# REFLECTIONS FROM COVID-19 DATA TRACKERS

HOW TO MAKE DATA USEFUL

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## **Executive Summary**



As the open governance agenda has evolved over the last decade, one of the constants has been efforts to enable people to use data to enhance transparency, participation, and accountability. This has included initiatives to enable users to track the use of public resources. This work has generated a wealth of insights that should inform how to effectively use data for participation and accountability in response to crises, such as the current pandemic. This report assesses the extent to which recent COVID trackers are building on these insights.

We developed a <u>checklist</u> to evaluate the design of COVID-19 trackers and tools to push for transparency, participation, and accountability to lead to better service delivery, and applied it to six trackers (all featured in the Global Integrity <u>COVID-19</u>, <u>Fiscal Governance & Anti-Corruption Database</u>) to evaluate how much these trackers reflected learnings in the sector.

The good news: trackers in general did give users options to dig into data further. But unfortunately, most were not designed to keep up with fast moving data and resources. And most disconcertingly, trackers were also falling into the "build it and they will come" trap, which has haunted open data tools.

We hope the practical examples we laid out here can help inform future efforts, and prepare us for the challenges in using data to fight corruption and improve livelihoods.

## Introduction

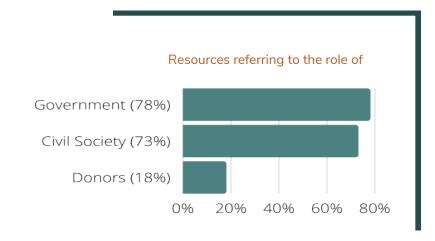


When large sums of money start flowing in different directions and for disparate purposes, new windows open for corruption. Simultaneously, when these windows open, civil society organizations spring into action, applying innovative approaches to corruption risks.

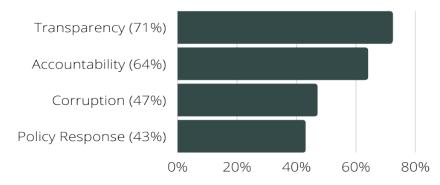
The past decade has yielded an impressive proliferation of tools designed to track resources and pursue accountability. Building on this experience, the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged actors from civil society and government to quickly develop new approaches and tools to track funding assigned to the pandemic response, in the hopes that this would lead to an effective use of resources and improved results.

In an effort to support the work of Global Integrity's team and partners, and enable them to learn efficiently around geographies and sectors, Global Integrity launched the COVID-19, Fiscal Governance & Anti-Corruption Database in July 2020. The database is a repository of 800+ resources (publications, webinars, etc.) curated by Global Integrity. The information included comes primarily from governance reform actors, thought leaders, and donor partners. Users can use the database to navigate and use existing resources to inform programmatic decisions, as well as identify gaps in current response and recovery efforts. While the database does not provide direct support for expenditure tracking, it does compile critical resources that those monitoring COVID-19 spending can use as a foundation for their work.

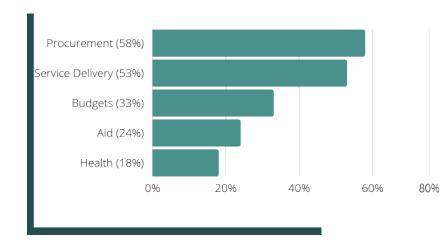
An overview of the 834\* resources added to Global Integrity's COVID-19, Fiscal Governance and corruption database can be found here. The database includes:



#### Resources related to governance issues such as



Materials that cover issues related to the flow of public resources with a focus on



\*Last updated in April, 2021.

Monitoring COVID-19 spending is a critical step towards ensuring that resources are being effectively used and benefiting the citizens they intend to benefit. Yet, the same challenges we see in many transparency, accountability, and participation (TPA) initiatives - such as the publication of bad quality data, limited use of the tools by target audiences, or a failure to connect citizen action and accountability - may also occur in these new COVID-19-specific tools. Furthermore, the fact that many of these new tools were developed quickly and in response to a fast-spreading pandemic means questions around user engagement and any potential combinations of online and offline strategies may not be fully fleshed out.

