Governance, Social Accountability and the Civil Society

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Abstract

This paper reviews the current literature on social accountability as a means to achieve good governance and increased public participation for improved public service delivery. After a brief discussion on concept and tools of social accountability, this paper illustrates that such innovations have led to improvements in the performance of state agencies and actors in varying contexts across the developing countries. Increased donor-led efforts to converge good governance agendas and neo-liberal economics tend to overlook politics that is central to struggles for social accountability. The complete faith of the neo-liberal development paradigm in market-friendliness, devolution, and working through NGOs often disregards politics within which such policies have to operate and on which they are ultimately dependent. The overarching issues of poverty and redistribution should caution development practitioners that such innovations and policy transfer[s] pertaining to social accountability might not become blunt instruments of 'traveled formalism'

Keywords: governance, accountability, civil society

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[1] The author works for the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The views expressed in this paper are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of ADB, or its Board of Governors, or the governments they represent. ADB does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this paper and accepts no responsibility for any consequence of their use. The countries listed in this paper do not imply any view on ADB's part as to sovereignty or independent status or necessarily conform to ADB's terminology.

Introduction

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of poverty reduction and governance as key priorities in international development. With the failure of structural adjustments and other [classic] neo-liberal economic reform programs in reducing poverty, development theory and practice emphasized the role of a capable state for effective interaction with markets and citizens. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 further stressed the need for transparency and effective regulatory and legal frameworks for national governance.

Notwithstanding the empirical challenges, strong evidence of links between country governance systems and development performance has been noted (World Bank, 2006). Studies have, for instance, shown that the benefits of public health spending on child and infant mortality rates are greater in countries with better governance. Similarly, public investments in primary education are more likely to lead to higher education attainment if governance improvements are effected (Swaroop and Rajkumar, 2002).

Cross-country comparisons and 'unbundling' of governance components such as rule of law, voice and accountability, corruption control and state capture, have indicated that a greater focus on external accountability can lead to improved governance. In this context, transparency mechanisms and monitoring tools, as well participatory voice and incentive driven corruption prevention approaches, have been emphasized. Debates on public services and market-friendly growth strategies have also highlighted the need for an effective state and citizen empowerment. For instance, the 2000/2001 World Development Report and World Bank's empowerment framework recognize accountability as an integral component of 'empowerment' and hence poverty reduction.

With an increased emphasis on accountability, the concept has been defined in different ways from punishment or sanction to answerability and enforcement. A working definition of accountability describes it is a "proactive process by which public officials inform and justify their plans of action, their behavior, and results and are sanctioned accordingly" (Ackerman, 2004: 3). Accountability mechanisms can broadly be classified as either 'horizontal' or 'vertical.' The former can occur internally (for example, an internal audit within a government agency) and can be among equals (for example, legislators holding each other accountable). Horizontal mechanisms occur externally and involve one party holding another accountable and therefore exercising 'superior authority' or greater power. Among the various mechanisms of promoting accountability, we focus on social accountability here given its role in facilitating civic engagement aimed towards improving the living conditions of the poor.

Social Accountability – Concept and Application

Social accountability has been defined as "an approach towards 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" (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004: 1). The mechanisms for implementing this form of accountability are 'vertical.' Although elections have a similar role, they are considered a 'blunt instrument' as they do not enable citizens to state

their preferences regarding specific issues, participate effectively in public decision making or hold public officials accountable for particular decisions and behavior.

Examples of social accountability initiatives include 'traditional' forms, such as public demonstrations, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism; and, the recent ones such as citizen report cards, participatory public policy making, public expenditure tracking, and "efforts to improve the effectiveness of "internal" accountability mechanisms of the government, for example by involving citizens in public commissions and hearings and oversight committees." (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004: 4) It has also been suggested that social accountability initiatives are most effective when these are 'institutionalized' and when the states' 'internal' (horizontal) accountability mechanisms are "more transparent and open to civic involvement." (2004: 4) Thus, transparency is inextricably linked to accountability.

Poor people are the greatest beneficiaries of effective social accountability initiatives as they are the "most reliant on government services and least equipped to hold government officials accountable" (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004: 5). The proponents of social accountability maintain that by involving citizens in initiatives geared towards demanding accountability of elected leaders, social accountability also strengthens democracy. The monitoring of government performance and demand for transparency protects against corruption.

A key feature of recent practices is the increased reliance on civil society organizations (CSOs)— through domestic imperatives or externally driven donor support—to influence government priorities for spending and reform and monitoring public expenditures. These models have originated from different sources in response to various problems. We elaborate such innovations below.

