,700 SMS and web queries per month about development projects and citizens have used the information obtained to expose corruption at local as well as national levels of government. One example was the uncovering of a major corruption scandal at the Ministry of Water that led to the firing of a number of public officials involved.

**CASE STUDY**

**Digital Doorway**

The Digital Doorway (DD) project is an initiative of the South African Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) Meraka Institute in South Africa. The aim of the initiative is to encourage computer literacy and to empower rural communities with information, thus narrowing the ‘digital divide’ (LLSA, 2009). The DD is a free-standing computer terminal that allows 24-hour access for users. Its content is customised for each community, orientated to promoting access to a variety of support mechanisms and information,
including computer literacy, educational and employment opportunities, ICT-related entrepreneurial activities, and information on government and social services. Some DD models can operate in deep rural areas with no access to the electricity grid and run on solar power.

Impact: To date, the feedback on the Lesotho DD has been exceptionally positive and it is a model for improving ICT access in rural areas for local capacity-building (Smith, 2011). Two hundred and fifty Digital Doorways have been installed, with 214 in South Africa, 32 in Uganda, and 1 in each of Ethiopia, Lesotho, Australia and the Solomon Islands.

**CASE STUDY**

**Community Services Centres (India)**

Community Services Centres (CSCs) are delivery points for multiple government, private and social sector services to rural citizens of India, who otherwise have to face logistical and financial costs to access such services. CSCs are run by a local entrepreneur who can generate income from users.

Impact: As of the 30 April 2012, a total of 88,995 CSCs are operational in 33 states. One hundred per cent of CSCs have been rolled out in 12 states (UNESCO, 2005). CSCs charge nominal amounts from users for services, yet substantive revenue generation has been achieved by many, which pays the salaries of the operators and supports sustainability. Keeping in view the scope of the project in terms of its coverage and scope of services offered to citizens, it has created immense impact in terms of effective service delivery to rural areas of India.

**CASE STUDY**

**Improving public service delivery through monitoring and feedback**

Improving the access and quality of public services is a political, social and economic imperative for all developing countries. Through its World Development Report 2004, the World Bank highlighted that too often services fail the poor, and recommended that in order to improve service delivery, institutions need to be devised that strengthen the accountability relationship between policymakers, service providers and citizens.

A key route to improving the availability, quality and responsiveness of public services is to augment citizen monitoring and feedback (Gaventa, 2010). The following case studies illustrate how water, education and health service delivery can be made transparent and accountable by empowering stakeholders with information and monitoring tools.

**CASE STUDY**

**Raising the Water Pressure (Tanzania)**

More than half of Tanzania’s rural water points are malfunctioning despite increases in government funding and population growth, and less than half of new funding was going towards below average coverage of water facilities. In a citizen survey in 2008, water supply was identified by citizens as one of the top three priorities for government to address. The ‘Raising the Water Pressure’ programme enabled citizens in rural areas to send feedback or grievances about their local water supply through their mobile phones. This information is forwarded to the appropriate district officials and the local media. Local media can then interact with district officials to determine their plan of action regarding the poor water service.

Impact: Some 18,829 texts (SMs) have been sent to the water database – information that was used to get 12 water points in three districts repaired, improving water access for up to 24,000 people. It has created incentives for government to be more responsive to citizens and deliver services; due to its success, a similar initiative is being developed for the education and health sectors (Daraaja, 2011).

**CASE STUDY**

**CU@SCHOOL (Uganda)**

Teachers’ absenteeism in Uganda is one of the highest in the world, with rates of 20–30 per cent, costing the government US$30 million every year and with obvious implications for the quality of education – 27 per cent of Ugandan children are also not in school at any given moment, despite free universal education (Twaweza, 2010). Despite these dramatic figures, no routine data is available on pupil and teacher attendance.

The CU@SCHOOL pilot project uses mobile phones to monitor teacher and pupil attendance and absenteeism in 100 primary schools on a weekly basis. This information is mapped and sent to newspapers and radio shows, school management and district officials. Mobile phone coverage is exceptional in Uganda: almost one in three people owns a phone, and mobile networks reach 90 per cent of Uganda. Provided the pilot is successful, measured using a randomised control trial methodology, the aim is to integrate the use of mobile technology in Uganda’s new Education Management Information System. The information will support short-, medium- and long-term planning.

**CASE STUDY**

**Stop Stockouts (Kenya and Uganda)**

The Stop Stockouts campaign lobbies African governments to meet their obligations to provide essential medicines by increasing the national budgetary allocation for the
purchase of these medicines and by ensuring efficiency and transparency in the procurement, supply and distribution of medicines.

