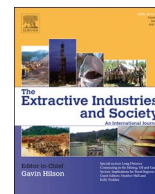




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Viewpoint

Enhancing citizen engagement in natural resource governance: Scope, content and input in the operation of the extractive industries transparency initiative

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ABSTRACT

This opinion piece (discussion paper) examines citizen engagement in natural resource governance under the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). Building on earlier discussions of citizen engagement, it examines how the EITI can engender the interest and hence involvement of citizens in resource governance. While acknowledging the significance of reforms in the 2016 standard, this discussion seeks to provoke thought and discussion on the participation of citizens in the operation of the governance mechanism, with respect to the scope of EITI reporting, content of reports and input from citizens. The paper aims to point to possible areas for further research into the operation of the EITI and its significance for natural resource governance.

1. Introduction

The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) is an important global governance norm. It seeks to address fiscal impropriety in the resource value chain, by targeting non-disclosure of extractive sector transactions. Its operations aim to empower citizens to contribute to development policy and governance. Scholars have observed that the involvement of citizens in governance enhances the process (Edwards and Gaventa, 2001; Kasymova, 2014; Scholte, 2011). Thus, the EITI performs a vital role in resource governance.

Since its inception, a little over a decade ago, the EITI has attracted considerable scholarly interest. Some have observed that it can be more impactful if measures that engender active civil society participation in resource governance improve (Aaronson, 2011; Acosta, 2013). In this respect, scholars have emphasized the centrality of strong institutional structures that enable individuals to access and utilize information from the governance mechanism (Acosta, 2013; Gaventa and McGee, 2013; Kolstad and Wiig, 2009). In this article, I add to the discussion on the enhancement of citizen engagement. I examine two approaches: 1) widening the scope of EITI reporting – to diversify the content of reports. The mechanism currently focuses only on reporting fiscal information; yet, social and environmental outcomes have more immediate and direct impact on resource-rich communities. Perhaps, extending attention to these issues in the EITI process will encourage more popular interest and engagement; and 2) encouraging citizen input in the compilation of reports. Whereas, the mechanism aims to

benefit citizens, only companies and governments contribute input to its reports. Following the first point, a window for citizen input might attract more interest and hence participation in its operation.

Before delving into the crux of the discussion, a brief background to the EITI will be an appropriate lead to the subject of citizen engagement.

1.1. The EITI

The EITI emerged in response to the need to address aspects of the resource curse (Caspary, 2012). The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in South Africa was the forum that first gave formal expression to the idea of the EITI. The meeting emphasized the importance of links between sustainable resource governance and development. Architects underscored how poor governance and unsustainable resource extraction contributed to the “resource curse” – the situation in which resource-rich communities experience impoverishment, conflict and underdevelopment (Auty, 1993). Having identified corruption and lack of transparency as major causes of the resource curse phenomenon, a coalition of civil society groups began in the early 2000s to advocate for transparency in the extractive sector. Dubbed Publish What You Pay (PWYP), the campaign aimed to ensure transparency in the resource value chain. This eventually gave impetus to the idea of the EITI, as a global resource governance mechanism. It aimed to engender transparency and accountability in the global extractive industry, and improve resource governance for the benefit of

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citizens of resource-rich countries. Thus, scholarly discussions, policy considerations and advocacy shed light on the global imperative for improved resource governance, and ultimately gave rise to the emergence of the global governance mechanism.

The EITI provides an outlet for extractive companies and governments to publish information on sector transactions for public scrutiny and use in policy processes. The operation and impact of the EITI hinge on three key elements: transparency, accountability and citizen engagement in resource governance. The mechanism sets specific parameters for transparency, which basically make fiscal information publicly accessible (Extractive Industries ND); with this provision, individuals and civil society can hold officials to account for any discrepancies or omissions. Armed with this information, citizens are then able to make informed contributions to development policy. Citizen engagement under the EITI therefore entails verifying information, holding officials accountable and using the information to contribute to policy.

In the rest of the piece, I outline what I mean by citizen engagement in the next section. I then discuss citizen engagement in resource governance under the 2016 EITI standard, and proffer suggestions to further improve this aspect of the process. I conclude by rehashing the significance of citizen engagement in the EITI process, and the broader implication for natural resource governance.

