Using resource tracking and feedback to enhance accountability and resource effectiveness

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Introduction

This paper describes an approach to enhance accountability and effectiveness of resources through community resource tracking and feedback loops. Since 2011, Development Research and Training (DRT) and Development Initiatives (DI) have been testing a four-phased model of resource tracking and feedback to improve demand for, and accountability of, decision making on resources reaching five districts in northern Uganda.

The model developed by DRT and DI is based on building demand for information and feedback loops between community members and duty bearers. Resource trackers are selected by the community to lead in demanding information and feeding back to relevant duty bearers on the relevance, quality and effectiveness of resources on poverty reduction. Since 2011, 41 resource trackers have been trained in five districts of northern Uganda, a region affected by conflict until 2011 and characterised by high poverty levels.

The paper discusses lessons learnt about building demand for evidence, building a culture of accountability and involving disempowered groups. Access to information on resources and service delivery, and access to decision makers at local and national level, are found to be key in facilitating and boosting citizen participation in holding duty bearers to account for resource allocation and service delivery. The paper concludes by emphasizing the crucial role of feedback loops in supporting development process and a data revolution at local level.

1. The context

Poverty trends

Uganda is one of the first countries to have halved poverty in the past two decades, from 56.4% in 1992–1993 to 24.5% in 2009–2010. Increasing socio-economic and political inequality coupled with social exclusion is persistent, however, with many people still at risk of falling back

into poverty. [1] This is evident in rural–urban discrepancies in income and other socio-economic indicators. [2] The northern region of the country is particularly affected by high levels of poverty.

The post-conflict situation

For over 20 years, northern Uganda suffered from devastating armed conflict, coupled with natural disasters, that left people's livelihoods disrupted and economic growth reversed. The majority of the population were confined in internally displaced people (IDP)'s camps dependant on food stamps and other basic services from both the government and international organisations such as the World Food Programme. In 2005, there were an estimated 1.8 million IDPs across 11 districts in northern Uganda due to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict. [3] The Acholi and Teso sub-regions were particularly affected; they have lagged behind in development as the LRA conflict affected people's livelihoods and investments to the sub-regions. While the Ugandan government and the LRA signed a truce in 2006, the LRA continued to be active, particularly in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo. Furthermore, the Karamoja region in the north east is Uganda's least developed region. Despite armed conflict enduring until 2011, it has been neglected in terms of development resources.

In 2010 the Ugandan government and humanitarian actors concluded that the humanitarian crisis in Uganda was over. In 2011, Uganda was the 20th largest recipient of gross official development assistance (ODA), with ODA inflows reaching US$ 1.6 billion. Government expenditure was US$3.6 billion. [4] Despite the inflows of resources into the three sub-regions from the Ugandan government and the international community, poverty levels still remain above the national average, raising the question: "where have the resources gone?"

Map 1. The 5 districts in northern Uganda where trackers operate: Gulu, Kitgum and Pader (Acholi sub-region), Katakwi (Teso sub-region) and Kotido (Karamoja sub-region).

