1. Reinventing Accountability – a new twist on a key concept in democratic theory

How is the notion of ‘social accountability’ different from the conventional role assigned to civil society groups in animating vertical accountability systems?

Civil society in its ‘watchdog’ or vigilance function has always played a key informal (non-institutionalised) function as the main support for the formal vertical accountability system of the electoral system. Lately, citizen’s initiatives form around the world in holding power-holders to account have moved civil society groups beyond this vigilance function in vertical accountability relationships into a more direct engagement in horizontal accountability relationships. Citizens are gaining access to the formerly closed arenas of public accounts-keeping, judicial proceedings, performance monitoring of public sector actors. They are demanding answers more directly from power-holders by engaging in Public Interest Litigation, or directly auditing local spending and demanding to know the whereabouts of funds that are missing.

A classic example of this new type of citizen initiative, what the Social Development group at the bank are calling ‘social accountability’ is a range of efforts by citizens to engage more directly in public expenditure management – either in decision-making about budget allocation, or in social audits of government spending. These initiatives are rightly of particular interest to the community of Practice on Social Accountability, and they have classified these ‘participatory public expenditure systems’ into those concerned with budget formulation (e.g.: Porto Alegre’s participatory municipal budgeting process), budget analysis such as that produced by DISHA in India or IDASHA in South Africa, budget tracking, such as in the Uganda Public Expenditure tracking System, and performance evaluation, such as in the report Cards of the Public Affairs Centre in Bangalore. To my mind the most radical of these efforts involve tracking of actually spending, to see whether sanctioned funds have reached targeted beneficiaries. The work of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS – literally the Workers and Farmers Power Society) in Rajasthan has elaborated a methodology for doing this. This 1000-strong informal union has been protesting local government corruption for the past ten years. Its initial preoccupation was the persistent denial of full wage payments to women working on government drought-relief public works programmes. A substantial portion of women’s payments were routinely pocketed by the overseers of these projects, by the junior engineers responsible for taking measurements of the amounts of earth moved in building a road or a bridge, and the local government politicians responsible for...

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persuading rural development officials to locate a drought-relief programme in the area. Other funds were regularly creamed off by over-invoicing for building supplies and other forms of account-rigging. The MKSS addressed this problem by holding dramatic public hearings in which women testified about under or non-payment in front of officials. Officials’ protests that under-payment was not their fault, but that the central government had not supplied enough money, would be contradicted when local government accounts were read out in public, showing the receipt of proper funds for the project in question. Over-invoicing would be exposed when local suppliers explained they had only delivered half or less of the amounts of sand, bricks, rocks, or cement that the accounts suggested had been purchased from them. A serious obstacle to this method of exposing corruption was the lack of a citizen’s right to information about government spending. However, years of campaigning resulted in the promulgation of a state-wide right to information under the local government Act in April 2000, enabling the MKSS and other organizations to access official documents much more effectively.

For poor rural women to stand up in front of local officials and politicians and accuse them of lying and theft is an extraordinary achievement in a traditional, some say feudal, society like rural Rajasthan. These same officials and politicians may be their neighbours, may be their employers or landlords, may control access to key state resources, like a land ownership certificate, a marriage or birth certificate, or the right to participate in another drought-relief program. They may be higher caste members of the local community, in a position to make life impossible for lower caste villagers, excluding them from access to key resources like water. The willingness of women and poor men to engage in this struggle for justice comes from years of investment by the MKSS in changing local attitudes towards domestic tyrants and towards the state, cantering mainly upon inculcating the very modern view that in a democracy, the role of civil servants is to serve the public, making no distinctions between citizens.

Among the many striking features of the MKSS’s work, and other initiatives aimed at enabling citizens to participate in the oversight of the spending of public money, is that it brings citizens into one of the most exclusive arenas of state decision-making. The management of public accounts tends to be a highly secretive affair because of the great political sensitivities involved in identifying sources of government revenue and collecting it, establishing priorities for national spending, and assessing whether government records indicate that the allocated funds were indeed spent under the budget headings created for them. But what comes after – formal auditing -- gets even less public attention, largely because the multiple levels of auditing are not fully grasped by people without first-hand experience. Auditors must review the contents of the government’s financial records and investigate a sample of individual expenditure transactions by contacting recipients of funds to verify the amounts received, identifying other data sources that could corroborate or falsify the government’s own record, inspecting the physical assets allegedly created through funded-programme action, and performing a range of other time- and labour-intensive tasks.