Social Accountability - Experiences

Recent practices implementing the concepts of social accountability include, among others, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, monitoring of public service delivery, investigative journalism, public commissions and citizen advisory boards. A key feature of such practices is the increased reliance on CSOs – to influence government priorities for spending and reform, and monitoring public expenditures. Some of the best models have arisen at the local level, either from civil society or local government usually with external donor support, and signal the importance of reaching down to local levels for innovation.

Participatory Budget Processes

Various organizations, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations (2005), the Asia Foundation, and the International Budget Project have supported the introduction of participatory budget processes, largely at subnational level and now the use of such

approaches is fairly widespread.[2] These mechanisms operate along the public expenditure cycle, based on the assumption that budgets and their execution reflect actual policy decisions and their implementation (Wagle and Shah, 2002). Participatory budgeting is seen as instrumental in making the allocation of public resources more 'inclusive' and 'equitable.' By enhancing public access to budget information, transparency in fiscal policy and public expenditure management can be achieved that in turn reduces clientelism, elite capture, and corruption.

The World Bank has identified various types of social accountability mechanisms that can be applied at different stages of the policy sequence. These mechanisms operate along the budget and public expenditure cycle, understanding that budgets and their execution more truthfully reflect actual policy decisions and their implementation (Wagle and Shah, 2002).

CSOs have emerged as partners of local governments in areas such as (i) seeking voice in local development planning and budgeting processes; (ii) holding local governments accountable in the allocation of local resources; (iii) enhancing local revenues; and (iv) tracking the use of resources and the impact of local policies and programs (Thindwa, 2006). Porto Alegre in Brazil has become a model for participatory budgeting. This model entails close involvement of regional assemblies and participatory budget councils in allocating resources and monitoring how they are used. Using such techniques, the number of households with access to water services has substantially risen. The number of children in public schools doubled during 1989-1996 and the tax revenue increased by nearly 50% since increased transparency encouraged higher payment of local taxes (World Bank Institute, 2006).

Another example is that of the Gujarat State in India that has employed successful engagement of civil society in budget review and analysis. Since the use of such tools, allocation and release of funds to priority sectors has improved and there is strengthened flow of information among ministries. The Gujarat model is being replicated in several other Indian states (Thindwa 2004, World Bank Institute 2006).

Initiatives across the developing world are utilizing social accountability mechanisms in applied budgeting. In Bangladesh, participatory budgeting programs at the *Union Parishad*, the lowest tier of local government with the help of nongovernmental organizations have assisted citizens to monitor quality spending of local governments through the instrument of open budget sessions (Rahman, 2005). Jembrana, Bali in Indonesia has also been cited as an example of good local governance by various parties and agencies in Indonesia (Brodjonegoro, 2005). Jembrana is part of the Bali Island with a population of 221,616 and an area of 84,180 square kilometers with an economy dependent on agriculture. The government of Jembrana capitalized on the efficiency of local budget management. Local community was encouraged to participate in executing local programs in education. The community developed their respective schools based on their needs, rather than on local government plan. Result was significant budget saving for education, which was allocated for subsidy to elementary and secondary schools. People of Jembrana can now enjoy free education

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[2] See for example, ADB. 2005. Developing Pro-Poor Governance Capability and Knowledge. Available: http://adb.org/Projects/e-toolkit/default.asp. Catholic Relief Services. 2003. Social Accountability Mechanisms: Citizen Engagement for Pro-Poor Policies and Reduced Corruption. 09 January. Department of Policy and Strategic Issues. 209 W. Baltimore: Maryland, USA.

from elementary to high school. In Naga City, Philippines, CSOs have been assisting in analyzing the city's gender budget review and analysis; and undertaking effective budget advocacy during various stages of the budget cycle.