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[1] Chronic Poverty Research Centre (2011). Chronic poverty in Uganda: is anyone listening?, available at http://www.chronicpoverty.org/page/uganda
[2] Chronic Poverty Research Centre (forthcoming). Chronic Poverty in East Africa
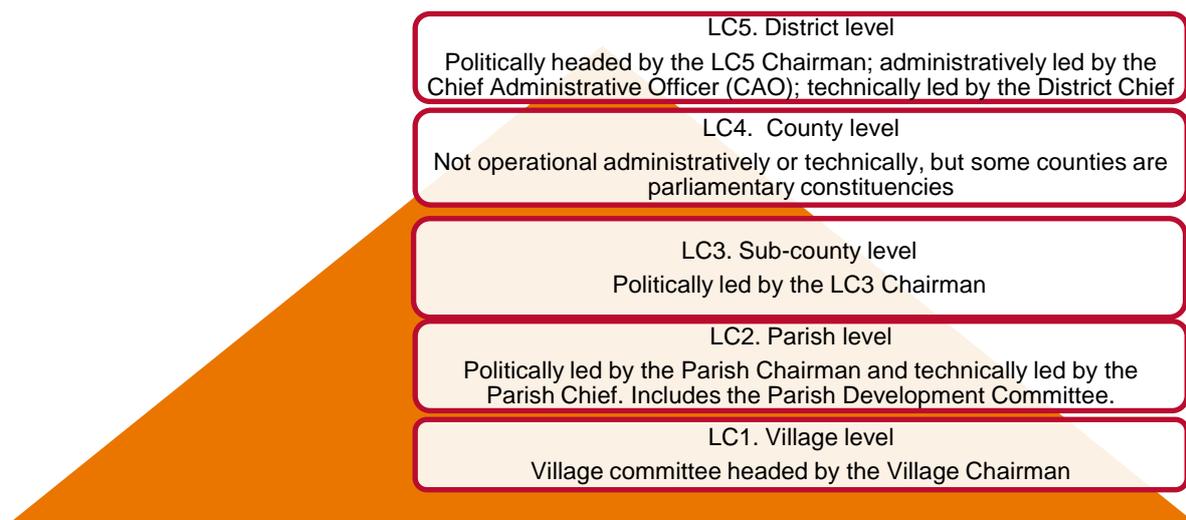[3] UNHCR (2012). Briefing notes: UNHCR closes chapter on Uganda's internally displaced people, available at http://www.unhcr.org/4f06e2a79.html
[4] Development Initiatives (2013) Investments to End Poverty. Country Profile: Uganda, available at http://devinit.org/countries/
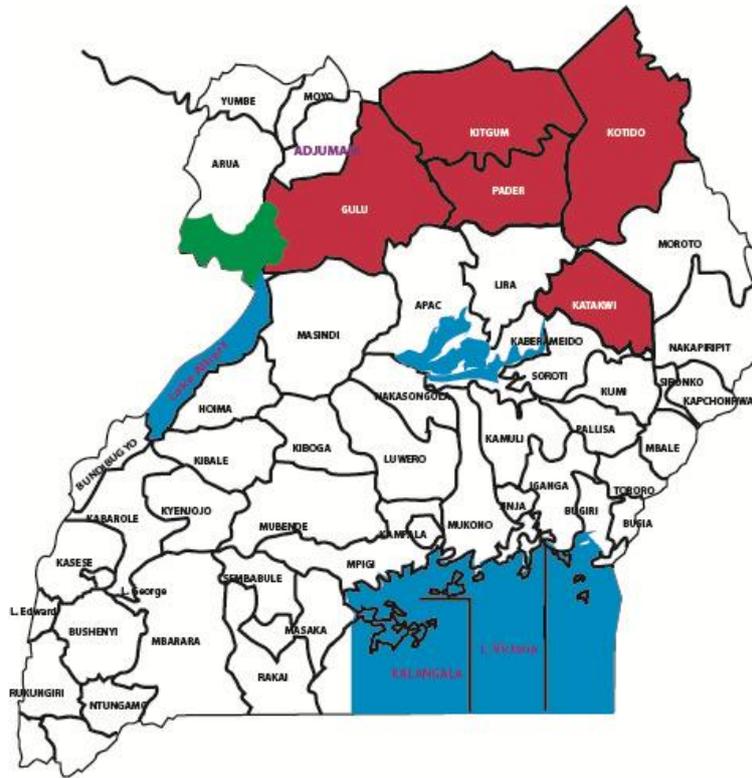
The governance context

Uganda has a decentralized system of government; districts are the major administrative hubs. Uganda has 112 districts, each with at least one Member of Parliament and a woman Member of Parliament. Most local administration and service delivery are arranged alongside the different levels of administrative structures described in Figure 1. The district is the Local Council 5 (LC5) level.

