

//SPEAKING OF INTERNATIONAL T/A INITIATIVES AND CSO-RESEARCHER DIALOGUE ...

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A recent TAI think piece by Florencia Guerzovich and Ari Shaw not only took stock of the state of knowledge about international T/A efforts, it also served as a point of departure for a recent Round Table convened as part of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative's (T/AI) learning process. They pointedly asked: 'international initiatives use scarce resources, but for what?' In late September, a couple of dozen civil society strategists, multilateral development bank governance specialists, and international relations/law scholars came together to exchange ideas about whether and how international initiatives generate change, what kinds of support strategies can bolster on-the-ground impact, how do the impacts vary – and how do we know? The gathering was especially timely, in the run-up to the Open Government Partnership's London Summit. Open government advocates were well-represented, though the workshop also included perspectives immersed in extractive industries campaigns, anti-corruption reforms, human rights treaties, World Bank reforms, environmental policy, financial transparency, and international election monitoring. These notes will share a few follow-up reflections, filtered through the lens of a participant who comes at the issues from the perspective of a scholar/semi-practitioner.

How do we figure out when international initiatives make a difference?

Yes, context matters – but when and how? The now-vast scholarly literature on previous waves of international governance reforms, including some with much longer track records, is quite relevant for the discussion of more recent T/A initiatives. Scholars who look back at human rights campaigns and treaties, or at international election monitoring, find that 'the action is in the

middle'. Beth Simmons compares the uneven national level impacts of international human rights treaties, addressing country differences and change over time. Judith Kelley digs deep into the uneven terrain of international election monitoring: sometimes outside actors can promote democracy, but they often have no actual leverage and sometimes even do harm. Lesley Wexler's legal analysis assesses the drivers and impacts of a wide range of international humanitarian law initiatives. These scholars find that we should not expect international initiatives to make a big difference in nation states that are already solidly democratic, or where authoritarian rule is entrenched. In countries in transition, in contrast, international initiatives can bolster national actors who have the motive and means to mobilize – and they can get the attention of those governments that might actually care about naming and shaming. The 'train has to be moving' for international actors to come in and play a reinforcing role. This reality check is helpful for calibrating our expectations, especially given the capacity of more savvy authoritarian regimes to game some of the international metrics and create 'islands of transparency' within a sea of rot. Indeed, one campaigner cautioned about the rise of 'zombie transparency,' superficial gestures by corrupt regimes.

The longer our causal chains, the greater the likelihood of weak links

This proposition may sound abstract, but it actually refers to a very concrete question about how change happens. Put another way: The more steps there are in between immediate CSO campaign goals and their intended eventual impacts, the greater the possibility that bottlenecks will get in the way. For example, what specific chain of events is supposed to unfold after an international

monitoring initiative releases its report? Beyond the initial media splash, what country-level leadership, strategies, and capacities can turn such moments into tangible, sustainable institutional change? The effort to figure out how international initiatives can help to promote national-level reforms, in specific country contexts, is yet another example of the challenge involved in fully spelling out our theories of change – to close the loop. That's what 'identifying the links in the causal chain' refers to – unpacking our theories of change into their distinct components. This kind of strategic planning exercise can help to identify possible weak links. In other words, how can we pinpoint the steps where we make assumptions that may turn out to require large leaps of faith. The more links in a proposed causal chain, though, the harder this thought exercise turns out to be.

In the open government advocacy community, many wonder about how to tighten up the links between emerging international standards, national level reforms, and actual changes in how governments interface with citizens. This is indeed a tall order. In response, the International Budget Partnership recently published a manual that marks a big step forward in making this exercise more accessible. Their [Super-Duper Impact Planning Guide](#) applies evidence-based approaches to the action strategies behind CSO reform initiatives.

Who decides what international norms are?

International T/A campaigners may differ in terms of their ideas about what norms are, not to mention who should set them. One OGP strategist stressed that the process is not about global norm setting – in the sense of promoting a one-size-fits-all set of substantive reform standards. Indeed, one of the strengths of the process is that it does *not* involve one set of governments telling another what to do. In contrast, the OGP process is about each government setting its own new open government goals, ostensibly in consultation with their respective civil society stakeholders. These national debates may well be informed by – or may even explicitly reference other international norms, such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (as in the US and UK). Yet another participant, from the international anti-corruption movement, pointed out that the OGP is very much about promoting global procedural norms, insofar as it requires minimum standards of consultation with civil society.

This is an especially hot topic in those countries whose governments seem intent on restricting the civic space for independent public debate. The national evaluations commissioned by the Independent [Reporting Mechanism](#) are taking a close look at whether governments moved forward on both fronts – their own substantive open government commitments in their Action Plans, and the degree to which they consulted with CSOs to set those goals. Most of the IRM reports on the first Action Plans in the eight OGP founding countries found civil society consultation processes to be rather thin, though in some cases government-civil society engagement improved in the course of preparing their second Action Plans. These process issues were the minds of many civil society participants at the London OGP Summit.

After international summits, how do reforms get embedded more deeply into states?

