Against The Odds:

Action for Empowerment and Accountability in Challenging Contexts

A4EA

Action for empowerment and
accountability research programme

Acknowledgements

Contents

1 Introduction

How and under what conditions does citizen-led social and political action contribute to empowerment and accountability? What are the strategies used, and with what outcomes, especially in settings which are democratically weak, politically fragile and affected by legacies of violence and conflict? These were the questions explored by the Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme between 2016 and 2021.

When we began this work there was an optimism in many places that the governance agenda of transparency, accountability and participation was both growing and making a difference in many parts of the world, at least in more stable and democratic settings.[1] Against this background we wanted to explore how this agenda played out in more fragile settings, especially those affected by legacies of conflict and violence. Our focus countries – Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan and initially Egypt – all had some level of democratic opening, yet at the same time had histories of authoritarian and military rule, marred by historical and ongoing violence in substantial pockets of their nations. What forms of citizen action could make a difference for empowerment of marginalised groups and strengthened accountability in these kinds of settings?

Over this period, of course, the world has changed. Rather than becoming more democratic, with more transparent and accountable institutions, we have seen democratic backsliding, growing authoritarianism and closing civic space. In 2021 Freedom House reported a 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom.[2] According to Civicus, some 87 per cent of the world's population now live in countries rated as closed, repressed or obstructed, and only 3.7 per cent in so called 'open' societies, where we might expect the freedoms and opportunities for social and political action to be the greatest.[3] These trends towards autocratisation have accelerated in many countries under Covid-19,[4] along with a growing distrust of authorities, increasing political polarisation and conflict, and rising and more visible social, economic and political inequalities. Rather

than being fragile exceptions to an otherwise increasingly democratic world, the countries we studied increasingly represent the norm.

Our work focuses on the fragile relationships between people and the states and other authorities that affect their lives. Whereas fragility is often used to apply to states or settings, for us fragility encompasses the notion of unresolved contestation over the legitimacy, role, and control of institutions of authority. The A4EA focus countries are fragile in this sense for different reasons—due to their own specific cultural, social and political histories in which conflict, violence and repression loom large. Yet they share common features: fragmentation of social and political groups, an absence of trust, weakened institutions, and a dominance of informal networks over formal processes and institutions.

Closing civic and democratic space, accompanied by growing authoritarianism serve to make these relationships more fragile still. This makes the findings we share here all the more relevant. These complicated contexts also unveil dynamics that may stand out more against a backdrop of fragility – such as the role of fear and distrust of authorities, and the centrality of the social contract – but are probably just as important and overlooked in other places.

Our research largely took a 'citizen-eye' view to the questions of how authority is understood, and how citizens, especially marginalised groups, make claims, express grievances, seek to have their voices heard, and hold authorities to account. Guided by a common research question, we applied a variety of methods - qualitative and quantitative, participatory and experimental, conventional and more innovative - across a diverse portfolio of projects and subthemes. In the following pages we provide a high-level summary of key findings distilled from those projects, and from the over 220 publications they've produced. Together, the work of A4EA offers new insights into how people experience governance relationships, mobilise to make claims of authorities, and strategise to demand greater accountability against a backdrop of fragile citizen-state relations. It highlights women's different experiences and the importance of women's leadership. And it explores how more accountable governance relationships, and a more empowered citizenry can be enabled. We highlight implications for those striving for those aims throughout, including recommendations for donors.

About A4EA

Over five years, A4EA brought together more than 100 researchers and 25 research partners to explore social and political action on a range of issues, from a variety of perspectives, and using a diverse set of methods. We looked at everyday experiences of governance, protest and contentious politics, donor-funded governance programmes, and women's leadership and political participation across 22 countries, but with a focus on Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Following an inception phase that produced conceptual framing papers, we completed 15 research projects in a first research phase (2017–2018). These mostly focused on single countries or issues, and 5 historical case studies on collective action for accountability. In a second research phase (2019–2021) we undertook five multi-country comparative research projects that took forward the hypotheses, key themes, and methods that emerged most strongly from the first phase. Findings from the first phase **were synthesised in an earlier policy and practice oriented paper**.

Find out more about A4EA on the IDS website.

View our **collected publications** online.

A4EA in numbers

220+
academic and policy outputs

1.8m+
output views online

58k+
output downloads

60+
multi-stakeholder events
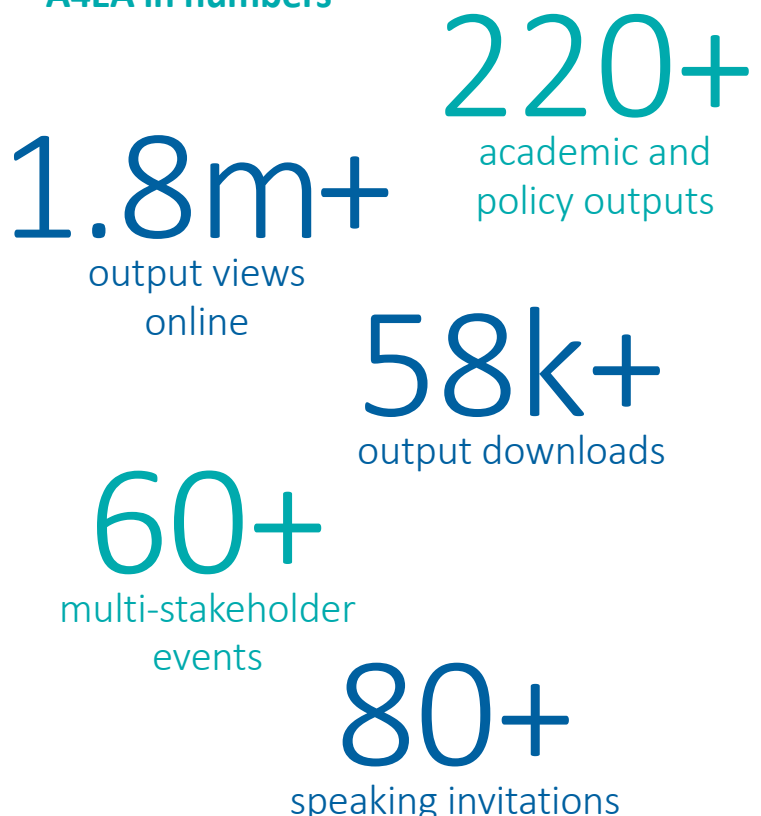
80+
speaking invitations

In this report we present findings against five cross-cutting research themes. We summarise and preview those findings, and their relevance, here.

