



Helpdesk Research Report

Infomediaries and accountability

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Question

A synthesis of what the existing evidence says (and where there are gaps) on: 1) What role might ‘infomediaries’, and specifically the media have in helping translate transparency into greater government accountability? In generating that accountability? In empowering citizens? 2) In what contexts or types of contexts do ‘infomediaries’ and media play such a facilitating role, and why? 3) What enabling factors contributed to success? 4) What role, if any, have donors had in supporting these sectors in this capacity? 5) What risks exist in this space?

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1. Overview

This rapid review provides a brief summary of the evidence on the impact of infomediaries, in particular the media, in generating greater government accountability and citizen empowerment. The term “infomediaries” – or information intermediaries – is used to refer to actors who “synthesise, translate, simplify and direct information on behalf of others” (UNDP 2003: 4; also see McGee and Gaventa 2010: 45). The information flow can be from government to citizens, or vice versa. This review focuses primarily on the impact of information flow from citizens to government, and is interested in infomediaries that go beyond simply making information available, to catalysing government responsiveness and accountability and citizen empowerment through the ways that they gather, analyse and distribute information (NDI 2015).

With growing consensus that transparency does not always or automatically lead directly to accountability – and research pointing to a role for infomediaries in generating accountability from transparent information – there is an emerging interest in understanding the role and impact of infomediaries on accountability (Halloran 2016; McGee and Gaventa 2010: 44).

This rapid research has found several reviews of the evidence on the relationship between the media and governance outcomes. A common conclusion is that there is strong evidence of the link between free media and better governance and government responsiveness on a range of issues, including public spending on education and health and public food distribution (World Bank and BBC World Service Trust 2011). A recent DFID review on corruption (2015) found a small body of evidence that finds the freedom of the press as an intermediate factor moderating the relationship between transparency and accountability. Not all impacts are positive: there are mixed results of the effects of information disclosure on election outcomes.

There appears to be a research gap for in-depth comparative or meta-analysis examining how, where and why the media – or other infomediaries – has helped translate transparency initiatives into greater government accountability and citizen empowerment. While there is a small but growing body of single case studies, these tend to emphasise small-scale isolated success stories, rather than more sustained or widespread shifts in behaviour.

In spite of these limitations, the small body of literature does indicate the kinds of accountability impacts that infomediaries are helping to generate. These include:

- Improved people’s knowledge of key governance issues, and in some countries, their political participation (TV and radio debate programmes in Kenya, Nepal and Sierra Leone – BBC Media Action)
- Catalysed changes to service delivery (community radio in Nepal – BBC Media Action)
- Generated new governmental accountability procedures for a cash transfer programme (Data journalism in Kenya – InterNews)
- Empowered residents to negotiate water provision with government authorities in South Africa (CSO-supported community-based freedom of information strategies in South Africa – Open Democracy Advice Centre)
- Increase in the allocation for school budgets in Indonesia (CSO-supported budget transparency initiative – Centre for Information and Regional Studies (Pattiro Malang)

Other key findings include:

Context and enabling factors

- Infomediaries are less successful in generating accountability outcomes in politically divisive and closed contexts, and the most effective strategies are grounded in the cultural and political context of the countries concerned (Stringer 2015).
- Oppositional or confrontational media roles may miss other key roles the media can play in creating trustworthy spaces, often the most constructive mechanism for engaging both governments and citizens (Stringer 2015).
- There is a range of enabling factors on both the citizen voice (demand) and state (supply side) which affect the success of infomediary interventions (McGee and Gaventa 2010).

Donor role

- With some exceptions, on the whole, donors tend not to invest in the media for the long term, struggle to integrate the media into broader policy agendas, and lack a clearly agreed strategic framework to position media support (expert comment).
- With little data to suggest that the “transparency + participation = accountability” theory of change is working in practice with public governance-oriented multistakeholder initiatives (Brockmyer and Fox 2015), some donors are looking for the right infomediaries to bridge the gap; others are focusing on strengthening citizen organisational capacities (expert comment).

