

## Building space for transparency in Honduras: Lessons from the Infrastructure Transparency Initiative CoST

*Construyendo espacios de transparencia en Honduras: Lecciones de la Iniciativa de Transparencia en Infraestructura CoST*

Maria da Graça Ferraz de Almeida Prado  
CoST – the Infrastructure Transparency Initiative, United Kingdom  
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1171-4522>  
E-mail: m.prado@infrastructuretransparency.org

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**Abstract:** The recent history of Honduras is marked by limitations in transparency and accountability, with civic engagement far behind other Latin American countries. The experience of CoST Honduras offers valuable insights to understand how a policy space was created to incorporate open information and social participation in the delivery of public infrastructure. Applying a multi-method approach that combined desk review, qualitative interviews and a process tracing analysis, the research demonstrates how a policy window, combined with a design and implementation sensitive to the nuances of context, were used to sustain momentum for future change efforts. The findings show real shifts in political agency, in the politics of engagement and in society's capacity to coordinate and act.

**Keywords:** policy window, transparency, accountability, participation, civic engagement

**Resumen:** La historia reciente de Honduras está marcada por limitaciones en transparencia y rendición de cuentas, así como una participación ciudadana muy abajo a otros países latinoamericanos. La experiencia de CoST Honduras ofrece lecciones valiosas para comprender cómo se creó un espacio de transparencia a garantizarse que la información básica de los proyectos de infraestructura se da a conocer al público. Aplicando un enfoque de múltiples métodos que combinó una revisión de literatura, entrevistas cualitativas y un análisis de seguimiento de procesos, la investigación demuestra cómo CoST se utilizó una ventana política, combinada con un programa diseñado e imple-

mentado de forma sensible a los matices del contexto, para mantener el impulso necesario para cambios de largo plazo. Los hallazgos muestran cambios reales en la acción política, en las políticas de participación y en la capacidad de la sociedad para coordinarse y actuar.

**Palabras clave:** ventana política, transparencia, rendición de cuentas, participación, compromiso ciudadano

## INTRODUCTION

The recent history of Honduras is marked by challenging conditions for transparency and accountability, with a series of laws restricting access to information and the rights to freedoms of assembly and association. Examples are many: Decree 243/2011 granted authorities broad powers to intercept telephone and telematic communication of individuals considered ‘under investigation’ (ISHR, 2015). A law passed in 2014 allows information on public security and defence documents to be kept confidential for up to 25 years (Freedom House, 2015) and, between 2014 and 2015, the government revoked the legal status of thousands of non-governmental organisations, introducing a new registration process that was seen as overly complicated and designed to silence opposition (Freedom House, 2016).

Violence and intimidation against civil society activists are also common<sup>1</sup>, creating a fear of reprisal that puts civic engagement in Honduras far behind other Latin American countries (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018, p. 28). The lack of engagement affects especially women and minorities who remain politically underrepresented in a system dominated by economic and military elites (Freedom House, 2019). Unsurprisingly, in the last decade the country has seen shrinking levels of voice and accountability and an endemic corruption that is considered “the result of the functioning of a system” (Chayes, 2017, p. iv).

Despite a limited scope for civic action, a policy window was used to foster and sustain momentum for change, improving policy processes and incorporating an unprecedented level of transparency, accountability and participation in public infrastructure policies. This paper concentrates on clarifying this policy window and the conditions that enabled further change to follow. Two questions are addressed: (i) can a policy window start and sustain a process of change? and (ii) what additional elements help explain successful outcomes? Unpacking the

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<sup>1</sup> The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported that between 2014 and 2018 at least 65 human rights activists were murdered and over 1,232 attacks have been documented between 2016 and 2017 (CIDH, 2018).

contributory role of a policy window and assessing additional causal factors is of key importance to better understand successful trajectories, particularly in contexts of limited freedoms.

Based on the evidence of a process tracing analysis, I argue that policy windows can be effective enablers of change, paving the way for future successful change efforts. But additional elements can optimise and amplify the long-term impact of a policy window. The findings confirmed that a design and implementation sensitive to the nuances of context are essential to further momentum and achieve broader impact, in this case observed in the reconfiguration of state-society relations and more accountable and participatory policies.

The remaining of the paper develops as follows: Section 1 discusses the policy streams framework, its applicability and limitations; Section 2 presents a description of the research design, followed by a summary of the CoST approach on Section 3; Section 4 analyses whether there is evidence of the applicability of the multi-stream framework in the causal mechanism; Section 5 explores elements of the programme's design and delivery that can be linked to the pathway of change; Section 6 discusses the shifts in public infrastructure processes and outcomes and to what extent they can be traced to the causal mechanism. Conclusions and implications are addressed in the last sections, with considerations to the comparative policy agenda and the wider spectrum of policymaking in Honduras.

