

Tech! What is it good for?

The role of technology in
social accountability initiatives
that focus on youth

1. Introduction

Integrity Action works with community monitors who "review" the quality of essential services, report problems publicly using a mobile app called DevelopmentCheck (DevCheck) and provide information to duty bearers who can solve the problems found.

This approach has been used in The Development Alternative programme. The initiative focused on young people in Uganda and Madagascar as agents of change; they acted as community monitors, reporting on livelihoods and other projects, and engaging with key power holders to demand that projects are delivered as promised. The programme aimed at providing a new paradigm that guides the way development is carried out, and was implemented by a consortium of organisations¹ using a

¹ The programme was led by Restless Development. The partner organisations were Accountable Now, DOT Lebanon, Integrity Action, INTRAC, War Child and Y Care International. For more information, please visit [The Development Alternative's website](#).

combination of approaches to open community feedback, youth leadership and accountability. It was funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Aid Connect Civil Society Effectiveness stream, between 2019 and 2021.

Within Integrity Action's monitoring process, community monitors go through a journey consisting of the following steps:

1. engaging relevant stakeholders
2. finding out what is promised by accessing relevant information on the service
3. conducting regular monitoring visits to the service
4. gathering data on the quality of the service
5. working with stakeholders to find solutions to the problems identified
6. organising campaigns if problems cannot be resolved easily
7. keeping the community informed about the process, problems found and solutions achieved

Integrity Action has commissioned this paper to explore the most positive aspects of using technology, while appreciating its challenges and potential drawbacks, both within The Development Alternative programme and other initiatives which focus on youth as agents of change implemented by Integrity Action and partners. The specific research questions are:

- How can technology support empowerment and accountability, particularly with regard to young people?
- How has the mobile app DevCheck supported the different parts of the process within Integrity Action's recent initiatives and partnerships, and how has technology in general supported other, similar, social accountability processes?

2. Background: DevCheck and the use of technology in social accountability

Despite having a specific technological tool set for the purpose, Integrity Action's initiatives do not focus only on technology, as it is recognised that community monitoring can also be effective offline, and that even with digital tools, a range of other activities and processes need to take place to bring about greater empowerment and accountability. Integrity Action's primary digital tool for community monitoring is called DevCheck. The purpose of offering this tool is to add value through some specific advantages of technology within social accountability processes, including the ability to capture evidence, display it in real-time, and find patterns in the data.

DevCheck was initially created in 2014 and financed through a Google Grant. It was set up as an "online data collection and reporting platform to enable partners and community monitors to share their findings with government, contractors, local leaders, the media and development agencies"². In addition to providing the app as a data gathering mechanism, Integrity Action also provides data verification and "works with country partners to engage local, national and international authorities to ensure that the identified problems are resolved to the community's satisfaction".

As the app started to be used, Integrity Action invested strongly in reviewing the information that had been collected and in understanding the key challenges. These reviews led to various changes and upgrades to the tool, including a reduction of open-ended qualitative questions, the development of customisable questions, the translation of collection formats into local languages, and the ability to use the app offline. The app continues to be updated to this day, particularly in relation to ensuring that information can be aggregated easily and converted into customisable visual reports which can be then shared with duty bearers and modified according to their requests. Integrity Action is now looking into ways to make the app more sustainable and scalable, with a view to having partners using technology without Integrity Action's heavy involvement.

² Integrity Action, Global Impact Challenge proposal, 2014.

Beyond Integrity Action, many other efforts have been made to use technology as a supporting tool for community monitoring and accountability processes. This is the case in *Making All Voices Count (MAVC)*, a programme “implemented between 2013 and 2017 which sought to support the development and spread of ‘innovative solutions’ – tools and platforms based on mobile phone and web technologies (‘tech’) – as well as some non-technological approaches”³. From its inception in June 2013 until its end in November 2017, Making All Voices Count issued 178 grants, including 72 innovation projects and 7 tech hubs. It financed programmes in Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Tanzania, The Philippines, and Uganda.

The data collected and specific support provided to carry out research on products in this arena allowed the programme to consolidate research-based evidence on how technologies contribute to accountable governance change processes, and to practice-based learning on how to support innovation in this field. Findings were consolidated in a meta-study covering a wide array of research products within the programme and published by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The “Appropriating technology for accountability: messages from Making All Voices Count” research found merits in the use of technology, but also “questioned the tech optimism of the era in which the programme was conceived”⁴. In particular, it highlighted the importance of many other contextual aspects that could make technological approaches more or less successful.