Figure 1. Local council (LC) structures in Uganda

LC5. District level
Politically headed by the LC5 Chairman; administratively led by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO); technically led by the District Chief

LC4. County level
Not operational administratively or technically, but some counties are parliamentary constituencies

LC3. Sub-county level
Politically led by the LC3 Chairman

LC2. Parish level
Politically led by the Parish Chairman and technically led by the Parish Chief. Includes the Parish Development Committee.

LC1. Village level
Village committee headed by the Village Chairman

According to government policy, planning for services in Uganda should follow a 'bottom-up' process where decision making on resource allocation is led from the local level, with the identification of a village's priorities by communities with support from the LC1. It is not,

however, always the case that these village-level priorities appear in the overall district plan and budget. Moreover, the planning process leads to the sub-county and district developing a rolling plan that they refer to for three years, so it is not every year that communities are consulted on their new or emerging priority needs.

Local governments have very little to no locally generated revenue, and largely depend on central government and development partners such as donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for resourcing services and infrastructure. This often affects the priorities that are chosen for funding and the amount of resources allocated to a given community.

2. Resource tracking and resource trackers

DRT and DI have developed a four-phased model to resource tracking. Resources include all the different financial and in-kind resources, such as grants and services, that are allocated to communities through the central and local government, NGOs and donors.

Communities are supported to identify and track the resources that reach them, and to follow-up and feedback on these resources, through community resource trackers.

What is resource tracking?

Resource tracking enhances communities' access to and demand for information on resources, and supports their ability and opportunities to feed back on the quality, effectiveness and relevance of resources to their needs.

The focus is on resources that address poverty and other inequalities, such as those for delivery of services in health, education and agriculture. Resource tracking involves monitoring these resources reaching a particular community to assess their quality, effectiveness, relevance and timeliness. The flow of resources from government, donors and other development actors to final beneficiaries often undergoes several levels of decision making and transfer of funds. Resource tracking therefore involves ensuring that funds are transferred and reach the intended final beneficiary.

What do community resource trackers do?

Resource trackers are volunteers selected from and by their community. Trackers are trained in simple resource tracking skills and given continuous on-the-job mentoring and field support supervision by DRT and DI. Training themes include understanding the national and local budgeting planning processes, legal frameworks (especially around a citizen's right to access to information), monitoring and reporting, community participation, basic quantitative and qualitative skills, and developing work plans.

