

## 1. WHAT IS SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

### 1.1 What is 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 (CSOs).

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This sourcebook focuses on the accountability of government actors toward citizens and, in particular, toward poor people.<sup>1</sup> 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 be accountable. Elected officials and civil servants are accountable for their conduct and performance. In other words, they can and should be held accountable to obey the law, not abuse their powers, and serve the public interest in an efficient, effective and fair manner.

There is considerable difference of opinion as to how narrowly or broadly the concept of accountability should be defined. Some see accountability as an essentially ex-post phenomenon while others argue that principles of accountability should be applied before, during and after the exercise of public authority (Ackerman, 2004). Some observers emphasize a distinction between government responsiveness vs. government accountability while others understand them as going hand in hand. This sourcebook, for both conceptual and practical reasons, adopts a broad definition of accountability.

### 1.2 What is social accountability?

In democratic states, the principal means by which citizens hold the state to account is elections. Elections, however, have proved to be a very weak and blunt instrument with which to hold government accountable.<sup>2</sup> Social accountability is about affirming and operationalizing direct accountability relationships between citizens and the state. Social accountability refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms beyond voting that citizens can use to hold the state to account, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts.

<sup>1</sup> Although this sourcebook focuses on the contribution of social accountability initiatives to public sector accountability, similar principles and approaches can be applied to increase the accountability of the private sector, civil society, and community leaders and representatives.

<sup>2</sup> Even if citizens were fully and accurately informed of the views and actions of every political candidate (which 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. See World Bank (2004a) for a discussion of the weaknesses of elections as a mechanism of accountability.

Traditionally, citizen or civil society-led efforts to hold government accountable have included actions such as public demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism, and public interest lawsuits. In recent years, the expanded use of participatory data collection and analysis tools combined with enhanced space and opportunity for citizen/civil society engagement with the state have led to a new generation of social accountability practices. They emphasize a solid evidence base and direct dialogue and negotiation with government counterparts. These include, for example, participatory public policy-making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, and citizen monitoring and evaluation of public services.

Social accountability mechanisms complement and enhance conventional internal (government) mechanisms of accountability. All governments have internal mechanisms in place to promote or ensure accountability of public servants. These include: (i) political mechanisms such as constitutional constraints, separation of powers, the legislature, and legislative investigative commissions, (ii) fiscal mechanisms including formal systems of auditing and financial accounting, (iii) administrative mechanisms, for example, hierarchical reporting, norms of public sector probity, public service codes of conduct, rules and procedures regarding transparency and public oversight, and (iv) legal mechanisms like corruption control agencies, ombudsmen and the judiciary (Gaventa and Goetz 2001). Internal (government) and external (citizens/civil society) mechanisms of accountability can and should be mutually reinforcing.

Social accountability includes efforts to enhance citizen knowledge and use of conventional mechanisms of accountability (for example, through public education about legal rights and available services) and efforts to improve the effectiveness of internal accountability mechanisms through greater transparency and civic engagement (for example, citizen and community participation in public commissions, hearings, advisory boards and oversight committees). Strengthening legislative oversight and links between parliamentarians, citizens and civil society organizations are also important ways to enhance social accountability.

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The concept of social accountability underlines both the *right* and the corresponding *responsibility* of citizens to expect and ensure that government acts in the best interests of the people. The obligation of government officials to be accountable to citizens derives from notions of citizens' rights, often enshrined in constitutions, and the broader set of human rights. Social accountability initiatives help citizens understand their civic rights and play a proactive and responsible role in exercising those rights.

Sanctions give social accountability power. Social accountability initiatives use a range of formal and informal rewards and sanctions. Informal mechanisms of sanction or reward usually rely upon creating public pressure, for example, through media coverage, public displays of support or protest, meetings between citizens and public officials, and petitions.<sup>3</sup> 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

