

Institutionalisation of Social Accountability in Urban Governance

Defining Social Accountability

Social accountability is referred to as an approach towards building accountability relationships between citizens and governance institutions, driven by citizen participation and civic engagement. It creates opportunities and spaces for the citizens and their organisations to participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability by promoting practice of active and responsible citizenship¹. Social accountability as the ‘demand side’ accountability practice (often referred to as vertical and diagonal accountability mechanisms) complements the ‘supply side’ accountability systems (often referred to as horizontal accountability mechanisms)². At the heart of social accountability is therefore the ability of citizens to hold the governance institutions accountable and increase the effectiveness of their programmes through a broad range of actions that may include: promoting access to information, monitoring of public services and engaging governance institutions through interface dialogues and negotiations to improve their responsiveness. These actions help the governance institutions and citizens to recognise their mutual responsibility in promoting just governance.

Critical Lessons from Social Accountability Practices

The practice on social accountability reveals a number of critical lessons for urban governance reforms, particularly with a bottom-up approach. Lessons from these experiences have enormous potential to pursue changes in the related policies and practices.

- a) *Access to information and awareness of citizens are the basic building blocks for social accountability:* The quality of citizen participation depends on the availability of information, awareness, and knowledge. While access to and freedom of information related to municipal policy, programmes and decision making processes are legally available in certain contexts it is considerably constrained in many other contexts. In the latter contexts, the civil society organisations (CSOs) have adopted various innovative means and ways to access and

¹Malena C., Forster R. & Singh J. (2004), Social Accountability: An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice. Social Development Papers, Participation and Civic Engagement, Paper No. 76, World Bank, Washington D.C.

² PRIA (2011), Democratic Accountability in Local Governance Institutions: Experiences from South Asia, New Delhi

disseminate information to the citizens either themselves or through other government officials. In situations where in the absence of a legal framework on Right to Information or Freedom of Information, the municipalities and civil society need to find alternative means to proactively provide information which is crucial for citizens to claim developmental rights and entitlements. Organising interface meeting between citizens and the relevant government officials to interact and share information related to government programmes, plans, schemes which are relevant to the citizens is one such alternative.

b) Working on both sides of governance produces better outcomes and multi-directional accountability relationships: Social accountability requires engagement between citizens, civil society and municipalities. Yet given the limited history of such engagements in many contexts, it requires substantial investments in capacity development. On one hand it requires enhancing the capacities of citizens and civil societies, interventions are also required for councillors and municipal officials. Experience suggests that the capacity development interventions including training, workshops, hand-holding support, exposure visits and joint-reflections are appreciated by the councillors as these help in enhancing their understanding on the importance of just governance, social accountability and citizen participation. These have positive spill-over effect and contribute to subsequent interactions with citizens and civil society in finding solutions to the problems faced by citizens. The results from many social accountability related practices thus reinforce the learning that working simultaneously on both the supply side and the demand side certainly produces better outcomes. In many instances social accountability (vertical accountability) practices and outcomes contribute to strengthen the horizontal accountability between state institutions (e.g. between municipalities and line departments) as well as accountability within the institutions (e.g. municipalities).

