Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Social Accountability

Module 01

Introduction and Social Accountability Concepts

World Bank Institute

Presentation Script

Module 1 Topic 1 Introduction

What is social accountability? In addition to answering this question, this presentation will also cover the concept of social accountability and its contributions to the improvement of governance, development effectiveness, and empowerment.

What is Accountability?

When addressing the concept of accountability one must begin with a concrete definition. Accountability can be defined as 'the obligation of power-holders to be held responsible or take responsibility for their actions'. 'Power-holders" refers to those who hold political, financial or other forms of power, and includes government officials, private corporations, international financial institutions and civil society organizations.

Government/Public Accountability

In analyzing government/public accountability demands, one must focus on the responsibility of government actors to their citizens, and in particular, poor people. 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 recognizes citizens' rights to actively demand accountability and the obligation of public actors to provide accountability, or to take responsibility for their actions.

Horizontal/Internal Mechanisms of Accountability

All states possess mechanisms for promoting or ensuring the accountability of public servants. Systems that are internal to the state are often referred to as "horizontal" mechanisms of accountability. These include (i) political mechanisms (for example, constitutional constraints, separation of powers, the legislature and legislative investigative commissions); (ii) fiscal mechanisms (for example, formal systems of auditing and financial accounting); (iii) administrative mechanisms (for example, hierarchical reporting, norms of public sector conduct, public service codes of conduct, rules and procedures regarding transparency and public oversight, and; (iv) legal mechanisms (for example corruption control agencies, ombudsmen and the judiciary.

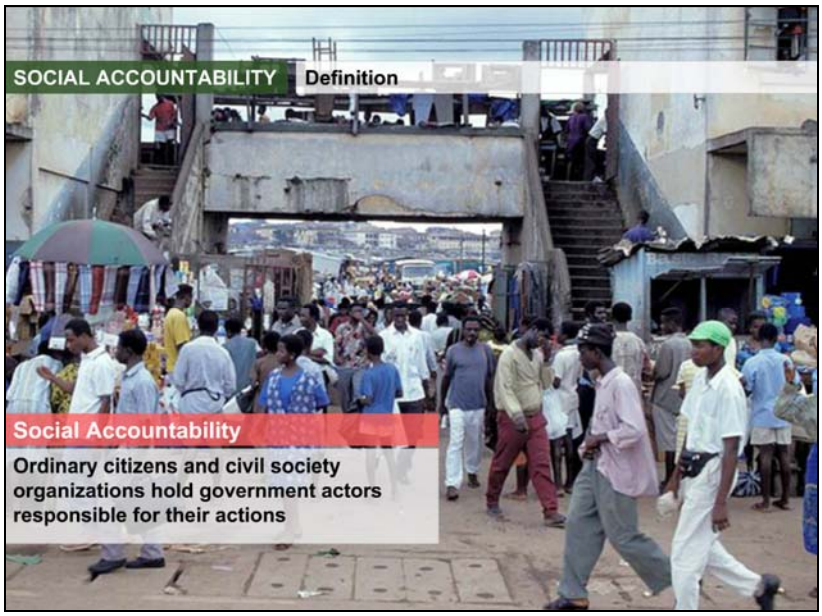
Vertical vs. Horizontal Accountability

Horizontal accountability requires that public officials use various institutions of accountability to report "sideways" to other state officials. By contrast, social accountability mechanisms are sometimes referred to as "external" or "vertical" mechanisms of accountability. One important "vertical" mechanism of accountability are elections.

Elections are a powerful and public method to champion government accountability. But even if citizens are fully and accurately informed about the views and actions of every political candidate, the exercise in democracy remains incomplete on some levels. The process lacks outlets where citizens can truly express their preferences regarding specific issues or the opportunity to assert accountability in relation to public actors and institutions.