## 1. POLICY WINDOW AND THE MULTI-STREAMS APPROACH

The use of a policy window is recognised as means to introduce and advance a new policy agenda (Fischer et al., 2007). The policy streams approach suggests that the confluence of three streams – political, problem and policy – can open spaces to set a new agenda. The political stream refers to shifts in power or power struggles (when a new government emerges after elections for example), the problem stream is associated with changes in the perception of a certain issue (when a shock exposes vulnerabilities that require a quick public reaction), whereas the policy stream occurs whenever a different way to address or solve a problem is identified (as in the case of new findings that challenge old solutions and lead to a new policy framework in response). Policy windows emerge in the confluence of the three streams, opening the opportunity to introduce a new agenda: “solutions become joined to problems, and both of them are joined to favourable political forces” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 21).

As a dynamic process, the use of policy windows requires a smart and rapid strategy of action. Since the alignment of the streams may not last long, agents of change need to act while the ‘iron is still hot’. They need to identify potential triggers of change, remove barriers, build trust, navigate bureaucratic processes, and develop policy and social acuity in order to respond to the opportunities (Gunn, 2017).

The metaphor of the streams has been of value to frame trajectories of change and to assess the contributors to a new agenda. Climate studies have used this framework to investigate entrepreneurial work in policy formulation (Hermansen, 2015). Examples in other areas include changes in drug policies (Alimi, 2015), stem cell research (Mintrom, 2015), and civil service reform (Romero, 2015) to name a few.

The framework has the merit of highlighting the enabling conditions of change. Because it was originally formulated based on cases in the United States, critics argue that its applicability to comparative policy research would be unrealistic (Zahariadis, 2007), or would at least “deserve more than mechanistic applications” (Béland & Howlett, 2016, p. 226).

This research attempts to provide evidence of the value of a policy window to start and sustain change. But instead of a sole contributor, the research reconciles the multi-streams approach with a more nuanced view where intermediate factors also matter for the causation mechanism.

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

### 2.1. Case study selection

The trajectory of CoST Honduras is applied in this study for three reasons: (i) to identify the conditions leading up to the policy window, (ii) to trace elements in the programme’s design and delivery associated with the change, and (iii) to link up the policy changes and outcomes with the interventions of the programme.

The reason for selecting CoST Honduras is two-fold. First, CoST Honduras challenged the context of its own creation. The application to join the initiative was submitted in June 2014, the same time of the passing of many restrictive laws and regulations mentioned above. The application was voluntary: signed by the Honduras Secretary of Productive Infrastructure the application refers to

a new Country Vision<sup>2</sup> pushing for greater transparency and accountability in the infrastructure sector. A dive in the trajectory of CoST Honduras can provide a range of insights to untangle the policy window as well as the pre-conditions of change.

Second, the outcomes of the programme show relevant improvements in the levels of transparency and civic engagement. Since the initiative was launched, information on over 2,000 projects valued in more than USD 1 billion have been opened to the public, and new participatory spaces have been established. Assessing the elements of the programme's design and delivery contributing to these outcomes can shed light on the conditions that amplified impact and allowed further change to happen.

## **2.2. A mix method approach**

A micro-level analysis was applied to assess change. As explained by Compton and 't Hart, "this approach offers the greatest leverage in opening the black box, and examining the stakeholder interests, institutional arrangements, power relationships, leadership and decision-making processes" (Compton & 't Hart, 2019, 7).

The approach combined a desk review, focused on the programme's policies, with qualitative in-depth interviews to capture stakeholders perceptions. To avoid biases, triangulation was applied to increase confidence in the findings. This was developed by assessing audio recordings and video interviews available in digital platforms where stakeholders and beneficiaries of the programme voiced their concerns and opinions on the programme implementation. The use of social media content as a data source is a recognised analytic approach that has "entered the mainstream of academic literature" (Snelson, 2016) as a model of methodological triangulation.

A multi-method design was chosen not only for triangulation purposes. It allows a deep understanding of the political economy where CoST Honduras operates, helping to unpack "the visible, the hidden and the invisible" (Green, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> The New Vision is laid out in Decree 286-2009 (available at <https://observatorioplanificacion.cepal.org/es/marcos-regulatorios/decreto-legislativo-no-286-2009-de-honduras>). Also part of the New Vision is Decree 266-2013 regulating the Optimisation of Public Administration, Improvement of Public Services and Public Transparency (available at [https://www.tsc.gob.hn/web/leyes/Ley\\_optimizar\\_adm\\_pub\\_fort\\_transparencia\\_gob\\_2014.pdf](https://www.tsc.gob.hn/web/leyes/Ley_optimizar_adm_pub_fort_transparencia_gob_2014.pdf)).