These tools are not striving to build transparency for transparency's sake: they are stepping stones on the path of improved public service delivery and can help in the deployment of health testing and economic relief measures. These outcomes are themselves intermediate steps in the ultimate goal to ensure people live better - and healthier - lives.

Given the responsive and at times rushed nature of tool creation, we set out to do our own rapid review of some of these tools to see how they do or do not integrate lessons learned over recent years by the open data, TAP, and anticorruption communities in their designs.

# Our Approach



To understand whether these tools are having an effect on the lives of people who should be benefitting from COVID-19 resource deployment, we would need to conduct a more rigorous evaluation to assess the size and validity of an impact against a counterfactual, which would require significant time and resources. Such an evaluation might be worth doing (more on this point at the end of this brief), but we decided to start with a first tier question about something necessary if not sufficient to the bigger issue of impact: do these tools leverage best practices in designing and implementing TPA approaches?

We began by scanning Global Integrity's extensive (and highly filterable!) <u>COVID-19</u>, <u>Fiscal Governance & Anti-Corruption Database</u> and developed a shortlist of entries focusing on those categorized as Tools. This resulted in a list of 29 entries, and you can find the shortlist <u>here</u>. We ultimately narrowed this list further to six resources that were diverse in their geographic focus and similar in their intermediate goals of presenting COVID-19 resource data that could be used for monitoring, feedback, and accountability.

In parallel with identifying a sample size of tools, we developed a method to assess the degree to which the tools integrated best practices for transparency, participation, and accountability. This method takes them as all integral parts of a holistic process, which is also how we reviewed the tools. For the sake of developing the criteria, it is helpful to think about the rationale connecting COVID-19 tracking tools to each of these criteria (transparency, participation, and accountability):

#### **OVERALL RATIONALE**

TAP tools will improve the response to COVID-19 when they provide useful information that effectively enables target audiences to answer questions that are relevant to them and take effective action to engage other relevant stakeholders in their contexts.

#### TRANSPARENCY CRITERIA

to assess whether data are complete, disaggregated, and available in formats that enable target audiences to answer questions that are relevant for them.

#### PARTICIPATION CRITERIA

to assess whether the resource actually encourages potential users to interact with and use the tool by including information that responds to target users' interests and provides them with examples or guidance about how to use the information to achieve those goals.

#### **ACCOUNTABILITY CRITERIA**

to assess whether the tool provides information about potential actions that target users can take for engaging government or other relevant stakeholders to provide feedback, demand accountability, and/or generate stories or complaints.

Finally, we relied on the hypothesis that tools that embed best practices in their design are more likely to be useful and used for accountability, and are ultimately more likely to improve how effectively COVID-19 resources are being used. The checklist that we used to assess each tool is available <a href="here">here</a>, and we would love your feedback on this.

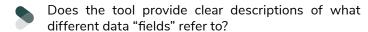
The checklist covers the following questions:



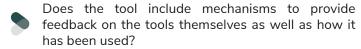
Does the tool include the source and intended use of funding for all data?

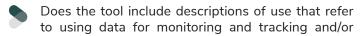


Does the tool allow for the filtering and disaggregation of national-level data by region, state or locality?









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In addition to these design elements, we coded several more general characteristics of the tools, including who they were designed by and for and whether the tool is connected to a larger project or initiative.

There are clear limitations to this approach. First, although we defined these variables as objective and binary (yes the tool does this - or no it does not), most of the elements that these variables seek to assess are not perfectly objective or binary. We sought to mitigate this limitation in a few ways:

- Developing relatively objective proxy indicators (for example, are data disaggregated at the sub-national level) to estimate more nuanced design questions (does the tool provide information that can be broken down to a level that users would find useful for tracking and advocacy).
- Reviewing each tool independently by two different people, with these reviewers discussing disagreements to settle on a final agreed-upon response to each question for each tool.