Stop Stockouts use FrontlineSMS in their monitoring activities, such as ‘Pill Checks’ where researchers visit public health institutions to check on the availability of essential medicines. Stop Stockouts state that FrontlineSMS technology has greatly improved their communications, reducing time spent, and enabling online mapping of results for easy comprehension and sharing. The results have been very impactful and governments are also currently using SMS to collect their own data and monitor facilities.

**Increasing citizen-led government accountability and responsiveness**

Participation is defined as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them (World Bank, 1994). Citizen engagement and participation has been evidenced to increase civic and political knowledge, foster a greater sense of empowerment, deepen networks, increase access to state services and resources, and enhance state responsiveness (Gaventa and Barret, 2010). However, to allow for a more equitable development process, disadvantaged stakeholders need to be empowered to increase their level of knowledge, influence and control over their own livelihoods, including development initiatives affecting them.

ICTs can facilitate both transparency and participation in public service delivery, which can lead to increases in efficiency and responsiveness, as well as improvements in the government’s ability to correctly prioritise government services to correspond with citizen desires. Not only can public trust in government be enhanced, but also inclusion and empowerment of groups often excluded from the policy process can be increased through extension of information access and capability to all citizens, as evidenced by the ICT4GOV programme in the DR Congo.

Mobile phones have enabled ‘crowdsourcing’, or the gathering of information from large numbers of people, which can help to solve potential problems ranging from public service delivery issues to election riots or crime. The non-profit tech company Ushahidi used crowdsourcing to enable citizens to provide quick geo-referenced information during elections to mobilise government help. The mobility, ease of use, flexible deployment and affordability of wireless technologies enables citizens even in rural populations with low levels of income and literacy to use them, as well as their adaptation to a variety of applications.

**CASE STUDY**

**ICT4GOV (DR Congo)**

With the support of the World Bank, the Congolese government launched an ICT for Governance (ICT4GOV) pilot programme in 2009 in South Kivu province, which suffered from years of civil conflict, political instability, mismanagement and corruption. The initiative aimed to facilitate decentralisation by empowering stakeholders to participate in the process of ICT-based participatory budgeting. Citizens were enabled to vote via SMS or at voting stations on a shortlist of budget priorities for the district, as well as to receive updates about how the budget was allocated, and to give feedback about the projects’ implementation.

**Impact:** In some areas, more than US$80,000 was invested in interventions such as school building, health clinics, roads and irrigation structures; in most cases, this was the first time that any real investment was made in the districts. For instance, Ibanda, a rural community, went from not having any investment budget to having 40 per cent of its budget devoted to investments. Levels of local tax collection have increased after the process, suggesting that citizens became more willing to pay their taxes, as they believed that government would actually use their tax dollars to deliver services (World Bank, 2012a). The programme is now being scaled-up countrywide.

**CASE STUDY**

**Ushahidi/Uchaguzi (Kenya)**

Following the post-election crisis in Kenya, there was a need to accurately and efficiently monitor election fraud and rioting in order to mobilise support to prevent or mitigate such situations. Ushahidi created a crowd-sourcing information and internet-mapping site that allowed users to submit eye-witness accounts of election fraud and riots via web, email, text or Twitter in order to help mobilise support for preventing or mitigating crisis situations. Information sent via SMS or through other media was verified, mapped for the public to view online, and communicated to public authorities, which could respond to the reports.

**Impact:** Between 30 December 2007 and 1 April 2008, the platform had 45,000 unique visits, 173,000 page views, and 220 incident reports (Hanna, 2012). Ushahidi is often cited as an example of how mobile phones provide a good complement to government-led governance. The platform has been deployed in other countries, including Uchaguzi in Uganda, Sudan Vote Monitor, Cuidemos el Voto in Mexico, Eleitor 2010 in Brazil, and Amatora mu Mahoro in Burundi. Furthermore, the platform has been adapted for other reporting objectives, such as a child-violence-reporting programme in Benin, and Stop Stockout’s ‘Pill Check Week’ in countries around Africa.
Key enabling conditions

Such case studies show how open government initiatives contribute to increasing state responsiveness, lowering of corruption, building new democratic spaces for citizen engagement and empowering local voices. However, they also reveal how transparency does not automatically lead to greater social accountability and better governance. Any conclusions on the impact of transparency and accountability initiatives must also be located within a broader discussion of the contexts within which these occur, as context affects which transparency or accountability initiatives are feasible, the internal effectiveness of initiatives, and their interaction with broader external factors (McGee and Gaventa, 2010). Nonetheless, through such case study research it is possible to identify lessons in terms of the enabling conditions that support the development and implementation of successful open government initiatives, summarised in framework that follows.

