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SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice

Carmen Malena, with
Reiner Forster
Janmejay Singh

THE WORLD BANK

Abstract

This paper highlights the World Bank's growing interest and involvement in social accountability initiatives, which derive from its core goals of promoting poverty reduction and effective and sustainable development. It addresses five fundamental questions: (i) what is social accountability; (ii) why is it important; (iii) what are its core features; (iv) what are the key applications; and (v) what are the factors that underpin its success. The paper also explores the linkages between the concept and other key issues such as governance, gender, participation, empowerment and rights.

Social accountability is defined as an approach toward building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations that participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability. In a public sector context, social accountability refers to a broad range of actions and mechanisms that citizens, communities, independent media and civil society organizations can use to hold public officials and public servants accountable. These include, among others, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, monitoring of public service delivery, investigative journalism, public commissions and citizen advisory boards. These citizen-driven accountability measures complement and reinforce conventional mechanisms of accountability such as political checks and balances, accounting and auditing systems, administrative rules and legal procedures.

Evidence suggests that social accountability mechanisms can contribute to improved governance, increased development effectiveness through better service delivery, and empowerment. While the range of social accountability mechanisms is wide and diverse, key common building blocks include obtaining, analyzing and disseminating information, mobilizing public support, and advocating and negotiating change. Critical factors of success include: access to and effective use of information, civil society and state capacities and synergy between the two. Ultimately, the effectiveness and sustainability of social accountability mechanisms is improved when they are "institutionalized" and when the state's own "internal" mechanisms of accountability are rendered more transparent and open to civic engagement. Social accountability mechanisms to be effective on the long run need to be institutionalized and linked to existing governance structures and service delivery systems.

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For additional copies of this paper, please contact:

Social Development
The World Bank
1818 H Street, NW
Washington, DC 20433

Fax: 202-522-3247
E-mail: sdcommunications@worldbank.org

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The paper forms part of an initial step to build the conceptual foundation for the growing body of work being done on social accountability and the demand side of good governance, and it reflects the ongoing efforts of the various teams in the World Bank who have been working on this issue.

Social Accountability:
An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice

I. Introduction: The Accountability Challenge

The crucial importance of government accountability to citizens has featured in the World Bank's policy discourse for some time now. The 2001 World Development Report and the World Bank's empowerment framework[1] recognize accountability as an integral component of 'empowerment' and hence poverty reduction. The need for strengthening accountability relationships between policy makers, service providers, and clients is at the core of the 2004 World Development Report's argument for "making services work for the poor."[2] Moreover, accountability of institutions is one of the three conceptual pillars of the emerging Social Development Strategy of the World Bank.[3]

Traditionally, efforts to tackle the challenge of accountability have tended to concentrate on improving the "supply-side" of governance using methods such as political checks and balances, administrative rules and procedures, auditing requirements, and formal law enforcement agencies like courts and the police. These "top-down" accountability promoting mechanisms have met with only limited success in many countries – be they developed or developing.[4] As a result, newer measures such as the setting up of independent pro-accountability agencies like vigilance commissions and ombudsman have been tried, and in other cases, public institutions have been privatized or services contracted to the private sector in an attempt to bring market-based accountability into the public sector.

More recently, increased attention has been paid to the "demand side" of good governance – that is to strengthening the voice and capacity of citizens (especially poor citizens) to directly demand greater accountability and responsiveness from public officials and service providers.[5] Enhancing the ability of citizens to engage with public servants and politicians in a more informed, direct and constructive manner is what the social accountability practices outlined in this paper are all about. The World Bank's interest and involvement in the area of "social accountability" derives from its core goals of promoting poverty reduction and effective and sustainable development. It reflects a growing attention to issues of governance, empowerment and rights-based approaches to development.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the concept of social accountability and to briefly explain its significance, key elements and applications on the basis of learning from emerging experience with such initiatives across the world.[6] The paper does not provide a detailed description of social accountability

[1] See Empowerment and Poverty Reduction, A Sourcebook, World Bank, 2002.
[2] See World Development Report 2001: Attacking Poverty, and World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People, The World Bank, Washington DC.
[3] See Transforming Institutions to Empower People – Social Development in World Bank Operations, World Bank, 2004.
[4] This issue is discussed in Ackerman (2004).
[5] This shift can clearly be seen in the case of World Bank operations, where an increase in policy based lending, as well as community-driven development projects has meant that the role of citizen-driven monitoring and accountability is becoming more central.
[6] More information on practical experiences with social accountability mechanisms can be found at www.worldbank.org/participation/sdn/sdn.htm.

tools nor does it seek to provide an exhaustive conceptual analysis.[7] Instead the goal here is to provide a concise overview of the notion of social accountability, its importance and features.

The next section of the paper defines and outlines a conceptual framework for social accountability. The importance and relevance of the concept and its links with other important development themes is also discussed in this section. Section III identifies some of the key elements or "building blocks" of social accountability initiatives. Section IV describes selected applications and tools of social accountability, while section V goes on to list some of the critical factors that contribute to the success of social accountability initiatives. Finally, section VI provides concluding remarks.

II. Social Accountability: A Conceptual Framework

What is accountability?

In order to explain the concept of social accountability it is important to first start with a concrete definition of accountability.

