

Addressing Transparency and Accountability Among Local Authorities

Lessons from an Academic-Practitioner Collaboration



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Summary of Findings

- Community and institutional social norms combine to drive unaccountable behavior by local authorities in the fulfillment of their duties. This undermines both the effectiveness of efforts to promote more transparent, accountable, and responsive behavior and the sustainability of any change that is achieved.
- It is critical — but difficult — to identify and specifically target the unique elements of a social norm to achieve sustainable change.
- ‘The devil is in the details.’ Social norms change utilizes many well-known tactics – such as dialogue, role models, media campaigns, social accountability processes, etcetera. However, the way they are implemented is different if the underlying causes of the behavior relate to public servants’ attitudes, their values and beliefs, or social norms.



I. Introduction

How can international and local non-governmental practitioners engage with local authorities to help overcome challenges to transparent and accountable local governance? This brief summarizes lessons from a collaborative learning effort between the Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy Program (CJL) of the Fletcher School (Tufts University), CARE Netherlands, CARE International Switzerland in Sudan, CARE Rwanda, CARE Burundi, and The Hague Academy for Local Governance (THA) on how to engage with local authorities to address social norms that may drive problematic behavior related to transparency and accountability – especially information sharing and accountability by local authorities needed for meaningful inclusion of and responsiveness to marginalized groups in communities.

Social norms – or informal ‘rules of the game’ – often operate in parallel to formal obligations and, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, create the social pressures that drive public officials’ behavior despite the existence of formal rules, leadership, or social accountability for greater transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance.¹ In conjunction with other behavioral drivers, social norms can perpetuate opacity and diminished accountability in

¹ Inclusive governance (IG) can be understood as the effective, participatory, transparent, equitable and accountable management of public affairs. CARE International. *Inclusive Governance: Guidance Note*. London: CARE International. Retrieved from http://governance.careinternationalwikis.org/_media/care-inclusive-governance-guidance-note-summary-april-2016.pdf.

everything, from unresponsive delivery of services and self-serving, exclusionary policies, to corruption. Consequently, efforts to promote integrity and improve inclusive governance need to pay attention to social and behavioral factors affecting transparency and accountability.

II. Background and Methodology

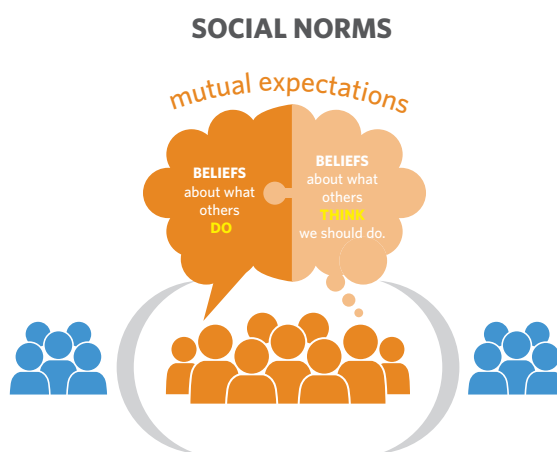
The collaboration aimed to identify practical lessons learned from CARE’s multi-country program, Every Voice Counts (EVC), for use in future programming and for understanding the unique aspects of working on social norms change within government institutions. The EVC program, financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, combined work with civil society and communities to create social accountability processes (using CARE’s “community scorecard” tool²) with work with local authorities in FCAS to stimulate their transparency and accountability.³ The aim was to increase the responsiveness of local authorities to the needs of women and youth and to citizen demands for accountability. THA worked with CARE to provide capacity-strengthening for public authorities on inclusive governance.

The conclusions are based on review and reflection on CARE/THA’s experience, analyzed in light of the evidence base related to social norms change, including the Fletcher School’s previous research on social norms and corruption in Uganda and the Central African Republic.⁴

III. What Are Social Norms?

Social norms are “the mutual expectations about the right way to behave” within a group.”⁵

They are held in place by positive reinforcement for complying with the informal rule and negative sanctions for breaking it. Social norms dictate or drive behaviors but are not the same as the behavior itself. They also differ from attitudes and values, which are individually held and derived, not dependent on what others think or do.



