TRANSPARENCY IS MORE THAN DOLLARS AND CENTS

An examination of informational needs for aid spending in Sierra Leone and Liberia

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This research looks at the information needed by in-country development stakeholders with an emphasis on accountability actors including civil society organizations, charities, government workers, and the media. To collect this information, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Sierra Leone and Liberia. The majority of interviewees wanted information about financial resources and the channels they flowed through, and all respondents wanted information on the services provided and where the work was happening subnationally, suggesting that these two sets of information may be the most important. Unfortunately, information on subnational locations and services provided is infrequently available through open aid data portals, implying a need to update what aid information is shared.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transparency in international aid is not just about fulfilling a requirement based on people's right to access information, but also about making aid more effective. Transparency can help improve coordination and planning, enable accountability, and build trust. Accomplishing these goals can be a challenge when there are many partners involved in channeling funds through a complicated web of service delivery without clear public information explaining who did what where.

Currently, there is a variety of information available through different proactive and open online reporting mechanisms. Efforts to track resources for the West Africa Ebola outbreak have made it clear that current transparency initiatives do not provide detailed enough information to follow the money to the ground. Most of these tools for tracking aid focus on how much is spent in broad categories and locations, but there is little information detailed enough to allow users to track international assistance to service delivery, learn lessons, or ensure that funds are used efficiently. But what information do stakeholders need from open aid data, especially for accountability purposes?

To gain insight into stakeholders' informational needs a qualitative analysis based on semi-structured interviews with 27 stakeholders in Sierra Leona and Liberia was conducted. Sierra Leone and Liberia were selected because of Oxfam's relationships with partners there, their recent experience with a humanitarian crisis (the Ebola outbreak), and their status as two of the poorest countries in the world. The interviewees included members of civil society organizations (CSOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), government workers, and members of the media. Of the respondents interviewed, most sought data for reasons of transparency, accountability, and/or citizen awareness. A smaller proportion of respondents were focused on improving coordination and planning. The fact that more interviewees were focused on social accountability than on improving coordination and planning aligns with the targeted nature of the stakeholder selection.

According to the stakeholders interviewed, open aid data needs to be available before work begins, include the amount of money and the channels the aid flows through, the time frame of the project, project activities, objectives, outcomes, impacts, the subnational locations of the work, and disaggregated data. The respondents also stated that their needs do not differ if it is government or donor funded work. These results mirror the results of a study by the Initiative for Open Ag Funding which examined the data needs of donors, foundations, and headquarters offices for INGOs, and the results of a study by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) looking into the needs of partner country governments, CSOs, media, academia, and private business in Bangladesh, Ghana, and Zambia.

The two topic areas that all respondents want information about—services provided and subnational locations—may be the areas that need the most improvement. According to Publish What You Fund's Aid Transparency Index, of the 46 donor organizations examined, 30 (65 percent) could not be ranked on results data and 21 (46 percent) could not be ranked on subnational locations because they never published these data or did so only infrequently.

While access to the right information can help improve aid effectiveness, other issues must be addressed so the information can be used for accountability and planning instead of just complying with transparency standards. First, stakeholders' lack of knowledge and low use of aid portals must be dealt with by all concerned parties, donors, INGOs, CSOs, and the media. Additionally, the lack of political will, acceptance of dissent, and the lack of resources—human, financial, and technological—need to be addressed so stakeholders can make meaningful use of the information.

If aid data is made transparent in a detailed manner, it could help ensure more effective service delivery, reduce coverage gaps and duplication of services, allow leakages to be identified and addressed, and enable lessons learned to be readily shared. A fully functioning system of transparent aid data would allow government financing and aid to pull in one coordinated direction to reduce extreme poverty and improve the quality of life for citizens, reducing needless death and inequality worldwide. Unfortunately, open aid data still has work to do so that the information needed is being provided. To address this, the first step is for publishers to include information on project services provided and subnational locations in their open aid data.

1 INTRODUCTION

Transparency in international aid is not just about fulfilling a requirement based on people's right to access information, but also about making aid more effective.[1] Transparency can help improve coordination and planning, enable accountability, and build trust.[2–5] Accomplishing these goals can be a challenge when there are many partners involved in channeling funds through a complicated web of service delivery, without clear public information explaining who did what where. In 2015 in Liberia and Sierra Leone, for example, there were more than 30 donors giving official development assistance in addition to government revenues.[6] With open aid data and the right tools to access the information, processes can be streamlined and simplified, allowing stakeholders to see a more complete picture of planned work in communities so that everyone is pulling in one direction. This would also allow stakeholders to see where work is not being done and have enough information to know what is missing and who is responsible. But what is the right information, and are the current systems fit for purpose?

Efforts to track resources for the West Africa Ebola outbreak have made it clear that current transparency initiatives do not provide detailed enough information to follow the money to the ground.[7,8] It is not that information on aid spending is not available; to the contrary, a variety of information is available through different proactive and open online reporting mechanisms. The International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) standard provides a framework for reporting aid data in a uniform manner, and more than 500 organizations report to it.[9,10] Many large donors and organizations also have their own portals, and the United Nations Financial Tracking Service website reports on humanitarian funding.[11–22] These aid transparency portals, which enable users to answer basic questions, are an important step forward for transparency, but users need more detailed data.

Currently, most tools for tracking aid focus on how much is spent in broad categories and locations, but there is little information detailed enough to allow users to track international assistance to service delivery, learn lessons, or ensure that funds are used efficiently (Figure 1). This means that aid transparency is not fit for purpose for many actors. But what information do stakeholders need from open aid data? In recent research the Initiative for Open Ag Funding examined the need for aid transparency to improve coordination and planning from the perspective of agricultural sector donors, foundations, and INGOs. They discovered that

Organizations need detailed information on what is being funded, the location of activities, the populations being served, which organizations are involved, how much is being provided and spent, and the results achieved.[3]

That study, however, did not include local CSOs or mention using transparent aid data for accountability purposes, which is the main focus of interest here.

USAID conducted a study on aid transparency in Bangladesh, Ghana, and Zambia that looked into data use by in-country stakeholders, with a focus on their demand for information, their capacity to use information, and ways to improve data sharing and use. Their findings revealed a lack of awareness of IATI and information provided by donors, capacity challenges regarding the use of data, and a desire for more detailed data, including off-budget aid, subnational locations, and data on project activities and results.[23] Although the USAID study looked at different stakeholder groups, their results in part mirrored the findings of the Open Ag Initiative.

To gain further insight into aid transparency needs, Oxfam conducted a study on the informational needs of in-country stakeholders with a focus on accountability instead of coordination. The research was conducted in Liberia and Sierra Leone to gain insight into what information is needed, how it should be shared, and what other challenges exist.