Trackers demand information on behalf their communities on the issues they are facing, and follow up on these issues to ensure action is taken. In particular, trackers gather information about resources, and collect feedback from their communities on the responsiveness of resources to their needs. For example, trackers may decide to monitor the construction of infrastructure profects for schools and hospitals providing essential access to health and education. Trackers ascertain the quality of the building materials for the construction versus what is stipulated in a Bill of Quantity. This information is then used for engagement with decision makers at the sub-county and district levels, who can influence the construction process. Resource trackers are therefore engaged in a long-term process of building rapport
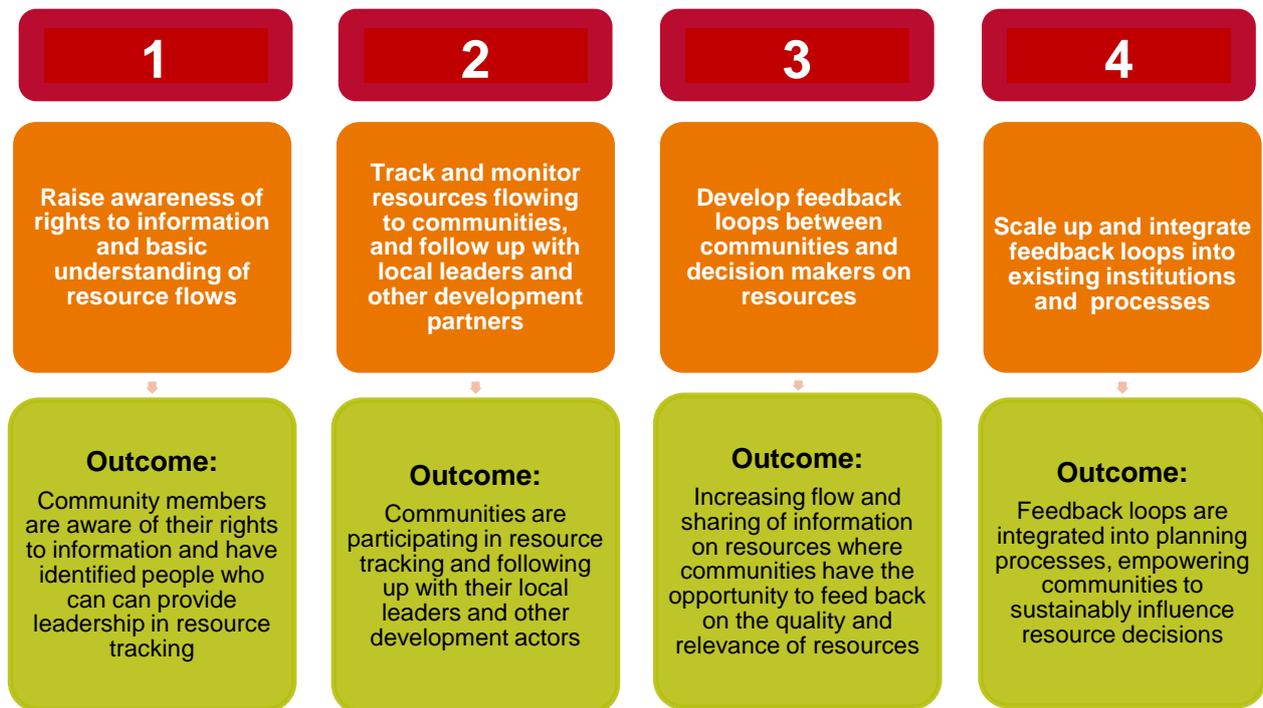
with local authorities, negotiating to receive this information and influencing duty bearers through feedback from the community.

A four-phased model for resource effectiveness and accountability
There are four phases to the resource tracking process implemented by DRT and DI.

DRT and DI are engaged throughout the four phases, providing training and mentoring to trackers, facilitating access to information, as well as making a financial contribution to trackers' transport and communication. The four-phased model described below should be implemented over several years as it requires changing attitudes, relationships and processes.

Figure 2. The four-phased model

1	2	3	4
Raise awareness of rights to information and basic understanding of resource flows	Track and monitor resources flowing to communities, and follow up with local leaders and other development partners	Develop feedback loops between communities and decision makers on resources	Scale up and integrate feedback loops into existing institutions and processes
Outcome: Community members are aware of their rights to information and have identified people who can can provide leadership in resource tracking	**Outcome:** Communities are participating in resource tracking and following up with their local leaders and other development actors	**Outcome:** Increasing flow and sharing of information on resources where communities have the opportunity to feed back on the quality and relevance of resources	**Outcome:** Feedback loops are integrated into planning processes, empowering communities to sustainably influence resource decisions

Phase 1: Raise awareness of rights to information and basic understanding of resource flows among community members
Key steps:
- Mobilize community members and all other stakeholders defined as those that can be useful to influence resource allocation, such as community-based organisations and local leaders
- Introduce the principals of resource tracking, access to information and feedback
- Promote among community members an awareness and appreciation for their right to information about resources
- Reach an agreement on the importance of resource tracking for poverty eradication and the role of the community
- Address any concerns and doubts from the community, such as fear about the reaction of local authorities and lack of capacity on the side of the community
- Support the community in identifying volunteers who can lead on resource tracking and feeding back.

Phase 2: Track and monitor resources flowing to communities, and follow up with local leaders and other development partners

Key steps:

- Build the capacity of community members to demand, access and interpret data and information on resource flows, particularly through mentoring of the trackers
- Facilitate demand for and access to information
- Use information to engage with communities, decision-makers and duty bearers
- Encourage the participation of community members in budget planning processes and other decision-making discussions; for example, working with the village chairman to call meetings
- Support trackers to identity issues and follow up with the local duty bearers and feedback to the communities.