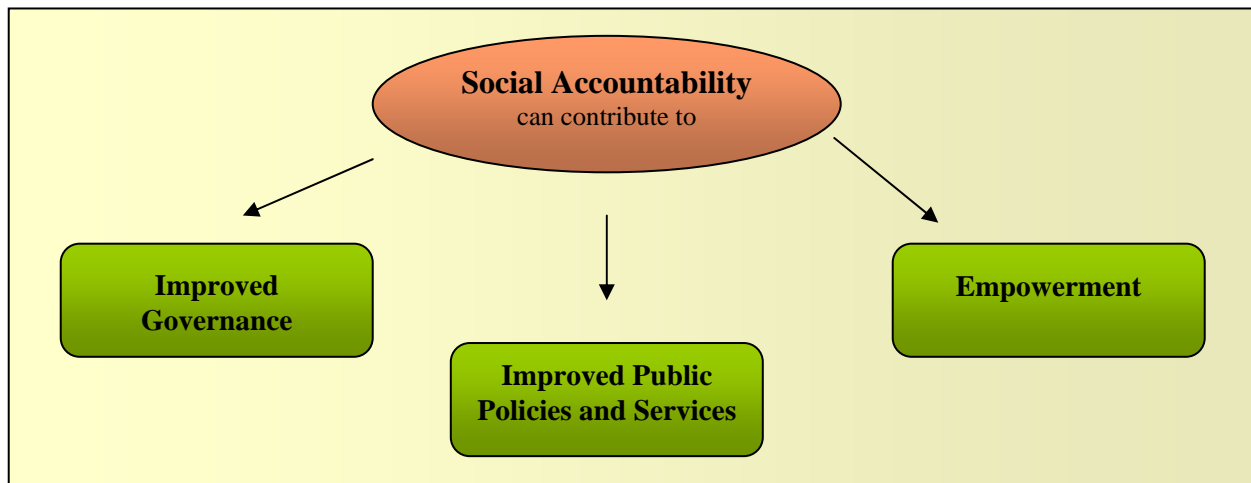
<sup>3</sup> A well-known example of such an approach are the highly publicized *jansunvais* or public hearings to reveal corruption in the use of local government funds organized by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan, India. See Jenkins and Goetz (1999).

ombudsman or filing a legal claim through the court system. Often, however, such means may be 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 reform or seek to improve their effectiveness through enhanced public participation.

### 1.3 Why is social accountability important?

Accountability of public officials is the cornerstone of good governance and democracy.<sup>4</sup> The effectiveness of conventional supply-side (government) mechanisms of accountability and elections (the principal traditional demand-side mechanism of accountability) has proved limited. By involving citizens in monitoring government performance, demanding and enhancing transparency and exposing government failures and misdeeds, social accountability mechanisms are potentially powerful tools against public sector corruption.<sup>5</sup> In addition to improved government, social accountability empowers citizens (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Benefits of Social Accountability**



The 2004 World Development Report (WDR) argues that the key to making services work for poor people is to strengthen relationships of accountability between policymakers, service providers and citizens.<sup>6</sup> According to the WDR 2004 framework (Figure 2), successful service delivery requires relationships in which citizens can have a strong voice in policymaking with politicians and bureaucrats (voice), clients can monitor and discipline providers (client power), and policymakers can provide the incentives for providers to serve clients (compact). The social accountability mechanisms described in this sourcebook offer concrete examples of ways in which each of these accountability relationships can be operationalized. By enhancing citizen information and voice, introducing incentives for downward accountability and creating

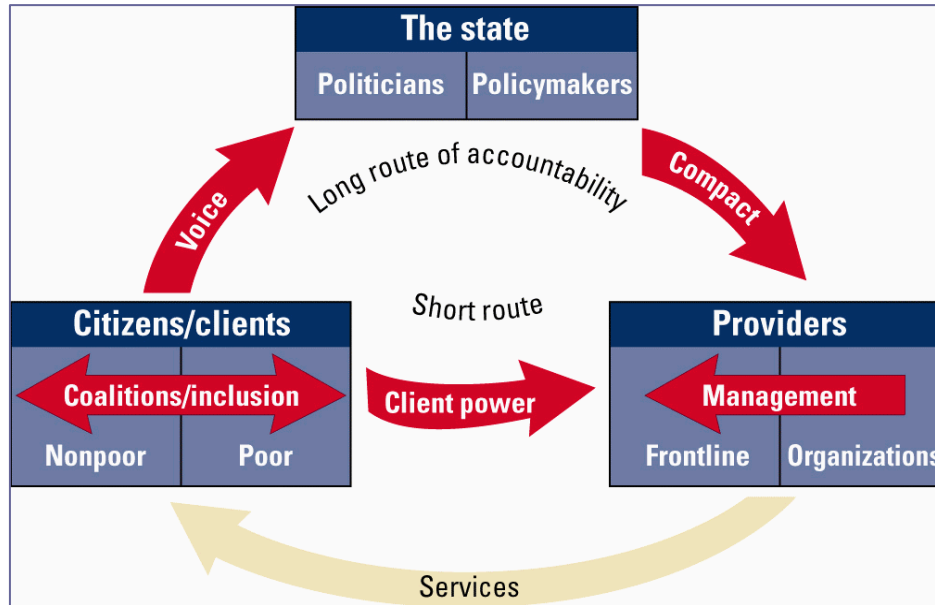
<sup>4</sup> See the public sector governance section of the World Bank website at <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector> and <http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance>

