Social Accountability and Public Service Delivery in Rural Africa

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Social accountability as a tool for development planning is gaining foothold in international donor circles. It is concerned with the responsibility and responsiveness of state authorities, as well as the ability of citizens to make claims and hold those who exercise power to account for their actions.

Esbern Friis-Hansen, efh@diis.dk

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Social accountability focuses on the demand-side of good governance. It aims at strengthening the voices of citizens to demand greater accountability and responsiveness directly from public officials and service providers. As such, social accountability can be broadly defined as citizen-led action to demand accountability for providers. It can be understood as institutional arrangements to facilitate the participation of ordinary citizens in the public policy processes.

Social accountability is widely seen as part of the on-going process of democratization and as a reaction to the so-called 'governance gap', for example, the continued inadequate governance of service provision in rural Sub-Saharan Africa. Social accountability measures aim at increasing the cost-effectiveness of investments in public services. By supporting social accountability initiatives at the local level, international donor agencies hope that civil society and citizen groups can hold the state accountable for using the budget as planned and prevent financial leakage. Many social accountability mechanisms have become an integral component of the 'second-generation reforms' that were introduced to improve institutional arrangements ('getting institutions right') after the structural adjustment policies of the mid-1990s. The focus is commonly on good governance through the institutionalization of participatory approaches. In addition, the rise in social accountability initiatives is also associated with a more radical agenda focusing

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Social accountability is not simply a technical issue. Technical social accountability initiatives often ignore the political context and power politics in which they take place. Rights-based approaches may add value to programs due to their increased focus on political transformation and power relations.

New institutions that can co-produce services may be required. Working within existing institutions has long been regarded as a practice of good governance within decentralization programs. However, deepening democratization with a view to enhancing both quality and access to services require legitimate organizations that are dedicated to specific users, and such organizations seldom exist in rural Africa.

'Invited political space' can enhance access to and the quality of service. New intermediary political spaces, created by local associations and social movements that are ivolved in democratic mediation, emerge as a source of change and are considered to have democratic potential. However, this requires political support and technical collaboration from local government.

Training for transformation of local government staff and institutions is needed. Social accountability initiatives are often implemented without adequate provisions for assisting the required change in local government service providers' mode of operation. Changing accountability relationships between service providers and citizens, along with devolution of resources and powers, provide an important enabling environment for the local realization of rights and participation in development and governance.

This policy brief recapitulates key findings and recommendations of a study commissioned to analyse impact and lessons learned from support for social accountability in rural Africa – both as technical tool within the context of decentralization and in terms of broader political engagement.

on 'autonomous' spaces of participatory governance through support for citizens' struggles and social movements linked to rights-based approaches conceptualizing states as 'duty bearers' responsible for fulfilling their obligations to citizens.

FOUR DRIVERS FOR SUPPORTING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES

Support for social accountability mechanisms in rural Sub-Saharan Africa has increased over the past decade and is becoming firmly anchored in government policies and donor and NGO strategies. The four sets of drivers behind this increased support are:

- *Improving public service provision.* A key argument for promoting social accountability mechanisms is that these can increase the cost-effectiveness of investments in public services, since involving the citizens is likely to result in improved planning and priorities, better monitoring of activities, and checks on how the budget is spent. This is thought to result in better access and quality of public services for all.

- *Local participation in democratic governance.* Support for social accountability can be seen as part of the ongoing process of democratization that started with the introduction of multiparty elections in the early 1990s, followed by decentralization reforms and periodic elections of local government councillors. Responsibility for public service provision in a number of sectors (including health, education, agriculture and roads) was devolved to local government in the late 1990s. However, this has not resulted in citizens becoming closer to the state as many had hoped. Since the early 2000s many countries have undertaken a process of deepening democracy, with users of services gaining influence over the governance of the units of service provision (so-called 'invited political space').

- *Holding states accountable to use budget as planned.* With the reduced funding of projects and increasingly coordinated multi-donor support for central government's implementation of policies, international donor agencies lost some of their direct control over investments. However, the concern over corruption has remained as strong as ever. By supporting social accountability initiatives at the local level, international donor agencies hope that civil society and citizen groups can hold the state accountable for using the budget as planned and prevent financial leakage.

- Human rights-based approaches that take their points of departure in the internationally recognized framework of political, social, economic and civic rights, which are translated into shared standards for the state's obligations and citizen's claims to rights. A human rights-based approach, it is held, heightens the emphasis on accountability relations between states and individuals by conceptualizing states as 'duty-bearers' responsible for fulfilling their obligations towards their citizens. It is a relatively new and still rare phenomenon in rural Africa that people demand services as rights rather than privileges.

FIVE MECHANISMS FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Support for social accountability initiatives in rural Africa have taken five different approaches, namely public expenditure tracking surveys (PETS), participatory budgeting, community-based monitoring, participatory planning and priority setting and demand drive service provision.

1. Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS)

A Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) is a quantitative survey of the supply side of public services that tracks the flow of public funds and material from the central government level, through the administrative hierarchy and all the way to the frontline service providers. PETS aim to improve the quality of service delivery at the local level by seeking to answer questions such as: Do public funds and material resources end up where they are supposed to? And if not, why are those funds being diverted?
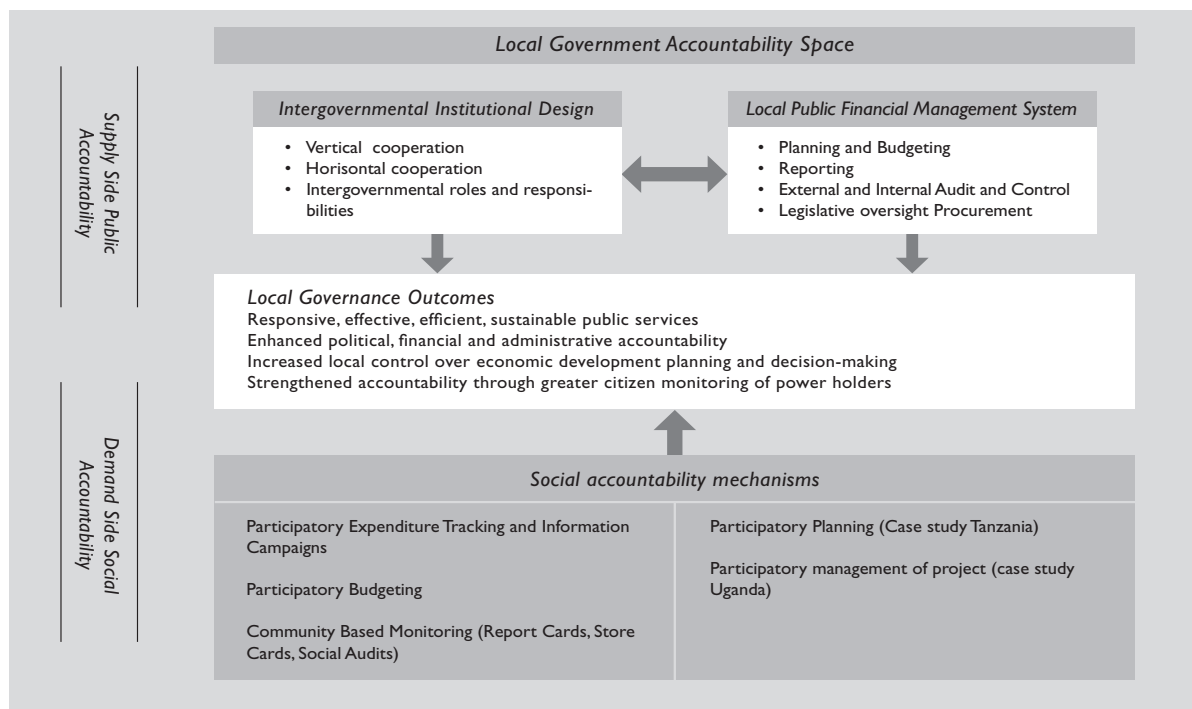
Lessons from Uganda indicate that PETS can be an effective tool to measuring how much of the funding intended for service providers actually reach the intended beneficiaries, at which level the leakages occur and the equality of disbursements. In response to a leakage of funds for district schools that was revealed by a 1996 Uganda PETS, government initiated an information campaign that published monthly transfers of capitation grants to districts schools. A follow up PETS in 2002 showed that the share of funds that reached the schools increased from 20% in 1995 to 80% in 2001.

2. Participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting is an entry point and mechanism through which citizens attempt to influence local government's decision-making. Participatory budgeting is a local and bottom-up approach that focuses on how public funds are prioritized and used, with less attention being paid to the revenue-producing side of the equation. There is evidence from various pilot studies that participatory budgeting has contributed to making budgets and plans more responsive to citizens' preferences and better adapted to their needs.

Experience from Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Uganda reveals that the introduction of participatory budgeting processes creates opportunities for dialogue and negotiation

LOCAL GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Local Government Accountability Space		

Supply Side Public Accountability

Intergovernmental Institutional Design
- Vertical cooperation
- Horisontal cooperation
- Intergovernmental roles and responsibilities

Local Public Financial Management System
- Planning and Budgeting
- Reporting
- External and Internal Audit and Control
- Legislative oversight Procurement

Local Governance Outcomes
Responsive, effective, efficient, sustainable public services
Enhanced political, financial and administrative accountability
Increased local control over economic development planning and decision-making
Strengthened accountability through greater citizen monitoring of power holders

Demand Side Social Accountability

Social accountability mechanisms

Participatory Expenditure Tracking and Information Campaigns

Participatory Budgeting

Community Based Monitoring (Report Cards, Store Cards, Social Audits)

Participatory Planning (Case study Tanzania)

Participatory management of project (case study Uganda)

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between citizens and government that can result in a new relationship and mode of mutual understanding and interaction between citizens, CSOs and the municipal council. However, in spite of the positive development, there are major challenges, including the high costs and the resistance from politicians and local elites. Contextual factors that contribute to the success of participatory budgeting include a stable multiparty political system and a well-implemented decentralization reform alongside capable and legitimate civil society organizations.