### 2.3. Process tracing

A theory-testing variant of process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2013) was also applied to substantiate the causal chain between the policy window, the programme design and delivery, and policy outcomes. The goal was to verify whether the policy window was a sole variable to prompt and sustain change, or if “intermediate factors” (Gerring, 2007, 45) were also critical to the hypothesized mechanism.

Two causal mechanisms were conceptualised, one comprising the policy window alone (Causal Mechanism 1) and the other combining the policy window and intermediate factors (Causal Mechanism 2). The operationalization of these mechanisms is summarized below.

TABLE 1: CAUSAL MECHANISM SUMMARY

Causal Mechanism	What we expect to see
Causal Mechanism 1: Generating momentum	Evidence of the applicability of the multi-streams approach to explain the outcome. Evidence of a sequence of events divided in three categories: (i) a change in the perception of a problem (the problem stream), (ii) a change in the political support (the political stream), and (iii) a change in the way to address a policy issue (the policy stream). Taken together these events are expected to provide a window of opportunity to start a process of change, in this case related to the improvement in the dynamic of infrastructure policymaking in Honduras.
Causal Mechanism 2: Generating & prolonging momentum	Evidence of the applicability of the multi-streams approach to explain the policy outcome as mentioned above, alongside (i) account evidence that specific elements of context (the intermediate factors, in this case related to factors identified in the design and implementation of CoST Honduras) played a role in explaining the outcome. Also evidence that (ii) the impact achieved would have been different in the absence of these intermediate factors (evidence that the intermediate factors are causally linked to the broader impact observed).

### 3. THE COST APPROACH

CoST is a global programme tackling corruption, mismanagement and inefficiency in public infrastructure. Its mission is to work with government, industry and civil society to improve disclosure, validation and use of infrastructure data so that public infrastructure can be accountable to people's needs.

The way CoST stimulates transparency is by offering governments a complete open data standard that enables a systematic and regular disclosure of infrastructure information. The use of a standardised open format encourages data centralisation and comparability, providing a valuable template that specifies what and how to disclose the information. CoST open data standards cover the entire project cycle, requiring disclosure of information from project appraisal to final completion, which allows public investment to be tracked down and monitored throughout the project cycle.

To stimulate social accountability CoST invests in an array of tools that encourages the use of the disclosed data. These tools include processes of data assurance, training courses, technical support and mechanisms of community engagement. The goal is to build capacity and skills to use the available information and start an informed dialogue with authorities.

Transparency and accountability are catalysed by a multi-stakeholder working group (MSG) that is established in each CoST programme where representatives from government, businesses and civil society are invited to participate in the implementation and oversight of the programme. MSGs use their diverse experience and local knowledge to support delivery of the programme (CoST, n.d.).

### 4. CAUSAL MECHANISM 1: GENERATING MOMENTUM

#### **4.1. The emergence of a policy window**

In Honduras, the transparency agenda gained traction after 2009 with the establishment of a Country Vision which called for a modern, transparent and responsible State. Improving corruption indices, strengthening mechanisms of transparency and accountability, and consolidating decentralised spaces for participation were also part of the agenda.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These are provided, respectively, on objective 4, goal 4.5 and Article 26 (j) and (k) of the Decree 286-2009.

The New Vision set infrastructure as a priority for growth and a special decree was enacted to simplify investment in public infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> A Secretariat of Productive Infrastructure was created to coordinate actions and plans, with three levels of power involved in implementation – National, Sectorial and Institutional – and a multitude of agencies and public bodies in between.

The focus on infrastructure was not new in Honduras. After Hurricane Mitch in 1998 many plans to rebuild the destroyed infrastructure were put in place. The novelty was a new policy approach where transparency, anti-corruption and public infrastructure came hand in hand. Also unique was the explicit political support in the form of a Country Vision stating transparency and accountability as a long-term government strategy.

The convergence of political endorsement, the need to develop public infrastructure and an explicit anti-corruption agenda led to an application to join CoST in June 2014. Once Honduras was accepted as a programme member, a kick-off workshop was held to compose an interim MSG. The compressed two-month timeframe between the interest to join the programme and the establishment of the interim MSG is consistent with the criticality of timing when exploring policy windows. As explained by a CoST stakeholder, the timeframe was developed “to avoid losing momentum.”