Risks

- Most media – and other infomediaries – in fragile states are operating in difficult and co-opted contexts. Like all governance work, media interventions can often entail political risks for donors and are affected by changing political circumstances (expert comment).
- Infomediaries have a powerful role in deciding whose voices get heard by who; it cannot be assumed that infomediaries always represent the diversity of voices within the constituency they claim to represent (Oswald 2014).
- Focusing solely on the role of infomediaries may distract from taking a more contextualised and systems view of accountability. In this accountability ecosystems approach to change, infomediaries – and the mediation of information – plays a complementary, but secondary role (Halloran 2015; Fox and Halloran 2016).

2. Infomediaries and their roles

Conceptual work establishing an analytical framework for the different roles and activities of accountability infomediaries is nascent. This is complicated by infomediaries’ activities spanning a range of different fields – including the open data movement, open government reforms, anti-corruption efforts and social accountability initiatives – which are not always well-connected (Fox and Peixoto 2016: 4). Ongoing and planned research may fill some of the gaps.¹

Often the media fulfil the infomediary function – and are the focus of this report (UNDP 2003: 4). A wide range of other entities can play an infomediary role. These include civil society organisations (CSOs) and community spokespersons, champions inside government and local government officials, researchers, think tanks and universities, market research companies and private corporations (UNDP 2003: 4; National Democratic Institute (NDI) 2015: 1).

The literature examined for this rapid review illustrates a wide variety of different media and tools used to gather and disseminate information to and from citizens in order to press for greater government accountability. Examples include: social media, data visualisations, online interactive portals, SMS

¹ The Transparency and Accountability Initiative (T/AI) is commissioning a review of the evidence on transparency, participation and accountability, with a report or other outputs planned for the second half of 2016. The draft research questions for this study include a focus on the role of infomediaries (T/AI n.d.). BBC Media Action’s evidence review of their activities and governance outcomes was summarised in 2014 (Casserly et al). A further review of their governance evidence will be published in early 2017. The Making All Voices Count programme¹ by Hivos, Ushahidi and the Institute of Development Studies will produce an analysis of lessons learned on intermediaries between citizens and their governments to strengthen accountability through improved transparency (Berdou forthcoming).

messaging, radio phone-ins, face-to-face meetings, surveys and crowdsourcing techniques (McLoughlin 2015; NDI 2015).

Infomediaries can be both data users – translators and disseminators – and data producers (NDI 2015). They may play a role in producing data when a government lacks the capacity or political will to provide information, or when an issue is not adequately understood or documented (NDI 2015).

Sometimes within the literature a distinction is made between infomediaries – referring to the traditional media and newer open data actors – and political intermediaries – such as CSOs representing the interests of citizens (Wanjiku Kelbert 2014: 10; Berdou forthcoming). Some literature finds that organisations may play both a (newer) information role alongside and complementary to other (more traditional) intermediary functions, such as citizen participation and issue advocacy, monitoring political processes, and undertaking community service and civic education activities (NDI 2015). Other analyses highlight the potential “disjunct between ‘democratic intermediaries’ (with little understanding of open data), and ‘open data intermediaries’, potentially with less understanding of the democratic and political change process’ (expert comment). Sometimes multiple intermediaries may be required to generate accountability from transparent information (Davies and Fumega 2014: 21).

3. Evidence on the role of the media

There is a large body of research providing “consistent evidence of the link between free media and better governance, including reduced corruption” (expert comment, citing Norris 2010). Various analysts of the enabling conditions for transparency to generate government accountability have identified a free and active media as an important factor (e.g. Peixoto 2013; McGee and Gaventa 2010). A 2011 GSDRC literature review finds that, where it is able to effectively fulfil the roles of watchdog, gatekeeper and agenda-setter, the media can improve governance by raising citizen awareness of social issues, enabling citizens to hold their governments to account, curbing corruption, and creating a civic forum for debate. It can also amplify the voice of marginalised and excluded groups (Haider et al 2011).

The evidence ranges from quantitative cross-country research (for example, proving the long-term association between a free and independent media and lower corruption), to a growing number of case studies on the media’s role in greater government accountability (DFID 2015: 22; World Bank and BBC World Service Trust 2011: 4; Odugbemi and Norris 2010: 385). The DFID paper concludes that “the media has a critical role to play in reducing corruption and [...] it plays a role in the effectiveness of other social accountability mechanisms” (DFID 2015: 86). World Bank and BBC World Service Trust (2011: 5) concludes that “the relationship between a free media and government responsiveness has been demonstrated with regard to public spending on education and health, prevention of famine and public food distribution and relief spending”.

