

# //LEARNING ACROSS LOCALITIES: ANALYZING LOCAL CONTEXT TO IMPROVE IMPACT

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- **Many efforts to promote accountability happen at the local level, but there is a need to better understand the local context that shapes these endeavors**
- **Organizations working at the local level are often volunteer community-based organizations with very different capacities and incentives for learning about context**
- **Local organizations need tools to help them learn from their context and opportunities for learning from other contexts, to help them better shape their approaches**

## The local gap in the debate about context

The field of transparency and accountability (T/A) is taking context more seriously than ever before. The case that context matters has been made for many years (see e.g. [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), and today many of our colleagues are paying attention to the concrete factors outside the control of practitioners and funders that affect the likely success of their strategies and interventions.

A recent [study](#) by the World Bank maps the factors that seem to account for differences in social accountability outcomes between countries. It is a useful framework for considering the national and international factors that are involved and is one possible starting point for unpacking complex local dynamics. (For more examples of local level contextual analysis, see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

In this piece, **we want to invite you to help us set some initial parameters for a research-action agenda that will contribute to filling the local context gap within TALEARN** - our global community of practice for learning in the T/A field.

We have zeroed-in on the local level partly because there is a gap in the field. More importantly, the local level is where a large

number of **organizations working in transparency and accountability operate**. We believe that much could be accomplished if civil society groups, funders, and researchers from across the world pooled their efforts in this direction.

## For whom does understanding context matter?

An understanding of the local context is often relevant to people (i.e. evaluators, donors, global networks, consultants) who are visiting local organizations from outside. Many of the early calls to consider context (see [here](#) and [here](#)) were from those who were worried about such people were working on projects without considering how local dynamics and interests would affect their relevance on the ground. Others came from those who knew that context often gets in the way of an external actors' desire to achieve widespread

Looking for examples? Why not explore the work of CEGSS in Guatemala, MKSS, NCDHR, or CHJS in India, the partners of Policy Forum in Tanzania, or other partners of PSAM across Africa.

Want to learn more about funding strategies built around local participation? How about this [evaluation](#) of World Bank Operations, these documents prepared for USAID ([here](#) and [here](#)), this note on DFID's work on [empowerment and accountability](#), or [the Making all Voices Count Call](#).

Walter's reflections: How organizations working at the local level differ from those working at the national level.

T/A initiatives at the local level are mostly implemented by community-based organizations (CBOs). These organizations are made up of volunteers who live within the context in which they implement their interventions. Such organizations are quite different from professional organizations that work at national or international levels for the following reasons:

- For local CBOs, there is little time to pause and reflect or cultivate skills and knowledge. Those working within these organizations need tools and frameworks that can take into account time constraints and the heterogeneous level of prior formal training and education among the group's members.
- Most learning in CBOs occurs by doing. Implementing actions should be structured in a way that allows for feedback loops and the documentation of the tactics and strategies being implemented. Again, this should take into account the time constraints of people who are working on a voluntary basis.
- Most CBO members involved in T/A work want to improve local public services that are either failing or showing poor performance. These are services that they and their families use. Without a direct connection to improving the provision of local services, it is difficult to engage local actors in broader actions that target the local and national level. This is not the result of a lack of interest from local actors but the opportunity costs that such actions impose on volunteer workers.

All the above imply that the actors, incentives, processes, tools, and frameworks for reflection and learning are quite different when working on T/A interventions at the local level versus national and international levels.

impact by using a project that works in one place to *scale in many other places*<sup>2</sup>.

The ability of a project to increase local participation in the selection and monitoring of development projects, for example, might depend on the local extent of elite capture. In turn, this might depend on factors such as the local level of citizen knowledge and local inequality. (For an alternative perspective, see [Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000](#), or [Dasgupta and Beard 2007](#)). If local dynamics such as inequality or lack of citizen knowledge allow for extensive elite capture and cooptation of participatory mechanisms, then introducing

these mechanisms may not in fact increase citizen voice in local development.