Because these auditing functions concern the epicentre of corruption – where it is linked to operational fraud – it is almost entirely closed to citizen involvement. Citizens have a great direct interest in how national and local funds are spent. But there is almost nowhere on earth that citizens or their associations have either been given access and information on, let alone a more substantive role in, formal auditing processes. Citizen auditing strikes at the heart of practices that preserve the powers of bureaucrats and politicians: the secrecy in public accounts that can mask the use of public funds for personal advantage.

Other versions of social accountability initiatives similarly have the potential to challenge the collusive relationships that produce the accountability failures that create and reinforce
But what is notable about citizen-triggered new accountability initiatives is that they move beyond the state-society relationship as conventionally configured. Citizens are taking these initiatives in relation to a broader set of power-holders than elected politicians at the national level and state authorities: they are reaching both above and beyond national boundaries to seek to check the actions of powerful actors such as multinational corporations or ex-heads of state who have abused human rights. And they are applying themselves to checking abuses of power at the local level, not just in local government but even in arenas often unreachable by state actors: in relationships governed by custom or tradition such as in the family, or between different ethnic groups and races. These actions have long-term implications for democratic theory, for good governance policy, and for human rights practice.

2. What explains the emergence of this new perspective on accountability?

Since the last wave of democratisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s great expectations have been raised amongst newly enfranchised subaltern groups about their rights under liberalised governance systems. The same period has seen the appearance, thanks to globalisation, of a range of new power-holders that do not answer to any particular government or authority, yet whose actions have a profound impact on the lives of the poor. Yet well-known deficiencies of contemporary liberal representative democracy, combined with poverty in newly democratic countries, make expectations of social equity and broader participation difficult to achieve. Conventional accountability institutions cannot cope with these changing features of the political and economic landscape.

There is a wide-spread perception that there is a ‘crisis in accountability’ in democracies all over the world (North and South) – a perception created by evidence of corruption and poor decision-making, as well as by the sense that state actors are distant from and not particularly responsive to ordinary citizens. In liberal democracies there are few formal means for individual citizens to hold the state to account, let alone to enforce answerability from particular parts of the state. The vote is the classic formal mechanism of vertical accountability, allowing citizens periodically to hold governments to account for their rule, but it is exercised infrequently, and there is growing dissatisfaction with its effectiveness in channelling citizen preferences to governments because of procedural defects in voting systems, or an absence of real programmatic alternatives between political parties, or civil societies and media that are weak, divided, or subordinated to dominant private interests. Weak horizontal accountability stems from a failure in control systems designed to check the powers of the executive. Instead, the judiciary, the public administration, and the legislature may be manipulated by the executive into condoning or perpetrating human rights abuses or corruption. And finally, new deficiencies in democracies have been created by globalisation, which has reduced the policy space in which national governments can make decisions and control private interests.

The product of these two inter-related forces – imperfect democratisation and unbalanced globalisation – has been pressure for innovations to strengthen accountability relationships between state agents and citizens. The groundswell of citizens’ interest in creating new accountability relationships does not add up to a coherent set of practices but hints at the emergence of a new accountability agenda that involves the invention of new procedures and norms for accountability systems, and new actors, both demanding accountability, or from whom accountability is being sought.
None of this means that people have given up on the possibility of conventional accountability. In fact, globalization has arguably heightened expectations of accountability by creating a convergence of standards (most notably, despite continued disagreements, in the area of human rights), by extending the geographic reach of legal regimes and bringing misdeeds to the attention of the global media audience. Democratization, moreover, has raised the ability of publics to voice their discontent with the current arrangements for delivering accountability.

Nor have the challenges posed by imperfect democratization and unbalanced globalization led people to abandon the possibility of redesigning conventional institutions like electoral systems, courts, bureaucracies and auditing agencies. Arguably, the bulk of the world’s efforts to improve accountability consist of what are by now fairly mainstream initiatives at fixing these traditional pillars of accountability:

- **Electoral reforms**, such as variants of proportional representation systems and ‘reserved constituencies’ for disadvantaged groups;
- **Legal and judicial reforms**, such as the creation of human rights commissions or specialized bodies for the promotion of women’s interests;
- **Civil service reforms**, such as result-oriented management schemes and market-based approaches to service delivery; and
- **Reforms to systems of public-sector oversight**, such as the worldwide spread of anti-corruption commissions, ombudsmen, auditors-general and parliamentary public accounts committees, and the proliferation of programs designed to increase the technical capacity of those that already exist.

