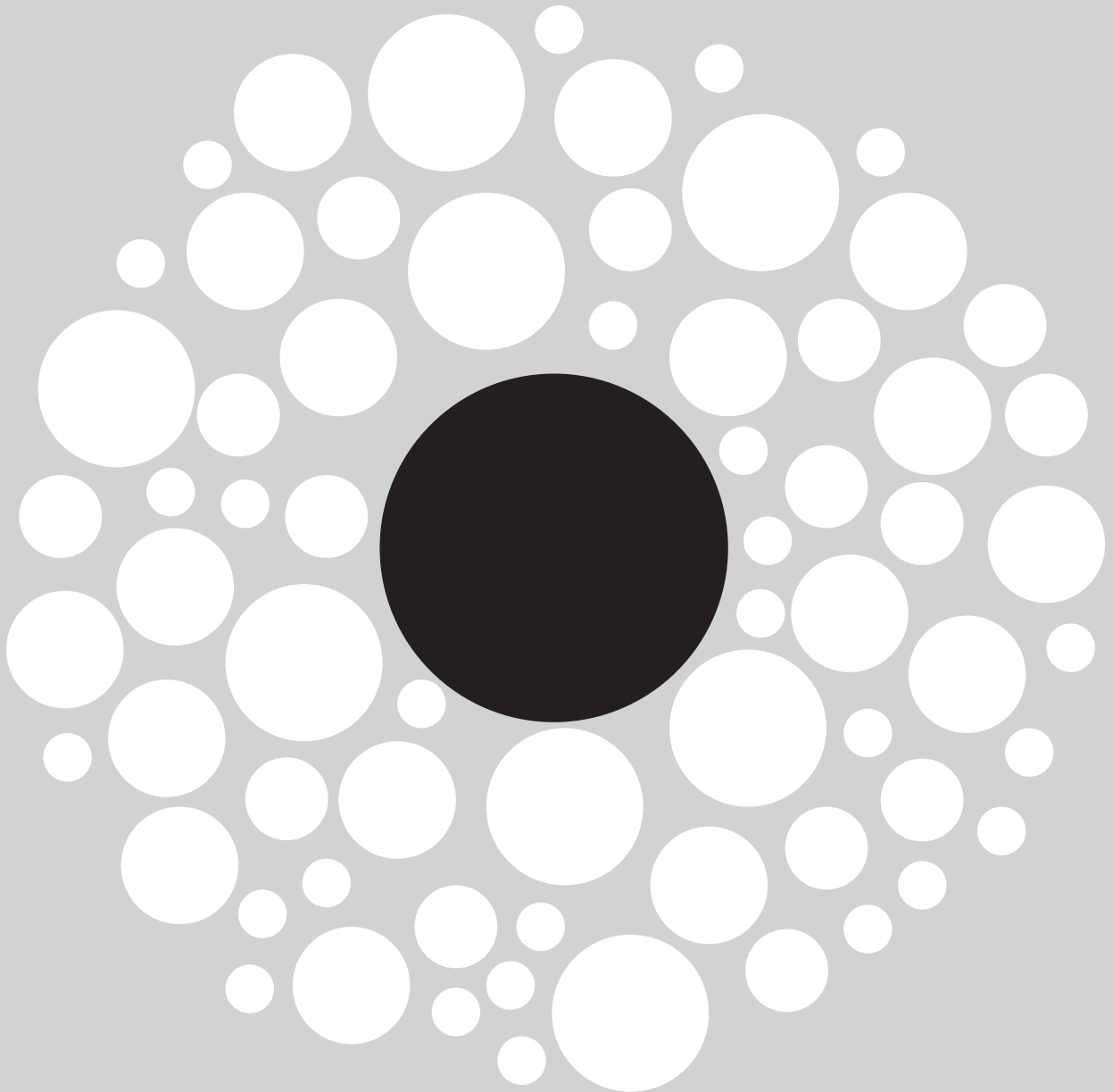


Social Accountability and its Conceptual Challenges: An analytical framework

Claudia Baez Camargo | Eelco Jacobs



“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you”(Arnstein 1969, 216)

Responsibility for the views expressed and for any errors of fact or judgment rests with the authors alone.