2 See CARE Nederland. 2013. “The Community Score Card Toolkit.” https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/FP-2013-CARE_CommunityScore-CardToolkit.pdf.

3 EVC defines *transparency* as the extent information and/or data linked to the decisions of government institutions is open and easily accessible, including those pertaining to laws, budgets and expenses, planning and prioritisation. It defines *accountability* as the obligation to reveal, explain and justify one’s actions in a relevant, timely and accessible manner, and accept the possibility of sanctions for failure to fulfill one’s duties.

4 Data collection involved 21 discussions with CARE and THA staff in Burundi, Rwanda, Sudan, the Netherlands and the UK, carried out between June and September 2020, a review of documentation related to the EVC program, and a review of the literature related to social norms in public authorities. In addition, two group reflection sessions with CARE, THA and outside experts were held. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fletcher School team was not able to travel to connect with the full range of people initially identified, including local partners and all discussions with staff were done virtually. As EVC was not specifically a social norms change program, there was little systematic data collection in the monitoring and evaluation process on social norms change related to transparency and accountability. Consequently, the conclusion in this brief are based as much on what was not found as on what was found.

5 Scharbatke-Church, Cheyanne and Diana Chigas. 2019. *Understanding social norms: A reference guide for policy and practice*. Medford, MA: Leir Institute, Fletcher School, Tufts University. p. 25.

For programming it is helpful to break social norms into their component parts:

- **The 'informal rule,' composed of:**
 - Descriptive norm: what we see or believe other people in our group do/what is typical
 - Injunctive norm: what we think others in our group expect us to do/what is approved of
- **Reference Group:** people who identify with or are important to each other and who hold mutual expectations of each other.
- **Reward/Punishment:** the positive rewards (e.g. approval or promotions) or negative punishments (e.g. gossip or distrust) enacted by the group in response to an individual's behavior. These are usually social and reputational.



Identifying a social norm: an example

To determine if the behavior is driven by a social norm, we look to see if the three elements are present. For example, consider a typical pattern of behavior that is seen in fragile (as well as not so fragile) contexts: that local authorities are expected by their extended families to provide preferential treatment to their own.

Typical: a local authority may observe that all of their peers in local government are prioritizing their family members for services and jobs.

Appropriate/expected: they may also perceive, and receive messages from their family, that when a family member is in a position of public authority, it is expected that they should help their family.

Sanction: The local authority may fear they will be punished by their family if they do not help; the family will first talk to them and explain that they helped get them this position, and if the individual continues to refuse, they will go to the ministry and lobby for them to be fired. When they help, they get positive reinforcement from appreciation and assurances that their family will help them when they need it.

Social norms matter tremendously to the choices an individual makes about how to behave in certain situations because people want to belong and to preserve their status and reputation. The importance of belonging can override contrary attitudes, morals, and even the prospect of legal penalties, particularly in fragile states where uncertainty and insecurity prevail and one's social connections are key to survival.

IV. Lessons Learned: Why do Social Norms Matter for Accountability and Transparency?

Social norms are frequently an obstacle to transparent and accountable behavior. Technical assistance and capacity-building to government institutions can help enhance awareness and capacity for integrity and responsiveness and reduce incentives and enablers of unaccountable behavior. Similarly, working with communities to support building awareness, capacity, and solidarity to monitor local service delivery and effectively advocate for inclusion and accountability (as EVC did) can influence local authorities' practices. Yet if social norms are influencing local authorities' behavior and are not addressed as part of these strategies, any progress that may be achieved may not be sustained; the social norms can act as a 'brake' to sustainable change.

Local authorities may be subject to pressure both from their communities and from within their institutions to sustain non-transparent and unaccountable governance practices:

- As community members, authorities are subject to the social norms of their group (family, clan, community, etcetera) — such as norms regarding helping family members or serving family members first or exclusively, or that women should not raise their voices when they face injustice.
- As government officials, they are influenced by the informal pressures (professional or institutional norms) within their workplace — both from their superiors/those with power and from their peers. For example: “serve one’s superior (or political party leader), even if it is out of bounds or illegal”; “avoid making peers look bad”.⁶

In many cases, the social norms from these multiple groups converge to reinforce the same behavior, making it difficult to change. The pressure to comply — and the resulting fear amongst authorities — can be very strong and even override any formal legal or policy mandate or personal preference or desire. Local authorities cannot be expected to change if these social norms reinforcing unaccountable and non-transparent practices are not addressed, as the consequences for breaching them can be severe, even livelihood- and life-threatening.