Figure 1: Information Available on 15 Aid Portals
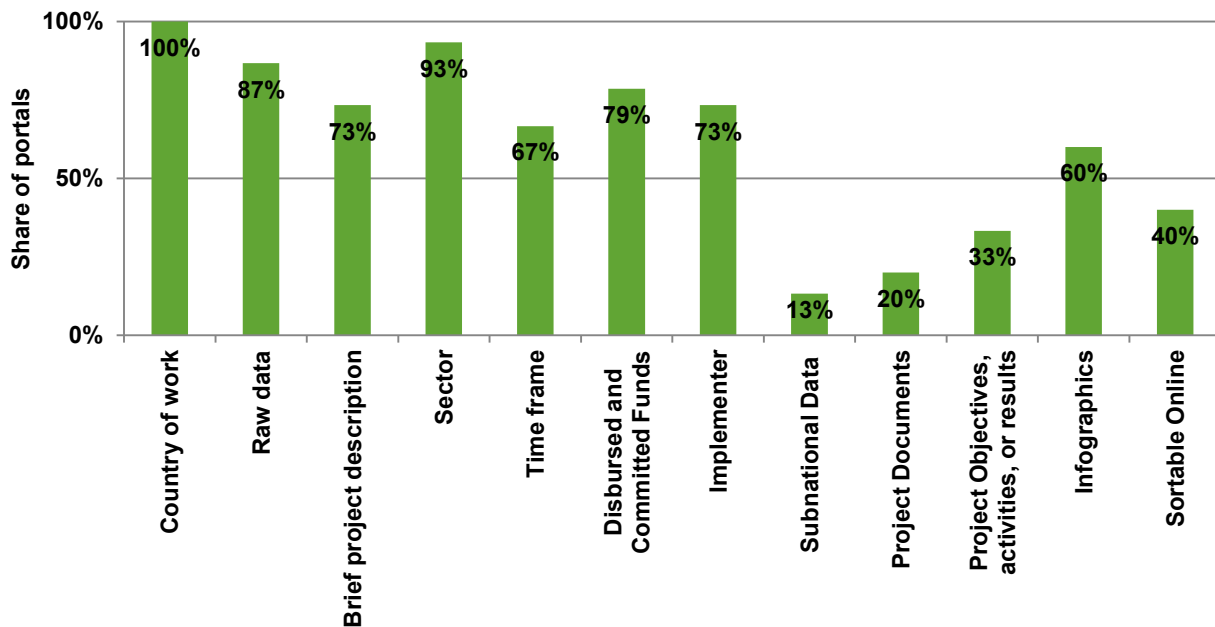
Source: Author's compilation based on the following portals: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Financial Tracking Service (UNOCHA FTS); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Common Reporting Standard (OECD CRS); International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) (query builder); d-portal; IATI Studio; Interaction NGO Aid Map; OECD Forward Spending; EuroAid; EDRIS European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO); UK Department for International Development (DFID); US Foreign Assistance; US Agency for International Development (USAID Explorer); Deutsche *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ); France Transparence-aide; and Sweden Open Aid.

Note: The fact that a portal has a particular information category does not mean that all projects report that information.

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2 METHODS

With support from Oxfam America and colleagues in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the author conducted a qualitative analysis of the information needs of in-country stakeholders for development spending. Sierra Leone and Liberia were selected because of Oxfam's relationships with partners there, their recent experience with a humanitarian crisis (the Ebola outbreak), and their status as two of the poorest countries in the world.[24] The analysis was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 27 stakeholders (15 in Sierra Leona and 12 in Liberia) using a framework developed based on trends identified while tracking funds pledged for the West African Ebola outbreak (see Annex 1).

Table 1: Survey Respondents by Gender

Type of respondent	Male	Female
CSO	10	3
INGO	3	0
Government	4	3
Media	2	2

The stakeholders represented national and local government (26 percent), local CSOs focused on good governance (48 percent), local offices of INGOs working on good governance (11 percent), and in-country media outlets (15 percent). There was an attempt to include women equally as key informants to understand whether data needs or perspectives differed between men and women. Unfortunately, owing to challenges identifying women in the appropriate roles, women represented only 30 percent of the interviewees (see Table 1 for gender breakdown). Of the respondents interviewed, most sought data for reasons of transparency, accountability, and/or citizen awareness. A smaller proportion of respondents—mostly those who worked in government—were focused on improving coordination and planning. A larger proportion of women were concerned with coordination and planning than men, but this could be because a larger share of female respondents worked in government. The fact that more interviewees were focused on social accountability than on improving coordination and planning aligns with the targeted nature of the stakeholder selection.

The responses were then coded, using qualitative data analysis software, based on recurring themes and topics. This coding highlighted key concepts, quotes, and the level of importance respondents attributed to different transparency needs. All data were also disaggregated by gender and organization type; however, differences in these categories were noted only when there were substantial variations in responses. While the initial focus was on aid transparency, the interview guides were designed to assess transparency information needs broadly (see Annex 1).

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3 RESULTS/FINDINGS

WHY TRANSPARENCY IS NEEDED

During the interviews a few key stakeholders discussed why they believe transparency is necessary. An underlying theme seemed to be to build trust and to know if funds were used for their stated purpose. Their responses (see key quotes in Box 1) highlight the importance of free-flowing information to generate faith and trust in institutions and to hold those institutions accountable for the services they are supposed to provide. Additionally, respondents noted that it is important to know where funds for projects come from so that it is clear which projects are the result of aid dollars and which are due to taxes and revenue collected by the government.

If, instead of open information on funds well spent, there are just stories of corruption, waste, and mismanagement, the resulting lack of trust could have serious consequences. For example, some people did not believe Ebola was real but just a way for the government to get money from the international community. This skepticism may have allowed the disease to spread further, putting additional lives at risk and increasing the need for resources to contain the crisis.[25] The lack of belief in institutional claims owing to a lack of trust is not a challenge limited to Ebola or Sierra Leone and Liberia; it was also an issue in Nigeria around the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls.[26] Broader efforts to address this lack of trust, in part through greater transparency, are needed.

Box 1: Key Quotes from Respondents on why Transparency is Necessary

CSO staff members

"Because of lack of trust in government a lot of negative things happen in the country. Like when the Ebola process started, and the government said Ebola was in Liberia and people are dying. People [then] said government was just looking for a way to get money from the international community. They never trusted the government, so many people died because we all were confused just because of the lack of trust in government."

"There was mutual mistrust between donor agencies and the government of Sierra Leone."

