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The quest for citizen-led accountability: looking into the state

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In citizen-led accountability initiatives, we understand much more about how citizens mobilise around accountability demands than we do about what leads state agents to respond to them. This report highlights some key themes that are important in exploring the state side of the accountability equation.

The insights shared here emerged from a workshop which brought together researchers, policy specialists and practitioners working in the field of accountable governance. The questions they asked included:

- which types of citizen engagement lead to which kinds of government responsiveness?

- what makes government actors that are targeted by accountability demands change their behaviour?

- what are the critical ingredients for supporting the development of champions of transparency and accountability within government institutions?

Looking into the state

To understand why citizen-led accountability efforts do or do not gain purchase and contribute to greater responsiveness and accountability, we need to examine the inner workings of the state.

The state is not a monolithic actor. It is composed of many institutions at various levels that have different organisational cultures, and power dynamics between and within them. It also comprises both elected and non-elected officials, who face very different pressures and incentives that shape whether they will be in favour of reforms; as Miles' Law states, "where you stand depends on where you sit". This means that state agents face collective action problems the same way social actors do, due to fragmentation, risk aversion or unclear lines of responsibility.

Seeing the citizens: looking out from the inside

In seeking to understand the inner workings of the state, it is important to think about how state actors view citizens. Do they see them as subjects, users, allies or co-producers? How do various representatives and officials view citizen demands? Do they perceive them as legitimate or unreasonable? What determines whether state actors see citizen demands as being within the remit of their job?

In order to understand the opportunities and constraints facing state agents in responding to citizen demands, it is also important to acknowledge their layered identities, the organisational cultures they operate in, and their formal and informal institutional relationships.

In fact, much of what the transparency and accountability community has learned from the citizen engagement side of the equation applies to government actors. Within government, the same issues of voice, legitimacy, leadership, empowerment and internal reprisals apply. Seeing government officials as individuals rooted in their context can help social actors invoke both legal and moral accountabilities more effectively in order to achieve positive responses.

From this perspective, it becomes possible to examine a wider range of impacts of citizen-led accountability demands on state institutions. This includes not only the visible impacts like improvements in service delivery, but also less visible impacts such as increased perceptions of the legitimacy of citizen claims, transformed perceptions of gendered roles in public spaces, and enhanced feelings of cohesion within public agencies. These 'invisible' impacts are important, because although pressure can lead to improvements in service delivery, these may not be sustainable in the long term without deeper changes in the political and bureaucratic culture.

Contextual drivers of state action

What drives state action in response to accountability demands? In the World Bank's Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability

framework, drivers include state actors' awareness of the issue (or its political saliency), ability to resolve the issue, attitude towards engaging with civil society, intrinsic motivations, and the incentives and costs linked to action or inaction. These factors are shaped by cultural norms, the nature of the rule of law, and the prevailing political settlement in any given context.

Because the state is not a monolithic actor, its responses to citizen action are not uniform. Responses can vary according to the type of citizen engagement, across the spectrum from inviting civil society to participate in decision-making and oversight, to refusing to engage or carrying out reprisals. Responses also vary across levels of government, and between various institutions that have horizontal accountability relations. They can be shaped by timing, in particular whether accountability demands happen before or after elections. In the longer term, responses change through repeated interactions and negotiations. The process of building and embedding accountability is iterative, an ongoing and dynamic cycle. However, the process does not move in only one direction; citizen–state interactions can lead to both stronger and weaker accountability.

Engaging the authoritarian state

In contexts where the space for citizen–state engagement is formally constrained, there is a particular set of challenges. Political freedom is limited, society is often dominated by a ruling elite, there may be a limiting regulatory framework, information is tightly controlled, citizens feel disempowered, there is a high degree of mistrust, and state actors often resist citizen engagement.

Despite these challenges, there may be willingness and space to engage in certain zones of government, particularly at the local level and in sectors that are less politicised. By identifying areas where the government is seeking information generated by citizens, it may be possible to start in a non-confrontational manner, and work slowly to open up more space for engagement. Strategies for overcoming the constraints in authoritarian contexts include:

- appealing to the personal or professional integrity of public officials
- appealing to a government's existing instrumental interest in improving service delivery and efficiency
- linking accountability mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of the state's own horizontal accountability framework
- using existing divisions within state institutions
- working within the boundaries of government-endorsed, donor-financed initiatives.

Evidence shows that social accountability activities are possible in such environments, but that their scope and mechanisms are constrained, and their impact is limited to the domains in which they operate. While gains may be achieved, it is important to question whether operating under conditions that are acceptable to such governments may further strengthen existing power structures instead of challenging them.

Learn more: *Opening the black box: the contextual drivers of social accountability*

Following the money: accountability in taxation, budgeting and spending

The inner workings of the state cannot be understood without examining the thing that makes it run: money. How a government raises, allocates and spends money lies at the root of most accountability deficits and demands.

