Empowerment and accountability in difficult settings: what are we learning?

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Introduction

Empowerment and accountability have long been part of the international development vocabulary and a core part of governance, social development and civil society programmes. Yet, much of what has been learnt about these approaches has been drawn from studies in somewhat stable, open and middle-income places around the world. Less is known about how empowerment and accountability are achieved through social and political action in more difficult settings – those faced by institutional fragility, conflict, violence, and closing civic space.

Learning these lessons is critical for policy makers and practitioners alike. Today, over two billion people live in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence. According to the OECD (2018), without concerted action the share of the global poor living in such settings is projected to reach over 80 per cent by 2030. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of leaving no one behind, and in particular Goal 16 of promoting "peaceful and inclusive societies" and building "effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" new approaches will be needed.

This document highlights key messages emerging from the work of the **Action for Empowerment and Accountability Research Programme (A4EA)**, and the implications for how donors, policy makers and practitioners support strategies for empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict and violence affected settings (FCVAS).

Our eight key messages have strong implications for the theories of change used for effective programming in the field.

Taken together, the messages emerging from our findings pose important challenges to the received theories of change on empowerment and accountability used by donors and other external actors. The findings are also relevant for the effective implementation of a number of programmes dealing with gender equity, conflict and stability, strengthening civil society, and inclusive governance, particularly in fragile, conflict, and violence affected settings. In designing strategic interventions across sectors, it will be important for donors to keep these messages in mind. Equally, it is important for donors to see that they themselves are also actors in these settings, and that how they intervene can build or diminish trust, open or close spaces for engagement, or strengthen or weaken existing forms of authority.

BELOW
Fieldwork on the World Bank citizen engagement project in Myanmar included meetings with members of the local community.
PHOTO: WUNNA HTUN

Key messages for empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings (FCVAS)

Message 1

In FCVAS, factors like closing civic space, legacies of fear and distrust challenge fundamental assumptions about the conditions necessary for many processes of empowerment and accountability, which assume that 'voice' on the one hand and 'responsiveness' on the other will underpin the formation of a social contract between citizens and the state.

Message 2

Theories of change often assume the existence of 'accountable and responsive institutions', towards which voice may be directed, but in FCVAS, we need to re-understand the nature of authority and question our assumptions of who is to be held to account, and by whom.

Message 3

FCVAS are highly diverse, and constantly shifting. Opportunities for empowerment and accountability may present themselves at particular moments and in particular places, even while other places remain closed or difficult.

Message 4

Even in difficult contexts, action for empowerment and accountability may be present, but not always in ways we see or recognise, implying different entry points for thinking and working politically, beyond business as usual.

Message 5

In FCVAS, women's collective action is an important driver of empowerment and accountability, through greater political empowerment in formal processes, as well as through more informal channels, social movements, and local actions which challenge gender norms.
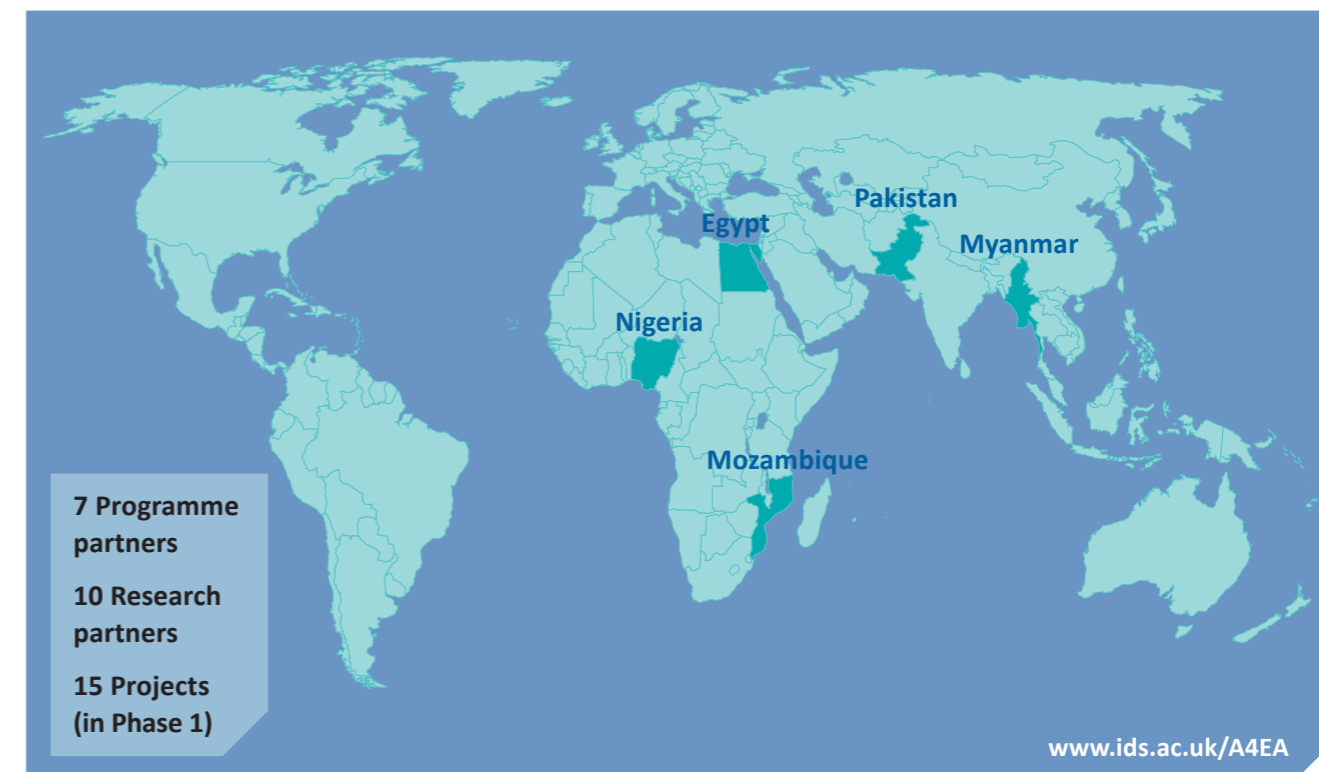
Message 6

Donors, policy makers and external actors can make important contributions in these settings, but more careful and grounded approaches are needed, with more appropriate expectations and measurements of outcomes.