"A lot of money comes into this country from international organizations; they go and decide what they want to do. They are not accountable to civil society; I don't know if they are even accountable to government. I know a few months ago the president got angry and said we need to start to check international and national organizations because there is a lot of work happening [through them] but we don't see the impact [of that work]."

"They [the government] politicize everything as if it is the government that is doing it [the work]. But if this information is out there very clearly, people can begin to ask the necessary questions.... All of the development you have outlined is funded by donors; what are you [the government] doing with our own resources? It [aid transparency] gives [people] the space to ask those questions when the clarity [of project information] is out there for everyone to know."

"Information is the major tool for fighting corruption."

Government officials

"We know information is power. When information is lacking there is no trust, the level of trust is greatly reduced, but if information flows to the people then the level of trust grows."

INFORMATION NEEDS

What information would stakeholders need to help build trust and reveal whether services were provided? To gain insight into this question, stakeholders were asked a series of questions about their needs. It is important to note that respondents wanted the same information regardless of whether funds came from donors or their government. The fact that respondents did not want different types of information for different actors implies that stakeholders' information needs apply to all budget transparency initiatives, not just aid transparency. This is not to say that respondents did not care where the money came from; on the contrary, the majority of respondents wanted to know the source of the funds and the channels through which the funds flowed. All but two

respondents wanted to know the projects' financial information, suggesting that access to financial data is an important part of aid transparency, but not the only piece.

Services Provided

With 100 percent of respondents stating that they wanted information on services provided, this is clearly a critical piece of information to include in open aid data (see key quotes in Box 2). While many people wanted to know about project activities, information on activities alone was not enough for any of the respondents. Instead, all respondents also wanted information about outputs, outcomes, objectives, or impacts; however, the breakdown of what information stakeholders wanted to know about the services provided differed between respondents (see Figure 2). Male respondents were more likely than female respondents to want to know about impacts, whereas proportionally female respondents were more likely than male ones to want to know about activities and outcomes/objectives. The responses suggest that aid transparency data should at a minimum include outputs, objectives, and/or outcomes, especially in cases where information on longer-term impacts is not yet available.

Figure 2: Details Wanted on Services Provided
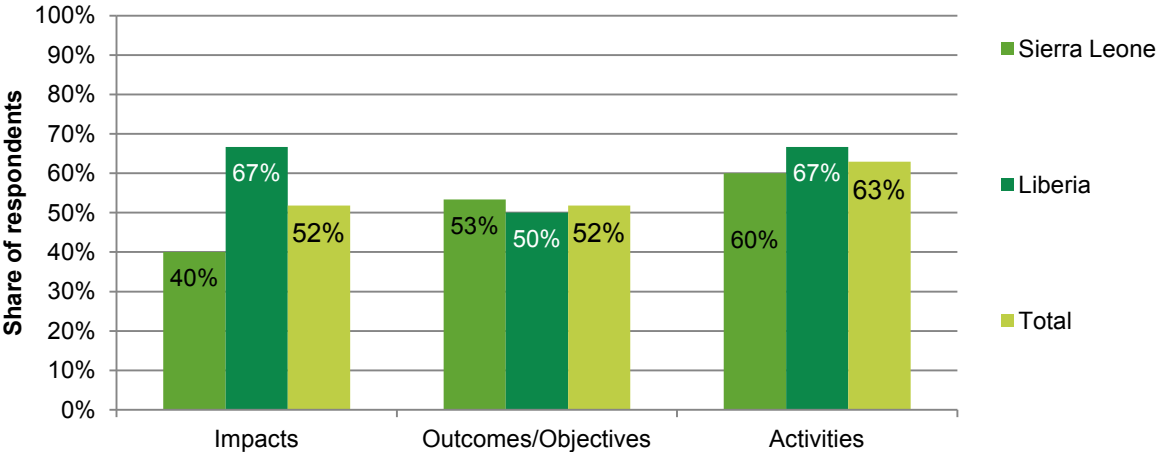
Note: Stakeholders had multiple answers for questions so percentages in the figures may not add up to 100.

Government officials

"We need to know the impact on the community…. If you come into the community to do a project, we first need to know at the end of the day what you hope to achieve…. [Respondent talks about a project in the community to help people that suffered from Ebola.] At the end of the day they [the implementers] are giving them cash so that they will be able to grow back economically, because during the interview most of them said their business collapsed because of Ebola…. [Respondent explains the project more.] That money is intended to build back their life, so the impact of this project is to build back livelihoods. [But did they build back their life?]"

"[We need to know] What they received, what they did, and what the impact was."

INGO staff

"[We need to know] How these funds are impacting or helping to change lives."

CSO staff members

"Well, I think what would be the one thing we would like to see is the impact or benefit of that support on the country or the particular group of people that were targeted, and what change that has brought."

"Well, the one thing that is very much important is exactly how or what level of impact [the project made]. How much has been brought in [to the country or community] first of all, and what impact it is making."

"Once you know the design [of the project], then we [can] start asking questions on what the activities will be, if the activities are there, then we want to know what the benefits [are], if the benefits are there, we want [to know] the impact."

"We never hear in the final analysis how that $240 million was translated into tangible outcomes. That aspect is totally missing. We also would like to hear outcome information, to be able to say that $240 million was allocated in 2012, for example, and the project was four years long and in 2016 this is what we have."

"Is the money having an impact or is it just overpaying contractors…. What is the impact of the project, are people leaving poverty, are their lives improving?"

"What were the activities designed for those resources, because we need to match those activities against the proper implementation."

Media

"What's that money for, how is that impacting people?… What are you using $5 billion for in a country that needs less than a billion dollars to restore electricity and water? Let's see something impacting on people. But I sense that they are using money for people dancing around here…. You know, for me that doesn't make sense."

"What was supposed to happen? Has it happened?"

"[We need to know] The activity, the end goal. First the plan; you can't do a project without a plan. The project management, whoever is coming in, their history. I think if that happens that's gonna be great, it's gonna be great."

Location

All respondents also identified the subnational location of a project as necessary information. The level of detail desired, however, differed between stakeholders. Some respondents wanted information about project location only one level below the national level, with more men (6) stating that one level below national was sufficient than women (1). Others thought two levels below the national level was necessary, and some wanted more than two levels below the national level (see key quotes in Box 3). Altogether, about three-quarters of stakeholders wanted to know the project location at least two levels below the national level (see Figure 3). It is also important to note that Liberia and Sierra Leone are relatively small countries, and for larger countries location data may need to be even more disaggregated.