A second limitation is that the exercise was not designed to rank or score individual tools; instead we hope that this provides some insight into how different tools/resources take into account transparency, accountability, and participation principles in their design, from the perspective of potential users (including us). Ultimately, we hope and believe that understanding these design trends can help us better understand "what works" and can support efforts to make these resources better for designers and users alike.

## What we learned



Our review is based on the website descriptions of each tool. All of the tools that we reviewed were final versions (as opposed to prototypes) and were generally spin-offs or additions to existing platforms to track the use of public resources. These tools were designed and led by CSOs, governments, or a combination of the two. All of these tools were connected to existing processes of proactive government transparency or ongoing efforts to promote informed citizen engagement and accountability in budget, expenditure, and procurement tracking.

We assumed the relationship to existing efforts to be positive, as it meant that organizations reacted to the situation and built on their work; pivoting it to make it more relevant. However, it would be valuable to conduct additional research to understand whether these collaborations work well and to understand where interaction among government agencies, CSOs and people using the data occurs online as countries respond to the pandemic with restrictions on in-person meetings.

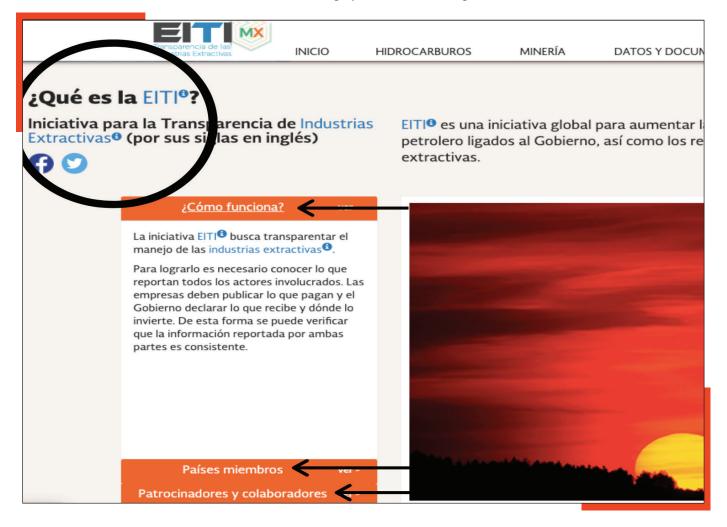
We found that most of the tools do not include a clear description - e.g. why they were developed, what their goal is, where the information comes from and what it means, and only half of them have some description of who their target users are and the types of actions that tool developers envision these users engaging in. The lack of clear descriptions of the tools and what they include, and as we discuss later how they are updated, can also hinder the re-use of these tools and the data they present as potential advocates or developers might not find it reliable enough or find it hard to see the links between the tool and data and the wider political and technical process required for service delivery.

These mixed results in terms of tool description and definition of user might be hinting to the prevalence of "build them and they would come" tools, or, to put it differently, of tools that disclose information in the hopes that a generic and often ideal user can make something out of the information presented and use it in ways that can lead to greater effectiveness, accountability, or improved service delivery.

## Presenting context and rationale in tracking tools

In addition to presenting clear data within the trackers themselves, it is important to:

- present context and background for tools and the data that they
  make available to the potential users this means providing clear
  information about who has developed the tool, for what purpose,
  and what information people can find in it.
- provide potential users with enough context about the issue on which the data in the tool focuses - this should include at minimum explanations about resource flows, regulation related to the data being opened, and existing efforts or work on the issue.



A good example can be found in the Mexican Extractives Transparency Initiative (EITI) portal. This tool includes an "about us" section that presents the EITI process and the state of play of the process in the country, the role that civil society plays in it, and the latest news in the process. In addition, the home page presents a general summary of the data, relevant links to related laws and regulation, and outputs from the EITI process by government and civil society. This additional information enables potential users to not only get data about the flow of resources in the extractive sector but also to put this data in context and better understand how they can use it.