Message 7

Working in FCVAS requires an approach that is adaptive and flexible. This means giving frontline staff autonomy, recruiting entrepreneurial and politically savvy staff, and sometimes going against the grain.

Message 8

Understanding complex and highly political issues of empowerment and accountability in FCVAS requires new tools for political economy analysis and research that are sensitive to local dynamics, whilst also maintaining rigour.

7 Programme partners

10 Research partners

15 Projects (in Phase 1)

www.ids.ac.uk/A4EA

ABOVE
Map showing the five focus countries for A4EA Phase 1. Of the 15 projects which took place during this phase, some were focused on one particular country and setting, whilst others compared multiple settings.
GRAPHIC: LANCE BELLERS

What is the A4EA Programme?

Funded by UK Aid from the Department for International Development (DFID), the **A4EA Research Programme** asks the question: **How and under what conditions does social and political action contribute to empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict, and violence affected settings (FCVAS)?** During our first phase (2017-2018), we carried out over 15 research projects, with a particular focus on Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan. The research projects were loosely organised under four themes:

1 **Meanings and expressions of empowerment and accountability** – exploring the use of innovative methods such as governance diaries to examine how marginalised people relate to institutions in daily life, popular culture as forms of political expression, 'unruly' or unpredictable forms of protest actions as mechanisms of accountability, and religious meanings and identities for women's empowerment in Muslim majority contexts.

2 **Pathways to accountability bargains** – examining the effectiveness of various approaches to accountability work in settings often characterised by closing civic space, fragmented forms of authority, and informal mechanisms of power, including through political participation, judicial tribunals, information disclosure mechanisms, and social accountability programmes.

3 **Women's social and political action** – exploring the particular role of women's action, including work on collective action to tackle sexual harassment, the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Nigeria, women's political participation in Pakistan, and women's representation in Mozambique.

4 **The role of external actors, particularly donors** – focusing on the ways external donors support social and political actions for empowerment and accountability. Projects have explored the implementation of the World Bank's citizen engagement policy, the role of adaptive programming and the challenges of working across scales in DFID programmes in FCVAS.

Throughout the work, we have also paid special attention to methods of conducting and communicating research in FCVAS. Emerging findings offer important insights into understanding the contexts of FCVAS, the strategies and mechanisms of social and political action, and the role of external actors in reaching appropriate empowerment and accountability outcomes.

Our research has produced dozens of studies and communications products, which can be accessed through the **A4EA webpage**.

A note about the terms "Empowerment", "Accountability" and "FCVAS"

Terms like 'empowerment' and 'accountability' or 'fragile, conflict and violence affected settings' are widely used, but often have very different meanings. However, for our purposes, two points are particularly important:

While often used together, **empowerment and accountability** are very different processes.

Empowerment often refers to people having, or perceiving themselves to have, greater voice over decision making, an expanded range of choices and the possibilities of making them in the social, political and economic spheres, and increased control over their own lives (see Green 2016; Eyben 2011; DFID 2011).

Accountability, on the other hand, refers to the process of holding actors responsible for their actions (Schedler 1999; Fox 2007a; Joshi 2008). This involves 'answerability' — usually formal processes in which actions are held up to specific standards of behaviour or performance. For some this is sufficient to count as accountability, while others prefer a more rigorous minimum standard, including sanctions and/or remedies for transgressions. These two definitions can be described as 'soft' versus 'hard' forms of accountability (Fox 2007b).

Our interest is in how collective forms of social and political action can contribute to both empowerment and accountability, and their interaction. Yet, as we have found in historical studies, "processes of accountability have to be distinguished from processes of empowerment and strengthening agency. Empowerment gains might be achieved without gaining accountability, and, (though less likely) institutional responsiveness might not lead to any empowerment" (**Joshi 2019: 3**).

In A4EA, we have chosen to use the term fragile, violence, conflict affected **settings rather than states** – preferring to focus on the specific characteristics of a defined area or affected group at a point in time.

As with empowerment and accountability, while these terms are often grouped together, **fragility, conflict, and violence** are each, of course, different and should not be used inter-changeably,

although there may be synergies between them in particular settings. All three are dynamic, and at times highly volatile. In A4EA, we adopt the OECD multidimensional understanding of **fragility** as including societal, political, economic, environmental and security aspects (OECD 2018: 10). We also understand fragility to be along a continuum, and that it can be experienced in many settings, even in countries considered to be more stable.

In our first phase of research, A4EA focused on Egypt, Myanmar, Mozambique, Nigeria (primarily the northern states), and Pakistan. While these do not perhaps represent the most extreme examples of fragile, violence or conflict affected settings (such as Yemen or Afghanistan), each of the five countries in which we work experience some dimensions of fragility, as recognised by the OECD (2018: 84). Three of the countries – Pakistan, Nigeria and Myanmar – have been on every list of fragility published by the OECD since 2008. Each also has a long history of authoritarianism, as well as a relatively strong state security apparatus, which has affected the possibilities and experiences of civic action over time. We believe that insights from settings such as these may also help us understand social and political action for empowerment and accountability in other settings as well.

BELOW
Aisha Yesufu from the #BringBackOurGirls movement speaking at an A4EA research feedback meeting in July 2018.
PHOTO: CDD AND PASGR

Key messages and their implications

The role of fear

In settings with long histories of authoritarianism and violence, internalised norms of fear shape the possibilities and nature of 'voice'. Despite the creation or existence of formalised mechanisms for citizen engagement, citizens may hesitate to challenge authority in public ways. While this may be more extreme for marginalised groups, it also affects middle classes, who can often serve as allies for mobilisation and social and political action.

A4EA research found:

- In Mozambique, many citizens are dependent on the dominant party for survival, making criticising it dangerous in terms of a risk to their livelihood. Even when information is available that informs citizens about corruption, for example through the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI), this "new information may impose direct and indirect costs that far outweighs the expected benefits…this may include individual safety in taking rational action following new information" (**Awortwi and Nuvunga 2019: 13**).

