Module 2

Social Accountability Concept

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Content

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1. Definition of Accountability and Social Accountability

1.1 What is Accountability

"Accountability"[1] can be defined as the obligation of power-holders to account for or take responsibility for their actions. "Power-holders" refers to those who hold political, financial or other forms of power. Power-holders include officials within the government, private corporations, international financial institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs)[2] who should be accountable for their (i) conduct and (ii) performance. In other words, they can and should be held accountable to (i) obey the law and not abuse their powers and they should (ii) serve the public interest in an efficient, effective and fair manner.

Accountability can be viewed from a two pronged perspective of "supply side and demand side". All states have mechanisms in place to promote or ensure accountability of public servants. Systems of accountability that are internal to the state are often referred to as **"horizontal"** mechanisms of accountability (Schedler et al. 1999). These include: (i) **political check and balances** (e.g., constitutional constraints, separation of powers, the legislature and legislative investigative commissions); (ii) **fiscal mechanisms** (e.g., formal systems of auditing and financial accounting); (iii) **administrative rule and procedure** (e.g., hierarchical reporting, norms of public sector probity, public service codes of conduct, rules and procedures regarding transparency and public oversight), and; (iv) **legal mechanisms** (e.g., corruption control agencies, ombudsmen and the judiciary) (Goetz and Gaventa, 2001), these were more "top-down".

Holding governments to be accountable from the 'demand side' through strengthened citizens' voices on the other hand more "Bottom-up" approach, as demands/voices are raised from grassroots level which are referred to as "**vertical**" mechanism. Vertical accountability is the means of ordinary citizens, mass media and/or civil society organizations seek to enforce standards of good performance on officials.
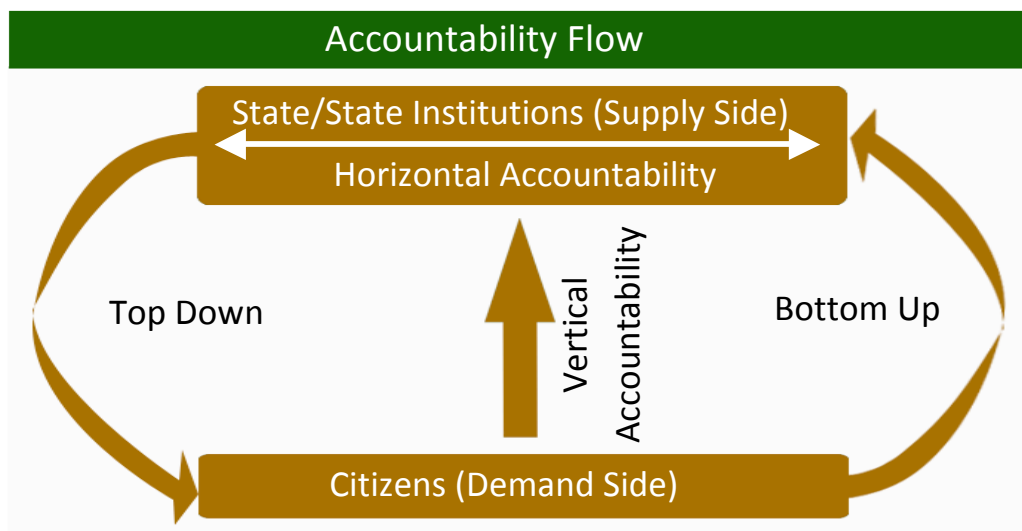
1.2 What is social accountability?

'Social Accountability' means the act of citizen of civil society organizations use to help government or public service provider be accountable transparent, and response to need of community with support and coordination from state, media, and relevant stakeholders. The World Bank defines social accountability can be defined as an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, (i.e. ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations) who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability from government.

For this reason, social accountability is used to refer to the broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens, communities, civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media can use to hold public officials and servants accountable.

