Citizen Helpdesks

A Platform developed by Accountability Lab

Citizen Helpdesks are a pioneering citizen feedback, dialogue and community voice platform to ensure accountability in the development process. The Helpdesks collect critical information from hundreds of communities to solve daily problems for citizens and close the loop on challenges related to everything from service delivery, to human trafficking, to natural resource management and security issues.

The Problem

- Citizens and communities are rarely consulted about the decisions that affect their lives, particularly in hard-to-reach places. Where information is collected from them, the process is extractive, with very little feedback on how this data is used;

- Systemic corruption, opacity, discrimination or mismanagement by local governments and companies often prevents people from making their voices heard on issues they care about;

- Where trust in authority is low, rumors and misinformation can create negative feedback loops that further divide communities;

- At the same time, power-holders in the public and the private sectors often lack the information they need to make decisions effectively and the channels to engage with their constituencies in meaningful ways;

- All of this undermines development, fuels conflict and prevents progress towards the SDGs.

The Solution- Citizen Helpdesks (I)

- Communities select volunteers: Community Frontline Associates (CFA), led by local journalists, act as two way information collection and dissemination units.

- The CFAs gather information on critical problems affecting their communities on a monthly basis through community surveys. They then relay this information to our teams at the Lab coordinate with local and national power holders.

The Solution- Citizen Helpdesks (II)

- We feed validated information on these issues back down to communities through local radio shows, community meetings, info-graphics, music, films and bulletins in local languages, facilitating conversations about key local concerns and working with partners to solve problems.

- The Helpdesks ensure that everyone understands how and when development will take place, to build accountability into local decision making in real-time, and to close the feedback loop between citizens, governments, the media and the private sector.

The Scale and Scope

- The Citizen Helpdesks began in Nepal after the earthquakes in 2015- as a mechanism to collect and disseminate information related to the relief process in the worst affected districts.

- They quickly became a core component of the $4.4 billion recovery effort and the information was used regularly by the reconstruction authority and donor organizations to inform decision-making.

- In Nepal, the Helpdesks have grown to cover issues of migration, public service delivery and public finances; and have now been adapted to Liberia (gold mining and service delivery) and Mali (security and justice issues).

- We are now exploring the Helpdesk model in Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa and Mexico.

The Feedback Loop
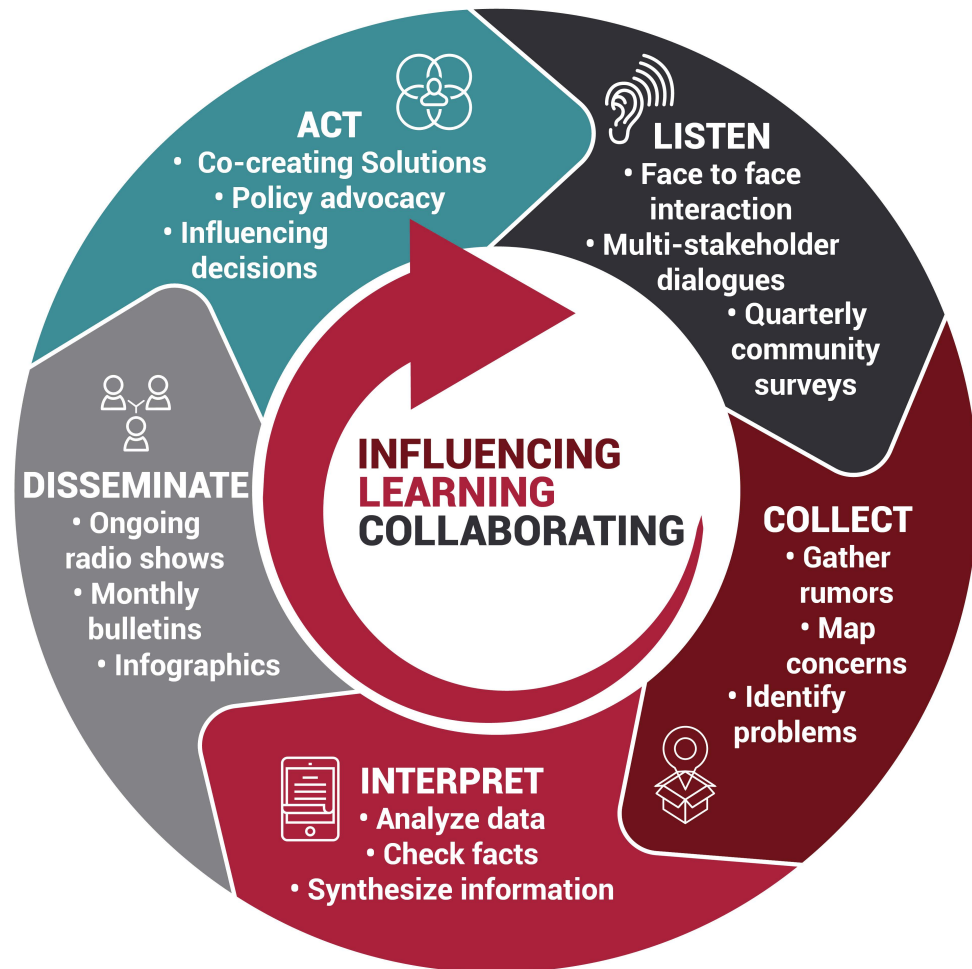
- The Helpdesk process is circular- with the feedback loop building trust as it evolves;