As a result of the much wider information available in this and other meta-studies, Integrity Action’s paper does not aim to offer the same level of analysis as the IDS report, but rather to use key findings from The Development Alternative programme in Madagascar and Uganda, as well as from other Integrity Action initiatives in Armenia, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal and Tanzania, to validate it and to provide additional insights and recommendations.

In the following sections we will explore evidence of the possible contributions of technology to the social accountability process, as well as its limitations.

³ McGee, Edwards, Anderson, Hudson and Feruglio. “Appropriating technology for accountability: messages from Making All Voices Count”. IDS, January 2018. Pg. 5.

⁴ Idem, pg. 25.

3. Technology's key contributions to social accountability and DevCheck's specific added value

Among its summary points, the Making All Voices Count report highlighted four main contributions of technology to social accountability and community monitoring. These were:

- a. improving services where the problem is a lack of planning data or user feedback,
- b. empowering citizens and strengthening their agency for engagement,
- c. creating new spaces for engagement between community and state,
- d. supporting social mobilisation and collective action by connecting citizens.

This paper will now review evidence of these contributions throughout different Integrity Action's initiatives and, if found, highlight new contributions that might not have been documented yet.

a. Improving services where the problem is a lack of planning data or user feedback

Given the way in which Integrity Action operates, this the main area where DevCheck has added value within the organisation's social accountability initiatives. Integrity Action works with partner organisations which are knowledgeable about the local context to make sure the approach is adapted properly. In all the initiatives that were part of this review, the partner organisations involved already had longstanding experience in community monitoring and/or social accountability processes. Six of the eight partners interviewed had also been working with technological tools before, and were part of advocacy networks with local governments.

All of them also reported that they saw DevCheck as a mechanism to support data collection and analysis, rather than a tool covering the whole social accountability process. Specifically, the main cited benefits of the tool as a data collection mechanism included:

- It simplifies the process of data collection/reporting, helps save time, and avoids information getting lost.
- It allows for easier and faster information sharing, particularly in remote areas.
- It permits easier data consolidation and analysis by creating a database of information which is comparable and measurable.
- It improves historical documentation and avoids duplication, by consolidating information that could be easily available for future community monitors.
- It increases the legitimacy of the monitoring process, by allowing community monitors to use a tool that is seen as professional and a standardised methodology which has been created by experts.

According to the community monitors and project coordinators interviewed, the app allows the user to identify common issues in the planning and implementation process of development projects, investigate other projects to find potential solutions, and identify trends that can be shown to the community and duty bearers for planning purposes. To do this, DevCheck provides information across three key indicators, which are monitored and aggregated across programmes and locations: the Fix Rate, community reviews and access to information.

One of the biggest and most overarching indicators of success of a project using DevCheck is the **Fix Rate**, or the proportion of problems identified that have been addressed or solved to the satisfaction of the community and monitors⁵. According to the information provided by DevCheck at the time of this paper, US \$1,026,838,379 worth of projects have been monitored with DevCheck since 2013, with a 63% Fix Rate achieved. The Fix Rate varies across problem categories, with higher rates being

⁵ It is expressed as a percentage and is calculated: (no. of problems solved/no. of problems identified) x 100.

achieved for problems such as low quality of materials, insufficient resources, lack of accessibility or inclusion, and safety issues.

Many examples of the problems identified and solved were provided during the interviews. For example, young monitors in The Development Alternative programme in Uganda were able to identify at least five instances in which projects had not considered the needs of people with disabilities. Also, thanks to the pictures taken through DevCheck by the young volunteers, there was sufficient photographic evidence to reduce any potential dispute about the findings, and thus problems were resolved within 3 to 5 months and more awareness about this topic was created. According to the information available on DevCheck, at least 72% of accessibility issues were resolved. More on the usefulness of the photographic evidence is provided in the subsequent sections.

In Armenia, community monitors identified safety issues during the construction of local schools. The monitors initially reported these issues to local authorities and supervisors, who did not listen; however, thanks to the ability of the app to take pictures to document the issues found, they were able to change the behavioural practices of the builders, getting pillars moved or reinforced and even dismantling illegal buildings that had the potential to affect the construction being monitored. According to the community monitors and project coordinators, DevCheck provided a tool that not only allowed them to document areas of greater importance but also to record visual evidence (more on this in the final part of this section).