Phase 3: Develop feedback loops between communities and decision makers on resources

Key steps:

- Identify opportunities (both existing and potential) for communities to feed back on their needs by exploring existing feedback mechanisms
- Provide on-going support to trackers to develop skills in engagement, negotiation and communication, as well as continued support on research and analysis
- Enhance quality and quantity of informal and formal interaction between duty bearers, service providers and communities to ensure faster access to information and closed feedback loops
- Build trust between communities and duty bearers at various levels of decision making to ensure better sharing of information and communication.

Phase 4: Scale up and integrate feedback loops into existing institutions and processes

Key steps:

- Work with all stakeholders making resource-allocation decisions to adopt and institutionalise feedback mechanism that supports two-way interaction with the communities
- Ensure ownership, especially by the community, of the feedback mechanisms and resource tracking
- Impart trackers with community facilitation skills so that they can autonomously support self-reporting in their communities on resources and needs
- Roll out feedback mechanisms from local to national level through interaction with centralised institutions.

3. Enhancing resource accountability: findings from the experience of resource trackers

For resource trackers and the wider communities to influence resource allocation, three key factors are at play: the accessibility of information, the accessibility of decision makers and duty bearers, and the opportunities for feeding back.

Accessing information and feedback

Information is sought about resources, including allocation in budgets and transfers of resources from the point of disbursement to the final expenditure or delivery point.

Methods for accessing information

Trackers use the following means of accessing information and feedback about resources:

- **Observation** is a key method used by trackers to monitor resource allocation and use in their communities. This is particularly relevant for infrastructure projects and service delivery, including progress in the construction of roads and availability of drugs in health centres. Notice boards remain key tools in sharing data; at different places, such as district headquarters, parish and sub-county offices, schools, health units, clinics, shops and landmark trees in a village, notice boards are displayed and viewed by villagers on a regular basis
- **Formal methods**, including village meetings, budget conferences, sector coordination meetings, quarterly meetings, Barazas[5], etc. Village meetings and discussions among community members play a key role in guiding trackers' focus, ensuring that their action is based on the needs expressed by the community. Government data is formally accessed mainly through the sub-county and district levels
- **Informal methods** remain more important for trackers than formal methods. Informal methods include approaching the custodians of information without any authorization from the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), such as meeting the LC3 Chairman in the village or in his office, and engaging with duty bearers without an official appointment. This method often depends on the relationship between the information seeker and the custodian of the data.

Types of information and data

Trackers demand and access information about the following types of resources:

- **Government resources**: centrally and locally managed resources. Government data is accessed from parish, sub-county and district levels. The formal process of accessing data involves gaining authorization from the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) in the case of the district
- **Donor and NGO resources**: donors and NGOs' expenditure in the districts, including donors' ODA, and the private and public funds spent by NGOs
- **Community-generated resources**: funds generated by and for community members, such as group savings
- **Public–private partnerships:** resources allocated to private firms contracted by the government for specific projects. Accessibility of information on procurement and private firms' practices is also reported to be lacking.

Data collected is generally financial and performance data, or social impact data:
- Financial and performance: includes information about budgets, inputs, outputs and progress

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[5] A Baraza is an open interface platform organized by the resident district commissioner (RDC) in the district in collaboration with the Office of the Prime Minister. Barazas on average are reported to take place yearly.

- Social impact and needs: includes information about the needs of the community and social indicators.

See Table 1 for an example on accessing information about a school's construction in Pader district.

