

# Effect of International Standards on Accountability Behaviors

What is the evidence that efforts to promote international norms and standards for transparency and accountability have an impact on behaviors of accountability actors?

Lily L. Tsai, Benjamin S. Morse, Guillermo Toral, and Varja Lipovsek

MIT Governance Lab

2018



— This brief has been prepared by MIT Governance Lab on behalf of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative.

— The Learning from Evidence series documents a learning process undertaken by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative to engage with and utilize the evolving evidence base in support of our members' transparency and accountable governance goals. We are pleased to have partnered with MIT's Governance Lab and Twaweza on this initiative. This series comprises a variety of practice- and policy-relevant learning products for funders and practitioners alike, from evidence briefs, to more detailed evidence syntheses, to tools to support the navigation of evidence in context.

— For more information contact:

Transparency and Accountability Initiative  
OpenGov Hub, 1110 Vermont Ave NW #500  
Washington, DC 20005

[www.transparency-initiative.org](http://www.transparency-initiative.org)

Copyright © 2018 Transparency and Accountability Initiative

This work is licensed under the Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivates 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Sharing in its original format and with proper attribution is highly encouraged.

Citation: Tsai, LL, Morse, B.S., Toral, G. & Lipovsek, V. (2018). *Effect of International Standards on Accountability Behaviors*. Washington, DC: Transparency and Accountability Initiative.

Report designed by TAI. Cover photo courtesy of Pexels



# I. Introduction

We conducted a systematic literature review of the research assessing the impact of international norms for transparency and accountability on actions taken by citizens and “accountability actors” to hold government accountable. For the purpose of this review, “accountability actors” are individuals or groups within government or in society, such as media or civil society organizations (CSOs), who take action to hold government accountable by establishing shared expectations for accountable performance, monitoring, and sanctioning government behavior. We focused on the norm-setting efforts of seven public sector multi-stakeholder initiatives: the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the Open Budget Survey (OBS), the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT), the Construction Sector Transparency Initiative (CoST), the Medicines Transparency Alliance (MTA) and the Open Contracting Partnership (OCP).

Efforts to promote international norms and standards by nature often start at the national level with the aim of integrating standards into national laws and policies; however, many initiatives also aim to reach civil society and media, and enable or support these accountability actors to use the information and data related to norms and standards to hold their governments accountable.

The focus of this review is on evidence that these initiatives had an impact on the behaviors of these accountability actors, and we limit our review to published academic papers or academic working papers. Our review thus complements the 2015 report previously commissioned by TAI on the effectiveness of governance-oriented multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs), which focused primarily on “grey literature” and highlighted the gap in this literature on the impact of MSIs on the actions of accountability actors.<sup>1</sup>

1. Brockmyer, Brandon, and Jonathan A. Fox. “Assessing the Evidence: The Effectiveness and Impact of Governance-Oriented Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives.” Transparency & Accountability Initiative, September (2015). This report discusses only three documents that address the question of MSI impact on accountability actions -- Harrison & Sagoyo (2014), Petrie (2014), and World Justice Project (2015). Only one of these (Harrison

and Sagoyo 2014) is an academic paper; it is also included in our review.

**Our goal was to review the evidence on the impact of international standards and norms of actions taken by citizens, civil society, and government actors to hold the government accountable**

This memo is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the methodology used for the literature review. Section 3 summarizes the evidence. Finally, Section 4 concludes by presenting some suggestions for future research. The list of articles reviewed is included in Appendix A.

Our goal was to review the evidence on the impact of international standards and norms on actions taken by citizens, civil society, and government actors to hold the government accountable. Given the focus of the 2015 MSI report on stakeholder interviews and “grey literature” such as non-academic papers, civil society organization reports, and blog posts,<sup>2</sup> we undertook a systematic review of the academic research because it often focuses more on behavioral outcomes like accountability actions and assesses causal impact more explicitly.

We started with Web of Science, a large aggregator of articles published in academic journals, with inclusion being based on citation analyses and impact factors. Looking at papers in Web of Science ensures a minimum level of academic quality, but since there is sometimes a lag between the production of research papers and their publication in academic journals, Web of Science may not cover the most recent evidence. To incorporate more recent papers, we searched for papers in the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), a major online repository of academic working papers. In both cases, we searched for all papers that mentioned the name of each initiative, and then filtered out those that had no content relevant to our question. Table 1 below presents the number of papers found, and the number among those that were relevant, for each of the initiatives considered.

Our experience with the taxation and accountability literature review indicates that although other available search engines (like Google Scholar or the repositories of international organizations) tend to identify a broader number of papers, these papers are either already covered by the Web of Science or SSRN or of significantly lower academic standards. Unfortunately, the quality of the papers in terms of believability (internal validity) and generalizability (external validity) found in Web of Science and SSRN on our seven initiatives of interest was already quite low, as discussed below. Therefore, we chose to focus our review only on the results stemming from Web of Science and SSRN.