Besides the Fix Rate, DevCheck allows the measurement of two other types of indicator. Through the **Community Reviews**, the local community is surveyed and can comment on their awareness of the project/service, their satisfaction with the project/service and whether the project/service was needed by the community. **Access to information** is also examined. This indicator reflects how easy it was for the monitors to access key information, such as contracts or budgets related to the project/service, and to understand exactly what has been promised.

Integrity Action's research and evaluations have also identified other technological tools used by duty bearers/service providers which are specifically intended at providing feedback and planning data for service delivery. In Kenya, for example, Integrity Action's VOICE initiative evaluation highlighted the growing importance of

tech tools using Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) codes⁶, which at the moment are being used to provide financial services and collect some monitoring data but have the potential to be expanded to support the monitoring of service delivery.

Integrity Action's partners in Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania also reported previous experience using Akvo Real Simple Reporting System FLOW, KoBo Toolbox and Open Data Kit (ODK)⁷ as standardised monitoring systems for organisations in the development field. These are much closer to DevCheck in terms of goals and method of data collection and can be used for free but with some limitations in terms of customisation, data analysis, and ability to compare results with other community engagement mechanism or graphic reports. All these tools have in common the inability to connect directly with duty bearers, although there is the potential for these tools to be directly used by duty bearers if the right incentives to do so exist.

Finally, interviews with accountability experts in Kenya highlighted the importance of social media tools such as WhatsApp, Facebook and even Twitter, which some duty bearers/elected officials are using to obtain direct feedback from communities and share information for planning purposes. More on this in the subsequent sections.

b. Creating new spaces for engagement between community and state

DevCheck is not intended as a direct mechanism to connect citizens with duty bearers. Instead, it focuses on data collection and analysis, and it is a tool for local CSOs and community representatives to be more effective in their engagement with duty bearers. In all the projects surveyed, the tool was seen as a reporting platform used to strengthen already existing community accountability and advocacy processes, and thus is mainly useful for project/monitoring coordinators, and in more

⁶ USSD (Unstructured Supplementary Service Data) is a Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) protocol that is used to send text messages. USSD is similar to Short Message Service (SMS) and uses codes made up of the characters that are available on a mobile phone. It can be used for Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) browsing, mobile money services, prepaid call-back services, menu-based information services and location-based content services. Unlike an SMS message, during a USSD session, a USSD message creates a real-time connection. This means USSD enables two-way communication of information and allows for queries and answers to be solved almost instantaneously.

⁷ Akvo FLOW is a system to collect, manage, analyse and display geographically referenced monitoring and evaluation data working on mobile phones, KoBo Toolbox is a suite of tools for field data collection for use in challenging environments, it is free and open source. ODK is an open-source software for collecting, managing, and using data in resource-constrained environments. It also allows for offline data collection with mobile devices in remote areas.

recent cases its added value is enabling quick data analysis and visualisations. Engagement with the communities and duty bearers is done directly by the CSOs and community monitors (without the use of DevCheck), and is mainly dependent on their ability to access, communicate with and influence key relevant stakeholders. Some examples of these processes are:

- Joint Working Groups, which regularly bring together community representatives, monitors and duty bearers to analyse issues being reported on DevCheck, potential solutions and the progress in solving them. These can be integrated within existing platforms, like community meetings, or Project Management Committee meetings (Kenya).
- Inter-monitor meetings, which happen at regular intervals throughout the initiatives, are a space through which monitors from different communities can come together in person and learn from each other.

In Tanzania and Uganda these platforms were highlighted as key enablers of success. Having a specific structure in place to oversee monitoring, discuss fixes and hold implementers to account worked well in most communities, as evidenced by the high Fix Rate achieved and growing ownership of the process by community monitors. Using DevCheck within these community-owned mechanisms increased the monitors' confidence in their role, allowed them to communicate findings in a more succinct and technical manner, and thus increased their ability to convince the community and duty bearers and create change.

For example, monitors in Tanzania mentioned that “inter-monitor meetings cemented what they had learned during initial training sessions, provided insights into what actions were helping to fix issues identified and motivated them to take their role as agents of change for their communities seriously”⁸. Community monitors reported using DevCheck to exchange notes with others monitors, improve their data collection techniques and understand how others were achieving changes in their communities. The smartphones provided by the initiative also helped them to get information about future meetings and discuss issues before and after those meetings.