Taxation and accountability

How can taxation be used as a means of increasing government accountability? Theoretically, governments that depend on revenue from their citizens should be more accountable to them than governments that rely on natural resources or large amounts of foreign aid. States afflicted by the 'resource curse' have no issue raising revenue, but because they do not have to make the effort of taxing their citizens, they have fewer incentives to be accountable to them. On the other hand, governments that do not have access to these 'unearned' sources of revenue must tax their citizens, and this can catalyse a virtuous cycle.

A government dependent on broad-based taxation has every incentive to ensure that its citizens and businesses prosper, as this will increase the tax base. The government will also be motivated to develop effective bureaucratic apparatuses in order to obtain the information it requires to successfully collect taxes. On the civil society side, the experience of being taxed has the potential to engage citizens politically, as they will want to ensure the government is spending their money well, by providing public goods and services. Other citizens may resist tax demands. Both resistance and scrutinising how taxes are raised and spent lead to a process of bargaining between the governments and citizens that can be very constructive. Over time, citizens can exchange willing compliance for public services and influence over public policies, which will be better as a result of debate and negotiation.

The model seems very straightforward, but in reality things are more complicated. First, tax bargaining crucially depends on what kinds of collective action citizens engage in. If action is fragmented, and groups vie for narrow concessions, the government may buy-off the group they deem most important and put them in competition with the others.

Second, while value-added tax and personal income taxes are the dominant revenue sources in high-income countries, personal income tax is very low in most low-income countries and corporate taxes account for a large majority of revenue. This means that

room for bargaining with citizens is limited, while large companies have greater sway over government policy. This can be seen in the large tax exemptions that developing country governments offer to foreign firms to attract their investment, even though this significantly undermines their revenue-raising potential.

Finally, informal taxation is a fact of life in developing countries, with people repeatedly being asked to pay bribes to non-state actors as well as to state actors. The preponderance of informal taxation makes bargaining over the taxes that are official and legal much more difficult.

Learn more: _Summary brief on taxation, state-building and accountability_

Health systems and accountability

How can governments be accountable when they are not directly responsible? In the case of the health sector, there are complex institutional arrangements involved in the delivery of medicines and services. Increasingly, parts of the health system are run by private entities, and services are co-produced by governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector. When it comes to challenging health issues like ensuring the safety of medicines, preventing medical malpractice, managing sanitation, and preventing and containing epidemics, the government cannot cope alone.
However, in most countries, while health systems have changed rapidly, laws have not; there is a need for the regulatory

system to catch up. Thus, there is a need for stronger bureaucratic controls (in accrediting providers and registering medicines), supply-oriented policies (such as subsidies, incentives and contracts for private entities), citizen-oriented programmes (such as education, access to information and legal redress), as well as effective collaboration between the public, private and non-profit sectors.

How can we ensure that health systems leave no one behind? In Brazil, for example, indigenous people have often had very limited access to health care. So, even though the activities of vigorous rights-based movements resulted in universal coverage of primary health care – including a strong legal framework for social accountability and the establishment in 1999 of an Indigenous Health Subsystem – by 2008 the infant mortality rate in indigenous communities was three times higher than the national average, despite per capita spending being five times higher.

The International Budget Partnership investigated and found that it was not a lack of resources or political will that was leading to these outcomes, but a problem with the model of service delivery. A great deal of money was being spent on non-indigenous health workers who did not speak the local languages or stick around for long. Indigenous people soon realised that they had campaigned to be included in a standard model of health service delivery that didn't work for them, and they wanted to have a say in reshaping the model. This gives us an example of social accountability processes moving from a focus on 'using and choosing'

to 'making and shaping' health systems.

Learn more: *Future health systems research programme consortium*

Building coalitions around budgets as an accountability entry point

To hold governments accountable for how they spend public money, one must first examine and understand the budget, before building coalitions within the accountability ecosystem. This might include coordinating with the legislature, the supreme audit institution, the judiciary, the media, donors, sympathisers in government, political parties and civil society organisations (CSOs).

Coalitions in different countries have achieved changes in the budget:

- When cuts to the health budget in Brazil were being put forward, the Instituto de Estudos Socioeconômicos built support from CSOs, the Department of Health, universities and judges to prevent the cuts.
- In India, when funds were being diverted away from spending on pro-poor programmes, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights was only successful once it was able to engage the local and international media, along with opposition legislatures and force a debate in the parliament.
- In the Dominican Republic, the Coalition for Education with Dignity worked with civil society groups, engaged all the presidential candidates, and staged a campaign that saw teachers walk to school carrying yellow umbrellas in order to achieve a commitment that 4% of gross domestic product be allocated to education.
- In South Africa, the Treatment Action Campaign took the litigation route, working through the courts to achieve antiretroviral treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS.

As these examples demonstrate, it is crucial when building coalitions around budgets to strategically map out courses of action and bring in allies depending on the issue and the context.

Learn more: *Open budgets transform lives* (video), *International Budget Partnership*

From collaboration to confrontation: approaches to engaging government

How can CSOs engage, challenge or build alliances with government in order to strengthen accountability? Examples from Bangladesh, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Mozambique and South Sudan offer insights into different approaches taken by civil society actors in their accountability work.