For workshop participants, the remarkably rapid take-off of the OGP process underscores the importance of high level buy-in, building on pre-existing networks that brought together leaders in society and the state at both national and international levels. Yet getting governments to make commitments is one thing, while transforming public institutions so that meaningful reforms actually get carried out is another -- and usually requires a different set of coalitions and incentives. OGP strategists are well aware of this, envisioning change as driven by distinct top-down, mid-level, and bottom-up processes that interact with each other. Indeed, diverse actors are pursuing several different change strategies under the OGP umbrella simultaneously. Yet as a delicately negotiated, strictly voluntary, multi-stakeholder, now really global initiative, the OGP process is not well positioned to 'reach deeply into countries'. Instead, the best-case scenario is to 'tip the balance in favour of those that want open government'. Though it's almost a cliché to talk about 'unpacking the state', many agreed that that's what civil societies need to do – to find and bolster possible reform champions and get buy-in from those government officials with their hands on the levers that really control the various branches of the state apparatus, while identifying and politically isolating anti-accountability bottlenecks within the government. Incoming civil society OGP co-chair Rakesh Rajani recently offered a balanced assessment of these challenges, in the [Tanzanian context](#).

Is a crowded field of international T/A initiatives a strength or a limitation?

Now that the international governance reform space is filling up with so many initiatives, it is far from clear when they find positive synergy with each other, when some crowd others out, and when some may even act at cross-purposes. Florencia Guertzovich and Roberto DeMichele make this point in their [2010 study of international anti-corruption initiatives in Latin America](#). In Africa, Latin America, and Europe, for example, the OGP entered regional civic spaces that were already occupied by closely related initiatives – with several regional CSO governance reform initiatives in Latin America involving transparency (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), for example), and a decade of intergovernmental governance reform ‘peer review’ efforts by the Follow-Up Mechanisms to anti-corruption conventions based at the [Organization of American States](#), the [Council of Europe](#), and the [African Peer Review Mechanism](#). Most of the African governments involved with OGP have also participated in the APRM, underscoring the need to harmonize such efforts at the national level.

Should international initiatives set the bar for entry low, to encourage governmental engagement – at the risk of watering down reform goals?

One rationale for making it easy for ‘imperfect’ governments to sign up to international reform initiatives is to bolster incomplete regime transitions and insider reform champions. This is a theory of change. But what if this doesn’t happen? What if less-than-democratic regimes deliberately try to game the system by improving performance on narrow metrics to deflect international attention from the rest of what they are doing? For example, what if governments pass information access laws – on paper – and release just enough budget data to meet the OGP eligibility criteria, but they still fix elections and have political prisoners? Is there a risk that “open-washing?” will taint the OGP brand?

This issue comes up in the case of international election observers, where savvy regimes that are not interested in free and fair elections can permit the arrival of many external monitoring teams, as long as some are likely to disagree with others – thereby cancelling each other out. The broader issue keeps coming up: for

proponents of international reform initiatives, whether in government or civil society, when does continued engagement end up legitimating fundamentally unacceptable national processes? In one paradigm case, [Global Witness pulled out of the Kimberly Process](#) for dealing with conflict diamonds. Does CSO engagement with international initiatives sometimes risk becoming an end in itself? At what cost, and who decides? How do international reform initiatives take the possible downsides for local and national organizers into account? The diversity of possible answers is likely to remind us that where one stands depends on where one sits.

What resources and incentives are available to national civil society actors, to move these T/A agendas forward?

Since international open government reforms need national civil society partners to actually use them as leverage to help to reform states, what do those pro-accountability CSO actors need to help to broaden the constituencies for change? New apps? Better access to the mass media? Electoral clout? Legislative lobbying capacity? Strategic litigation? More naming and shaming? What about broad-based grassroots organizing? Probably some mix of ‘all of the above’ – which suggests that international funders should consider multi-pronged, versatile support strategies that are embedded in national contexts and constituencies.

Where do civil society *infomediaries* fit in to this broader reform landscape, and how can they punch above their weight? This kind of public information production and processing role could be filled by universities, think tanks, or campaigning organizations. The main challenge is how such actors can become the information processing hubs for broader civic movements for democracy and accountability, *grounded in actually-existing national social and political forces*. As economists might put it – how can we better align the supply and demand for the kind of information that broad-based social and civic actors will really use to motivate collective action, to gain legitimacy in the mass media, and thereby to create, trigger, or embolden public accountability institutions? After all, CSOs rarely have the power to hold governments accountable on their own.

When pro-democracy infomediaries develop their agendas for the production of civic information – how do their change strategies guide their choice of target audiences?

When planning their public awareness campaigns, policy monitoring exercises, performance indexes, and technical reports, who exactly are the intended ‘consumers’, as it were? Workshop participants shared their experiences of ‘reporting fatigue,’ suggesting that more long reports are not the answer, nor are scholarly tomes published half a decade later. Some participants reported that they only read blogs, relying on them to boil down the takeaways from others’ in-depth monitoring and research exercises. Yet the use of the term could be understood in several different ways. Does ‘reporting fatigue’ refer to the reader’s point of view, in terms of the accessibility, length, and growing number of the reports themselves? Or does it refer to how a report’s message may or may not stand out in a possibly crowded field? Or does the fatigue refer to the experience of those who produce the reports, who are uncertain as to whether they are worth the effort? Either way, this question brings us back to spelling out the links in the causal chain – the need to specify how a given information or reporting exercise is going to put actionable tools in the hands of relevant social, civic, and political actors.