---

2. Ten percent of the documents (8 out of 79) reviewed in the 2015 Brockmyer and Fox report were academic papers published in peer-reviewed journals. See Appendix A.

**Table 1.**

Number of papers found and included in the review, by initiative

Initiative	Number of papers found	Papers discussing accountability actors
EITI (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative)	76	10
OGP (Open Government Partnership)	9	7
CoST (Construction Sector Transparency Initiative)	4	1
OBS (Open Budget Survey)	3	1
GIFT (Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency)	1	1
MTA (Medicines Transparency Alliance)	2	0
OCP (Open Contracting Partnership)	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>20</b>

### III. SYNTHESIS OF THE EVIDENCE

The 20 papers reviewed vary with respect to the initiative they cover, the country or countries they study, the substantive question they focus on, and the methodology they use. In terms of the initiative, most papers focus on either EITI or OGP. Substantively, none of them focus specifically on our main question, how norm-setting efforts have affected the behavior of citizens and accountability actors, either within government or in society. Rather, the papers tend to focus on the effect of the initiative on governance outcomes generally (e.g. compliance with the initiatives protocols or measures of corruption), addressing the link between these initiatives and the behavior of accountability actors only insofar as it is seen as contributing to the broader success or failure of the initiative.

Methodologically, we found no studies that aim to provide evidence of causal impact. Three of them present quantitative analyses of cross-country data, but

**Methodologically, we found no studies that aim to provide evidence of causal impact of norm-setting efforts on the behavior of accountability actors**

these studies are largely descriptive and do not employ strategies for identifying causal effects. Eight papers present qualitative case studies, mostly using secondary sources and, in three cases, using stakeholder interviews. The remaining nine papers are descriptive accounts of the evolution and/or impact of one of the initiatives in one or several countries, presenting no empirical work.

We could not find studies with methodological rigor addressing the question of this review, which is: what is the evidence that efforts to promote international norms and standards have an effect on accountability actors? The fact that, even when looking at databases of relatively high-quality papers, one cannot find studies addressing our question directly and with some methodological rigor makes it

impossible to conduct a standard literature review discussing effects and mechanisms. Instead, here we synthesize the papers' views on how these international norm-setting efforts may affect the behavior of accountability actors (mostly civil society organizations).

## **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

First, researchers and practitioners working together can specify more clearly the hypothesized causal pathways through which international norms and standards could promote accountability behaviors, being specific about which actors, the determinants of their behaviors (motivation, ability, etc.) and the types of context in which they are acting.

We suggest three broad channels through which international standards of accountability and transparency may influence the behavior of accountability actors. First, they may change accountability actors' beliefs (i.e. norms) about what constitutes acceptable behavior by government, leading to greater dissatisfaction with the status quo and therefore greater action.<sup>3</sup> Second, transparency initiatives may empower accountability actors' with greater access to information about government performance that can be used as a political resource to hold it to account. Within the framework of the EITI, for example, civil society actors can access information about revenue in the extractive sector that can be shared with media and the public, allowing accountability actors to exert pressure on government when necessary. Lastly, by committing governments to adhere to international norms and standards, these initiatives may provide new institutional avenues to hold government to account.

3. Similarly, transparency initiatives may alter norms about what accountability actors should do. For instance, these initiatives may instill an expectation that civil society play a greater role in scrutinizing government, thereby leading to greater action.

While well-grounded in theories of accountability, more work is needed to assess whether these channels actually function as intended on the ground. The first step, in our view, is to collect better data on baseline levels of awareness and accountability behavior in countries of interest.<sup>4</sup> To this end, researchers could conduct surveys or semi-structured interviews with a broad sample of civil society organizations, media organizations, and other key stakeholders in a given country to assess the extent to which these actors are indeed i) aware of international standards initiatives; ii) able to access information ostensibly made available by these initiatives; iii) have channels through which they can exert pressure on government when necessary. This enterprise can serve as an initial step toward identifying barriers to greater action by accountability actors. The results of this preliminary, diagnostic research could then be used to identify interventions to increase accountability behavior and design research projects to test them.

Another option – one that does not involve fieldwork or survey data collection – would be to conduct a content analysis of local newspapers to assess whether the adoption of international standards in a given country corresponds to greater discussion of the relevant issue area, as measured by topic counts. For example, after Ghana became compliant with the EITI in 2010, do we see an increase in the number of articles mentioning extractive industries? Do we see an increase in the number of articles mentioning extractive industries and referencing efforts by civil society to hold government to account? (Online databases such as AllAfrica.com or LexisNexis now include news sources from a broad range of countries going back several years, making these kinds of analyses feasible.)

These are just a few preliminary ideas for research that could offer insight into how international standards for transparency and accountability influence accountability actors. Moving forward, researchers interested in gaining leverage on this question would do well to focus on particular initiatives in specific countries, and to combine local knowledge with more in-depth theorizing about the linkages between international standards and accountability actors.

---

4. While many of the studies covered in this review did collect data from civil society organizations, stakeholders, and other accountability actors, most studies relied on convenience samples and/or collected qualitative rather than quantitative data. Moreover, they tended to focus on accountability actors' perceptions of government, rather than their efforts to hold government to account.

