What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

Derek Thorne, Integrity Action

November 2021

There has been plenty of discussion in the transparency, participation and accountability (TPA) field on the role that information can – and can't – play in promoting good governance and helping citizens to successfully make demands of the people and institutions that serve them. This has particularly been in relation to the accountability of public services and projects that directly impact on citizens, like health services, education and infrastructure.

From Integrity Action's perspective, there has been less focus on exactly what is meant by "information" in this context, and on what kinds of information are most likely to be helpful when seeking to improve performance and accountability of services like these. We see information as "necessary but not sufficient" for accountability (or, with more nuance, "potentially very helpful but almost certainly not sufficient") and our recent research[1] suggested that *informed* citizen action is more likely to lead to problems with public services being solved.

There are existing definitions, though they are often derived from definitions of transparency. For example, Tsai, Morse, Toral, and Lipovsek[2] define it as "information about the responsibilities and actions of those in government". They also refer to an earlier World Bank definition[3]: "information about the actions of those in government and the consequences of these actions."

We feel there is room to expand on the existing definitions by providing a framework for the types of information that can best help to promote accountability. The purpose of this document is to provide such a framework and to act as a guide to anyone designing or implementing initiatives or policies concerning information and accountability, to ensure the most useful types of information are sought or provided.

This framework puts forward **three fundamental types** of information, plus a set of **cross-cutting issues** concerning those types. The hypothesis proposed here is that **the more types of information that are available, and the more the cross cutting issues are satisfied, the more useful the information will be to citizens or groups seeking to promote accountability.**

Integrity Action's focus is on accountability of essential services and projects, and our learning has informed this framework. However we suggest the framework could be applied to areas beyond basic public services.

These slides explain the framework by building it up step-by-step, with accompanying notes on the right hand side.

Thanks to Tom Aston, Dan Burwood, Gilbert Sendugwa, Ben Taylor and Courtney Tolmie for valuable feedback on earlier drafts.

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

The first type of information is **promises:** information on what has been promised, budgeted or committed by the institutions or individuals being held to account. This also covers more implicit promises that might not be spoken out loud, such as the laws or rules that public servants must abide by. (By taking those roles, public servants in effect promise to follow the rules associated with them.)

In the examples here, we have highlighted formal promises (which are typically recorded in official documentation, and possibly accessible), as well as informal promises (which are more likely verbal, or perhaps shared on social media). Informal promises are just as important as formal ones as a "subject" for accountability.

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

INTEGRITY ACTION

Examples might include **formal promises** like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and **informal promises** like verbal promises during an election campaign.

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

The second type of information is about **delivery**. This is information on what has been delivered and/or achieved by the institutions or individuals being held to account.

Delivery information often covers things that can be counted and verified, such as the number of desks in a classroom. However, it could also draw on aggregated feedback and citizens' own experiences, such as answers to the question "when you last visited the dispensary, could you get the medicine you needed?"

Both promise and delivery information may include, for example, a time dimension (e.g. was x delivered by time y) or an inclusion dimension (e.g. to which people or groups was x delivered).

The "why" is potentially an important element of delivery information. If a service is not delivered, this might be due to insufficient funds reaching the frontline service provider, rather than failures within the service provider itself. Understanding such causes is key when taking a constructive approach to accountability.

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation

PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.

The third type is about **"process"**: information on how citizens can engage with the institutions or individuals being held to account, provide feedback, report problems and make complaints. Such processes allow citizens to engage *on the issue of* what promises have been made and whether they have been delivered. In doing this, they may also have the opportunity to say what promises should be made in future.

As well as information on "how" to engage, this also includes who citizens can engage with, who is responsible, and what they can expect once they have engaged.