- Adaptive learning is at the center of the model, with this learning used to improve the process in real-time;

- The Helpdesks are a platform- they allow for deep collaboration with other organizations that have expertise around local issues.

- This allows them to be adapted and contextualized to build collective trust from the bottom-upwards.

Where We Work

Liberia
Mali
Mexico
Nepal
Nigeria
Niger
Pakistan
South Africa
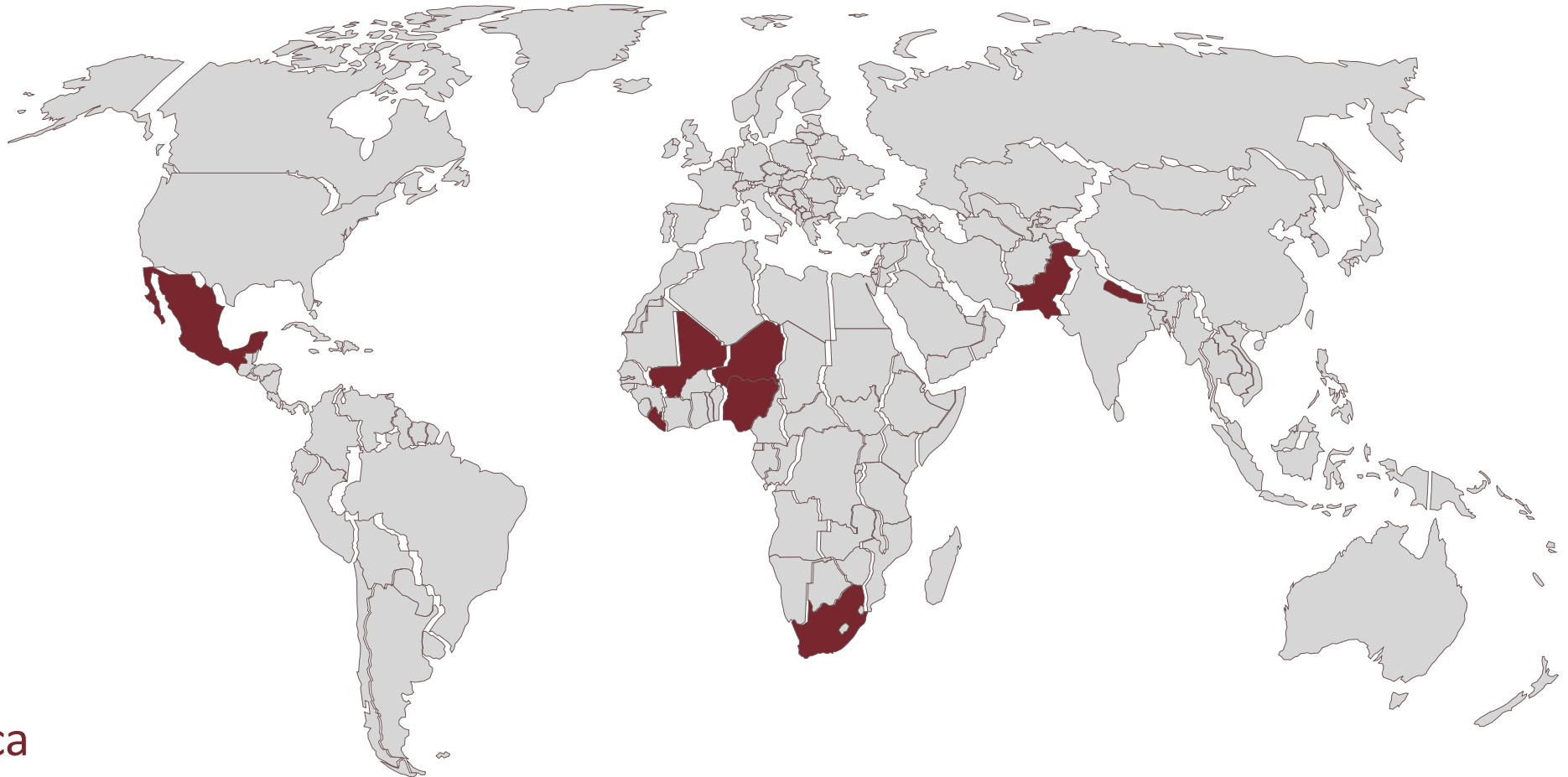
Citizen Helpdesks By the Numbers