V. How can One Determine Whether a Social Norm is Influencing Local Authorities' Behavior?

Diagnosing whether a social norm is driving the behavior in question is a critical first step to developing effective programming. Not all common behavior is driven by social norms. If not, then other strategies (changing attitudes, providing incentives, changing perceptions, building knowledge or skills, etcetera) may be more appropriate.

A helpful way to assess whether a social norm may be driving local authorities' behavior is to analyze the reasons behind their behavior choices. Table 1 below explains typical reasons and implications for programming:

⁶ See Scharbatke-Church, C., Teddy Atim, and Diana Chigas. 2020. “Understanding the Underlying Values, Norms and Behaviors Constraining the Implementation of Administrative Sanction in the Ugandan Public Service.” Final Report to SUGAR. Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy Program. <https://www.corruptionjusticeandlegitimacy.org/items/understanding-the-underlying-values%2C-norms-and-behaviors-constraining-the-implementation-of-administrative-sanction-in-the-ugandan-public-service>.

Reason for behaviour	Is it a social norm?	Explanation and Implications for Programming
'This is how everyone else does it'	Maybe, in part	It may be part of a social norm if people are engaging in the behaviour because they are following what they see everyone else is doing. Changing their perception that everyone in their group behaves that way may induce them to change behavior.
'If I don't, people would socially ostracize me' 'My friends/clan/networks will think I'm clever—I will be praised' 'There will be professional consequences if I don't behave this way'	Likely	Rewards and punishments are a key indicator that a social norm is at play. Social norms may exist even if the negative consequences for deviating are not totally visible. If this is the case, try to understand the 'informal rule' or expectation that people are concerned about deviating from, as well as whose 'rule' or view that is.
'This works; it meets my needs'	No	There is no social norm. People are not engaging in the behavior because others are doing the same. Rather, the behavior has become common because it meets many people's individual needs.
'People in my situation feel this is the right thing to do'	Maybe	If the behavior reflects commonly held values, attitudes, and beliefs about local authorities' role, then no social norm is at play. But if a belief that others in the same situation think this is right is driving behavior, then it may be a social norm. If others in the same situation do not actually want to behave this way, there may be an opportunity to change the norm by disseminating information about what authorities' actual beliefs are.
'I don't know how to do things differently'	No	This is not a social norm — capacity-strengthening and knowledge may help in this situation.

VI. Addressing Social Norms: 'The Devil Is In The Details.'

If social norms are driving local authorities' behavior, then it is important to address them as part of a behavior change strategy. If not, one might still want to **create a new social norm**, if possible, to reinforce and sustain any behavior change over time, after the intervention has ended.

The steps for changing and creating a social norm are similar, involving:

- Group deliberation about transparency and accountability, its costs, benefits, and functions, in order to change attitudes/beliefs about the practice and create openness to change. The **group** dimension is important to affect people's perceptions of what **others** think and do—and targeting the social norm.
- Group consensus and public commitment to behave differently: coming to agreement to abandon the old social norm and/or adopt a new behavior, with processes for mutual accountability (rewards/punishments);

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- Diffusion/dissemination of new behavior through media, strategic communications and publicly visible actions that change perceptions of what is typical and expected behavior.

If a social norm is driving harmful behavior, then a strategy will need to focus more on weakening the existing norm by people demonstrating that they can behave differently without suffering consequences. Trendsetters, ‘first movers’ in transgressing social norms, can play a key role in weakening existing social norms and creating perceptions that different behaviors are possible.⁷

Social norms creation and change uses many of the same tools and tactics as other behavior change approaches: role models, dialogue and reflection, media campaigns, social media, advocacy, training, and capacity-building, among many others. However, **nuances matter**; whether they are effective in promoting change or establishing new social norms depends on how they are tailored to the different components of a norm.