It's not only citizens that may lack access to this information; recent research[4] by Integrity Action highlighted that duty-bearers themselves may not know, for example, what their remit is, who is accountable for what, or the processes by which certain problems can be solved. It is also possible that this information doesn't exist.
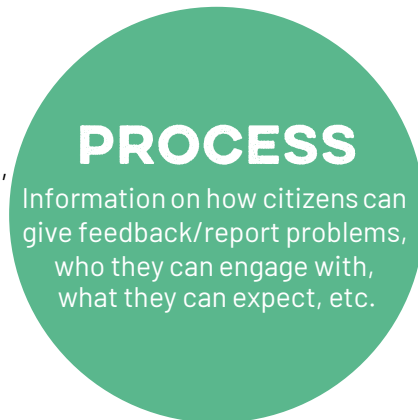
Continues...

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation

PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.
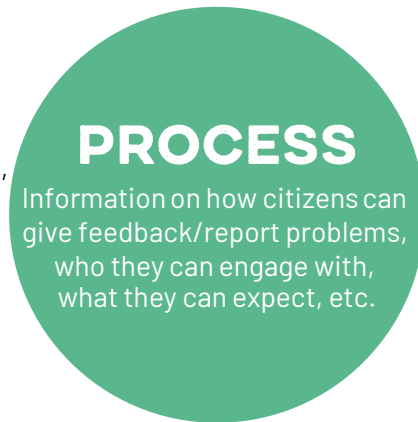
Continued

Some process information might be informal – the "unwritten rules of the game" or "how things *actually* work". Such information is still valuable to citizens demanding accountability, but would not be accessed or provided through formal channels.

There is potentially **overlap** between the three types. For example, if a local government provides process information such as "we will hold annual feedback forums in every village", this is also a promise and its delivery could be monitored.

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

INTEGRITY ACTION

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.

Linked

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

Outputs / Outcomes

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation

PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.

Importantly, both promise and delivery information can be at the **output** or **outcome** level.

Outputs refer to specific things to be done or provided (like a new school, or textbooks within a school).

Outcomes refer to things that are intended to be achieved (like better exam results).

Citizens may find it easier to secure accountability over promised outputs, rather than outcomes, because (1) they are typically easier to measure independently, and (2) the responsible authority has far more control over the delivery of outputs and failure to deliver them is more difficult to explain away.

It is also important for promise and delivery information to be **linked** (i.e. to be about the same things). It's not so useful if you have promise information about textbooks, and delivery information about exam results.