Political commitment and responsiveness

Open government implies changes in the culture of government and how it relates to citizens as clients, requiring not only citizen participation but also the ability and incentives of the public sector to listen to citizens and respond to feedback. To this end, secure political commitment and technical competencies to engage citizens, manage change and open government, leverage social networks and integrate knowledge from multiple participants, is central to most open government initiatives (Hanna, 2012). Without political will, transparency – including the creation of Transparency Portals or the provision of open data – is very difficult. Initiatives such as the Budget Tracking Tool in Kenya have experienced challenges due to inaccessibility of public data (Heacock, 2010).

However, even the existence of committed political leaders may not be enough to bring about desired changes if there are structural constraints, such as lack of financial and political autonomy to carry out reforms or take action against corrupt officials (McGee and Gaventa, 2010). Therefore, it is also essential that there exist mechanisms and resources for government to act based on citizen feedback, citizen demands, or corruption allegations.

Capabilities and motivation for citizen participation

If citizens are not able to process, analyse or use information gained from greater transparency initiatives, such information cannot be used effectively. These capabilities can be strengthened by a number of factors, including increased access (e.g. Community Information Centres in India); an active media (e.g. ‘Raising the Water Pressure’ in Tanzania); social mobilisation; the existence of coalitions and ‘infomediaries’, and increased computer literacy (e.g. Digital Doorways) (Hanna, 2012). It is also important to adapt open government initiatives to education level, culture, language, gender and other characteristics, as well as to facilitate participation through decreasing the costs of participating (time, money, uncertainty, insecurity) as well as increasing the benefits of participating (rewards, change and capacity-building) (Murillo, 2012).

Approaches and focuses of open government initiatives should be tailored to the specific country context, including the types, motives, incentives and capabilities of potential users – both citizens (who can give feedback on improving public services) and organisations or journalists (who are better positioned in some ways to put pressure on government) (Hanna, 2012). A number of studies show that transparency and accountability mechanisms gain more traction when linked to other mobilisation strategies, such as advocacy, litigation, electoral pressure, or protest movements (McGee and Gaventa, 2010).

ICT infrastructure

The effectiveness of open government initiatives in reaching citizens and businesses depends greatly on the availability of ICT infrastructure, including connectivity and broadband penetration and access. Mobile telephony, wireless access and other technological options should be explored by policymakers with regards to coverage and cost, with the recognition that strategic open government may be a key catalyst in reaching development targets and equitable public services for remote communities (McGee and Gaventa, 2010).

As demonstrated in the case studies, a variety of ICT tools can be applied to increase capacity-building, curb corruption and improve public service delivery. These include websites (e.g. Transparency Portals), crowdsourcing and geospatial technologies (e.g. Ushahidi or Stop...
Sustainability

Many open governance tools and initiatives are funded by external donors or government budgets and for specific periods of time. After the expiry period, there is a risk that these tools may come to a standstill. This was evidenced in ICT electoral tools like the Ugandan Election Watch 2011 and Uchaguzi (Hanna, 2012). Not only does this raise the problem of measuring their impact, but also it can sour citizens’ appetite for engaging with similar tools in the future (World Bank, 2012b). There may also be too many of the same types of platforms created by various organisations, leading to a duplication of efforts and citizen confusion. Sustainability needs to be an intention of ICT initiatives right from the start and should be designed into the initiative (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010). Consistent political commitment is one way to increase sustainability, exemplified by the commitment of the Brazilian government to constantly improve its Transparency Portal, as is increasing the self-sufficiency of open government tools, such as the locally owned, revenue-producing CSCs in India.

Conclusion

This article seeks to provide an overview of how open governance initiatives can utilise the many benefits of ICTs – including their ability to increase information accessibility even to rural areas, the opportunities for horizontal, upwards and downwards communication, and the possibility of quick, easy and affordable communication on a variety of platforms – to increase citizen participation. ICTs smooth the transition from simple government-to-citizen information supply to government-citizen-government interaction on a variety of issues, so that it becomes a seamless iterative cycle. ICT tools can maximise impact and reach, allowing anybody to access and update complaints and feedback on government services, the result of which can be tracked and used by NGOs, the media and the government. This, in turn, can create feedback and incentives for governments to improve their public services as well as promote government honesty, accountability and responsiveness – therefore helping to attain good governance goals.

The case studies briefly summarised here are just a taste of the many initiatives that can be learned from. While every country and context is unique, a few key common elements that should be taken into consideration when designing open governance initiatives have been identified, namely:

- Political commitment and responsiveness
- Capabilities and motivation for citizen participation
- ICT infrastructure
- Organisational partnerships
- Sustainability.

These issues affect the value that ICTs can add, and therefore the design and implementation of impactful open government ICT initiatives requires close attention to the enabling conditions that allow the translation of open government data into concrete accountability outcomes.

References