While it is clear that external actors need to assess local contextual factors, it is equally important for locally-based organizations to do the same. Despite the advantages of proximity and familiarity, **Local organizations sometimes lack the tools and opportunities to think systematically about their own context.** However, the complexity of T/A interventions means that **it is important for all actors, including local CSOs, to reflect upon local contextual factors that impact their work.**

- Taking local context seriously can increase the chances of an idea taken from a different place succeeding. It may also help implementers respond to changes in political contexts. Imagine a colleague who is implementing a monitoring strategy at a primary care unit using score-cards. Initially, he opts for a collaborative strategy – local officials and providers seemed to be willing to improve the quality of health delivery (much as they did in Uganda this famous case). But something happens and suddenly local officials and providers are no longer willing to play nice. Wouldn't it help our activist to have the opportunity to reflect on this shift and analyze the factors that caused it, and then adapt their tactics and strategies to better respond to this new context? This suggestion has been made by our colleagues from the Transparency for Development Project. More useful still would be a better grasp of how others in similar circumstances have strategically litigated or negotiated with officials.
- Taking local context seriously during an evaluation may increase the chance of it leading to useful lessons. At the very least it should mean not stumbling over similar obstacles twice. Suppose you want to design an effective programme that informs families about the performance of their local schools. It may be that programme performance depends on the relative wealth of local residents or how close they are to government officials. By thinking about these possibilities in advance, you can incorporate them into your evaluation design and see whether they do in fact play a role in the success of your programme. You can also target your activities to where they will be most effective and/or modify your intervention to address those contextual factors that pose the greatest challenge.

## How do we go about it?

What we are proposing is not easy. However, we would like to highlight some parameters that may help stakeholders advance the agenda. In our view, *the way forward is to develop and adopt ways to learn better.* In order to encourage a debate on how to achieve this, we offer the following ideas.

In the past, many colleagues engaged in implementing transparency and accountability interventions at the local level have sought to find ‘magic recipes’, or interventions that will work across or within contexts.

We are thinking about something different. Our sense is that TALEARN could add most value if it encouraged local-level funders, researchers, and activists to think about local problems together. Can we come up with a series of questions that our colleagues working on local interventions should keep asking themselves on a regular basis?

We have found that ‘safe’ conversations between experienced people who want to learn how to do better can draw out questions about the seemingly ‘obvious’ but hitherto unacknowledged. Inquisitive, open exchanges can help us re-think the way forward in potentially productive ways (see e.g. [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). The point is not to transfer the design of interventions automatically without reflection, but to learn about successes and failures in different contexts in order to generate new interventions and adapt existing ones, set more realistic expectations, and create productive feedback loops.

We believe that learning methods should follow and fit real world puzzles and questions, not the other way around. We don’t have a magic recipe for how to learn about local circumstances more systematically. Local-level T/A interventions are diverse, and there are many contextual factors in play. However, we do know that we are not looking for universal laws or quantified average effects of best practices. (This is an area that some of our colleagues are working on, however, often using randomized controlled trials and other experimental methods.)

The study and analysis of context at the local level is therefore likely to place more emphasis on ethnographic research than has been the case to date (e.g. see the work of [Panthea Lee](#)). The design and implementation of robust case studies as a part of this

research would allow comparisons to be made between different localities.

## Looking into a concrete case: Real needs, Real Gains

*To illustrate how we might create real gains for T/A organizations, we turn to the experience of the Guatemalan Center for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health Systems (CEGSS) – an organization led by Walter Flores. CEGSS’s mission is to help eliminate health inequities and the factors behind social exclusion. Its model combines advocacy, social research, and capacity development for socially excluded populations. Our knowledge of the field suggests that, while the organization is likely to diverge in its form, methods, and approaches from many others, its experience can help generate a broader conversation – even controversy – about shared needs and plausible ways to innovate and improve collectively.*

