

2.2 Building Blocks of Social Accountability

While social accountability encompasses a broad array of diverse practices, there are several core elements or building blocks that are common to most social accountability approaches. These include (i) accessing *information*, (ii) making the *voice* of citizens heard, and (iii) engaging in a process of *negotiation* for change.¹⁰

Accessing or generating relevant *information* and making it public is a critical aspect of social accountability. Building credible evidence that will serve to hold public officials accountable often involves obtaining and analyzing both supply-side information from government and service providers and demand-side information from users of government services, communities and citizens. The transparency of government and its capacity to produce and provide data and accounts are crucial for accessing supply-side information such as policy statements, budget commitments and accounts, records of inputs, outputs and expenditures, and audit findings. The initial focus of social accountability interventions often has been to lobby for enhanced information rights and public transparency. With regard to demand-side information, a wide variety of participatory methods and tools—such as community scorecards, citizen report cards, and participatory monitoring and evaluation techniques—have been developed to generate data while simultaneously serving to raise awareness and promote local-level mobilization and organization.

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Another key element of social accountability is giving *voice* to the needs, opinions and concerns of citizens – helping government to better understand citizen priorities and how to better serve citizens. Important strategies for strengthening citizen voice include creating spaces for public debate and platforms for citizen-state dialogue, building citizen confidence and rights awareness, facilitating the development of coalitions and alliances that can speak with a strong, united voice, and making strategic use of (or helping to develop) both modern and traditional forms of media. A principal challenge of social accountability initiatives is to ensure that the voices of poorer and more marginal groups are not drowned out or dominated by more powerful and vocal groups.

The most crucial and challenging element of a social accountability strategy is to be able to elicit a response from public officials and achieve real change. *Negotiation* processes may be ad hoc or institutionalized. They can take the form of direct citizen-state interaction, for example, community level meetings with government officials or indirect, mediated forms of consultation and negotiation. In negotiating change, citizens groups employ a range of both informal and formal means of persuasion, pressure, reward and sanction. These include creating public pressure (e.g., media campaigns and public meetings) or when necessary, resorting to formal means of enforcement (e.g., legal and judicial processes). The space and opportunity for negotiation, as well as the possibility of appeal to formal means of sanction, vary greatly from

¹⁰ The identification of these core building blocks draws from the Civic Engagement Analytical Framework, an analytical tool designed by the Participation and Civic Engagement Group of the World Bank to assess the conditions for civic engagement.

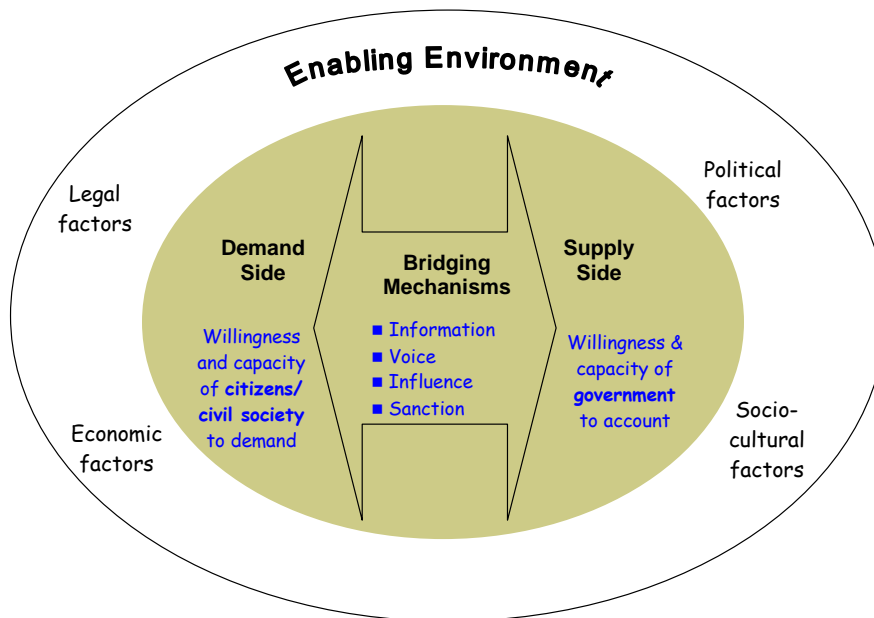
one context to another. In many countries, citizen's groups have found that legal and/or institutional reforms are necessary to facilitate meaningful negotiation.

