GPSA Brown Bag Lunch Series
When and How do Digital Technologies Strengthen Citizen Voice and Collective Action

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Presenters: Zahid Hasnain, Senior Public Sector Specialist, World Bank, Jonathan Fox, Professor, American University & Tiago Peixoto, Governance Specialist, World Bank

Discussant: Susan Crawford, Visiting Professor, Harvard Law School
Chair: Roby Senderowitsch, Program Manager, Global Partnership for Social Accountability

MAIN TAKE-AWAY MESSAGE

- While technology can be a compelling way of increasing citizen voice, it is not a silver bullet and does not work in all situations. Digital technology that effectively improves citizen voice in an inclusive manner need to be designed thoughtfully keeping context and institutional structure in mind.

I. ABSTRACT

This BBL presented a background paper for the 2016 World Development Report (WDR). The 2016 WDR will examine how digital technologies can be used as a force for development by generating economic growth, greater labor market opportunity and greater government accountability. The background paper presented in this BBL explores whether digital technologies can make governments more responsive by helping to strengthen citizen voice and collective action.

The BBL started with brief introduction of the WDR framework by Zahid Hasnain – one of the core authors of the WDR. The WDR suggests that digital technologies affect development by a) improving information e.g. by opening up new markets and reducing information asymmetries to ameliorate market failures, b) increasing efficiency e.g. through automation and better monitoring within government, and c) by increasing innovation e.g. through reducing cost of citizen participation and replication to zero and guaranteeing scale.

Focusing on the impact of digital technologies on accountability, WDR suggests that these technologies can lead to top-down (e.g. through user feedback to allow government to monitor public and private service providers) as well as bottom up pressure (e.g. through helping collective action) for accountability. However, it suggests, impact of technology is conditioned by institutions, both formal and informal. When institutions are strong and have prior capacity and especially willingness to improve accountability, digital technologies can have positive augmenting effect. On the other hand, when institutions are not aligned, digital technology can become another tool for elite control, and can even lead to negative consequences in some situations.

Following the brief introduction of the WDR, Tiago and Jonathan Fox focused on examining if and how digital technologies can lead to greater citizen voice and how that voice can lead to greater government responsiveness. For their study, they narrowed down the universe of intervention that have used platforms to solicit citizen feedback about service access and quality to 23, selecting the interventions for which some analysis of their impact was available. These platforms spanned a variety of platforms from CheckMySchool in the Philippines, and from Pressure Pan in Brazil to Maji Voice in Kenya. They distinguish these initiatives on the basis of directionality of accountability; upward accountability means that frontline providers are accountable to their managers and policy makers while downward accountability is when citizens exert pressure on public service providers. The authors also make a distinction between user feedback, civic action and citizen engagement. User feedback is individual and undisclosed. On the other hand, citizen action occurs only when feedback is publicly available and can be aggregated. Citizen engagement occurs when these two categories overlap.

They find that out of 23 cases, 7 initiatives resulted in high responsiveness from government. These initiatives include: 1) Proactive Listening Electricity in Dominican REpublic, 2) Maji Voice in Kenya, 3) Lungisa in South Africa, 4) Rio 1746 in Brazil, 5)Digital State Participatory Budgeting in Brazil, 6) I Change My City in India, and Por Mi Barrio in Uruguay

They did not find any trends or identified variables (institutional aspects) that appeared to determine government responsiveness. They did however make the following observations. Successful initiatives that resulted in government responsiveness were started by the government (4) as well as by the CSOs (3). On the other hand, none of the platforms that are donor-driven resulted in high levels of institutional response. They also find that all three CSO initiatives with high responsiveness include partnership with their respective governments. Another interesting observation was that the uptake of the information by the government does not necessarily leads to responsiveness and that citizen engagement also does not systematically depends on government response.

They also find that not all voices are heard equally. Affluent and more educated citizens are more likely to provide feedback. Moreover, the concept of 'user feedback' limits the participation to users and excludes citizens or individuals who do not have access to services in the first place. System's categorization may also select for some kinds of priorities to the exclusion of others.

In addition to these disparities, there is also digital divide. Large proportion of the population of the world, especially in developing countries, does not have access to these technologies. Even among the EU countries where broader access is not a problem, the presenters showed, disparities across groups is wide.

The presenters concluded the discussion by suggesting that digital technologies increase the capacity of governments to respond but not necessarily their willingness to do so. Therefore, the presenters and the participants suggested that the main challenge of increasing willingness of governments to respond to citizens' voice remains. It is important to understand the incentives of all the involved stakeholders including incentives of users to provide actionable information and government's incentive to respond when implementing digital technologies.

The discussions also proposed that like in other social accountability initiatives citizens' voice may be necessary but not enough for institutional responsiveness. Many participants and the presenters suggested that the study provided cautionary tale of overstating the use of technology; interface between citizens and state through digital technologies is one of many possible interfaces and should be treated as such.

Despite the mildly disappointing results, the participants of the BBL suggested that this agenda of using digital technologies for greater accountability is still at a very primitive stage. They also suggested that perhaps the greatest impact of digital technologies on governance comes from the increase in the capacity of governments to monitor themselves and service providers, for example through greater information and automation.

Presenters and participants also highlighted the need to further understand the relationship between citizen voice as enhanced through digital technologies and government responsiveness, such as understanding how and if some technologies are better at eliciting citizen participation and government response, what kind of opportunities may be available in closed environments, and how is the impact mediated by aspects of political accountability. They also suggested that studying the impact of technology by sector could also be helpful. Since this was an exploratory study, presenters and participants agreed that methodology could be made more precise to capture micro-level as well as political variables, to accurately understand the impact of digital technologies on government responsiveness through citizen feedback.

II. IN CONCLUSION

The presentation highlighted a number of important viewpoints for social accountability. It highlights a fundamental perspective – the importance of understanding the political context where a social accountability intervention is implemented including incentive structures of various stakeholders. Without ensuring that the social accountability initiative are designed in consonance with the political economy environment, as well as without aiming to impact these dynamics, digital technologies will only have limited impact in improving government accountability. This discussion also highlighted the importance of 'closing the feedback loop' and emphasized that citizen voice while necessary is not sufficient to exact accountability.

Last but not the least, this discussion reiterates the importance of constructive engagement for social accountability approach. The CSOs that engaged governments in addition to eliciting and encouraging citizens to raise their voice through digital technologies were successful in generating government response as compared to the CSOs that did not do so. This observation reverberates existing research suggesting that constructive engagement between citizens and government officials is often necessary to reach the goal of greater accountability.