US Perspective

One level below:
State

Two levels below:
County

All respondents agreed that it is critical to tie projects to subnational locations in part to ensure that projects are more distributed throughout the
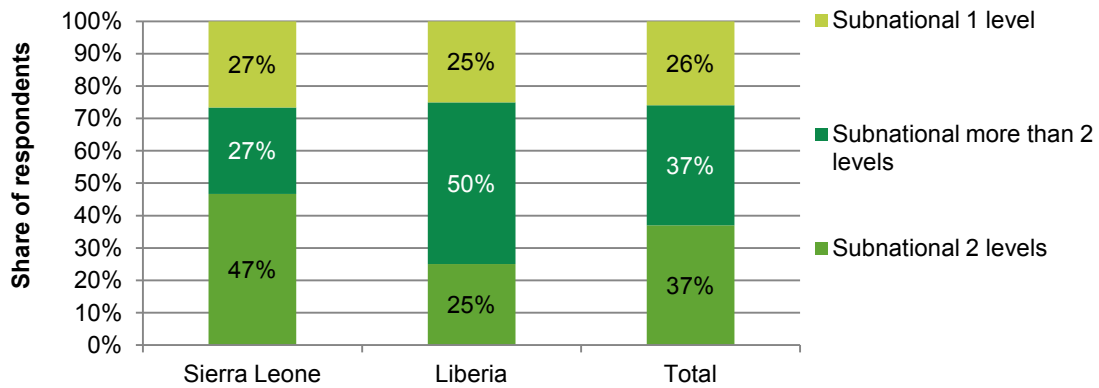
country and to be able to effectively to determine whether work has happened. Reporting aid at the national level is insufficient; for information to be fit for purpose for most stakeholders, it needs to be at least two levels below the national level.

Figure 3: Level of Detail on Project Location

Box 3: Key Quotes on Location

CSO representatives

"*As far as the last level, the village. It helps in tracking, because we do a lot of monitoring. If you want to monitor, you need to have all those specific details to make sure you can follow the money.*"

"'*Why are all the projects going to Bombali [a district in Sierra Leone]?' he [the donor representative] was asking me. I was kind of shocked [I never realized that]; probably there is not that analysis line somewhere for you to track how resources are being distributed in the country [so trends like this can easily be identified]… [It is important to know the information down to] two layers, District and Chiefdom… [to ensure there] is equitable distribution [of resources within the country], because most times when resources aren't equitably distributed it creates inequality and marginalization [of groups within Sierra Leone].*"

"*There has been quite a lot of suspicion that this government will always allocate more resources to its northern base population, so once we get that [subnational information] we can say, hey guys, that is not true, or yes, it is true, and this government is depriving certain regions of the country. These are things that are very essential.*"

When Information Should Be Available

Timeliness of data is frequently mentioned as a challenge, so stakeholders were asked when information should ideally be available.[27–30] Three-quarters of respondents wanted project information before implementation, and two-thirds after implementation; half of respondents wanted information during implementation, with many respondents wanting project information at multiple phases of implementation (see key quotes in Box 4). Additionally, CSO stakeholders wanted information during implementation more than government or INGO respondents. The responses highlight that reporting should not only occur after the fact, but should be done at the beginning of a project so progress can be tracked. This approach can make open proactive reporting another tool to inform stakeholders of ongoing and planned work, which is what stakeholders want.

> **Box 4: Key Quotes on Timing for Publishing Data**
>
> *CSO representatives*
>
> *"I think even before the start [of the project] information should be out there and maybe there could be… periodic reports on the progress or status of projects."*
>
> *"From the very, very beginning…. That would help us in the first place to track it, so we begin immediately to follow the progress of the project, and if for any reason the process of the project is not going as planned, certainly we can go to the proper authorities to find out why."*
>
> *Media*
>
> *"I think it needs [to be] a give and take, at least… by when 50 percent of the project is complete [at the latest]. I know it takes a lot of time to get all this information and put them [the information] somewhere [so some flexibility is needed]… at the end also. …If we know that [project information] already, we are looking for it, then we can hold their feet to the fire. Right now there is no accountability so everybody does anything they want."*
>
> *Government Officials*
>
> *"I want to know information at the initial stage. And at the end stage it's just a matter of telling what you have done, the essentials of the project."*
>
> *"It would be nice to know the parameters at the beginning, and then within the implementation within these parameters as you go along, and at the end when everything is completed, you have a global report. Then you can determine whether in fact this has been an efficient project."*

Project Time Frame

The majority of respondents stated that having information on the project time frame was important (89 percent); however, two-thirds of those respondents had to be asked specifically if they thought the time frame was important information to have. The desire to have information on the time frame seemed to stem partly from a desire to understand if a project is on track and to gain insight into potential reasons for the lack of success if the time frame is off and if project outcomes are affected (see key quotes in Box 5). All of this suggests that information on a project's time frame is important, but not the most critical piece of information for the data to be fit for purpose.

> **Box 5: Key Quotes on Project Time Frame**
>
> *CSO representatives*
>
> *"Absolutely, I think those things [time frames] are to be factored into the parameters for the use of the resources."*
>
> *"It is a key part of the whole process, the timing. For example if I am doing [a] farming [project], I am supposed to receive my rice seed, and I am supposed to plant [the seed] in the rain. So if the seed is delayed [past the rainy season], what do you expect to happen? To determine such things is important. There are certain activities that are time bound, and others you just need to know the time because you want to measure progress against time. If the project is supposed to take six months, and five months in you just have 10 percent of work done, it can raise a red flag."*
>
> *"Because we are tracking the project, we are following the progress, we want to know if the project stays within the time frame or there has been some extension. If there is [an extension], why the extension, what led to the delays that caused the extension? Was [the fault] on the part of the community, the implementing partner, or the government, or was it some plan to bring up delays so you [the contractor] could have additional funding?"*
>
> *Government officials*
>
> *"We need to know the duration of the project."*
>
> *Media*
>
> *"[I want to know] The timeline of the project."*

Disaggregation

Many respondents mentioned the desire for disaggregated information (78 percent); more respondents from Sierra Leone expressed this preference than did those from Liberia. However, all but three people had to be specifically asked about disaggregated data before mentioning it as a need. Of the respondents who wanted disaggregated data, three categories were mentioned: gender, age, and disability status. The same proportion of men and women that wanted disaggregated data wanted gender as a category; among all respondents, however, a slightly higher proportion of women wanted gender-disaggregated data then men. Respondents wanted disaggregated data to ensure that services were delivered to the correct people and to help citizens feel connected to the information (see key quotes in Box 6). Disaggregation, respondents believed, could help citizens see projects as being for them instead as of some distant services to which they were unconnected. Given that most respondents want disaggregated data and given that these data could help create buy-in and engage citizens, open aid data should be disaggregated.