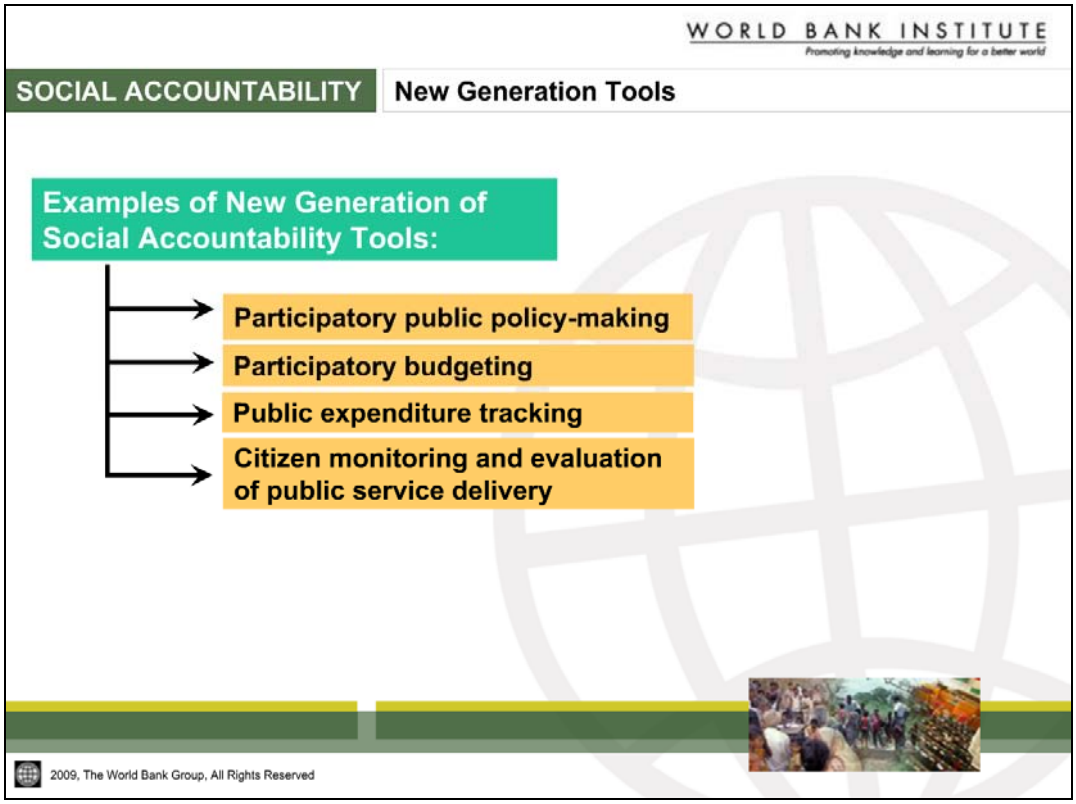
What is Social Accountability

A useful definition, then of social accountability is "*an approach toward 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 holding government actors responsible for their actions*" 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.



New Generation of Social Accountability Tools

In more recent years, there has been an expanded use of participatory data collection and analysis tools in many countries, combined with enhanced space for citizen/civil society engagement with the state. The result has been a new generation of social accountability practices emphasizing a solid evidence base and direct interaction with government counterparts. Examples include participatory public policy-making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, citizen monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery (such as social audits and citizen report cards).



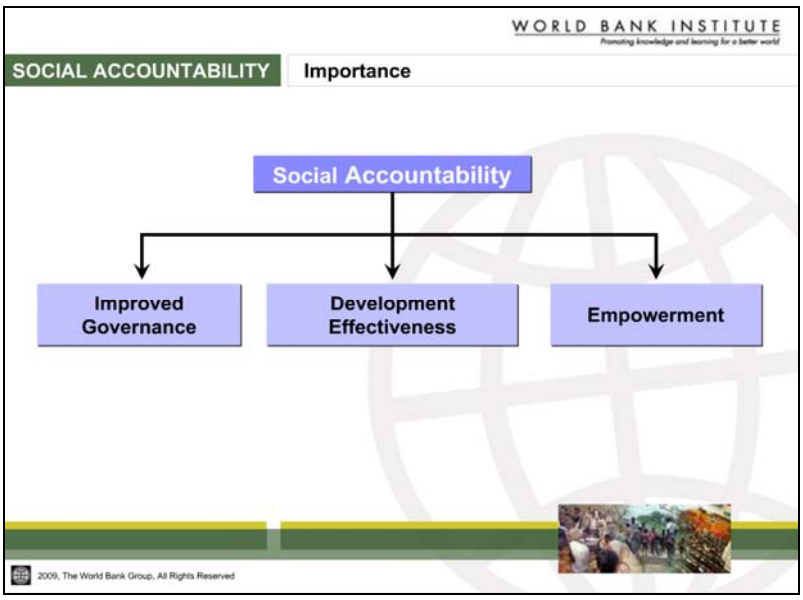
Social Accountability's Interaction with Conventional Accountability