Nuancing approaches to deal with social norms: an example

A media campaign aiming to persuade clan elders to support women for political positions can try to change both attitudes and social norms. Messaging that women are capable and can and should contribute to governance promoted change in elders’ attitudes and beliefs about women’s roles and capabilities. A social norms-focused campaign would target elders’ perceptions of what other elders do and think is appropriate with messages suggesting that their peers increasingly believe it is appropriate for women to hold political office—for example, by depicting respected clan elders interacting with women, publicizing appointments of women by elders, etc.

If one can state the informal rule in the following format, then one can be confident that the elements of a social norm have been identified:

“[X people] are expected by [Q people] to do [this specific behaviour related to poor accountability]; and if they do not, [Y negative sanction or R positive sanction] will occur.”

For example: “[Local-level authorities] are expected by [their peers and the men in their community] to [communicate with men and engage men in decision making in local governance]. If they do not, [they will be considered weak and incompetent by their peers and community and will not progress in their work].”

Three questions can help practitioners focus and target program design to ensure it is addressing social norms:

⁷ See, e.g., Bicchieri, Cristina 2017. *Norms in the Wild*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Ch. 5. Bicchieri also explains the concept of ‘trendsetters’ in a 2020 interview with Alive and Thrive: <https://www.aliveandthrive.org/inspire/how-trendsetters-and-soap-operas-can-help-us-change-child-feeding-behaviors/>.

1. Does the program address the mutual expectations underpinning social norms?

Local authorities' perceptions and mindsets about local governance affect their behavior. Mindsets about what is important and appropriate about local governance are shaped by many factors: attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions — and social norms. Effective social norms programming unpacks these different elements of mindset and specifically targets mutual expectations. This can be difficult. In some instances (e.g. for gender norms) attitudes and beliefs reflect deeper cultural values and ideologies and align with the expectations; in others, authorities may believe in transparency and accountability but may not be able to act on those beliefs because of social norms. In an example from EVC, the proverb, “a hen cannot crow when a rooster is present” may reflect cultural and social values (internalized by both men and women) about women's role in society. It may also reflect mutual expectations about how women should behave when men are present; if women spoke up, they would be criticized by their male (and possibly female) family members, and the men would likely be ostracized by other men for being weak or allowing such behavior. It is important to understand the reasons for exclusion — attitudes/beliefs or fear of the consequences of breaking a social norm (or both) — in order to design and implement **effective** programming to sustainably enhance women's participation.

2. Identifying the ‘reference group’: Are the right people engaged in the effort to change social norms?

Many social norms are widespread across society – i.e., held by large categories of people (e.g. women, the community, men, society, etc.) — such as norms around helping one's family or returning favors. In these circumstances, identifying more specifically who ‘enforces’ the norm, who influences the particular local authorities' careers or reputation, or whom they look to to decide what is appropriate behavior can help to gain greater specificity about who exactly constitutes the reference group. This enables accurate participant selection in program initiatives.

Questions that help identify these subgroups include:

- What are the specific social and professional networks that the particular local authorities (e.g. of the village, district, etc.) belong to, identify with and/or look to, to decide what is appropriate or expected behavior?
- What people do the local authorities view as influential or similar to them? Influential or widely known people who are seen as reflective of the group can effectively signal that a norm might be changing.
- Who ‘enforces’, polices, or imposes consequences on the local authorities if they deviate? It is not always the case that those who enforce the norms are different from those expected to comply (as is the case with gender norms); the authorities and their peers, family, or community may all expect each other to comply and all check on each other. For example, in Burundi, local authorities are expected to follow the directives of the political party over the desires or needs of their constituency; local authorities who deviate may be punished by party officials or by their peers in the local government.

These questions help identify who needs to be engaged to change specific local authorities' perceptions about social norms. This may require work at several levels of government and engagement of different people across different regions to ensure the incentives and space for behavior change exist.