⁸ Project Completion Report, Social Accountability through Youth (SAY) in Tanzania, August 2020, page 5.

Community meetings also helped to close the feedback loop and acted as a key platform through which negative perceptions around the capacity of community monitors could be dispelled. They were convened to specifically discuss issues and fixes reported through the app and provided a space where community members could ask questions, share their thoughts, and gather information on social accountability and decision-making in their village. In some cases, social media apps were used to convene the meetings, and even though not all community members had access to a smartphone, they would get the information through the young people in their family⁹.

These working groups or community forums proved to be key opportunities for the young volunteers to engage with their communities in a way they had not done previously, presenting themselves as change-makers. DevCheck was there to provide well documented data which they could use both in various meetings to both present findings, share evidence to demonstrate the findings and plan solutions. Through the combination of these factors, the wider community was able to see first-hand how young people were taking on leadership roles, and so the meetings were a key step towards more positive feeling being created around youth capabilities. Also, during the height of the COVID pandemic, with restrictions in place, some of the Joint Working Group and inter-monitor meetings were held using social media tools.

Yet, this is an area in which more could be done by Integrity Action. For example, the evaluators of the VOICE initiative in Kenya mentioned examples in which duty bearers are integrating existing technology as a tool of accountability, and particularly the type of technology that is more accessible in rural areas. As an example, a Kenyan chief in a remote area is using Twitter¹⁰ to inform the local community about the outcomes of barazas (community meetings) twice a month, or to report information on service delivery, including reports about robberies. Local residents receive tweets through a free text messaging service, which makes the information easily available and reduces the risk of not reaching vulnerable communities. These mechanisms follow the logic of MPESA, a digital money transfer service which allows users of

⁹ FGD Dodoma communities, September 2019.

¹⁰ CNN, Kenyan chief foils robbery via Twitter, highlights reach of social media, February 18, 2012, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/18/world/africa/kenya-tweeting-chief/index.html> Despite this, since September 2019, Twitter shut down the "Twitter via SMS" function for most of the world to protect users from potential security threats. <https://twitter.com/twittersupport/status/1254822372353257473>

both smartphones and regular phones to use the service either online or through SMS. The potential for these existing free services is something that could be explored more by Integrity Action as a way to customise DevCheck to allow a more effective connection between citizens and duty bearers.

c. Empowering citizens and strengthening their agency for engagement

Eighty-six percent of monitors using DevCheck are young people between 18 and 34 years. This is an intentional measure put in place by Integrity Action which is intended at empowering youth, strengthening their agency for engagement, and giving them spaces to exercise leadership. Furthermore, the use of technological tools such as DevCheck attracts the attention of young people, who tend to be much more technological savvy and/or interested in using tech. For example, in Madagascar, volunteers reported enjoying using DevCheck to input data, found learning how to use DevCheck and a smartphone exciting, and saw the ability to use the app as an added value for their lives. In this sense, a technological tool can both incentivise young people to engage in public political spaces, as well as give them the opportunity to showcase their strengths and abilities.

This was observed in many of the initiatives supported by DevCheck. For example, in Tanzania, an impact evaluation carried out in late 2020 “saw a significant shift in the perceptions of young people held by stakeholders including community members, those in leadership positions and among youth themselves. At the start of the intervention the formative research conducted indicated that the general feeling was that young people were lazy, disinterested in issues faced by their communities and did not care to get involved in decision-making processes. Conversely, young people themselves said that they did want to participate in community matters but lacked opportunity and direction”¹¹.

By the end of the initiative, many of the individuals who provided feedback reported that because of young people’s involvement in the project, and particularly their ability to consolidate evidence on the key issues for the community and offer possible solutions, they saw young people as productive members of society with important contributions to make in community decisions. The monitors themselves said they felt they had become role models and praised the initiative and DevCheck for giving them the chance to get their voices heard. This was supported also by quantitative

¹¹ Social Accountability through Youth (SAY) in Tanzania Project Completion Narrative Report. July 2021. Pg. 5.

data¹², with 99% of young people involved in the project in Tanzania as Community Monitors, Youth Cluster Coordinators or Campaign Coordinators reporting feeling more confident to take the lead on taking action in their community. 96% felt more confident to speak up about issues that affect them and 95% felt that the project allowed young people to be seen more positively in their community.

