



Policy Briefing

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Participatory Accountability for the SDGs: beyond Social Accountability

People who are most marginalised need to participate in the monitoring and accountability of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) if the 'leave no-one behind' ambition is to be met. Participatory accountability is necessary for their realities to be understood and for their voices to be heard. This can be achieved through processes that both enable personal empowerment, collective identity building and knowledge of rights, and support interest in and capabilities for political engagement. Knowledge generated by people in the margins must complement statistical data in order to build a deeper understanding of the issues that perpetuate poverty and inequality and how to address them. People's knowledge and collective action for accountability needs to be joined with efforts by national governments, civil society organisations, the UN and other multilateral institutions.

Accountability, as expressed in Goal 16 of the SDGs, is a gateway to achieving all other goals and the framework as a whole. The SDGs commitment to 'leave no one behind' cannot be realised without the sustained participation of marginalised groups in the monitoring and accountability of these goals. Participatory research in Egypt, Ghana and South Africa found that in order for accountability relationships to function effectively within the SDGs, they should be:

- grounded and defined in national and local contexts
- linked to processes of justice, and existing laws and regulations at local and national levels
- embedded in truly participatory and inclusive processes.

Marginalised groups face multiple barriers to claiming accountability. Harmful social norms that

Above

A child living with HIV hand in hand with a project staff member at the opening event.

PHOTOGRAPH: Center for Development Services, CDS (Egypt)



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Knowledge from the margins for the SDGs

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discriminate and stigmatise work to silence and make people invisible; power inequalities across multiple levels and spaces exclude marginalised citizens and frustrate the realisation of their rights. For the most marginalised, standard social accountability approaches such as budget tracking, community monitoring and participatory budgeting are not enough and often not accessible.

Participatory accountability considers that marginalised groups must be central to building systems of accountability that make a difference in their lives. Working towards participatory accountability is an ongoing and dynamic process. Accountability pathways cannot be the same for all citizens; they need to respond and engage with local contexts and power dynamics, and evolve over time. Organisations working with marginalised groups play a critical role in accompanying processes of participatory accountability. A participatory accountability approach also requires policymakers to be proactive and responsive in seeking out and building ways to create accountability with citizen groups in different contexts.

Pilot Processes on Participatory Monitoring and Accountability of the SDGs

Pilot processes on Participatory Monitoring and Accountability of the SDGs

Organisation/ Country	Description of process
Centre for Development Services, Egypt	HIV+ children and adolescents (+CHAD) building rights to health service provision and fair treatment in a context of stigma, discrimination and fractured governance
Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation, South Africa	Community representatives and youth (Delft Safety Group) creating space for change around problems of safety and security in a context of extreme violence and corruption
Radio Ada, Ghana	Salt-winning women's collective (Yihi Katseme) addressing power imbalances in resource management in order to reinstate sustainable livelihoods for all

From these three pilot learning processes, five main lessons have been learned about building participatory accountability with people in the margins:

1 Building self-recognition creates the basis for people at the margins to claim accountability collectively

People living in extreme marginalisation often do not recognise their own rights and the underlying reasons why their rights are not protected. Living with stigma and discrimination as well as economic and spatial marginalisation, their identities and capacities tend to be devalued. Most accountability literature and initiatives are power-blind, speaking vaguely about empowerment and movement building, but not saying explicitly how to shift power imbalances.

Supporting people's awareness of their intrinsic value, their rights and their own meanings of accountability must be the first step in building participatory accountability. The pilot projects have all used elements of popular education to develop individual and collective rights awareness. Significantly, these methods, situated within broader participatory action research processes, encourage reflection, dialogue and relationship-building. By continuously moving between individual and collective reflection people are able to see themselves as rights holders and as having the capacity to claim rights through accountability. This approach is well-established and documented in popular education, which is based on Paulo Freire's education for critical consciousness.

2 Effective accompaniment sparks marginalised groups' capabilities and motivation for political engagement in accountability

The combination of discriminatory social norms, multiple inequalities and the pressure to fulfil basic needs create day to day barriers to community participation. For genuine political engagement by people in the margins, an accompanying process may be required to spark their motivation and develop their capabilities. Sustained political engagement is needed between marginalised groups, and decision-makers in government at different levels. This engagement includes both the mobilisation of the most marginalised and the increased responsiveness of policymakers and decision-makers. Without political engagement, the many mechanisms and tools for accountability promoted by governments, donor agencies, and multilateral organisations under the SDGs will not lead to sustainable changes in relation to the power necessary for real accountability.

3 Generating data with people at the margins can complement mainstream statistics and enable people to use this data in accountability processes

Data generated using participatory approaches with people from the margins can complement and give depth to data gathered through surveys and digital data banks. Knowledge from the margins carries important information but also

emotion. It is this combination that gives it the power to break discriminatory norms and silence around injustices, and can be the basis for mobilisation at multiple levels, contributing to accountability. Policymakers, alongside citizens, need this data in order to get a deeper understanding of the underlying issues that perpetuate poverty and marginalisation.

Knowledge from the margins is important not only for its power to surface the problems, but also because it can be used to open up and build a dialogue about possible solutions. Developing accountable relationships therefore requires facilitating spaces in which citizens and decision-makers can come together to discuss this data in order to jointly design, implement and evaluate programmes and interventions.