- In Myanmar, governance diaries with marginalised groups also found that there is widespread fear amongst people of being disrespected or blamed by the authorities for any issues they raised. Due to previous negative experiences, many people did not dare approach village or ward administrators for fear of being shouted at, ridiculed or not taken seriously (A4EA forthcoming).

Fear means that even where collective action is possible, it has to be carried out cautiously or in 'hidden' ways. This can be due to a lack of security, where the state is unable to protect citizens, such as against the Boko Haram in Nigeria or the Taliban in Pakistan, or due to the overly heavy presence of the security apparatus, such as in Egypt, where spontaneous action is risky.

Fear and distrust are linked

In each of the research settings, we also found extreme lack of trust, both between different groups in society, and in authorities. Fear and distrust are interlinked: the absence of trust in authorities means that citizens have little incentive to overcome fear to challenge them. Citizens may see little point in making demands of others, as they do not trust that things will change.

- In Mozambique, our research into the impact of the EITI found that citizens do not believe that protesting or criticising the government will actually make a difference to their daily lives, so even if they are given information about corruption, for example, they choose not to act on it, as they don't believe their action can change it (**Awortwi and Nuvunga 2019: 20**).

- In Myanmar, our studies found that the extent to which marginalised groups engage with authorities to resolve issues is highly determined by both personal experiences and relationships, such as social kinship, shared ethno-linguistic background and other socio-economic factors., Generalised trust in political and state institutions is very low or absent (A4EA forthcoming).

- This lack of trust does not just exist between citizens and the state, it also exists between different groups in society. Our Governance Diaries project found in Pakistan that it is difficult to collectivise in a context where there are extremely low levels of trust across and within groups.

Fear and distrust are constantly being reinforced in changing/closing civic spaces

Even where democratic spaces are slowly opening, and where some signs of citizen agency emerge, fear can often be reinforced by constantly closing civic space. Civil society organisations and civic actors face:

- Physical harassment and intimidation, including threats, injuries and killings, impunity and lack of protection

- Criminalisation: preventative measures such as terrorism lists and terrorism taskforces, investigation and prosecution for punitive purposes

- Administrative red tape such as restrictive bills on NGO registration and operation, and *ad hoc* measures by different governments

- Stigmatisation and negative labelling, including criminal and social stigmatisation of specific actors

- "Space under pressure", including through co-optation and the closure of newly created space

(Hossain et al. 2018b: 14-15)

Implications

When programming for empowerment and accountability, it is critical that external actors understand how the legacies of fear and distrust affect the potential for citizen voice and agency, and how their own presence and intervention can affect trust. They need to:

➤ Develop programmes which provide opportunities to overcome fear, to rebuild confidence and trust. Small interventions which build on personalised relations of trust, create safe spaces for groups to come together, and for slowly engaging authorities are important for longer term and larger scale change and are important measures of success.

➤ Open, protect and maintain spaces for agency and action. Programmes for empowerment and accountability which involve citizens taking risks by speaking truth to power also may need legal and human rights support, such as provided in the Human Rights Defenders Programme, or for women's rights activists in other interventions.

➤ Use the 'boomerang' approach – work with activists in relatively safe spaces who can support and speak for those in more risky, unsafe spaces. For instance, in the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Nigeria, more elite groups in the capital campaigned on behalf of the families in Chibok town, who were less able to speak out (Aina et al. 2019).

Message 2

Theories of change often assume the existence of "accountable and responsive institutions", towards which voice may be directed, but in FCVAS, we need to re-understand the nature of authority and question our assumptions of who is to be held to account, and by whom.

Taking a view from below

Rather than assume we understand the nature of authority in FCVAS, we need to understand more about the perspectives of those who we expect may be empowered to hold public authorities to account.

In Mozambique, Pakistan and Myanmar, governance diaries with extremely marginalised groups provided a different view of which authorities were important, and how they were accessed, than we might otherwise expect (Loureiro et al. forthcoming).

Authority is often highly fragmented – involving both state and non-state actors

In FCVAS, those who citizens see as having authority may involve both state and non-state actors, such as the militias and armed groups in Pakistan, Myanmar and northern Nigeria, or religious leaders in Myanmar.

- In Mozambique the terms 'State', 'Party', and 'Government' are often used interchangeably. The local actors who are understood as having authority are generally village chiefs and ward secretaries, the latter playing a hybrid role which blends traditional and state authority (Chaimite et al. forthcoming).

- In Myanmar, people's understanding of authority is shaped by fear, history and past experience, rather than by an up-to-date understanding of the official government structure. In some rural areas Village Administrators are largely viewed as being the local authority figure who can resolve disputes, despite a change in the law that removed their official status (A4EA forthcoming).

- In Pakistan, the governance chain is long, with several layers of (male) intermediaries brokering access to services between poor and marginalised households and public authorities. Quite often there are a multitude of intermediaries, with success being a matter of contacting the right one.

- The governance chain also includes transnational state and non-state actors. For instance, in the case of fuel subsidy reforms, which have sparked protest in each country studied, it has included transnational energy investors and multilateral financial institutions, which were fragmented and distant from the view of the protestors (Hossain et al. 2018a).

Voice needs response but authorities may be distant, or lack the capacity or incentives for accountability

The governance diaries in both Myanmar and Pakistan show that what we might think of as the state or other authorities are not as present nor as significant in peoples' lives as is often assumed. Even if there are grievances, there may not be any authority with whom people are linked and who can respond, or authorities may be at conflict with

one another, or when they do respond, they do so in a way that increases fear and repression.

When citizens do raise voices these are met with non-responsiveness due to lack of capacity or political will, or indeed met with repression. The result can be a weakening of already fragile social contracts. Strengthening empowerment from below without also addressing the ability or willingness of authorities to respond can inadvertently reinforce legacies of fear and distrust.

- In Nigeria, civil society actors viewed Commissions of Inquiry (CoIs) as an opportunity to help bring about peace and justice in the aftermath of violence. However, very few CoIs led to actual prosecutions. Civil society actors blamed the weakness of state institutions and informal politics and networks as major factors affecting the ways in which COIs have operated, as well as their outcomes (Oosterom and Sha 2019).