In the past 4 years the Helpdesks have generated:

- Over **200,000** community conversations about topics ranging from how to understand legal documents to how to complain about corruption;

- Over **250** concrete issues solved for communities, from accessing stalled funding to fixing healthcare facilities to improving access to resources;

- Over **1 million** people reached through local community radio shows discussing local issues and informing people of decisions made;

- Over **120** townhall meetings bringing together over 30,000 community members;

- Over **50** bulletins and infographics disseminated to communities and government offices across Nepal, Mali and Liberia.

The Broader Impact

- *In Nepal*, based on progress through the Helpdesks, 3 districts have now allocated local budgets to support the sustainability and growth of the process in local communities;

- *In Liberia*, violent protests in targeted mining communities have been reduced by almost 90% as the Helpdesks have built trust and cooperation with mining companies;

- *In Mali*, our Helpdesks in the center and the north of the country are providing data for the government and donors from places they are unable to visit, providing the basis for new thinking about peace-building approaches;

- *Around the world*, the Community Frontline Associates (CFAs) have now become key resource people for local decision-making, and have been asked to form new committees and draft new policies and procedures for local governments;

- Feedback from communities demonstrates that the process has generated significant increase in trust both within communities and between communities and the government.

Key Lessons

- *Localization*- ensuring the process is highly contextualized- with staff and volunteers who truly understand community dynamics;

- *Transparency*- complete transparency throughout the process to build trust and ensure impartiality;

- *Scope*- setting boundaries and expectations so that communities understand the Helpdesks are a citizen voice platform not a panacea;

- *Creativity*- particularly around communication back to communities using tools that they tell us are most effective;

- *Patience*- the Helpdesk process can show quick-wins but can also take months or years to demonstrate larger impact.

Next Steps

- *In Nepal,* the Helpdesks are now being *adapted by municipal governments* to support citizen engagement around budget issues;

- *In Liberia*, the Helpdesks are now being rolled out as a *national model for citizen feedback* around health and education with the World Bank;

- *In Mali*, the Helpdesks are now being *used by the International Criminal Court (ICC)* to better understand perceptions of justice and possible actions to address human rights violations in the center and north of the country;

- *In Nigeria*, the Helpdesks are focusing on *communities affected by large-scale infrastructure* projects.

How the Helpdesks Can Help You

- It is more critical than ever that citizens' voices are heard as part of the process of development;

- Governments, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and other organizations recognize this but have not found effective ways to operationalize the process efficiently, sustainably or cost-effectively;

- The Helpdesks provide a flexible platform that can be adapted to context, provide real-time data for decision-making; and can address both short-term problems and longer-term trust-building challenges simultaneously.