Similar observations were given by the young community monitors in Uganda and Madagascar. Some of those interviewed mentioned that DevCheck allowed them to provide sufficient evidence of their findings and lent a sense of professionalism to their work. This information was then consolidated, discussed, and then reported to the communities and duty bearers. The fact that information was very well presented and supported by photographic evidence, helped mobilise community leaders “who started visiting the projects and consulting the monitors about what could be done next”¹³. With community support, “the local government also became so interested in the project that it started to visit more often and consolidate community engagement mechanisms to improve upon it”¹⁴. More about these additional benefits will be reviewed at greater length below.

d. Supporting social mobilisation and collective action by connecting citizens

DevCheck was not designed with the idea of catering for collective action in mind; therefore, not much of this potential benefit was observed in programme reports or mentioned by those interviewed. Yet, project coordinators and community monitors in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda mentioned that one of the benefits of the training given on the app was the fact that they were able to meet and connect with other people with similar interests. In this regard, other technological tools were useful, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook. Many partners set up online groups to allow easier communication with and among community monitors. These groups, in some cases, became hubs of sharing learning between the community monitors and eventually led to new relationships between youth leaders.

So far, there is not extensive evidence suggesting that these new connections and the experience are leading to the consolidation of new mechanisms for social

¹² Information from Social Accountability through Youth (SAY) in Tanzania Project Completion Narrative Report. July 2021. Pg. 2.

¹³ Interview with community monitors in Kampala, Uganda. 17 November 2021.

¹⁴ Interview with community monitors in Mombasa, Kenya. 16 November 2021.

mobilisation. This might not be because this is not happening, but rather because it is not being documented within the project. For instance, some examples have been documented with regards to young monitors attaining leadership positions within their communities (to be examined in the next section) or sharing information publicly available in DevCheck with local journalists and radio stations so they can bring different communities together to tackle common problems. More could be done to document what has been done in this area within the Integrity Action initiatives, and as highlighted in the previous section, to connect DevCheck with online and offline tools that allows better information flow and learning among citizens and between citizens and duty bearers.

Are there other potential benefits?

The interviews and reports have also highlighted other potential benefits of technology within the social accountability process. Some of these have been mentioned briefly before and/or are derived from some of the previously described benefits. A brief description of them is provided below.

a. The use of technology can attract young people to participate in political processes

As mentioned in the UNDP guidance document ‘Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle’, “even though people below age 25 constitute more than half the population in many developing countries, young people participate less than older citizens in most formal political processes, such as elections”¹⁵. Also, the “likelihood of their involvement in protests is not significantly different from that of their older counterparts”¹⁶. This “challenges the representativeness of the political system and leads to the disenfranchisement of young citizens. It can also reinforce stereotypes that treat young people as disinterested in political issues, as objects of social policy or as troublemakers”¹⁷.

As mentioned before, young community monitors across Tanzania, Ghana, Uganda, Madagascar and Armenia report that having a technological tool makes it more

¹⁵ UNDP, Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle, February 2013. Pg. 11.

¹⁶ Resnick, Danielle, and Casale, Daniela. The Political Participation of Africa’s Youth: Turnout, Partisanship, And Protest, WIDER Working Paper 2011/056 Helsinki: UNU-WIDER, 2011. Pg. 2.

¹⁷ UNDP, *ibidem*, pg. 12.

interesting, enjoyable or “exciting” for them to join initiatives like The Development Alternative. The reasons for this vary but are mainly centred around:

- the ability to learn a new technology which could be showcased on their CVs or shown to their peers,
- the status that managing a new technology brought within their community and friends,
- the fact that managing new technology helped them improve their digital skills, typing skills, online programming, and
- the fact that being part of a world-wide community of monitors could provide them with leadership opportunities.

Furthermore, school communities involved in school-centred social accountability initiatives appreciated the tool as it allowed “the students to have critical thinking”. The above provides some evidence that the use of technology in youth-led social accountability programmes can become an incentive for them to get involved. This could potentially also increase the role of youth in governance and politics (although by no means can be seen as sufficient).

b. The use of technology can increase legitimacy in the information presented

In Tanzania, Ghana and Uganda, community monitors stated that the use of a smartphone and an app added a level of legitimacy and trust to their actions. Community members perceived them to be more ‘professional’ as a result of them using smartphones to capture data and feedback and therefore felt more willing to participate in the surveys undertaken. The ability to take pictures also ensured that there was sufficient “documentation” of the issues they had observed and thus added even more credibility and legitimacy.

