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Accountability ecosystems: directions of accountability and points of engagement

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Further reading

This briefing is one of three that were written as background notes for the Making All Voices Count Learning Event on Transformative Governance, held in Manila, Philippines, in February 2016.

The other briefings are:

Aceron, J. and Isaac, F. (2016) *Getting strategic: vertically integrated approaches*, Brighton: IDS

Leighninger, M. (2016) *Transforming governance: how can technology help reshape democracy?*, Brighton: IDS

The report of the Learning and Inspiration Event is:

Making All Voices Count (2016) *Transforming governance: what role for technologies?*, Brighton: IDS, <http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/11675>

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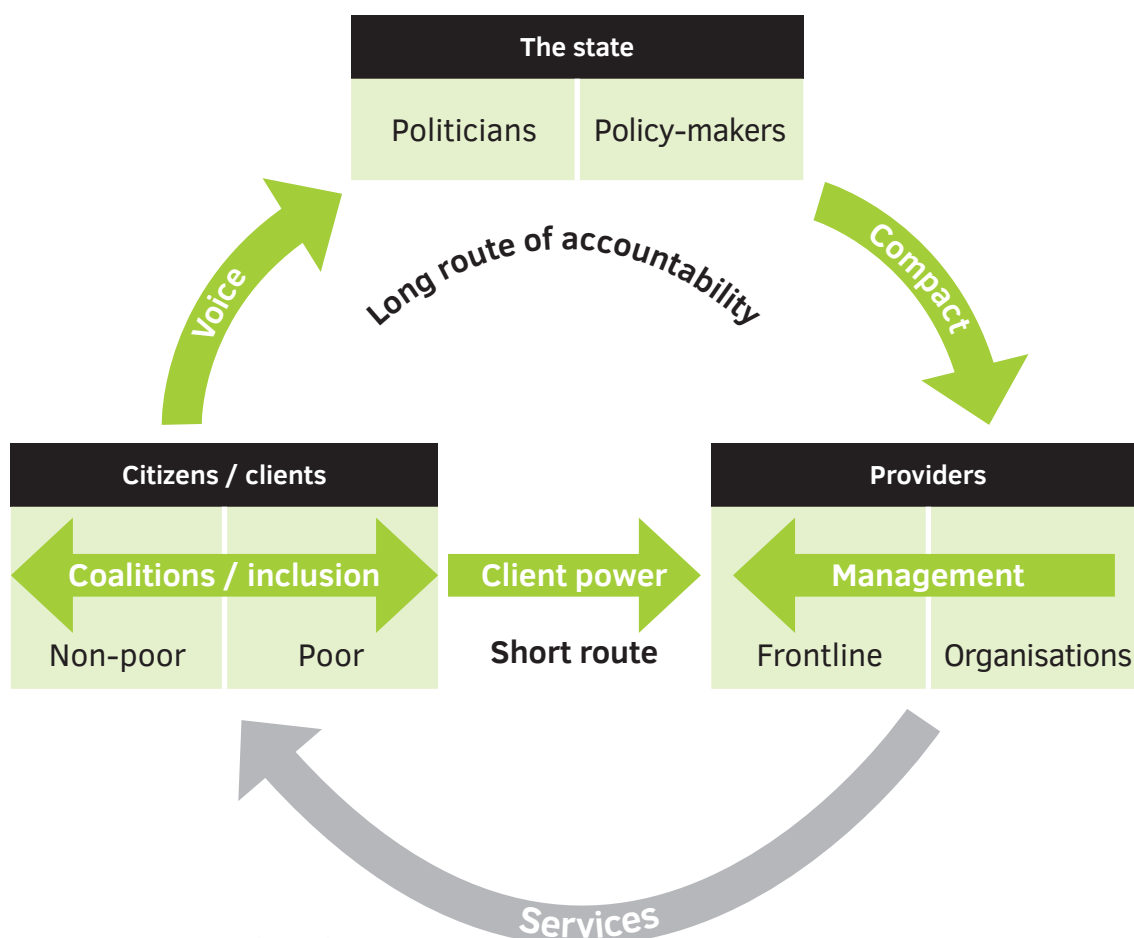
Accountability ecosystems: directions of accountability and points of engagement

Accountability, the obligation of those in power to take responsibility for their actions, is a process involving relationships between different actors (in state and society) and mechanisms, and is influenced by many contextual factors. Using the lens of an accountability ‘ecosystem’ focuses our attention on the complexity of accountability processes. An ‘ecosystem’ perspective suggests that simple ideas about accountability – such as citizen feedback

reaching decision-makers ensures more accountability, or that greater transparency equals greater accountability – are often actually much more complex.

Thinking systematically about accountability relationships helps us plan more strategically for how to promote accountability and responsiveness. For example, if we are interested in more responsiveness in the provision of public services, we can think of a *short accountability route* from citizens to service providers, and a *long accountability route* from citizens to government decision-makers, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Key relationships of power



Source: World Bank (2003)

Attempts to ‘close the feedback loop’ assume that if decision-makers receive citizen priorities or complaints, they will act on them. Often these assumptions prove false in the more complex realities in which we work.

Similarly, understanding accountability as an ecosystem encourages us to think about multiple accountability directions. These include upward and downward accountability relationships involving service providers:

Upwards accountability is where service providers are held accountable by higher-level elected or appointed government officials. Downwards accountability (sometimes called ‘social accountability’) is where citizens and civil society engage with service providers to ensure greater accountability.