Figure 1 - Stages of public expenditure management as tools of social accountability
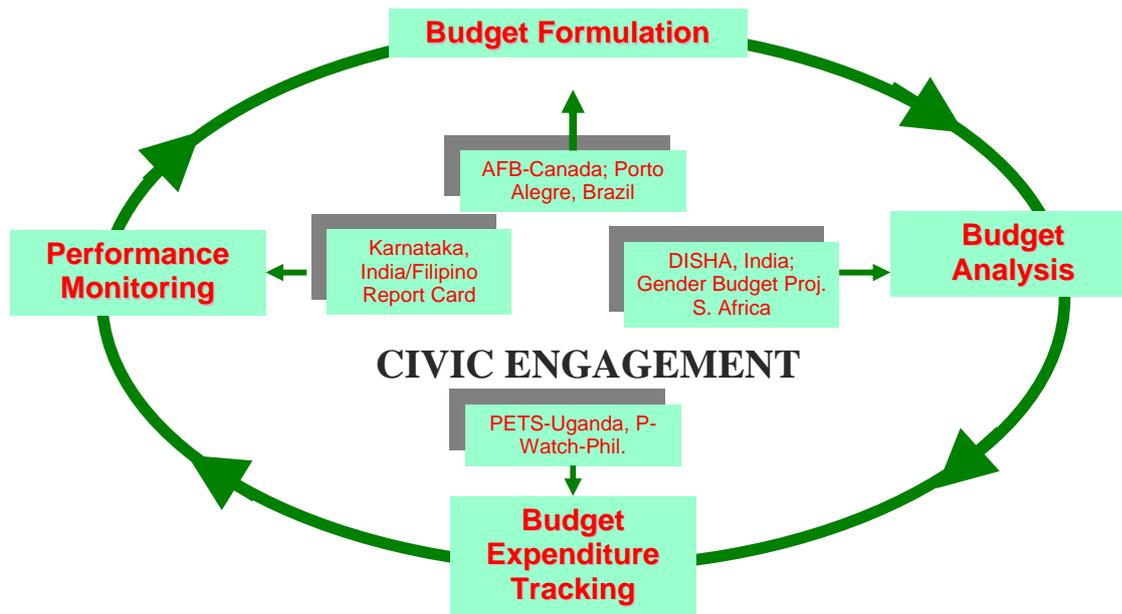
Source: "Entry Points for Civil Society to Influence Budget Processes", by Jeff Thindwa Powerpoint presentation during the training/workshop on Budget Analysis and Tanzania's Participatory Public Expenditure Review.

The Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys in Uganda are a model for participatory expenditure tracking. In 1995, for every dollar spent on non-wage education items by the central government, only about 20 cents reached the schools with local government capturing most of the funds leaving the poorer schools under-resourced. Due to tracking measures, primary school enrollment in Uganda rose from 3.6 million students to 6.9 students between 1996 and 2001; and the share of funds reaching schools increased from 20% in 1995 to 80% in 2001 (Brodjonegoro, 2005).

The various stages of public expenditure management as tools of social accountability are summarized in Figure 1.

Citizen Report Cards and Social Audit

The use of citizen report cards—as performance monitoring and feedback mechanisms—has also gained currency since the late 1990s. Citizen report cards evaluate different service providers from a user perspective and thereby make the service providers more accountable to the citizens. The Public Affairs Centre, in Bangalore, India has been a world leader in applying using these tools in Bangalore's public agencies in 1994. Since then, the Public Affairs Centre has brought out report cards on several other cities, rural services, and also on specific sectoral services such as health care. During the first Citizen Report Card in Bangalore, most public service providers received low ratings from the people. Subsequently media involvement and consultations brought issues of service-delivery into the public domain. CSOs facilitated increased demand for better performance (Paul, 2002; Paul and Shekhar, 2000; Ravindra, 2004). With the second report card in 1999, these improvements were reflected in the somewhat better ratings that the agencies received. The third Citizen Report Card in Bangalore completed in 2003, showed a marked improvement in services (Paul, 2005). Report cards have also been replicated in the Philippines (see box 1), Kenya, and Ukraine, to name a few places.

> **BOX 1** - During 2002, report card surveys were piloted RCS in determining the state of the local government's delivery of public services in nine (9) cities of Metro Manila. Cities and municipalities are mandated to perform a very wide array of public services under the Philippine Local Government Code of 1991. Five services were initially selected for inclusion in the survey agenda; namely: *garbage collection*; *traffic management*; *public (neighborhood) safety*; *public market management*; *and permit issuance/licensing*. The objective of the survey was to establish what the local residents think about the quality of these services across several dimensions of their *actual experience and/or contact* with the service(s). The residents' feedback on these dimensions formed the basis for the "report card" (for the five services) for each city and used inter-office comparisons. The results for each city were discussed with the city mayor and officers from different offices of the concerned city. The citizens' satisfaction ratings or the "report cards" were published in newspapers, discussed in radio programs and presented in two workshops attended by non-government organizations and government agencies. The findings as well as the experiences in implementing the RCS demonstrated the tool's ability to empower citizens to provide feedback on public services even those that did not belong to organized groups. The results showed gaps between what the citizens and the government considered as important dimensions of a service, prompting the city government to step up its efforts in providing information and consulting the citizens. The other uses of the RCS were to validate the results of other evaluation efforts and assess the quality of subcontracted and privatized services. Lastly, the RCS identified areas needing clarification between the local governments and the national government agencies under a decentralized set-up.