<sup>5</sup> See the governance and anti-corruption section of the World Bank website at <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/anticorrupt> and <http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance>

<sup>6</sup> See the economics research section of the World Bank website at <http://econ.worldbank.org>

mechanisms for participatory monitoring and citizen-state dialogue and negotiation, social accountability mechanisms can make an important contribution to more informed policy design and improved public service delivery (Ravindra 2004).

**Figure 2: The WDR 2004 Accountability Framework**



Finally, social accountability initiatives can contribute to empowerment, particularly of poor people.<sup>7</sup> The 2001 World Development Report, the World Bank Empowerment and Poverty Reduction Sourcebook,<sup>8</sup> and the Social Development Strategy (World Bank 2005) all recognize accountability as an integral component of empowerment, poverty reduction and sustainable development. The degree to which a person or group is empowered is influenced by agency (the capacity to make purposive choice) and opportunity structure (the institutional context in which choice is made). By providing critical information on rights and entitlements and introducing mechanisms that enhance citizen voice and influence vis-à-vis government, social accountability initiatives serve to enhance both of these key determinants of empowerment. Of particular importance is the potential of social accountability initiatives to empower those social groups that are systematically under-represented in formal political institutions such as women, youth and poor people. Numerous social accountability tools, such as gender budgeting and participatory monitoring and evaluation, are specifically designed to address issues of inequality and to ensure that less powerful societal groups also have the ability to express and act upon their choices and to demand accountability.

<sup>7</sup> Empowerment can be defined as a person's capacity to make effective choices; that is, as the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/strategies>

### 3. KEY BENEFITS AND RISKS OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

#### 3.1 Benefits

While some government actors play a key role in introducing and supporting social accountability initiatives, others initially may be hesitant or feel threatened by such initiatives. Experience shows that enhanced social accountability offers important potential benefits for governments including increased effectiveness, legitimacy, popularity, resources and political stability. Sharing such experiences with reticent public sector actors or, better yet, facilitating exchanges with peers who can share their own first-hand experiences with social accountability experiences, can go a long way towards achieving government buy-in.

Social accountability mechanisms have been shown to lead to *improvements in government programs and services*. Citizen participation in policy-making and planning processes, for example, can lead to the development of programs that better reflect citizen priorities and are better adapted to their needs. Citizen monitoring can ensure the rational use of resources and provide a safeguard against leakages while citizen evaluation can provide feedback on problems or shortcomings in service delivery and propose collective solutions. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, participatory budgeting has led to expanded increased school enrollment and expanded sanitation services (Wagle and Shah 2003). In Ghana, enhanced citizen participation in local governance has led to improvements in streetlights, drains and the maintenance of township roads (GAIT 2004).

Many governments currently suffer from a lack of *legitimacy*. Citizens cite corruption, weak accountability, and a lack of responsiveness on the part of government as the reasons for their growing disillusionment. On the other hand, citizens' trust in government grows when they feel they have a say and an eye on government's activities, and when government listens and responds to their concerns. Social accountability mechanisms can play an important role in enhancing government credibility and legitimacy.

Improved effectiveness and enhanced legitimacy can lead to *greater popularity and public support for the government*. Citizens who are better informed about government policies, budgets, expenditures, services and conduct are more likely to vote and are better placed to select candidates who they feel are trustworthy and will best serve their interests.

Enhanced social accountability can also lead to *increased government resources*, both from international donors (who increasingly request or require enhanced mechanisms of accountability) and from tax-paying citizens. After introducing a system of participatory budgeting, for example, the municipality of Porto Alegre in Brazil saw its municipal revenues increase by almost 50 percent in four years.<sup>11</sup> After considerable reluctance to open up discussions on the budget with local civil society leaders, the mayors of some communities participating in Ghana's Government Accountability Improves Trust program saw significant

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<sup>11</sup> Budget resources just for investment increased from \$54m in 1992 to \$70m in 1996 (Wagle and Shah 2003).



increases in their municipal revenues with leaders of local associations even playing a role in helping to collect taxes from their members in order to finance mutually agreed municipal projects.