2. Citizen engagement

Views on the definition of citizen engagement vary. Eversole (2011) has explained that citizen or community engagement in governance entails exchanges among stakeholders in the policy process, especially at the level of implementation. For ordinary citizens to participate in this exchange, governance structures need to be widely accessible. Transparency and accountability also encourage citizen engagement in governance processes (Kasymova, 2014). With respect to resource governance, scholars have asserted that decentralization further facilitates wider participation (Agrawal, 2001; Larson and Soto, 2008; Pahl-Wostl, 2009). Decentralized governance helps bridge gaps between policy making and its execution, and encourages the utilization of indigenous knowledge systems. Hence, a decentralized and transparent platform that enables citizens to access relevant information and hold officials to account can engender exchanges between ordinary citizens and other stakeholders in governance.

It is important that governance mechanisms not only trigger popular interest, but also sustain it. This requires a process that facilitates “deep and continuous involvement ... with the potential for all involved to have an effect on the situation” (King et al., 1998, p. 320). Citizens are likely to participate in governance when the process sustains their interest. If the EITI should thrive, positively impact individuals and communities, and thus help to reverse the resource curse, it must remain attractive to citizens of resource-rich countries. Hence, the notion of citizen engagement in this discussion refers to sustained participation of individuals and civil society groups in governance processes. In the next section, I address how the EITI engenders citizen engagement in resource governance.

3. EITI and citizen engagement

As stated earlier, citizen engagement is one of the central elements of the EITI. Having recognized the importance of the involvement of citizens in resource governance, stakeholders of the EITI continue to devise measures to engender wider popular participation in the process. The most recent reforms to the mechanism in the 2016 standard outlined measures targeting accessibility and comprehensibility of EITI reports. The new standard recommended that reports should include brief descriptions of technical information (EITI, 2016). Earlier studies have observed that the technical nature of EITI reports make them incomprehensible to most individuals in resource-rich countries (Asafu-

Adjaye, 2011,2012; Gillies, 2011), which is a disincentive for popular participation. Hence, the understandability of EITI reports is key to enhancing wider citizen participation.

With regard to facilitating accessibility to information, the standard encourages the use of different channels available in the particular governance context to disseminate EITI reports. Context is a key determinant of the extent to which transparency and accountability in resource governance is achievable (Gaventa and McGee, 2013). Hitherto, the mechanism depended on and utilized only the internet to publish reports since it is the most public source of information for many. However, due to logistical challenges in most of the developing world, only a few individuals (mostly the urban elite) can access internet-based information (Hilson and Maconachie, 2009; Ocheje, 2006). Besides, owing to the cost of internet facilities in the developing world, an even fewer number of people in that part of the world can afford to use it to study EITI reports. The 2016 standard therefore sought to address this challenge by encouraging the use of other media platforms that are more widely accessible in the specific context of each community. This will hopefully attract wider popular engagement in the operations of the EITI and resource governance generally.

However, the ability to use EITI reports is perhaps a more significant motivation for citizen engagement than access to them. Merely accessing and understanding information does not guarantee its use. The relevance of the information to citizens is key: the content of EITI reports can either motivate or discourage citizens from participating in resource governance under the mechanism. Information reflecting measures that address concerns of individuals and communities makes the process relevant and attractive (Kasymova, 2014). Wilson and Van Alstine (2014) have observed that in Ghana and Nigeria for example, EITI reports have consistently left out issues of major concern to citizens. This makes reports less useful and hence less attractive to individuals and communities, regardless of their accessibility and comprehensibility.

As noted already, reporting is limited to fiscal activity only. Under the 2016 standard, the mechanism still focuses exclusively on payments, revenues and transactions between governments and extractive companies. Whereas this helps to address some aspects of poor resource governance and manifestations of the resource curse (Auty, 1993), such information is mostly relevant to only a few elites and government technocrats. This therefore limits the usability of the published information, popular interest in it and ultimately participation in resource governance under the mechanism. So how can the EITI process further enhance popular interest and hence more active citizen engagement in the process? I turn to this question in the next section.

4. Sustaining citizen engagement: scope, content and input

To enhance wider citizen engagement under the EITI, it is important for the mechanism to not only attract, but also sustain interest in its operations. A decentralized and transparent mechanism that aims to encourage wider participation can be effective if it also addresses issues that impinge directly on individual and community survival. Resource-rich communities contend with many socio-environmental externalities of extractive activities (Hilson and Nyame, 2006). Diseases, conflict, low food production and malnutrition, deforestation, flooding, various forms of pollution, among other problems are rampant in communities where resource extraction takes place. These problems pose immediate and direct threats to human survival and have far more pressing relevance to individuals of resource-rich communities. The imperative to address these issues has led to the establishment of such governance mechanisms as corporate social responsibility (CSR), the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme (KPCS), and Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights Initiative (VPs), among others (Campbell 2012; Haufler, 2009; Voluntary Principles, 2017). It is worth noting however that despite these efforts, adverse social and environmental outcomes from resource extraction persist.

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