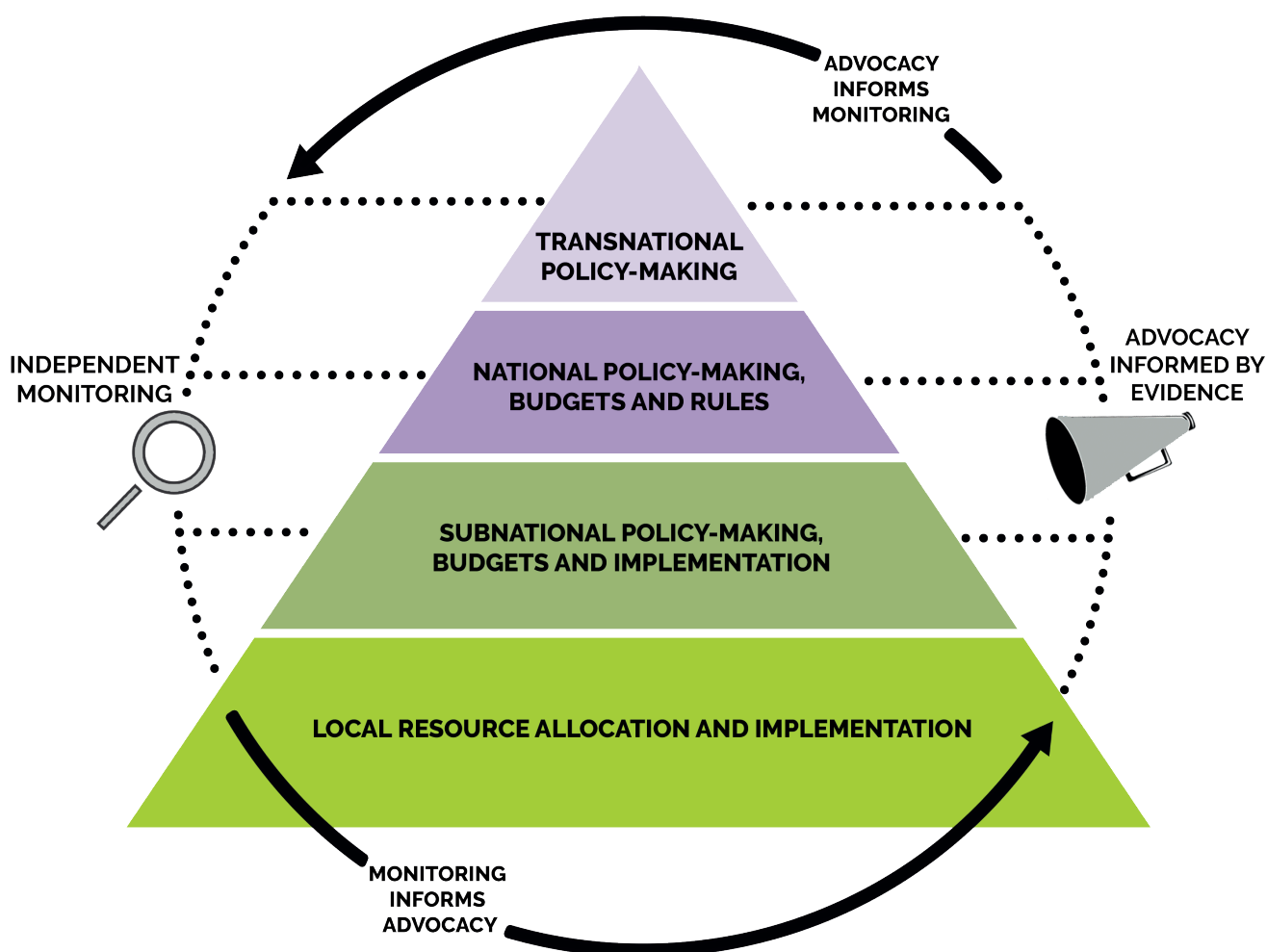


Taking scale into account in transparency and accountability initiatives



Jonathan Fox

Causes and symptoms, tactics and strategies

We know that gaining access to information and raising citizen voices are not the same as achieving accountability. It is important to look beyond the symptoms of accountability failure, and consider how to tackle the causes.

What strategies and tactics are needed to tackle causes rather than symptoms? What are the possibilities for supporting pro-citizen power shifts, and bolstering the state's capacity to respond to citizens?

In the current context, where windows of opportunity for change may be non-existent or closing, how can we trigger

- virtuous circles of empowerment....
- between otherwise weak, scattered pro-accountability champions...
- so that their actions become greater than the sum of their parts....
- and trigger large-scale, nationwide cumulative power shifts?

Differentiating tactics and strategies

When applied to contemporary accountability initiatives, tactical approaches are:

- Tool-led interventions (often external)
- Limited to citizen voice efforts
- Information provision (assumed to inspire collective action that can influence public sector performance)
- Limited to 'local' arenas

Strategic approaches, in contrast:

- Multiple, coordinated tactics
- Enabling environments for collective action, to reduce perceived risk
- Citizen voice coordinated with governmental reforms that bolster public sector responsiveness ('voice plus teeth')
- Multi-level (linking local–subnational–national actors and targets)
- Campaigns rather than interventions (iterative, contested and therefore uneven processes)

Source: Fox (2015)¹

Understanding the issue of **scale** is one important aspect of making transparency and accountability initiatives more strategic, and therefore fit to address the systematic embeddedness of anti-

accountability forces in multiple levels and branches of the state. Scale shapes both the causes of accountability failure and the tactics and strategies needed to address it.