Accountability can be defined as the obligation of power-holders to account for or take responsibility for their actions. "Power-holders" refers to those who hold political, financial or other forms of power and include officials in government, private corporations, international financial institutions and civil society organizations.

This paper focuses specifically on the accountability of government actors toward citizens and, in particular, toward poor people.[8] This accountability is a consequence of the implicit 'social compact' between citizens and their delegated representatives and agents in a democracy. A fundamental principle of democracy is that citizens have the *right* to demand accountability and public actors have an *obligation* to account. As Mulgan (2000) has stated, "those calling for an account are asserting rights of superior authority over those who are accountable".

Government officials and bureaucrats are accountable for their (i) conduct and (ii) performance.[9] In other words, they can and should be held accountable to (i) obey the law and not abuse their powers, and (ii) serve the public interest in an efficient, effective and fair manner.

All states have some form of mechanisms in place to promote or ensure accountability of public servants. Systems of accountability that are internal to the state are often referred to as "horizontal" mechanisms of accountability (Schedler et al. 1999). These include: (i) political mechanisms (e.g., constitutional constraints, separation of powers, the legislature and legislative investigative commissions); (ii) fiscal mechanisms (e.g., formal systems of auditing and financial accounting); (iii) administrative mechanisms (e.g., hierarchical reporting, norms of public sector probity, public service codes of conduct, rules and

[7] For a deeper conceptual discussion of social accountability and how it relates to other notions of accountability, see Ackerman(2004). Similarly, for a more practical guide to different social accountability tools and applications see the forthcoming Social Accountability Sourcebook, currently being developed by the Social Development Department of the World Bank.

[8] Although this paper specifically focuses on the contribution of social accountability initiatives to public sector accountability it is worthwhile mentioning that similar principles and approaches can be applied and in fact have proven effective to increase the accountability of private sector, civil society and community leaders and representatives.

[9] Behn (2001) further distinguishes 'fairness' and 'financial' from performance accountability.

procedures regarding transparency and public oversight), and; (iv) legal mechanisms (e.g., corruption control agencies, ombudsmen and the judiciary) (Goetz and Gaventa, 2001).

There is considerable difference of opinion among scholars of accountability as to how narrowly or broadly the concept of accountability should be defined. Some, for example, see accountability as an essentially ex-post phenomenon while others argue that principles of accountability should ideally be applied before, during and after the exercise of public authority (Ackerman, 2004). Related to the ex-ante/ex-post debate, some observers have argued for making a clear distinction between government responsiveness vs. government accountability – the former referring to whether governments respond to citizens' expressed needs, and the latter to whether citizens are able to hold governments to their promises. Other scholars, while acknowledging the difference between the two concepts, understand them as going hand in hand and see less of a need for treating them distinctly. This paper, for both conceptual and practical reasons, views the two concepts as inextricably linked. It therefore describes mechanisms that promote both responsiveness and accountability at various stages throughout the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of government policies and programs.

What is social accountability?

Social accountability can be defined as *an approach towars building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability.*[10] Mechanisms of social accountability can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both, but very often they are *demand-driven* and operate from the bottom-up.

Social accountability mechanisms are sometimes referred to as "external" or "vertical" mechanisms of accountability (in contrast to the more conventional "internal" or "horizontal" mechanisms of accountability discussed above). One important "vertical" mechanism of accountability in democratic states is elections. Elections in and of themselves, however, are a very blunt instrument with which to hold government accountable. Even if citizens were fully and accurately informed of the views and actions of every political candidate (which of course is far from the case), elections still only allow citizens to select among a limited number of individuals or political parties. They do not offer citizens the opportunity to express their preferences on specific issues, to contribute in a meaningful way to public decision-making or to hold public actors accountable for specific decisions or behaviors.

For this reason, social accountability is here used to refer to the broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens, communities, civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media can use to hold public officials and servants accountable. Traditionally, these have included a variety of citizen or civil society-led actions such as public demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and public interest lawsuits. In more recent years, the expanded use of participatory data collection and analysis tools combined with (in many country contexts) enhanced space and opportunity for citizen/civil society engagement with the state, have led to a new generation of social accountability practices that emphasize a solid evidence base and direct interaction with government counterparts.[11] These include, for example, participatory public policy-making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, citizen monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery. They also

[10] The term social accountability is, in a sense, a misnomer since it is not meant to refer to a specific type of accountability, but rather to a particular approach (or set of mechanisms) for exacting accountability.

[11] A well cited example of this are the 'citizen report card' surveys pioneered by the Public Affairs Center in Bangalore, India, that sought to assess the quality and effectiveness of public services in the city. See Paul (2002).

include efforts to enhance citizen knowledge and use of conventional mechanisms of accountability (for example, through public education about legal rights and available services) and/or efforts to improve the effectiveness of "internal" accountability mechanisms, for example, through citizen involvement in public commissions and hearings, citizen advisory boards and oversight committees.

Social accountability mechanisms are therefore intended both to complement and enhance conventional mechanisms of accountability. "Internal" (state) and "external" (social) mechanisms of accountability can and should be mutually reinforcing. It has been argued that impact is greatest and most sustainable when social accountability mechanisms are "institutionalized" or when the state's own "internal" mechanisms of accountability are rendered more transparent and open to civic engagement. This can lead to what some scholars have termed "transversal", "hybrid" or "diagonal" accountability (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001).