However, little is known about how the relationship between the media and control of corruption works in practice, and therefore what needs reforming to strengthen good governance (World Bank 2014: 383). This rapid research has found it hard to identify in-depth comparative or meta-analysis that examines where, how and why the media has helped translate transparency initiatives into greater government accountability and/or citizen empowerment.

Moreover, not all the evidence is positive. Evidence of the impact on disclosure of information – often through the media – is mixed with regards to effects on election outcomes (DFID 2015: 71). A 2014 review commissioned by BBC Media Action – looking specifically at randomised controlled trials and

other quasi-experimental research – finds that while media initiatives have led to positive governance outcomes, including improved accountability, they have also at times had unexpected adverse effects² (Godfrey 2014; Moehler 2014). Furthermore, the experimental studies on media initiatives and accountability have been confined to a small number of countries, with research questions linked to specific interventions and outcomes, making generalising difficult (Godfrey 2014).

There is a small but growing body of single case studies that look at how the media has attempted to generate greater government accountability and/or citizen empowerment. Here are a few illustrative examples of this case study evidence to show the type of activities and findings available:

TV and radio debate programmes

BBC Media Action commissioned research into the governance impacts of debate programmes in Kenya, Nepal and Sierra Leone. It found a significant association between viewers or listeners of the programmes and high levels of knowledge of key governance issues in Sierra Leone and Kenya, and political participation in Nepal and Sierra Leone (Myers and Harford 2014: 5). The authors caution that the type of analysis used was not designed to allow causal attribution of the impact of these programmes on governance outcomes, which would require longitudinal and/or an experimental research (Doherty 2015).

Previous research on the DFID-funded ‘Sajha Sawal’ (Common Questions) debate programme in Nepal found that it has been successful at increasing levels of civic knowledge and political engagement and action amongst its audience and holding Nepal’s government to account (Vallance 2012: 1) (see Vallance 2012, and longer summary in Carter 2013b: 9-10).

Community radio

A recent review of how CSOs hold governments to account in developing countries flagged that community radio is sometimes seen as a way to engage citizens in local accountability whilst avoiding exclusionary cultural impediments or political economy dynamics (Mcloughlin 2015: 2).

The BBC Media Action Global Grant Governance project in Nepal built the capacity of regional radio stations across the country to produce localised versions of the national debate programme *Sajha Sawal* (Common Questions). The aim is for these local discussion programmes to provide a platform upon which local government officials can be questioned and directly asked to follow up, thus supporting accountability of leaders. Research on the impact of this initiative found that the programmes helped inform local people, ensured the voices of all groups were heard (including women, girls and other marginalised groups) and successfully highlighted issues of local importance and prompted officials to commit to taking action. There were examples of changes made to service delivery as a result of commitments made on the show. However, impact and satisfaction among audiences, in terms of actions taken following the show, varies across episodes. In particular, where action was needed at a higher policy level, or required collaboration between several groups (including private companies), local people reported being less satisfied that commitments from the show had been fulfilled sufficiently (BBC Media Action 2015).³

² For example, in Vietnam publishing national assembly delegate performance data on the internet resulted in the more outspoken delegates critical of the one-party state less likely to be re-elected, among other outcomes (Godfrey 2014).

³http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/summaries/asia/nepal/localised_debate. Accessed 11.03.2016.

By contrast, Keefer and Khemani (2011) found no evidence that community radio in Benin leads to successful collective demands for better government performance or increased government accountability. Government inputs into village schools, and household knowledge of government policies related to education, are all unrelated to village access to community radio. The researchers find that the political setting in Benin may reduce the effects of media access on citizens' ability to hold government accountable for service delivery (Keefer and Khemani 2011: 69).

In Mcloughlin's (2016) review of social and political accountability in Malawi, a brief case study is provided on radio listening clubs under the Mwananchi Programme. The radio clubs aimed to inform community members and enable them to raise their concerns with duty-bearers, with a focus on the use of Constituency Development Funds (CDF) and the Local Development Fund. Political obstacles were encountered: in one case village chiefs did not support a radio club probing why only one of 16 bridges meant to be constructed using the CDF had been built because the MP in charge of the funds was a member of the ruling party. Analysis suggests that radio clubs often do not work in politically divisive contexts or where the CSO itself is in a vulnerable position (Mcloughlin 2016: 8-9).