Taking scale into account

Scale is a term that is often used in the governance and international development fields, but not always clearly defined. The idea of scaling up usually refers to growing or replicating a given initiative, but the goal of building public accountability calls for an additional approach to scale. What is needed to make transparency and accountability initiatives more strategic is a way of 'taking scale into account' that addresses the systemic embeddedness of anti-accountability forces across multiple levels and branches of a state apparatus.

'Scale' has many different meanings across fields and contexts. Looking at scale from different angles – drawing insights from different ways of using the term – helps understand how we can take scale into account when developing strategic approaches to transparency and accountability that tackle symptoms rather than causes.

• *Scaling up success?*

In development, 'scaling up' is frequently used to broadly describe a process of expanding, replicating, adapting or sustaining successful policies, programmes or projects to reach a greater number of people. There are different pathways to achieving this, but moving along them is easier said than done. What does this mean for civil society actors interested in influencing public sector actors towards accountability? As well as seeing scale as 'managing more to get bigger', it may also be useful to think of it as 'strategising at multiple levels to get more leverage over powerful institutions'.

• *Scaling citizen voice with ICT*

ICT has enabled rapid scale-up of transparency through digital media, and in the projection of citizen voice for accountability in a wide range of settings. ICT allows citizens to broaden both the horizontal projection of voice (communicating with each other to get issues onto the policy agenda) and the vertical projection of voice (targeting messages that communicate with elites). But *diagonal voice* (when social media campaigns move beyond their online communities and convert allies into actors that can pressure anti-accountability forces) is also important for scaling advocacy. Horizontal and diagonal projection of voice can be seen as key steps on the causal chain

¹ Fox, J. (2015) 'Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?', *World Development* 72: 346–361

towards successful vertical ‘messaging’ aimed at getting authorities to listen. Multiple waves of horizontal and diagonal resonance may be needed in order for citizen voice to influence whether or not those in power will hear.

- **Scale shift: from local to national to transnational**

Scale shift describes the way that localised collective actions spread to become social forces with national scope, or to resonate in transnational arenas – often through the pathway of mass collective action. The idea goes beyond the proposition that more collective action means more power for change, acknowledging the need to take scale into account by recognising the capacity needed for mobilisation which targets power-holders at multiple levels – with the flexibility needed to adapt to political spaces that open or close at different levels. Scale shift also needs brokers who can create multi-level links across the pre-existing social networks that are widely recognised as key for the capacity to mobilise.

So taking scale into account involves more than replication or expansion – it links pro-accountability actors across scale in order to promote mutual empowerment and to either target or bypass accountability bottlenecks.

Many conventional approaches to social accountability and transparency do not take scale into account in this way. On the one hand, most social accountability initiatives (such as community scorecards) are locally bounded; on the other hand, most open government initiatives rely on national agencies to disclose official budget or activity data, which is rarely disaggregated in citizen-friendly or actionable ways. So local interventions tend to remain localised, rarely spreading horizontally or extending their leverage vertically by influencing higher level authorities, while national initiatives based in capital cities risk circulating primarily among the already-convinced—or remaining limited to cyberspace, delinked from offline civic action.

If scale shift matters, how does it happen?

Scale shift includes both transitions to multi-level CSO links, and the broadening of the territorial reach of citizen-led monitoring and advocacy. But what do the opportunities and constraints look like from different points of view?

Looking from the bottom up, how and why do socially grounded civic initiatives spread from 10 to 50 to 500 communities? How can this process avoid the traps that have held back previous top-down

What would ‘taking scale into account’ look like for social accountability initiatives?

For example, if a social accountability initiative involves community interface meetings between health clinic workers and communities, then scaling up as replication would mean convening them at more clinics (e.g., from 10 to 50 to 500 villages). Yet the underlying causes of medicine stock-outs or abusive staff may lie far upstream. If civil society oversight efforts to address these problems were to do accountability differently, and make connections *across* scale, they would *bring together* democratic representatives from those 10, 50 or 500 grassroots communities. Such meetings could ground a strategy to build a broad-based civic or social process that would have not only significant evidence-generating capacity, but also the civic clout needed to persuade policymakers to *act* on those findings – especially regarding problems in the health system that are caused by factors located beyond their respective clinics.

efforts to scale up participatory approaches? How do those communities, in turn, project oversight capacity and the power to advocate for themselves upstream in the policy process? This involves building the capacity to aggregate voice, to engage in collective action at scale, and to construct representative organisations that embody both legitimacy and authenticity.

In contrast, looking from the national level towards the subnational and local, how do campaigns led from the capital sink roots more broadly and deeply within existing, organised civil society that is closer to the ground? This often involves cross-sectoral coalition-building, which is not often treated as a focus of research. Moreover, campaigns often shift scale in response to changing opportunities and constraints at different levels of the state, which are caused by the changing balance of forces in the political system. In the process, how do policy advocacy campaigns collaborate with some levels and branches of the state, while also challenging others?

Cutting across all of these processes is the question of how ICT can potentially play the role of enabler and accelerant – contributing, for example, to the development of socially grounded civic initiatives, the aggregation of citizen voice, or building coalitions across sectors. We still have much to learn about how online and offline collective action can reinforce each other to leverage public accountability.

About this research summary

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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. 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.

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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About the Accountability Research Center

The Accountability Research Center is an action-research incubator that partners with public interest groups and policymakers, based in the School of International Service at American University.

About the Empowerment and Accountability Research Programme

In a world shaped by rapid change, the Empowerment and Accountability Research Programme focuses on situations of fragility and conflict to ask how progressive social and political action for empowerment and accountability emerges in these contexts, what pathways it takes, and what impacts it has.

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