Another key feature of social accountability mechanisms is their use of a range of both formal and informal rewards and sanctions, including public pressure. The strategy adopted depends on a number of factors including: the nature and purpose of the social accountability initiative; whether compliance is forthcoming; the expertise and means of those seeking accountability; and the availability of formal means of enforcement. Informal mechanisms of reward or sanction usually rely upon creating public pressure, for example, through (positive or negative) press releases, media coverage, public displays of support or protest, "interface" meetings between citizens and public officials, petitions, etc.[12] When necessary, citizens' groups can appeal to formal means of sanction or enforcement to effect change, for example, by presenting evidence to a corruption control agency, appealing to a public ombudsman or filing a legal claim through the court system. Often, however, such means are absent, ineffective or inadequate to effect real change. In such cases, citizen actions might aim to reveal the inadequacies of these mechanisms, lobby for their (legal, administrative or institutional) reform or seek to improve their effectiveness through enhanced public participation. Again, these types of actions can potentially lead to the creation of new hybrid (i.e., "partially formalized") mechanisms of enforcement including, for example, citizen oversight committees or grievance redress mechanisms (with varying degrees of formality and legal authority).[13]

A wide range of actions and instruments are used to achieve social accountability goals. Section III of this paper, for example, categorizes some selected social accountability tools according to the stage of the public policy/budget cycle at which they are applied. As experience accumulates, efforts are being made to develop criteria for distinguishing and categorizing different social accountability practices. Social accountability mechanisms can be distinguished, for example, according to: (i) whether they are initiated by citizens or the state; (ii) the extent to which they are "institutionalized" vs. "independent"; (iii) the extent to which they are "collaborative" vs. "conflictive"; (iv) whether they employ formal or informal sanctions; and (v) whether they occur at the local, regional or national level, etc.

Why is social accountability important?

There are three main arguments underlying the importance of social accountability – **improved governance**, **increased development effectiveness**, and **empowerment**. Each is discussed below.

[12] The highly publicized 'jansunvais' or public hearings to reveal corruption in use of local government funds organized by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan India is a well-known example of such an approach. See Jenkins and Goetz (1999).

[13] Compare for example the introduction of a grievance redress mechanism by the World Bank supported Kalahi Community-Driven Development Program in the Philippines. See World Bank (2002).

First, the issue of **governance**. Accountability of public officials is the cornerstone of good government and a prerequisite for an effective democracy. At the present time, when notions of citizens' rights and responsibilities are evolving and expanding, relations between citizens and their governments are characterized by what some have termed "a crisis of legitimacy" (Gaventa, 2002) or simply a "governance crisis" (Paul 2002). Citizens in both the North and South express growing disillusionment with their governments – citing a lack of responsiveness, abuse of discretion, corruption, favoritism and weak accountability on the part of public officials and bureaucrats. (Commonwealth Foundation, 1999, Narayan et al. 2000). Especially in developing country contexts, the effectiveness of conventional "horizontal" mechanisms of accountability has proved limited. As discussed above, elections, the principal traditional "vertical" mechanism of accountability, have also proved a weak and blunt instrument for holding government officials and employees accountable for specific actions.[14] Social accountability mechanisms allow ordinary citizens to access information, voice their needs, and demand accountability between elections. Emerging social accountability practices enhance the ability of citizens to move beyond mere protest toward engaging with bureaucrats and politicians in a more informed, organized, constructive and systematic manner, thus increasing the chances of effecting positive change.

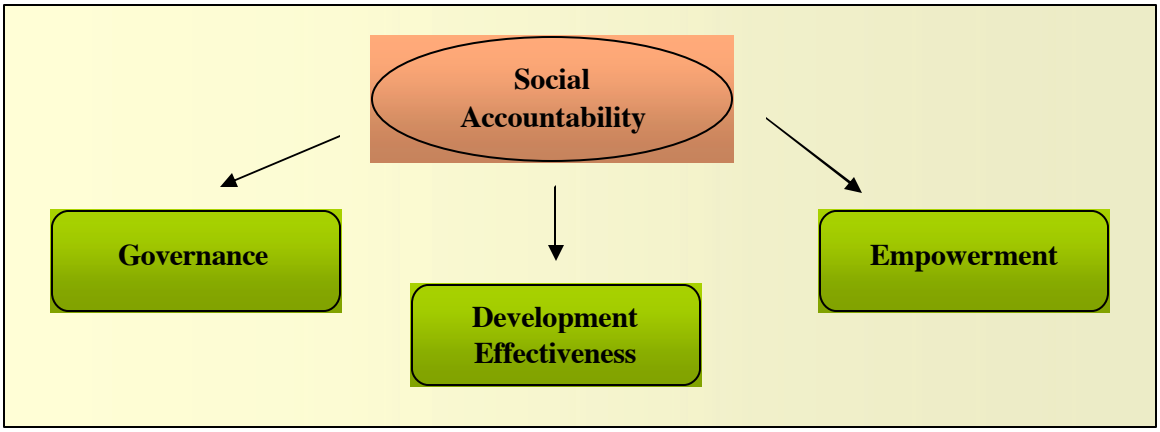
Social accountability also contributes to **increased development effectiveness.** This is achieved through **improved public service delivery** and **more informed policy design**. In many countries, especially developing ones, the government fails to deliver key essential services to its citizens due to problems such as: misallocation of resources, leakages/corruption, weak incentives or a lack of articulated demand.[15] Similarly, governments often formulate policies in a discretionary and non-transparent manner that goes against the interests and actual priorities of the poor.[16] These problems are perpetuated because the three key groups of actors in the public policy and service delivery chain-policy makers, service providers and citizens have different (sometimes conflicting) goals and incentives, compounded by information asymmetries and lack of communication. By enhancing the availability of information, strengthening citizen voice, promoting dialogue and consultation between the three groups of actors and creating incentives for improved performance, social accountability mechanisms can go a long way toward improving the effectiveness of service delivery and making public decision-making more transparent, participatory and pro-poor. Since poor people are most reliant on government services and least equipped to hold government officials to account, they have the most to gain from social accountability initiatives.[17]