Space for citizen[a] action

Closing civic space and increasing authoritarianism combine with legacies of fear and self-censorship to limit opportunities for citizen voice. Civic space for those who speak out against government or for human rights closed down significantly in our focus countries during our research, in line with global trends. A4EA work on civic space documented how the pandemic brought about a crackdown on civil liberties and rising intolerance by governments towards dissenting voices, building on previous practices of state-sponsored harassment, intimidation, and forced disappearance. From excessive force used to police lockdowns and protests in Nigeria to bans on opposition political gatherings in Pakistan whilst pro-regime events went ahead, governments took advantage of the pandemic crisis to tighten their grip on power.

Through the innovative **governance diaries** research approach we documented significant mistrust in, and fear of, authorities amongst people living in conflict-affected areas. The risks associated with speaking out and legacies of fear reinforce cultures of self-censorship and, in some cases, silence. For example, in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar we found norms of not 'causing trouble' mixed with fear of mistreatment by authorities. Without civic space and the confidence to make claims, approaches which assume that citizens, even armed with information, will claim accountability from authorities through direct and public processes will no doubt fail. Challenging the global retrenchment on civic freedoms is a crucial pre-condition for civic empowerment and accountability.

Understanding governance from the margins

Taking a 'citizen-eye' view from conflict-affected areas and marginalised communities highlights low expectations, the importance of non-state authorities and intermediaries, and active efforts to avoid the state. A4EA research challenges notions of who people see as relevant authorities and ask or expect to solve problems. Authority – and the capacity to deliver on basic services, security and conflict resolution – may not lie with the state. Rather, these are often settings of multiple and parallel authorities, including armed militias,

▲ **A woman raises her hand in the three finger salute during a protest against the military coup in Myanmar, May 2021. A4EA research highlights a wide array of citizen action to defend rights and democratic freedoms.**
PHOTO: MAUNG NYAN / SHUTTERSTOCK

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[a] Note that we use the term citizen throughout this report in a broad sense to refer to those owed accountability by authorities. We do not use this term to distinguish between citizens and non-citizens, and recognise formal citizenship itself is often a key source of conflict.

customary leaders, religious authorities and more. While normative theories of accountability may expect citizens to raise claims with the state, they may in fact go to the authorities they find most relevant to their needs and experience – for example ethnically based parallel authorities in Myanmar, or directly to a mining company responsible for community re-settlement in Mozambique.

A4EA research also explored the **practices of intermediaries** that we found people generally go to either to make decisions about local issues, or to make claims and contact authorities on their behalf. Preferences and incentives for local resolution and 'self-help' that doesn't involve external authorities are highly ingrained, as are gender norms that very often limit women's ability to navigate these systems independently of men. A very successful and well-regarded intermediary in Pakistan still needed to send her son to meetings she wasn't allowed to attend because of her gender. Where authorities are distant and distrusted, accountability claims are more likely to be highly localised, and directed towards 'unusual' actors. Recognising these realities of local governance is essential for any action to enhance public accountability.

Women's political participation and collective action

Women's political agency expresses itself in multiple ways, including leadership of social action, although it is also curtailed by gendered social norms at the household level and beyond. In fragile settings, women's political agency is limited in multiple ways by gendered social norms and male gate-keepers. A4EA research shows how mobility and access to the public sphere are often constrained. Women experience the threat of violence, the biased perceptions of state agents, and decision-makers who do not consider them as claim-makers. In Pakistan one research project explored how women **had become 'invisible citizens'** as a result. Despite these gender-specific barriers, women lead and mobilise to contest decisions and claim accountability, and they also engage with local authorities to demand better services and protection. These actions can take the form of individual voting; making claims on local authorities (both state and non-state) for better services and infrastructure, security, employment rights, and other entitlements; participating in protests against violence perpetrated on their community; mobilising for accountability on issues

such as sexual harassment; and taking part as elected representatives or CSO leaders in formal processes of decision-making to push authorities to account for their actions.

Collective action led by women is mediated by multiple factors at the family and community levels. Women's expressions of political collective agency are often gendered to reduce risks – for example in the way claims are justified or in the way women mobilise. Research with women involved in protests in Mozambique and Pakistan highlighted how they foregrounded their identities as concerned mothers or wives, and framed their actions as defending the honour of the community. While participation in protests can lead to women feeling empowered at the personal level, its impact on the collective position of women as citizens and claim-makers or their leadership and ability to secure accountability outcomes varies. Encouragingly, we saw how women's political agency can actively be built through interventions that overcome gatekeeping, raise political consciousness, and utilise solidarity networks. Both domestic and international actors can support such interventions.