#### **4.2. The effective use of a policy window to sustain change**

CoST Honduras used the policy window to rapidly put in motion some essential and effective measures. The formed MSG played a critical role to lock-in ground rules that helped to frame the design and implementation of the programme.<sup>5</sup>

A key action agreed by the MSG was to develop a scoping study to understand local nuances and sensitivities. This decision proved crucial to establish an objective baseline which indicated that the infrastructure sector in the country had a high level of opacity. Although procuring entities claimed that 92% of the data provided under CoST disclosure standards was available to the public upon request, the country’s transparency portals were in fact publishing less than 30% of the CoST data points (CoST Honduras, 2015a). Additional findings of the study included (i) the existence of different interpretations by procuring entities

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<sup>4</sup> Decree 58-2011, available at <https://www.tsc.gob.hn/biblioteca/index.php/leyes/267-ley-especial-para-la-simplificacion-de-los-procedimientos-de-inversion-en-infraestructura-publica>

<sup>5</sup> The idea of a lock-in is based on the influence of path dependence; see Howlett, 2019.

in relation to the data to be disclosed, with no coordination of the government's transparency efforts; (ii) lack of integration between government's e-portals, with evidence of many technical limitations and difficulties of access; (iii) lack of guidelines to enforce the government transparency agenda, leading to low compliance with transparency regulations and obstacles for citizen bodies such as the Citizen Transparency Commissions to fulfil their legal mandate as social auditors; and (iv) lack of stakeholder capacity and skills to use the available information.

Based on the findings and in line with the Country Vision, CoST Honduras developed an action plan to redesign Honduras infrastructure open data system. The selected entry point was SISOCS –in Spanish *Sistema de Información y Seguimiento de Obras y Contratos de Supervisión*–, a monitoring system that had been established in early 2014 in the context of a World Bank road rehabilitation programme. Despite donor and local efforts, data fragmentation and lack of integration had prevented the use of SISOCS as an effective transparency tool.

Without reinventing the wheel, CoST Honduras implemented the necessary changes in SISOCS, applying the principles of data centralisation and easy access. By February 2015, “SISOCS 2.0” was born. As explained by a government official: “the information is disclosed through this platform, from planning, to design, implementation and maintenance. Physical and financial progress of infrastructure projects are included in the information that can be accessed in SISOCS alongside the execution of works and budgets as well as the work plans and other elements” (CoST Honduras, 2017c).

SISOCS revised guidelines mention that the 2.0 version is the result of the adaptation of the system to the CoST open standards, answering to the country's commitments towards transparency, accountability and citizen participation (SISOCS, 2017). Proposing a response that was time-sensitive and grounded on local findings was key to advance an essential change within the first six months of implementation. It also proved essential to prepare the ground for further change to follow.

## 5. CAUSAL MECHANISM 2: GENERATING AND PROLONGING MOMENTUM

### 5.1. The ‘targeted transparency’ approach

After adjusting SISOCS, a set of interventions was devised which included the adoption of a transparency targeted strategy to keep momentum for change.

Evidence from accountability initiatives shows that to trigger social action, information needs to be understood and be perceived as useful and actionable by citizens (Fox, 2015). With that in mind, to implement a targeted strategy CoST Honduras combined SISOCS 2.0 with tools to “simplify, demystify and disseminate” (Grandvoinnet et al., 2015, p. 31) the disclosed data. One of these tools was the process of assurance that is part of the CoST approach, where an independent technical team assesses a sample of infrastructure projects and identifies red flags to the public. These red flags help citizens to understand technical nuances, transforming available data into actionable information.

The process of dismantling of the Honduran Road Fund is an example of how the strategy worked in practice. Concerns regarding the performance of the Road Fund were raised by the assurance team, with special emphasis on the high amount of public funds spent without control. The evidence was picked up by civil society and helped to push the government to open an investigation into the fund’s practices, which led to the termination of the entity. From objective data that showed lack of transparency and low performance, the assurance process was able to generate compelling evidence that prompted collective and government action (Open Contracting, 2019).

CoST Honduras also used the findings of the scoping study to design another way to generate actionable information and trigger accountability – this time with a focus on repurposing the Citizen Transparency Commissions. Established by Decree, the commissions are municipal bodies with legal mandate to carry social audit and ensure a transparent delivery of public projects.

Given the low utilisation of the commissions, strategic partnerships were set by the programme to maximise their potential. As explained by a MSG member, CoST had two objectives: “to expand the action of CoST in regions where it had no reach, and also to expand action through the Citizen Transparency Commissions and individuals that, after training, would have all the tools and capacities to implement social audit not only through the processes of assurance in areas covered by CoST but also in other areas” (MSG member – civil society) (CoST

Honduras, 2017d). The strategic impact of these partnerships is highlighted by a MSG member representing the private sector: “[the commissions] are strategic allies to help us fulfil our goal of strengthening accountability in public infrastructure” (Pineda Valladares, 2018).

The training of the commissions on how to use SISOCS helped social auditors to bring together communities and pressure authorities. According to a MSG member representing the public sector: “providing capacitation [to the commissions] in transparency means providing the capacity so they can seek the information themselves and use it” (CoST Honduras, 2019).