Finally, social accountability initiatives can lead to **empowerment, particularly of poor people**. While there is no single definition of empowerment, at its broadest, it can be understood as the expansion of freedom of choice and action.[18] Research shows that poor people's dissatisfaction with government relates largely to issues of responsiveness and accountability. Poor people report that state institutions are "often neither responsive nor accountable to the poor" and "not accountable to anyone or accountable only to the rich and powerful" (Narayan et al. 2000, pp. 172 and 177). By providing critical information on rights and entitlements and soliciting systematic feedback from poor people, social accountability mechanisms provide a means to increase and aggregate the **voice** of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. This enhanced voice empowers the poor and increases the chance of greater responsiveness on the part of the state to their needs.[19] That said, reaching out to poor people with the support they need to initiate their own social accountability actions and ensuring that social accountability mechanisms are designed in the

[14] See World Bank (2004a) for a discussion of the weaknesses of elections as a mechanism of accountability.
[15] For a more detailed account of the problems in service delivery, see the World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People, World Bank.
[16] Examples of such policies include regressive tax exemptions, laws that invade on civil liberties, etc.
[17] See, for example, Singh and Shah (March 2003).
[18] See Empowerment and Poverty Reduction, A Sourcebook, World Bank, 2002 p.14
[19] Empowerment of the poor and disadvantaged has been recognized as one of the three key pillars of poverty reduction by the World Development Report 2001, "Attacking Poverty", World Bank, 2001.

interest of the poorest (and not "captured" by more powerful groups) are key challenges of effective, pro-poor social accountability.

Figure 1: Why is Social Accountability Important?



Links between social accountability and other key concepts/agendas

The notion of social accountability is linked to a number of key concepts and agendas. As described above, social accountability mechanisms have a key role to play in improving **governance** and deepening **democracy**.[20] Social accountability is sometimes referred to as the "demand side of good governance", as it is based upon the active involvement of citizens in exacting accountability from their elected representatives and leaders.

Social accountability also has strong potential to contribute to **poverty reduction** through more-pro-poor policy design, improved service delivery, and empowerment. Some social accountability mechanisms have specifically been developed for use by poor (and/or illiterate) populations and many focus on issues of priority importance to poor people (such as public health, education, water and sanitation services). However, as mentioned above, constant effort is required to ensure that social accountability initiatives effectively serve the priority needs of poor people, include mechanisms to overcome potential barriers to their effective participation and, ideally, allow poor people to be "in the driver's seat".

Social accountability also has important **gender** implications. Women are systematically under-represented at every level of government in almost every country around the world. This situation of political marginalization weakens women's capacity to promote their interests and defend their rights vis-à-vis government. Social accountability mechanisms, due to their bottom-up, inclusive and demand-driven nature, enhance the ability of women to make their voices heard. A number of social accountability tools (such as gender budgeting and gender disaggregated participatory M&E) have been specifically designed to adress gender issues. As stated in the above paragraph, social accountability initiatives often target those public sectors of greatest importance to poor people, of which women constitute a significant part. Similarly, social accountability initiatives have great potential and have already been used to draw attention to the needs of **vulnerable groups** in society, whether disabled people, children or youth. In light of the intense focus on the plight of children by CSOs around the

[20] See, for example, Reuben (2002 and 2003).

world, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has become the main basis for children's budgets and related policy work.

According to political theory, a core function of **civil society** is to hold government accountable. Social accountability, in fact, refers to this essential role of civil society. Social accountability can also be understood as a particular form of **civic engagement,** one in which citizens engage with the state for the purpose of holding public officials accountable. The concept of social accountability is closely related to evolving notions of **citizenship** that give added emphasis to citizens' rights, roles and responsibilities and lead to enhanced citizen expectations and engagement.

Social accountability is closely related to **rights-based approaches to development**. The obligation of government officials to be accountable to citizens derives from notions of citizen's and information rights, often enshrined in constitutions, and the broader set of human rights. Social accountability offers mechanisms to monitor and protect these rights.[21] The concept of social accountability underlines the right of citizens to expect and ensure that government acts in the best interests of the people.