Table 1. Accessing information about school construction in Pader district: methods and types of information

Type of information	Informal method	Formal method	Observation
Financial and performance	Discussion with school headmaster about classroom construction budget	- Budgets and annual work plans (district-level data) - Budget performance reports by sector (district-level data) - Financial statements and reports (district-level data) - Transfers to lower local governments (district-level data)	Construction of the classroom has stalled; workers have not been seen for 2 months
Social impact and needs	Discussion among community members during LC1 meeting called by Village Chairman	- Enrolment in primary school data(district level data) - Enrolment in primary school data (school data) - Performance in exams data (district level data)	Low levels of literacy in their village; children are seen not going to school

Barriers to accessing and using information

- **Low digestibility of information:** trackers report that available data is often in bulky formats that they sometimes find difficult to interpret and make meaningful use of. In order to be useable, information needs to be presented and packaged in a user-friendly way. In this case, the support and mentorship from DRT and DI can enable the trackers to understand the information
- **Technical nature of information**: in cases where the required information is related to a specialist subject, trackers may also seek information from external sources. For example, trackers in Katakwi sought information from construction specialists while they were monitoring the construction of two classrooms in a school. This allowed trackers to gain knowledge about the appropriate construction standards, such as the mix of cement and sand, and to monitor classroom construction more effectively to ensure quality and value for money
- **Access denied:** access to information can on occasion be outright denied or delayed significantly. Gathering support from allies, such as Village chairmen or LC3 Chairmen is a key strategy that trackers can use in these cases. Furthermore, information accessibility can sometimes be affected by poor record keeping or record management, and staff changes among local authorities' administrative personnel, which can also affect access to information.

Accessing decision makers and duty bearers

Influencing resource allocation requires understanding who is responsible for resource decisions. For trackers in remote parts of northern Uganda, accessibility of decision makers is often dependent on physical access to these individuals or groups. This accessibility is constrained by distance and at times by poor road conditions, flooding and water logging (particularly in Teso and Karamoja). For most trackers, several hours' travel on a bicycle are required to visit the LC3 or district level office. For example, Lakwela village in Gulu district is 27 km along a poor road from the LC3 or district office.

Accessibility of NGO representatives is also reported to be limited, particularly when NGOs do not have a field-based office and only visit the site where their resources are being utilised irregularly. Community members may not be aware in advance of this visit. In some cases, resource trackers reported accessing NGOs through the Assistant Community Development Officer (ACDO) at LC3 level or Community Development Officer (CDO) at LC5 level.

Table 2 describes the patterns of accessibility of information and decision-makers as reported by resource trackers.

Table 2. Resources tracked by trackers and reported accessibility of information and decision makers on these resources

Resource type	Examples of resources followed up by trackers	Reported accessibility of information	Reported accessibility of decision makers
Community	• Parent- Teacher Association funds	Medium	High
NGO resources	• World Vision borehole • Caritas/AVSI bridge	Medium to low	Low
Donor resources	• World Bank-funded classrooms (joint programme with the government) • European Union-funded roads (joint programme with the government)	Low	Low
Government resources: locally managed	• Cattle provision programme for families with children affected by nodding disease • National Agriculture Advisory Services (NAADS)	Medium	High
Government resources: centrally managed	• Universal Primary Education funding • Universal Secondary Education funding	Medium to low	Low
Private firms (often contracted by government)	• Classroom construction	Low	Low

Feeding back to duty bearers

Resource trackers gather feedback from the community and feed it back to duty bearers. Through access to information, communities are able to provide informed feedback and to voice their views based on evidence on how resources are being spent. Examples of feedback include:

- Katakwi district: five pipes in the local borehole need repairing, and the budget should be made available for this purpose
- Gulu district: three families in the village are reported to have a child with nodding syndrome[6], a neurological disease that is still little understood; the families want to know if any government support is available for them

Following up once feedback has been provided

Feeding back to duty bearers is not a one-off process, but rather involves long-term follow up on a single issue. In order to develop feedback loops as part of decision-making processes, feedback needs to be a continuous cycle where communities and duty bearers engage in regular two-way interaction.

Following up once the first feedback has been provided is often challenging. The amount of time required to follow up can be significant, and trackers often do not receive clear timelines from duty bearers detailing when information can be accessed and further engagement arranged. To respond to this challenge, gaining greater awareness of institutions and processes is key.