Finally, technology could help guide future interventions and make completed information on previous projects accessible, by enabling the storage of a larger backlog of information which is easily available, easy to use and to classify. Furthermore, having this backlog of information means that potential evidence can be

available in the future to document public responsibility in issues highlighted by the monitors but not solved.

c. Information that is publicly available can be used at any time and can put pressure on duty bearers

In two of the interviews held with partners in Uganda and Ghana, it was mentioned that the fact that DevCheck information was available publicly had unexpected benefits. In Uganda, community monitors reported that even as they were just starting to collect information, the fact that it was available online helped during an unexpected visit by a duty bearer. Despite not having the reports to hand, they were able to use the webpage to show pictures and findings, which led to initial conversations about how some issues could be resolved. In Ghana, partners saw as a key benefit in DevCheck (as opposed to other tools used before), the fact that information was available online and, once shown to duty bearers, it had the potential to create pressure.

This benefit was however only mentioned in a few instances, and more evidence might be needed before any specific benefit or result could be attributed to DevCheck.

4. Technology's potential limitations and risks, and how DevCheck is responding to them

The MAVC's meta-study highlighted several areas in which technology could harm social accountability processes. The report highlighted, for example, that:

- not all voices can be expressed via technologies and deepening digital divides can intensify existing exclusions,
- technologies alone don't foster the trusting relationships needed between governments and citizens, and within each group of actors,
- technologies can't overturn the social norms that underpin many accountability gaps and silence some voices,
- the kinds of democratic deliberation needed to challenge a systemic lack of accountability are rarely well supported by technologies,
- the capacities needed to transform governance relationships are developed offline and in social and political processes, rather than by technologies,
- technologies expand the possibilities for surveillance, repression, and the manufacturing of consent, or
- uncritical attitudes towards new technologies, data and the online risk is narrowing the frame of necessary debates about accountable governance.

In the next sections we will explore how some of the above issues are being tackled by DevCheck and what is still missing.

DevCheck responses to potential limitations and challenges

From Integrity Action's perspective, the best way to respond to the above limitations is to be completely clear from the onset about what DevCheck can and cannot do and ensure that the areas in which the tool is not intended to create change are covered by other mechanisms or risk mitigations. This is particularly true for limitations like the impossibility for an app alone to foster trusting relations between government and citizens, overturning social norms or ensuring democratic deliberation processes. In all their initiatives, Integrity Action and partners agreed with the MAVC's meta-study about the fact that technology cannot create the capacities needed to transform governance relationships, and that specific community and advocacy platforms were needed.

According to Integrity Action's partners, DevCheck is honest about what it can do. It mainly focuses on facilitating data collection during regular monitoring visits to the service, gathering data on the quality of the service, or allowing stakeholders to find solutions to identified problems by comparing them across projects. DevCheck does not focus on areas like direct support in project development, engaging and advocating with relevant stakeholders, and even at the moment keeping the community informed about the process, problems and solutions found. For these areas, Integrity Action relies on experienced national and regional partners, and their good understanding of the context in which they are operating. As mentioned by one of Integrity Action's partners, each project required first an "understanding of the power dynamics in each of the areas of intervention, and then specific tools to support or create the social and political processes that could help to change the dynamics that were undermining community participation". Partners mentioned working on this with Integrity Action from the onset of the project planning process and numerous tools were mentioned, including a light political economy analysis tool or the use of existing projects already working on these areas, and then adding DevCheck as a mechanism to facilitate data collection and analysis.

For example, in Uganda, conversations between the community monitors at the onset of the project suggested that political interests and corruption of development actors prevented effective monitoring. The community monitors were nervous of having to interact with development actors. In discussing the challenges, some volunteers provided suggestions such as more field visits from the partners, more support in

meetings with the duty bearers, more training on effective communication to support them in their interactions, and for volunteers to take a lead in the project selection process, so that projects in which risks were lower could be tackled first, and more difficult projects could be tackled once they had gained more legitimacy, confidence, and experience.