The importance of confronting power

In Guatemala, the Centro de Estudios para la Equidad y Gobernanza en los Sistemas de Salud (CEGSS) works on accountability in the health sector. In 2006, the government recognised the right to monitor public services and participate in budgeting. Although this opened up room for engagement, the space it created was limited by elite actors, who pushed to halt monitoring and participation.

To overcome this, CEGSS facilitated evidence-gathering via SMS, photography and video. They also developed a complaints mechanism using the crowdsourcing software platform Ushahidi, which helped users refer their cases to the appropriate human rights bodies. In their work, CEGSS found using the strategies of social movements to be crucial. They successfully opened up alternative channels of engagement by allying with movements linked to land, justice and the environment. They also took a more confrontational stance, marching on parliament in order to shame the government and gain attention. From this experience, the main lesson was the need to deal with power and adopt a flexible, strategic and citizen-driven approach to struggles for increased accountability.

Learn more: _Centro de Estudios para la Equidad y Gobernanza en los Sistemas de Salud_

Supporting civic mobilisation in challenging contexts

International NGO Oxfam works to support civic mobilisation in South Sudan, where civil society is very weak and the political situation is difficult. The first challenge was identifying partners; the process of negotiating and establishing relationships took over a year. Then, Oxfam focused on explicitly creating spaces where officials could be brought in for dialogue. This was important; for example, when the

government was going to impose NGO legislation, there was a network in place to oppose it.

Following a flare-up in the country's conflict, Oxfam shifted its methodology to use theatre and film to foster constructive conversations. In fragile contexts, the evidence indicates that non-confrontational approaches are often the most fruitful.

Learn more: _Building a social contract in South Sudan_

What role for unruly politics?

When collaboration is no longer effective, sometimes confrontation is necessary. One effective confrontational strategy is demonstration, a performative strategy that can be tremendously powerful. Governments do not like demonstrations because they are unpredictable, but it is this quality that creates opportunities.

Riots over the right to food in Bangladesh, Ghana, India and Mozambique provide examples of dramatic increases in the price of staple goods, leading to street protests linked to social movements. This succeeded in getting the governments in those countries to grant subsidies or improve food distribution.

When attempting to engage the government in order to get it to change its policies, decisions or behaviours, all civil society actors must gauge where on the continuum between collaboration and confrontation they will be most effective. However, there is no 'sweet spot' to be found, as strategies must adapt to suit a changing landscape as events unfold. As the case studies demonstrate, achieving greater accountability is about changing power, and it is important not to depoliticise social accountability programmes and strategies.

Learn more: _Food riots and food rights_

Advancing the accountability research and learning agenda

There are two important aspects of the accountability research and learning agenda: (1) improving practice and performance in citizen voice, transparency and accountability work, and (2) building a base of evidence and new theories in the field about what works and why.

One challenge in pursing this agenda is how to make conceptual frameworks usable for practitioners in the field. Social learning – which encompasses learning through workshops like the one on which this report is based, where participants can be presented with new ideas, reflect on their experiences, and learn from each other in a collaborative way – is important, but so is organisational learning, which ensures that insights and lessons are embedded in practice.

Further research in two key areas is needed. The first is the role of intermediaries between the state and civil society. What makes intermediaries successful in opening up space for dialogue? What are the politics of the interfacing space? What are the particular roles that organisations can play to make the interface more productive?

The second is the perceptions, motivations, incentives, opportunities and constraints facing state actors in responding to accountability demands. Increasing our understanding in this area will help practitioners understand why their claims do or do not gain purchase, how accountability champions develop within government, and how they might be supported. To achieve this, further ethnographic studies of the state are needed.

Learn more: *Watch the videos of the workshop introduction and plenary*

Author

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About this report

The report brings together insights from the Q*uest for Citizen-led Accountability: Looking into the State* workshop, held at IDS in April 2015. This was hosted by Making All Voices Count, the Global Partnership for Social Accountability and the Transparency and Accountability Initiative. It was the third in a series of three workshops which focused in on citizen-led accountability efforts.

In summarising the themes that were discussed at the workshop, this report draws on and acknowledges the following presentations:

Anu Joshi (IDS) and Helene Grandvoinnet (World Bank)	Understanding context within the state
Mick Moore (IDS)	Tax and accountability
Gerry Bloom and Alex Shankland (both IDS)	Health systems and accountability
Claire Schouten (International Budget Partnership)	Budget coalitions in education, and budgets as a means to link across sectors
Jo Rowlands (Oxfam) and Walter Flores (CEGSS)	How have NGOs engaged with and built alliances with the state?
Patta Scott-Villiers (IDS)	Unruly politics? Food riots and government responsiveness
John Gaventa (IDS)	Applying our insights to practice, policy and research

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. It focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

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Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's research, evidence and learning component, managed by IDS, 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).

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