Informal channels and sources of authority

Even when national or local level authorities are present, marginalised groups may confer authority and legitimacy on other actors who are seen as more effective and linked to their concerns.

- In Mozambique, when there was little trust in local leaders, the communities themselves

legitimised other actors. For instance, the community-based Mualadzi Development and Natural Resources Management Committee emerged as an alternative interlocutor to solve day-to-day problems of people in the community, including access to health and security services (Chaimite et al. forthcoming).

- In Myanmar, when local governance actors were seen as 'one of us', they were more likely to be approached by villagers with accountability requests or demands. Proximity, ethnicity and common history are important – people tended to go to others from the same village or ward, or someone with whom they grew up, and who was accessible locally (A4EA forthcoming).

Implications

➤ In working with marginalised groups, it is important to carry out political economy analysis from below to better understand how institutions and authorities are perceived. This also means greater attention to "the politics of the governed" (Chatterjee 2004), focusing attention on how the marginalised and disempowered negotiate with the relatively powerful, build coalitions and alliances, and develop their own theories of power and political change to guide their political actions and choices.

ABOVE
Word cloud, created using online polling service Sli.do, showing responses to a question about civic space posed at the Global Assembly 2019 of Publish What You Pay. A4EA Director John Gaventa was invited to speak at the event and shared his reflections in his blog piece entitled 'Can transparency make extractive industries more accountable?'.

➤ In FCVAS, it is also important to work both sides of the equation to strengthen the opportunities for voice and action from below, but also to build the capacity of institutions to respond. Voice without response can risk weakening fragile trust; top down policies that aren't informed by citizen voice and action may simply consolidate unfair power structures.

➤ Understanding informal channels and sources of authority is critical to understanding how power works, and poses dilemmas for practitioners. Understanding local context also means understanding cultural and social norms around authority, and the role of religious, military, traditional or other authorities. Whose authority and capacity is to be strengthened, and whose accountability counts?

Message 3

FCVAS are highly diverse and constantly shifting. Opportunities for empowerment and accountability may present themselves at particular moments and in particular places, even while other places remain closed or difficult.

Challenges of closing space

While there is growing attention to the challenges of closing space for civil society, it is critical to understand the different drivers for this in political-economic settings, and their impacts.

● As **Hossain et al. (2018b: 7)** find, "civic space may be conceptualised not as closing or shrinking overall, but as changing, in terms of who participates and on what terms."

● The impact of closing or changing civic space for development outcomes will vary according to whether states are more developmental or more predatory, or whether authority is more competitive or more singularly dominant. The nature of civil society space will vary across these, but it is the 'fit' between state, civil society and market actors which will affect whether civil society is able to "engage with and hold state, political and economic actors to account for inclusive development policies (whether in process or outcome)" (**Hossain et al. 2018b: 35**).

Civic space is not static

Civic space is opening and closing constantly, affecting entry points for voice and citizen engagement, as well as broader spaces for reform and change.

● A study of five historical examples of movements for accountability, finds that the dynamic nature of the context is constraining but also "can

simultaneously offer opportunities for civic actors to form coalitions with new actors and movements that enable some traction… However, such coalitions by their nature are tricky and constantly in flux; and point to the staggered, non-linear nature of progress — where gains can be made as well as lost within a short period of time" (**Joshi 2019: 3**).

● Even in the same country, there will be multiple sub-national variations of context, and these will constantly shift and change. There may be areas that are in conflict, and others that are largely peaceful. In some areas the state is strong, yet weaker in others. For instance, in areas of conflict and violence, such as in northern parts of Nigeria, social and political action may be difficult. But in more stable nearby urban areas, the presence of groups with less fear and higher access to resources and social networks may mean that allied social and political action can occur, such as in the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Nigeria (**Aina et al. 2019**).

● In Pakistan, conflict in one part of the country, and deeply patriarchal gendered norms in tribal areas, did not stop empowerment successes for women at the legislative level. However, this took sustained effort over many years, and navigating different levels of political commitment to women's inclusion under different governments and through different forms of mobilisation (**Khan and Naqvi 2018**).

● In Egypt, even as the space for citizen voice was closing in the streets through protests, campaigners for accountability against sexual harassment were able to find other spaces for engagement, taking a multi-prong approach. As pointed out by one researcher "…in a volatile environment, it is much better for external actors

BELOW
A woman posting her vote in a ballot box during the 2013 general elections in Pakistan. Pakistan has one of the highest gender gaps in self-reported turnout amongst democracies in the world. Ahead of the 2018 elections, one A4EA project explored what lies behind this gender gap, which is more acute in big cities than it is in rural areas.
PHOTO: OLAF KELLERHOF

to segment and fragment the initiative across several actors and entry points in lieu of going to scale with one large intervention that authorities can crack down on" (Tadros forthcoming).

Shifting entry points for action

Where action at the national level is difficult, sub-national levels may provide important opportunities and entry points for action. At the same time, actions need to be able to shift scales and entry points, depending on where there are strong allies.

● Our study of DFID-funded empowerment and accountability programmes examines how local demands were taken to different tiers of authority and institutions to gain resolution or build a case for reform, with practitioners and activists actively trying to navigate around bottlenecks and resistance. (Anderson et al. forthcoming).

● Case studies also illustrated how joining up pro-reform actors across national and local geographies, particularly in civil society, but within authorities as well, provided some ground work that allowed them to navigate opening and closing opportunities for progressive change (**Christie and Green 2018**).

● In other cases, such as in Mozambique, it was important to spread horizontally, finding pockets of good practice and linking them up with others, producing spill over effects from one locality to another (Anderson et al. forthcoming).

Implications

➤ Donors can play an important role in protecting, opening, or preserving civil society space, but how this can be done, and with what consequences, depends on the nature of the regime in place and the capacities and needs of civil society in that setting.

➤ Because spaces rapidly open and close over time, policy actors need the ability to read or register small shifts in opportunities for social and political action, knowing when the door is opening, as well as when it is about to close. A historical and contextual perspective is important to assess the significance of current opportunities or setbacks.