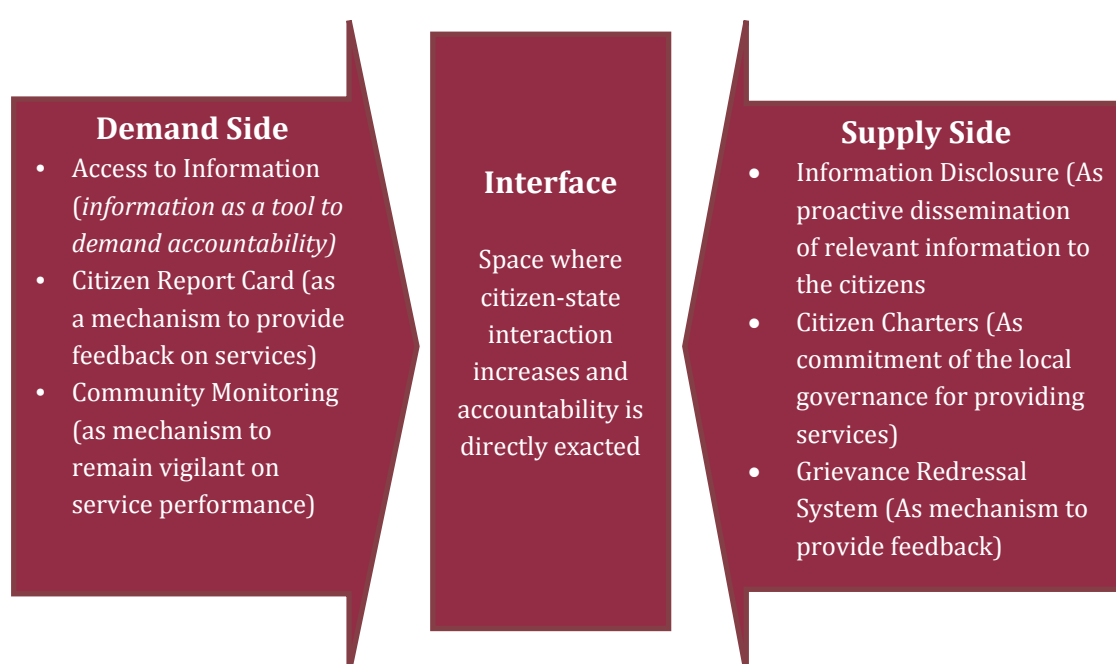
c) Better design and implementation of social accountability tools can lead to better articulation, meaningful interface and improved responses: Successful social accountability interventions require a fine balance amongst dissemination of relevant information, mobilisation of citizens, monitoring of municipal services and organising interfaces between citizens and municipalities. Review of practices on social accountability often reveals that while a number of initiatives focus mostly on information promotion or mobilisation activities only a few initiatives focus on monitoring of services and vice versa. The interventions which use structured and/or semi-structured tools for monitoring of municipal services tend to identify, articulate and communicate service deficits with better specificities to service providers. Striking a balance in practice between the technical know-how of using specific social accountability tools and political mobilisation of citizens is crucial. While a technically sound social accountability tool may generate great amount of citizen feedback and related data in a rather short period, the participation of citizens may be somewhat limited to as passive information providers, unless it is



Neighbourhood Committee members developing a pictorial monitoring chart

factored in the intervention design. The ownership of the community through collective analyses, reflections and action must be optimised.

- d) *Simultaneous and synergistic actions are required in practice as well as at the policy level:* In recent years many opportunities have been created for expanding the practice of social accountability in many contexts. However, further scaling-up may require providing support to a range of smaller grassroots civil society groups with provision for capacity development support including training, mentoring, coaching, guidance, learning, documentation and systematisation of lessons. The necessary pre-conditions must be identified rigorously in order not only to maintain but also to excel the quality of social accountability practices before many pilot initiatives are scaled up and/or scaled out. Social accountability interventions involving CSOs should foster strategic alliances among CSOs so that their collective strength and knowledge is recognised and acknowledged by the policy makers. The interventions must have clear strategy to influence the policy making process by way of engagement and dialogue with the national and sub-national policy makers. The skills to convene multiple stakeholders, communicate the analyses and facilitate dialogues without antagonising any stakeholder are extremely important in the success of social accountability approach. The lessons learnt from practice must be systematised properly with policy-oriented recommendations and agenda for advocacy.
- e) *Mainstreaming participation of marginalised groups as change agents in social accountability practices:* The participation of women and other marginalised groups must be ensured by



mainstreaming their issues and concerns in the overall framework and practice of social accountability. The interventions which pay attention to these aspects have better potential to contribute to enhanced participation of women and other marginalised groups. Therefore, the choice of services and issues to be monitored should also be made in such a manner so that it encourages the participation of women and other marginalised groups.

Deepening Local Democratic Governance through Social Accountability in Asia: An initiative to Institutionalise Social Accountability in Municipalities

Deepening Local Democratic Governance through Social Accountability in Asia initiative was implemented by PRIA in partnership with local partners in Bangladesh (PRIP Trust) and Cambodia (SILAKA) from 2011 to 2013. The initiative was supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF). The initiative, on one hand, used interventions like sharing information, organising campaigns and interface meetings and dialogues etc., on the other hand, it used social accountability tools like Citizen Report Cards (CRCs), Pro-active Information Disclosure, Citizen Charters (CCs), Public Grievance Redressal System (PGRS) etc.