This paper appeared in eucrim, the European Criminal Law Associations' Forum, 2013/2, published by Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science c/o Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law, Freiburg i. B., Germany.

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1. Introduction

Social accountability initiatives are increasingly expected to facilitate positive development outcomes such as more responsive local government, exposing government failure and corruption, empowering marginalized groups, and ensuring that national and local governments respond to the concerns of the poor. However, exactly through which mechanisms this is expected to take place and what are facilitating pre-conditions for accountability to work, are topics that have not been sufficiently explored in the literature. As O’Neil, Foresti, and Hudson (2007, v) argued, “there is a need for more evidence on how change occurs, and how voice and accountability relate to more effective states and better development outcomes.” Thus, an acknowledged conceptual void in this field concerns the specific causal chains by which better governance outcomes can be associated with social accountability approaches (see, for example, (Frankish et al. 2002, Reich 2002, and Thurston et al. 2005).

In this research brief we wish make a contribution towards addressing this void and propose a conceptual framework linking civil society participatory approaches to increased responsiveness of public officials and, based on it, suggest a set of conceptual guidelines to identify essential features of social accountability initiatives. In addition we aim to shed light on the challenges and limitations to the model, which require due attention in programme design. The paper is organized as follows. It starts with a clear definition of accountability in general and social accountability in particular. It then proceeds to discuss the manner in which incentives of local public officials may be affected to improve responsiveness by means of citizens’ participation. Lastly, it highlights some of the practical and inherent limitations to the social accountability approach.

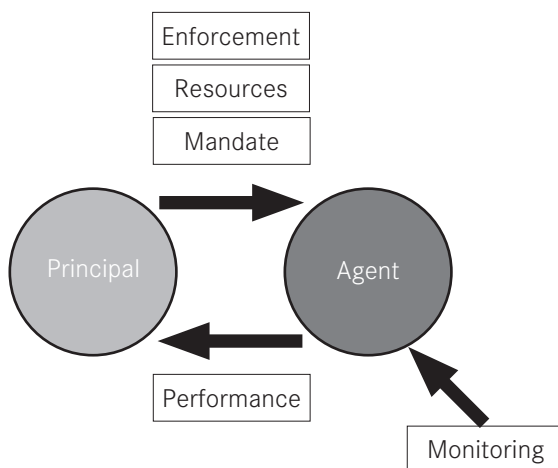
Each development context differs from the other so this paper does not offer universal blueprints. However, we intend to provide a map of different elements that are essential to consider in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of social accountability projects. Responsiveness may be improved by strengthening some aspects of the accountability chain, and it is up to implementers to decide which elements have greater feasibility and potential impact given the particular circumstances in each case.

2. Definition of concepts

Conceptualising social accountability begins with an understanding of the concept of accountability per se. Accountability is here defined as a process within a principal-agent relationship. In this relationship the behaviour and performance of the agent is evaluated against predetermined standards by the principal and misdeeds are sanctioned (Baez-Camargo 2011, 6). In public governance, citizens are intrinsically the ultimate principals with the state acting on their behalf to provide a wide array of public goods and services. Following the World Bank’s seminal discussion (World Bank 2004), there are five components that need be present for accountable relations to take place in public governance: mandate, resources, performance, information about performance, and enforceability (See Figure 1).

Taken together, these elements suggest that accountability refers to a dynamic process: First, a clear mandate governing what is expected from the agent must exist and be known. Next, the agent needs to have access to the resources necessary to carry out the mandate. With a clear mandate and adequate resources the agent should perform as indicated. However, the essence of accountability resides in the fact that the principal retains the ability to follow up on the performance of the agent. Therefore, performance of the agent needs to be monitored vis-à-vis the original mandate and the potential to enforce sanctions in case of unsatisfactory performance needs to exist. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the different functions associated with accountability need to be interconnected in a coherent manner. For example, resource allocation needs to correspond to the scope of the mandate and the information generated by the monitoring activity needs to be communicated to those evaluating performance and enforcing sanctions.