Finally, enhanced social accountability can contribute to *political stability and peace*. The risk of instability is increased when citizens lack trust in government, when government is perceived as corrupt or unresponsive, or when it fails to deliver the basic services that people need. Actions such as public protests, street demonstrations and strikes result when channels for more constructive dialogue and negotiation are lacking. Social accountability mechanisms create opportunities for informed and constructive dialogue and negotiation between citizens and government and the identification of mutually agreed solutions, thus contributing to better government and greater political stability.

### 3.2 Risks

*Raising citizen expectations* is inherent in social accountability initiatives. Social accountability is possible when citizens are aware of their rights and expect and demand that public sector actors respect those rights and live up to their role as genuine public servants. Care must be taken to ensure that those expectations are realistic and reasonable. Social accountability initiatives should emphasize both citizens' rights and responsibilities and help citizens develop a realistic understanding of the challenges and constraints faced by government through information sharing and dialogue.

In seeking accountability, there is always the risk of *conflict* or adversarial attitudes. One of the key precepts of social accountability approaches is to promote constructive approaches that go beyond making accusations or lodging complaints to seeking collective solutions. For example, Talking Drum Studios in Sierra Leone works through community radio to promote greater government accountability in the areas of education, mining and HIV/AIDS and advocates collaborative approaches to resolving social problems. In particularly sensitive or politically charged contexts, the use of professional mediators, facilitators or conflict management specialists may prove useful.

If genuine *political will or buy-in is lacking*, there is a risk that public sector actors will only pay lip-service to social accountability approaches and no concrete results will be achieved. One strategy for overcoming this risk is to build safeguards into the design of social accountability mechanisms, for example, explicit agreed guidelines about participation, rules of engagement, monitoring, and follow-up. Another longer-term, but ultimately more productive, strategy is to promote greater government buy-in. This can be done by identifying and nurturing within the public sector social accountability champions who genuinely believe in and are willing to support the approach and investing time and energy in educating government actors about the concrete benefits of social accountability approaches including, for example, in-country demonstration pilots and cross-country exchanges or study tours.

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As with almost any development intervention, social accountability initiatives run the risk of *elite capture* of agenda-setting and decision-making processes by more powerful or influential stakeholders. Specific efforts are required to ensure the meaningful inclusion and participation of less organized and less powerful groups such as the poor, women, minorities, youth, and groups with special needs. Many of the social accountability methods and tools described in this sourcebook are specifically designed to identify and promote the equitable participation of marginalized groups. These tools are only as effective as their user. Promoters of social accountability must exercise vigilance at every step of the process to ensure that traditionally marginalized stakeholders remain at the forefront.

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Another risk is to include only a limited universe of friendly actors in social accountability processes and to *exclude more critical or radical viewpoints*. Even if it is not intentional, processes of dialogue and negotiation frequently end up involving the “usual suspects” or “well behaved” NGOs. The maximum benefits of social accountability processes are gained, however, when a full spectrum of societal viewpoints are represented. Here, facilitators of social accountability processes must make specific efforts to explore the broad universe of diverse viewpoints on the issue or sector at hand and promote meaningful, and ideally non-partisan, interaction of diverse stakeholders.

Along with enhanced inclusion of non-governmental actors in processes of public dialogue and negotiation comes the risk of real or perceived *co-optation*. Civil society actors who become too closely associated with government processes can suffer weakened links with their constituencies and a loss of legitimacy. If their own power or interests are enhanced by their involvement in institutionalized mechanisms of dialogue or negotiation, they may be tempted to allow themselves to be co-opted in order to sustain their newfound status or influence. In order to mitigate this risk, care must be taken in aiming for an optimal and appropriate level of institutionalization of social accountability mechanisms, safeguards against co-optation should be introduced, and fora for state-civil society dialogue and negotiation should be made as open and transparent as possible.

Social accountability initiatives, especially if not well explained and prepared in a participatory manner, can be *demoralizing or threatening* to state actors or service providers. Hence, it is important to actively involve state actors in the design and preparation of social accountability initiatives, to pay attention to creating/enhancing incentives for accountability, and to build in mechanisms of reward as well as sanction.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, are the potential risks that social accountability approaches pose to those individuals or organizations that speak out. Depending on the country context, citizens who dare criticize government actions or question the conduct of authorities do so at considerable *personal risk*. For this reason, promoters of social accountability must take very seriously their primary responsibility to protect the security of individual citizens, in particular, those who are least powerful and most vulnerable. Where basic rights and freedoms of information, association and expression are not guaranteed, preliminary efforts should focus on developing these.