Citizen-led strategies for empowerment and accountability

Despite the obstacles, a rich repertoire of under the radar and more overt citizen action can often be found in these contexts – including through cultural forms of resistance and often intense collective protest – but accountability gains that result are often fleeting. In contexts of limited civic space, multiple, weak and/or repressive authorities, and constraining social norms we could perhaps assume that citizens will not act to claim accountability. Indeed, literature on citizen action argues that social movements, protests, civic engagement will be more likely in more open and democratic settings, and that in these closed, fragile or hybrid settings, it will not emerge, or if so, only through more violent means.[5] A4EA research found the contrary: despite the limited space for civic voice and agency, and despite the complexities and limitations of how authority is constructed, we see a rich repertoire where at certain places and times, citizens can and do express their agency and make claims collectively.

Sometimes these claims are expressed in cultural forms rather than directly to the authorities, for

instance through <u>political song in Mozambique</u>. Sometimes they are made through informal channels, through networks or intermediaries. At other times, citizens may not choose direct confrontation, but choose instead to create alternative systems for service delivery, such as we found in parts of Myanmar. And at yet other times, protests may arise – often apparently spontaneously and sometimes fleetingly – arising from a sense of moral outrage that citizens, no matter how vulnerable, have had enough, and their own sense of fairness and justice demands that they speak out. We found this in struggles for security against violence, or against sexual harassment, or for access to energy, seen from below as a necessity for cooking, transport, and livelihoods. A4EA work has seen that this kind of citizen action does get responses from authorities, and brings about subtle power shifts, but that gains can be all too fleeting and easy to roll back. Strategies to support citizen-led accountability need to engage with these moments of action, tap into what drives them, and work to sustain their momentum.

Enabling citizen action

It is possible to enable greater citizen engagement in governance in conflict-affected contexts. Such efforts can contribute to long-run gains in empowerment, but the strategies and tactics used, and their interactions, matter. A4EA research found much citizen action taking place outside of formal participation channels, and in many contexts reluctance to use formal channels (if they existed in the first place). We also found examples in which spaces for action can be strengthened or enabled

from above – through multilateral actors, donor programmes, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and state authorities. For example, efforts to challenge dominant norms on gender, women's voting and political participation were successful, even in the highly patriarchal setting of Pakistan. Successful approaches were characterised by working in a joined up way across multiple layers or levels of governance, connecting up grassroots actors and activists with national champions, and taking advantage of (often short) political openings. They required agility and adaptation in their approaches, and to recognise the process as explicitly political. For example, the DFID-supported **Pyoe Pin programme in Myanmar** supported multi-level coalitions of civic actors and reformists that could tap into political opportunities.

These kinds of actions are not always successful, however. Power dynamics are hard to shift, wins can quickly be reversed, and assumptions about what stimulates citizen action sometimes don't match reality. There are also complexities in how multiple efforts to build empowerment and increase accountability interact. We found that whilst different donor programmes can bolster and support one another's efforts, they can also work entirely in parallel, or indeed actively undermine one another. Research on the interactions of World Bank and DFID-funded projects on fiscal transparency and participation in Nigeria illustrated all three possibilities. These 'mixed results' suggest that more nuanced strategies to support accountability demands and rights-claiming are needed, and more work is required on evidencing their outcomes beyond the scope and scale of single projects.

▼ **Excerpt from graphic stories produced by A4EA representing stories of women-led protests in Mozambique.** ILLUSTRATION BY ALESSANDRA PAES, STORY BY CARLOS OSVALDO. FULL GRAPHIC AVAILABLE AT WWW. PODERUSAS.COM
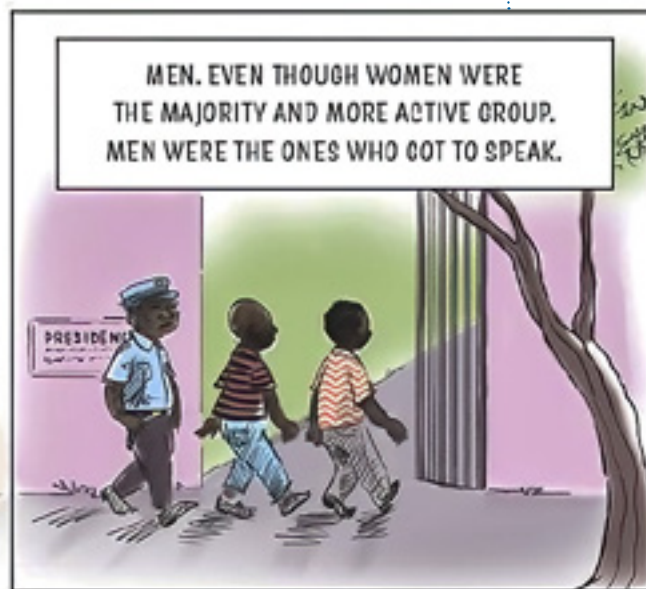
3 Key implications

The fragile citizen-state relations we describe above pose fundamental challenges for theories of change that commonly underpin actions to improve public accountability. A first generation of these actions in the development field focused on the importance of transparency of information, with the assumption that with information, citizens would be able to mobilise and to claim accountability from authorities who had capacity to respond.[6] This approach led to the development of dozens of accountability tools and approaches including budget monitoring, citizen report cards, and information disclosure related to extractives revenues, donor funds, and local budgets. There has been a profusion of evidence since that highlights the importance of embedding citizen-led accountability work in its political and institutional context.[7] A further generation of approaches, dubbed 'accountability 2.0'[8], recognised this evidence and has subsequently focused more on strategic approaches that include political mobilisation, linking across scales of governance, building alliances, and strengthening the political capacities of citizens.[9]

It is in this territory of recognising the complex political realities of efforts to bolster accountability to citizens that we position our lessons from A4EA. Across our research themes, five overall points stand out as key implications for donors, governments, and civil society organisations (CSOs) seeking to strengthen empowerment and accountability processes in challenging settings.

