

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY: AN ANALYSIS WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

The role of civic engagement in ensuring public accountability has become a catchword in recent years. Over the years, there has been dissatisfaction with formal state mechanisms as well as newly introduced market mechanisms. Now there is a consensus that social accountability mechanisms based on civic engagement can hold public officials accountable by complementing state accountability mechanisms. However, there are a number of contextual factors facilitating as well as inhibiting the effectiveness of social accountability. This paper intends to (a) explore and analyze cross-cultural evidence of social accountability in the developing world and (b) evaluate the claims of the advocates of social accountability in view of the socio-economic and political dynamics.

Key words civic engagement, social accountability, public accountability, developing countries

INTRODUCTION

Improved public service performance is a serious concern for the developing world. It is on top of the agenda of national development plans and programs. Despite all efforts, the lack of improved performance of public officials remains an incessant phenomenon. While there are many

factors responsible for the poor performance, the lack of public accountability is considered a major one. Accountability is not only a hallmark of democratic governance, it is an essential element for improving the performance of public officials. Accountability is linked to 'almost every conceivable aspect of good governance' (Jayal, 2008). It is an important 'instrument for fighting three vices such as corruption, clientelism and capture' (Ackerman, 2005). Historically, with the development of modern governing systems, different formal institutional mechanisms have been developed in most countries. While the developed world has demonstrated enormous success, most developing countries still lag behind in enforcing formal institutional mechanisms.

While the importance of the formal institutional mechanisms cannot be denied, market- and society-based approaches have cropped up in recent years to make public accountability more meaningful. The society-based approach is based on civic engagement in various forms. There is now a consensus that civic engagement is an essential requirement for public accountability under any circumstances. When the state is strong and formal institutional mechanisms are effective, it plays a supplementary role. When the formal institutional mechanisms are in disarray, civic engagement compensates institutional weaknesses. However, this is not a straightforward equation. Other socio-political and economic factors play an important role in shaping and reshaping the civic engagement terrain for public accountability. This paper is an attempt to assess the role of civic engagement in making public officials accountable. The paper has the following objectives:

- Locate and analyze the position and role of civic engagement in the discourse on public accountability.
- Provide cross-cultural evidence of civic engagement and its role in the public accountability regime.

- Evaluate the lessons learned from social accountability initiatives in view of cross-cultural evidence and socio-economic and political dynamics in the developing world.

The paper is organized in the following fashion. After this introduction, the next section discusses the concepts of civic engagement and public accountability. Then, the paper proceeds to illustrate selected case studies, illuminating social accountability initiatives in the developing world. Finally, the paper provides some lessons learned and their implications for the public accountability discourse.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

This section focuses on theoretical discussion on civic engagement-based social accountability and public accountability. First, the meaning of accountability and the mechanisms of social accountability are defined and described respectively. Second, the reasons for the emergence of social accountability are discussed. Third, the role of social accountability is analyzed. Forth, there is a note of caution regarding the application of social accountability.

Meaning and Mechanisms of Social Accountability

Accountability of public officials is an essential ingredient of democratic governance. Without the accountability of public officials, the essence of democracy cannot be realized. Ackerman defines accountability as a “pro-active process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behavior and results and are sanctioned accordingly” (Ackerman, 2005: 6). Accountability as an icon serves as a synonym for many loosely defined political concepts, such as transparency,

equity, democracy, and efficiency (Behn, 2001). Bovens (2007) argues that accountability as an icon is loaded with evocative overtones and less useful for analytical purposes. He thus turns to accountability as an institutional arrangement which is now getting currency in the wider discourse on public accountability. Thus, accountability can be defined as a “social relationship in which an actor (an individual or an agency) feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other (a specific person, an agency or a virtual entity such as the general public)” (Bovens, 2007). According to Schedler, accountability involves “the obligation of public officials to inform about and to explain what they are doing” and enforcement, or “the capacity of accounting agencies to impose sanctions on power holders who have violated their public duties” (Schedler, 1999).

Numerous state-centered mechanisms have been developed over the years to ensure the accountability of public officials. However, in recent years there has been a clamor for participation of citizens and wider society in ensuring public accountability. Thus, social accountability which is based on civic engagement has emerged as an organized approach towards public accountability. The World Bank has defined social accountability as “an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e. in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability” (World Bank, 2004: 1).

Social accountability focuses on the ways in which non-state or social actors can hold public officials accountable through various mechanisms (Malena et al, 2004). Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000) emphasize the mode of social accountability as sponsored by civil society organizations, social movements and media. Public demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and public interest law suits are commonly used mechanisms.

There is a unique combination of the use of participatory data collection and analysis tools and the enhanced space given to citizens and their groups, thus resulting in a new generation of social accountability practices that emphasize a solid evidence base and direct interaction with state actors (Malena et al, 2004). Thus, different kinds of mechanisms are being used for civic engagement-based social accountability. Broadly, the mechanisms are:

- Participatory public policy making
- Participatory budgeting
- Public expenditure tracking
- Citizen monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery
- Raising public awareness about their legal rights and public services
- Citizen involvement in public commissions and hearings, citizen advisory boards and oversight committees.

Reasons for the Emergence of Social Accountability

Historically, the formal vertical (elections) and horizontal (political, fiscal, administrative and legal) mechanisms have played an important role in ensuring accountability of public officials. The question arises as to why social accountability is getting currency in the theory and practice of public accountability despite the existence of a plethora of formal state-centered mechanisms. On account of the limitations of conventional vertical and horizontal mechanisms and market mechanisms discussed below, the focus has shifted to social accountability.