Social accountability mechanisms are intended to both complement and enhance conventional mechanisms of accountability. Impact is greatest and most sustainable when social accountability mechanisms are "institutionalized" or when the state's own "internal" processes of accountability are strengthened, rendered more transparent and open to civic engagement. For example, a participatory budgeting process could be institutionalized within a state or locality when the government regularly and systemically includes this type of process within the public financial management cycle. Similarly, social accountability mechanisms utilizing public budget information could be

complemented by internal accountability processes, such as freedom of information laws and increased public budgetary transparency.

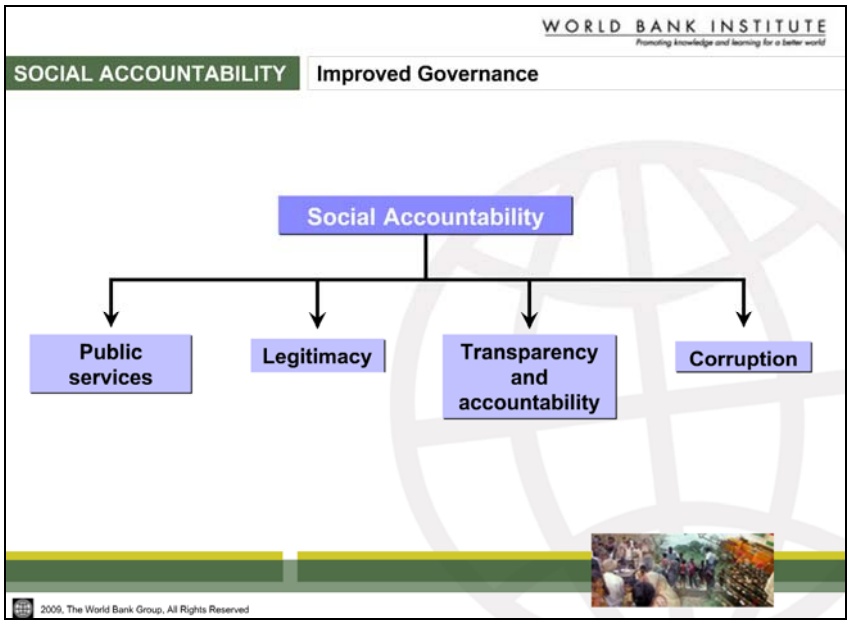
Why is Social Accountability Important?

Now that we have a definition of social accountability, let's focus on why social accountability is increasingly recognized as an important and effective strategy around the world. There are three main arguments underlying the importance of social accountability— the first being improved governance, the second increased development effectiveness, and the third argument being empowerment.