The concept of social accountability is closely linked to that of **participation**. It is the participation of citizens that distinguishes social accountability from conventional mechanisms of accountability. In many cases, citizens, communities and CSOs do not merely participate in social accountability activities but initiate and control them. While many participatory approaches focus exclusively on the individual community or micro-level, social accountability mechanisms expand opportunities for participation at the macro-level. This may include, for example, citizen involvement in the analysis and/or formulation of national or local budgets or linking the findings of local level participatory monitoring and evaluation exercises to budgetary, administrative or governance issues at higher levels of the public service delivery chain.

By monitoring government performance, demanding and enhancing **transparency** and exposing government failures and misdeeds, social accountability mechanisms are also powerful tools against **corruption**. Indeed it has been argued by some that the only true safeguard against public sector corruption is the active and on-going societal monitoring of government actions and the evolution of more open and participatory anti-corruption institutions.

Social accountability mechanisms can complement **public sector reforms**, by addressing the **demand-side** aspects of public service delivery, monitoring and accountability. Social accountability mechanisms have proved particularly useful in the context of **decentralization**, helping to strengthen links between citizens and local-level governments and assisting local authorities and service-providers to become more responsive and effective.

[21] Simply disseminating information about entitlements or soliciting citizen feedback about public sector performance, for example, can facilitate the fulfillment of rights of access to information, food, housing, social security, education, freedom of association and speech, etc.

III. Social Accountability: Building Blocks

As described above, social accountability encompasses an extremely broad array of actions that citizens can potentially take to hold government officials and bureaucrats accountable. These actions may be carried out by a wide range of actors (e.g., individual citizens, communities, parliamentarians, CSOs, media), occur at different levels (e.g., local to national), address a variety of different issues (e.g., public policy, political conduct, public expenditures, service delivery) and use diverse strategies (e.g., research, monitoring, participatory planning, civic education, media coverage, coalition building). Despite this diversity, social accountability approaches regularly feature processes of collective interest articulation and negotiation. Beyond mere advocacy, they often also try to build a convincing evidence-base for public engagement. They normally comprise several (and, ideally, all) of the following key elements or 'building blocks'.

Mobilizing around an entry point

The first step of almost any social accountability initiative is the identification of an entry point and the development of a strategy whereby a priority problem can be addressed. The problem may be of a specific or general nature and may be identified at a local, regional or national level. For example, in the case of poor health service delivery, potential entry points might include national health budget allocations, corruption/inefficiencies within the national distribution system or the performance of local service providers or village health management committees. Each of these could be a serious bottleneck to delivery of health services. Potential strategies for addressing these issues could include, for example, budget analysis/advocacy activities, tracking of health inputs and/or expenditures, participatory evaluation of local health services, etc.

Building an information/evidence base

Accessing or generating relevant information and building a credible evidence base that will serve to hold public officials accountable is a critical aspect of social accountability. Social accountability initiatives often involve obtaining: (i) "supply-side" data/information (from government and service providers) and (ii) "demand-side" data/information (from users of government services, communities and citizens). In accessing "supply-side" information (e.g., policy statements, budget commitments and accounts, records of inputs, outputs and expenditures, audit findings, etc.), the transparency of government and its capacity to produce and provide data and accounts are crucial.[22] With regard to "demand-side" information, a wide variety of participatory methods and tools (e.g., community scorecards, citizen report cards, participatory monitoring and evaluation techniques) have been developed to generate data, while simultaneously serving to raise awareness and promote local-level mobilization and organization.

Relevant data/information, once obtained, must be interpreted and analyzed in order to be rendered operationally useful. This may involve working with trained specialists (e.g., who can help to "demystify" budgets or disaggregate financial accounts) or using participatory methods to help community members or user groups analyze local data or collectively evaluate public services. In either case, the goal of the analysis is to produce meaningful findings that can be understood by all stakeholders and used to move beyond mere protest to evidence-based dialogue.

[22] In many country contexts, the initial focus of social accountability interventions has in fact been to lobby for enhanced information rights and public transparency.

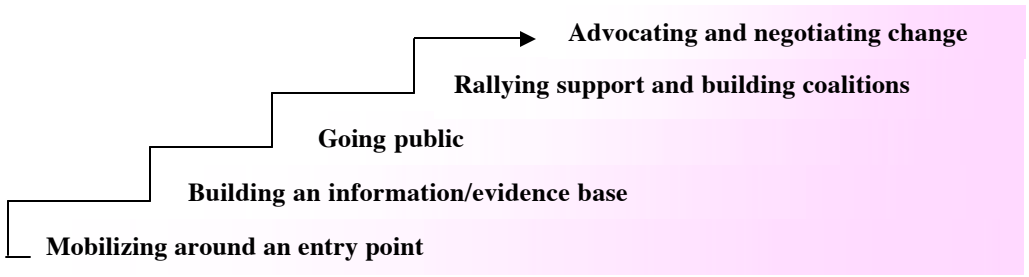
Going public

Bringing information and findings into the public sphere and generating public debate around them are a key element of most social accountability initiatives. Be it budget details, the findings of public expenditure reviews, audits or project evaluation results, this information takes on new significance and impact when made accessible to the public at large, serving both to inform and to create an impetus for action. Effective communication strategies and mechanisms are, therefore, essential aspects of social accountability. These may include the organization of public meetings and events as well the strategic use of both modern and traditional forms of media. Transmitting relevant information to government officials who are in a position to act on it (and, ideally, interacting directly with those decision-makers on an on-going basis) is also an essential aspect of social accountability.