Box 6: Key Quotes on Disaggregation

CSO representatives

"I think in our country there is a need to focus on people with disabilities and women and children."

"[Disaggregated information is important to answer key questions] Is it [the target group] youth? If it's the youth, what demographic of the youth? Is it women? If it's women, have we considered all of their issues? If not all, most of their top-priority issues? From the design stage, then [also at] the beneficiary [level], we need demographic information."

"Disaggregated data is a way for people to see themselves in some of government programs. For example, if there is a program targeting 15,000 disabled people, and among them X amount are women and X amount men. In the end, if [disabled] people feel they are not touched by that project, they will be able to come with their evidence in their hand and [go to government and say] you said you were going to provide X, Y, and Z services to 15,000 disabled persons. From our record, we are only seeing 1,000 people in the disabled population. So that itself is a way for citizens to engage from a rights-based perspective."

Infrequently Mentioned

There were several other areas of information that were mentioned by less than a third of respondents: the value for money or effectiveness of the project, access to contracts and the vetting process, and the sector of the project. For most of these responses, respondents said little other than they would like to have this information. With regard to the sector of the project, stakeholders had given examples within specific sectors, so respondents could have assumed that information on the services provided would by default include the sector. It is possible that there would have been more interest in these categories of information if specific questions had been asked about them. The lack of frequent mention of these concepts does not mean they should be excluded from open aid data, just that they may not be the most important items at this time.

Sustainability and Ownership

Although sustainability and ownership were infrequently mentioned, they were brought up and discussed in more detail (see Annex 1). Even though the survey did not include a question about sustainability, respondents stated a desire to know if the project was sustainable and mentioned projects that were either left unfinished or not continued once donor support ended (see key quotes in Box 7). None of the stakeholders, however, mentioned the need for a sustainability plan to be included in open aid data. This may be because respondents do not want the information or simply because they have not yet considered what information on sustainability would be needed.

The desire for information on ownership was mentioned slightly less than sustainability, but there were more mentions of ownership signals, or components of work and information that represent pieces of what makes up ownership (see key quotes in Box 7). Respondents stated that they wanted local stakeholders to be involved in the process; though this was not an information need, these responses suggest that ownership signals are an important part of project delivery.

Respondents also wanted to know if local stakeholders were involved in decision making, if the needs of the people in communities were met, and how decisions were made. As with sustainability, it is unclear if specifics on the information needed about ownership are lacking because respondents do not really need this information or because more thinking remains to be done about the information that would be most useful for tracking ownership in projects. Given that multiple stakeholders brought up issues surrounding sustainability and ownership in some detail, it may be helpful to further explore what this could mean from a transparency perspective. Do stakeholders actually want to see sustainability plans and diagrams showing the levels and stages at which ownership activities were conducted? Or do they just want information on the work so they can confirm that it is sustainable and that local actors were involved in decision making? The latter option raises the question of how to hold actors accountable for including ownership and sustainability in projects before it is too late if this information is not published in open aid data before the project begins.

Box 7: Key Quotes on Sustainability and Ownership

CSO representatives

"I would also like to know how sustainable that is; there are times when programs or projects will begin and then they just end."

"After the project is finished, what has happened?"

"You go [to a community], you see a signboard, lots of USAID signboards, but then you go and you don't see a project."

"If there is no sense of ownership, then how do we sustain that [project]?"

"If you don't get what the people want and you just design [a project] for them, you will just develop a program that will fail.… [If] they can have some ownership of the program, they can ensure it's used for its intended purpose because they were part of designing the program, so I think it's important at all levels that citizens should be involved. In that way they can hold their leaders or whoever is doing [the work] accountable because they know exactly what should [have been] done."

"First of all who makes the decision to build that school? You don't just come with a bag of money and say, 'I'm going to build you a school.' Is it based on the needs of the people, did officials sit with the people and make a decision on if they need a school, or a bridge, or a clinic? All of that contributes to the lack of participation, so the first thing is get the people involved in making the decision about the school, or clinic, or bridge. And then [long pause] I think people's rights just have to be respected, people are citizens, citizens should be informed, people should be in the know. We can't continue to keep people in the dark because they feel so disempowered, and they lack information so they don't ask the right questions."

Box 8: Emergency/Humanitarian Situations

The fact that stakeholders from both countries recently experienced the Ebola crisis—which resulted in a massive influx of funds—raised the question, is transparency necessary during a crisis? If so, do the information needs change? Three-quarters of respondents wanted transparency in emergencies. Of those who thought transparency was needed during emergencies, about a quarter of stakeholders acknowledged that there may be a need to shift what information is available or when. While not everyone stated that transparency in an emergency was necessary, none of the respondents said that there is no need for transparency during emergencies. Additionally, about a fifth of respondents mentioned the misuse of funds during emergencies.

"People tend to suspend the systems that exist for accountability, and so it creates a lot of space for losses and leakages in the system. There was a time during Ebola when data showed that 30 percent of funds for Ebola were actually lost through corruption. So an emergency helps people to abuse the system…. During an emergency we have to direct money to saving lives, but there has to be some transparency around that."

"There is a dire need in terms of emergency for government or public institutions to put aside someone that will be monitoring the governance dynamics. This is when money gets lost, this is when contracts get offered to relatives of politicians or public officials who [don't] deserve them or have no experience."

"People in government used the opportunity because it was an emergency. Some of the cars that were donated or some of the supplies that came to the country were misused. They said that because it was an emergency period, we did not have time to set a system in place. So much money that came in country for Ebola was not properly used…. When you check the list of donor support to Liberia, it said civil society received it, but nobody knew how they got it. That was money that came through USAID; we just couldn't track who received that money in civil society."

"That kind of data really was kind of difficult to get, how many people were working for Ebola."

CURRENT WAYS TO GET INFORMATION

In light of the information needs expressed by stakeholders, several questions arise: Are stakeholders already able to get information? How? And does the information they currently get match their needs? While stakeholders can currently acquire information from a variety of outlets (see Figure 4), all respondents stated that the current system does not suit their needs. Two-thirds of respondents get at least some of their information from personal contacts. When meetings are included, three-quarters of respondents said they get information from connections, highlighting the need for stakeholders to have access to key informants in order to get information. Seven respondents said that meetings and/or contacts were their only sources of information, with a larger proportion of women getting their information from contacts than men. This could mean that only elite stakeholders have access to information, or that people's ability to speak out is limited because they fear losing access to information. Of the respondents who got information directly from the communities where projects are being implemented, all also used other sources to get additional information. This was also the case for people using freedom of information (FOI) laws to access information. Seven respondents said yes when asked if they had used an aid transparency website (IATI or another site). As they continued talking, however, four of the respondents seemed to be talking only about publicly available documents, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) scorecard,[1] a video statement by President Barack Obama on Ebola, and information on national laws. It is thus possible that only three of the 27 respondents had actually used an aid transparency website. This finding highlights stakeholders' lack of knowledge about open aid data sources, suggesting that more outreach needs to be done to raise awareness of IATI and other aid transparency portals. For the purpose of this research, participants were not shown the aid portals before the interview (after the interviews were completed, links to portals were shared if participants wanted them).