The keyword here is ‘user-centred’. The capacity of civic information reach its potential to both motivate and guide collective action for accountability depends on the degree to which it is designed with users in mind. This is where the idea of targeted transparency comes in, a concept that hones in on the kinds of *really* accessible information that reach people where they are at. In contrast to weighty technical reports and online indices about seemingly far-away policies, targeted transparency initiatives provide evidence that allows specific stakeholder constituencies to make informed decisions about whether and how to act.

In the T/A field, research needs to catch up to practitioners – and who sets the agenda?

CSO, governmental, and multilateral T/A initiatives have been gaining momentum at local, national, and international levels, yet the state of research on the field is just beginning to ramp up. Most of those researchers who are engaged with this agenda tend to have a focus that is more applied than scholarly. Scholarly research also tends to be retrospective rather than engaged with practitioners in real time – as well as being divided by discipline and methodology. (The International Budget Partnership recently completed a set of innovative,

real-time case studies of open government initiatives). At the same time, practitioners could do more to influence scholarly research agendas, especially since academics are well-positioned to ask larger questions that go beyond the next short-term evaluation, including examining assumptions.

‘What works?’ may be the wrong question

Research can certainly help to address the ‘what works’ question, yet that framing of the question can distort the answer. As stated, the question implies a yes-or-no answer, yet much of what we do know falls into the not-very-satisfying category of ‘it depends...’. Given how hard the T/A reform agenda is, and the fact that there are few magic bullets, the best that we can hope for is usually some *partial* degree of progress. That means reframing the question: *how often* does something work, by *what criteria*, and to *what degree*? Plus, who decides ‘what counts’ as working? If a T/A intervention only ‘works’ in some sense, let’s say, a third of the time – is that a success or a failure? Why should we expect reforms that have enemies to go viral as quickly as Facebook? If we go further and ask ‘under what conditions’ does it work, and if the short answer is ‘context matters’, then how, when, and where?

Getting around methodological walls

Once we start reframing the ‘what difference are we making’ questions in this way, we start to hit a methodological wall erected by the dominant dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods – the longstanding duel between large N statistical correlations vs. case studies. Quantitative approaches can document *how often* institutional change happens (if it’s measurable) – but they have a harder time with the question of ‘why and how’ it happens. Meanwhile, qualitative institutional analysis can answer ‘*why and how*’ change happens, but is not so good at documenting *how often* it happens. You can see where this is going... Each approach turns out to be incomplete, yet with complementary strengths. Fortunately, ‘mixed methods’ are becoming increasingly de rigueur in some scholarly circles. Yet there is still a missing link. If we circle back to the ‘*how does context matter*’ question, this is where the *comparative method* comes in.

Comparison is often used in everyday conversation merely to illustrate a point, or because it seems interesting to juxtapose

cases. But there is an entire school of comparative analysis that focuses on carefully defining and selecting cases, holding some variables constant in ways that allow researchers to rule out some explanations and to bolster others. Scholars go back and forth over how to define the ideal number of cases, ‘what counts’ as a comparable case or an outlier, and whether to look across many cases at once vs. focusing more deeply and historically on just a few cases.



(For classic academic works, see, among others, Arend Lijphart, ‘II. The Comparable-Cases Strategy in Comparative Research’ *Comparative Political Studies*, 8(2), July 1975, Giovanni Sartori, ‘Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,’ *American Political Science Review* 64, 1970, Charles Ragin and Howard Becker, eds., *What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

The main point here is that the comparative method is a broad *logic of inquiry* within which quantitative and qualitative approaches are merely tools whose relevance depends on the question. Yet in the applied research world, the comparative method remains *crowded out* by the dominant qualitative-quantitative divide.

Taking comparative analysis seriously is relevant for international T/A initiatives because it allows us to ask three sets of questions that get excluded by the simple ‘does it work’ question. First, if a specific international reform effort begins to get taken up, it is likely to have varying impacts *across* countries – but what explains the variation? Second, *within* countries where such reform efforts begin to gain traction, how does impact vary across different issue areas, government agencies or regions? This subnational focus is key for the goal of closing the loop. (See Richard Snyder’s [classic synthesis of the subnational comparative method](#).) Third, what about the different political dynamics across the wide range of different international reform initiatives? They vary widely not only by issue and target, but also in terms of their tools and theories of change – starting with the huge difference between the *hard law* represented by treaties and conventions and the very *soft power* represented by voluntary, multi-stakeholder agreements. Indeed, at the concluding plenary of the OGP London Summit, incoming civil society co-chair Suneeta Kaimal stressed that OGP needed “dentures” to give it “bite.”

Wrap-up

This workshop contributed to T/AI’s silo-busting mission by bringing together practitioners and researchers from across a wide range of issues and perspectives – provoking new and better questions for the future

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