

## Defining transparency, participation and accountability

Given the general nature of the key terms that the initiative is focused on – transparency and accountability – it is necessary to provide some brief definitions around these terms. The following definitions have been developed by the T/A Initiative Program Manager and are being used across all areas of research carried out by the program.

### Transparency

Transparency is a characteristic of governments, companies, organisations and individuals that are open in the clear disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions<sup>2</sup>. As a principle, public officials, civil servants, the managers and directors of companies and organisations, and board trustees have a duty to act visibly, predictably and understandably to promote participation and accountability. Simply making information available is not sufficient to achieve transparency. Large amounts of raw information in the public domain may breed opacity rather than transparency. In order for that to be achieved a number of qualifying criteria must be added to the definition. Information should be managed and published so that it is:

- **Relevant and accessible:** Information should be presented in plain and readily comprehensible language and formats appropriate for different stakeholders, whilst retaining the detail and disaggregation necessary for analysis, evaluation and participation. Information should be made available in ways appropriate to different audiences, and at minimal or no cost.
- **Timely and accurate:** Information should be made available in sufficient time to permit analysis, evaluation and engagement by relevant stakeholders. This means that information needs to be provided while planning as well as during and after the implementation of policies and programmes. Information should be managed so that it is up-to-date, accurate, and complete.

### Participation

Citizen participation generally is understood either as consultative participation or as empowered participation. In the case of consultative participation, a government provides citizens and their representatives with a chance to be heard, but there is no guarantee that participation will be heeded. Decision makers have the freedom to agree with citizens or not, though there is normally an obligation to give the reasons for why they agree or disagree. In order for participation to be meaningful, there must be accountability. In the case of empowered participation, the participants are invested with decision-making power and influence, such as having citizen representatives on boards

that oversee local public service delivery. Citizens may participate through local associations, social movements and campaigns, formal participatory governance spaces and multiple approaches which employ several of these strategies. Participation is key to making transparency and accountability directly meaningful to citizens. For the purposes of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative's research, citizen participation is relevant in as much as it leads to increased transparency and accountability.

### Accountability

Broadly speaking, accountability refers to the process of holding actors responsible for their actions. More specifically, it is the concept that individuals, agencies and organisations (public, private and civil society) are held responsible for executing their powers according to a certain standard (whether set mutually or not). Accountability is an institutionalised (i.e. regular, established, accepted) relationship between different actors. One group of people/organisations are held to account ('accountees'), by other groups ('accounters'). It is useful to think of an accountability relationship as having up to four sequential stages:

1. **Standard setting:** setting out the behaviour expected of the 'accountee' and thus the criteria by which they might validly be assessed.
2. **Investigation:** exploring whether or not accountees have met the standards expected of them.
3. **Answerability:** a process in which accountees are required to defend their actions, respond to questions, and generally explain themselves. This applies both to negative as well as to positive feedback.
4. **Sanction:** a process in which accountees are in some way punished for falling below the standards expected of them, or rewarded for achieving or exceeding them.

Most accountability sequences are not as formal, and/or do not include all these stages. More informally one can think of accountability as not only a set of institutional mechanisms or a check list of procedures but an arena of challenge, contestation and transformation.

<sup>2</sup> Transparency International, 2009.