Identifying pressure points

To influence resource allocation through feedback, trackers identify pressure points for influencing decisions. This could be key meetings related to budget discussions, local council meetings, Barazas, etc. Identifying key timelines and opportunities for influencing, such as consultation and disbursement timelines, can also help improve coordination among trackers to ensure that feedback comes in time to influence decision making. A trackers' ability to participate at these pressure points varies according to the type of resource: government resources, community-generated resources, NGO resources or donor resources. As described earlier, informal and impromptu meetings are also a key strategy for feeding back to duty bearers.

Trackers report that the pressure points are more easily identifiable for some resources than other, for example community-generated resources such as parent-teacher association funds. Trackers are community members themselves, and often parents, and can more easily be aware and participate in key decision-making meetings, such as Parent-Teacher and school management meetings.

Escalating an issue

In some cases, feedback needs to be escalated beyond local government level. For example, trackers may uncover issues to be reported to the police or may need to follow up with an NGO country office, if the field office is not responsive. In these cases, trackers sometimes find it difficult to know who to escalate an issue, when information about decision-making responsibilities and processes is lacking. Access to information about who holds power to make decisions is therefore important.

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[6] See Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) "Nodding syndrome", available at
http://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/noddingsyndrome/

Clear and transparent governance and decision-making arrangements play a key role for trackers to effectively feed back and escalate an issue. Such clear arrangements, in turn, enhance trackers' ability to identify opportunities to use these existing processes and identify pressure points. Improving access to information and clear governance arrangements are therefore essential to improving the quality and impact of feedback.

4. Emerging lessons from three years' implementation

This section discusses emerging lessons in four areas: building a demand for evidence, involving disempowered groups and the whole community, building a culture of accountability, and building sustainability through feedback loops.

Building demand for evidence

Implementation of the model shows that promoting a culture of accountability is a slow process that is achieved through gradual gains, sometimes on single issues.

It is essential for citizens to understand that it is their right and not privilege to access information and to use it to influence pro-poor development outcomes and policies. Building demand for evidence requires creating awareness and providing support in promoting access to and use of information and developing a culture of participation and informed decision making.

Building a culture of demanding evidence and substantiating claims made by the community is one of the key processes learnt by trackers and shared with the community. For example, if community members have a perception that medical staff are selling medicines and drugs rather than providing to patients, the model promotes evidence gathering to substantiate this claim. Feedback from the community is less likely to be dismissed as 'accusations' if backed by evidence. Therefore, building demand for evidence is key.

Involving disempowered groups and the whole community

A challenge faced by trackers is to spread the responsibility of resource tracking beyond just themselves to involve the whole community in reporting directly to government. Furthermore, a community is not monolithic, and community members have varieties of needs, views and issues.

Empowering marginalised groups to participate, particularly women, people with disabilities and people with low levels of literacy, is important and requires special attention. Working as a group is important to trackers as it ensures that trackers from more marginalised groups can be involved. Furthermore, group work is reported to provide safety for the trackers in cases where suspicions about intent may arise, and to forestall any repercussion on a single tracker for seeking information about resources and their use.

- People with low levels of literacy: illiteracy is a challenge but not a barrier to engaging in decisions on resource allocation. Several of the resource trackers are semi-literate, yet they are still able to engage with decision makers. Traditional ways of sharing information (e.g. face-to-face discussions) remain important, as does observation for assessing information. Visual and audio methods can also be used to capture information, such as recordings of meetings.

- Women: currently only 14 out of 41 resource trackers are women, due to different issues constraining women's participation. These include lower levels of literacy amongst women, lower self-esteem and confidence, less traditional involvement in politico-economic issues, and a lack of availability due to domestic responsibilities. Female and male trackers report working jointly as groups of trackers; but more importantly, trackers work as representatives from their community. Female trackers report that having been selected by their community provides them with legitimacy in approaching duty bearers and demanding information. Nevertheless, the five districts where DI and DRT work are very diverse in terms of culture and language. In Katakwi, half of trackers are women.