Rallying support and building coalitions

Informing citizens of their rights and responsibilities, engaging their interest and mobilizing them to build coalitions and partnerships with different stakeholders (like bureaucrats, media, parliamentarians, etc.) is a core aspect of social accountability. Ideally, every step of a social accountability initiative contributes to informing/engaging citizens and mobilizing support. The ability of citizens to organize for collective action and the capacity of CSOs to facilitate and support such mobilization are crucial to the success of social accountability initiatives. Again, reaching out to poor and marginalized segments of the population requires specific effort and remains a principal challenge.

Figure 2: Social Accountability Building Blocks



Advocating and negotiating change

The most crucial and challenging element of a social accountability strategy is to be able to elicit a response from public officials and effect real change. The most effective strategies usually involve direct interaction and negotiation with the concerned government counterparts and, in some cases, the institutionalization of mechanisms for ongoing consultation and dialogue. As discussed above, in negotiating change, citizens' groups employ a range of both informal and formal means of persuasion, pressure, reward and sanction. These include, for example, creating public pressure (e.g., through media campaigns and public meetings) or when necessary, resorting to formal means of enforcement (e.g., through legal and judicial processes). The space and opportunity for negotiation as well as the possibility of appeal to formal means of sanction obviously vary greatly from one country context to another. In

many developing country contexts, citizen's groups have found that legal and/or institutional reforms are necessary to facilitate meaningful negotiation.

IV. Social Accountability: Applications and Tools

A variety of strategies and methods (comprised of some or all of the above elements) have been developed to promote social accountability. In the context of World Bank support to social accountability, key areas for the use of these methods have been: (i) the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of poverty reduction strategies; (ii) public sector reform and public expenditure management processes; (iii) community-driven development projects; and (iv) sectoral interventions (e.g., in the areas of health, education, transport, water and sanitation). Among the wide range of mechanisms that can be used to build social accountability, those that seek to directly involve ordinary citizens in processes of allocating, disbursing, monitoring and evaluating the use of public resources have proved very effective since it is these resource flows that put policy into action. The following is a brief description of such selected social accountability methods that have been used as entry points at different stages of the public policy and public expenditure management cycle.

Participatory policy and budget formulation

This involves direct citizen/CSO participation in formulating public policy and budgets (i.e., in proposing projects and allocating funds). Participatory policy formulation has become an increasingly common trend, particularly with the introduction of the poverty reduction strategies at the national level and community driven development initiatives at the local level. Participatory budget formulation is less common and usually occurs at the local level (as in over 100 municipalities in Brazil)[23] but is also theoretically applicable at higher levels. Another approach to participatory budget formation is when civil society actors prepare alternative budgets (such as South Africa's Women's Budget or Canada's Alternative Federal Budget) with a view to influencing budget formulation by expressing citizen preferences.

Participatory policy and budget analysis

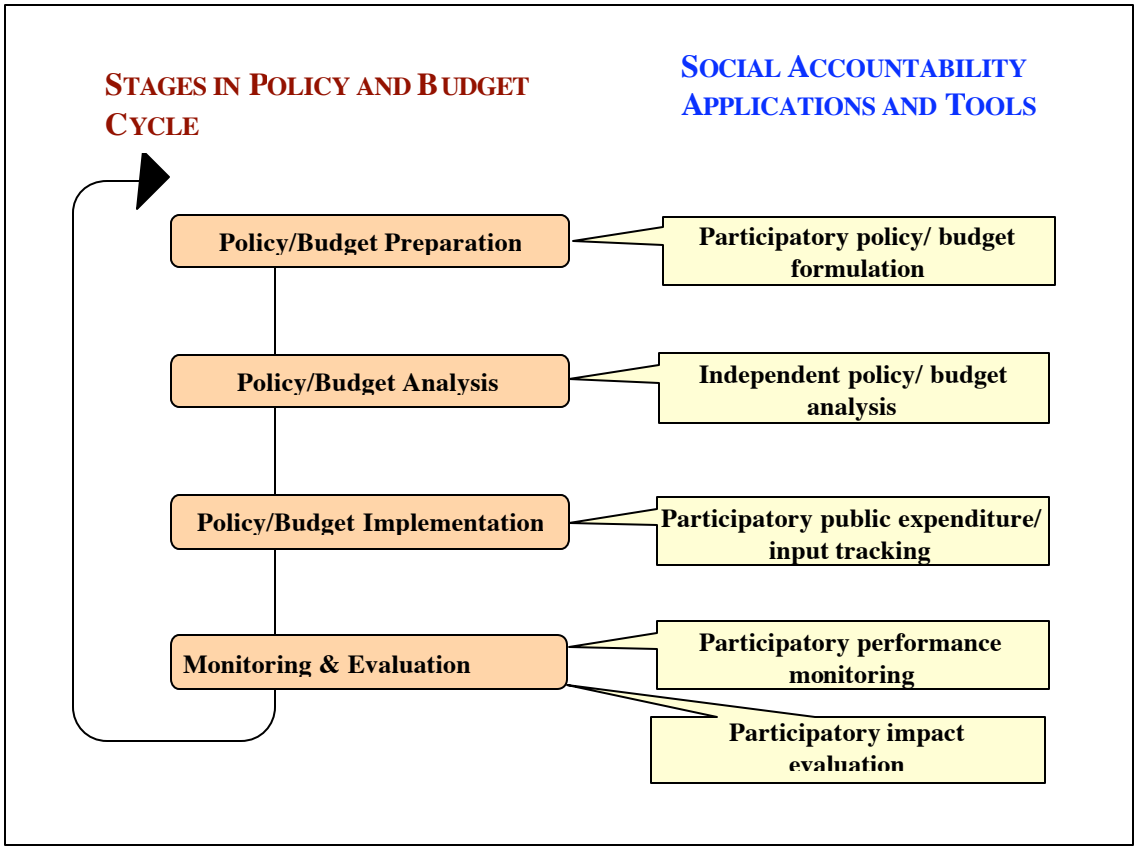
Here, CSOs review budgets in order to assess whether allocations match the government's announced social commitments. This may involve analyzing the impact and implications of budget allocations, demystifying the technical content of the budget, raising awareness about budget-related issues and undertaking public education campaigns to improve budget literacy. At the local level, whether or not citizens have participated in budget formulation, efforts to publicize and encourage debate around the contents of local budgets can serve to enhance public understanding of budget issues and constraints and encourage civic engagement in its implementation and monitoring. CSOs also play a key role in reviewing, critiquing and building public awareness about policies in key areas such as poverty reduction, gender equity, environmental protection, employment and social services. [24]