3. Why are local authorities complying with the social norms?⁸

A key element of a social norm is the consequences local authorities believe they will suffer if they do not comply with the norm (or positive benefits if they comply). It is thus important to understand their motivations for complying with the norm and address or mitigate them. The checklist below of common reasons may help in the reflection:

Reasons for complying with norm	
Socialization and internalization	Norms are internalized and self-enforced without question; people experience shame, embarrassment, discomfort if they do not comply.
Enforcement or pressure from powerholders	People fear negative repercussions from people in power (e.g. social, professional) if they do not comply.
Social rewards and sanctions from peers/the group	People fear negative social or professional consequences (e.g. disapproval, ostracism, lack of advancement) for noncompliance, or expect and value positive rewards (e.g. social approval, social or professional recognition and status) for following the norm.
Lack of capacity to challenge the norm	People may not have the knowledge or attitudes to question the norm; or they may not want to comply, but do not have a sense of self-efficacy or confidence, support systems/allies, power, or resources to challenge the norm effectively.
The norm supports group identity	People want to demonstrate membership in a particular group and fear their identity will be undermined if they do not follow it.
The norm serves a function	Social norms that promote 'negative' behaviors still serve a purpose for the group. If the norm is needed to achieve a shared goal, people may follow the norm even if they do not agree with the specifics.

VII. Conclusion and Continuing Questions

Social norms change should rarely, if ever, be pursued divorced from efforts to address other factors related to transparency and accountability: institutional, political, power/empowerment, economic, legal, or attitudinal and psychological. They should be embedded in larger, multi-faceted strategies to improve integrity and governance and combat corrupt behaviors. At the same time, our collaborative learning effort confirmed that addressing social norms amongst local authorities “may well be a key piece in transforming some of the more intractable behaviors” of public authorities — “especially those that are kept in place by gender norms.”⁹ Social norms

8 This section draws extensively on: Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change. 2019. *Social Norms and AYSRH: Building a Bridge from Theory to Program Design*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. https://www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/lc_theory_to_practice_bridge_08262019_final_eng.pdf.

9 Stefanik, Leigh and Theresa Hwang. 2017. “Applying Theory to Practice: CARE’s Journey Piloting Social Norms Measures for Gender Programming.” Atlanta, GA: CARE USA. https://prevention-collaborative.org/knowledge_hub/applying-theory-to-practice-cares-journey-piloting-social-norms-measures-for-gender-programming/.

may be the ‘invisible hand’ that guides local authorities’ choices regarding transparency and accountability.

If social norms are at play, facilitating behavior change and sustaining it require changing the expectations at the heart of social norms and the real fears local authorities feel about deviating from them. And if social norms are not driving untransparent and unaccountable local government behavior, creating **new** social norms can be part of a change strategy to reinforce and sustain new behaviors over time, after an intervention has ended. This requires gaining a deep understanding of the nuances of social norms, as well as of local practices, attitudes, perceptions, and social networks that influence behavior.

Our collaboration surfaced a number of important questions that remain unaddressed:

- Is it possible to promote inclusive governance — and transparency and accountability as a component of inclusive governance — without tackling the issue of corruption and social norms that sustain corrupt practices — from bribery to patronage to clientelism and ‘sextortion?’
- Is sufficient attention being given to building these positive norms? Much attention has been given to countering negative norms. But if social norms are not driving untransparent and unaccountable local government behavior, and even if destructive social norms are dislodged, creating new social norms can be part of a change strategy to reinforce and sustain new behaviors over time, after an intervention has ended. This would require work to establish mutual expectations over and above the promotion of formal rules, positive attitudes, mindsets and behaviors about governance.
- The EVC program aimed to promote more inclusive governance by empowering local communities — especially women and youth — to demand more accountability and responsiveness from public authorities on decisions that affect their lives. We have seen that gender norms affect local authorities’ behavior in this context in relation to inclusion of and responsiveness to women’s voices, needs and issues. In other research we have also seen that social norms related to corruption are gendered. Different behavior is expected of women and men as public servants; expectations regarding corrupt behavior by women and men are different; and punishments for transgressing norms can be more severe for women than for men. It will be important to analyze and address in much greater depth the gendered dimensions of social norms affecting transparency, accountability, and service provision.