Data journalism

With the move to open data in Kenya in 2011, journalists struggled to interpret and disseminate the data (Susman-Peña 2014: 31). Through the Data Dredger project started in 2013, Internews aimed to provide an open data incubator system and grow a data journalism community in Nairobi, primarily offering training to journalists and a web resource that transformed the government data into interactive and visually attractive data sets⁴ (Susman-Peña 2014: 31; Constantaras 2014). Success stories include a journalist who exposed missing funds, inefficient distribution and ghost recipients in the Kenyan parliament's management of a cash transfer programme. After a front-page story was run for several days, the government undertook an audit, introduced new vetting committees that included community leaders and initiated a mobile banking service to distribute the funding (Constantaras 2014). Internews notes that success drivers included the project being well-funded, and the existence of a robust media industry (Bourgault 2015).

4. Evidence on other infomediaries

This rapid review has found a paucity of comparative or meta-reviews on the impact of CSOs and other organisations in their specific role as 'infomediaries'. It may be that it is challenging to separate out analysis of CSOs' infomediary role from their other intermediary roles (e.g. coalition-building, political advocacy etc.); summarising the evidence on this broader role is beyond the scope of this limited review.

There is, however, pertinent case study evidence on the roles and impact of infomediaries other than the media. This rapid review includes a selection of illustrative case studies from three areas:

Citizen voice platforms

There is an emerging body of literature examining citizen feedback channelled to government authorities that has been generated by open data movements and technology developments as well as the increasing importance attributed to the role of information (Gigler and Bailur 2014). There are recent

⁴ <http://www.internewskenya.org/dataportal/content?page=about>. Accessed 11.03.2016.

studies looking specifically at the impact of technological initiatives; some include findings on the role of infomediaries in generating accountability outcomes from these initiatives.

Davies and Fumega's (2014) review of adopting ICT innovations for transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption includes the case study of an Indian CSO and a citizen crowdsourcing platform aiming to generate greater government accountability for bribery practices. In 2010, Janaagraha, a non-profit organisation in Bangalore (capital of Karnataka state in India) developed a crowdsourcing platform – I paid a Bribe – that collates stories of bribes paid (or not paid) by citizens across the country.⁵ To reach more people a Hindi-language version was launched in 2013. Janaagraha also launched mobile apps and SMS services in order to make bribe reporting easier and more accessible to citizens across India. As a result, the transport commissioner pushed through reforms in the motor vehicle department, enabling drivers to apply online for a licence, so avoiding demands for bribes. Davies and Fumega (2014: 11) report that this experience illustrates the impact that citizen reporting initiatives can have when there is political will within the public administration to act.

Peixoto and Fox's (2016) review of 23 ICT-enabled voice platforms finds mixed results on both user uptake and institutional response, with institutional response low or non-existent for the majority of cases. The authors caution that one reason for these results, however, is that the umbrella category "ICT-enabled voice platforms" may have resulted in a comparison of quite different cases (Peixoto and Fox 2016: 21). The evidence points to the importance of civic engagement in addition to information – that is both public disclosure of feedback and public collective action – to generate greater accountability and responsiveness from senior policymakers and frontline service providers (Peixoto and Fox 2016: 22).

Community-based freedom of information strategies

There are other case studies that look at the role of civil society intermediaries in helping freedom of information (FOI)/access to information (ATI) strategies achieve their potential.

In South Africa, the work of the Open Democracy Advice Centre (ODAC) points to the significance of promoting 'community-based' FOI strategies, rather than simply providing information and training (McGee and Gaventa 2010: 25). Calland's ODAC case study (2010) details how the organisation changed strategies from simple information dissemination and training of paralegals and NGOs on how to use ATI laws, to more interaction with the communities involved. ODAC started to facilitate community-based meetings, identify the issues people wanted to take action on, and facilitate requests for information and advocacy processes on behalf of the communities. ODAC found this new approach rapidly yielded results, with the number of PAIA⁶ requests increasing remarkably, and with most being settled by the empowered communities taking over the process, rather than reaching the point of litigation. ODAC cites a success story where their involvement empowered residents to put pressure on a municipality to include their community within a water delivery system. Along with media attention, this resulted in the provision of fixed water tanks (drums) that are regularly replenished, along with a commitment to lay pipes for a permanent water supply. However, these successes have to be seen against the overall backdrop of a challenging context for accessing information in South Africa; during 2003-2004, South Africa's compliance with FOI requests declined (Calland 2010: 10-14).