Figure 1. Components for Accountable Principal-Agent Relations

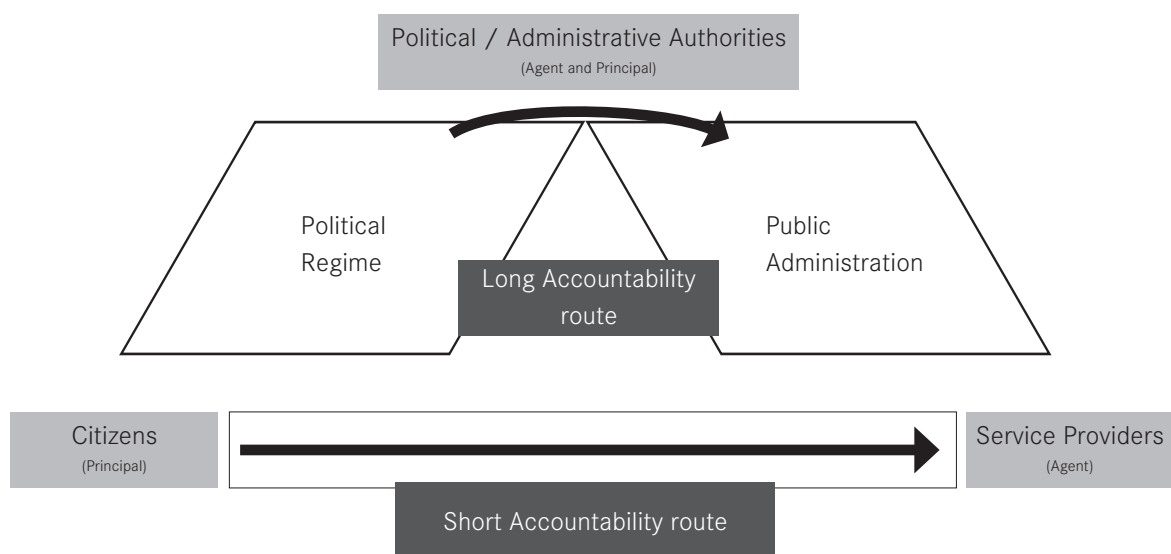


Source: Baez Camargo (2011) based on World Bank (2004)

Ultimately, effective accountability is expected to be achieved in a context where the incentives faced by the agents point towards fulfilling their mandate adequately. This in turn can be assumed to be a function of how well the different elements associated with accountability are linked together. Incentives for performance will be compromised if, for example, there are no effective monitoring mechanisms to assess performance or if, regardless of monitoring, sanctions are rarely enforced.

Social accountability refers to formal or informal mechanisms through which citizens and/or civil society organizations engage to bring state officials or service providers to account. In recent years donors and policymakers have come to consider social accountability as one of the more promising approaches to build bottom-up democratic governance processes since it takes place precisely at the interface where the state and citizens interact, whether or not institutional space for this exists. The direct participation of citizens is in fact what distinguishes social accountability from other conventional mechanisms of accountability (Malena, Forster, and Singh 2004).

Figure 2. Model for accountability routes in the provision of public services



Source: Beaz Camargo (2011) based on World Bank (2004)

Most often, social accountability activities are associated with the provision of public services at a decentralized (local or community) level. To illustrate the discussion it is useful to refer back to the World Bank’s 2004 model, where a long and a short accountability routes are identified (See Figure 2.). The long route involves citizens holding the government accountable through mechanisms of political representation (closely related to regime type), and then the government (through formal mechanisms in the public administration) holding providers accountable for delivering public services to the population. Therefore, along this route the accountability link between citizens and providers of public services is indirect and requires adequate performance across a substantially large institutional space.

Improving the responsiveness of service providers can be a real challenge because public services are for the most part provided at the local level, where the implementing and enforcement capabilities of the state may be hampered by resource constraints or institutional bottlenecks. For this reason, strengthening a direct or short accountability route through local participatory mechanisms can be seen as a potentially efficient way to exercise some of the functions associated with the principal-agent relationship. This approach may entail, for example, obtaining information about performance from communities directly involved in monitoring service providers.