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

INTEGRITY ACTION
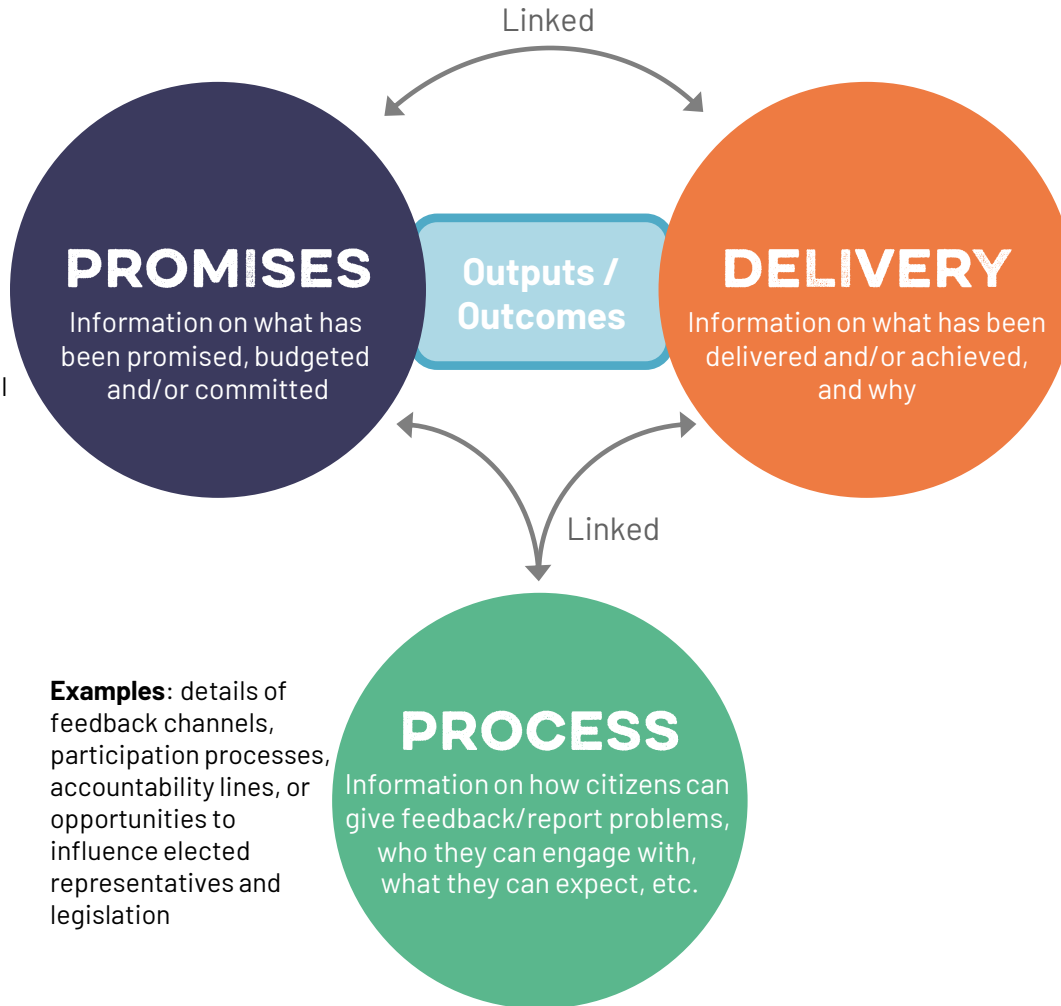
Promise and delivery information should, in turn, be **linked to process information**. That is to say that, if the promise and delivery information is about education commitments at the local level, the information on who to engage with, and how, should relate to education at the local level as well.

Such linkages will reappear as a cross-cutting issue later on.

Linked

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

Outputs / Outcomes

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

Linked

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation
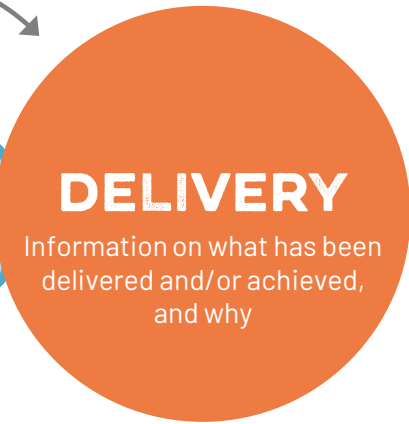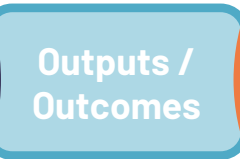
PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

INTEGRITY ACTION

Generated by: institution / service provider, plus politicians and leaders

Linked

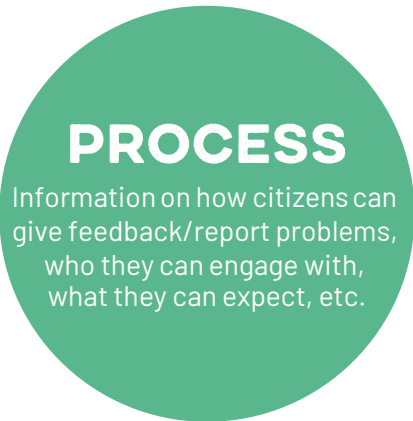**Generated by**: institution / service provider, oversight institutions, OR independently produced

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

Outputs / Outcomes

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

Linked

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation

PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight bodies, CSOs and others

Where does this information ultimately come from?