⁵ Further information: <https://www.ipaidabribe.com> <http://hindi.ipaidabribe.com/> <http://www.janaagraha.org/>. I Paid a Bribe has also been replicated with partners in a number of other countries such as Pakistan, Kenya, Morocco, and Greece.

⁶ Promotion of Access to Information Act.

CSO budget accountability activities

There is a small body of work looking at the impact of budget transparency platforms, some of which are developed by CSOs, while others are used by CSOs to generate accountability. This emerging evidence base provides success stories, and some mixed findings, of the impact of CSOs' role in generating government accountability from budget transparency. An earlier GSDRC review (Carter 2013a) provides an overview of the available evidence. Examples from that review include:

- Indonesian CSOs report examples of CSOs' budget transparency activities leading to improved budget accountability and participation. One of the case studies looks at advocacy around local school budgets which led to improved engagement between civil society and government, and ultimately an increase in the allocation for school budgets (IDEA et al 2011).
- Diverse cases of civil society budget transparency campaigns documented by the International Budget Partnership⁷ (IBP) find that most report some improved accountability outcomes. Common success drivers included: taking advantage of political circumstances ('windows of opportunity'), support from external donors and building on pre-existing broad networks (see Carter 2013a for further summary of IBP CSO case studies).

5. Context and enabling factors

An expert consulted for this review finds that infomediaries are (generally) necessary in helping translate information into accountability, but not sufficient (expert comment).

In particular, the case studies included in this review highlight the importance of the political context: a lack of political freedom and constraints to freedom of expression will undermine the capacity for citizens to hold government to account (Stringer 2015: 21). Infomediary activity was less successful in generating accountability in politically divisive and closed contexts (e.g. community radio in Benin and Malawi; publishing national assembly delegate information in Vietnam).⁸

Another lesson learned is that "the effectiveness of media as an accountability mechanism relies substantially on its capacity to take accountability relationships to scale and translate localised issues into larger scale public discourse" (expert comment). This effect is stronger where elected officials act more in the interest of their constituents and attend more committee hearings (expert comment).

BBC Media Action's quantitative and qualitative research on a DFID-funded five-year media support project to improve transparency, participation and accountability in Angola, Sierra Leone and Tanzania⁹ (Stringer 2015) concludes that "the media's role as a force for accountability – especially in fragile states or emerging democracies – is complex and the most effective strategies tend to be those which are grounded in the cultural and political contexts of the countries concerned". Other lessons learned are that "strategies that focus only on an oppositional or confrontational role of media in society are insufficient and can miss other key roles the media can play in fostering more effective state-society

⁷ http://internationalbudget.org/ibp_publication_categories/impact-of-civil-society-on-budgets/. Accessed 07.2013.

⁸ There is related literature on the work of infomediaries and particularly the media in fragile and conflict-affected states, looking at how infomediaries and the media can help a society discuss and resolve differences peacefully. This rapid review has not covered this literature.

⁹ Called 'A National Conversation' the 2007-2013 project – supported by the DFI) through its Governance and Transparency Fund – worked with a diverse set of media organisations on community radio, national radio debate and magazine programmes, debate road shows and public service journalism.

relationships”. The study found that “working with the media to create trustworthy spaces that brought disparate groups together to discuss, mediate and collectively problem-solve – especially at the local level – often proved the most constructive mechanism for engaging governments and citizens alike”. Finally, the research highlights “the need for locally embedded approaches to governance support that are both adaptive and reflective”.¹⁰

The wider literature identifies enabling factors for transparency and accountability initiatives more generally. These are relevant for understanding the wider context which affects the success of infomediary activities. For example, McGee and Gaventa (2010: 7) summarise a range of enabling factors – on both the citizen voice (demand) and state (supply side) of the transparency-accountability equation:

- “The capabilities of citizens and civil society organisations to access and use information made transparent/accessible and to mobilise for greater accountability; b) the extent to which T/A Initiatives are linked to broader forms of collective action and mobilisation; and c) the degree to which accountability, transparency and participation initiatives are embedded throughout all stages of the policy cycle
- The level of democratisation or space for accountability demands to be made; b) the degree of ‘political will’ or support from the inside for accountability and transparency demands and initiatives; c) the broader political economy, including enabling legal frameworks, incentives and sanctions which affect the behaviours of public officials.”