This is where mechanisms such as the Joint Working Groups/Community Meetings and inter-monitor meetings were important. For example, in all the projects monitored by The Development Alternative community monitors, the consortium included a mechanism to regularly ensure communication with and between the community monitors, and between them (or those representing them) and the community. In these meetings, specific ways in which the findings should be communicated to the duty bearers would be discussed, as well as how to advocate for change.

In Kenya, for instance, the Joint Working Groups discussed the best mechanisms of advocacy in order to take the project findings to the members of the Parliament, County Assembly and Village Administrators. Based on previous experience, they agreed to target the Environment and the Justice and Legal Affairs Committees in the County Assemblies and from there take any unsolved issues to specific Parliamentarians who were already champions on social accountability issues. This route helped to resolve many of the pending problems identified and achieve a higher Fix Rate. Specific advocacy plans were also consolidated in all the other programmes reviewed.

Furthermore, project coordinators agreed with the risk that the use of technology could intensify existing exclusions, or expand the possibilities for surveillance, repression and the manufacturing of consent. In this area, once again, appropriate measures were found outside of the remits of DevCheck. In the first place, The Development Alternative initiative was aimed at a particular set of the society, youth. It aimed to “help shift power to communities and young people so that they can hold development actors to account and lead the design of solutions to problems they identify”¹⁸. To effectively respond to this objective, the programme was based on research evidence about the state of youth civil society consolidated at the onset and

¹⁸ The Development Alternative, About us. <https://restlessdevelopment.org/the-development-alternative/>

during the programme¹⁹ and end impact evaluations recognised that women, youth and people with disabilities were adequately included among the community monitors, and that plans for them to be included in wider community groups were supported with varying grades of success.

Finally, regarding the limitation that technologies have in fostering relationships between governments and citizens, and within and between communities, some steps are being planned within more recent projects. In Ghana, for example, duty bearers are being trained alongside community monitors and the possibility of using summaries of key findings through local radio stations is being considered²⁰. For these partners, it is important to understand what will entice duty bearers to use DevCheck. This can allow a more open dialogue about the customisation of the templates used by the app.

As mentioned in the Impact Evaluation of the Visibility Openness and Integrity through Community Engagement (VOICE) initiative in Kenya, DevCheck's openness and accessibility for duty bearers in real time would assist in local government performance tracking and responsiveness. This information, if packaged right, could help local governments to improve future project planning and implementation. It can also be useful to empower CSOs to hold the government accountable and demonstrate the government's capacity²¹.

¹⁹ See: Development Alternative. Towards A Thriving, Credible, And Sustainable Youth Civil Society. April 2019. <https://restlessdevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Development-Alternative-Youth-Civil-Society-Report.pdf>

²⁰ Community radios have also been already used in some of the communities involved in the SAY project in Tanzania. According to the Community Monitors, a summary of the findings is posted in public notice boards and broadcasted on the community radio. The radio has also helped to mobilize community to attend Joint Working Groups.

²¹ Beryl Consult Limited. Evaluation Report: Visibility Openness and Integrity through Community Engagement (VOICE) Programme, June 2021. Pg. 29.

5. How could technology be enhanced to support social accountability processes?

Besides the above, this research also revealed many areas in which DevCheck and other technologies for social accountability could keep progressing in response to the limitations mentioned. These are gathered below:

- a) Connect data collection platforms that can help to communicate key findings.*

DevCheck and other apps focused on data collection and analysis could benefit from connecting to other technological tools that can facilitate the process of calling citizens to action and advocacy with duty bearers. Two tools were mentioned for this purpose. On one side, existing community radios could help transmit key messages and support community mobilisation. On the other, online apps for data collection could be directly connected to USSD and SMS technology to allow key notifications to be shared with monitors or the wider community. Given the importance of USSD technology in Africa and elsewhere, and the fact that it allows community members without a smartphone or mobile data to connect, this gives the possibility for the apps to increase their reach and be more effective for community mobilisation. A move into SMS or USSD technology could also lower the costs of data collection, as the cost of mobile data was a significant issue for many of the community monitors and one that will effectively exclude them from continuing to use these kinds of apps once project support is no longer available. Finally, lower costs could also make these tools more accessible to duty bearers and the wider community.

