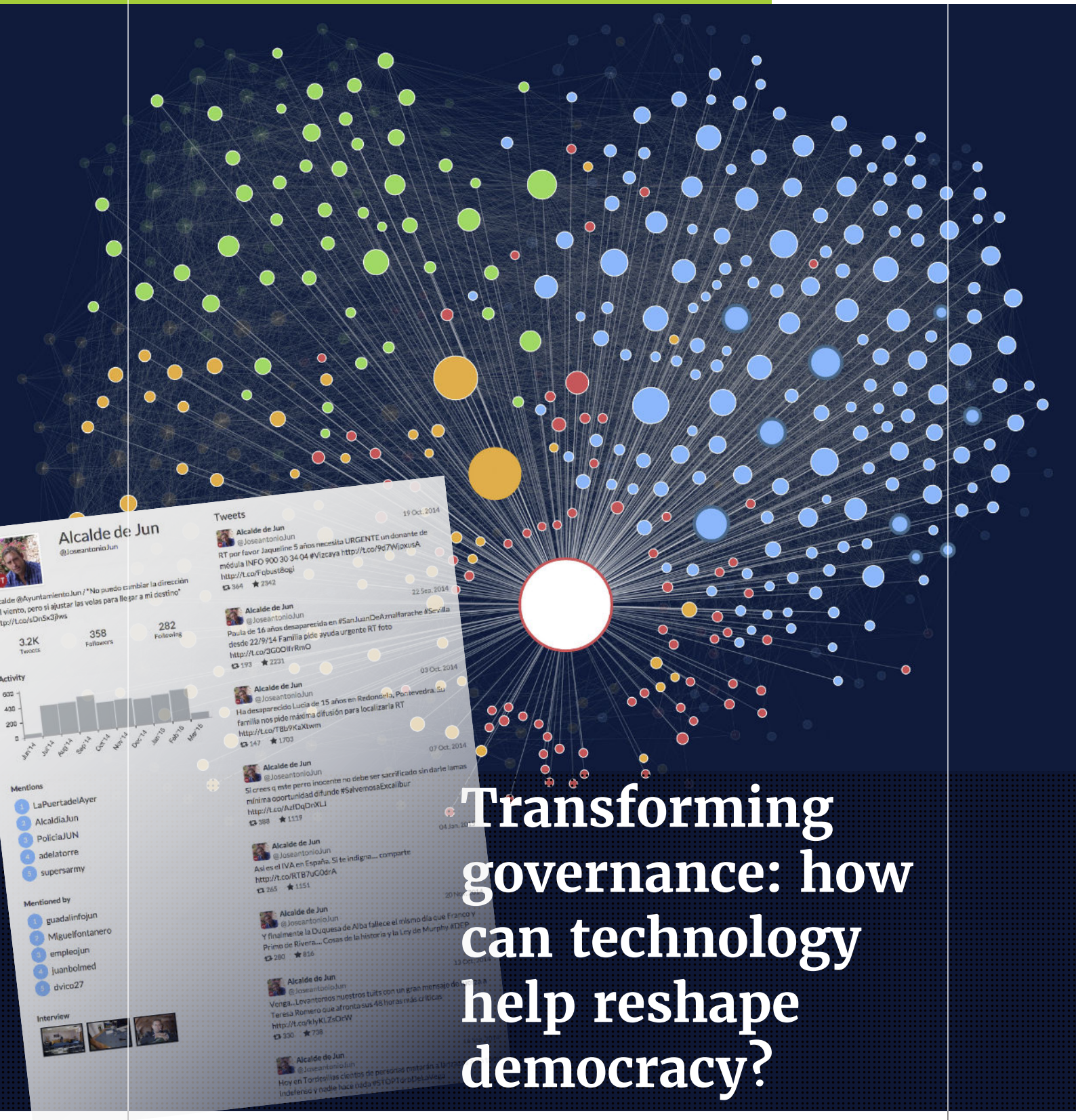
RESEARCH BRIEFING
JUNE 2016

MAKING ALL VOICES COUNT

MANILA LEARNING EVENT BACKGROUND NOTES

A GRAND CHALLENGE FOR DEVELOPMENT



Transforming governance: how can technology help reshape democracy?