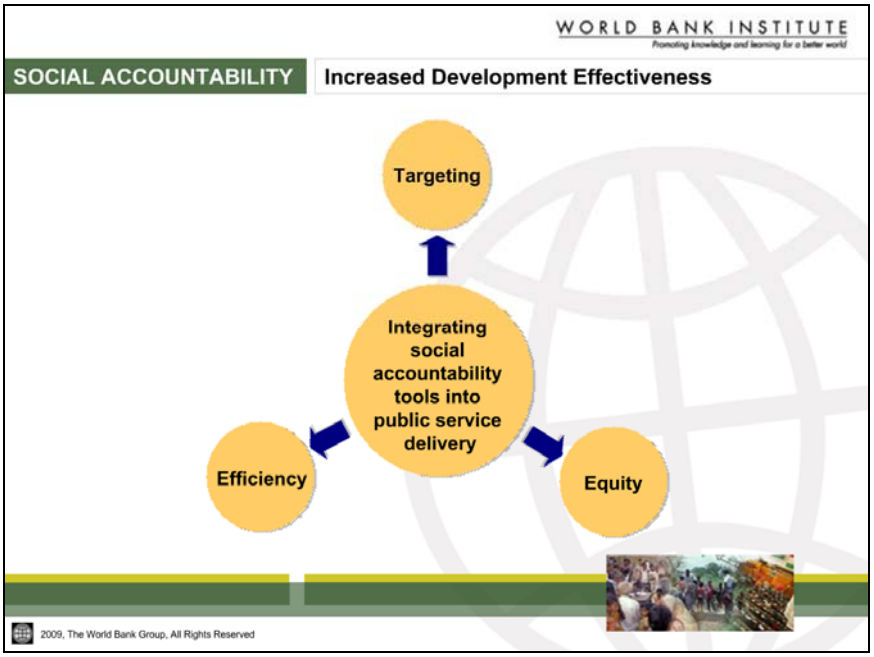
Improved Governance

Let's look at the first argument for why social accountability is important -- improved governance. Accountability of public officials is the cornerstone of good governance as well as a prerequisite for an effective democracy. At the present time, as notions of citizens' rights and responsibilities evolve and expand, relations between citizens and their governments are characterized by what some have termed a "crisis of legitimacy." Social accountability can play an important role in mitigating such crises by, improving the efficiency of public services, strengthening government legitimacy, heightening transparency and accountability, and curtailing corruption.



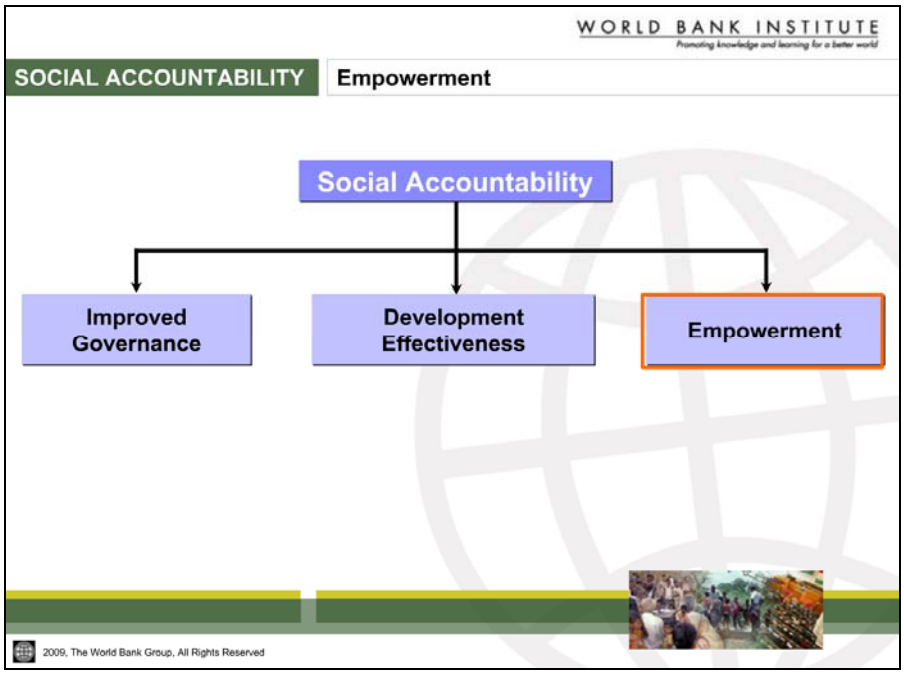
Increased Development Effectiveness

Social accountability also contributes to increased development effectiveness, achieved through improved public service delivery and more informed policy design. Integrating social accountability tools into public service delivery has been shown to improve targeting, efficiency, and equity of public services. Similarly, integrating broad-based participatory mechanisms into policy design supports governments in aligning policies with the priorities and expressed concerns of their citizens.