3. Community-based monitoring
Community-based monitoring of public service delivery involves using a set of tools designed to create a dialogue between citizens and local government officials and service providers. The logic behind using such tools is that a lack of relevant information regarding the status of service delivery and community entitlements, coupled with a failure to agree on reasonable expectations from service providers, constrain people in holding service providers accountable. The objective is to ensure that the priorities of the poorest and most vulnerable groups are taken into account. The tools are:

- *Citizen report cards* are a type of survey that aims to obtain feedback from users of public services directly by asking citizens to rate the provisions of public services, such as water authorities, primary schools or municipal councils.
- *Community scorecards* are a reporting method that links service providers to the community and facilitates assessments of services in order to negotiate improvements.

- *Social audit* consists of an open and participatory review of official reports of works and expenditure. It represents a voluntary collaborative effort between a public organization and local communities, where the organization conducting the audit has to use its own resources to locate the official reports presented.

4. Participatory planning and priority setting: the case of the Tanzanian health sector
As part of a participatory planning and priority approach in the Tanzanian health sector, a Council Health Management Team headed by the District Medical Officer, prepares a District health plan and submits it to a District Health board that consists of four council staff members, District Medical Officer, four elected community members, and representatives of faith-based organizations and the private sector. An evaluation has revealed that while participatory planning and priority institutions have been put in place and are percieved as positive, the local communities' actual influence over the planning process remains limited because of inadequate information and communication between different layers of government, the continued dominance of the District Medical Officer, the inadequate voice and legitimacy of community representatives on the board and the generally low level of discretion left to local government.

Social accountability mechanisms need to be better institutionalized and linked to existing governance structures. Moreover, NGOs could support the process of building capacity of both staff and community members in drawing up budgets and planning activities.

5. Deepening democracy: The case of agricultural advisory services in Uganda

Deepening democracy aims to open up political spaces for citizens' direct participation in the demand-driven governance of selected areas of decentralized service provision. Deepening democracy shifts power from central ministries to the lowest appropriate levels with a view to enhance citizens' influence. In Uganda, the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS – a body consisting of representatives of farmers groups) devolved control over the use of the budget for agricultural advisory services from the Ministry of Agriculture to new farmer institutions created by NAADS, the so-called Farmer Fora.

The reform is radical in that it assigned new roles and responsibilities, stimulated the formation of new farmers' institutions, and required both local government staff and organized citizens to learn new skills and capacities. Farmer Fora needed the capacity to articulate needs collectively, prioritize the budget, select to whom and how services are to be provided and inputs procured, and undertake participatory monitoring to ensure the quality of services and to prevent leakage. Local government extension staff needed the capacity to facilitate the involvement of private service providers, the technical back-up for new farmer institutions, and to act as an 'honest broker' in the tender process.

Lessons learned

- Devolving direct control over how to spend the budget to organized users of services is a very effective mechanism for enhancing social accountability.
- Deepening democracy is challenging for all stakeholders involved and its success depends on adequate investment in farmers' institutional development; on preparing local government staff for their transformed roles and responsibilities; and on allowing success to be shared with or attributed to politicians by involving them in the process.

GENERAL POLICY LESSONS ABOUT SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

- A gap continues to exist between the intention to institutionalize participation and the reality which excludes poor and marginalized citizens. This can be attributed to failures to implement or sustain policy gains, resistance to transfers of resources and capacities to lower levels of governments, elite capture, and reprisals against those who challenge the status quo.
- Creating invited political space through social accountability initiatives can enhance the effectiveness of the participatory approach to development. However, technical social accountability initiatives cannot stand alone and must engage with the local political context in which the initiatives take place.
- Participatory governance and demand driven service provision initiatives are more likely to be successful for services that are highly discretionary and require co-production to ensure quality.
- Social accountability mechanisms are often seriously under-institutionalized and would be more effective if they were anchored in sub-district level institutions consisting of representatives of users. If services are offered to all citizens without requiring them to contribute or engage as organized users, co-production will not take place, and the quality of services may decline.
- There remains a lack of evidence regarding the existence of a causal relationship between democracy and development. Review of literature reveals several positive findings, however so far there is not enough evidence to support the claim that participatory governance causes improvements in government performance. There is a need for research-based impact evaluations linking efforts to support social accountability interventions with improved access and improved quality of services for the poor.

FURTHER READING

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