First, the public governance system all over the world has undergone fundamental changes over the last two decades or so. The state is not a single actor. Rather, there is a multiplicity or plurality of institutions which are supposed to coordinate and network with each other more through horizontal linkages (Chandhoke, 2003). Therefore, non-state

actors are now recognized as important contributors to governance.

Second, elections are held periodically. If there is maladministration citizens have to wait a long time to give their verdicts. However, elections may not be an effective device of holding public officials accountable as citizens do not encounter them on a daily basis. Moreover, there is also an apprehension about elections in the developing world as vote rigging, manipulation of elections results and the use of black money and muscle power in elections are common phenomena (Zafarullah and Akhter, 2001).

Third, very often, it is difficult for the formal horizontal institutions to oversee the entire gamut of government operations. Parliamentary instruments have limited effects on checking the excesses of the executive branch. The audit office can look at a limited number of audits and very often, their objections remain unattended. There is hardly any follow-up action against those who misappropriate state resources or abuse power for self interests. The constant interference of the executive in judicial matters, huge expenses and structural insufficiency deter many people to seek justice from the courts of law against administrative abuses (Sarker, 2009).

Fourth, in recent years, the market approach has become quite popular in exacting public accountability (Paul, 1992; Peters, 2001). It assumes that rent-seeking public officials must be subjected to the pressures of the market or business principles in order to invoke responsiveness. While the market approach has been successful in some respects, it is not without problems. It is extremely difficult for the business techniques to work in the complex social and political environments of developing countries (Joshi (2008). Most market mechanisms focus on citizens as customers. Those who do not have the ability to pay are automatically excluded from the service delivery system (Haque, 2000).

The Role of Social Accountability

While the above discussion justifies the emergence of social accountability based on civic engagement, its actual role in development matters is note-worthy. Malena et al (2004) have identified three different areas in which social accountability intervention has become prominent: increased development effectiveness, improved governance and empowerment.

Social accountability initiatives enhance development effectiveness. In the developing world, citizens do not have easy access to essential public services. The factors that have contributed to this situation include massive corruption, misallocation of resources and weak incentive structure. Cross cultural evidence corroborates this assumption. Participatory budgeting in Brazil is a case in point. Before the program was introduced there was a perennial problem of misallocation of resources. Resource allocation was mainly based on traditional patron-client relationship (Blair, 2008). With the introduction of participatory budgeting ordinary people through their representatives directly participate in resource allocation. And also there is little scope for corruption as well. In Bangladesh, the distribution of electricity for running irrigation pumps was inflicted with massive corruption. Mere complaints to the higher authority were of no use. Therefore, ordinary peasants organized movements against the power distribution authority. The government resorted to force against peaceful movements and killed several people. The movements helped the peasants realize their objective of receiving electricity without corrupt practices (Sarker, 2009). In India, social auditing of local government officials' works programs and autonomous supervision of ration shops by citizens' groups help curb corrupt practices significantly (Ackerman, 2004; Goetz and Jenkins, 2001). There are a large number of examples which corroborate the notion that social accountability initiatives improve the performance of the

public service delivery system which in turn ensures effective development (Public Affairs Foundation et al, 2007; Reuben, 2003).

Improved governance can also result from social accountability initiatives. Governance crisis has engulfed many developing countries. Conventional horizontal mechanisms have not helped improve the situation significantly. On the other hand, periodic elections, a vertical mechanism, have not also been adequate in strengthening governance. Under this circumstance, the role of social accountability is enormous. It has the capacity to deepen democracy. Social accountability mechanisms enable citizens to voice against governmental injustices, seek access to information, express their needs and concerns and demand accountability between elections. A constructive engagement is developed between the state and citizens (Malena et al, 2004).

Social accountability helps improve citizens' empowerment. Unlike the market, social accountability ensures social inclusion of the poor people. It is based on the language of citizens' rights and empowerment. It facilitates the inclusion and social justice more directly. It enables the poor people to get information about their rights and give feedback to state decision makers. By doing so, it increases the voices of the poor people and enhances the chance of greater responsiveness of state actors to the needs of the poor people (Ackerman, 2005). One essential thrust of social accountability is to combine "participatory monitoring of poverty with a process of empowering citizens to demand accountability from government for poverty reduction investments, while at the same time, supporting government (especially at local government levels) to improve its capacity to engage with citizens for the benefit of promoting reforms in poverty-targeted policies, budgets and programs" (Apusigah, 2009:13).

A Note of Caution

While the virtues of social accountability are quite robust, its success cannot be taken for granted. There are two important considerations in this regard. First, social accountability initiatives cannot and should not work in isolation of other mechanisms. They are expected to complement state horizontal accountability mechanisms. In fact, when some horizontal mechanisms are open to civic engagement they produce effective results (Malena et al, 2004). Second, the issue of institutionalization is of paramount importance. Goetz and Jenkins (2001) have emphasized five key institutional requirements of social accountability:

- Legal basis of civic groups' participation within institutions of public sector oversight;
- Civic groups' continuous presence throughout the process of the agency's work;
- Well-defined procedures for the conduct of encounters between citizens and public sector actors in the meeting;
- Civic groups' access to public information; and
- Civic groups' right to dissent and report directly to legislative bodies.

Ackerman (2004) also suggests that participatory mechanisms have to be institutionalized in order to ensure participation of the poor people and make the administration accountable. First, strategic plans of the concerned government departments could make a focused commitment. Second, new agencies can be created to serve the purpose of social accountability. Third, there should be a legal framework to enforce participatory mechanisms.