Upward / downward directions, and short / long routes are often simplifications, and seldom work in isolation from other factors, but they do help us think a bit more systematically about accountability relationships and how and where to influence them. For example, if a programme only acts through the short accountability route, there is an assumption that service providers have the incentives and capacity to respond to citizens. Similarly, attempts to ‘close the feedback loop’ assume that if decision-makers receive citizen priorities or complaints, they will act on them. Often these assumptions prove false in the more complex realities in which we work. In the following section, I will briefly address new research that explores this very issue, with relation to technology.

ICTs and accountability

A recent study by Peixoto and Fox (2016) helps clarify how efforts based on information and communications technologies (ICTs) have influenced accountability, or not. The study looked at 23 digital platforms that gathered citizen feedback on government services in an effort to inform decision-makers and prompt a response in the form of service improvements. Thus, most of the initiatives that these researchers examined relied on the idea of ‘closing the feedback loop’. However, the creators of these ICT platforms assumed that citizens would (and could) make use of them to provide data or make a complaint. Furthermore, they assumed that decision-makers would use this information to improve services. In many cases, these assumptions did not prove correct.

Let’s look at a couple of examples. *FixMyStreet* is a web-based citizen-reporting mechanism. Simply put, citizens upload a picture and location of a hole, blocked sewer or other problem with a road. An email is sent to the relevant government official, and the problem is mapped on a public website, which shows if the issue has been resolved or not. After four years of operation, only 4% of reported issues are repaired within one year of reporting.

Another case, *Check my School* in the Philippines, follows a similar pattern. Citizens

report issues with their local school, and these are displayed on a public website. The programme was developed in collaboration with the government, and has both online and offline components. Yet only about one in ten issues that are reported get resolved.

What is going on here? Why didn't these ICT-based accountability initiatives work as planned? In both examples, it seems that decision-makers either did not have the capacity to respond to the issues raised, or were not influenced to respond even with public display of their inaction, or both. The initiatives were based on assumptions about why there were problems with service provision and what would influence the relevant government actors to be more responsive.

The study found that there was no evidence that the platforms influenced the political will of decision-makers to improve services, which is driven by a number of other factors (including political calculations, personal motivations and the institutional environment). It did find, however, that where decision-makers were already willing to respond, ICT-enabled citizen voice often increased their ability to do so, by providing specific information. Many of the more successful initiatives were run by government agencies as they sought tools to improve service delivery.

Thus, where there is existing political will, ICT tools contribute to *upward accountability* by providing information to government decision-makers to then pressure service providers. However, the ICT platforms generally do not influence the *downward accountability / short accountability route*,

nor the *long accountability route*, which evidence and experience tells us relies on approaches that strengthen civic capacity, including through collective organisation, building relationships and trust, and acting in flexible and adaptive ways according to shifting contextual opportunities and constraints.

In many ways, this should be intuitive. We know that influencing government decision-makers can be hard, and an ICT short cut does not exist. On the other hand, the recent anniversary of the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt reminds us that ICTs can play an important role in collective mobilisation (though not in building durable citizen organisations, which requires more patience and commitment). Less dramatic, but equally important, examples exist of civil society organisations using technology strategically to enable them to navigate the accountability ecosystem, working to address multiple entry points for strengthening accountable and responsive governance.

Leveraging ICTs in accountability ecosystems: connecting the dots

Thinking about accountability more systematically helps us to envision strategies that take advantage of the diversity of tools, tactics and opportunities for engagement around the challenges we seek to overcome, and the governance relationships we seek to improve. It also helps us reflect on our own experiences and theories of change to spark new insights about how to work most effectively.

One of the key lessons from this kind of thinking is about the need to connect the dots, rather than work in isolation (Fox and

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Halloran et al. 2015). In other words, isolated projects rarely address the causes of poor services or unaccountable governance. They too often focus on one point of engagement or one kind of accountability process. Influencing the accountability ecosystem means connecting the dots across multiple levels of governance (community, regional, national, even international), multiple actors (such as formal non-governmental organisations, grassroots groups and social movements, and government reformers), and multiple tools and approaches (including advocacy, monitoring, legal empowerment and investigative journalism).

Technology and data can be key contributors to diverse organisations and their approaches, when leveraged strategically with a sound understanding of the accountability ecosystem. ICTs can support citizen collective action, data analysis can enable more effective advocacy and monitoring, and collecting citizen data and priorities can be useful for orienting action. However, these approaches seldom work alone and must be combined to contribute to systematic change.

How is your work connecting the dots to strengthen the accountability ecosystem?

References

Fox, J. and Halloran, B. (eds) with Levy, A., Aceron, J. and van Zyl, A. (2015) *Connecting the Dots for Accountability: Civil Society Policy Monitoring and Advocacy Strategies*, Report from Open Government Hub workshop, 18–20 June 2015, Washington DC, www.transparency-initiative.org/reports/connecting-the-dots-for-accountability (accessed 23 May 2016)

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About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. This Grand Challenge focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The field of technology for Open Government is relatively young and the consortium partners, Hivos, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Ushahidi, are a part of this rapidly developing domain. These institutions have extensive and complementary skills and experience in the field of citizen engagement, government accountability, private sector entrepreneurs, (technical) innovation and research.

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Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's research, evidence and learning contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and Technology for T&A (Tech4T&A). This component is managed by IDS, a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communication with over 30 years' experience of developing knowledge on governance and citizen participation.

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