



The Participation and Civic Engagement Team works to promote poverty reduction and sustainable development by: Empowering the poor to set their own priorities, control resources and influence the government, market and civil society institutions; and influencing governmental and private institutions to be responsive, inclusive, and accountable.

Note No. 75

March 2003

## The Role of Civic Engagement and Social Accountability in the Governance Equation

There is a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the role of civic engagement in development. Oftentimes, engagement is perceived as existing in the absence of a robust state. In addition, it is also often held that the presence of a strong state reduces the space for and scope of civic engagement. However, the existence of a healthy and active civil society does not preclude the existence of a robust state, and vice versa.

In cases where states are weak, or have failed, and are experiencing conditions of widespread conflict and social ungovernability, civil society organizations usually offer the institutional basis for public service delivery and, in many cases, they contribute to conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts. Conversely, there is substantial evidence that an effective and sound public sector depends very much on the existence of a dynamic civil society and strong citizen involvement in the public realm. Such involvement can manifest itself in participatory engagement in policy formulation and monitoring that brings transparency and effectiveness to public institutions.

States with the capacity to enforce the rule of law, set clear rules of engagement for civil society and promote sound public policy have proven to supply an appropriate environment for civic engagement.

The dynamic relationship between civil society and the state sets the basic conditions of governance. This relationship, which is in essence contradictory, can become symbiotic and crucial to achieving good governance and sustained development.

This concept note outlines the fundamental tensions behind the governance equation, examines the strategic approaches that governments and civil society take toward each other, describes how civic engagement contributes to improving the legitimacy of public institutions through vertical mechanisms<sup>1</sup> of accountability, and how social accountability can play a positive role in the governance equation.

<sup>1</sup> Social accountability, by definition, consists of vertical mechanisms of accountability.

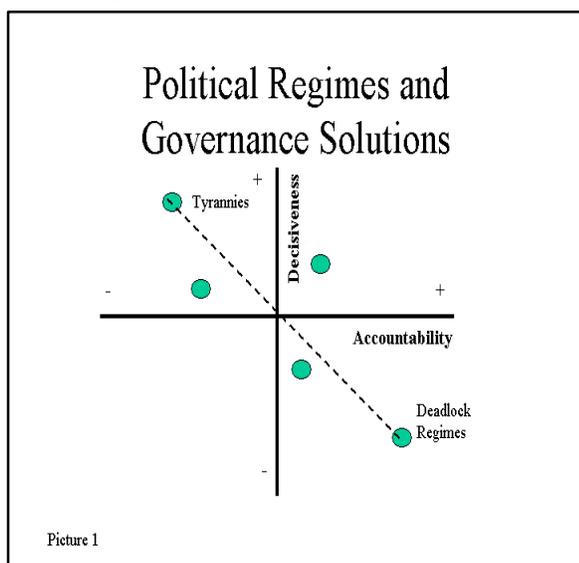
William Reuben is the author of this note, and was assisted in its preparation by Michelle Levy-Benítez. He is Co-Cordinator of the Participation and Civic Engagement Team.

*The views expressed in this note are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the World Bank.*

## Governance: Striking a balance between decisiveness and accountability

Any governance crisis expresses a fundamental contradiction between the citizenship and the state. The fact that the power exercised by the state through law, coercion and the administration of public resources is the result of the delegation, or take over, of citizens' sovereignty permeates the entire range of tensions that characterizes this relationship.

Although this contradiction has existed since the emergence of the state, it takes on different shapes and varies several degrees according to the characteristics of political regimes and the level of disjuncture between ruling institutions and citizens. *The smaller the extent to which citizens feel represented and serviced by public institutions, the bigger the governance crisis. The greater the degree of separation between the actions of rulers and citizens' expectations and control over rulers' actions, the greater the governance crisis.* However, this statement is not as simple as it appears, because it embeds two distinct elements on the same side of the equation: expectations and representation. The majority of citizens may feel that their values are represented and respected by a given government. Yet, that does not inevitably mean that their expectations are fulfilled. Representation responds to the existence and functioning of democratic institutions and mechanisms of control over those who exercise power. Fulfillment of expectations is linked to the capacity of public institutions to manage and deliver public goods.



The tension between representation and expectation can in turn be translated into the tension between decisiveness in fulfilling expectations, and accountability in holding public power under the control of those represented by the state. The point of encroachment of these two contradictory elements defines the type of regime and therefore the political approach likely to be taken toward addressing the governance dilemma. Tyrannies may tilt the balance in one direction, deadlock regimes in another. Other regimes will use a more balanced mixture of the two elements to work out the governance equation (See Figure 1).

## Strategic Interaction: How governments and civil society react to each other

However, there is no permanent equilibrium to the governance equation. The changing conditions of the relationship between the government and civil society constantly shift the balance in one direction or another. This relationship is determined by many contextual factors, a fundamental example of which is the political regime and the type of approach a specific government adopts toward organized interests expressed in civil society. James Manor identifies seven possible types of strategies governments may adopt<sup>2</sup>:

- *Laissez-faire approach*: A passive approach that refrains from strong engagement with civil society but may enable the organization of citizens in independent civil society organizations.
- *Combination of conflictive and harmonic relationships*: A strategic approach in which government seeks to create factions among civil society by establishing alliances with some groups while confronting others.
- *Repression of all manifestations of citizens' organized interest*: An approach usually adopted by autocratic governments.