Although social accountability is beset with a strong theoretical back-up and some success stories in the developing world, the socio-economic and political contexts may pose serious constraints in realizing the objectives. The

best objectives of social accountability are being perturbed by unfavorable social and political contexts. Particularly, in the developing world extreme inequality, poverty, and undemocratic political situations pose considerable threats to the autonomous actions of civic organizations. The effectiveness of social accountability initiatives also depends on the strength of civic organizations. Here strength implies the ability to sway initiatives, attract members and mobilize them. In many countries, their strength is impaired by internal strife, undemocratic elements within the groups, clientelist nexus with state decision makers and so forth. In order to extract better results, civic organizations and the state have to work in tandem. While it is erroneous to depend exclusively on state horizontal mechanisms as there could be instances of manipulation, it is equally not desirable to depend exclusively on civic organizations, as their efforts could be thwarted by the state. Therefore, the synergy between these two sectors is vital for producing best results in the public accountability regime.

CROSS-CULTURAL EVIDENCE

This section will sketch a number of initiatives undertaken in different parts of the developing world and identify the critical factors of success and/or failure. Appendix 1 summarizes the case studies discussed in this article.

Social Accountability Initiatives in Asia

There are a number of social accountability initiatives in Asia that have attracted attention from all those concerned. Bangladesh has got some experiences of social accountability initiatives of different magnitude. Although popular participation in development programs is always emphasized by state decision makers in policy pronouncements, this has never been realized properly. Of

all the initiatives undertaken so far, the Sirajganj local government development project (SLGDP) has been the most comprehensive one in terms of contents and coverage. The Bangladesh government with financial assistance from the United Nations Development Program and United Nations Capital Development Fund undertook this project in 2000. The project was ended in 2006. Union *Parishads* (council) (UPs), the lowest level of local government structure, was the focal point of intervention. The project has proved that “UPs can be participative, transparent and accountable to the community if funds are provided with the right incentives, some procedural changes are made, and a grass-roots based participatory planning and monitoring system is adopted” (GoB et al, 2007: 7). The major innovations of the project were:

- Devolved performance-linked funding
- Open budget sessions
- Participatory planning
- Infrastructure and service delivery
- Enhanced transparency and accountability
- Participatory performance assessments of UPs
- Improved measures for central government oversight of UPs
- Innovative procedures for enhancing women’s participation
- Local resources mobilization
- Dissemination of lessons learned for policy change (Rahman (n.d.).

So far as participatory planning is concerned, there was effective participation of around 10 percent of the typical adult population in the decision making process. This is in contrast to earlier practices where there was only nominal participation of UP members and the rural development bureaucracy was the de facto actor. The project also provided

the scope for systematic mapping and problem analysis, scheme identification and prioritization through local facilitation volunteers. UP-approved projects were implemented, monitored and maintained by community committees. Budget meetings were usually attended by 100-500 people. Community's priorities and concerns were always taken into consideration. While women were the objects of intervention in the past, the project provided the scope for more active women's participation. Thirty percent of local committees were chaired by female members. Thirty percent of funds were earmarked for women. Women played crucial roles in scheme identification, prioritization, implementation, supervision and monitoring. Several methods were used to assess the performance of UP members. The assessment was done once a year in a particular day in presence of local people. There were also assessment workshops where 100-300 (including 20-30 per cent women) local people participated. In addition, public score cards were used. There were links between the results of the performance assessment and funding and capacity building activities of UPs (World Bank, 2007).

The results of the SLGDF project were quite satisfactory in terms of the role of effective popular participation in development activities at the local level. Accountability of UPs, participation of women, equitable distribution of benefits, community participation in planning, implementation and monitoring of UP activities, and reduced corruption were many of the outcomes of the SLGDF project. The success has prompted the GoB and other development partners to upscale the project further (GoB et al, 2007: 7).

There are some other piecemeal social accountability initiatives. In most of these cases, traditional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played the pioneering role. The distribution of *khas* land (unutilized government-owned land) and leasing out of *jalmahals* (water

bodies) among the poor people, the enforcement of minimum wage legislations and assuring a fair allocation of Vulnerable Group Feeding cards are some of the examples where NGOs have had relative success.

The government owns a substantial portion of lands which remain unutilized. This has been the bone of contention of the land reform policy in Bangladesh for many years. Despite the policy pronouncement, successive governments have found it difficult to distribute *khas* land and *jalmahals* among the destitute people who can rely on these resources for their livelihood. Traditionally, the influential people including rural elites in cooperation with the land and rural local government offices have ensured their control over *khas* land and *jalmahals* (Barakat, 2006). While this is a common scenario, there are some exceptions where NGO interventions helped the poor to have rights over these resources. The cases of *Samata* in Pabna, and *Prashika* and Caritas in many parts of the North-West signify the impact of NGO activism in securing greater access for the poor to *khas* land (Devine, n.d.). Barakat (2006) observes that one of the lessons that the success stories reveal is that the poor should be attached to progressive political parties, social organizations and poor-friendly NGOs in order to fight against administrative injustices and the rural elites.