## Can data be disaggregated?

A key component of transparency is not just availability of data, but the ability to dig into the parts of the data most relevant to specific users. With the geographic variability of the

pandemic, the ability to disaggregate data by geography may be the difference between identifying a responsible party from whom to demand accountability and the myriad funds lost to administrative error or corruption. For this reason, we assessed tools on a definition of disaggregation and usability. We found that four tools allowed for disaggregation by geography—state, region, or another lower administrative division. Three of these allow lower level administrative data to be viewed or downloaded alone.

Regardless of disaggregation, a key tenet of transparency is that users be empowered to interrogate the data on their own. We assessed tools for whether the data were downloadable as spreadsheets or .csv files. All but two made data easily downloadable. The other two provided the raw data, though in a less accessible format. Additionally, only two tools use open data standards and either enable the download of the data through an API or are linked to an API that can be accessed by users. Making data easily downloadable is a quick fix that would increase the usefulness of these and future similar tools.

## Does the tool provide clearly identifiable sources for the data?

As long as we are downloading data, it's useful to know what each of the fields in a dataset represents with definitions that are understandable across users. Ensuring the correct definitions allows for more honed data use and advocacy which in turn helps users correctly interpret the data they are manipulating. In this area, the tools we reviewed performed well: all but one tool had clearly identified the source of each data entry and four had easily identifiable and understandable definitions for each variable/field in the data. For example, we found several tools that distinguished between sources of funding and the spending body, making it easier for users to understand how different actors are involved in resource delivery and allocations. For some data fields that are not self-explanatory, some tools provided further descriptions, definitions, or categories of items like "type of procurement." This characteristic is especially important to ensure that users can correctly employ the data, even in ways that the tool designers have not necessarily envisioned. Unfortunately the two tools that do not provide clear descriptions are likely to be very difficult to use. The lack of definitions may prove a significant roadblock for users to actually be able to interact with the data.

## Are the datasets being updated?

Three of the six tools had data that were current: the data presented had been updated within the last three months before our review. All three of these updated tools had clear dates associated with the last update, which is encouraging. A review of best practices suggests that data should be regularly updated with clear and actionable processes and timelines for updating the data. For some tools, this involved a regular scraping of available government data, but where this functionality is not available or feasible, tools should include information about future updates and work in regular revisions. These updating processes are likely affected by COVID. Governments may be delayed in their own updating or disbursement processes, slowing the flow of information. This challenge underscores the importance of putting in place protocols and adhering to standards of transparency for the tools themselves. If they are to be used for accountability, then the mere fact that data is not available could be cause for action, but if a user does not know the data are missing, it is impossible to act on that knowledge. For example, if a tool has not been updated in three months, there may be many underlying reasons. If this same tool informs users that it will be updated monthly if data from the government is available, then users can better assess the likely cause of the breakdown (government provision of data) and act accordingly. If alternatively the tool does not provide information on how and when it will be updated, users have no way of knowing where the breakdown in data provision has occurred.



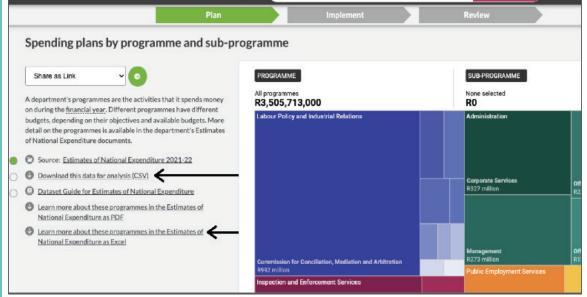
A common set of challenges when trying to use public resource data is the availability, quality, and timeliness of the data presented in tools. These problems often relate to issues with data production and publication that those developing resource tracking tools may not have any control over. Nevertheless, these reformers can take important measures such as:



- Making explicit how often the data is updated, such as this platform for procurement red flags in Chile.
- Using data standards such as those for <u>open contracting</u>, <u>aid transparency</u>, <u>extractive industries</u>, <u>fiscal data</u>, and <u>infrastructure projects</u> to improve the quality of the information.
- Providing clear data dictionaries that include definitions about the data fields presented and relationships between data points, like <u>Uruguay's</u> Open Fiscal Data portal.