Interventions with the communities (demand side)

Participation of citizens in municipal governance and their feedback on the quality of services is an important way in which municipalities could be made accountable. When citizens engage and raise their concerns with the authorities by questioning the state of affairs, they will be more cautious and careful in their functioning. Considering this, the following interventions were conducted and tools like CRC and citizen monitoring were used to mobilise the citizens and build their capacities to hold authorities to account.

- a) *Facilitating access to information:* For citizens to participate and engage pro-actively in demanding effective governance and improved services, it was important to first ensure that they had access to critical information and were well aware of their rights and obligations. This was done through regular meetings, focused group discussions and city-wide campaigns. Pamphlets and leaflets in the local languages (Bangla and Khmer) were disseminated and information



Disseminating information through folk theatre

boards were put up at different locations where they could be accessed by most citizens. In Bangladesh, folk theatre, for example, '*gamvira*' was used during the campaigns to spread information and generate awareness to the wider audience. In Cambodia, rallies with the citizens were organised followed by discussion with the municipal authorities. In addition to this, trainings and capacity development programmes were organised for citizens on citizen participation, social accountability and governance, which made them aware of

their potential strengths and equipped them to confidently approach authorities and seek relevant information. Thus, access to information and enhanced awareness on municipal roles and responsibilities, municipal services and standards, role of citizens in municipal governance and tools of social accountability strengthened the capacities of citizens in the long run and helped them demand more accountable and transparent governance institutions.

b) Conducting Citizen Report Card (CRC): CRC is an instrument (generally a sample survey) to obtain feedback from actual users of a service, as opposed to general public opinion. They are typically participatory surveys capturing user feedback on performance and status of public services, especially on quality and effectiveness. It involved capturing not just user perceptions but also collecting factual information relating to the services like frequency of garbage collection, water supply status and cost, besides their rating of services. Apart from conducting household survey, separate focused group discussions were also held with citizens in different locations to understand the issues and challenges faced by them. In doing so, it was ensured that the poor and marginalised groups including women and youth are engaged in these discussions. Once the survey was conducted, data was collated and analysed by the project teams. These findings



Neighbourhood Committee members preparing monitoring plan

were shared with the citizens in order to validate them. After the findings were validated, reports were prepared and shared more widely with all the stakeholders. This was done through multi-stakeholder dialogues, involving citizens, media representatives, municipal officials, councillors, representatives from other government agencies, private service providers as well as other like-minded CSOs. These sharing meetings acted as platforms for various stakeholders to interact and jointly plan for the improvement of services which was then monitored by the citizens.

c) Facilitating citizen monitoring: Alongside conducting CRC, citizens were mobilised to form Neighbourhood Committees (NCs) and trained to take up monitoring of water and sanitation services. The most crucial and relevant indicators were identified collectively. This was done in an innovative manner by developing pictorial monitoring formats, so that even the illiterate citizens could understand them. Citizens started monitoring on a monthly basis and collected information was collated at the end of the month. The consolidated monthly information was shared with the respective authorities and councillors through interface meetings at the ward level. These ward level interface meetings, emerged as vibrant platforms, where citizens raised important issues and councillors and officials tried to respond to them.

With the municipal authorities (supply side)

In order to create more sustainable models of social accountability and effective governance system through citizen participation, it was essential and critical not only to engage with the citizens at large, but also with the municipalities. Efforts were made to strengthen and enhance the accountability mechanisms within the municipalities so that the increasing demand is met

more effectively. Tools like citizen charters, grievance redressal system and information disclosure were adopted to equip the municipalities.

- a) ***Citizen charters:*** Citizen charters are written voluntary declarations from municipality that inform citizens about service entitlements, standards (time frame and quality), remedies available for non-adherence to these standards, the procedures, costs and charges of various services, if any. As there was a huge gap in availability of information about municipal services and standards citizens found it difficult to demand their rights and entitlements. These gaps were identified in consultation with citizens, councillors and respective officials through a series of discussions



Citizens and municipal officials discussing the citizen charter

along with suggestions for making it more meaningful and useful for the citizens. The municipal staff were trained and provided hands on support from conceptualisation to finalisation of the charter. The draft charter was shared with the citizens, private service providing agencies etc. and after their feedback was gathered, relevant changes were incorporated. The final charter was prepared collectively in consultation with the concerned stakeholders.