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The Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy Program (CJL) is a re-search-to-practice initiative committed to improving the effectiveness of anti-corruption programming in contexts of endemic corruption housed under the Henry J. Leir Institute at the Fletcher School, Tufts University. CJL's early work in Uganda, Central African Republic, and Democratic Republic of Congo developed and tested an alternative analytic method, analyzing corruption as a dynamic, adaptive system, that reflects the full range of influential factors, from political dynamics to social norms.

One of CJL's current priorities is the nexus of social norms change and corruption. CJL's comprehensive exploration of the role social norms play in endemic corruption in fragile states can be found in 'Understanding Social Norms: A Reference Guide for Policy and Practice'. CJL's work advances in this work, plus that of others, can be found on the Corruption in Fragile States Blog hosted by CJL. The blog challenges thinking about established practices in anti-corruption programming in fragile and conflict-affected states with a combination of in-house and guest posts.

AUTHOR BIOS

Diana Chigas is the Senior International Officer and Associate Provost at Tufts University and a Professor of the Practice of International Negotiation and Conflict Resolution at the Fletcher School. She has worked with governmental and non-governmental organizations on systemic conflict analysis, and strategic planning, reflection and evaluation to improve the impact of peace programming. She is the Co-Director of the Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy Program at the Fletcher School which works to improve the effectiveness of anticorruption programming in contexts of endemic corruption.

Freddy Sahinguvu is a governance and accountability expert/trainer. He has extensive experience in governance/accountability issues in Africa: Burundi, Benin, Ethiopia, Mali, South Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe. At The Hague Academy, he is a senior program manager and the account manager for Sub-Sahara Africa.



CARE Nederland is the Dutch member of CARE, an international development confederation operating in 100 countries. CARE started with American food-aid to Europe after World War II. For 75 years, CARE has offered assistance to those most in need of help.

CARE works around the globe to save lives, defeat poverty, and achieve social justice. CARE helps people in some of the world's most challenging places to establish a better existence. CARE fights poverty by battling inequality. This is done by providing emergency assistance, facilitating women's entrepreneurship and by stimulating participation in decision-making processes. CARE also helps to improve communities' resilience to the effects of climate change and natural disasters. CARE distinguishes itself by using a tailored approach: CARE consults closely with local partners, governments, and communities to determine what is needed and what works. Because only by working together can we achieve sustainable results.

Currently he is managing a five-year program on gender sensitive inclusive governance focusing on meaningful inclusion of vulnerable women and youth in governance processes. The program is implemented in six countries: Afghanistan, Burundi, Pakistan, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan.

Cheyenne Scharbatke-Church is the Co-Director of the Corruption, Justice and Legitimacy Program at the Fletcher School which works to improve the effectiveness of anti-corruption programming in contexts of endemic corruption. She is the Founding Principal at Besa: Catalyzing Strategic Change, a social enterprise committed to catalyzing significant change on strategic issues in places experiencing conflict. She has significant experience working on issues related to accountability and learning across the Balkans and West and East Africa. As a Professor of Practice at Fletcher, she teaches on program design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

The Hague Academy for
local governance

The Hague Academy for Local Governance (THA) has been established by the international Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG International) and the municipality of The Hague with the aim to strengthen local governance worldwide. By developing and implementing practice-oriented training courses for professionals across the globe, THA responds to the growing need for practical knowledge in the field of local governance. In the past years, THA has built an excellent reputation in the international development community as leading center for training and knowledge exchange. THA is dedicated to delivering sustainable learning results and therefore facilitates a continuous, active exchange of knowledge and experience.

THA offers open subscription training courses and training programs that cover all dimensions of local governance, multi-level governance and public service delivery. In addition to THA's open subscription courses, THA develops tailor-made programs for various organizations that work on strengthening local government capacity.

Katie Whipkey is a policy researcher specializing in mixed methods research on topics including inclusive governance, social norms, women's rights, gender-based violence, and women's economic empowerment. For the past two years, Katie has been working with CARE Nederland on the Every Voice Counts program to enhance inclusive and effective governance processes in some of the most fragile settings in the world including Afghanistan, Burundi, Pakistan, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan. She supports capacity strengthening in using research and data to learn and change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of target stakeholders (including government officials, civil society, amongst others).



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