CEGSS works in partnership with community-based organizations to aid social accountability in health in more than 15 municipalities in Guatemala. Although all of these municipalities share some key characteristics (a majority indigenous population and high levels of extreme poverty), there are also important differences (prior civic engagement of CBOs, opportunity costs to civic participation, type of community leadership) that make each municipality unique. They are also located in 5 different provinces of the country. CEGSS carries out its analysis of context at two levels. At the first, each of the 15 municipalities is a context on its own. The second level is that of the provincial government. When the CEGSS team engages with context, it is not seeking to identify the ‘magic bullets’ that work anywhere and everywhere, or to generate conclusions that are generalizable to local contexts in other countries. It is first trying to understand why particular interventions are not succeeding or have become stuck. It is also trying to understand why some are particularly successful. Our colleagues also try to identify the strategies and tactics that may be playing a role in the outputs and outcomes of their interventions.

*Analyzing context for CEGSS is first and foremost a process of learning about and engaging more effectively with the centre’s own context. For it to do this better, they feel that they can still improve their tools for documenting context and capturing complex dynamics.*

While workers at CEGSS read case studies of interventions in other contexts, their main interest is to identify the sorts of strategies, tactics, and actions that have been implemented by other colleagues and organizations that may have potential in their own context. For the case studies to be useful, two key criteria need to be fulfilled:

- The case studies should have enough description of context and local dynamics, as well as the tools, strategies, and tools applied, for it to be possible to understand what was implemented in that context; and
- CEGSS colleagues should have a clear enough understanding of their own context to allow them to compare similarities, differences, outputs, and outcomes between other experiences and their own.

CEGSS believes that to improve learning about context, there should be collective efforts to develop:

- *Common guidelines and tools to help organizations systematize and learn from their own context; and*
- *Guidance and tools to document case studies of T/A interventions at the local level.*

If the many organizations working at the local level were to use the same or a similar process and tools to document their work, then there would be *enormous potential for learning across contexts and even the possibility of implementing meta-ethnography<sup>3</sup> and other recent research techniques to systematize large amounts of qualitative data.*

## A working agenda for the T/A community

It's early days for the TALEARN community of practice. In February 2013, we launched an ambitious programme to bring together funders, researchers, and civil society organizations interested in doing their work better. We are exploring joint activities and learning by doing.

In November 2013, we got together to think candidly about the issue of context, and it's relationship to the work of TALEARN members. Some of the key questions that we discussed were:

- What is the role of context in local-level T/A interventions?
- Are these local context issues different from those at regional, national, and cross-country levels?
- How do organizations think about context?

- What tools and processes can help organizations working locally learn about context more systematically?

Many of these questions were explored further at our [TALEARN workshop](#) in March 2014.

**We look forward to your thoughts! TALEARN stands for innovative work in a candid, collaborative style. Many of these questions were explored further at our [TALEARN workshop](#) in March 2014.**

And for other great insights, check out the [CONVERSATION](#) we've triggered at COPASAH!

## DICTIONARY:



1. In this think piece we take a cue from the work of CEGSS. For CEGSS, the local level is the smallest government unit in a given country. In Latin America, this is usually the municipal government. Of course, each municipality is different, and in some cases the local level might be a smaller unit still. Some municipalities have five million inhabitants, for example, while others might have just five thousand. In the case of large municipalities, it might be necessary to analyse contextual factors within particular neighbourhoods.
2. Do you use a different definition of "local" in your T/A interventions? Scale here refers to a means to more comprehensively grow social impact. Scale is not a synonym for replication. There are many possible routes to achieving scale. Check out [this brief](#) to learn more.
3. Meta-ethnography is a method for synthesizing qualitative research and interpreting findings across multiple studies. See Salla Atkins et al., 2008. 'Conducting a meta-ethnography of qualitative literature: lessons learnt.' *MC Medical Research Methodology*, 8:21.

## \*THANKS TO:

*Thanks to Tim Rutherford-Johnson, Francesca Terzi and participants in the London meetings, members of COPASAH, Jonathan Fox, and Simon O'Meally*

AUGUST 2014

*The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of T/AI's members*



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