The above does not mean that other platforms could not be also used. As mentioned before, Facebook Groups, WhatsApp or Signal could still be used to establish effective channels of communication between the platform and the community or duty bearers. The key added value in this recommendation is for DevCheck to allow this as a direct functionality of the app, instead of requiring community monitors or programme teams to do it by themselves.

b) Make DevCheck an open-source platform but still offer customisation and support at minimum costs

The most important recommendation for DevCheck pertains to its sustainability. As the app is a proprietary piece of software, once an initiative ends, there are concerns about who will take the lead on collecting, analysing, and visualising data, and solving technical issues. In this sense, project reports and evaluations, as well as interviews with partners, recommended considering putting in place a pathway to facilitate the transition from DevCheck to open-source software, but in a way that would allow partners to customise the tool to local needs and institutions.

One of the key added values of DevCheck in comparison to other platforms is that Integrity Action provides partners with extra support in the use of data. The project coordinators interviewed mentioned that this app, alongside others used before, can produce a lot of information, which it can be difficult to make sense of. To be able to make sense of data requires a lot of support as well as regular practice. According to the partners interviewed, Integrity Action can provide such support, either by ensuring that information collected is reviewed for quality assurance, well presented and accurate, or by providing the capacity for community monitors and local CSOs to do this in the future.

In this sense, a key recommendation for data collection apps that do not provide this service is to either offer it under a subscription cost or to open a channel of communication between different projects and experts within the app that allows for training to be available, as well as advice on how to present this information and use it for advocacy purposes. This is also potentially a mechanism that DevCheck can follow if it transitions from a proprietary software to an open-sourced one.

c) Provide spaces in DevCheck to collect more qualitative data and even oral comments.

Most communication in rural areas works around storytelling and community conversations. Community monitors and project evaluators mentioned that sometimes people who are not willing to give feedback for surveys will do it orally or as a story. These stories are difficult to translate into quantitative information but can be used as case studies. Thus, if technology is introduced in these spaces, there is a need to introduce it in ways that allow for these stories to be integrated, for example

as a feature that can aggregate vocal/oral communication. In community accountability spaces there is a lot of information that is lost because oral comments are not being consolidated and aggregated. Some of the recommended ways of doing these are:

- Offer a possibility to transcribe voice messages and store them as case studies. Community monitors should then have the responsibility of storing the information around the appropriate categories and recommend potential uses for those stories.
- Add a field in the app for the monitors to elaborate on the feedback from the community and their responses. This feature would allow app users to better explain negative feedback when they interact with duty bearers.
- It can provide support in managing negative feedback or interacting with local leaders.
- DevCheck formats allow for quick efficient data collection but lack the ability to adapt and convert messages which are very specific to the context. For this, the app could provide partners with a mechanism to add a maximum of short answer questions to be chosen by the local teams based on initial experience and feedback. These added fields in the app could also be discussed and agreed with duty bearers to increase ownership and interest.
- Connecting oral stories to radio advocacy. Radio is a technology that has resisted the test of time in Africa and elsewhere and is something that can be tapped into, especially given the importance of oral communication in remote areas. As a result, the oral stories collected could be used as community radio stories that make calls for action more compelling and accessible to all. This has already been demonstrated by organisations such as [On Our Radar](#) and [Africa's Voices Foundation](#).

6. Conclusion

This paper shows additional areas where technology is providing an added value to social accountability, as well as potential areas where its role has could be expanded, especially in programmes focusing on youth. In particular, it highlights that technology can serve as an incentive for youth to become involved in these processes and can give them technical and leadership skills which can be useful for their professional paths. This is important given the low rate of youth participation in political processes, but also because they are usually marginalised from the decision-making processes in their communities. Furthermore, these young participants can also bring ideas about how existing social accountability technology can be linked with other technological tools (social media or USSD platforms, to provide some examples) in order to decrease the gap between technology, communities and duty bearers.

However, most of the conclusions of this study are similar to those found in previous research. Technology is only a conduit in the social accountability process, and there are limitations to what it can achieve. If these limitations have clear and sufficient mitigations, and additional activities are set up to accompany the process, then technology can provide great added value to the communities it intends to serve. Yet, if this is not the case, technology has the potential to harm the social accountability process(es) that it is supposed to be supporting by creating false expectations for which no appropriate supporting activities are established. For those designing and implementing social accountability initiatives, the responsibility is then to ensure that such clarity is achieved, properly communicated and planned for, while at the same time to keep driving changes in the technologies that can push beyond the existing limitations.





**DEVELOPMENT
ALTERNATIVE**



**INTEGRITY
ACTION**