Commenting on the work developed by social auditors, one city mayor highlighted the importance of municipal authorities collaborate “with individuals that are performing such an essential work that is to oversee what belongs to the people” (CoST Honduras, 2020). Acknowledging oversight powers to the people is a relevant behavioural change in the route of rebalancing the relationship between citizens and powerholders. Power redistribution, with more voices in position to demand accountability, is an essential change that helped to keep momentum.

## **5.2. The ‘voice and teeth’ strategy**

In addition to the targeted approach, the design of CoST Honduras also included a combined ‘voice and teeth’ strategy.

### **5.2.1. Voice**

Two voice tactics were implemented by CoST Honduras. Based on the findings of the scoping study, the programme envisioned a capacity building plan that included the creation of learning platforms. Three instances were established: the School of Infrastructure Social Audit, the Journalists Diploma on Infrastructure Transparency and the Virtual Diploma on Infrastructure Transparency.<sup>6</sup> According to a CoST manager: “The School of Infrastructure Social Audit allowed CoST to get closer to the people”.

Having permanent learning spaces served to technically equip stakeholders. Capacitation also contributed to the wider purpose of creating a community of transformers. As explained by a graduate of the School of Infrastructure Social Audit: “people need more empowerment and guidance on the subject, because they do not know much about infrastructure. And when they do not know, they do not participate in an informed manner. (...) [Through the Citizen Transparency

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<sup>6</sup> For additional information, see CoST Honduras (n.d.-a).

Commissions] we can do advocacy at the local level and achieve change” (Open Contracting, 2019).

The second tactic was to provide means to aggregate the different voices. Evidence shows that having intermediaries to aggregate the voice of different stakeholders is of key importance to facilitate negotiations with powerholders.<sup>7</sup> Resonating with the evidence, a great part of the MSG work involved collecting and combining the voices of stakeholders and presenting an informed, unified position to powerholders.

The example of the MSG approach on the topic of road designs illustrates how this occurred in practice. Based on different stakeholders’ assessments – for example the assurance findings showing inaccurate project preparation as a common sector issue; claims by contractors seeking additional payment due to inaccurate bidding documentation; complaints by procuring entities that contractors undermine public budgeting by seeking additional pay; and community concerns related to project delay – the MSG was able to offer a unified position to remedy a long-standing sector issue. In the voice of a MSG member representing the private sector: “we have seen repeated cases of contract modifications because the [feasibility] studies that have been submitted by authorities were outdated, so we recommended the government to update the project designs before opening the bid” (CoST Honduras, 2018b).

Working as a mediator, the programme bridged communication gaps and helped to aggregate the voice of different stakeholders. Aggregation also served the purpose of redistributing power. As put by Fox, “for the voiceless to exercise voice effectively requires support – as well as cross-cultural translation and bridge-building” (2015, p. 15). What is relevant to note is that no confrontation was reported by stakeholders during the interviews. Working with the establishment seems another example of how the programme propelled momentum forward.

### 5.2.2. Teeth

Voice was combined with a ‘teeth’ strategy developed in two ways: pursuing a legal backing for the programme and developing the technical capacity of public officials. Seeking legal basis for disclosure was a step to guarantee enforceability. This was achieved via a decree that incorporated CoST disclosure standards as part of the Honduran Law.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See the importance of facilitators to coordinate citizen actions improving results in Bjorkman & Svensson, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Available at [https://sisocs.org/docs/decreto\\_sisocs.pdf](https://sisocs.org/docs/decreto_sisocs.pdf)

The impact of the decree was decisive. In four years, entities participating in the assurance process reported a disclosure rate equivalent to 95% of compliance with the CoST data points. In 2015, the rate recorded by the participant entities was 27%.

Another reason of compliance can be traced back to the responsiveness of public authorities which is connected to the second teeth tactic and the capacitation of procuring entities. Given that the level of technical capacity of public servants in Honduras is one of the lowest in the region (Lefebvre, 2015), creating a space to provide capacitration to officials was a need identified by stakeholders.

The capacity of public officials to respond to voice is as important as voice itself. According to the evidence, experiences of accountability achieve higher impact when there is synergy between voice and teeth, and teeth is broadly defined as to include public authorities' responsiveness (Fox, 2015). CoST Honduras integrated voice & teeth strategy seemed an additional factor to have prolonged momentum for change.

### **5.3. The broad notion of community**

Another element of the programme design that can help explain success is the way CoST Honduras defines community. In the context of infrastructure projects, the definition of community tends to be location-based: villagers and residents that live close to a project, who are directly affected by it and are normally the main users of the infrastructure. Although CoST is an infrastructure initiative, the notion of community applied by the programme is broader than geography, encompassing stakeholders with shared interests, values and goals. As explained by a MSG member representing the public sector: “The MSG has managed to develop a truly candid level of dialogue where civil society, private sector, and government, can convey opinions with respect but also honesty; it is always our opinion. That situation has ensured a lively initiative built on mutual respect; we share a common vision for the greater good of the country” (Open Contracting, 2019).