In India, *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) or Workers and Peasants' Power Association, Public Affairs center (PAC) and Rationing *Kruti Samity* are some of the important civic groups that have rendered valuable services in holding state officials accountable. Right to information has been one of the cornerstones of accountable administration. In the past, there were many abuses such as non-payment and under-payment of wages to the rural poor and personal aggrandizement of council officials. Against this backdrop, a non-political movement known as MKSS was launched. Initially, diverse strategies such as sit-ins, rallies, lobbying with the government, music, puppets, street

theater etc. were used. Finally, the MKSS became victorious when the government of Rajasthan incorporated the government notification that the people have the right to access the records on *Panchayet* expenditure and photocopy the records. The government finally enacted the Right to Information Act in 2000. The MKSS used public hearings through which the discrepancies between what was written on paper and what was given to the rural laborers could easily be identified. Through this, the laborers got fair wages, fictitious names on the pay roll could be identified and other kinds of anomalies could be detected. The MKSS is no more confined to Rajasthan. It has moved to other Indian states and works with similar groups on right to information issues. It is worth mentioning here that the federal government of India eventually passed the Right to Information Act in 2005. This legislation applies to the federal, state and local governments in India.

There have been perennial problems of essential public services such as water, electricity and health in India. Mismanagement, customer dissatisfaction, and corruption were quite rampant in the past. Frequent smaller movements were waged in the past against the unresponsive and corrupt public officials. However, things did not change much. PAC, a Bangalore-based NGO, came forward with a noble idea to improve the service delivery system of essential public services. PAC has introduced report cards that seek citizens' opinions about different public services (Rahman, n.d.). These report cards provide citizens to express their opinions about the state of different public services. PAC and other NGOs take up citizens' concerns with relevant authorities and the latter take initiatives to rectify problems. The initial experiment started with the health services of the Municipality. Feedbacks received from citizens were circulated among experts and NGOs. A number of recommendations were placed before the Bangalore Municipal Corporation and health experts. The Municipality

in principle accepted many of the recommendations and initiated reforms in health services. Based on this experiment PAC now conducts surveys using report cards for all essential services in different parts of India (Paul, n.d.).

Food security has been a serious concern for the poor people in India. With this end in mind, the public distribution system (PDS) has been active for several decades. The system has been riddled with massive corruption, apathetic administration and mismanagement. Though there is official vigilance committee consisting of the elected representatives of the Municipal wards and concerned citizens, doubts were raised about the way selection was made and the committee worked. Very often, the committee was captured by the accomplices of the shopkeepers. Sometimes, shopkeepers themselves sat on the committees. In the past some NGOs were active in raising the concerns but the real breakthrough came in when these NGOs and community-based organizations formed a coordination committee, called the Rationing *Kruti Samity* or Rationing Action Committee. The committee has been working to safeguard the interests of the poor people in Mumbai and other areas. The committee's collective strength was reinforced by the then Controller of Rationing who championed the idea of monitoring the performance of shopkeepers. The committee's main concern was to detect whether commodities were diverted illegally to the private market. Monthly meetings were arranged between PDS officials and vigilance committees where officials were informed of any irregularities detected by the committees. Shop owners were required to post information about deliveries and the updated price of commodities. Ordinary customers had also access to sales register (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001).

The initial success was spectacular. The pilferage of commodities decreased substantially. Adulteration of commodities was also reduced. Card holders could get commodities according to their entitlements. The overall

service delivery system was significantly improved. The factor responsible for the initial success was the crucial role played by the Controller of rationing. So long he was in charge, things were moving in the right direction. Once he was removed from the position, manipulation reappeared again (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001).

The relative success of these three Indian social accountability initiatives has to be seen in the context of the democratic set-up of Indian society and space given to the civil society organizations. In all these Indian cases, the role of the state has been quite crucial. On top of it, cooperation extended by reform-oriented bureaucrats was also significant. Nevertheless, all these initiatives suffer from the lack of institutionalization and inclusiveness (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001).

Social Accountability Initiatives in Africa

There are a number of successful social accountability initiatives in Africa. McNeil and Mumvuma (2006) have identified and analyzed a number of such initiatives in Anglophone Africa. Social accountability initiatives undertaken by civil society organization is a timely intervention which has coalesced with other pressing challenges such as decentralization, the need to fight poverty, and the need to improve service delivery for the poor. In most cases, impacts are not visible but they are expected to be in sight in the long run. The Institute for Policy Alternative in Ghana is a civil society organization that has initiated social accountability in community monitoring of poverty reduction project. Both community and citizen scorecards were used for this purpose. The community scorecard differs from conventional surveys, which use individuals as unit of analysis. The Institute for Policy Alternatives also organized interface meetings between the community and service providers at the local level.

This intervention provided the scope for participation for the rural poor people in assessing the performance of local government officials. They also spoke to these officials directly at the interface meetings about different anomalies in the service delivery system. Along with these the Institute for Policy Alternatives also executed some other activities such as tracking access to basic education, quality health care, resource allocation and public expenditure and assessing their impact on beneficiaries by using participatory tools and so forth. Though there is no immediate impact of the intervention, its results have future implications. The process has not been institutionalized at the governmental level. But the government recognizes the importance of the initiatives. The methodologies are also being widely used by other NGOs across the country. The overall impact is that a pattern of skill acquisition and capacity building has emerged. Citizens are much more conscious about their rights and becoming acquainted with government policies (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006: 44).