Promises are generated by the people or institutions that are empowered to make them.

Delivery information may also come from the supply side, or from official oversight bodies. However, critically, *it can also be produced independently*, at least where delivery is observable (e.g. by citizen monitors visiting service points). The potential for empowerment when citizens/non-state actors produce delivery information themselves is one reason why Integrity Action works with partners to apply such approaches.

Process information comes from various sources. That's because processes for feedback and participation are created by various entities including government, oversight bodies, and civil society. Such processes might even be the result of a collaboration.

It is also because informal information ("how things *actually* work") could be provided by anyone who has experience of the process in question.

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

Generated by: institution / service provider, plus politicians and leaders

Linked

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight institutions, OR independently produced

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.
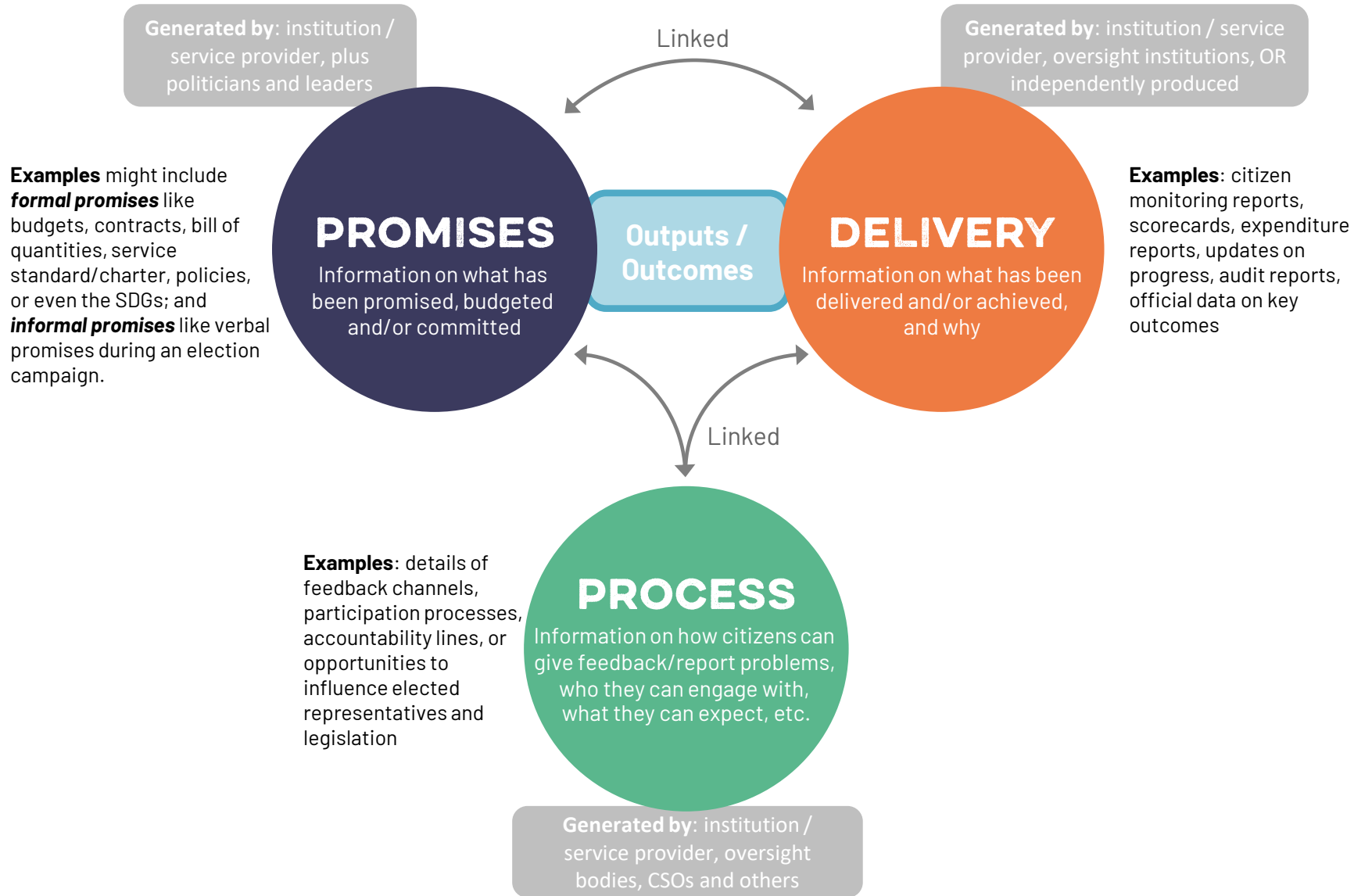
PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