The notion of a shared community of values and goals was not limited to the MSG work. Capacity building activities helped to inspire a sense of belonging and ownership that have been described by stakeholders as essential to expand the CoST community. According to a graduate of the School of Infrastructure Social Audit: “Thanks to the preparation we got, we have conducted many audits and today we feel part of CoST” (Open Contracting, 2019).

Replacing a narrative of self-interest for one of shared benefits is a key factor reported in successful policy experiences (Burai, 2020). The experience of CoST Honduras is in line with the evidence: infrastructure training and a narrative of shared objectives gave common ground to stakeholders and enabled the development of a broad network of like-minded agents of change.

#### **5.4. The impact of inclusion**

Accounting for inclusion was also part of the pathway of CoST Honduras. The programme embedded inclusion in different ways, starting with a gender balanced MSG with 50% female representation. In the assurance process, events that include participation of communities were designed to be gender diverse. Meetings were scheduled in advance to give time for women to prepare and organise household activities to allow their participation. Assurance teams also reserved a time during project visits to hear the opinion of female villagers. Analysis of the percentage of jobs held by women, persons with disabilities and indigenous population have been included in assurance reports, with recommendations for procuring entities to integrate minorities in project design and delivery.<sup>9</sup>

Capacity building activities were also designed to account for minority representation. The School of Infrastructure Social Audit kept a balanced number of female students over the years and a specific cooperation agreement was established with the Institute of Sustainable Development of the Lenca Women to provide technical capacitation to women of the largest indigenous community in Honduras.<sup>10</sup>

The incorporation of inclusion was a way found by CoST Honduras to rebalance power relations. The testimony of CoST managers indicates that the inclusive approach emerged organically: “it was a design that emerged from the contributions of the [CoST] National Secretariat, the guidance from the [CoST] International Secretariat on the topic of non-discrimination, the expertise of the assurance teams when assessing inclusion in projects and the sensitivity of MSG members to recognise that diversity is not commonly applied in Honduras”. Although organic, the fact that women were identified by the programme as the “most committed community leaders” (Hivos, 2020) was a powerful insight used to amplify impact.

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<sup>9</sup> See for example the findings of the 1<sup>st</sup> Assurance Report indicating that the average percentage of women working on the projects subject to assurance was less than 6%, with no workers with disability employed (CoST Honduras, 2015b, pp. 42-43, 45).

<sup>10</sup> Available at: [http://costhonduras.hn/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/convenio\\_idesmulh.pdf](http://costhonduras.hn/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/convenio_idesmulh.pdf)

Similar to other initiatives where inclusiveness has been associated with long-term success, the case of CoST Honduras demonstrates the positive impact of inclusion to ensure stability and trust. To assume that participatory initiatives are automatically inclusive denies how heterogeneous and unequal society is – particularly in contexts like Honduras where lack of minority representation is notorious.<sup>11</sup> The “sensitivity of the MSG members” to add inclusion in the design contributed to further momentum and achieve higher impact.

### **5.5. Learning and adaptability**

A final element to be highlighted is the capacity of the programme to adapt and adjust over time. Tools that account for change were built in many aspects of the programme, including in the regulation of the MSG, with provisions determining the rotation of the members every two years. In addition to adaptability, the purpose of the provision was referred in interviews as a mechanism to prevent capture and to stimulate a healthy renovation of voices and perspectives within the programme.

The approval of an annual plan to feed into the 5-year strategy was another way to keep the programme’s goals and targets under review. The tactic imprinted an entrepreneurial mindset with short loops of implementation, measurement and learning that allowed the programme to quickly identify new areas of impact, as in the case of municipalities. As explained by a CoST manager: “we have a strategic plan that we have just concluded which put as a priority the need for CoST to work closely with municipalities as from the next year” (CoST Honduras, 2017a).

Feedback was also embedded in capacity building activities, with evaluation mechanisms that opened the programme to the voice of beneficiaries. The Virtual Diploma on Infrastructure Transparency, for example, was launched in response to the feedback received from the attendees: “After the first Journalists Diploma held between May and June 2017 and the first edition of the School of Infrastructure Social Audit between April and June of the same year, it was suggested to CoST Honduras to replicate these experiences using virtual platforms to facilitate access” (CoST Honduras, n.d.-b).

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<sup>11</sup> See in particular: “participatory mechanisms are not automatically inclusive and demand side approaches may overlook the fact that communities are not homogeneous. They run the risk of being hijacked and manipulated by governments or the local elite, resulting in further marginalisation of the poor” (Chêne, 2008, p. 9).