In this paper we want to emphasize that in order to improve the effectiveness of social accountability interventions it is important to have clarity on which of the elements associated with accountability relations is being targeted and whether the appropriate interconnections between all the components of accountability are being considered for programme design and implementation. What are often understood as social accountability projects often target specific aspects linked to the accountability and performance of service providers. For example, participatory budgeting can improve local governance performance by making resource allocation more responsive to expectations of citizens. Citizen charters target the mandate element since citizens and local providers come to agree upon expected standards of services (World Bank 2007, 50). Most common are “fire alarm” monitoring activities through which citizens report observed irregularities, which institutions with formal investigative powers may then utilize (Grimes 2012). Such monitoring activities are carried out through a range of social accountability tools and approaches such as community score cards, citizen report cards, participatory public expenditure tracking, participatory evaluation of local service provision, citizen based ex-post auditing and participatory monitoring of procurement and implementation of local government contracts.

There are many potential ways in which communities can become involved in strengthening direct accountability. Appendix 1 presents a partial list of social accountability tools. Because monitoring functions are the most frequent type of social accountability intervention here we focus on assessing the design and impact of participatory performance monitoring, though a good part of the discussion will also be applicable to interventions targeting the other elements. However, special attention should be paid to the larger picture in order to make sure that the elements targeted with the intervention are adequately embedded in the specific context to contribute to a situation where accountability of the public officials and service providers is strengthened. Focusing on just one element such as monitoring may generate information on actual performance but does not necessarily have a significant impact on the incentives underpinning that provider performance. For this reason, in the following section we set out the different elements that need be minimally present for the social accountability mechanism to qualify as such.

3. Voice, enforceability and answerability

In this section we elaborate on the component elements for the notion of accountability outlined above to develop a conceptual map linking citizen participation with enhanced accountability of local public officials. Because most social accountability mechanisms primarily intend to strengthen ‘voice’, we give special attention to this concept, exploring its meaning and suggesting what are preconditions for voice to be exercised. The premise is that voice is ineffective unless it can elicit answerability and enforceability (Goetz and Jenkins 2005, UNDP 2010). Therefore, we posit that social accountability involves at least three core elements: **voice, enforceability and answerability**, which together form part of a cycle. We begin by defining and discussing each of these concepts in turn.

Voice here is understood as a variety of mechanisms – formal and informal – through which people express their preferences, opinions and views and demand accountability from power-holders (UNDP 2010, 11).

The concept of voice distinguishes itself from a simple collection of complaints or comments through the following three characteristics:

- First, for citizens to effectively **participate** in monitoring and evaluating any aspect of public sector performance, they first need to have a clear understanding of what the mandate is. In other words, citizens may very well not even be aware of their rights and entitlements and of the specific obligations that public officers have to fulfil in the course of their work. For this reason **capacity building**, understood minimally as communicating basic information on mandate, rights and entitlements to citizens who are to perform social accountability activities, can be deemed to be a first prerequisite for voice to be effective.
- Second, the individual evaluations and opinions of citizens that result from social accountability monitoring activities need to be **aggregated and articulated**. Most importantly, the information resulting from the process of aggregating and articulating citizens’ assessments,