Action for empowerment and accountability in fragile and conflict-affected contexts needs to:

1 **Understand the political economy of governance from below, using approaches that take a 'citizen-eye view'.** Closed, fragile and authoritarian settings challenge our understanding of where the possibilities for action might be, how citizens interact with authorities, if at all, and how such authority is constituted in the first place. There are important subnational differences. While political economy analysis often gives us strong institutional insights, new tools which capture the citizens-eye view – such as the governance diaries, civil society observatories, or in-depth work to understand grievances and triggers of protest we've used in A4EA – are needed to understand and navigate the complex terrain of governance.

2 **Proactively link accountability-focused work with strategies for strengthening fundamental social, political and civic rights.** Much of the accountability agenda of the last decade has been built upon the assumption that certain basic democratic freedoms exist through which citizens can freely organise collectively, make claims and demand accountability in public channels. Conflict, authoritarianism, and closing civic space challenge these assumptions. Protecting the available space for accountable governance requires more engagement with the networks, alliances, and approaches that focus

on human rights, protection of civic freedoms, promoting open societies, and protection of women's rights. It also requires learning from highly conflictual settings on how to support pro-accountability actors 'under the radar'.

3 **Start with bolstering accountability on the issues that matter most to citizens and pay more attention to their choice of tactics.** The issues we found which galvanised citizen action were not those normally approached in the social accountability agenda, which has tended to focus on basic public services such as health and education. Community safety and security, protection from sexual harassment, and access to affordable energy were all flash-points for collective voice. Accountability interventions need to overcome assumptions about the most salient issues for action, but also the ways that citizens choose to exercise voice. Recognising the complex ecosystem of ways in which citizens act to make their claims and grievances heard, often outside formal channels and programmes for accountability, is crucial.

4 **Approach accountability as the need to build *countervailing power* of organised citizens, with a focus on the political agency, organising and networks needed to do that.** While potentially important in combination with other actions, simply strengthening transparency and creating spaces for engagement from above will have little impact on their own. Despite much progress in the transparency and accountability field in recent years, simplistic assumptions about when people will act to make claims often persist. Further enabling conditions must be addressed, including building awareness and capacity and supporting linkages within networks and alliances and across levels of governance.

> ❝ *In contexts where space is deeply circumscribed and there is a high risk of violence, survival in itself should be taken as a proxy for success. In other contexts, success may be best seen in terms of small-scale gains in people's ability to demand their rights from local power-holders, or their ability to organise around interests and even just the act of voicing their grievances in a collective safe space.* ❞
>
> Tadros, 2020 **Eleven Recommendations for Working on Empowerment and Accountability in Fragile, Conflict or Violence-Affected Settings** (p.5)

5 **Focus on the building blocks towards the long-run goal of democratic and accountable governance.** To expect citizen action and institutional reform to result in idealised accountability relations where authorities are routinely answerable and citizens able to effectively sanction them is perhaps an unrealistic goal in such settings. The gains we saw in our work were often fleeting, and, in volatile settings where civic space is rapidly closing, gains won could later be taken away. Whatever our long-term aspirations, a more realistic ambition is towards the intermediary outcomes which can serve as building blocks for more democratic and accountable governance. The paths to change are not linear, and setbacks will be experienced as spaces open and close, but over time, the importance of small steps which change norms and expectations, create capacities, and evolve new governance models, are important.

Stepping stones towards accountable governance

- Increased visibility of previously excluded issues and voices

- Strengthened sense of rights and citizenship, political agency, and capacities to act

- Greater responsiveness from authorities on certain concrete issues

- Greater recognition from authorities of the validity of citizen voice

- Changing norms and relationships, including gender norms

- Strengthening citizen and authority expectations and cultures of accountability

- Building trust between people and public authorities

- Strengthened solidarity networks between groups

4 Thematic findings and recommendations at a glance

Space for citizen action

Key findings

- Global trends of increasing authoritarianism are decreasing the civic space available for rights-based and pluralistic civic action
- Citizens who organise to demand better governance and accountability face significant risks
- Closures of civic space sit against a backdrop of mistrust in and fear of authorities
- The Covid-19 pandemic represented an opportunity for governments to further close down space for dissent and activism

Recommendations

- Discourse and actions on accountable governance and defending human rights need to be joined up more strongly
- Donors should follow recent strong **OECD DAC recommendations** and use their leverage to challenge the global retrenchment on civic freedoms and protect civic space
- Donors, in particular, need to be aware of the risk of funding or tacitly supporting repressive and anti-democratic practices
- Acutely repressive contexts and human rights emergency situations offer lessons and approaches on channelling support to CSOs

Understanding governance 'from the margins'

Key findings

- Low expectations and a lack of trust in authorities are very common in conflict-affected areas
- Very often people solve their governance problems through customary, informal, or highly localised ways, avoiding engaging formal authorities
- When they do need to engage others to solve problems, people often do this through a web of 'governance intermediaries'
- Women can be very effective intermediaries despite highly patriarchal structures that generally prevent women's access to resources
- People often see non-state authorities as having a more important role in resolving problems than the state

Recommendations

- Intermediaries' influence on solving everyday governance problems and controlling access to public services needs to be acknowledged by policy-makers and practitioners
- In conflict-affected contexts, strengthening of solidarity networks and social capital, trust between people and public authorities, and expectations and cultures of accountability are important target outcomes
- Fine-grained analysis is needed to create policy and develop programmes that engage and understand people's preferences for community-based governance and solutions
- Governance programmes need to be based on a better understanding of how people see authority and which authorities they choose to go to, including non-state authorities

Women's political participation and collective action

Key findings

- In fragile settings, women's political agency is limited in multiple ways by gendered social norms, including at the household level
- Nevertheless, women frequently collectively organise at the frontline, and sometimes emerge as key leaders of the resistance against oppression
- Expressions of collective agency by women can generate increased critical awareness and a collective sense of belonging and ability to act together, regardless of whether their accountability goals are met
- Action that builds women's political agency and networks of solidarity has been key in advancing gender equality efforts