➤ In each setting, entry points need to be found which can create new models and cultures of accountability. Working with small 'islands' of agency and action, often in local or sub-national settings, and supporting their horizontal spread can be an important strategy.

➤ Working across levels then becomes important for smaller initiatives to have impact. This, however, requires clear strategies to work across levels simultaneously and not assuming that multiple local projects will in themselves generate a tipping point towards more accountable institutions. There also need to be deliberate strategies of building horizontal and vertical links, as well as support for champions 'from above'.

Message 4

Even in difficult contexts, action for empowerment and accountability may be present, but not always in ways we see or recognise, implying different entry points for thinking and working politically, beyond business as usual.

● When it isn't possible to work with or through the state or official channels, citizens may use informal or alternative channels to seek accountability. Research into the social contract and accountability pathways in Myanmar found that people were often self-reliant when it came to trying to resolve conflicts or issues due to a lack of trust in authorities to play this role. In such settings, the weakest and most vulnerable groups rely on intermediaries who are trusted to make their accountability claims (A4EA forthcoming).

● Research on countering sexual harassment collectively in Egypt found that success needed to be judged differently from programmes that promote highly visible and public voice. In hostile environments, just surviving and retaining a low profile can be criteria of success (Hamada et al. forthcoming).

Alternative forms of political engagement

Even when there are formal institutional channels for voice and accountability, citizens may use more informal ways of expression, such as through popular culture as a media for political voice.

● In Mozambique, a study on information disclosure showed that grassroots citizens were rarely using information from formal sources to hold extractives to account (**Awortwi and Nuvunga 2019**). Yet at the same time, a study of hip hop lyrics in popular culture showed a great deal of popular awareness and critique of corruption and governance. These songs are able to articulate a culture of fear that prevents people from criticising the government and the lyrics use moral judgement, ridicule and humour as alternative forms of political engagement (Manhiça et al. forthcoming).

Spontaneous and unruly action

When there isn't a clear institutional channel for accountability, citizens engage in episodic and spontaneous action, like protests. These can become more coherent movements and grow beyond their initial mandate.

- In Myanmar, Egypt, Mozambique and Nigeria, protests on energy prices were amplified and scaled-up from local or national economic conditions, into a bigger political challenge. In Mozambique and Nigeria, this involved significant disruption to the economy and to everyday urban life. In Pakistan, energy protests had visibly shaped the electoral contest that followed, and the implications for policy thereafter (**Hossain et al. 2018a**).

- The Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) movement in Nigeria grew out of an initial hashtag #BringBackOurGirls and a one-off protest in Abuja in April 2014, into a national movement that has consistently campaigned to hold the government to account in returning the kidnapped schoolgirls. BBOG later extended its mandate to several other issues such as safe schools, a missing persons audit, and soldiers' welfare (**Aina et al. 2019**).

- In Guatemala, the youth-led anti-corruption protests in 2015, which started under the banner of the hashtag *#RenunciaYa* in Guatemala City, spread to other major urban areas, ultimately leading to the resignation of the President and Vice President. The campaign evolved from one "that targeted individual politicians (*#RenunciaYa*) to one that began to grapple with the breadth and depth of corruption in state institutions (*#JusticiaYa*)," though this momentum proved difficult to sustain (**Flores 2019: 37**).

Implications

➤ Contextual mapping and political economy analysis needs to search for where the social energy is around political and governance issues, and start by understanding those spaces, not where we think the energy ought to be.

➤ Donors and policy actors need to broaden the understanding of 'voice' – and look for its multiple forms, not just those that appear through established channels or formal mechanisms for accountability.

➤ Contentious episodes of action are important signals for change. We need to understand the ways in which large scale, and unruly protests contribute to empowerment and accountability.

Message 5

In FCVAS, women's collective action is an important driver of empowerment and accountability, through greater political empowerment in formal processes, as well as through more informal channels, social movements, and local actions which challenge gender norms.

The importance of women's movements

Movements such as BBOG can be an important form of strengthening political empowerment and for demanding accountability on issues affecting women and girls.

- The Nigerian women-led BBOG movement was established to demand government action for achieving the release of 276 secondary school girls who had been abducted by Boko Haram from Chibok, Northeast Nigeria in April 2014. The movement has achieved the release of around 160 of the girls, the establishment of a national missing person's register, and has created a rupture in the complacency in which violence against women is seen. It cuts across generations, gender, ethnicity and religions (**Aina et al. 2019**). While starting as a demand for security and accountability, the movement also led to empowerment of its members with new skills, organisation and voice.

- In Pakistan, historically, the drive for supporting women's representation in politics has combined street level women's activism with support from internal champions for reform at key moments. Once women appeared in large numbers in assemblies, they were able to promote progressive legislation affecting large numbers of women (**Khan and Naqvi 2018**).

Challenging gender norms

Challenging gender norms with both men and women can contribute greatly to women's political participation and important policy reforms.

- In Pakistan, weak ties between political parties and women has gendered political spaces with very low levels of electoral participation by women. However, a women voters' mobilisation campaign was successful at increasing women's turnout by 8 per cent at the household level, but only when this campaign involved men and motivated them to act as enablers for women to vote on election day (**Cheema et al. 2019**).

- Where women have entered the legislature, they have contributed to important gains in policies for women, inclusion and gender equality (**Khan and Naqvi 2018**).

Representation and legitimacy are key issues

While women's social and political action is important, significant issues remain around representation and legitimacy.

In Pakistan, Mozambique and Egypt, women's collective action has involved heterogeneous groups coming together, which has strengthened their mobilisation, but also brought tensions in terms of power relations and issues of representation.

- For example, in Mozambique, while national level women's NGOs may be effective in securing policy changes, in emphasising their relation with local and public authorities and less with the people they supposedly represented, they had difficulty in maintaining their legitimacy with their constituencies (Taela forthcoming).

- **Evidence from Bangladesh, Nigeria, Egypt and Pakistan** shows women mobilising around land rights, health, education, and workers' rights. They are not necessarily mobilising under either feminist or religious banners, but around community issues. However, labelling these women activists as feminists in these settings, as is sometimes done by the press or by Western donors, can inadvertently give support to nationalist and fundamentalist agendas of anti-women's rights groups who seek to delegitimise local women's rights movements (**Tadros and Khan 2019**).