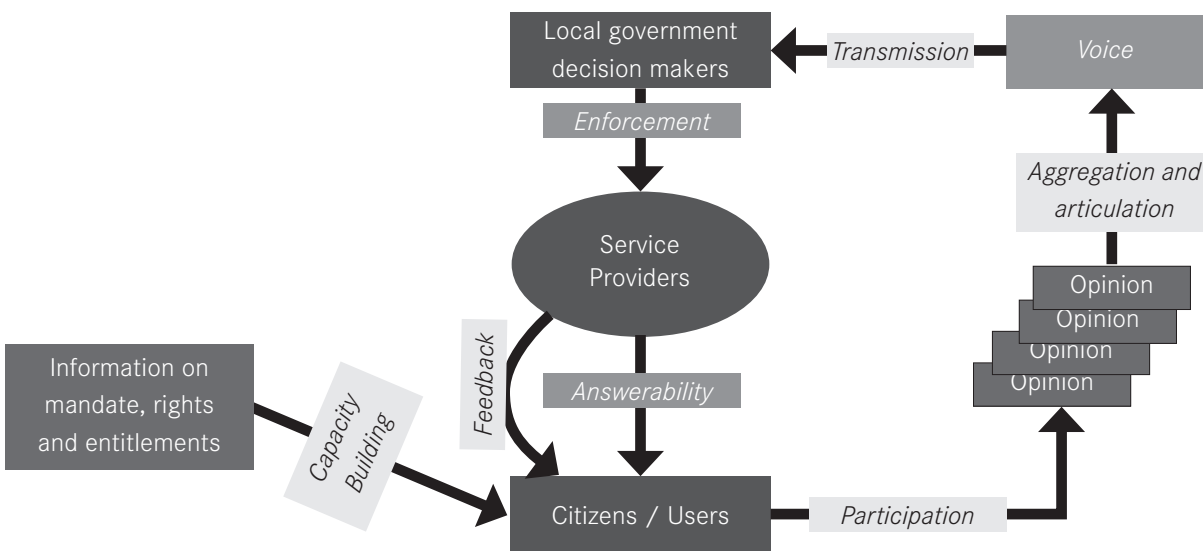
opinions and complaints should be formulated in direct reference to the mandate highlighting specific shortcomings, unmet targets, and in the case of complaints synthesizing individual grievances into actionable demands.

- Third, generating information is not enough. Citizen’s feedback needs to be **transmitted** to relevant actors or decision makers who can act upon the information and/or for whom the information has the potential to generate costs. In other words, aggregating and articulating information is not sufficient unless it is channelled in a way that it can have an effect on the incentive structures of decision makers and public officials.

Enforceability refers to a situation where, when the mandate is not appropriately fulfilled, consequences are expected to exist and be executed. Enforceability is a critical underlying factor shaping the **incentives** of service providers to act in a more or less responsive manner with respect to the communities they serve. Incentives here can be understood in terms of the costs for the service provider associated with unsatisfactory performance and normally refer to formal disciplinary action, but can also entail rewards for good performance (both usually involve remuneration or career opportunities).

Answerability is defined by UNDP (2010) as the obligation to provide an account and the right to get a response. In this discussion, answerability can be understood as voice triggering a response from the service provider or pertinent authority. It is essential in the sense that it is one of the concrete manifestations of the notion that accountability is a two-way process, in the case of social accountability, directly engaging citizens and service providers. As a concrete example of the interconnection of the concepts here discussed, answerability is strongly contingent on enforceability, but it also involves a **feedback** process through which the citizens can be informed of the use made of the information they have provided; namely to whom it has been relayed and what actions are being taken to address the issues uncovered by the social accountability exercise.

Figure 3. Components and steps involved in effective social accountability initiatives



Putting these three concepts together, social accountability involves an informed citizenry exercising voice that is transmitted to those with enforcement capabilities in order to generate answerability from service providers and local authorities. This notion and its component elements are illustrated in Figure 3.

All three elements, (voice, enforceability and answerability) need to be present to at least some extent for social accountability to meet the preconditions for a meaningful and sustainable impact on the provision of public services.

One of the main implications of this model is that because providers of public services are, within contextual variations and different modalities, embedded in the institutional apparatus of the state, promoting the engagement of citizens to articulate their voice is not enough when such voice is

not reaching the state and its institutions in one way or the other. When a social accountability exercise has no available channel through which to impact the incentives of service providers (i.e. increase the cost of bad performance) it is unlikely that tangible results can be obtained through participatory mechanisms of social accountability. Finally, sustainability of direct accountability mechanisms requires answerability, at the minimum through feedback on the manner in which citizens' participatory efforts have been handled and concerns addressed.

Acknowledging that reality is always complex and resources are scarce, this framework seeks to direct attention to, not only the elements that are essential for fostering accountability at the local level, but also the importance of the interconnectedness of those elements. Consequently it is important to not just inform citizens about rights and entitlements, but to also make adequate participatory schemes accessible. It is not enough to obtain an informed opinion from citizens; the process of aggregating and articulating opinions into actionable demands or claims is a highly significant one as well. It is also not enough to create the conditions necessary for citizens to exercise voice, but to have adequate mechanisms and the right target audience to whom to transmit the citizens' voice. Therefore, even in the case of a successful participatory exercise, for voice to translate into more responsive government and service provision it should be transmitted in a way such that it can impact on the incentives of decision makers.