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[1] The Millennium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) scorecards use policy indicators collected from independent third-party sources to determine eligibility for its assistance programs.[31]

Figure 4: Current Ways to Get Information
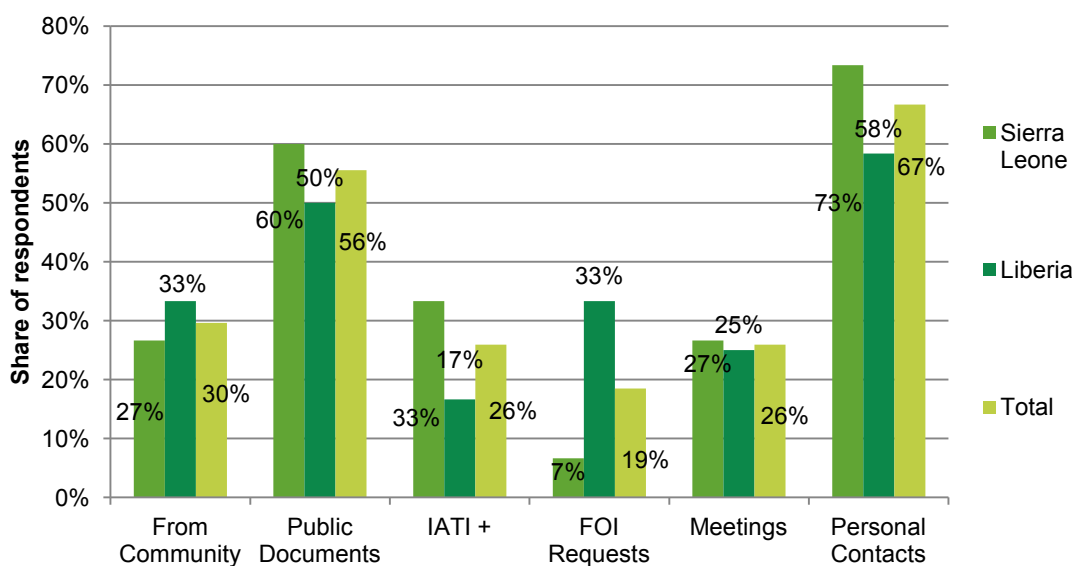
Since many stakeholders rely on access to personal contacts and meetings for information, their ability to criticize poorly performing partners that supply the information could be restricted if they want to keep access. Additionally, the fact that most respondents used public documents suggests that enhancing the availability of proactive open reporting could lead to more use. The fact that none of the respondents found that their current way of getting information consistently works well highlights the need to ensure that open aid data is proactively published, via a system that is fit for purpose and easy to use (see key quotes in Box 8).

Box 9: Key Quotes on Flaws in the Current Ways to Get Information

CSO representatives

"You cannot go to a one-stop shop where you are able to see a clear picture of the amount of money, where it is, and what they are doing with it. I don't know if it is a problem with donor coordination."

Media

"Sometimes those organizations are kind enough to give them [the information requested], and sometimes we don't get any reply…. Most of these organizations don't feel they owe the media [a response] when we ask for that information."

Government official

"Most [of the] time we don't get information on time; we just see people in the community [doing work]."

INFORMATION USE

Key stakeholders were also asked to discuss how they planned to use the information. A small proportion said they would use information for planning and coordination purposes, but the majority said they would use it to inform the public and to monitor work or to hold actors accountable. Of respondents focused on accountability, two-thirds planned to use the information to monitor projects, and about a third identified some action to hold an actor accountable for misuse, waste, or theft found during monitoring (see Figure 5).

Stakeholders, however, did not consistently identify how they would hold people accountable after monitoring work. Two respondents said they would sue, and one stakeholder mentioned using a government institution and external influence to hold actors accountable. Three stakeholders suggested that citizens questioning the government could hold the government accountable. Additionally, two stakeholders referred to citizens' ability to hold leaders accountable by voting out

leaders who are corrupt. Voting out corrupt individuals, however, is possible only if funds went through the government or if funds were misused by a government actor—conditions that would exclude many aid projects. So while there is a desire to use information to monitor work and inform the public, stakeholders are less certain about what levers they can pull to hold bad actors accountable for their actions.

Figure 5: Information Use
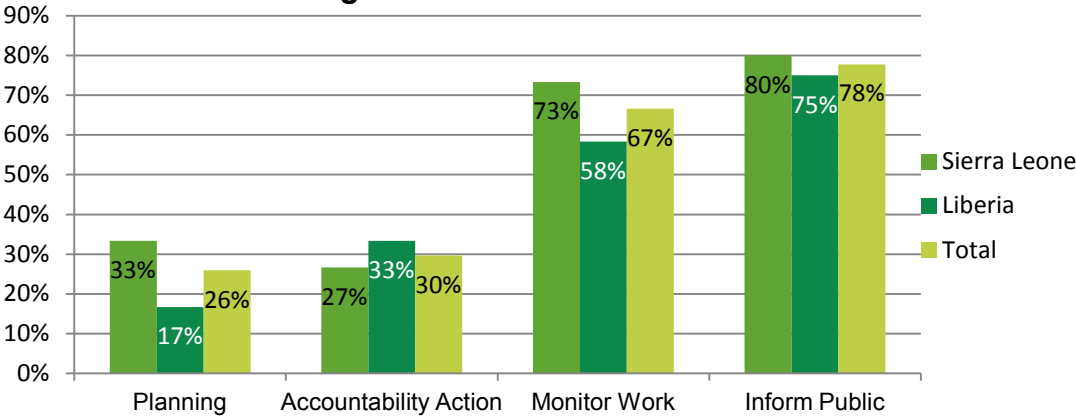
Box 10: Key Quotes on Using Information

CSO representatives

"I think even litigation; I think it would be important that some common-interest litigation happens around these things [misuse of funds]."

"If you give us this information, [we would use it] possibly to sue groups that are working here and didn't do what they were supposed to do."

"If I see the discrepancy, then I can also move to ACC, the anti-corruption commission. If some websites internationally also have that [information], then there is a watchdog on that that can help push my voice further, then I would engage that institution. When people start paying for wasting other people's money, the culture of impunity in this country may stop."

