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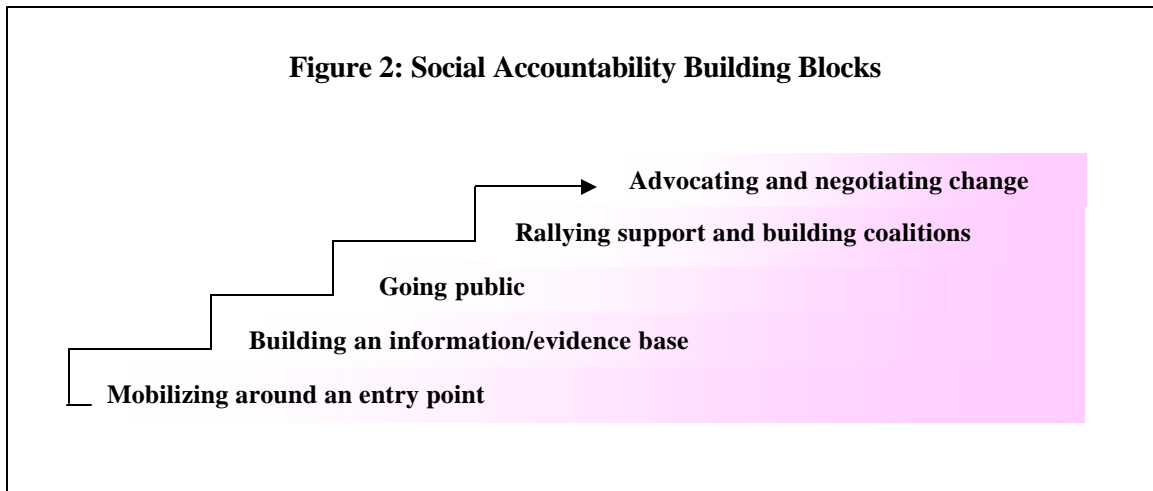
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[22] In many country contexts, the initial focus of social accountability interventions has in fact been to lobby for enhanced information rights and public transparency.

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

Rallying support and building coalitions

Going public

Building an information/evidence base

Mobilizing around an entry point

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 bcal 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]

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

[24] See 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

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[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

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[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.