Recommendations

- Men should be actively engaged alongside women in interventions that aim to increase women's social and political action and participation, but care is needed to avoid provoking backlash
- Political parties need to directly engage with women to reduce their perception of being 'politically invisible', deepening their cadres of women workers and putting more women forward for election
- Taking a bottom-up approach defined by local actors, women's political agency can be bolstered in conflict-affected contexts – for example through support to neighbourhood women's groups that engage in accountability claiming
- Finding ways to support broader women's organising, network-building, and advocacy is crucial, despite restrictions on NGOs and donor finance – but donors need to be allies, not agenda-setters

Citizen-led strategies for empowerment and accountability

Key findings

- A rich repertoire of citizen-led social and political action exists despite authoritarian governance styles and real risks of reprisal, including actions that are 'under the radar'
- Cultural expressions of dissent and critique of the status quo are important forms of social and political action
- Moral outrage and a lack of formal opportunities for citizen voice can prompt intense collective protests, particularly on key trigger issues such as safety and security, and access to energy
- Direct action and protest often get responses from authorities, and are part of gradual shifts in power relations, but these gains are too often fleeting

Recommendations

- Advocates for citizen engagement and accountability should pay more attention to the ways that citizens raise their voices outside of institutional channels, such as through protests
- New approaches to political economy analysis are needed to help to measure and identify the sparks of energy from citizen protest and 'pulse of the streets', and to consider their potential for reform and change
- Accountability reforms and programmes need to expand their focus to include the key triggering issues we found in conflict-affected settings – such as safety and security and access to energy
- Much greater engagement of citizens about the energy policies that affect their lives is needed in order to tackle the climate emergency

Enabling citizen action

Key findings

- CSOs and donor-funded programmes can create space and support enabling conditions for citizen engagement in governance in conflict-affected settings, though power dynamics can be hard to shift
- Spaces and opportunities often change quickly, but they potentially have long-run gains in empowerment and citizen capacities to engage in social and political action
- Even partial political openings can allow donors to support multi-level approaches that bolster countervailing power
- Donor-funded programmes to increase empowerment and accountability can mutually reinforce one another, miss opportunities to do so, or end up undermining one another
- Conflict and fragility increase the need for flexibility and adaptation, allowing those at the frontline to respond fluidly to changing political opportunities and risks

Recommendations

- Institutional development should be undertaken hand-in-hand with supporting citizens to organise to take advantage of political openings and new spaces for engagement
- Monitoring and evaluation strategies around empowerment and accountability should focus on longer-term change and the building of capacities and capabilities, rather than short-run policy reforms
- Enabling greater flexibility and agility through donor architecture and management practices is essential in allowing frontline staff to respond to rapidly shifting contexts
- Donors need to recognise themselves as social and political actors and try harder to agree shared levels of ambition and act synergistically with other donors