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1 Stapenhurst, R.and O'brien.M, "Accountability in Governance", accessed at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/
2 Malena,C., Forster, R. and Singh, J. (2004)

Social accountability mechanisms are therefore intended to complement and enhance conventional mechanisms of accountability. "Internal" (state) and "external" (social) mechanisms of accountability can and should be mutually reinforcing. It has been argued that impact is greatest and most sustainable when social accountability mechanisms are "institutionalized" or when the state's "internal" mechanisms of accountability are rendered more transparent and open to civic engagement. This can lead to what some scholars have termed "transversal", "hybrid" or "diagonal" accountability (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001). In general Social Accountability mechanisms are example of vertical accountability.

## 2. The Importance of social accountability

There are three main arguments underlying the importance of social accountability. They are **improved governance**, **increased developmental effectiveness**, and greater **citizen empowerment**. Each is discussed below.

On the issue of improving **governance**, accountability of public officials is the cornerstone of good government and is a prerequisite for an effective democracy. Mechanisms of social accountability allow ordinary citizens to access information, voice their needs and demand accountability between elections. Emerging social accountability practices enhance the ability of citizens to move beyond mere protests and toward engaging with bureaucrats and politicians in a more informed, organized, constructive and systematic manner; Thus, increasing the chances of effecting a positive change.

Social accountability also contributes to **increased developmental effectiveness**. This is achieved through improved public service delivery and more informed policy design. By enhancing the availability of information, strengthening citizen voice, promoting dialogue and consultation between the three groups of actors (three key groups of actors in public policy and service delivery: chain-policy makers, service providers and citizens) and creating incentives for improved performance, social accountability mechanisms can go a long way toward improving the effectiveness of service delivery and making public decision-making more transparent, participatory and pro-poor.

Finally, social accountability initiatives can lead to **citizen empowerment**, particularly for the poor. While there is no single definition of empowerment, at its broadest, it can be understood as the expansion of freedom of choice and action. This enhanced voice empowers the poor and increases the chance of greater responsiveness on the part of the state to their needs. That said, reaching out to poor people with the support they need to initiate their own actions of social accountability and ensuring that social accountability mechanisms are designed in their interests (and not "captured" by more powerful groups) are key challenges of effective, pro-poor social accountability.

Figure 1: Why is Social Accountability Important?
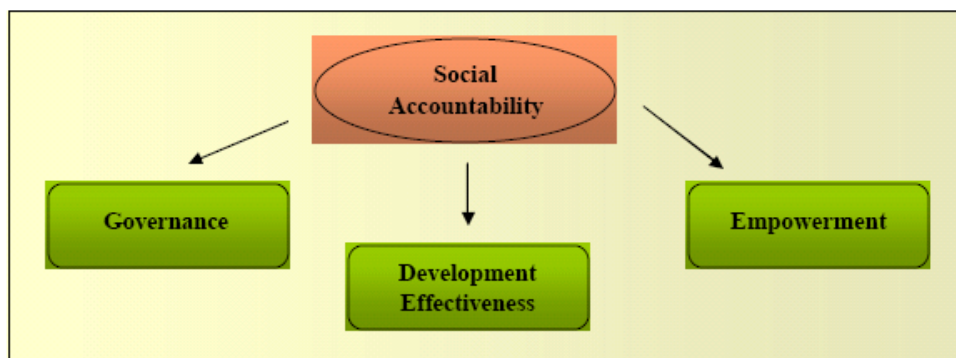
3. Building Blocks of Social Accountability

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.

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 (such as policy statements, budget commitments and accounts, records of inputs, outputs and expenditures, and audit findings) and service providers and demand-side information from users of government services, communities and citizens.