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Production credits

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Designer: Lance Bellers, lancebellers@btinternet.com

Further reading

This briefing is one of three that were written as background notes for the Making All Voices Count Learning Event on Transformative Governance, held in Manila, Philippines, in February 2016. The other briefings are:

Aceron, J. and Isaac, F. (2016) *Getting strategic: vertically integrated approaches*, Brighton: IDS

Halloran, B. (2016) *Accountability ecosystems: directions of accountability and points of engagement*, Brighton: IDS

The report of the Learning and Inspiration Event is:

Making All Voices Count (2016) *Transforming governance: what role for technologies?*, Brighton: IDS, http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/11675

IDS requests due acknowledgement and quotes from this publication to be referenced as: Leighninger, M. (2016) *Transforming governance: how can technology help reshape democracy?*, Brighton: IDS
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FRONT COVER IMAGE: VISUALISATION OF THE MAYOR OF JUN'S TWITTER FEED © MARTIN SAVESKI / MIT MEDIA LAB

Transforming governance: how can technology help reshape democracy?

Around the world, people are asking how we can make democracy work in new and better ways. We are frustrated by political systems in which voting is the only legitimate political act, concerned that many republics don't have the strength or appeal to withstand authoritarian figures, and disillusioned by the inability of many countries to address the fundamental challenges of health, education and economic development.

We can no longer assume that the countries of the global North have 'advanced' democracies, and that the nations of the global South simply need to catch up. Citizens of these older democracies have increasingly lost faith in their political institutions; Northerners cherish their human rights and free elections, but are clearly looking for something more. Meanwhile, in the global South, new regimes based on a similar formula of rights and elections have proven fragile and difficult to sustain. And in Brazil, India and other Southern countries, participatory budgeting and other valuable democratic innovations have emerged. The stage is set for a more equitable, global conversation about what we mean by democracy.

How can we adjust our democratic formulas so that they are more sustainable, powerful, fulfilling – and, well, democratic? Some of the parts of this equation may come from the development of online tools and platforms that help people to engage with their governments, with organisations and institutions, and with each other. Often referred to collectively as 'civic technology' or 'civic tech', these tools can help us map public problems, help citizens generate solutions, gather input for government, coordinate volunteer efforts, and help neighbours remain connected.

If we want to create democracies in which citizens have meaningful roles in shaping public decisions and solving public problems, we should be asking a number of questions about civic tech, including:

- How can online tools best support new forms of democracy?
- What are the examples of how this has happened?
- What are some variables to consider in comparing these examples?
- How can we learn from each other as we move forward?

This background note has been developed to help democratic innovators explore these questions and examine how their work can provide answers.

What does it mean to transform governance?

Despite the rapid growth of civic tech around the world, in most cases these forums and tools are not fully satisfying expectations. One reason is that they are usually disconnected from one another, and from other civic engagement opportunities, and so they are not reaching their full civic potential. Another is that some are designed mainly to gather small scraps of feedback from citizens on a government service, with no guarantee that the government will be willing or able to use the input – so they only *have* limited civic potential.

But while it may be unfair to expect any new technology to automatically change our systems of governance, we should certainly have these tools in mind – along with the many processes for productive public engagement that do not rely on technology – when we think about how to redesign democratic systems.

In that conversation, 'transforming governance' can be a helpful term because it urges us to think more broadly about democracy, and about the power of democratic systems to improve our lives. There are at least three ways in which these positive transformations can occur:

- Changing how people think and act in democracies, by giving them the information they need, the chance to connect with other citizens, the opportunity to provide ideas and recommendations to public officials and public employees, the confidence that government is accountable to citizens' needs and desires, and the encouragement to devote some of their own time and energy to improving their communities.
- Changing how governments work, so that public officials and employees can interact effectively with large numbers of people, bridge divides between different groups of citizens, provide information that people can use, gather and use public input, and support citizens to become better public problem-solvers.
- Changing how civil society organisations ('intermediaries') and information mediators ('infomediaries') work, so that they are better able to facilitate the interactions between citizens and government, monitor and report on how decisions are being made and problems are being solved, and provide training and support to new leaders.