Uganda has set a unique example of social accountability of a public sector program. The Ugandan Community-led HIV/AIDS Initiative, popularly known as CHAI, is a glorious example of how public service providers are held accountable to service-receiving citizens. As a part of public sector reform, the Ugandan government has recognized the importance of bottom-up accountability and incorporated this within poverty eradication action plan (PEAP). There is a national strategic framework on HIV/AIDS. The Ugandan CHAI has been developed in line with this strategy which is a PEAP- consistent sectoral policy and planning instrument (Awio et al, 2007). The project has three components – national, district and community. It is the community component where programs are directly implemented and reported on by organized community groups. Though the bureaucratic district AIDS/HIV committee is responsible for initiation, appraisal and

approval of the projects, vital inputs are sought from the community facilitators. The district technical committee makes it sure that there is evidence of participation in identification of the problems and prioritization of solutions by the community members. The role of the community project committee members is crucial as they are directly involved in implementing the projects. They are given basic training in simple management skills.

In the overall process, multiple accountability relationships are found. The community groups and the community project committees have to report to the community stakeholders through written reports, oral briefings during local and council meetings and informal information sharing during the course of executing planned activities. The community groups as a whole also have to submit written financial and progress reports to parish councils, sub-counties and district local governments. Awio et al (2007) observe that the Ugandan CHAI initiatives provide a unique case where genuine local participation in diverse aspects of a project is ensured. They have singled out social capital as a critical factor for relative success. Social capital has played a significant role in driving the community groups in achieving efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. For the Ugandan CHAI, the communitarian approach has performed better than the new public management (NPM) approach in enforcing public accountability.

Social Accountability Initiatives in Latin America

There have been some successful social accountability initiatives in Latin America. Participatory Budget (PB) in Porto Alegre municipality in Brazil is a glaring example of how citizens participate in different aspects of the budgetary process. This PB was instituted in 1989. However, it did not start automatically. It was civil society that championed this idea of a participatory budget.

More importantly, it was the city government that opened the space and civil society readily grabbed the opportunity. Therefore, “the design of today’s PB arrangement arose after a period of intense negotiation and participation both within the new government and between the new government, civil society groups, and involved citizens” (World Bank, 2004). There is a unique process. The city is divided into 16 distinct regions and below that neighborhoods. The budgetary process begins with public meetings at the neighborhood level. Every year, more than 14,000 citizens discuss the previous year’s performance, discuss and prioritize projects for the upcoming year. They also elect their delegates to the regional meeting. They also elect delegates on five themes covering such areas as education, transportation, health and taxation. The assembly in each region further elects its representatives to work in the citywide Participatory Budgetary Council (COP). The COP plays a crucial role in the process in that it is responsible for citywide budget plan and consolidates and prioritizes the proposals from regions and theme groups (Blair, 2008). At all these levels such as neighborhood, district and citywide, there is genuine popular participation and decisions are made through intense debates, negotiations and the use of sophisticated weighted voting systems designed to assure a fair distribution of resources, with an emphasis on helping the most needy areas of the city. The municipal council discusses and approves the proposals. The delegates from all regions, neighborhood and COP monitor the whole process of approval (Blair, 2008).

There have been marked improvements in the city’s infrastructure, health, education and transportation systems. In 1989, only 46 percent households had access to the sewerage network. The percentage rose to 85 percent in 1996. Similarly, access to running water increased from 80 percent to 98 percent during the same period. Marked improvements in road infrastructure and transportation were also visible. The percentage of school enrolment increased

significantly (Novy and Leobolt, 2005; Rahman, n.d.). The effects on redistribution and empowerment and accountability have also been quite remarkable (Blair, 2008; Novy and Leobolt, 2005; World Bank, 2004).

- The poor and women have earned a sense of belongingness with the state. Their participation has been quite higher compared to pre-PB periods. (Blair, 2008).
- Since there is transparency in the whole budgetary process, PB has significantly reduced the scope for personal aggrandizement of local bureaucracy.
- Traditional patron-clientage does not have significance as the allocation of resources is not based on dyadic relationships. Rather, a set of public elements such as assemblies, lists of previous access to goods and necessity criteria determine the distribution of material benefits (World Bank, 2004).
- PB has also reduced the familiar propensity of the capture of service delivery agencies by the rich people (World Bank, 2004).

Despite great implications, PB has engendered some drawbacks in recent years. It is argued that PB has succeeded in an area which has traditionally been rich and bestowed with good administrative infrastructure. It would be interesting to see how it works in poverty-stricken areas (Blair, 2008). Moreover, the vivacity that PB in Porto Alegre had in previous years seems to be gradually disappearing. For instance, Fox (2008) reports that the meeting in 2008 showed less enthusiasm among the residents and political officials.

LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

The case studies discussed above reveal a number of lessons learned which have wider implications for public accountability. First, public accountability cannot be meaningful if people at large don't benefit from it. Social accountability initiatives provide a number of important benefits. Second, there is a great importance of contextual factors in facilitating and/or impeding social accountability. Third, the role of the state is of paramount importance in promoting social accountability. Fourth, unless the whole process of social accountability is institutionalized, the sustainability of such intervention remains problematic. Fifth, while social accountability provides an important approach towards public accountability, another alternative such as local government can also be very useful when both work in tandem. Sixth, the skill base of civil society organizations needs to be addressed for the sustainability purpose. Seventh, there is a need to address the issue of political society. Finally, the issue of public accountability has to be seen from a holistic perspective. All these lessons are being analyzed in the following paragraphs.