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

> *Core elements that are common to most social accountability approaches include accessing information, making the voice of citizens heard, and engaging in a process of negotiation for change.*

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

4. Critical Factors of Success and Environment of 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
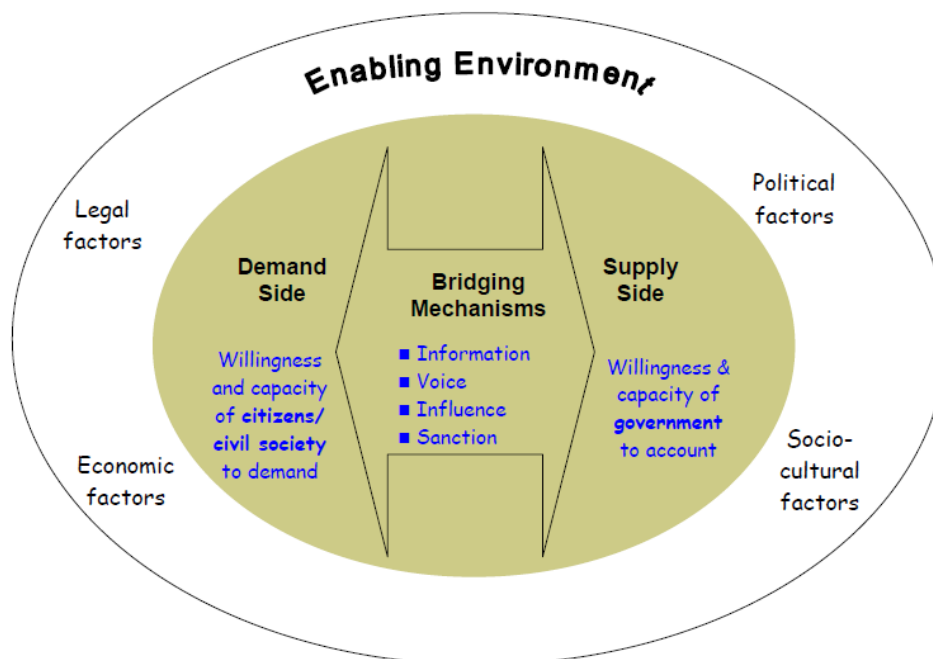
Each of these groups of factors can be looked at in terms of the three key core elements of social accountability – information, voice and negotiation. While social accountability

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,

> *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.*

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 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.

5. LINKS BETWEEN SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE
Good governance, social accountability, and decentralization

As described above, the mechanisms of social accountability have a key role to play in improving **governance.** Social accountability is sometimes referred to as the "demand side of good governance", as it is based upon the active involvement of citizens in exacting accountability from their elected representatives and leaders. While explaining 'good governance' is not just about government. It is also about political parties, parliament, the judiciary, the media, and civil society-citizen. It is about citizens, leader, and public institutions relate to each other in order to improve service delivery.

Social accountability mechanisms can complement **public sector reforms**, by addressing the **demand side** aspects of public service delivery, monitoring and accountability. Social accountability mechanisms have proved particularly useful in the context of **decentralization**, helping to strengthen links between citizens and local-level governments and assisting local authorities and service-providers to become more responsive and effective.

Thus it can be said that social accountability as a practice leads to enhanced people's participation and involvement in governance process. Raising voices for demanding accountability form the state by actively engaging/participating in development dialogues

subsequently results in achieving decentralization further resulting in improved service delivery. `