Explicitly stating the data sources and timeframes covered by data sets, as done by the Vulekamali tool which links to the sources and provides access to different versions of raw data including PDF documents and spreadsheets.

Show data for a financial year 2018-19 2019-20 2020-21 2021-22 Plan Implement Review



Making clear what data is available and what gaps might be in the data, for instance the approach used by <u>Monitor Karewa</u> uses the secuencial number of contracts to review what contracts have been cancelled or are not published.

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Presenting explicitly updates or changes in the information presented, including changes in the spending plans and/or projects. The <u>COMVER</u> platform in Veracruz shows the program and projects that have been cancelled across years which enable users to know what investments are not happening and track where this cancellations are happening.



# Do the tools provide examples of how they can be used?

While some data users approach trackers with a clear idea of how they will utilize data on the site, best practice suggests that tools should provide potential users with ideas, such as use cases, for how someone could take and utilize the data for monitoring, tracking, and ultimately advocacy to improve resource effectiveness. Only two of the six tools we reviewed include any examples (including brief descriptions) of how data could be used by those visiting the site. Interestingly, in both cases, the examples provided are guidance presented as hypotheticals, as opposed to case studies of how the data has been used; this suggests that tool developers do not need to provide real-life examples to make recommendations for how they could be used.

Without such examples, there is a danger of tools falling into a "build it and they will come" trap, in which developers assume that those who find their way to the data will know how to use them, although this may not actually be the case. Looking outside of the trackers themselves, there is good guidance and recommendations for how tool designers can address this gap and make it clearer how data they are including in their tracker can be used. Some great resources for this include the Open Contracting Data Standard's Guide to collect, publish and visualize COVID-19 procurement data, tutorials from the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency on using and presenting budget data, and Development Gateway's guide to "Designing Data Strategies."

# How are people engaging with the data?

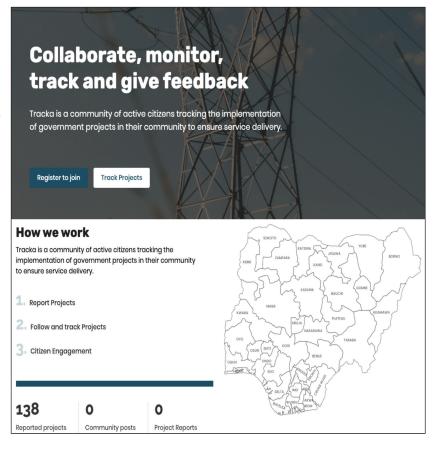
Most tools reviewed provide some form of interaction opportunity for the users which range from an email address, to a chat bot, to links to contact other organizations/ agencies that users can reach out to, to a dedicated option or space for providing comments, evidence, or complaints. The opportunities that these engagement options provide to users are often not clearly explained; only one tool provides different channels for purposes like providing feedback on the tool and the data in it. comments and interaction with others to discuss the information, and denouncing instances of corruption. The wide range of options and the ways in which these interaction channels work also make it hard to assess the extent to which users are interacting with the tool or using it to advance their goals. Only two tools provide some evidence that anyone engaged with the tool, by leaving comments or developing blogs or other products with the information provided. Even in the case where users can provide complaints, it is not clear whether tool implementers have received any or what they have done with such information.

#### Users and uses of the data

A good practice for designing and implementing tools for tracking the use of public money is having a clear understanding regarding the expected users and how they would like to use the data. This understanding can help with tailoring how data is presented and visualized, identifying what channels for interaction and feedback can be more appropriate, and providing them with guidance and opportunities for putting the data to use.