5 A4EA focus countries

Pakistan

Myanmar

Nigeria
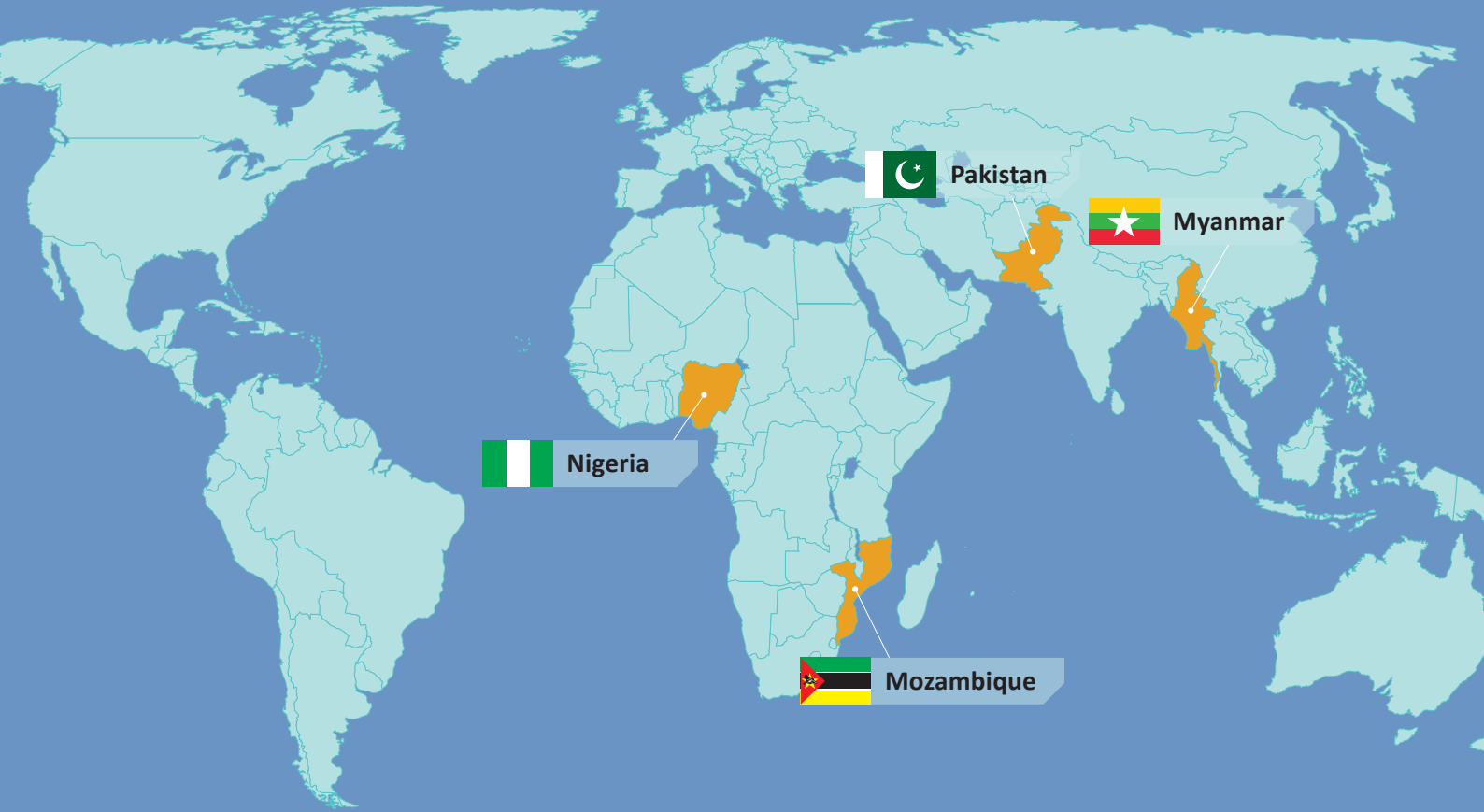
Mozambique

While A4EA research spans a number of countries, we focused primarily on four – Mozambique, Nigeria, Myanmar and Pakistan.[b] The four countries have many differences, but they also share common features. These include histories of authoritarianism and military rule, conflict and violence, and often fragile or weak political institutions. At the same time, each country at the time of the research had constitutional provisions for at least a minimal level of democracy. Within each country, of course, there is huge variation at the sub-national level, especially in terms of levels of conflict and violence. Over the course of the five-year research programme, we also saw significant changes, most notably the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, and the tightening of civic space across all of the countries.

The four countries share some similar characteristics in relation to democracy and civic space. The V-Dem regime type index in 2020 categorised Myanmar, Mozambique, and Pakistan as electoral autocracies and considered that Nigeria could also belong in this category, although it scored just in the 'electoral democracy' category.[10] Electoral autocracies are those where authoritarian governance and significant limits to democratic freedoms and participation sit alongside democratically elected institutions. The Civicus Monitor for 2020 classified civic space in each country as 'repressed', except for Mozambique, which was 'obstructed'. On the Fund for Peace Fragility Index,[11] each country is ranked among the most fragile 15 per cent of countries in the world. On the OECD Fragility Index all are ranked as highly fragile in relationship to security issues, meaning threats and histories of violence loom large.[12] In a world of diminishing democratic space, the four countries are in the lower 50 per cent on the V-Dem scale of liberal democracies – while they do not represent the most closed or autocratic settings, neither are they the most open.[13]

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[b] Egypt was originally also a focus country, but we were not able to continue work there in the second research phase due to security concerns.

Table 1: A4EA focus countries in international measures

	Mozambique	Myanmar	Nigeria	Pakistan
V-Dem Report 2021 (for 2020)[14]	Electoral autocracy Rank 114	Electoral autocracy Rank 110	Electoral democracy Rank 91	Electoral autocracy Rank 116
Civicus Monitor (2020)[15]	Obstructed	Repressed	Repressed	Repressed
OECD Fragility Index (security) (2020)[16]	High	High	High	High

The countries share other characteristics in addition to these broad indicators of democracy, which have long affected the nature of citizen-state relations.

Perhaps the most important of these is that they share recent histories of military rule, and memories of the repressive power of the military remain strong. Following independence from their colonial powers, both Pakistan and Nigeria have experienced intermittent military governments, up until 1999 in the case of Nigeria, and as late as 2007 in the case of Pakistan. In Myanmar the military retained significant legislative and executive power through the constitution even after democratic elections in 2015, and led the coup following the 2020 general elections. In Mozambique, the security apparatus is under highly consolidated control by the dominant party, Frelimo.

Closely aligned to the history of military power and dominant-party control of the security apparatus, the A4EA countries also share legacies of conflict and violence involving historically marginalised regions. Following independence, Mozambique experienced civil war up until 1992, and currently faces armed violence in the central and northern regions. From the end of its own civil war fifty years ago, Nigeria has similarly faced the rise of the Islamist Boko Haram in the north, ongoing conflicts amongst religious and ethnic groups, and longstanding unrest over oil extraction in the Delta. Pakistan faces conflicts related to Taliban insurgency in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa and nationalist insurgency in Balochistan provinces. Myanmar is regarded as having the longest-running civil war in the world, with a multitude of armed groups linked to ethno-regional identities involved in active conflict with the state military, and – prior to the coup – only some of these signatories to a fledging peace agreement.

All four countries are regarded as 'highly fragile' in terms of security and either 'severe' or 'high' in terms of societal fragility.[17] Yet they are not fragile states in terms of their repressive power. 'National security' or 'anti-terrorism' can be invoked to suppress dissent and close civic space, and with the historically central roles of the military and secret police in these countries, these threats cannot be taken lightly.

It is also important to note that these are low income and highly unequal countries, where livelihoods and access to basic services such as health and education remain a daily struggle for vast numbers. Each sits at the extremely low end of the Human Development Index.[18] There is not great confidence in the governments' abilities to deliver on these needs, as they also rank relatively high in terms of perceived corruption, with high levels of mistrust of the state.[19]

Despite these challenges, each country also has a vibrant civil society and, to varying degrees, a history of informal protest and contention towards the regime. Across all four, a dense network of CSOs provides essential services, representation, and – where space allows – advocates for change. At key moments in history, mobilisations and protests in all four have protected civic space, challenged government, or triggered action towards more democratic practices. Understanding how these mobilisations and expressions of collective agency play out against the factors constraining them was an important part of our research.