<sup>2</sup> Manor, James. *Civil Society and Governance: A Concept paper*. IDS. 26 August 1999. <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/civsoc/public.doc>

- *Cooptation approach:* Governments seek to co-opt some or all interests in an attempt to control civil society through relationships of dependency.
- *Patronage approach:* Similar to the cooptation approach. However, this approach usually divides citizens' interests along clientelistic lines.
- *Proactive engagement:* Governments seek to mobilize all or the majority of organized interests in order to build political consensus. This approach may create a climate of strong citizen engagement in public debate and action, however it can surpass the boundaries of independent and critical mobilization.
- *Civic mobilization through nationalistic appeals*
- *Selective collaboration:* A strategy that combines collaboration on specific fronts and a critical distance, or even confrontation, on others. This strategy usually leads to complex tensions within civil society and between CSOs and the government, though it also opens up dynamic spaces for negotiation and constructive engagement.
- *Full endorsement:* CSOs fully engage and endorse government objectives and policies. This situation characterizes the political and social climate in the aftermath of deep political and social crises and the emergence of national unit governments. These are usually situations of transition that, in time, shift to one of the previously mentioned strategies after a "grace period," or to conditions of enduring clientelist deals and patronage.

In most cases, governments will employ a mixture of these approaches, creating or limiting in different ways and degrees their interaction with organized expressions of the citizenry. However, civil society organizations also implement their own strategies in defining their relationship with the state and other development actors like political parties, business organizations and international institutions. Four main civic engagement strategies can be identified:

- *Confrontation strategy:* Civil society organizations view government as the main obstacle for achieving their objectives. This confrontation strategy usually gives way to social and political unrest and therefore to the narrowing of civic freedoms.
- *Parallel track strategy:* Civil society organizations decide not to engage with the government and instead establish a set of parallel services that they themselves deliver directly to their clients and constituencies. In these cases there is limited or in-existent engagement between CSOs and public institutions, and a competition for external resources and local influence usually characterizes the relationship between governments (or their bureaucratic bodies) and CSOs.

Given the heterogeneous character of civil society, these strategies coexist and create all sorts of tensions among CSOs and between CSOs and the government. The complex mix of government approaches to civil society and civic engagement strategies frames the specific formula of the governance equation. Nevertheless, existing legal, institutional, and policy frameworks also play an integral role in determining the environment for constructive forms of civic engagement and governance solutions.

### **Governance and Accountability: Horizontal & vertical mechanisms**

To what extent can decisiveness and accountability, the two elements in permanent tension that comprise the governance equation, be reconciled to enhance policy effectiveness and sustainability? In other words, is it possible for public institutions to increase decisiveness and therefore achieve efficiency in delivering and managing public goods and services in order to meet the expectations of the population, while expanding accountability and therefore achieving higher levels of legitimacy and credibility? Any answer to this question would have to consider the following aspects: The decision-making

processes and mechanisms in place, and the systems by which the government is held accountable.

Delegation of representation prevails in accountability systems relying on purely horizontal controls.<sup>3</sup> National comptroller bureaus, ombudsman offices and procurement units are appointed either by the legislative or executive branches of the state. Their legitimacy depends on the credibility of public institutions at large.

In countries characterized by a climate of distrust in public institutions, these horizontal control mechanisms generally enjoy limited or nil public confidence. In democratic regimes where effective and credible processes of delegation of authority prevail, the same mechanisms of control may enjoy higher levels of public confidence and therefore may contribute to improve citizen trust in public institutions. In fact, in effective democracies, these mechanisms incorporate a combination of downstream and upstream accountability through downwards transparent reporting and upwards legitimate delegation of authority. In both situations, strict horizontal controls work against efficient and timely government policy implementation, delivery of public goods, and result in increased transaction costs.

However, a new set of mechanisms of accountability have begun to seep into the mainstream, characterized by their vertical nature and by the exercise of direct participation of civil society organizations and citizens-at-large. The Social Development Department of the World Bank has identified various types of social accountability mechanisms that can be applied at different stages of the policy sequence.<sup>4</sup> These mechanisms operate along the budget and public expenditure cycle, understanding that budgets

and their execution more truthfully reflect actual policy decisions and their implementation.

### **How Social Accountability Contributes to the Governance Equation**

As evidenced, the existence of mechanisms of social accountability can lead to significant changes in both the decisiveness and accountability of governments. In terms of decisiveness, or fulfilling expectations, vertical mechanisms enable civil society and government to work towards:

- Improving public expenditure targeting of social programs through improved knowledge of citizen needs.
- Enhancing the quality of services delivered through the issuing of citizens' report cards.
- Improving the allocation of budget resources through the incorporation of citizen feedback on budget proposals.
- Enhancing public expenditure effectiveness through participatory tracking and monitoring systems.

These mechanisms also lead to a better management of expectations. They provide civil society with a more realistic understanding of budgetary constraints and the difficult choices inherent in deciding where best to allocate scarce resources and how best to meet the needs of a diverse population.

In conclusion, social accountability can play an important role in the creation of more transparent and representative governments and aid public institutions in meeting the expectations of the population. It allows civil society and government to interact in a manner that acknowledges the limitations each sector faces while recognizing that collaboration is necessary for effective and sustainable development.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the concepts of horizontal and vertical accountability see: O'Donnell, Guillermo. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Swarnim Wagle and Parmesh Shah. *Participation in Public Expenditure Systems*. Participation and Civic Engagement Group. Social Development Department. The World Bank. January 2002.  
<http://www.worldbank.org/participation/webfiles/pem.pdf>