Promoting a culture of accountability

Building relationships of trust, particularly between citizens, services providers, decision makers and other duty-bearers, requires sustained effort from the onset and is crucial to the success of the model. This requires involving a wide variety of stakeholders from the start, particularly local leaders whose buy-in is critical to ensure ownership and sustainability. It is necessary for both the supply and demand of evidence, so that both provide valuable inputs in monitoring resources that can improve their responsiveness.

Trackers often require the support of LC1 and LC2 to escalate an issue to LC3 (see Figure 1 on LC structures). LC1 does not take decisions, but it can have influence and access to duty bears. For example, in Kotido district, trackers gathered support from LC1 and LC2 to request police presence around the trading center to respond to insecurity and conflict.

Following up with duty bearers can be a time-consuming process for trackers. Prioritization of issues is important to ensure follow up and impact. While there are often numerous issues for resource trackers to address, focusing on a single specific issue in a way that enables follow up can set a precedent, enhancing accountability for a specific resource and developing a culture of information sharing between citizens, service providers and decision makers.

Building sustainability through institutionalised feedback loops

Sustainability of the model is achieved by spreading the responsibility beyond trackers and progressive DRT and DI withdrawal, as well as scaling up and integration of feedback loops into decision-making processes and existing institutions.

Feedback mechanisms used by NGOs and donors, where existing, are usually project based and do not continue after project closure. Sustainable feedback loops are those that are integrated into sustainable institutions and processes. For example, resource trackers who join parent-teacher meetings, and systematically share feedback from the community with the school management committee, can develop a culture of feedback and formalise its use. An agreement can be reached to seek and respond to community feedback as part of school management committee decision making.

Promoting a culture of accountability involves all sections of the population and requires direct links between citizens and decision makers, not, in the long-term, facilitated by DI and DRT. Furthermore, connecting local to national level is essential to support trackers in following up on resources controlled from the central government level, or from donor and NGO headquarters. Embedding feedback loops into existing structures for decision making at both local and central government level is key to accountable resource allocation. Taking advantage of existing structures such as Barazas is therefore an important opportunity, which DRT and DI will be focusing on in 2015. An initiative originated in the Office of the Prime Minister, Barazas are

forums bringing together citizens and local leaders. District officials are tasked to explain how resources for communities have been expended, and citizens have an opportunity to provide feedback to government, which can then be escalated to the Office of the Prime Minister.

Conclusion

Involving communities in resource tracking in post-conflict settings where relationships of accountability are weak is a long-term, but nonetheless empowering, process. Gains in empowerment and accountability are largely achieved through building awareness of rights, linking resource flows to needs and impacts on the citizenry, and demanding information and feedback loops on specific issues, such as a broken bridge or a poor quality school building.

Resource tracking and feedback loops are envisaged to have an important role to enhance resource effectiveness and development outcomes, including supporting the Data Revolution for development called for by the United Nations' Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development.[7] For national and local level actors to be in the drivers' seat of this Data Revolution, data needs to be made more accessible and useable at local level. In particular, the transparency of all resources, including contracted firms and NGOs, needs to be improved with information made more accessible and digestible. Facilitating and enabling access to quality information is essential to the functioning of feedback loops. While generating demand for information among communities is therefore key, it is also important to stimulate capacity and demand to use feedback among duty bearers and decision makers.

Closed feedback loops, embedded into existing structures for decision making, are essential in supporting accountability to deliver services appropriate to the community needs. The model developed by DRT and DI increases community capacities to feed in planning, policy and programming processes at local level. Bridging the gap between resource allocation and communities' needs, through ensuring the feedback from the community can be integrated into decision-making cycles, can improve humanitarian and development outcomes. In the long term, the model promoted by DRT and DI can enhance the quality of the rapport between communities and the duty bearers, precipitating improved mutual accountability and decision-making based on evidence and feedback on resources.

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[7] Independent Expert Advisory Group Secretariat (2014). A world that counts: mobilising the data revolution for sustainable development, available at http://www.undatarevolution.org/report/