Other examples of adaptation emerged naturally. That was the case of the development of action plans between CoST and procuring entities, designed to keep a follow up of the recommendations proposed to public entities. It was a format developed by CoST to prolong the dialogue started with assurance and to ensure procuring entities meet the improvements identified.

### 5.6. Additional elements

The elements listed above played a central role in the success of CoST Honduras. Making use of a policy window, the programme combined different elements and approaches – open data technology, targeted transparency, training, collaboration and inclusion – to enable a community of diverse stakeholders to find their voice to push momentum forward and influence policymaking.

Other elements can be added to the list as intermediate factors without which impact would not have been the same. One was the politicization and depoliticization dynamic adopted by the programme, marked by a close proximity with political leadership at the early stages to secure buy-in, followed by a gradual distancing to a neutral, non-political position, with technocrats as MSG members in order to consolidate the programme as an independent and trusted ‘consensus architect’.<sup>12</sup>

It could also be mentioned the strategy of non-adversarial coalition advocacy adopted by the programme which chose to engage with social and political forces on a constructive basis, avoiding unnecessary risks and articulating the programme’s positions on positive terms such as the reduction of inefficiencies and the improvement of cross-sectoral linkages. “To let the facts speak for themselves” was the way described by a programme advisor when clarifying the role of the programme. In a country where fear of reprisal is high, a technical, non-judgmental advocacy played a central role in preserving a safe space for citizens and civil society.

The causation analysis brings evidence of how CoST Honduras managed to use context and local factors to further momentum for change. In the next section, the outcomes associated with these interventions are assessed. The analysis serves to demonstrate that the impact of the programme would have been different in the absence of these intermediate factors.

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<sup>12</sup> See examples of politicization and depoliticization strategies of policy success in Compton & 't Hart (2019, 16–17). The expression ‘consensus architect’ was borrowed from there.

## 6. SHIFTS IN POLICY PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES: INTERMEDIATE FACTORS LINKED TO IMPACT

As mentioned before, by means of Decree 286-2009 the new political leadership established a top-down approach to policymaking, with hierarchical levels (and sub-levels) of planning and implementation, including for infrastructure matters. In terms of social accountability, although decentralisation and participation had been included in the Country Vision, the scoping study pointed to a weak utilisation of the existing participatory instances.

Despite this scenario, CoST Honduras was successful in changing the top-down relationship between authorities and stakeholders. The multi-actor collaboration established by the programme is at the heart of the transformation and created a hybrid democratic arena “at the interface of state and society” (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007, p. 1) where stakeholders from different backgrounds could voice their views and concerns to improve the delivery of public infrastructure.

The interventions of the programme paved the way for this new collaborative arena, helping to shape a new form of political exchange – a “new politics of engagement” (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007, p. 18) – which included actors that have not been able to participate in policy discussions before. In the words of the President of the Citizen Transparency Commissions: “Now that the opportunity has been given to civil society we have been empowered in these processes and we have the ability and opportunity to review how they are investing the funds to which we contribute to” (CoST Honduras, 2017b).

Building the capacity and confidence of the new actors to use the arena was reported as equally important as the arena itself, opening “spaces of possibilities” (Edelenbos, 1999) that did not exist. The institutionalisation of the MSG by law also brought stability to the collaboration and created the conditions for additional sets of impact to take root. First, the development of a trusted environment of cooperation and debate, protected against violence and reprisals. Second, the incentive for civil society to build alliances outside the limits of the programme, allowing the community of interests and the network of CoST to expand.

The new state-society dynamic changed how government officials reacted to social claims: “there are many irregularities, and we need to start to change, make [new] proceedings, provide capacity to our personnel; [...] our doors are open to anyone who wants to come in” (CoST Honduras, 2018a).

These improved outcomes can be traced to the participatory processes implemented and encouraged by the programme. Some examples provide

evidence of this causation. First, the implementation of PPPs saw improvement following action plans co-created by CoST and authorities. The case of the Tourist Corridor is an example. According to the assurance findings, the lack of appropriate studies led to an unfeasible project planning for the PPP which intended to generate 59% of the concessionaire minimum income from one tool booth placed in an area where residents were mostly low-income households. The findings were incorporated into an action plan which triggered a review of the financial model of the PPP, finally leading to the termination of the contract and the reassessment of the project.

Another example of improved outcomes was the introduction of a system to monitor compliance with health and safety conditions after the MSG voiced concerns regarding the lack of appropriate safety measures for road users. Also relevant to note was an action plan that established a management process to map out environment risks after assurance and the MSG had flagged environmental issues in projects developed by the National Port Agency.

In a country where policymaking is mostly siloed within government, having examples of a renewed state-society interaction is promising evidence of a new politics of engagement.