"I think for me once people are informed they can ask the right questions and get their leaders to account to them."

"The more people that know about it, the more people can ask questions and the more accountability [there would be]."

"The citizens can use this information to hold leaders accountable."

"For every election year we make sure that we raise awareness so those corrupt officials cannot be elected to office again."

FORMAT

For people to be able to use information regularly, it needs to be in an accessible, easy-to-use format. To gain insight into what that would be, key stakeholders were asked how they would like to receive all of the information they had just said was necessary (see key quotes in Box 10). However, there was limited consensus on what was ideal besides the desire for a one-stop shop (81 percent of respondents said they wanted one place to find information). About a quarter of stakeholders wanted one set of information for donors and a separate site for government information (most of those respondents were from Sierra Leone). Slightly more stakeholders mentioned that they would need to be able to filter government funds out from the single source. So even with regard to the one-stop shop, there was not a consensus on whether or not government funds should be included.

Box 11: Key Quotes on Format

CSO **representatives**

"People should have an information hub. If you want to do a particular project you can also use the radio to announce so that people can be aware of some of the programs you want to do, how you want to do them, who is involved. Just so people can have access to information on development programs so they can be able to know and be able to hold their leaders accountable."

"Just like the essence of why the government created the open data portal, to have a one-stop shop web portal where whatever government information you want, you can go in there and get it. So the same thing is needed from the donor to make it easier and make it more friendly; some of these institution websites are complicated for extracting information. So what we want is online in a format that is easily searchable."

"It's always nice to have visuals with the narratives, you might read it, but the charts and graphs give you the ingredients to look at it and understand…. One place that tells you different things, it makes more sense to me than going around to different places."

Media

"We've got great internet so we can access a website…. That does create problems for local radio stations because they wouldn't have access to that kind of information."

"If there was a one-stop shop where we could harness all this information, like whenever aid is given we know exactly everything that happens, how the money was spent; that would be an awesome help to radio stations and other media institutions."

About half of respondents wanted some online portal, reports, Excel type documents, and/or the information in charts, pictures, or graphs, but they did not provide details about what those would look like or how they would access them. About a third of people wanted information from the media and a few wanted to get information via meetings. It was unclear if respondents were aware of how many projects were on going in their nations at any given time—1,338 in Liberia and 1,340 in Sierra Leone in 2015—and how that volume might affect how they would like to receive information.[10] A third of all respondents said they wanted information to be sortable, suggesting that at least some stakeholders are concerned with how they would search through all of the information provided.

Since most respondents were not familiar with aid transparency portals, it may be helpful to further explore how stakeholders would like to receive information after they have spent time exploring the different sites. This would enable them to talk about what worked well and what was hard to use or find so that the interfaces could be made more user-friendly and fit their need*s*.

CHALLENGES

Key stakeholders were asked what other challenges, besides lack of information, they face in accomplishing their goals (see key quotes in Box 11). A third of respondents, including the majority of media respondents, replied that information is the main challenge. Other stakeholders stated that the lack of resources—in terms of human capacity, financial, or internet resources—was a challenge. More respondents in Sierra Leone (8) stated the lack of resources was a challenge than in Liberia (3). The lack of political will and/or the inability to hold people accountable and the lack of acceptance of dissent were also mentioned as challenges. Three people even mentioned the chance of being threatened for speaking out. These insights suggest that while having access to the right information is a key part of accountability, it is not the only issue that has to be addressed for transparency to turn into accountability. Transparency should not be seen as the only action but rather as part of a bigger plan (see Annex 2 for a theory of change).

Box 12: Key Quotes on Other Challenges

Media

"In the educational sector … students are paying for marks. That one was a huge challenge [to investigate] because you had to spend money to get that information [so we need resources to do accountability work]."

CSO representatives

"We need digital infrastructure."

"Some of the information that we get is very technical, and the whole question of analysis makes it very difficult, so you have to go to look for experts, who of course demand to be paid very well."

"We don't have the time to really be able to monitor or work to get these institutions actively involved or working."

"Using the internet is a major challenge for them. How do you build the capacity of the whole civil society?"

"Superintendents, what you call governors in your country, have been suspended for corruption, but then after some months they are reinstated. The government will say, we suspend you and you need to pay back the money, but then after two, three months you see them going back to work. [The stakeholder went on to clarify that they never repaid the funds before they went back to work.]"

"We have national audit reports that are produced on an annual basis with clear explicit theft of money or misuse of funds that are not accounted for, and nothing happens."

"To some degree to hold government accountable there needs to be a willingness to be held accountable…. We recognize that some ministers will never consent to being questioned in a public forum."

"There is a clear increase in intolerance to dissent. Everybody must toe the government line, or you are branded as a dissident. So apart from that, there is a pattern where if a report is critical the government spin masters will gang up against that institution and intimidate them. They will harass, intimidate, harangue the civil society groups to the point where the civil society groups are no longer publishing reports. These are challenges; sometimes you get physical threats about the work you are doing, all kinds of threats from operatives."

"Many will not want to do that because they are not protected under the law…. For example, let's say we say, 'Let's get all these guys prosecuted.' In this country when you take someone to court, it means you are against their family and their family is against you, and they are going to tell their family, family friends, everybody. The community will even go against you for saying the truth. There needs to be protection for people, watchdogs, especially when it is verified that this person is saying the truth. There needs to be some international coverage for that person so when the person is threatened there is a way to escape. Without that, certain things in the country won't happen."

"The local people [government workers] will become afraid because they are not elected. They can lose their job if they continue to demand accountability on issues. They could lose their job because they are working at the will and pleasure of the president and those in power, so these are some of the challenges. We are facing fear."

4 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

For stakeholders to be able to use transparent funding and project information to monitor work, hold actors accountable, and plan aid in a coordinated manner, the right information has to be available. This is currently not the case. Transparency is about more than just financial flows; it is also about the work that is happening with that money. According to the stakeholders interviewed, open aid data need to include the amount of money and the channels the aid flows through, the time frame of the project, project activities, objectives, outcomes, impacts, the subnational locations of the work, and disaggregated data.