As implied by the framework presented here, transmission of voice should be directed to those actors who have an ability to directly influence the incentives facing the relevant public officials or service providers. This is not a necessarily straightforward question. States typically entail complex institutional and hierarchical networks. It may therefore be challenging to distinguish the relevant decision makers who have the possibility to act upon the information generated by social accountability initiatives

Voice needs to be communicated strategically. As a first approximation, we can assume that in terms of enforcement mechanisms, those with direct influence on the incentives of service providers will be those making decisions about remuneration and career promotion of the service provider. However, ultimately, the point is that voice should be able to generate a shift in the incentive structure of service providers, triggering answerability towards the citizens who have participated in the social accountability exercise. How this can be achieved depends largely on context. The possibility to engage reform minded and receptive government officials may not be abundant in some cases but also the presumptions about citizens' willingness to commit to a participatory role in the long run may not hold true in a variety of settings. The next section discusses some of the challenges to social accountability initiatives from this perspective.

4. Practical and conceptual challenges to social accountability

Building upon the conceptual clarity offered in the previous paragraphs it is possible to further explore the applicability and use of social accountability. As the approach has grown in popularity among donor agencies and policymakers, more has become known about its practical challenges but also more fundamental questions about its applicability have risen. A mixed record of success and failure of social accountability on the ground confirms this (Gaventa and Barrett 2010, McGee and Gaventa 2010)

While conceptual clarity is important the need to contextualize interventions becomes increasingly evident. Social accountability initiatives tend to be especially used in areas of precarious statehood, because of the inadequacy of formal structures of governance. They, however, tend to face the same challenges that are associated with other governance interventions in these contexts. First of all, low levels of security or even direct violence discourages the mobilisation of citizens (Schouten 2011: 2). High factionalism or particularist interests further threaten the participatory dimension of social accountability, resulting in elite capture and the use of projects for exclusionary means. Lack of administrative capacity, community trust or the constraining effects of poverty can further limit the success of social accountability projects, requiring due attention in project design and implementation. The challenges facing social accountability are however not solely practical in nature but also question the underlying assumptions and universal applicability of the model. This not only necessitates a deeper understanding of the contextual factors shaping the incentives of citizens to participate, but also an awareness of the limitations of the model's applicability.

What social accountability offers is a bottom-up approach intended to strengthen governance based upon the principal agent model. It is meant to complement the top-down interventions, such as judicial and legislative reform, anti-corruption strategies or capacity-building for public financial management that have long been the main target of governance programmes. As it became evident that the performance of governing elites did not solely depend on more capacity building or better policies, hopes were shifted

to the chastening effect of external incentives, i.e. bottom-up pressure for performance. Both approaches however assume the existence of an intrinsic, uncomplicated desire for better public governance and goods provision on behalf of the relevant actors (Booth 2011). What works and does not work for the actors involved can vary widely across settings in terms of their goals and expectations as well as in terms of what is socially acceptable and feasible for attaining sustained results.

Figuring out these details is not a straightforward task as any governance setting harbours multiple, often conflicting interests and a web of varying loyalties and accountability relationships, whereby principals sometimes act as agents and vice-versa. The businessmen who would welcome a new road do not want their land captured for its construction. The patient who needs better health care in the district is also related to a nurse whose position and income is threatened in any reorganisation. A power plant can offer much-needed electrification and jobs but can also threaten livelihoods through the occupation or pollution of farmland. In short, these dilemmas illustrate what limitations reality can pose to the applicability of the social accountability in certain settings, and highlights the need for an awareness of the appropriateness of such interventions in each context.

Furthermore, public goods and service provision in many developing countries is often the result of some degree of co-production between (quasi-) government bodies, charitable or other aid organisations, the private sector and (groups of) citizens (Joshi and Moore 2004). It is questionable to what extent the principal-agent model underlying social accountability approaches applies to such unorthodox but nonetheless widespread organisational arrangements. In a situation of co-productive service delivery a basic feature is the blurred distinction between regulators, producers, users, professionals, clients and recipients. These circumstances make it difficult to enforce a straightforward type of explicit accountability (Joshi and Moore 2004: 44). This could be motivation behind the fact that the social accountability label is frequently applied to initiatives that do not entail the essential dimensions of accountability as outlined in this paper.