Outputs / Outcomes

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

Linked

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation

PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight bodies, CSOs and others

Cross-cutting issues:

- **Accessibility** (can it be accessed by all who need to? Does it exist? Does access cost money?)
- **Format** (is it provided in an appropriate format?)
- **Detail** (is it detailed enough to be usable?)
- **Comprehensibility** (can citizens make sense of it? Is it appropriately contextualised?)
- **Reliability** (is it reliable? Is it up-to-date? Is it complete?)
- **Interlinked** (e.g. does the information on delivery relate to the information on promises?)

Finally, these are the **cross-cutting issues**. Most of these are to do with the nature of the information itself. Some (particularly format and comprehensibility) depend on who is, or could be, using the information.

Accessibility refers to whether citizens can gain access to the information and depends significantly on whether right-to-information laws are in place and implemented. In some countries, access to information requests cost money, which reduces the level of accessibility. Proactive disclosure on the internet is only accessible to those with internet access.

It is also possible that the information in question doesn't exist at all, or is not formally recorded. For example, it might be unclear who is responsible or accountable for specific aspects of a service. In such cases, and when the information can't be generated independently, an advocacy drive may be needed to persuade relevant duty bearers to produce it.

Continues...

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

INTEGRITY ACTION

Linked

Generated by: institution / service provider, plus politicians and leaders

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight institutions, OR independently produced

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

Outputs / Outcomes

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

Linked

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation

PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight bodies, CSOs and others

Cross-cutting issues:

- **Accessibility** (can it be accessed by all who need to? Does it exist? Does access cost money?)
- **Format** (is it provided in an appropriate format?)
- **Detail** (is it detailed enough to be usable?)
- **Comprehensibility** (can citizens make sense of it? Is it appropriately contextualised?)
- **Reliability** (is it reliable? Is it up-to-date? Is it complete?)
- **Interlinked** (e.g. does the information on delivery relate to the information on promises?)

Continued

Format refers to whether the information is provided in a format that can be used by the citizens requesting it. Providing information on a USB stick, for example, is not much use to citizens if they don't have access to a computer. Providing data in PDF files that are difficult to scrape is another example.

Detail is about whether the information is sufficiently detailed to be usable. For example, if outcome data is not disaggregated by gender, it may be of little use in checking on the delivery of gender-specific promises. More detail can make data more difficult to comprehend (see below), so care is needed to ensure both detail and comprehensibility are satisfied.

Comprehensibility refers to whether citizens with no specialist expertise can make sense of it. Too often, information like budgets and contracts are too complicated for citizens to understand. Information can be repackaged by independent actors to help achieve comprehensibility (and indeed other cross-cutting issues).

Continues...

10

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

Linked

Generated by: institution / service provider, plus politicians and leaders

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight institutions, OR independently produced

Examples might include *formal promises* like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and *informal promises* like verbal promises during an election campaign.