Implications

➤ Programmes for gender equality and for the empowerment of women and girls provide important entry points for building skills of empowerment and accountability, even in difficult settings. These approaches are important for holding policies and policy makers to account on issues of gender equality and women's rights.

➤ Programmes for empowerment and accountability need, however, to address issues of gender norms, not only with women and girls, but with men and with broader institutions. In Pakistan, working with the male-dominated political parties, as well as with the men in the households, was important to ensure that women were recruited to vote, and supported at home to do so.

➤ The language used to support women's empowerment is important to each context. It is important to avoid 'binaries' when talking about women's movements. Mobilisations may not be under 'feminist' or 'religious' banners, but around specific community issues affecting women.

➤ As with other civil society organisations, to have lasting impact, women's organisations need to not only hold authorities to account, but also build structures and processes for their own legitimacy with their grassroots constituencies.

EMPOWERMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN DIFFICULT SETTINGS: WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?

EMPOWERMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN DIFFICULT SETTINGS: WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?

Message 6

Donors, policy makers and external actors can make important contributions in these settings, but more careful and grounded approaches are needed, with more appropriate expectations and measurements of outcomes.

Outside funding can be a double-edged sword in FCVAS settings

Outside funding can sometimes threaten the legitimacy of local movements, or lead to unexpected forms of backlash and protest.

- For instance, in Nigeria, the BBOG refused external funding to protect itself from being accused of being an intervention by outside donors (**Aina et al. 2019**). On the other hand, research in Pakistan found that donor support was critical to building an effective women's movement over time. Positive policy outcomes for women are strongly linked with the increase in women's voices in elected bodies, however, additional factors such as party commitment and donor/international support also need to be in place (**Khan and Naqvi 2018; Khan 2018**).

- In Mozambique, women's movements have often prioritised accountability to donors at the expense of building legitimacy with grassroots (Taela forthcoming). In the work on fuel-related protests, reform agendas promoted by external actors such as the International Monetary Fund can play a significant role in sparking political struggles and action around energy. External actors need to be more aware of the risks and other implications of their reforms, which requires far closer attention to the political economy dynamics of fossil fuel subsidies and energy, and to design their reform agendas with these in mind (**Hossain et al. 2018a**).

Supporting citizen action for accountability

In some instances, donor mandates and initiatives for transparency and citizen engagement are present, but support is needed to convert these into citizen action for accountability.

- A study of the World Bank's 'Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement Strategy' in Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan, identifies the ways in which projects commit to integrating citizen engagement mechanisms and activities into project design and monitoring, yet we know very little about whether and how these mechanisms are actually utilised in practice during project implementation. Even among projects that document a range of citizen engagement commitments, few provide specifics on how they plan to carry these out. The study finds "there is greater emphasis on "reporting up" to World Bank management rather than "reporting out" to the public at large, even when projects commit to third-party monitoring and implementing mechanisms for collecting citizen feedback and grievance redress" (**Nadelman, Le and Sah 2019: 9-10**).

- In these World Bank Citizen Engagement programmes, while 91 per cent of the projects studied proposed a project-specific grievance redress mechanism as a form of citizen engagement, only 22 per cent included a monitoring indicator dedicated to measuring the process or its results (**Nadelman, Le and Sah 2019**).

- The study of information disclosure through EITI in Mozambique found that while information existed, it was rarely used for public action to hold the extractive industries accountable. Our research identified some 18 intermediate variables that exist in the long chain from information disclosure to achieving accountability (**Awortwi and Nuvunga 2019**).

In both of these cases, important global initiatives or policies have created frameworks and information which could potentially be used for action towards accountability, but large gaps remain between the potential and the reality of how these are taken up.

Exploiting wider learning

- In each country we studied, DFID has also supported large scale empowerment and accountability programmes. They often report positive outcomes within specific sectors and their programme timeframes. However, the wider learning that could be gained from them, and their combined effects in specific contexts, is not fully exploited.

- DFID-funded programmes in Mozambique, Myanmar and Pakistan shared similar logics and repertoires; they all involved elements of civic education, supporting civic space and environments for accountability, and establishing ways to channel people's experiences and demands to power-holders.

- The discrete, separate nature of these programmes and the incentives to show particular results in five-year timeframes mean that their contribution to the evidence base is limited. They measure their impact differently, and largely by impacts on national policy, rather than empowerment or accountability outcomes themselves. There is a desire amongst practitioners and programme designers to learn what works and how, but there are significant disincentives and limitations in the evidence base to really analyse this question (Anderson et al. forthcoming).

- Across the programmes, our research suggests the need for much more careful monitoring and evaluation of the relationships between empowerment and accountability outcomes and a wider frame of reference for what people experience as empowering or improving accountability in these kinds of settings. In the DFID programmes studied, there was very little focus on monitoring and evaluating empowerment, such as changes in individuals' agency or capacities to organise and raise voice, yet these may be lacking in FCVAS settings, and are critical to achieving accountability (Anderson et al. forthcoming).

Implications

➤ Think carefully about the impacts of outside funding on emerging movements. Our research suggests a number of lessons for working in a low key or less risky way, including lessons on branding and framing, working closely with partners to assess risk, addressing the less contentious but enabling issues, supporting coalitions rather than single actors, and working on a "multitude of smalls" instead of one large high-profile initiative (Tadros forthcoming).

➤ Strengthen civil society and governance actors to use policy levers which do exist, such as the World Bank Citizen Engagement policies. Join up and work across donor programmes for empowerment and accountability, both within single donors, and with others.

➤ Foster more cross-programme learning within existing DFID programmes for empowerment and accountability. Empowerment and accountability initiatives may sit within separate departments, whether health and service delivery, governance, or economic development, yet they rarely communicate within one country, let alone across countries.