## 7. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS: WINDOW AND CONTEXT; INCREMENTALISM AND CHANGE

As an example of a politically smart, locally led programme (Booth & Unsworth, 2014), CoST Honduras combined opportunity and action, adopting a strategic approach that accounted for local intricacies and considered not only the call for improved transparency set out in the Country Vision, but also the need of dealing with entrenched unbalances in knowledge and power.

The trajectory of CoST Honduras helps to demonstrate the value of a policy window to trigger momentum for change, helping to advance the ‘what works and why’ policy research agenda. As put by Gaventa and Barrett: “the issue is not simply to ask ‘what difference does it make?’ but to understand further the conditions under which it makes a positive difference” (Gaventa & Barrett, 2010, p. 50).

But the importance of the policy window does not mean other factors should be disregarded in the analysis of change. The case of CoST Honduras demonstrates the importance of intermediate factors to amplify impact and create the conditions for future change. In this case, the process tracing analysis helped

to capture how a design and implementation sensitive to the nuances of context are essential to further momentum and prompt broader impact.

The case of CoST Honduras reinforces the importance of engaging with the real social and political dynamics to design and implement interventions. Not reinventing the wheel and using existing local structures when developing responses, building communities of shared interests, and going beyond the political economy to understand the visible, the hidden and the invisible proved essential to prolong momentum for change. Recognising the limitation of the streams approach as a sole explanation to understand change is a welcome advancement that the study offers to comparative policy analysis.

A second implication of the research relates to incrementalism and large-scale change. The work developed by CoST is focused on infrastructure. The goal is to improve transparency, accountability and participation in infrastructure policies so the outcome is better-quality projects and public services.

Although the programme's outcomes can be considered incremental and specific to infrastructure policies, the changes noted in the behaviour of public and private stakeholders, although embryonic, indicate that a reconfiguration of state-society relations is taking place, with a potential knock-on effect if the values of transparency, accountability and social participation are propagated outside the limits of the programme. Capacity building within and outside government are key enablers in generating transferrable skills that can serve to broader ends than the programme alone.

As evidenced in the literature, through incremental change major breakthroughs can be achieved by removing opposition that would exist if change would come all at once (Falletti, 2010; Mintrom, 2015). The non-adversarial advocacy employed by the programme and the strategy of building coalitions and using data in an objective manner helped to remove barriers and avoid confrontation. It can also pave the way for bigger change in the medium and long-term.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Understanding policy change is the holy grail of many practitioners and policymakers. By unpacking the conditions of change, better policies can be designed, and stories of success replicated.

In this research, the trajectory of CoST Honduras was used for many purposes. First, to identify the enabling conditions leading to the policy window. Secondly, to trace elements in the programme's design and delivery associated

with the change and, thirdly, to link policy change to the interventions of the programme. The goal was to offer concrete insights to practitioners and policy-makers and help untangle the complexities of change.

Some takeaways of the research should be highlighted. First, there is value in using policy windows and the streams approach to understand stories of change. It helps to identify pre-conditions of change and pinpoint the enabling conditions that can prepare the way for future successful change efforts. But institutional and social nuances, considered in this research as intermediate factors, cannot be neglected and should be an integral part to understand long-term impact of policy windows.

Second, the case of CoST Honduras demonstrates impact beyond infrastructure policies which is key for comparative research. Change in the behaviour of public and private stakeholders is indicative of a reconfiguration of state-society relations. In a context of limited freedoms, this shows how change can derive from incremental and localised interventions.

The third takeaway relates to path dependence and the importance of initial stages to lock in behaviour and practices. The fact that programme strategies were conceived based on empirically knowledge helped to create a sense of authenticity to the programme that inspired local actors to take ownership and navigate complexities during implementation.

A final note is about context. The pathway followed by CoST Honduras represents one of many possible routes to improve policy processes and outcomes. In this case, change was prompted by a policy window that prolonged momentum and fostered additional change in political and policy behaviour. Because change is not linear, this analysis reiterates the importance of leaving behind a view of how change ‘should happen’ according to theories and frameworks, embracing a fluid approach where change is inevitably organic, marked by adaptation, resilience and ‘working with the grain’ (Levy, 2014).

Although this research focused on elements of success, CoST Honduras is not a story without roadblocks. Stakeholders reported that authorities continue to delay disclosure, which requires a continuous follow up to keep SISOCS updated. The Covid-19 pandemic and hurricanes Eta and Iota also added a new test to prove the programme’s capacity to adapt, particularly in a scenario of social distancing, increased corruption risks and shrinking civic space. But CoST Honduras is a story of change with evidence of real shifts in political agency, in the politics of engagement and in society’s capacity to coordinate and act. This is not small – and can generate further ripple effects beyond infrastructure itself.

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