Accountability in Governance

Accountability ensures actions and decisions taken by public officials are subject to oversight so as to guarantee that government initiatives meet their stated objectives and respond to the needs of the community they are meant to be benefiting, thereby contributing to better governance and poverty reduction.

Accountability is one of the cornerstones of good governance; however, it can be difficult for scholars and practitioners alike to navigate the myriad of different types of accountability. Recently, there has been a growing discussion within both the academic and development communities about the different accountability typologies. This Note outlines the present debate focusing on the definition and substance of different forms of accountability and considers the key role that legislatures play in ensuring accountability.

What is Accountability?

The notion of accountability is an amorphous concept that is difficult to define in precise terms. However, broadly speaking, *accountability* exists when there is a relationship where an individual or body, and the performance of tasks or functions by that individual or body, are subject to another's oversight, direction or request that they provide information or justification for their actions.

Therefore, the concept of accountability involves two distinct stages: *answerability* and *enforcement*. Answerability refers to the obligation of the government, its agencies and public officials to provide information about their decisions and actions and to justify them to the public and those institutions of accountability tasked with providing oversight. Enforcement suggests that the public or the institution responsible for accountability can sanction the offending party or remedy the contravening behavior. As such, different institutions of accountability might be responsible for either or both of these stages.

Why is Accountability Important to Governance?

Evaluating the ongoing effectiveness of public officials or public bodies ensures that they are performing to their full potential, providing value for money in the provision of public services, instilling confidence in the government and being responsive to the community they are meant to be serving.

What types of Accountability?

The concept of accountability can be classified according to the type of accountability exercised and/ or the person, group or institution the public official answers to. The present debate as to the content of different forms of accountability is best conceptualized by reference to opposing forms of accountability. As such the main forms of accountability are described below in reference to their opposing, or alternate, concept.

Horizontal vs. Vertical Accountability

The prevailing view is that institutions of accountability, such as parliament and the judiciary, provide what is commonly termed horizontal accountability, or the capacity of a network of relatively autonomous powers (i.e., other institutions) that can call into question, and eventually punish, improper ways of discharging the responsibilities of a given official. In other words, horizontal accountability is the capacity of state institutions to check abuses by other public agencies and branches of government, or the requirement for agencies to report sideways. Alternatively, vertical accountability is the means through which citizens, mass media

and civil society seek to enforce standards of good performance on officials.

While parliament is typically considered as a key institution in constructs of horizontal accountability, it is also important in vertical accountability. Citizens and civil society groups can seek the support of elected representatives to redress grievances and intervene in the case of inappropriate or inadequate action by government. In addition, through the use of public hearings, committee investigations and public petitioning, parliament can provide a vehicle for public voice and a means through which citizens and civic groups can question government and seek parliamentary sanctioning where appropriate.

Political versus Legal Accountability

Parliament and the judiciary act as horizontal constitutional checks on the power of the executive. The role of these two institutions can be further delineated in that parliament holds the executive politically accountable, whilst the judiciary holds the executive legally accountable. These classifications stem from the fact parliament is a political institution, while the judiciary can only adjudicate on legal issues. Together, they provide ongoing oversight in order to keep the government accountable throughout its term in office. They may also be aided by other institutions, such as supreme audit institutions, anti-corruption commissions, ombuds offices and human rights institutes. These secondary 'autonomous institutions of accountability' are typically designed to be independent of the executive; in the case of supreme audit institutions (in 'Westminster parliamentary systems'), anti-corruption commissions and ombuds offices they often report to parliament while in the cases of supreme audit institutions in Francophone countries and human rights institutes, they may be part of the judiciary.

Political accountability usually manifests itself in the concept of individual ministerial responsibility, which is the cornerstone of the notion of responsible government (see below).

Another School of Thought: Horizontal versus Vertical Accountability

A minority of commentators diverge in their opinion as to what constitutes horizontal and vertical accountability. An alternate conception of horizontal and vertical accountability relies on the relationship between parties to determine whether one party exercises horizontal or vertical accountability over the other. In instances where there is a classic top-down, principal-agent relationship, whereby the principal delegates to the agent, the agent is accountable to their direct superiors in the chain-of-command and this constitutes a form of vertical accountability. For instance the public official answers to the department/ agency minister, the department answers to the minister, the minister answers to parliament (in particular in parliamentary systems), and parliament answers to citizens.

Parliament is again a key actor. In terms of holding government officials to account, parliament is the principal and the official the agent. Parliament, as principal, requires the government and its officials, as agents, to implement the laws, policies and programs it has approved – and holds the government and officials to account for their performance in this regard.

Parliament is also an agent, in that the electorate (the principal) elects legislators to enact laws and oversee government actions on their behalf. The electorate then hold legislators to account at election time and, in a few jurisdictions, through recall, where dissatisfied voters can recall their elected representative and vote for an alternative.
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The absence of the direct principal-agent relationship relegates the accountability relationship to one of horizontal accountability or social accountability. In order for there to be social or horizontal

accountability a hierarchical relationship is generally lacking between actor and forum, as are any formal obligations to render account.

Social Accountability

The prevailing view of social accountability is that it is an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, namely a situation whereby ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability. Such accountability is sometimes referred to it as *society driven horizontal accountability*.