4 Social movement building is critical to claiming rights and sustaining accountability

For people at the margins, their possibilities of coming together around a collective agenda are influenced by the nature of local power struggles (including at family level), and the wider social, political and economic context. Inclusive social movements, such as Yihi Katseme and the Delft Safety Group, play a critical role in transforming marginality into positive action, mobilising citizens to claim rights and accountability. When social movements engage in accountability processes, they can create partnerships between people from the margins and those in positions of power in government, civil society and the private sector. Participatory accountability processes founded on multiple partnerships are most likely to be sustained over time because they are not dependent on a single champion. It is known that social mobilisation comes with political risks and potential reprisals; hence, by organising collectively, social movements and their partners can minimise these risks. However, weighing the risks of social action must be an ongoing negotiation amongst movement members.

5 Accountability initiatives must go beyond narrow processes of consultation or data collection, and engage in approaches connected to wider systems

Policymakers and organisations should understand accountability as a *system* rather than as a step-by-step structured initiative, as tends to be the case with social accountability tools. Isolated individuals, especially those who have been systematically marginalised, cannot easily change entrenched inequalities; hence the crucial need for participatory accountability individual and collective processes of empowerment. One-off processes of consultation or narrow citizen-monitoring mechanisms will not change

the dynamics between marginalised groups and authorities, let alone the underlying causes of inequality. Long-term participatory accountability processes undertake multiple strategies at different levels to connect to the wider system. Some of these actions include gathering and analysing data from the perspectives of those most marginalised, developing and campaigning around collective messages, opening spaces for dialogue, building skills for dialogue, identifying champions amongst stakeholders, and using social media as well as radio, television and the press.

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Knowledge from the margins for inclusive sustainable development: Songor for All

Over the year of the pilot process, the Radio Ada community radio station supported Yihi Katseme (Brave Women), formally constituted as the Ada Songor Salt Women's Association, in their process of reflection and community mobilisation for defending the Songor salt lagoon as a communal source of livelihood. This process enabled them to generate data through songs, dance and participatory methods suited to their context, and analyse this data both within the group and in dialogue with their communities, about the situation and sustainability of the Songor Lagoon which is being depleted by unsustainable practices. For example, they used sticks, stones and leaves to represent actors who were enablers, neutral or actively threatening the sustainability of the lagoon. Yihi Katseme used this data to develop a manifesto: 'Songor for All' (a set of demands for the benefit of all who depend on the resource). Throughout Ghana's national electoral process of 2016, this manifesto was presented to the presidential candidates during their pre-electoral campaigns. Yihi Katseme and Radio Ada also used diverse mainstream media, social media, in addition to their traditional channels like the annual Ada cultural festival, to communicate their findings, and most importantly, their proposals for ways forward.

Recommendations

For policymakers:

- Protect spaces created by civil society organisations and other collectives for people to meet and work collectively (e.g. by upholding people's rights to organise, and enabling civil society networks and capacity-building initiatives to access resources)
- Provide free facilities where people can gather, form relationships and develop ideas for social, economic and political empowerment
- Create and uphold legal frameworks that protect the rights of communities to have access to independent communication channels
- Actively participate in dialogue with people from marginalised groups, accompanying organisations and other relevant stakeholders
- Revise and revitalise, in partnership with citizens, existing participation mechanisms for accountability (such as school councils, health/water committees, neighbourhood policing forums, etc.)
- Consider non-statistical data as credible and valid for informing decision making on policy, programmes and initiatives.

For accompanying organisations (working in partnership with marginalised groups):

- Commit to long-term processes with marginalised communities, and support them to build their capacity for internal/horizontal accountability
- Create safe spaces for individuals experiencing exclusion to come together to share their experiences
- Strengthen the communication resources of the marginalised, e.g. Community Radio and increasingly social media, to support mobilisation and dialogue
- Facilitate encounters between policymakers and marginalised groups where citizens' knowledge is at the centre of the discussions
- Accompany the process of political engagement with people from the margins, weighing the risks of social mobilisation constantly; this should not be a one off process.

For UN or multilateral organisations working on monitoring and accountability of the SDGs:

- Prompt national governments to consider putting in place financial and human resources for developing participatory accountability processes with those most marginalised
- Pilot policy innovation such as participatory policy development in particular cases to experiment with how to scale-up this approach
- Consider processes for citizen-led monitoring and accountability as part of wider data generation
- Acknowledge and reward positive examples from national governments of participatory policy innovation through "Accountability Golden Globes"
- Strengthen links to other global initiatives on accountability, bringing in the focus of those most excluded and marginalised.

Further reading

Lopez-Franco, E.; Shahrokh, T. (2015) Achieving meaningful accountability for people living in poverty and marginalisation, Brighton: IDS.

Black, G., Derakhsani, N., Liedeman, R. ; Wheeler, J. 'What we live with everyday isn't right': Partnerships for Safer Cities in South Africa, Cape Town: SLF.

Information for using story-based approaches: www.transformativestory.org

Authorship

This briefing was written by **Erika López-Franco**, **Jo Howard** and **Joanna Wheeler**. It was edited by **Emilie Wilson**. It is based on findings from participatory research contributing to the *Participate* initiative, which aims to provide high quality evidence on the reality of poverty at ground level, bringing the perspectives of the poorest into the SDG debate. Thanks to **Thea Shahrokh** for her constructive comments.

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