But while these kinds of efforts are widely regarded as necessary, they are increasingly viewed as insufficient for the scale of accountability-related deprivations facing a world of blurred jurisdictions in which new concentrations of power threaten the stability of long-accepted institutional forms.

It is these sorts of concerns that are driving the emergence of a *New Accountability Agenda*.

### 3. The New Accountability Agenda

Despite the undeniable diversity among governance experiments that have sought to improve accountability, and the widely differing contexts in which they have been undertaken, it is possible to discern the defining characteristics of a new accountability agenda. In their most promising forms, ‘social accountability’ innovations offer disadvantaged people opportunities to operationalise rights and to shift the terrain of governance from technical solutions to a concern with social justice.

Above all, the new accountability agenda is characterized by an expansion of accountability along the many dimensions of this concept. To put this slightly differently, there is now a wider spectrum of legitimate responses to the five fundamental questions that must be asked when seeking to understand an accountability relationship. The defining features of the new accountability agenda emerge from the answers to the questions:

- **Who** is seeking accountability?
- From whom (or what) is accountability sought?
- Where (in which forums and over what extent of geographic coverage) is accountability being sought?
- How (through what means) are the powerful being held to account?
- For what (which actions, and against which norms) is accountability being sought?

Accountability-seekers (who is seeking accountability?) now include more ordinary people seeking to engage directly – rather than relying upon intermediaries -- in efforts to make power-holders answer for their actions. Power-holders (from whom accountability is sought) remain much the same as always – state actors and private actors – but their power in relation to each other has shifted with globalisation, with some private corporations wielding significant powers over state actors. But there are new power-holders to consider – non-state and non-firm actors such as large transnational NGOs or global economic institutions. Answers to questions about the arenas in and the methods through which accountability is being sought (where and how) reveal the emergence of a wide range of new accountability jurisdictions, and new practices intended to expose poor governance or abuses of power. The international space offered by international institutions, human rights regimes, war crimes courts, and new trade regimes offers new jurisdictions for accountability relationships. The devolution of powers to local authorities does the same. Cyberspace even offers a new terrain for the prosecution of complaints and claims against power-holders. New methods have emerged such as public audits, participatory budgeting, report-cards, and shadowing the work of public sector officials. New tools provide new means of holding public actors to account – most notably, the slow spread of a practical citizen’s right to information.

But it is the question of what power-holders are held accountable for that is arguably the dimension along which accountability is being most dramatically reinvented, and therefore where its implications for how democracy can be made to work for the poor most require fresh analysis.

New popular understandings of accountability are emerging that go beyond the conventional use of the term. These standards are applied mainly to the evaluation of the behaviour of power-holders and the outcomes of accountability exercises – what power-holders are accountable for -- but also such matters as the appropriate standard of evidence, the suitability of the proposed sanction, and the legitimacy of the chosen arena. Accountability has traditionally been based upon an assessment of whether procedures have been followed diligently, not whether a socially desirable outcome has been produced. To use the idea and mechanisms of accountability to pursue social justice is to elevate a popular expectation about democratic governance – that it should be responsive and egalitarian – into a formal objective of institutions of public oversight. In other words, accountability systems are expected to not just satisfy concerns with process integrity, but also respond to norms of social justice. In the context of development, this means holding state and non-state actors accountable for their contribution to poor people’s opportunities to reach minimum levels of human development and to realise substantive freedoms.
4. Assessing the effectiveness of accountability innovations

The World Bank’s COPSA will be looking for replicable innovations, and actionable analyses of what works and what does not in citizens’ accountability initiatives. Any review of accountability innovations from around the world will have to establish criteria for assessing their effectiveness. One concern is to distinguish between token efforts to elicit the ‘voices of the poor’ in consultations or dialogues over policy-making, and those efforts which endow accountability-seekers with concrete rights to a response from public actors.