Benefits

In all these case studies, public accountability has remained problematic over the years. Inefficiency, corruption, clientelism and capture have been quite rampant. Though state-centered horizontal as well as market mechanisms have remained operative, their effectiveness has not been observed in curbing corruption or stopping capture by the elites. Under this situation, the advent of social accountability as an organized approach towards public accountability is a timely intervention. All the case studies demonstrate such positive gains as invoking administrative responsiveness, raising citizens' voice, ensuring genuine participation of women and poor people, highlighting the power of information and so forth resulted from social accountability initiatives in various forms (Ghonkrokta and

Lather, 2007). However, reaping benefits from social accountability initiatives is not an automatic process. Such factors as the context, the degree and the kind of institutionalization, the role of the state and so forth also play important roles.

The Importance of Contextual Factors

The case studies highlight the importance of the context in facilitating as well as impeding civic engagement in public domain. It is worth-mentioning here that though there are perceived benefits of social accountability, it has not been exploited to its full potentials. The factors that facilitate civic engagement in some contexts may be counter-productive in other contexts. Also there is a question of scaling up social accountability initiatives and it is interesting to see how they work in wider contexts. The Indian case studies reveal some interesting findings. Indian democracy is on a strong foothold now. Despite this, state institutions responsible for horizontal accountability have not played effective roles. In this case, civic forums have contributed enormously. The democratic set-up has also facilitated the process. The Right to Information Act (RTI) is a case in point. The fact that the RTI is in place does not automatically guarantee that civic forums can avail the opportunity. While in India, civic forums successfully have taken advantage of this Act, in Bangladesh civic forums are far from this trend though there is an RTI Act in Bangladesh. Therefore, it can be presumed that democratic governance is more tolerable in engaging civic forums in horizontal accountability. Akin to this, there is also an issue of the degree and the kind of mobilization initiated by civic society organizations.

The Role of the State

The case studies signify the role of the state in giving space to civic groups for engaging citizens as well as

devising new strategies on its own to promote civic engagement for accountability purposes. It is not always easy to involve civic forums in public governance. The very nature of political culture and bureaucratic bungling pose stupendous threats to effective participation of civic groups. The lack of political commitment in implementing reforms has remained a perennial problem in most developing countries (McCourt, 2003). A few case studies indicate that if there is political will and commitment many problems relating to civic engagement can be overcome. In fact, all the success stories indicate the importance of political will in enforcing social accountability. Political commitment in implementing social accountability initiatives becomes easier for ruling political parties who have a wider support base among ordinary citizens (Heller et al, 2007). It is also not an automatic process. Despite the fact that a left wing political party has been in power in the Indian state of West Bengal, community monitoring has not improved the performance of poverty alleviation schemes. Traditional clientelist politics has helped some rural elites infiltrate into the committees responsible for monitoring the programs. In fact, a nexus between local civil society and officials has turned into a dominant coalition of corruption (Veron et al, 2006). This is in contrast to some other experiences in India and Brazil. Even small differences in political patterns and relational dynamics can thus produce divergent trajectories and outcomes for successful social accountability initiatives (Heller, 2001).

Institutionalization

The case studies also draw attention to the importance of institutionalization of civic engagement in order to develop long-term, sustainable relationship with relevant stakeholders. A lack of such process may corroborate the notion that social accountability is not taken

seriously by the state and it is one-off exercise like many other experiments undertaken in many developing countries.

Some successes are difficult to sustain unless there is “constructing alliances” between civic forms and state officials (Ackerman, 2004: 458). There is a need for developing the culture of this constructing alliance. With heavy confrontations or bloodshed, some concessions can be gained from the state. But in the long run this does not have significance. There are examples that some progressive officials cooperate with the civic forums. This temporary engagement gives some successes. But once these officials are transferred somewhere or removed from the positions, the whole initiative gets disarrayed (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001). More importantly, without broad-based institutional basis, civic engagement may become a misnomer because it lacks any substantive decision making power (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001). Therefore, the institutionalization of civic engagement must be given a top priority. A critical element in the process is a legal standing guaranteeing substantive jurisdictions of civil society organizations. However, a mere legal framework may not work if there is no conducive political environment and the enforcement of legal provisions over a long period of time. Moreover, civic groups’ continuous presence in performing oversight functions may be unrealistic in unfavorable socio-political contexts. Even despite the overall favorable political situation in Kerala, specific local contexts have prevented utilization of full potentials of civic groups in enforcing social accountability (Venugopal and Yilmaz, 2009).

While a democratic set up is an important condition, it does not guarantee automatic institutionalization. Many case studies reveal the lack of institutionalization. While governments provided encouragement for civic engagement, the institutionalization of the process was still lacking. Permanent engagement of pro-poor civic groups with state functionaries is expected to streamline the structure of public

accountability on a long term basis. The *khas* land distribution project in Bangladesh, the CHAI initiative in Uganda, and the community monitoring of poverty reduction project in Ghana demonstrate some concrete benefits in terms of citizens' voice, responsiveness of public officials and wellbeing of ordinary citizens. The Ugandan case study clearly indicates that the communitarian approach based on social capital is much more effective than the conventional horizontal as well as NPM mechanisms in invoking accountable performance from the service providers. However, there are no concerted efforts to institutionalize the process for reaping long-term benefits. A World Bank report attributes this lack of institutionalization to the reluctance of central bureaucracy and political leadership to devolve power to civic groups (World Bank, 2005). Therefore, resistance is inevitable from the state decision makers. With strong political will, political mobilization and vibrant civic action such initiatives can also be implemented successfully. Social accountability initiatives in Brazil and India are cases in point. In the Indian state of Kerala and Brazil, mass-based political leadership was always in favor of participatory development. Civil society organizations being encouraged by political leadership also have had breathing space to orchestrate genuine participation by underprivileged groups (Heller et al, 2007).