An expert contribution notes that the media and social media are part of a growing, increasingly complex set of accountability relationships and movements (expert comment). This requires developing intelligent and appropriate strategic linkages to include the media across other infomediaries and accountability actors – such as civil society actors, access to information social movements and other citizen based accountability efforts (expert comment).

6. Donor role

Although there are some exceptions (such as DFID’s BBC Media Action Global Grant), donors spend relatively little on media support (expert comment). Donors often do not invest for the long term and struggle to integrate the media into broader policy agendas. There is no clearly agreed strategic framework to position media support: different governance actors have different opinions on the importance and role of media on governance (expert comment).

At the same time some donors are investing heavily in “transparency first” approaches to government responsiveness and accountability, for example, through international initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the Open Government Partnership (OGP) among others (expert comment). However, a recent review of the evidence by T/AI shows there is little systematic data to suggest that the “transparency + participation = accountability” theory of change is working in practice (Brockmyer and Fox 2015; expert comment). This has led to a search by some donors and initiatives for the right infomediaries to bridge the gap between transparency and accountability, while others (e.g. see the recent Hewlett Foundation transparency and accountability strategy) are focusing on strengthening citizen organisational capacities, alongside infomediary work (expert comment).

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/policy/briefings/policy-power-of-talk>. Accessed 11.03.2016.

7. Risks

The relationship between the media and the government is political, and “where media is stronger, closer to its audience and has greater financial independence, it is more likely to play an effective accountability role” (expert comment). However, “most media landscapes in fragile states are increasingly characterised by substantial money being paid to co-opt media to reflect – and protect – the interests of political, factional or commercial actors in society” (expert comment).

Moreover – as with all governance work – media interventions can often entail political risks for donors, and are affected by changing political circumstances (expert comment). Developing country media organisations often operate in a context of market failure: donors need to plan for the long term and understand sustainability in a different way (expert comment).

Work by the Making All Voices Count programme highlights that mediating individuals and organisations have a powerful role in deciding what and who is included in knowledge sharing activities – and therefore whose voices get heard by whom (Oswald 2014: 6). Mediators – including the media, CSOs etc. – may not always represent the diversity of voices within the constituency they claim to represent (Oswald 2014: 6). In addition, while new technologies and mediums, particularly community media, tend to be seen as ways to support marginalised voices, “invisible power” may still affect whose voice has value within these contexts, while technology can be an additional barrier for certain people or groups (Oswald 2014: 6). Infomediaries’ power can be significant, given that they can play a role in articulating demand for data, and in working with government to implement the supply of open data, as well as simply using the data (Davies 2014: 15).

Lastly, there is a concern that focusing solely on the role of infomediaries as a way of making the “transparency (properly mediated) + participation = accountability” equation work may distract from taking a more contextualised and systems view of accountability (expert comment). Pointing to the growing body of evidence about the failures of many governance reform efforts to strengthen accountability, often due to inaccurate and simplistic assumptions about the nature of change, Halloran proposes an “accountability ecosystems” approach (Halloran 2015: 1). He finds that “when organisations or coalitions work across the scales of government (local, provincial, national, international), build partnerships with key actors and institutions (legislative oversight bodies, anti-corruption commissions, grassroots organizations and movements, etc.), and leverage multiple tactics and tools (legal, media, FOI, collective action, etc.), they can better influence the power relations that make real accountability possible” (Halloran 2015: 7). This approach “locates the centre of attention on collective citizen action, with any infomediary role being distinctly secondary, but complementary” (expert comment; see Fox and Halloran 2016 for more strategic insights).

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Key websites

- Transparency & Accountability Initiative <http://www.transparency-initiative.org/>
- TAP Knowledge <http://www.tapparticipation.org/>

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