5. Final Remarks

Just like transparency initiatives undertaken by the state can only go so far if citizens do not make use of their access to information rights, so can participation only generate limited results without a responsive state. Therefore, one of the challenges of improving governance lies precisely in creating adequate interfaces for society and state. In this respect, social accountability initiatives can be an enabling mechanism to transmit information and structure interactions between state and citizens. From this perspective, this type of intervention holds potential as a means to develop democratic institutions and practices from the bottom up. The remaining question is, naturally, what are the most effective ways to achieve this?

In this paper we have aimed to make a contribution towards bringing greater clarity to the concept of social accountability, taking into account the essential components that shape any accountability relationship and the preconditions for direct accountability relationships between communities and public service providers and/or local authorities to take place. Furthermore, we have outlined a basic conceptual framework to understand and trace the causal chain through which citizen participation can translate into effective voice and how voice itself can have an impact on enforceability and answerability. Lastly, it has highlighted some of the main practical and theoretical challenges to the social accountability approach.

The analysis offered is not meant to provide a single recipe for devising and assessing social accountability interventions. Rather, and acknowledging that each context is different and challenges and opportunities vary accordingly, this paper is meant to be a reference for interested implementers to ask relevant questions about feasibility, minimum standards for design and review of specific social accountability projects.¹ We argue for an increased awareness of both the conceptual and practical boundaries of social accountability, which have thus far been insufficiently addressed. The ultimate goal is to support the development of sustainable initiatives that are consistent and work with what is on the ground.

¹ Appendix 2 presents a suggested list of questions addressing the different concepts outlined in the framework.

Appendix A.

Frequently Used Social Accountability Tools (Partial list)²

2 Sources: UNDP, *Fostering Social Accountability: A guidance note*, Transparency International 2011, World Bank 2007

Citizen report cards (CRC)

Generally involve two related elements: (a) the collection of survey data on the quality and/or quantity of a public service, and (b) awareness-raising and broad-based advocacy based on the results of the survey. They are used in situations where there is no demand-side data, such as user perception on quality and satisfaction with public services. The report card process relies on extensive media coverage and civil society advocacy to achieve greater accountability.

Community scorecards (CSC)

Combine participatory quantitative surveys with village meetings bringing together service users and providers to jointly analyse and resolve service delivery problems. Citizens are empowered to provide immediate feedback to service providers in face-to-face meetings.

Participatory budgeting

Is a process through which citizens participate directly in the different phases of budget formulation, decision-making, and the monitoring of budget execution. This tool can assist in increasing the transparency of public expenditure and in improving the targeting of budgets.

Participatory output monitoring

Is a method through which local actors can monitor the achievement of stated project or policy outputs against identified indicators.

Social audits

Are designed to build accountability and transparency in the use and management of public resources through citizen monitoring, analysis and evaluation of government performance. It can take different forms and cover a range of actors and practices.

Participatory public expenditure tracking (PET)

Expenditure tracking is a method to monitor flows of public resources for the provision of public services and goods and uncover leakages and corruption in the system.

Performance-oriented, citizen-based, ex-post auditing

Citizens perform physical and financial audits of the local government accounts. By comparing the written records

with the actual outputs and discussing them in public venues, citizens forced local governments to answer the following

Public revenue monitoring

Refers to the tracking and analysis of the type and amount of revenue that a government receives. This can detect and help prevent corruption or the squandering of revenue sources, as well as increasing awareness of the amount of money that a government has at its disposal.

Study circle

Comprises a small group of people who meet over a period of time to learn about and deliberate on a critical public issue. Trained facilitators provide discussion materials to the circle and move the discussion from personal experience 'how does the issue affect me?' to action 'what can we do about the issue here?'

Virtual or online town hall meeting

Refers to organized web based meetings where participants pre-submit questions to an official or elected representative, and the officials respond during the allocated time. Depending on the technology used, the responses can either be viewed online in real time or can be received via email, phone or live web-text.