Since the 1950s, the concept of Social Audit has evolved from a corporate management tool to its present form as a means of feedback and participation for increased state accountability and transparency. A social audit usually records and interprets the experience of the clients or citizens the organizational entity is meant to service. The international nonprofit agency Community Information and Epidemiological Technologies (CIET) has developed a social audit approach that conducts user surveys and provides formal

mechanisms for user participation in the interpretation of evidence and identification of local solutions.[3]

Across Asia, social audits are proving useful in promoting public accountability and responsiveness. In one Bangladesh project, for instance, the participation of over 125,000 people from 250 communities, most of them women, led to their voice being counted in the provision of health and family planning services. In Pakistan, ADB and other international organizations such as CIET are investing in building civil society capacity to interact with the new local government system as policy advocates and monitors of public accountability. Selected studies from India show that relatively 'well-governed states' such as Kerala, have made headway in social auditing. In Delhi, a successful civil society movement *Parivartan* (fighting corruption) using the Right to Information law has been conducting public audits of civil works and other services and rallying people around common concerns of misgovernance. In many instances, the state government and its agencies have responded by rectifying the immediate causes of discontent.

Perspectives from the practitioners

Several risks have emerged during the implementation of above-stated approaches. Foremost of such risks is the absence of an enabling environment—policy, legal and regulatory frameworks, an accommodating political environment, accessible government. In particular, local elite capture of the process may distort the exercise of social accountability; and it is noted frequently that better organized CSOs and interest groups can take advantage compared to other grassroots groups. In some cases, due to application of such tools, the expectations of the local community may exacerbate disharmony in citizen-state relations particularly where the government capacity of delivery is weak. The importance of social mobilization and effective media exposure has also been highlighted for the success of such approaches (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2002).

The weaknesses of citizen interest groups advocating for civic engagement and social accountability is also a risk. Internal governance and accountability weaknesses of CSOs may lead to the undermining of civic engagement. Application of social accountability mechanisms also results in "(a) a tendency to take up an exclusively local level perspective on issues, (b) top-down design of initiatives, and (c) failure to link up with the legal structure[s]" (Ackerman, 2005: ii). It has been argued that the "social accountability entrepreneurs" keen to implement rights based approaches to development need to explicitly address the aforementioned concerns in their work.

Poor communities are often presented with solutions and participatory recipes through the medium of 'civil society'. Having illustrated the increased emphasis on the role of civil society, embedded within the concept of social accountability, the following section discusses some of the conceptual challenges that the term civil society offers in the context of developing societies.

Understanding 'Civil Society'

Social groups and institutions located outside of government and not working purely for profit in the private sector; political groups; NGOs and community and neighborhood organizations; and

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[3] Further details can be found at www.ciet.org/.

other groups, which advance public interest, tend to constitute what is commonly called 'civil society.' However, the relationships between governments and civic associations are far more complex than presumed. Analysis of these 'ambiguous associations' (Read and Pekkanen, 2005) is not yet complete, but it is now being recognized that many modes of popular association eliciting participation are not always independent but linked to the state in several ways. While the avowed agenda of international development agencies is to foster, support and work with the civil society, critics have noted that donor support to NGOs is often external to indigenous development processes.

As Chatterjee contends, democratic development is not dependent on building blocks of 'civil society' but on the enabling of poor into the 'political society'—an arena of governmentality where the disadvantaged can pressurize the state to negotiate their entitlements (Chatterjee, 2002; 2004). The regulatory capabilities of colonial governments preceded the inclusion of these populations into the legal framework of citizenship. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of postcolonial subjects continue to maintain only the most fragile association to formal citizenship, and interact with a state that sustains itself by violating its own regulations. It is via this nebulous and tumultuous political dynamics that much of the daily negotiation and organization of state power actually takes place.

Thus, civil society differs from the political society. In the former, individual groups articulate their interests. On the other hand, the contested terrain of political society is where formal and informal institutions and citizens—as well as the poor with little engagement with citizenship—negotiate with the local state for security, entitlements and services and the welfare-related rights are viewed as collective rights.