Useful tools for understanding data users include the development of <u>user personas</u> and <u>use cases</u>. An alternative for organizations that do not have the resources for these approaches is continuously <u>iterating with partners</u> to build on their existing work and experience and engaging users as they <u>develop stories and try to use</u> the data provided by the tools.

Additionally, it's also important to open up interaction channels with users through which reformers implementing tools can get feedback on the information they are providing, promote dialogue and collaboration among users, and even open channels for users to share evidence and complaints. The <a href="Tracka">Tracka</a> tool in Nigeria provides an example of this as users can register access data and share evidence that <a href="BudglT">BudglT</a> - the leading organization - is taking to demand accountability based on this information. Setting up these sort of channels requires careful consideration about the effort required to provide responses and actually act on the feedback or complaints received in a transparent way; however they can be a very effective mechanism to help data translate to action.



## What's next?



This review and these takeaways on their own reveal important patterns in the development of a purposefully selected set of tools - and point to some recommendations for design updates for these and other tools. Notably, the adherence to these best practices drops off as we move from transparency to participation and accountability; tools largely make data available in a digestible, downloadable, and filterable way. However, many design elements (some relatively easy to integrate) that would likely help increase participation with the tool and resulting accountability actions are missing. The learnings above reveal ways in which developers could address these gaps, including examples from the tools we reviewed that provide helpful guidance. As we noted above, we have made the checklist publicly available for tool developers, partners, and users to identify strengths and potential gaps outside of this sample of six. We would love to hear about your experience using this checklist!

# Moving beyond tools: processes to improve accountability

Opening up data on the use of public money is a linchpin for effective citizen engagement, government accountability, and improving development results. However, experience and research on the issue has shown that information is not enough. Good practices for increasing the impact of efforts to track resources include having a clear understanding of the contexts where these initiatives are implemented, having targeted and continuous engagement with users, and use of evidence and learning to continuously adapt and improve these initiatives.

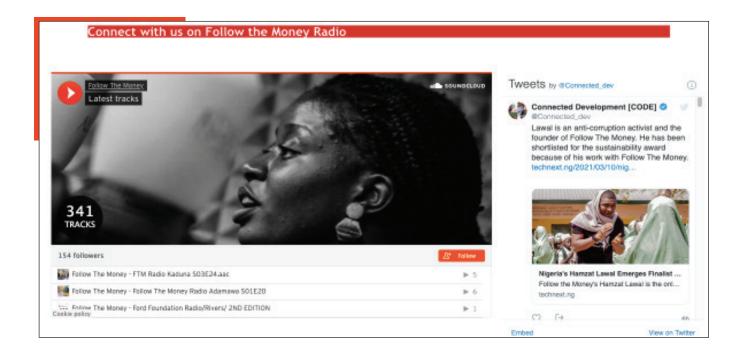
Examples of these sort of processes include:



The work by Connected Development and their I Follow the money network which combines a digital network to share data, continued engagement with marginalized communities to understand their needs and amplify their voices, and advocacy at different levels of government to demand responsiveness and accountability.



The work by the Interamerican Development Bank and several Latin American governments to open data on government spending and testing different ways in which this data is used to achieve changes in accountability and service delivery, and using that evidence to continuously improve how the Mapa inversiones tool is implemented.



Finally, we want to acknowledge that this review was rapid and focused on the means (transparency and participation and accountability) to the end, but not the end itself (COVID-19 resources that are effectively used to improve the health, livelihood and wellbeing of those most affected by the pandemic). All of the tools we reviewed (as well as those from the larger shortlist) are seeking to strengthen transparency, accountability, and participation as a means to improve distribution and effectiveness of COVID-19 resources; however, examining higher level outcomes is outside the scope of our review. What reviews like this one can do is to start to identify where these mechanisms may not be effective – because if the tools are not achieving transparency and participation and accountability, they are unlikely to contribute to more effective resource allocation and use.