[23] See, for example, Wagle and Shah (2003).
[24] See Wagle and Shah (2003).

Participatory public expenditure/input tracking

This involves citizen groups tracking how the government actually spends funds, with the aim of identifying leakages and/or bottlenecks in the flow of financial resources or inputs. Typically, these groups employ the actual users or beneficiaries of government services (assisted by CSOs) to collect and publicly disseminate data on inputs and expenditures. This approach often involves the triangulation of information received from disbursement records of finance ministries, accounts submitted by line agencies and information obtained from independent enquiry (using, for example, tools like social audits). Information is disseminated through the use of media, publications and public meetings. The participatory tracking of primary education expenditures in Uganda and the social audit techniques used under Bolivia's social monitoring initiative are examples of such an approach.[25]

Figure 3: Social Accountability: Examples of Applications throughout the Public Policy and Budget Cycle



Participatory performance monitoring and evaluation

This entails citizen groups or communities monitoring the implementation and performance of public services or projects and evaluating their impact, often according to indicators they themselves have selected. This is achieved through the use of participatory monitoring and evaluation tools (such as community scorecards) and, at a more macro level, through the use of public opinion surveys, public

[25] Wagle and Shah (2003).

hearings or citizens' report cards, for example, as carried out in India and the Philippines.[26] The findings of participatory M&E exercises are presented at interface meetings (where users and service providers come together to discuss the evidence and seek solutions) or, as in the case of citizen report cards, are publicly disseminated and presented to government officials to demand accountability and lobby for change.

Early experience has shown that each of these methods has the potential to produce significant *operational results* (e.g., improved performance, the introduction of corrective measures) as well as *process outcomes* (e.g., institutional, behavioral and relational changes). Experience also suggests that impact is enhanced and synergies created when a *systems approach* is adopted and social accountability initiatives are supported at various stages throughout the public policy and expenditure cycle. In the context of a social reform programmatic loan in Peru, for example, several of the above methods have been applied, accompanied by efforts to build capacity and promote an enabling environment for social accountability – moving toward what has been termed a *social accountability system.*[27]

V. Social Accountability: Critical Factors of Success

The evolution of most social accountability initiatives has been far from systematic. For the most part, measures by citizen groups to promote accountability have been opportunistic responses to particular situations. Their success has therefore also been heavily dependent on several factors. Some of these are discussed below.

Political context and culture

The parameters for social accountability are largely determined by the existing political context and culture. For example, the feasibility and likelihood of success of social accountability initiatives are highly dependent upon whether the political regime is democratic, a multi-party system is in place, basic political and civil rights are guaranteed (including access to information and freedoms of expression, association and assembly) and whether there is a culture of political transparency and probity. The existence of these underlying factors, and the potential risks that their absence may pose, must be taken into account when planning social accountability initiatives. Legal, institutional and socio-cultural factors will also have an important influence on the success of social accountability activities. An unfavorable context does not mean that social accountability activities should not be pursued. In such circumstances, however, an analysis of the key factors influencing the environment for social accountability (and the risks they entail) must be undertaken and appropriate strategies for addressing potential barriers developed.

Access to information

As described above the availability and reliability of public documents and data is essential to building social accountability. Such information is the basis for social accountability activities, and thus its quality and accessibility[28] is a key determinant of the success of social accountability mechanisms. In many cases, initial social accountability efforts may need to focus on securing freedom of information

[26] Wagle and Shah (2003).
[27] See Felicio and John-Abraham (2004).
[28] Accessibility here has two connotations, physical access to documents, and their availability in a format that is understandable to inquirers. Because not all information is in documents, access also means to people (officials) and places.

legislation, addressing a lack of political will to disclose or strengthen the technical capacity of public institutions to record, manage and make available relevant data.