These changes can add up, in many different combinations, to democracies that are more participatory, energetic, efficient and equitable.

Disrupting systems or remaking them?

In assessing whether and how technologies can aid in transforming governance, we have to look more closely, not only at the technologies themselves but also at the contexts in which they are being introduced. In fact, the variables that have to do with the surrounding system – the extent of government buy-in, for example, or the level of digital literacy in the population – may be the most important ones for determining whether and why a democratic innovation has been successful.

It may also be helpful to make a distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' engagement. Thick engagement is intensive, informed and deliberative. It relies on small-group settings, either online or offline, in which people share their experiences, consider a range of views or policy options, and decide how they want to help solve problems. Thin engagement is faster, easier and potentially viral. It encompasses a range of mainly online activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. Thick and thin forms have different strengths and limitations, and they complement each other well; the term 'multi-channel' is often used to describe

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participation that includes both kinds of opportunities.

Some observers and researchers argue that many recent attempts at democratic innovation haven't paid sufficient attention to the surrounding systems, and haven't adequately combined thick and thin engagement. "Because they are worried about low connectivity / ICT [information and communications technology] skills in the target population, innovators end up designing projects that are based purely on simple feedback (e.g. send an SMS [short message service], click and vote online), rather than including thick engagement (e.g. discuss online, participate multiple times)," comments one observer. Another takes an even more sceptical view, saying that "in general, this 'feedback loops' stuff is expert talk by consultants who are trying to corner the international open government market". Yet another says that "I'm afraid we found that the potential for transformation [by civic technology] was fairly limited, or at least not living up to the hype".

This scepticism and sense of let-down may have more to do with the way civic technologies were described than their actual impacts on the ground. Many advocates, funders and practitioners of civic technology have emphasised commercial language and embraced the image of solitary entrepreneurs who work to 'acquire customers' and 'bring their products to market'. They have romanticised the notion of 'disruptive technologies' that combat the inefficiencies and inequities of the systems that govern us. While it may be possible to disrupt systems, at some point it is also necessary to renovate them, add to them, or design new ones.

Democratic innovations that feature technology

The following three examples of democratic innovations that feature technology are situated in very different communities in different parts of the world. Several other key variables also differ:

- the role of government
- geographic scope
- the existing level of online access and skill in the population
- whether the example relies on social media, SMS, websites or a combination of these, and whether face-to-face meetings are also part of the mix
- the use of existing technologies or the development of new ones
- the openness of the agenda, either focused on an issue or problem that is presented to citizens, or open to issues or problems that citizens present.

Each of the examples can be said to have transformed governance, but in very different ways.

1. Governance through Twitter

Where

Jun, Spain (population: approximately 3,500).

What

The use of Twitter as a venue for interaction between citizens and the local government on a wide range of issues, from street-sweeping schedules to European Union (EU) policy.

When

Started in 2011.

Why

Jun's mayor and local government had long been advocates of civic technology. In 1999, the town had declared Internet access a basic public service and universal right for its residents. A long-time Twitter user, the mayor wanted to test how the technology could be used to communicate with residents on matters large and small.

How

First, the town invited residents to verify their Twitter accounts at City Hall, so that they would know which tweets were coming from people who actually lived in Jun. The mayor encouraged city employees, including police officers and street sweepers as well as department heads, to open Twitter accounts and start tweeting about their work. The mayor, who has 350,000 Twitter followers, tweets on everything from town issues to EU policy debates.

To broaden access, the town created a digital literacy programme aimed specifically at residents over the age of 65. They also encouraged citizens to use Twitter for other purposes, such as booking doctor's appointments, in addition to interacting with the government.

Twitter has since become the town's 'community noticeboard', where people get information on everything from incidents of crime to school lunch menus. Residents also use it to ask questions of town employees and report problems with public services. The work of the government is now much more visible and responsive to citizens. "The speediest time for a problem to be resolved so far is three and a half minutes, from a resident tweeting about a faulty street lamp to it being replaced by the electrician, with a photo posted online. 'The employees, whose work was previously not appreciated, now take pride in achieving their tasks', says the mayor. 'It brings residents closer to the administration at the same time'" (Roberts 2015).