It is essential to note that accountability is not synonymous with either the widely used term ‘responsiveness’ or with a subjective sense of responsibility. Responsiveness is the desired attitude of power-holders towards ordinary citizens: we wish them to be responsive to the concerns and problems of citizens, to listen with impartiality and fairness to divergent views, and to subject all expressions of need and interest to publicly-agreed rules for weighing and assessing the merits of claims and cases. Conventionally, public sector actors have a duty to be responsive to the members of the public with whom they interact, but to account for their actions to their seniors, who account to the legislature and the executive, to financial auditors, and to higher court judges. The responsiveness of public-sector actors is not governed by the same set or intensity of rules, checks, and constraints as the accountability of these actors.

The idea of responsibility is also closely related to accountability, and is also distinguished by the lack of formal compulsion. In other words, an actor may feel responsible for taking action to improve the lot of poor people, but may not be required, technically and legally, to account for her actions or non-actions. That businesses speak of corporate social responsibility rather than corporate accountability is not a mere difference of terminology. It is based upon the understanding that measures taken to mitigate the ill-effects of business activity fall into the category of voluntary action, commitments which are not to be enforced.

Political engagement of late has been geared towards pushing voluntary self-regulation into enforceable commitments – producing the key distinction between answerability and enforceability as essential elements of accountability relationships. Thus a standard against which the effectiveness of new accountability innovations must be judged is the degree to which they generate credible answers (or accounts, explanations and justifications of actions) from power-holders and lead to enforcement of negative sanctions where appropriate.

Thus for accountability practices to be meaningful and productive for citizens, to produce both answers and the hope of seeing complaints addressed and misdemeanors redressed, they must endow citizen participants with certain rights:

1. legal standing or formal recognition for non-governmental observers within policy-making arenas or institutions of public sector oversight;
2. a continuous presence for these observers throughout the process of the agency’s work;
3. structured access to the flow of official documentary information; and either
4. the right of observers to issue dissenting report directly to legislative bodies, or
5. the right of service users to demand a formal investigation and/or seek legal redress for poor or non-delivery of services
6. At the same time, officials need to be reassured that citizen groups are genuinely representative of their constituencies, have internal democracy and transparency, etc. There is a perennial anxiety about ‘who shall watch the watchdog’?
5. Backlash
Various aspects of new accountability activities are fuelling a growing political backlash. There are three streams of criticism that any social accountability agenda will have to address:
(1) that the design of new accountability initiatives tends to de-politicize the activism of the poor, or at least to channel it into activities that fail to challenge the structural power of political elites;
(2) that accountability experiments stunt the growth of formal democratic institutions; and
(3) that they further erode trust in public officials, stifling both initiative and the development of a professional ethos, both of which are necessary to produce better outcomes for the poor.

6. Enabling Conditions

The Participation and Civic Engagement team at the World Bank’s Social Development Group have recently studied the enabling conditions for civil society engagement in accountability exercises, and more particularly, in the PRS process. They have identified several major conditions:
A favourable legal and regulatory environment;
Effective civil society associations (good leadership, internal democracy, plenty of resources);
A conducive political environment (for instance the PT in Brazil and its ability to support participatory endeavours).

The most significant condition of all is implied by the legal and regulatory environment but is more than that: It is a high-capacity and a democratic state. Strong states engender active and effective civil societies, and it is not the other way around. Yes, supporting civil society development can produce more responsive states, but civil society can also be easily crushed by non-democratic forces that a weak state cannot control (patron-client relationships, drug cartels, warlords, feudal interests, even domestic patriarchy). So, a strong and democratic state is essential to the success of social accountability initiatives. This is why we see an MKSS working well in India, but it will be some time before any civil society group can challenge local vested interest in the same way in Kenya or Uganda. That is why, indeed, we see an MKSS in Rajasthan but not in Orissa, or Bihar, or Assam. A certain level of state-assured physical security is needed for such initiatives to function at all. And state-supplied legal process and justice is needed to follow through prima facie charges of corruption or malfeasance.

Given the importance of a high-capacity and democratic state for the success of social accountability initiatives we must ask: is social accountability going to be a panacea for the perennial dilemmas of making public sector reforms and good government policies work? The answer is no. But social accountability certainly is an essential element of any good governance programme.