Social Accountability and Local Government

Most social accountability mechanisms in the developing world focus on the role of civic groups in exacting accountability. Local government offices are being left out. Empirical indices suggest that the existing local government set up can be an important area of social accountability intervention (Arroyo and Sirker, 2005). The SLGDF project in Bangladesh bears testimony to this. The advantage is that local governments are already near the door steps of common people. If there is any good intention, they

can really translate this good intention into productive social accountability initiatives. Traditionally, local government offices have been the dens of corruption and patronage distribution. But this particular project was devoid of these vices. Critical factors could be the institutionalization of the process, the formulation and enforcement of incentives and constant presence of aid officials. Again, it would be interesting to see how the format works on a larger scale as the decision has already been taken to scale up. While PB in Brazil has provided scope for broad-based participation of civil society, it has undermined the existing local government system. Brautigam (2004) rightly observes that PB in Brazil has substituted an elected local government system which is expected to facilitate social accountability initiatives. The fact that local government institutions are inflicted with corruption, social divides and clientelism (Haque, 2008) does not vindicate the point that a parallel structure has to be instituted. In that case, there is a need for vigorous reforms of the existing local government system which further needs strong political will and commitment. Apart from the SLGDF project, there are other local government initiatives which have promoted social accountability. The local government experience in Kerala in India is another glaring example in this respect. The point is further elaborated in discussion on the importance of political society.

Skill Base and Sustainability

One of the key issues is the skill level of civic forums to substantiate their claims against the state officials. This can be done on a few occasions with the voluntary engagement of a few enthusiastic professionals. Unless civic forums are well-equipped with substantive skill base it would be difficult to sustain the tempo of social initiatives. There is evidence that civic forums are even dependent on the donors not only for financial resources but also for the

development of context-appropriate social accountability tools and methodologies (World Bank, 2007). Based on Indian experiences Goetz and Jenkins (2001) observe that to be effective civil society organizations need different types of resources such as time, money and literacy and technical skills which may not be available all the time.

The Importance of Political Society

Substantive jurisdictions given to civic forums must not dissociate the target population from the political society. Ahmed (2008) quoting Chaterjee observes that it is political society that can ensure that the disadvantaged people pressurize the government to negotiate their entitlements. Democratic development should strive how the poor could be integrated to the political society. It is also true that decentralized local government and its engagement with the poor work better where there is conducive political environment. The case of Kerala in India is a glaring example (Ahmed, 2008). Genuine civic engagement has been ensured in the local government offices. The left government in Kerala came to power in 1996 and implemented its electoral promise “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning.” Heller et al (2007) have identified three sets of impacts:

- (a) The participatory planning in *Panchayets*. Civil society inputs were significant.
- (b) The constitution of participatory publics exemplified by the authoritative contributions of *Gram Sabhas* and Task Forces.
- (c) The overall development performance of the participatory structures is quite significant.

Venugopal and Yilmaz (2009) in their study have revealed discernible impacts of social accountability initiatives within the existing local government structure. For instance, procurement and project appraisal normally done

by local government officials are being conducted by citizens' groups. Similarly, indigenous redressal institutions, women watchdog committees and social audit committees perform a number of effective social accountability functions. It has been discussed earlier that in some specific contexts, social accountability initiatives may be impaired by the local clientelist politics.

The Need for a Holistic Perspective

The whole discussion of public accountability has to be seen from a holistic perspective. Social accountability is not an isolated approach. It has to be contextualized in relation to other aspects of state capacity. It implies that the importance of the capacity of the state has to be underscored in political, administrative, institutional and technical spheres (Walis and Dollery, 2001). It should be mentioned here that civic forums cannot bring out fundamental changes in the accountability regime if their efforts are not tied up with efforts to increase and accentuate state capacity. When the authority of the government is at stake, how can civic forums contribute to accountability? If the dominant political culture of the country is clientelist and elite capture is a common phenomenon, how can civic forums integrate the poor and ensure their participation in accountability? Political capacity exemplified by effective political institutions such as parliaments and parliamentary committees, and participatory local governments is vitally important. Here again, the concept of political society is pertinent as this can effectively integrate the mass people into the mainstream development efforts. If they are ineffective, civic forums have very little to offer. For effective public accountability the states in the developing world should first concentrate on improving their capacity. In a developing country context, even if there are established democratic institutions, clientelism of various forms, routinized forms of social exclusion and the failure of public

legality may undermine proper citizen-based forms of participation. In that case, there is a need for “democratic deepening” with explicit objective of direct citizen participation in diverse activities (Heller et al, 2007). Once they are in order, civic forums would have enough space and play effective roles in the accountability regime. Otherwise, we can only see some “success stories” here and there without any sustainable institutional basis.