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

Outputs / Outcomes

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

Linked

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation

PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight bodies, CSOs and others

Cross-cutting issues:

- **Accessibility** (can it be accessed by all who need to? Does it exist? Does access cost money?)
- **Format** (is it provided in an appropriate format?)
- **Detail** (is it detailed enough to be usable?)
- **Comprehensibility** (can citizens make sense of it? Is it appropriately contextualised?)
- **Reliability** (is it reliable? Is it up-to-date? Is it complete?)
- **Interlinked** (e.g. does the information on delivery relate to the information on promises?)
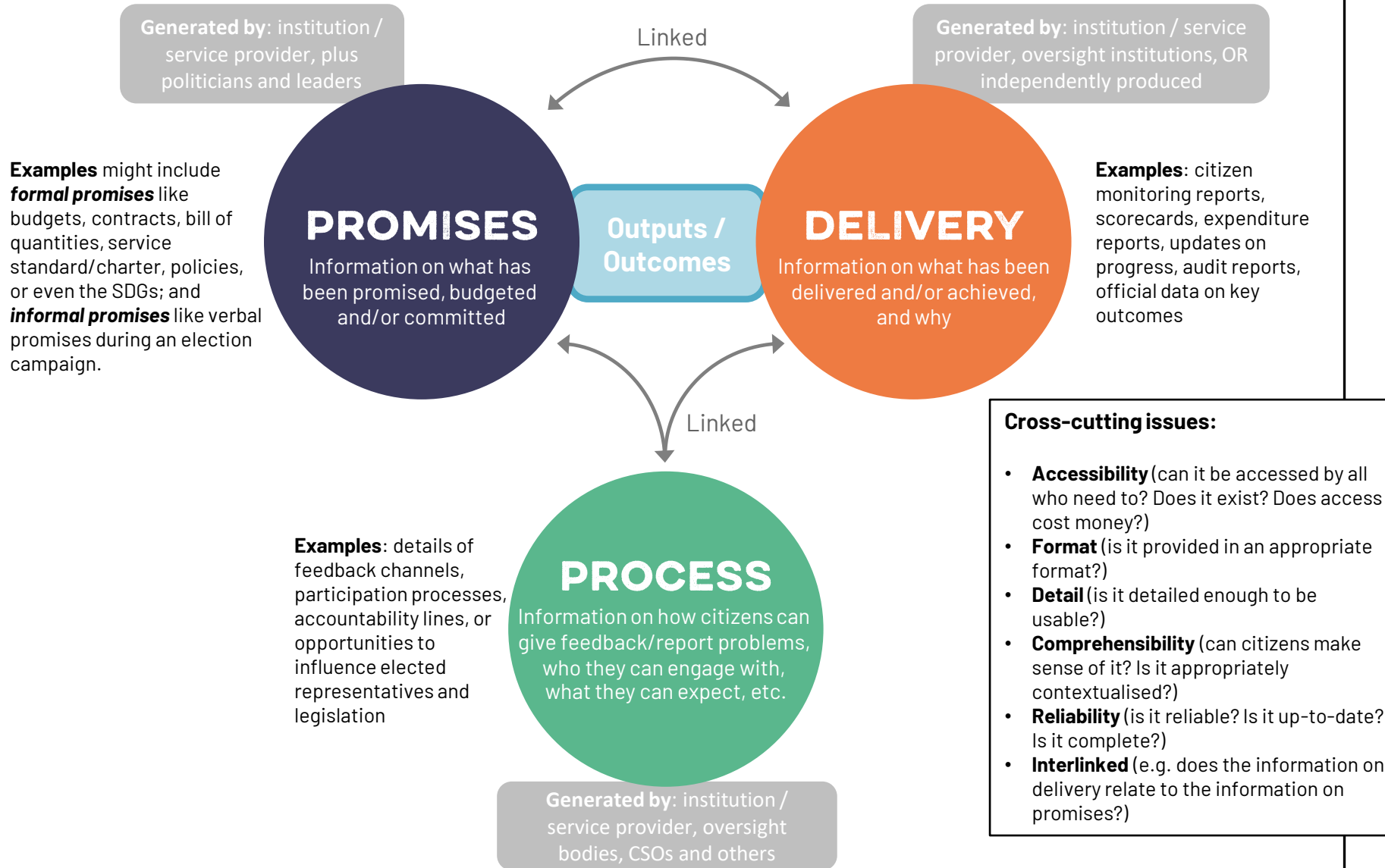
Continued

An important way of making information easier to comprehend is by providing context – such as trends in service performance over time, or comparisons/league tables featuring different service locations.