Public employees, like the town's main street sweeper and sole police officer, have become increasingly popular figures. The street sweeper is known for tweeting jokes, along with before and after pictures of his work. The police officer believes that 'immediate interaction' helps prevent crime. "Twitter provides him with an immediate snapshot of what is happening, with images and geotagging so that he knows exactly where the incident has occurred. He believes the image of the police has improved. 'People now see the police as a force that wants to help rather than punish,' he says" (Roberts 2015).

Limitations

- There are different opinions about whether the system could work in a larger community (Schlossberg 2015).
- The system individualises citizen voice, which increases the visibility of individuals when challenging or questioning government; people are suggesting small changes and

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improvements, but they may not feel as comfortable sending tweets that more openly challenge the mayor or town government.
- In places where SMS is the only widely accessible tool, a system relying on Twitter won't work.

Why it works
- Strong leadership by the government, and trust between citizens and the government.
- Because residents are using Twitter for other reasons related to their daily lives, and because some of the tweets are entertaining, people have more incentive to engage in the conversation.
- A 'critical mass' of participants, especially relative to the size of the community.

Sources: Powers and Roy (2015); Roberts (2015); Schlossberg (2015)

2. Generating and prioritising policy solutions

Where
Rio Grande do Sul, a state in southern Brazil (population: approximately 11 million).

What
The Government Asks, a multi-channel (web, mobile, face-to-face) approach to crowdsourcing and voting on policy ideas.

When
Started in 2012.

Why
Participatory budgeting and other democratic innovations were pioneered in the cities of Rio Grande do Sul, and then across the state, starting two decades ago. *The Government Asks* (also called *The Governor Asks*) is an attempt to build on this work by adding an extensive online element that gives people the chance to propose policy ideas and to vote on them. During the last three years, over 360,000 votes have been cast by citizens, for 3,600 policy proposals developed by citizens.

How
At face-to-face meetings and then through websites and mobile phones, citizens are presented with wiki surveys, using the *All Our Ideas* platform, that enable them to give input on policy alternatives. People can vote for the ideas and proposals they like best. The technological design uses dynamic pair-wise preference aggregation to address challenges commonly associated with crowdsourcing efforts, such as preventing information cascades and early-voting bias.

Specific outreach initiatives are carried out to ensure that the process is as inclusive as possible.

- An education campaign was launched to make people aware of the process.
- Both the outreach materials and the tools were tested intensively to make sure that people with low literacy levels and limited technological experience could use them effectively.
- Vans equipped with Internet access and trained personnel travel across the state to collect feedback, particularly from marginalised communities.
- Citizens can also participate through Facebook through a mobile application (app) developed specifically for the initiative.
- Face-to-face meetings for exploring and developing policy proposals are carried out, particularly in the poorest regions of the state.

The Government Asks has included citizens in policy discussion on a number of issues. Early on, there was a special focus on health: through an alliance of the ICT4Gov Programme of the World Bank Institute and the Open Development Technology Alliance, citizens were invited to co-design solutions to address health challenges in the state. The process has been credited with impacts such as: a 166% increase in the allocation for primary health care; the allocation of US$44 million for family health programmes; financial support for three regional hospitals; and the implementation of a specialised network for prenatal and childbirth care.

Limitations

- It is a large-scale process with many moving parts.
- It is unclear whether the process would work, or work as well, in a state or province that doesn't have the same history of robust public participation at the local level.

Why it works

- Strong leadership by government.
- Strong public–private partnerships.
- Because it is a multi-channel process that includes face-to-face meetings and different online opportunities, people have different ways and incentives to participate.
- It was built on existing participatory budgeting processes and a strong civic infrastructure.

Sources: allourideas (2014); Brixi, Lust and Woolcock (2015); Gigler and Bailur (2014); Peixoto and Weber (2012)

3. Connecting a diaspora to respond to a global crisis

Where

West Africa and the West African diaspora, with concentrations in Minnesota (USA), the UK and Australia.

What

By integrating website-based technology and an app interface with face-to-face meetings, a network of Africans of the diaspora worked together to transform how health-care practitioners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and people on the ground in West Africa engaged with each other during the Ebola outbreak.