CONCLUSION

Accountability is an essential component of modern day governance in all countries. While historically internal state mechanisms have played significant role in ensuring public accountability, in recent years, their significance has come under incessant criticisms. The new mode of governance has given rise to the market and society-based mechanisms in ensuring public accountability. This paper has looked into the society-based mechanisms. More specifically, the role of civic engagement in accountability embodied in the concept of social accountability has been elaborated theoretically and empirically. A number of cases around the developing world have been discussed. These case studies demonstrate that social accountability initiatives have played significant roles in improving the accountability of public officials. The paper has identified contextual factors facilitating or inhibiting social accountability initiatives. Political commitment, democratic governance, institutionalization, and the level of development of civil society organizations are some of the factors that have facilitated apparent success of these initiatives. It has been noted that though apparently many social initiatives have succeeded, but some weaknesses are also profound in the functioning of civic groups and other relationships. For instance, the issue of technical competence in carrying out horizontal audit functions on the part of civic forums is

doubtful. The question is for how long they can mobilize professional volunteers to carry out this function. In some cases, the benevolence of state officials has also facilitated the success. Their departure from the scene has deteriorated the level of civic engagement. Some civic groups have their weaknesses too. In some cases, clientelist practices make it difficult for them to play an effective oversight role. This paper recognizes the important contributions of civic engagement in public accountability. However, their success should not be at the cost of undermining more established conventional state mechanisms. The development of political institutions, strengthening audits institutions, anticorruption agencies and ombudsman should be prioritized. Civil society organizations perform better in tandem with state institutions performing accountability functions. Citizens' groups would play much more important role while working within a context there is an efficient state, an ample space for pro-people civil society organizations to operate and an institutionalization process that cements the relationship between citizenry and the state.

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Appendix 1: Summary of Case Studies

| Case Studies | Accountability Problems | Accountability Mechanisms | Results/Impact | Factors Responsible | Role of the State | Remarks |
|--|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| Case Study 1 Participatory Budgeting in Sirajgonj, Bangladesh | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inefficiency, corruption, and lack of equity in the delivery of services. ▪ Clientelism within societal organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participatory budgeting ▪ Devolved performance-linked funding ▪ Open budget sessions ▪ Participatory planning ▪ Participatory performance assessment of UPs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Genuine participation by women and poor people ▪ Some distributional effects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More active interests of donors ▪ Small scale intervention ▪ Incentive structure ▪ Active presence of the donor agency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strong backing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Important to see what happens when upscaled. |
| Case Study 2 Distribution of <i>Khas</i> Land in Bangladesh | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Elite capture orchestrated by rural elites, their central level patrons and land department bureaucracy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participatory service delivery system, jointly managed by the government and NGOs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Proper distribution of <i>khas</i> land among the poor people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ State support ▪ Pro-poor NGOs ▪ Donors' pressures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acceptance by the state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clientelism in another form. ▪ NGOs' involvement in party political activities ▪ Lack of accountability mechanisms for NGOs. |
| Case Study 3 Grassroots Anti-corruption initiatives, India | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inefficiency, corruption, lack of equity in the delivery of infrastructure and social services ▪ Capture of pre-existing participatory mechanisms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social auditing by <i>Mazdur Kishan Shakti Sangathan</i> (MKSS) ▪ Independent investigation of government expenditures ▪ Public hearings ▪ Public protests | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active participation of the poor. ▪ Fair wages, no system loss. ▪ Genuine participative alternative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vibrant civil society ▪ Relatively better political environment, RTI Act ▪ Sympathy of some state decision makers. ▪ Executive responsiveness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encouragement by the state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sometimes confrontational ▪ Kerala local government is better alternative ▪ Importance of institutionalization of participatory mechanisms |
| Case Study 4: Citizen Report Card in Bangalore, India | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mismanagement of essential public services, including corruption and non-responsiveness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Citizen report cards administered to seek citizens' opinions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved public services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vibrant civic groups ▪ Citizens' competence ▪ Executive responsiveness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encouragement by the state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Importance of institutionalization of participatory mechanisms. |
| Case Study 5: Grassroots Anti-corruption initiatives, India | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inefficiency, corruption, lack of equity in the delivery of infrastructure and social services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rationing Action Committees (Rationing Kruti samiti [RKSS]) ▪ Autonomous supervision of ration shops. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active participation of the poor. ▪ Genuine participative alternative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vibrant civil society ▪ Better political environment ▪ Sympathy of some state decision | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encouragement by the state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Doubtful technical sustainability ▪ Importance of institutionalization of participatory |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|--|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Capture of pre-existing participatory mechanisms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Publicity of prices and samples. | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ markers ▪ Reformist bureaucracy | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> mechanisms versus reformist bureaucracy. |
| <p>Case Study 6 Community Monitoring of Poverty Reduction Project, Ghana</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Corruption ▪ Elite capture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participatory audit function ▪ Interface meetings between community groups and service providers ▪ Citizen report cards ▪ Tracking resource allocation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No new immediate discernible results but expected to have wider implications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Needs time to have impact | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strong backing ▪ Encouragement & forbearance of the state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Political will is there. ▪ Brighter future implications ▪ Needs institutionalization |
| <p>Case Study 7 The Ugandan Community-led HIV/AIDS Initiative, CHAI</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of implementation ▪ Negative results ▪ Misappropriation of resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participation of community groups in planning, budgeting, cash flow management, implementation, monitoring and reporting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Needs are better identified, resources properly allocated ▪ Discernible results are visible | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strength of the community groups based on social capital ▪ State support. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strong backing & forbearance of the state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communitarian rather than NPM approach to accountability seems to be working better |
| <p>Case Study 8: Participatory Budgeting, Porto Alegre, Brazil</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inefficiency, corruption and lack of equity in the delivery of services. ▪ Clientelism within societal organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participatory budgeting & decentralized programs ▪ 10% of budget opening to society ▪ Three levels of participation – neighborhood, district, citywide ▪ Weighted pro-poor voting system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rapid improvement in infrastructure and public services in poor areas. ▪ Promotes development of new social actors. ▪ Active participation of the poorest ▪ No more clientelist basis for resource allocation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vibrant civil society ▪ Political mobilization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active state support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Local government system is weakened. ▪ Loss of euphoria |