Reliability includes whether information is accurate and trustworthy (as opposed to being poor quality, or even tampered with); whether it is up-to-date; and whether it is complete (without omissions or redactions).

Reliability is an issue both when information is provided by the institution making and delivering promises, and when it is independently produced. Information should not only be reliable, but *perceived* as reliable, perhaps through transparency of how it is generated.

Interlinked information, as mentioned earlier, is when the different information types refer to the same thing (e.g. the same aspects of the same project/service).

What information helps citizens demand accountability and improvements to services?

INTEGRITY ACTION

Examples might include **formal promises** like budgets, contracts, bill of quantities, service standard/charter, policies, or even the SDGs; and **informal promises** like verbal promises during an election campaign.

Generated by: institution / service provider, plus politicians and leaders

Linked

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight institutions, OR independently produced

PROMISES
Information on what has been promised, budgeted and/or committed

Outputs / Outcomes

DELIVERY
Information on what has been delivered and/or achieved, and why

Examples: citizen monitoring reports, scorecards, expenditure reports, updates on progress, audit reports, official data on key outcomes

Linked

Examples: details of feedback channels, participation processes, accountability lines, or opportunities to influence elected representatives and legislation

PROCESS
Information on how citizens can give feedback/report problems, who they can engage with, what they can expect, etc.

Generated by: institution / service provider, oversight bodies, CSOs and others

Cross-cutting issues:

- **Accessibility** (can it be accessed by all who need to? Does it exist? Does access cost money?)
- **Format** (is it provided in an appropriate format?)
- **Detail** (is it detailed enough to be usable?)
- **Comprehensibility** (can citizens make sense of it? Is it appropriately contextualised?)
- **Reliability** (is it reliable? Is it up-to-date? Is it complete?)
- **Interlinked** (e.g. does the information on delivery relate to the information on promises?)

Conclusion

The application of this framework would ideally mean that citizens know how to engage with the institutions they rely on, and they have evidence on what those institutions should have done and whether they actually did it. We expect this would make it easier for citizens to successfully demand accountability in practice.

Many practitioners may, upon looking at this framework, say "we are already taking this approach." If so that is great news. However we still hope a clear framework will help the field to consistently address the inclusion of information within programmes and strategies.

Pulling together this framework has also prompted us to ask: what information would help *duty-bearers* in responding to citizens' demands? Our recent research[4] on what makes frontline duty-bearers act with integrity highlighted how duty-bearers need to know their precise roles and responsibilities, as well as the needs of the citizens they serve. But this question is worthy of further exploration.

References

1. Silver, D., Lorusso, E., Crane, D., Lau, K. and Tay, C. (2021) Solving Problems in Public Service Delivery: Pathways to resolution when citizens identify problems in Kenya, Afghanistan and Palestine; Integrity Action research report.

2. Tsai, L.L., Morse, B.S., Toral, G., & Lipovsek, V. (2019). Information and Accountability: Evidence Syntheses of Within-Government and Citizen-Government Accountability Pathways. Washington, DC: Transparency and Accountability Initiative

3. World Bank. "Making politics work for development: harnessing transparency and citizen engagement." (2016). Washington, DC.

4. Leclert, L., Fernández Fernández C. (2021). What makes frontline duty-bearers act with integrity? Conditions and approaches that influence teachers and health workers to deliver services with integrity. Integrity Action research report.