➤ Focus on and measure the development of changes in the enabling conditions for accountability, and include these as key outcomes. Overcoming fear, changing social norms, sowing seeds of empowerment and accountability through small initiatives, may all produce intermediate level outcomes which are building blocks for longer term change. Think of accountability as a continuum, moving across such factors as empowerment – responsiveness – signalling – lack of impunity – answerability – accountability, and measure changes across the continuum, appropriate to local context.

Message 7

Working in FCVAS requires an approach that is adaptive and flexible. This means giving front line staff autonomy, recruiting entrepreneurial and politically savvy staff, and sometimes going against the grain.

The text for this message is extracted from the report of the A4EA study on 'Adaptive Programming' by Angela Christie and Duncan Green (2019) '**The Case for an Adaptive Approach to Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Fragile Settings**'. The study involved three case studies of large DFID governance projects in Myanmar, Nigeria and Tanzania.

FCVAS are messy and ambiguous contexts in which to plan and implement development initiatives. To work there, external actors are increasingly adopting an adaptive approach to empowerment and accountability programming, whatever the setting. This means using a compass rather than a map, where real-time political economy analysis in relation to context and programme monitoring and evidence-informed learning in relation to intervention are used in combination and in shorter-than-usual planning cycles to maintain and adapt strategic direction. (**Christie and Green 2019**)
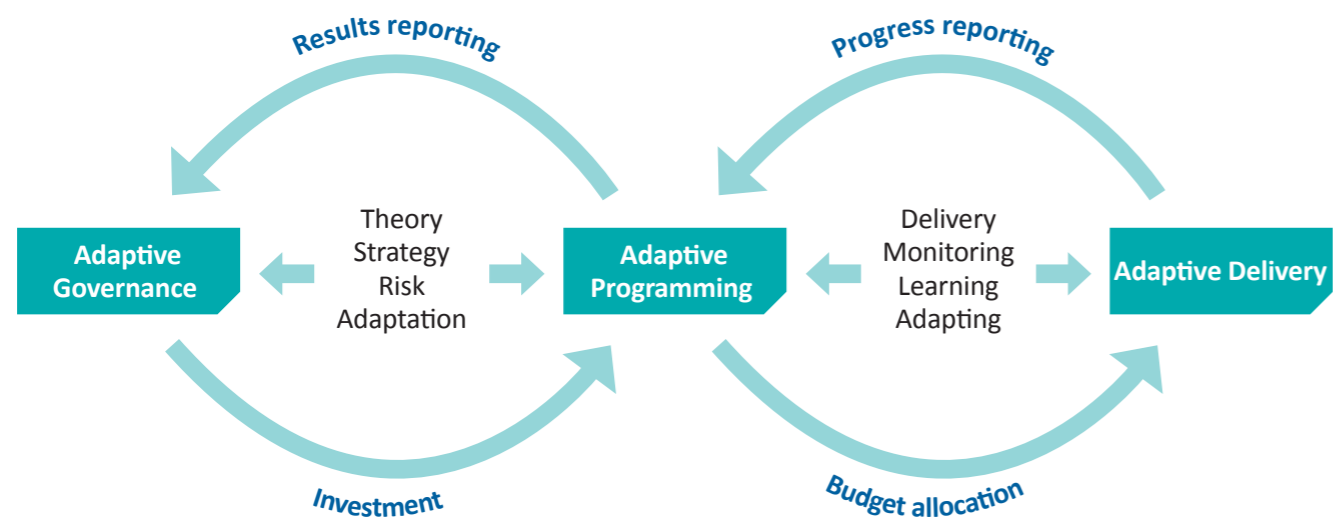
BELOW
Poster advertising feedback event for the Alternative Expressions of Voice project in Mozambique.
CREDIT: KALEIDOSCOPIO
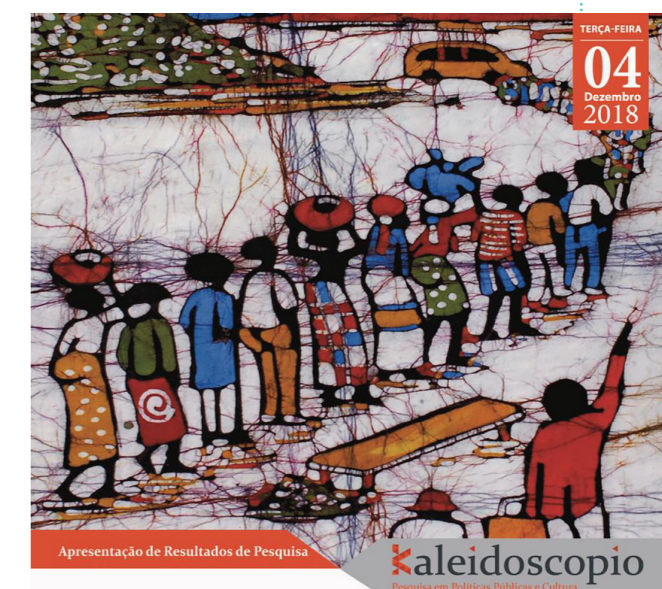
Adaptive governance, adaptive programming and adaptive delivery are intertwined

- *Adaptive Delivery* is the daily, on-the-ground work undertaken by a delivery team, with their fingers on the social, political and economic pulse of the world in which they operate

- *Adaptive Programming* is a slower and more structured process, usually in the hands of the senior team within the programme office and informed by frontline staff and the patterns and players that they are spotting or that are emerging from delivery, as well as the pressures from donors to deliver results

- *Adaptive Governance* normally resides with the officer(s) in the donor agency responsible for funding the programme and following its progress

The relationship between adaptive delivery, programming and governance is constantly evolving, and can sometimes be fraught. Alignment and trust across the various players and tiers involved and confidence that the plan is realistic are critical to success.

When to work with or against the grain

Adaptive approaches emphasise the importance of "working with the grain" of existing institutions rather than attempting to transplant ideas and institutions from elsewhere. But that approach requires treading a tightrope between engagement with local structures, and the programme's commitment to transformational change. When government and citizen groups have competing priorities, how can a programme identify whose grain to go with? When is the existing grain so

damaging to the interests of marginalised groups that 'working against the grain' should be the preferred response? This dilemma was particularly evident on issues of gender equity and inclusion in our case studies, where projects were often represented by men.