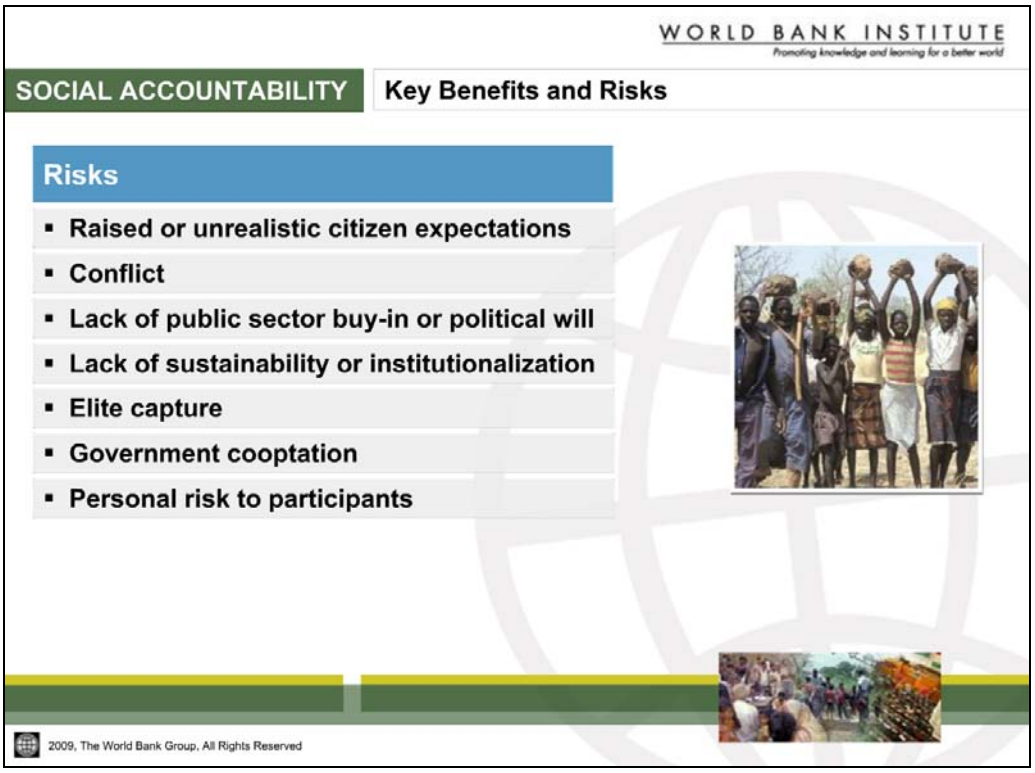
Empowerment

Finally, social accountability initiatives can lead to empowerment, particularly for the disenfranchised and poor. While there is no single definition of empowerment, at its broadest, it can generally be understood as the expansion of freedom of choice and action. By providing critical information on rights and entitlement and soliciting systemic feedback from citizens, social accountability mechanisms provide a means to increase and aggregate citizen voice. This enhanced voice empowers citizens and increases the chance of greater state responsiveness to their needs.



Key Benefits and Risks of Social Accountability

All social accountability initiatives contain potential benefits and risks, which are important to weigh when assessing a social accountability initiative or tool. Potential benefits include: improved governance and services, enhanced government credibility and legitimacy (via greater transparency, reduced corruption, and increased public support), increased government resources, enhanced citizen voice and empowerment (especially for the poor), and increased social capital and trust in government. Potential risks include raised or unrealistic citizen expectations, conflict, lack of public sector buy-in or political will, lack of sustainability or institutionalization, elite capture and/or the exclusion of more critical viewpoints, government cooptation, and personal risk to participants.



Social Accountability Tools

There are many social accountability approaches and methodologies in use now around the world, Social accountability tools take advantage of differing entry points in their implementation, such as the electoral cycle, the policy formulation cycle, and the public financial management cycle as organizing frameworks. Here, we'll quickly look at some "entry points," or organizing frameworks, and some corresponding social accountability tools in the following categories: public information, education and deliberation, advocacy and expression of citizen voice, public dialogue, elections, policy and planning,

public budgets and expenditures, monitoring and evaluating public services, and public oversight.

Review

This presentation began with a conceptual discussion regarding the fundamental rights and responsibilities of citizens and the state – and the role that social accountability plays in the context of active citizenship. We clearly defined social accountability and laid out some of the principal arguments for its importance. Lastly, we surveyed some of the major benefits and risks of this type of approach that you should carefully consider before designing and implementing social accountability programs.