The four A4EA focus countries are therefore illustrative of many contexts around the world. Certainly, in terms of increasingly authoritarianism and democratic decline they are not exceptions to an otherwise democratic world – they reflect the new normal. The challenges such contexts present for social and political action for empowerment and accountability are the focus of the following pages.

Space for citizen action

Our research

The availability of space for citizens to claim accountability was a theme across a number of research projects in both phases of our work. A number of studies identified the ways in which activists negotiated the limited space available to raise demands and claims on authorities, and the ways in which fear of reprisal or violence circumscribe these. In collaboration with a **multi-country research project funded by Act Alliance** we also supported the publication of country case studies of how civic space was changing and the implications for development, and the construction of a conceptual framework on the linkages between governance, conflict, and civic space.

In our second phase and in response to the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic we launched a project specifically **looking at how civic actors navigated the rapidly changing civic space in Mozambique, Nigeria and Pakistan**. This project was based on real-time cataloguing of events taking place in each country. We did this through media scanning, interviews with key civil society actors, and by establishing small 'observatory panels' of civil society leaders and activists in each country. These observatory panel members reflected monthly on events taking place as the first year of the pandemic unfolded, and discussed the implications for their

strategies and the long-term direction of governance relationships and civic space in their context.

What we found

Global trends of increasing authoritarianism are shrinking the civic space available to challenge inequities in the status quo. All of the country contexts that A4EA worked in were characterised by authoritarian modes of governance, constrained space for civic dissent, and risks of sometimes violent reprisal for those engaged in activism. This was the case at the start of our programme in 2016, but worsened by the time we concluded our work. The Economist Intelligence Unit's annual Democracy Index showed that between 2016 and 2020 the score of all four A4EA countries dropped, indicating growing authoritarianism.[20] Similarly, Freedom House metrics showed a decline in fundamental freedoms between 2018 and 2020 for all four countries.[21] Difficulties researching issues of social and political action safely led us to drop Egypt as a focus country in the second phase of our work, and in Myanmar we concluded work shortly before a military coup drastically curtailed civic and democratic freedoms. Across our focus countries a range of measures enacted by authorities – from legal restrictions to physical harassment – have combined to undermine the ability of citizens to organise.

▲ **Police in Myanmar are given roses – one of many creative strategies used by those protesting against the February 2021 military coup. Civic space in Myanmar closed dramatically during A4EA research.**
PHOTO: MAUNG SUN, CC BY-SA 4.0

The evidence on these changes indicates that the shift in the balance of power towards the state disproportionately affects rights-based organisations and development NGOs, 'pushing and pulling' many of these groups into closer relationships with political elites in order to survive.[22] Space has closed down particularly for those with foreign funding or links outside the country, and on issues that affect business and land interests. The closure has been supported by shifts in governance norms. In Pakistan, as one example, the ability of the state to make these authoritarian moves has been supported by shifts away from democratic models of development, governance, and public accountability, aligned to geo-political changes.[23] In pre-coup Myanmar government persecution of journalists and peaceful protesters, and inhumane treatment of political prisoners remained commonplace despite the high hopes that the first democratically elected government would govern differently.[24] In our Covid-19 study civil society actors that were part of our observatory panels commonly noted that the space for them to operate safely and openly had been reducing for some years.[25]

Citizens who organise to demand better governance and accountability in the context of these changes face significant risks. In the A4EA focus countries we found that the freedom for citizens to organise, raise their voices, and make claims of authorities were curtailed through both legal and physical means, both offline and online. In Nigeria, research on the Bring Back Our Girls movement (BBOG) noted the physical harassment of their members by security forces aligned to the state.[26] Studies of popular protests over access to energy highlighted the frequent violent repression experienced by protestors.[27] Baseline studies of pre-pandemic civic space gave numerous examples, including a human rights defender killed by police in Mozambique while preparing to monitor the 2019 elections,[28] and the arrest and killing of Pakistan's Pashtun Tahafuz Movement activists, allegedly linked to their criticism of the government.[29]

Forced disappearances of prominent government critics and targeted harassment of individuals online were common across countries in our civic space study. Those accused of undermining government narratives, fomenting dissent, or presenting uncomfortable truths were censored – for example with both musicians and activist NGOs in Mozambique being denied airtime as a result of government interference with the media.[30] Rights-

> ▌▌ *The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated trends in civic spaces underway before 2020 in Pakistan, reinforcing the state's on-going deep discomfort with rights-based actors and mobilizations whilst allowing the divisive rhetoric and mass gathering of sectarian forces to flourish.* ▌▌
>
> **Navigating Civic Spaces During a Pandemic: Pakistan Report** (Khan, Kwaja & Jawed, 2021, p.6)

based and campaigning NGOs persist despite increasing attempts to regulate civil society action through the law, with arbitrary and selective use of legislation to pursue and undermine those critical of government.[31]

These closures sit against a common backdrop of mistrust in and fear of authorities. Legacies of violence and conflict and authoritarian approaches to governance, often sustained from colonial rule, leave little trust in governments and authorities. These legacies are reinforced by current repression of critical voices. Self-censorship is a common response. For example research exploring the impact of extractive industries transparency measures in Mozambique found that people were wary of being associated with NGOs demanding transparency, fearing loss of their livelihood or other reprisals.[32] The fear of causing trouble for themselves and their communities by approaching authorities was common in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar.[33] This was compounded by fear of mistreatment even in accessing government services, or following procedures to get citizenship or land ownership documented.