- b) ***Pro-active disclosure of information:*** Under proactive information disclosure, the municipality willingly discloses information which is relevant to citizens. It recognises that transparency is generally in citizens' interest and that public authorities should therefore strive to put maximum information in public domain. Information disclosure by municipal authorities in many countries has been made mandatory through Right to Information Acts. Pro-active disclosure of information was used as a tool to exact accountability of the municipalities. Unlike Bangladesh which has enacted Right to Information Act in 2009, there is no such Act in Cambodia. Regular meetings and trainings were conducted with the municipal authorities to make them aware of the provisions of the RTI Act as well the benefit of information disclosure. Steps were taken to put up information boards on strategic locations across the city for wider outreach. The municipality was supported in preparing an information disclosure format for the process of grievance redressal for various services.

- c) ***Grievance redressal system:*** Grievance redressal is a platform provided by municipalities to citizens to voice their dissatisfaction about inadequate performance of the institutions and hold them accountable for the same. A functional grievance redressal system is a unique gauge to measure service efficiency and helps the municipality to deliver quality services in a user-friendly manner. Grievance redressal system tool was used to strengthen social accountability mechanisms of municipalities and help them emerge as more efficient and citizen friendly governance institutions. Efforts were made to develop an effective system of complaint redressal at the ward level by placing complaint boxes and registers so that citizens could get their

complaints registered more conveniently at the local level. Once lodged, these complaints were forwarded to the respective officials at the zonal/ municipal/ departmental level for further action. Once installed, citizens were informed about the newly introduced system.

- d) *Interface dialogues among stakeholders:* Apart from specific interventions on the demand and supply side, efforts were also made to bring the stakeholders together and use that space as a



Interface dialogues between municipal officials and citizens

means to raise critical issues and to exact accountability. Interface dialogues and meetings among different stakeholders were conducted which helped build a conducive environment for interaction and collective reflection on most pressing issues. Opportunities for dialogues were created on regular basis so that the gaps between citizens and municipalities could be reduced.

Significant Outcomes

The use of various accountability tools with the citizens and the municipal authorities and their regular interactions with each other brought about some significant changes. It opened up opportunities for unique partnership to flourish and paved the way for a more participatory system of municipal governance. Some of the broad results of these processes can be explained as follows.

- a) *Enhanced capacities of citizens:* The capacities of citizens to get organised, collectively identify gaps in service delivery through social accountability practices and raising demands for improving these services had enormously enhanced during the course of the project. Citizens got opportunities to get deeper insights into their contextual realities and thereby participate more constructively with the authorities. When their perceptions about municipal services were supported by factual data collected by them they faced the authorities with more conviction and ownership. Their arguments to improve service delivery became much sharper and their capacities to negotiate and dialogue with elected representatives and officials also enhanced considerably.
- b) *Enhanced capacities of municipal authorities:* The understanding of municipal authorities enhanced significantly as they became aware of the concepts of social accountability. Through regular capacity development support they were not only informed about the social accountability tools like citizen charters, public grievance redressal systems and information disclosures tools but also supported in implementing them. As municipalities gradually started to adopt these tools they became more capable to cater to requirements of the citizens and effectively respond to their needs.
- c) *Increased transparency and accountability:* With the citizens using tools like the CRCs and monitoring basic services on their own to further raise demands in interface meetings,

remarkable changes were noticed. The most significant one was increased transparency and accountability on the part of municipal authorities. This was also the result of constant dialogues and meetings with the municipal authorities and their sensitisation towards the adoption of social accountability tools like citizen charter, pro-active disclosure of information and grievance redressal systems. A strategic combination of these tools on the demand and the supply side helped in reaching a stage where they complemented each other in increasing responsiveness towards citizens' needs and improving service delivery.

- d) *Improved relationship between citizens and municipalities:* The use of community driven social accountability tools equipped the citizens analytically assess service gaps and monitor services in a collective manner. The municipal authorities could also share critical information and respond to the citizens' needs through newly established grievance redressal systems. The interface dialogues created conducive environment and helped in bridging the gap between citizens and municipal authorities where important issues were deliberated and solutions were arrived at. These interactions, which were almost absent before, created a much required space for negotiations, dialogues and sharing of ideas that transformed the way citizens thought about the municipalities and vice-versa.

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