In reality, several donor-led programs espousing advanced liberal principles view fighting poverty as the shared responsibility of individuals, private institutions, and NGOs that struggle for the 'rights' of poor citizens while the state takes a backseat in the process. In this world of individual and the private, citizen engagement as entrepreneurs and consumers in global markets and domestic financial systems is a panacea for poverty and exclusion. This discourse therefore ignores the political dimensions of citizen-state relations, imperatives of political society and how in such a context, the (postcolonial) state secures entitlements for the poor.

Good Governance and Politics

Due to the lack of a precise definition of good governance, it has been extremely attractive to the donor agencies, particularly the Bretton Woods institutions. Bound by their Charters, the international financial institutions (IFIs) find the route of 'institutional reform' much easier to manage. However, devoid of a direct political economy lens, the development agencies' governance agenda has also been termed as 'naïve' for it "ignores that good governance is not simply available on order, but requires a particular kind of politics both to institute and sustain it" (Leftwich, 1993: 612). Agendas for good governance need to be critically considered as these may end up deflecting attention from the 'real' issues such as the political process itself or redistribution of assets such as land. For instance, studies clearly show that the ownership of land leads to greater employment opportunities, an increased ability to borrow money, greater self respect and less vulnerability and poverty.

Recent research has noted that the discipline of 'development' is beyond its 1980s and 1990s phase of classic neo-liberal policy prescriptions: structural adjustment, deregulation, privatization, and scaling down of the state. Craig and Porter (2006) have argued that the recent 'engagement' with issues such as poverty and governance, pro-poor services via decentralized governance underscore the importance of a 'capable state'. Analyzing the entitlements' record in the post-structural adjustment phase of development, evidence points out that the government's political responsiveness and accountability has been undermined; and the overarching focus on service delivery overlooks the required political and institutional capacity of governments to respond to issues of security, entitlements and social justice.

Decentralized local governance patterns and engagement also work where the enabling political context is conducive. For instance, some have held that in the Indian context, states such as Kerala and West Bengal[4] demonstrate successes in terms of civic engagement and local state responsiveness where a 'supportive' political environment is available (Kohli, 1987).

The importance of political society

Political and social realities in the South are far more complex than assumed by the international development diagnostics and prescriptions. For instance, Harris-White (2003) unpacks the formalistic state and holds that that the statutory state, over the decades, has been consumed to a degree by the 'shadow state.' The latter includes brokers, advisers, political workers, contractors who interact and often determine the choices of the 'official state' and engender processes that assure private gains for the employees of the formal state. The poor, therefore, become dependent on the security provided by the intermediaries for basic survival through a process termed as the politics of governmentality. However, this leads us to the question whether the traditional actors, the patrimonial elites and development agencies will move towards such a nuanced, political economy-driven development practice.

Craig and Porter (2006) have argued that there are early signs of this happening already. The difficulties encountered in implementing governance reforms have underlined the need for further shifts in development practice. Thus, focus is shifting towards the *political capability* of the state at national and sub-national levels to respond to issues affecting the poor's security and asset access. The functions of subnational government are viewed beyond service delivery and right into the domain of public good provision and social (and political) accountability. In particular, the struggles around the distribution of public resources and assets such as land, water, etc., are gaining prominence in the search for governance outcomes.

It would be pertinent to note here that the emerging giant economies—India and PRC— have recognized the issues of inequality, rural-urban divide and public goods as their key priorities.[5] That such policy priorities are articulated in spite of adherence to market based principles is a telling story that is beyond the scope of this brief. Suffice it to say that these are issues directly

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[4] Both Kerala and West Bengal states in India have high levels of political participation and reformist governments with ambitious social agenda. Whilst the overall performance of these state governments has been mixed, these states have actively articulated citizen interest through political route[s].

[5] For India, see Government of India. 2002. 10th Five-Year Plan (2002–2007). New Delhi.

located in the political realm. The attempts to rollback the role of state have exacerbated or ironically brought back the issues of political capability and accountability back into the development discourse. Therefore, the task of promoting and achieving social accountability has to be located within the context of political action that would include civil society's role but not limited to it.

The challenge for international development partners is to find appropriate modes of engaging with national stakeholders in a manner that facilitates and builds on the domestic reform and its political underpinnings. Only, then social accountability in its true sense could be supported. Future research and action agenda therefore needs to identify the appropriate instruments and processes in identifying and enabling local drivers of change. It is complex, time consuming given the limitations of aid bureaucracy but crucial to achieving what is referred to as good governance.

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