# Appendix A: Papers Reviewed

Aaronson, S. (2011). Limited partnership: Business, government, civil society, and the public in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). *Public Administration and Development*, 31(1), 50-63.

Andrews, N. (2016). A Swiss Army Knife? A Critical Assessment of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in Ghana. *Business and Society Review*, 121(1), 59-83.

Baltador, L. & Budac, C. (2014). Open Government—A Long Way Ahead for Romania. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 16, 557-562.

Bukenya, B. & Yanguas, P. (2013). Building State Capacity for Inclusive Development: The Politics of Public Sector Reform. Global Development Institute Working Paper Series (esid-025-13).

Carbonnier, G., Brugger, F., & Krause, J. (2011). Global and local policy responses to the resource trap. *Global Governance*, 17(2), 247-264.

Corrigan, C. (2014). Breaking the resource curse: Transparency in the natural resource sector and the extractive industries transparency initiative. *Resources Policy*, 40, 17-30.

Gondol, J. & Allen, N. (2015). Open government partnership as a platform for advancing open education policy. *Open Praxis*, 7(3), 273-280.

Harrison, T. & Sayogo, D. Transparency, participation, and accountability practices in open government: A comparative study. *Government Information Quarterly*, 31(4), 513-525.

Hilson, G. & Maconachie, R. (2009). The extractive industries transparency initiative: panacea or white elephant for sub-Saharan Africa?. In Richards, J. (Ed.). *Mining, society, and a sustainable world*. Berlin: Springer, 469-491.

Jiménez, C. & Gascó, M. (2012). Y ahora... Gobierno Abierto. Nuevos términos en la constante búsqueda por la transparencia y la rendición de cuentas. *Ponencia presentada en el XVII Congreso Internacional del CLAD sobre la Reforma del Estado y de la Administración Pública*, Cartagena de Indias, Colombia.



Öge, K. (2014). The Limits of Transparency Promotion in Azerbaijan: External Remedies to "Reverse the Curse." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66(9), 1482-1500.

Pino, H. (2013). The Impact of the International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey and Its Partner Institutions' Advocacy on Budget Transparency in Honduras. *International Budget Partnership Impact Case Study*.

Roberts, A. (2015). Incentives Research: Promoting Fiscal Openness. *Global Initiative for Financial Transparency*.

Sequeira, A., McHenry, M., Morrison-Saunders, A., Mtegha, H., & Doepel, D. (2016). Is the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI) sufficient to generate transparency in environmental impact and legacy risks? The Zambian minerals sector. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 129, 427-436.

Sovacool, B. & Andrews, N. (2015). Does transparency matter? Evaluating the governance impacts of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in Azerbaijan and Liberia. *Resources Policy*, 45, 183-192.

Sovacool, B., Walter, G., Van de Graaf, T., & Andrews, N. (2016). Energy Governance, Transnational Rules, and the Resource Curse: Exploring the Effectiveness of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). *World Development*, 83, 179-192.

Truex, R. & Søreide, T. Why multi-stakeholder groups succeed and fail. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Series* (5495).

Van Alstine, J., Manyindo, J., Smith, L., Dixon, J., & Amanigaruhanga, I. (2014). Resource governance dynamics: The challenge of "new oil" in Uganda. *Resources Policy*, 40, 48-58.

Van Eechoud, M. (2016). Open Data Values: Calculating and Monitoring the Benefits of Public Sector Information Re-Use. In Dreier, T. et al.(eds.). *Informationen der öffentlichen Hand—Zugang und Nutzung*. Baden: Nomos, 107-144.

Yanguas, P. & Bukenya, B. (2016). "New" approaches confront "old" challenges in African public sector reform. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(1), 136-152.



**MIT Governance Lab (MIT GOV/LAB)** is a group of political scientists focusing on innovation in citizen engagement and government responsiveness. MIT GOV/LAB collaborates with civil society, funders, and governments on research that builds and tests theories about how innovative programs and interventions affect political behavior and make governments more accountable to citizens.

**Transparency and Accountability Initiative** is a collaborative of leading funders of transparency, accountability and participation worldwide. It envisions a world where citizens are informed and empowered; governments are open and responsive; and collective action advances the public good. Toward this end, TAI aims to increase the collective impact of transparency and accountability interventions by strengthening grantmaking practice, learning and collaboration among its members. TAI focuses on the following thematic areas: data use for accountability, strengthening civic space, taxation and tax governance, learning for improved grantmaking.

## MIT GOV/LAB

Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
30 Wadsworth Street, Building E53-380,  
Cambridge, MA 02142

---

[www.mitgovlab.org](http://www.mitgovlab.org)

---

@mitgovlab



TRANSPARENCY &  
ACCOUNTABILITY  
INITIATIVE

1110 Vermont Ave NW #500,  
Washington, DC 20005

---

[www.transparency-initiative.org](http://www.transparency-initiative.org)

---

@TAInitiative