Evolution not revolution

Our case studies suggest that there is still considerable uncertainty over how to deliver programmes successfully in an adaptive way and if and how this new approach yields better development results. This is not a surprising finding. Evolution takes time and only a commitment to further trial and the space for further error, will tell us whether adaptive approaches offer a way to do development not only differently, but better in settings where fragility, conflict and violence have challenged other more traditional approaches.

Implications

➤ **Getting the people right is critical:** Adaptive programmes need people who have the right attitude and soft skills to facilitate, influence, motivate and manage relationships with stakeholders, who are emotionally intelligent and show humility, but also have the entrepreneurial, risk-taking appetite and drive to seize opportunities and try out new ideas. Much more attention (and perhaps more research) is needed on how to recruit, incentivise and retain entrepreneurial spirits of the kind we saw in the three programmes.

➤ **Small money can be beautiful:** Small, agile pots of funding can kick-start a relationship, or respond swiftly to a request or an event. The

contrast with the normal big, slow procedures of aid allows adaptive programmes both to build trust and to seize windows of opportunity.

➤ **Communicate to build trust:** Building, maintaining and repairing trust between all the different people in the jigsaw is an exhausting and never-ending process of constant communication, especially important in fragile settings where tensions can run high. Communications are also about stamina, being prepared to start from scratch with every new arrival (particularly the case with donors, which often have a much higher level of staff turnover than programmes, especially frontline staff).

Deepening approaches to political economy analysis

Consistent with the wider debates on thinking and working politically, our research shows the need to deepen the standard institutional approach to political economy analysis in FCVAS – bringing in the importance of norms, emotions (fear), cultural expression, gender relations, and informal institutions that shape politics and the exercise of power in FCVAS.

- The governance diaries approach used in Mozambique, Myanmar and Pakistan is a promising and innovative way to understand from below how marginalised groups engage with and perceive authority (Loureiro et al. forthcoming).

- Other projects, such as our research in Mozambique on expressions of citizen voices through music, demonstrate the importance of cultural expressions as signals of political feeling, grievances, and conflict (**Green 2018**; Manhiça et al. forthcoming).

- Religious understandings, as well as understanding of the role of religious authorities, are also important, but need to be careful not to be read through a Western lens. Governance diaries gave a view of the importance of religious authorities in Myanmar, while the work by scholars on how gender

equality is interpreted through Islam gave important insights into understanding gender norms and actions in these countries (**Tadros and Khan 2019**).

- Sporadic, contentious episodes or protests can also be used as barometers through which to understand popular discontent and how political regimes are understood from below, as seen in the work on fuel protests across multiple countries (**Hossain et al. 2018a**).

Balancing rigour and risk

Researching complex and highly political issues of empowerment and accountability in FCVAS requires complex decisions to maintain rigour, whilst also minimising risk and overcoming constraints and limitations.

- Good local knowledge and partners are fundamental; researchers need to work with them on making strategic decisions about complex contexts.

- Not only civic space, but space for research is constantly opening and closing in these countries. There is a need for research programmes themselves to be adaptable and to shift their strategies in rapidly changing conditions.

- To research risky and difficult settings, while minimising risks to researchers and those with whom they conduct their research, is a challenging task. There is a need to understand the changing risks in given settings, and what kinds of questions and locations would put researchers at the lowest levels of risk, while still maintaining rigour and relevance. In some settings, it was important to conduct interviews 'under the radar', and even then, research was not possible in some settings.

Negotiating the route to research uptake in FCVAS

In some cases, research uptake through more traditional public channels may prove too risky, and alternative strategies may be needed.

- In one setting, we discussed the considerable risk of publishing and locally disseminating research findings that would be deemed as being critical to the government. While the research project seemed feasible early on, local partners said, "Now, our entire field of operations could be shut down as a result of publishing our research findings [which would be considered as being

ABOVE
Panellists at the launch of A4EA in Pakistan (from left to right): Khawar Mumtaz (Chairwoman of the National Commission on the Status of Women), Munizae Jahangir (TV journalist and documentary filmmaker), Bushra Gohar (former Member of Parliament), and Nafisa Shah (Member National Assembly NA-208. Central Information Secretary, PPPP).
PHOTO:
WASEEM GAZDAR

critical of the government], and local partners would be at personal risk."

• In another setting, the situation was so sensitive during the presidential election that two think-pieces written by participants from that setting were anonymised and only shared amongst other workshop participants.

• In another setting, following an official clampdown on people associated with a new, emerging social movement, we did not photograph or tweet about the three study groups with women activists, to avoid drawing attention to the fact that they were conducting research. Care also had to be taken on social media outputs, which were being monitored by intelligence services, since mainstream media is forbidden from covering the social movement, and individuals have been picked up for questioning if they had posted sympathetically about related activism.

Communication as trust building

On the other hand, communicating and disseminating research in these settings may itself offer important steps for building trust and overcoming traumas of violence.

• In some cases, simply bringing people together to discuss research processes or findings created important spaces for dialogue, which in themselves may have been rare in highly polarised, conflictual settings.

• In settings where people are dealing with the effects of trauma, violence and conflict, research offers a potential place for challenge and for healing. For instance, during a feedback workshop on the findings of the BBOG movement in Nigeria, the workshop's schedule had to be adjusted after the sharing of interim findings opened up a space for members to challenge both the language used by researchers and share the pain and hurt of their experiences, for example, where researchers used the term "physical harassment", members present corrected them "I think you [researchers] are not aware of what happened; we were not just physically harassed – we were tear-gassed, arrested and detained". During the workshop, sharing the research created a space for healing – many repeated their experiences, 'It was impossible to shut down or stop the overflow of words and emotions' wrote one participant (**Oluwajulugbe 2018**).

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A4EA

Action for empowerment and accountability research programme

Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) is an international research programme which explores how social and political action can contribute to empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict, and violent settings, with a particular focus on Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan.

Led by the Institute of Development Studies, A4EA is being implemented by a consortium that includes: the Accountability Research Center (ARC), the Collective for Social Science Research (CSSR), the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS), Itad, Oxfam GB, and the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR).

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