When

The Minnesota Ebola Task Force (MATFAE) was created in July 2014 by West African community leaders, in conjunction with the Minnesota Department of Health and the Hennepin County Department of Health. Minnesota has one of the largest populations of recent African immigrants in the USA.

Why

During the Ebola outbreak of 2014–16, nearly 30,000 people were diagnosed with the disease and more than 11,000 died. While the international community – including the World Health Organization, Médecins Sans Frontières and the Red Cross – were mobilising to tackle this unprecedented outbreak, so were many in the West African diaspora community.

How

MATFAE integrated face-to-face meetings with online and mobile technology to engage concerned stakeholders by facilitating a coordinated response to the Ebola outbreak in their home countries and abroad. The network also addressed gaps in how the West African diaspora was consulted and incorporated into the global response effort.

The MATFAE website and mobile app were created by an African immigrant to the USA, Dr Remi Douah, through his organisation Epimap247 Inc. The technology enables a global online community of thousands to connect with each other, share information and provide consultation services with people on the ground. The platform is organised into several categories, including public engagement, public health, psychosocial stigma and orphans. Online and web-based community members can send queries and comments, broadcast messages and upload photos to each category, thus enabling people to respond to needs in real time. The app also uses geographic information systems technology to automatically track and broadcast the location of each user.

Limitations

- Long-term sustainability: although this technology could certainly be sustained in the long term, now that the Ebola crisis has been contained, MATFAE no longer exists (although the website and mobile app are still available). Some MATFAE members have scaled up their initiatives by creating NGOs to address specific problems, like orphans and food security, in the affected countries.
- Not everyone had access to the website, nor to a mobile phone onto which they could download and install the app. The technological components were additional interfaces that people have to download and register for in order to access.

Why it worked

- It was an easy way to communicate, mixing online technology and apps with face-to-face interaction.
- Mobile devices are commonly used by the African diaspora.
- It introduced culturally appropriate tactics in an often purely clinical response to disasters and public health outbreaks.
- It built a community by utilising and strengthening already established social networks, elevating voices and connecting people on the ground as well as abroad.

Sources: Almendrala (2015) Minnesota Ebola Task Force website (www.mnebolataskforce.com)

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Discussion questions about these examples

1. What are the most noteworthy aspects? What jumps out at you?
2. Thinking about your own work and projects, which elements or lessons from these cases resonate with your own experiences?
3. Looking at each example in turn, would you say that it is transforming governance – and, if so, how? Is it transforming citizens? Government? Civil society organisations?

Conclusion

The experiences of Jun, Rio Grande do Sul and MATFAE illustrate three different ways in which governance can be transformed. All three examples seem to have changed the way people think and act, giving them new tools for solving public problems and interacting with government. Jun and Rio Grande do Sul seem to have had a clearer impact on governments (one large, one small; one local, one state / provincial). The MATFAE example is more connected with change in intermediary and infomediary organisations.

Perhaps the most striking common denominator in all three examples is the fact that the people who created them seemed to have a systemic perspective. In each case, leaders knew their technological innovations would require some kind of supportive civic infrastructure in order to thrive. They were aware of the skills, training and support that citizens would need in order to use the technology. And they had a clear sense of how the tools and processes would lead to change: in policy, in public services, in actions by NGOs, or in actions by citizens themselves.

This question of how to incorporate new technologies into public decision-making and problem-solving is one that is ripe for further research, practice and innovation. But no matter whether the task is to gather more information or to create a successful new project, starting with a systemic analysis may be essential.

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About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. This Grand Challenge focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The field of technology for Open Government is relatively young and the consortium partners, Hivos, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Ushahidi, are a part of this rapidly developing domain. These institutions have extensive and complementary skills and experience in the field of citizen engagement, government accountability, private sector entrepreneurs, (technical) innovation and research.

Making All Voices Count is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Omidyar Network, and is implemented by a consortium consisting of Hivos, IDS and Ushahidi. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's research, evidence and learning contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A). This component is managed by IDS, a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communication with over 30 years' experience of developing knowledge on governance and citizen participation

Disclaimer: This document has been produced with the financial support of the Omidyar Network, SIDA, DFID and USAID. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official policies of our funders.

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