These results mirror the results of a study by the Initiative for Open Ag Funding which examined the data needs of donors, foundations, and headquarters offices for INGOs, and the results of a USAID study looking into the needs of partner country governments, CSOs, media, academia, and private business in Bangladesh, Ghana, and Zambia.[3, 32] Multiple types of users in multiple countries stated the need for more detailed project information, suggesting that this kind of information is needed by all stakeholder types, not just in-country actors in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The two topic areas that all respondents want information about—services provided and subnational locations—may be the areas that need the most improvement so they are fit for purpose. Only 13 percent of aid portals had a way to search through subnational data, and only 33 percent had information about services provided (see Figure 1). Even when it was a category, the information was not always published. According to Publish What You Fund's Aid Transparency Index, of the 46 donor organizations examined, 30 (65 percent) could not be ranked on results data and 21 (46 percent) could not be ranked on subnational locations because they never published these data or did so only infrequently.[33] Even if all aid portals changed tomorrow and included these categories, there would be massive amounts of missing data. Considering that these were universal needs expressed by all respondents and identified as important in other studies, these gaps are particularly glaring and need to be included in aid portals and reported on by donors.[3,32]

While access to the right information can help improve aid effectiveness, other challenges were also identified and must be addressed so the information can be used. First, stakeholders' lack of knowledge and low use of aid portals must be dealt with by all concerned parties, donors, INGOs, CSOs, and the media. Additionally, numerous constraints need to be mitigated in tandem with transparency initiatives so that stakeholders can make meaningful use of the information. These constraints include human capacity, internet connectivity, and financial resource challenges along with the lack of political will and the lack of acceptance of dissent.

Making aid data truly transparent in a detailed manner, with subnational locations and results, would help ensure more effective service delivery, reduce coverage gaps and duplication of services, allow leakages to be identified and addressed, and enable lessons learned to be readily shared. A fully functioning system of transparent aid data would allow government financing and aid to pull in one coordinated direction to reduce extreme poverty and improve the quality of life for citizens, reducing needless death and inequality worldwide. Unfortunately, open aid data is not there yet, and the information needed is not being provided. To address this, the first step is for publishers to include information on project services provided and subnational locations in their open aid data.

Transparency is more than dollars and cents

ANNEX 1

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK

Part 1: Background

1. For our internal records, can you introduce yourself, and briefly talk about your role working on transparency and accountability initiatives? (Name, position/title, and organization).

    a. What outcome(s) are you trying to achieve, and how does access to information help you achieve that outcome? [If needed only: Prompt (Coordination, Accountability, some other reason)]

2. How do you currently get information you need?

    a. What about these ways of getting information works well, and what would you change?

    b. Please describe the time, resource, and/or access challenges that make the current system hard to use.

    c. Do you use EITI/IATI, d-portal, US or UK aid trackers, or national government budget portals?

        i. If not familiar make note that Oxfam will email them the links to all of the sites.

Part 2: Information Needs

1. What information would you like to have access to in an ideal situation?

    a. How do/would you use information on where the money is coming from? How do/would you use information on where the money is going?

    b. Who do you want information from? [If needed only: Prompt (Donors, Private Sector, Government, Implementers; all recipients of funds or just the first ones?)]

        i. How does your desire to find out what Donors/Private Sector/Implementers are doing change if the money goes through the government, as a grant or a loan?

    c. Do you just want to know about the money, or what happened/was supposed to happen with the money, or do you want to have access to both financial and programmatic information? Please explain why.

        i. If you want to know what was supposed to happen with the money, please elaborate about what you would like to know.

            1. Do you want to know what the project was designed to deliver? [Prompt only if needed: What key activities were/are planned to happen to monitor progress, what the longer term impact is, or some other information?]

                a. What part of this information is more important for you to have access to?

            1. How would you use information on the time frame of project?

2. How would you use disaggregated information? [Prompt only if needed: Would you want information broken down by gender, age, ethnicity, disability status, or another category?]

   a. Is certain information more important to have broken down than other information?

d. What level of detail would you like to have about the location of the work or funding destination?

   i. How important is it to you to have information broken down below the national level? To what level do you need information--county, district, or village?

e. When is this information helpful—before work has happened, during the activities, or after money is spent—and how frequently would you want information updated?

1. How do your needs change if it is an emergency situation like the Ebola crisis?

2. How would you like to get this information? [Prompt only if needed: In excel files, via open source code like XML, an online database that has charts, graphs, maps, and allows for sorting through information, a written report, or pamphlets?]

   a. Do you want one source for all country-specific information or would it be preferable to have a collection of different sources based on who the funder is?

      i. Should government funds be included in the system, or is a separate system for donors and another for government funds ideal?

      ii. If aid dollars given to the government become part of the budget, does that change how you view how those funds should be tracked?

Part 3: Use, Other Challenges, and Key Contacts

1. If you had all the information you wanted, how would you plan to use it?

2. Besides having the right information, what are other challenges that you face in using information to accomplish your goals?

3. What other people do you think it would be important for us to speak with? If possible, would you please share their contact information with us?

ANNEX 2
THEORY OF CHANGE

```
┌──────────────────┐
│ There is a       │ ──────►┐
│ demand for       │        │
│ information.     │        │
└──────────────────┘        │
                            ▼
┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
│ Information      │ ──►│ Information is    │
│ needed is        │   │ used to highlight │
│ publicly         │   │ problems:         │        ┌──────────────────┐
│ available.       │   │ misuse,           │        │ Individuals that  │
└──────────────────┘   │ duplication,      │ ──────►│ mismanaged        │
                       │ lack of service   │        │ funds are held    │
┌──────────────────┐   │ delivery, areas   │        │ accountable.      │
│ Information      │ ──►│ not being         │        │ Funds are         │ ──────►
│ is in an         │   │ allocated any     │        │ appropriately     │
│ accessible       │   │ services.         │        │ reallocated and   │
│ format.          │   └──────────────────┘        │ delivered.        │
└──────────────────┘                                └──────────────────┘
```

Boxes and flow (Theory of Change diagram):

- There is a demand for information. →
- Information needed is publicly available. →
- Information is in an accessible format. →
- Media and CSOs have space and ability to use information to bring about change. →

→ Information is used to highlight problems: misuse, duplication, lack of service delivery, areas not being allocated any services. →

→ Individuals that mismanaged funds are held accountable. Funds are appropriately reallocated and delivered. →

→ Aid is delivered is in a coordinated way, so that donors and government are not unintentionally duplicating services. Waste and misuse is minimized. And people are empowered to ensure they receive the services intended for them. →

→ Poverty and inequality are reduced.

- Demand to hold actors accountable. →
- Demand for aid to be more coordinated. →
- Desire from government, donors, and partners to make changes necessary for aid to be more transparent, accountable, and coordinated. →
- Parliament has information and resources to hold executive to account. →

→ Laws, policies, rules, agreements, and procedures are in place to address waste, misuse, duplication, and corruption. →

→ Financial management system improved to reduce duplication, lost funds, and waste. →

Transparency is more than dollars and cents

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