The role of the media

The media plays a critical role in promoting social accountability. In many countries, independent media is a leading force in informing/educating citizens, monitoring government performance and exposing misdeeds. Local-level media (in particular, private and community radio) provide an important means whereby ordinary citizens can voice their opinions and discuss public issues. The extent to which media is independent and ownership is pluralistic (versus concentrated in a few hands) are important factors that can contribute to the accountability of the political system. A common element of almost all successful social accountability initiatives is the strategic use of both traditional and modern forms of media to raise awareness around public issues, disseminate findings and create a platform for public debate.

Civil society capacity

The capacity of civil society actors is another key factor of successful social accountability. The level of organization of CSOs, the breadth of their membership, their technical and advocacy skills, their capacity to mobilize and effectively use media, their legitimacy and representativity and their level of responsiveness and accountability to their own members are all central to the success of social accountability activities. In many contexts, efforts to promote an enabling environment for civil society and to build the capacity (both organizational and technical) of CSOs are required.

State capacity

The success of social accountability initiatives also depends upon the capacity and effectiveness of the state. Social accountability initiatives make little sense, for example, where the state machinery has collapsed or is entirely ineffectual. A functioning public administration that has some capacity to respond to citizen demands is, therefore, a prerequisite. Other aspects of state capacity that influence the success of social accountability initiatives (and that may require capacity development investments) include: the ability to produce records and accounts; the existence of conventional ("horizontal") accountability mechanisms; the effective devolution of authority and resources; the willingness and capacity to build partnerships/coalitions; and, a political or administrative culture that values notions of public sector probity, accountability and equity.

State-civil society synergy

Ultimately, the success of social accountability initiatives depends on some form of effective interaction between civil society and the state. Meaningful results are most likely to be achieved when citizens, politicians and bureaucrats all have an incentive to act. Ackerman (2004) points out that "unilateral state action normally ends up in manipulation, while unilateral social action often ends in repression and violence by the state" and that "the most productive results arise when both sides actively participate". He clarifies that such mutual participation does not necessarily depend upon agreement, nor trust and that even "conflict and suspicion" can lead to effective state-society synergies. The lesson is that social accountability initiatives must include both state and societal actors and focus on the interface between them (Ackerman, 2004, p.7).

Institutionalization

While *ad hoc* or one-off social accountability initiatives can make a difference, experience shows that impact is greatest and most sustainable when social accountability mechanisms are "institutionalized" – in other words, embedded within and systematically implemented by a civil society, state or "hybrid" institution. As discussed earlier, "external" mechanisms of social accountability can be particularly effective when combined with accountability mechanisms "internal" to the state. According to Fox (2000, p. 1), "civil society demands for state accountability matter most when they empower the state's own checks and balances."

As a result, beyond seeking specific operational outcomes, social accountability initiatives should also pay attention to institutional factors and seek opportunities for influencing longer-term institutional development and/or reform. Social accountability initiatives often identify the need for institutional changes in government agencies and public services (e.g., changes in the behavior and attitudes of frontline staff, of the incentives and sanctions of a particular organization, its management style or decision making processes, etc.). They can go further and also play a catalytic role in bringing these changes about (e.g., by engaging with staff of health centers to regularly seek and embrace client feedback systems, setting up citizen transparency committees for local government decision-making or introducing social monitoring groups to evaluate performance of national programs or policies on an on-going basis). Where possible, the legal institutionalization of participatory mechanisms from the level of individual programs and agencies through to the overall system level should be considered as a means to enhance long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

VI. Concluding Remarks

A growing body of evidence shows that social accountability efforts on the part of citizens and civil society organizations can serve to create new effective vertical mechanisms of accountability and to strengthen existing horizontal ones.[29] This in turn will result in better governance, improved public service delivery and enhanced development effectiveness.

The paper has attempted to introduce the concept of social accountability, which is emerging as a promising area for the World Bank in terms of both investment lending and knowledge management activities. With the shift toward budget support and policy based lending that the World Bank and many other donors are encouraging, solid domestic accountability systems are a key prerequisite for the viability of this form of development assistance. In this context the role of direct citizen and civil society involvement in monitoring and accountability will become even more critical to ensure development effectiveness. It is precisely here that social accountability mechanisms can play an important part.

The World Bank is therefore increasingly promoting and supporting social accountability initiatives in a number of countries including Argentina, Armenia, Benin, Ghana, Honduras, India, Malawi, Peru, Philippines, Russia, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Uganda and Vietnam. These interventions include support to independent initiatives undertaken by CSOs, local government sensitization and capacity building, sharing of experiences and lessons learned, and the introduction of social accountability mechanisms within World Bank supported projects, programs and policies. As mentioned above, the long-term aim is

[29] Compare, for example, Ravindra (2004), a formal evaluation of the impact of citizen report cards on the quality of health services is currently being undertaken in Uganda by the Development Economics Research team and the Social Development Department of the World Bank.

that social accountability mechanisms are institutionalized as part of existing governance and service delivery systems, thus ensuring greater accountability of governments to their citizens in all sectors.

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