The term social accountability is, in a sense, a misnomer since it is not meant to refer to a specific type of accountability, but rather to a particular approach (or set of mechanisms) for exacting accountability. Mechanisms of social accountability can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both, but very often they are *demand-driven* and operate from the bottom-up.

It is generally accepted that social accountability mechanisms are an example of vertical accountability. However, a minority of commentators argue that, with respect to social accountability, a hierarchical relationship is generally lacking between actor and forum, as are any formal obligations to render account. Giving account to various stakeholders occurs basically on a voluntary basis with no intervention on the part of the principal. Therefore, social accountability would be a form of horizontal accountability.

Social accountability initiatives are as varied and different as participatory budgeting, administrative procedures acts, social audits, and citizen report cards which all involve citizens in the oversight and control of government. This can be contrasted with government initiatives or entities, such as citizen advisory boards, which fulfill public functions.

Often overlooked in considerations of social accountability is the role that legislators can play in providing weight to such grass roots accountability mechanisms. For example, a Member of Parliament can represent the concerns of his/her constituents by questioning a Minister during Question Period in Parliament or by requesting information directly from a government ministry or department.

Diagonal Accountability

The concept of diagonal accountability is far from settled with two groups of commentators adopting different definitions. The literature does not support a convergence of their ideas. Although, there is conjecture as to what constitutes diagonal accountability, the prevailing view is that diagonal accountability entails vertical accountability actors. Generally speaking diagonal accountability seeks to engage citizens directly in the workings of horizontal accountability institutions. This is an effort to augment the limited effectiveness of civil society's watch dog function by breaking the state's monopoly over responsibility for official executive oversight.

The main principles of diagonal accountability are:

- *Participate in Horizontal Accountability Mechanisms* – Community advocates participate in institutions of horizontal accountability, rather than creating distinct and separate institutions of diagonal accountability. In this way, agents of vertical accountability seek to insert themselves more directly into the horizontal axis.

- *Information flow* – Community advocates are given an opportunity to access information about government agencies that would normally be limited to the horizontal axis, for instance internal performance reviews etc. Furthermore, they have access to the deliberations and reasons why horizontal accountability institutions

make the decisions they do. Meanwhile, community advocates bring first hand experience about the performance of the government agency to the accountability process.

- *Compel Officials to Answer* – Community advocates co-opt the horizontal accountability institution's authority to compel a government agency to answer questions (as in the example given above of an MP questioning a Minister about issues of concern to his/her constituents); and

- *Capacity to Sanction* – Community advocates acquire the authority of the horizontal accountability institution to enforce the findings or influence elected officials.

Some argue that civil society can strengthen the effectiveness of horizontal accountability institutions by pressuring existing agencies to do their jobs more effectively. This type of participation in accountability is not direct action against wrongdoing, as with vertical accountability, but rather society-driven horizontal accountability, such as citizen advisory boards that fulfill public functions, like auditing government expenditures or supervising procurement. More generally, active citizens and civil society groups can work with elected representatives to enhance parliaments' representation role.

A minority of commentators diverge in their opinion as to what constitutes diagonal accountability. Some commentators suggest administrative accountability, exercised primarily through quasi-legal forums, such as ombudsmen, auditors, and independent inspectors reporting directly or indirectly to parliament or the responsible minister, is a form of independent and external administrative and financial oversight and control. This form of accountability is different to the classic top-down/ principal-agent relationship because the administrative accountability institution is not in a hierarchical relationship to the public

officials and often do not have formal powers to coerce public officials into compliance. It is argued that these administrative agents are auxiliary forums of accountability that were instituted to help the political principals control the great variety of administrative agents and that their accountability relations are, therefore, a form of diagonal accountability.

Social Accountability versus Diagonal Accountability

Recently the World Bank argued that social accountability is broad enough to encompass mechanisms of diagonal accountability. It was argued that diagonal accountability mechanisms can also be considered a form of social accountability.

Considering social accountability is not meant to refer to a specific type of accountability, but rather to a particular approach for exacting accountability, it might be a broader concept than diagonal accountability. This lends weight to the idea that diagonal accountability mechanisms could be a component of the broader approach of social accountability.

However, this is contrast to some commentators who draw a sharp distinction between social accountability and diagonal accountability. They argue that the state is often resistant to citizens poaching its exclusive oversight domain, instead encouraging new forms of social accountability, which they dismiss as being merely a form of outreach that provides an opportunity for civil society to inform government about public perception of government behavior.

Conclusion

Parliaments are key actors in what has been termed the 'chain of accountability'. They are, along with the judiciary, the key institution of horizontal accountability, not only in their own right but also as the institution to which many autonomous accountability institutions report. They are

the vehicle through which political accountability is exercised. Along with civil society organizations and the mass media, they are also important institutions in vertical accountability.

Newer concepts of accountability have emerged: social accountability and diagonal accountability. The former, defined as 'society driven horizontal accountability' seeks to provide direct answerability from government to citizens; parliaments and elected representatives are important vehicles through which citizens and civic groups can also extract enforcement. And – no matter how defined – parliaments are one of the institutions through which diagonal accountability can be exercised.

Further Reading

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