To get to this ultimate goal, we would need to work closely with partners to assess where they could strengthen their work, not only according to the criteria we discuss above (a necessary first step) but also towards the goal of ultimately improving effective resource distribution and use. This would involve rigorous research and evaluation to see whether COVID-19 fiscal governance and anti-corruption tools are reaching the people that the designers hope they do, being used by these people and organizations in effective ways, and ultimately making COVID-19 funding more effective. It would also require the use of clear theories of change that articulate the deployment of these tools with additional relevant actions to shift technical and political dynamics that enable the persistence and growth of corruption in their contexts.

Specifically, we think that taking an adaptive evaluation and learning approach would create a positive and supportive environment to improve these tools and make them more effective. Taking an adaptive approach means that tool developers can use evaluation strategies that are rigorous and informative, but also rapid, to see "what is working" – or not – in order to update designs in real time and take the additional actions that can help turn data into effective action for accountability, anti-corruption, and ultimately, improved development results. By approaching these evaluations in a rigorous fashion, we can uncover answers to bigger questions that other tool/tracker designers and users have.



Tool being reviewed	
Link to tool	

#### Basic information about the tool

Is it rapid prototyping or is it a final product?	
Does the tool include a description?	
Was the tool developed by the government or civil society?	
Is the tool meant to be used by government or civil society?	
Are the target users of the information clearly identified?	
Is the tool connected to a wider process?	

#### Checklist

Tool states source of funding for all entries	
Tool states intended/designated use of funding for all entries	
Data in tool is disaggregated by State/sub-national area	
Data for single state/sub-national area can be downloaded or viewed alone	
Ability to access raw data through the site/tool	
Clearly stated source of data for each entry	
Definitions and descriptions of fields are available and easy to understand	
Data in the tool has been updated or is not completely static	
Tool includes information about how the tool designers will be updating the data	
Material from main site describes at least one potential use for data	
There is a mechanism to present or provide feedback on the tool	
The mechanism to present or provide feedback has been used	
Description of use explicitly refers to monitoring, tracking	
Description of use explicitly refers to advocacy, outreach, dissemination	

## Annex 2. List of acronyms

ACA Anti-Corruption Agencies

ANEEJ Africa Network for Environment and Economic Justice

**AICCON** Association of Indigenous Construction Contractors of Nigeria

**BPP** Bureau of Public Procurement

**CAMA** Companies and Allied Matter Act

CAC Corporate Affairs Commission

**CCB** Code of Conduct Bureau

**Centre LSD** African Centre for Leadership, Strategy & Development

CISLAC Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre

CODE Civil Society Organizations
CODE Connected Development

**D4Acc** Data for Accountability Initiative

**FOI** Freedom of Information Act

Gl-ACE Global Integrity Anti-Corruption Evidence

**HEDA Resources Centre**Human and Environmental Development Agenda

MDAs Ministries Departments and Agencies

NASME National Association of Small and Medium Enterprises

NIPSA Nigeria Private Sector Alliance

**NEITI** Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiatives

**NEITIBO**NEITI Beneficial Ownership

NOCOPO

National Open Contracting Portal

OCDS

Open Contracting Data Standard

OCP

Open Contracting Partnership

**ODC** Open Data Charter

**OGP** Open Government Partnership

**PLSI** Paradigm Leadership Support Initiative

PTCIJ Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism

PPDC Public and Private Development Center

PCC Public Complaints Commission

**PMWG** Procurement Monitoring Working Group

**PWYF** Publish What You Found

SFTAS States Fiscal Transparency, Accountability and Sustainability

TAI Transparency and Accountability Initiative



Agency Report (2018, February). 12 Nigerian states miss out on a N1.37bn World Bank fiscal transparency grant. Premium Times. Retrieved from <a href="https://www.premiumtimesng.com/business/business-news/378003-12-nigerian-states-miss-out-of-n1-37bn-world-bank-fiscal-transparency-grant.html">https://www.premiumtimesng.com/business/business-news/378003-12-nigerian-states-miss-out-of-n1-37bn-world-bank-fiscal-transparency-grant.html</a>

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