6. Mechanisms/Tools for Ensuring Social Accountability

Having talked about the advantages and its impact on governance and service delivery, it becomes important to describe some of its mechanisms/tools. These mechanisms/tools are widely being used by citizens, CSOs, communities as well as governments all across the world at different stages of the development cycle starting from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation.
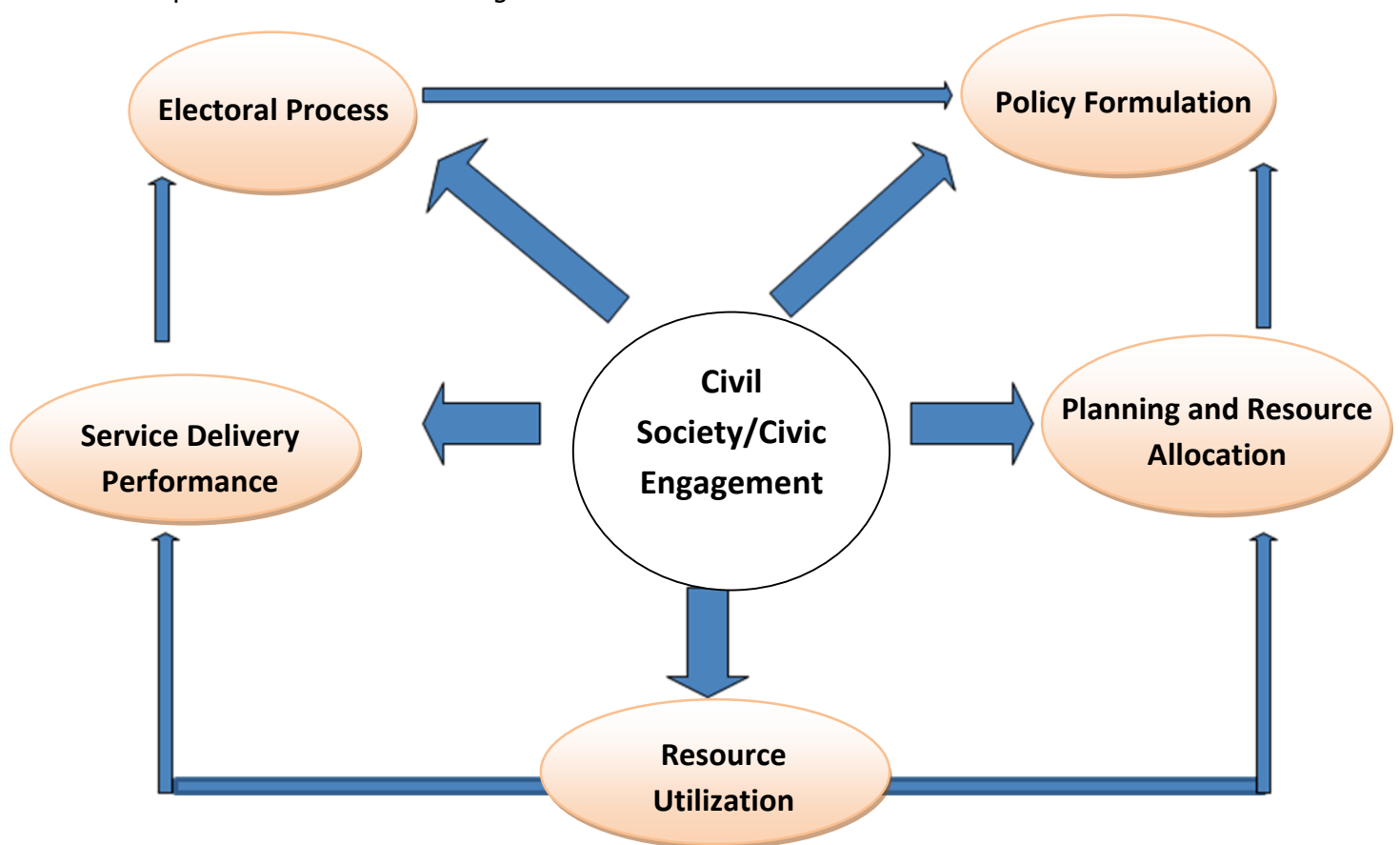
The above figure illustrates the various spaces where social accountability can be practiced in a governance cycle and how civic action, either by the civil society or citizen, can taking place at any of these spaces. Starting from the electoral process, which is the backbone of any given democracy, to policy formulation, planning and resource allocation, resource utilization and finally service delivery performance, the state's accountability needs to be ensured at each of these stages to ensure effective democratic governance.

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