2.3 Critical Factors for Achieving Social Accountability

Figure 3 depicts four groups of factors that are critical to achieving social accountability:

- (i) citizen-state bridging mechanisms
- (ii) attitudes and capacities of citizens and civil society actors
- (iii) attitudes and capacities of state actors
- (iv) an enabling environment.

Figure 3: Critical Factors for Social Accountability



Each of these groups of factors can be looked at in terms of the three key core elements of social accountability – information, voice and negotiation. While social accountability initiatives usually focus on creating or strengthening mechanisms for enhanced accountability, it is also important to take into account actions by government, civil society, development partners or other actors that can promote social accountability by addressing factors in each of these four key areas. In order to be effective, social accountability mechanisms often need to be preceded or complemented by efforts to enhance the willingness and capacities of citizens, civil society and government actors to engage in actions to promote a more enabling environment.

Many social accountability initiatives focus on strengthening *bridging mechanisms*—mechanisms for information exchange, dialogue and negotiation—between citizens and the state. This can involve the introduction of new tools, opportunities or platforms for citizen-state interaction, or the improvement, renewal or reform of existing mechanisms, systems and agencies. Examples include introducing or improving proactive government information disclosure through the establishment of public information centers or campaigns; creating

platforms for public debate and citizen-state dialogue such as radio “call in” programs, public hearings, town hall meetings and citizen’s juries; and establishing fora for negotiation and participatory decision-making such as public meetings, joint committees and participatory budgeting processes.

The *willingness and ability of citizens and civil society to actively seek government accountability* is another key determinant of successful social accountability. These factors can represent a major obstacle in contexts where civil society may be weak and notions of citizenship are undeveloped. Key issues include: the capacity of civil society actors—including independent media—to research, analyze, demystify and disseminate relevant information; the capacity of citizens to organize, mobilize, build coalitions and speak with a common voice; the willingness and ability to interact and negotiate with government and to adopt a constructive and solution-oriented approach; and the capacity of CSOs to build public support and to demonstrate credible and accountable behavior. A wide variety of training, capacity building and support measures targeting diverse civil society actors—including citizens associations, community based organizations, intermediary NGOs, social movements, media, think tanks, and public interest law centers—can be used to address capacity issues in this area. Efforts by civil society to build organizational capacities and improve internal governance practices, as well as initiatives by government and development partners to support such efforts, are an important component of enhanced social accountability.

The *willingness and ability of politicians and civil servants to account to the people* is a third critical factor in achieving social accountability. From the perspective of the three building blocks of social accountability—information, voice and negotiation—the willingness and ability of state actors to disclose information and to listen to and engage with citizens is key. Many governments have taken important steps towards enhancing their capacity to share information and engage with citizens. Such actions, sometimes undertaken with donor support and in collaboration with civil society actors, include improved information management systems, staff training to enhance communication and facilitation skills, the use of rewards and sanctions to promote transparent and responsive behavior, the adoption of professional codes of ethics, and information campaigns on accountability policies or citizens’ rights.

Finally, social accountability is strongly influenced by a range of underlying political, legal, social, cultural and economic factors. These factors play an important role in determining the feasibility and likelihood of success of social accountability initiatives. Some aspects of the *enabling environment* are so critical that they can almost be considered prerequisites for social accountability. For example, the opportunities for social accountability initiatives are clearly greater where the political regime is democratic, a multi-party system is in place, and basic political and civil rights are guaranteed. Rule of law and the existence of legal guarantees of the freedom of information, press, expression, association and assembly are crucial. Underlying socio-cultural and economic factors also have an important influence on key aspects such as citizens’ expectations of and relations with the state, peoples’ willingness to question authority or speak out, and the capacity and means of

The impact of social accountability mechanisms is strongly influenced by a range of underlying political, legal, social, cultural and economic factors. The key for sustained impact is to adapt social accountability methods and tools to suit the context.

CSOs to organize and act. An unfavorable environment does not mean that social accountability activities cannot be pursued. However, actions or reforms to create a more enabling environment—for example, by introducing freedom of information legislation or facilitating the registration of NGOs—can be critical to achieving effective and sustainable social accountability outcomes.