Appreciative inquiry summit

The opposite of problem solving, appreciative inquiry focuses on the positive aspects or core strengths of a community or organization. By focusing on what works, rather than fixing what does not work, it enhances the system's or organization's capacity for collaboration and change

Public forum

Refers to a place that is dedicated to the free exercise of the right to speech and public debate and assembly. Limited public forums are established when a government opens official meetings to the public to receive input or feedback. Designated public forums are intentionally created either by government or any other organization to provide space for public debate and discourse. VOICE, especially if government is involved

Citizen charters

These are pacts between the community and the service providers that spell out expectations and roles, enabling the citizens to interact more effectively with the municipality. They specify the expected standards of the services, identify who is responsible, and outline the procedures for the redress of complaints. (World Bank 2007, 50)

Appendix B.

This basic framework allows implementers to ask targeted questions geared at optimizing the impact of social accountability programmes. These could include the following:

1. Who and how performs capacity building activities? To whom are they targeted?
2. How do citizens participate?
 - How organized are communities/citizens to begin with?
 - How do we target community members who may be interested in participating sustainably while guaranteeing equal access and representation?
 - Which are the organizations or mechanisms of civil society interest articulation that are already in place? (Informal) How do they work? Who do they include, or not? What is their relationship with the state?
 - Are the instruments used for evaluation and generating community inputs adequate for the contextual situation of each community?
3. How and how aggregates and articulates opinions and evaluation results?
 - Are the criteria to synthesize information clear and transparent?
 - Are evaluations and recommendations jointly elaborated by program participants themselves or is there a third party involved?
 - In the case a third party is involved, is this an actor with a neutral agenda vis a vis the constellation of actors involved in exercising social accountability?
4. Is voice transmitted to the pertinent actors? While the abstract answer, to those with enforcement capabilities, is quite straightforward, in practice identifying those actors can be complicated. Some of the elements that need to be taken into account are:
 - Degree of centralization of the sector involved. For example, in most developing countries, the state delivers public services in a top-down, bureaucratic manner through sectoral line ministries down to the local level. Centralization of state structures means that formal sanctions for inadequate performance are usually supposed to be applied by officials along the official hierarchy (Mehrotra 2006, 264).
 - Degree of responsiveness of authorities to the public. This is expected to be a direct function of the type of regime, and where there is an absence of institutional participatory or communication mechanisms alternative transmission instances for voice, such as the media, have to be sought out.
 - What mechanisms (formal and informal) are there to access policymakers?
 - What actors or agencies have control over remuneration and career promotion decisions for service providers?
5. What are underlying factors affecting the incentive structure facing service providers?
 - Are political and/or reputational costs important?
 - Are formal “hard” enforcement measures applied consistently and predictably
 - Are there relevant local “soft” enforcement measures that the community can make use of?
 - What is the informal underlying distribution of power and social networks spanning public-private spheres?

6. Are there mechanisms in place to provide feedback information on how social accountability inputs have been addressed?
- How often and by whom is feedback provided?
 - What information is relayed back to citizens?
 - Are indicators of impact on process generated and disseminated? (i.e. changes in management, disciplinary measures, changes in budgetary allocations)
 - Are indicators of impact on outputs generated and disseminated? (i.e. better stocks; repairs/renovations; water points constructed; criminal cases reported; more police on the streets)
 - Are indicators of impact on outcomes generated and disseminated? (i.e. lower infant/maternal mortality; lower illiteracy; greater access to clean water; crime levels down; user satisfaction)

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Abstract

Social accountability has become a favored approach among most major multilateral and bilateral donors to develop grass roots mechanisms for democratic governance. In a successful scenario, citizen participation can promote more responsive governments and better provision of basic services by linking users' feedback to the policy design, implementation and monitoring activities typically undertaken by the state. However, there is a lack of agreement about which specific types of social accountability interventions yield the best results and what are the causal pathways that are critical to generate positive changes. This paper presents an analytical framework that identifies the key components that are required to exercise effective direct accountability and provides a blueprint to assess social accountability initiatives.