The Covid-19 pandemic represented an opportunity for governments to further close down space for dissent and activism. The crisis of the pandemic

> ▌▌ *... the adoption of effective responses that ensure that human rights do not vanish just because we face emergency times are imperative. If the overreaching activities of state actors are not monitored, challenged and restrained, Covid-19 containment measures... could transmute to permanent measures.* ▌▌
>
> **Navigating Civic Space in a Time of COVID-19: Reflections from Nigeria** (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Ibeh, 2021, p.50)

led governments around the world to legislate, regulate, and police more aggressively and autocratically in the name of public health. A natural response to the uncertainty and risks of the pandemic, restrictions on civil liberties were widely seen as justified in order to protect people from the virus and prevent health services from being overwhelmed. In the three countries that were part of our Covid-19 civic space monitoring, however, the restrictions that came in and their enforcement had extreme effects.

In **Nigeria**, the heavy-handed policing of lockdowns and mobility restrictions was reported to lead to extra-judicial deaths, provide opportunities for sexual violence and corruption by security forces, and form part of the backdrop to the brutally policed EndSARS protests.[34] In **Pakistan**, women journalists who were critical of the Covid-19 response by government were relentlessly harassed, male journalists 'disappeared', and opposition political parties' gatherings dispersed or banned whilst pro-government rallies were permitted.[35] In **Mozambique**, where the pandemic coincided with armed violence in the central and northern regions, press freedom was further curtailed, including attacks on media offices, and decision-making centralised and made more opaque.[36] Across all countries the pandemic **exacerbated political tensions between central and local governance, and social divisions** between different groups. With Covid-19 restrictions as a backdrop, social critique and popular protest around the effects of government policies on livelihoods and freedoms, and wider governance issues, were policed and regulated in newly aggressive ways.[37]

Key implications for policy and practice

- Attempts to empower citizens and develop more accountable governance need to be closely associated with protecting fundamental freedoms – and discourse and actions around accountable governance and defending human rights need to be joined up more strongly.

- Challenging the global retrenchment on civic freedoms is a crucial pre-condition for empowerment and accountability. Organisations need to grasp opportunities to apply pressure where they can do so to protect civic space. Donors, for example, should follow recent strong **OECD DAC recommendations**.

- Trends towards authoritarian governance increase the risk that international actors and donors are funding or tacitly supporting repressive and anti-democratic practices. Donors in particular need to carefully analyse this against 'do no harm' principles.

- Acutely repressive contexts and human rights emergency situations offer lessons and approaches on channelling support to CSOs and supporting their actions 'under the radar'.

Further reading and resources from our research on: **Space for Citizen Action**

Civil Society Observatory Panels

The Navigating Civic Space country research teams facilitated monthly observatory panels between June and December 2020 in Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan to discuss civic space under Covid-19. These panels were a safe environment for a small group of civil society leaders to collectively make sense of the changes in government restrictions and the impacts on their work and broader civic society and governance relationships. Their conversations had multiple positive outcomes. They allowed new links and solidarity to be built across members, and between campaigners with different sectoral or issue interests, and generated shared critiques of repressive moves and forces. In the words of one researcher, the observatory panel members "began to feel that we'd created a safe space under an otherwise quite dangerous situation, where people were increasingly fearful about gathering in person, and which ultimately became cathartic for members". In Nigeria and Mozambique, observatory panel discussions helped highlight how competition between formal civil society actors caused by broader restrictions on funding, and international funding in particular, were undermining efforts to unite against restrictions on civic space. The discussions generated information which was used to monitor the policy space available, support actors to strategise for the future, and to campaign to prevent temporary Covid-19 restrictions becoming more permanent.

7 Understanding governance 'from the margins'

Our research

From 2017–2019 A4EA researchers developed and used an <u>innovative research approach we called Governance Diaries</u>.[38] By visiting and interviewing the same households approximately monthly over the course of 12 months we were able to identify the kinds of issues that came up for poor and marginalised families, which governance actors they did or did not engage to help resolve them, and how far these issues were resolved. We included more than 160 households in this phase, in research sites in Mozambique, Myanmar and Pakistan.

From 2019-2020 we <u>looked more deeply at the dynamics we found in the first phase</u>. Researchers identified 80 key intermediaries – people who households reported were important in solving local governance problems – and used the same approach of visiting and interviewing them over 12 months. We looked to see what kinds of issues they became involved with, what strategies they used to resolve them, and how they navigated multiple authorities and linked into the wider governance system. We also adapted the method to investigate the roles of intermediaries and community level problem-solving after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

What we found

Low expectations and a lack of trust in authorities are very common in conflict-affected areas. Poor and marginalised people in areas that have experienced conflict generally have low expectations of service provision and accountability from authorities. These expectations are embedded in local norms and practices, but also in historically negative experiences of authorities and the state, and forms of governance that are authoritarian or extractive. Historic under-provision of services and limited experience of those authorities providing solutions were often coupled in our research sites with authorities being implicated in causing the problems that need resolving in the first place.[39] In Mozambique <u>people characterised the state as an "absent father"</u>.[40] In Pakistan, experiences of getting access to services were based on individual petitioning and contacts, rather than rights.[41] In Myanmar, decades of conflict underpinned mistrust in authorities beyond the community level and their ability – or legitimacy – to solve problems.[42] Low expectations reinforce other incentives not to approach higher authorities or use official channels.

> ❝ *...there is a blurriness of formal and informal networks: public authority is built and exercised through networks that bring together official and unofficial actors and institutions, in which inter-mediaries are embedded and which intermediaries to varying degrees build and sustain.* ❞
>
> **Accountability Bargains in Pakistan** (Loureiro et al, 2021, p.39)

▲ **Two bicyclists transport charcoal in rural Mozambique. A4EA research looked at how people living in remote and marginalised communities engaged with authorities and solved everyday governance problems.**
PHOTO: VANDERSPUYR/ WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, CC BY-SA 4.0

Very often poor and marginalised people solve their governance problems through customary, informal, or highly localised ways, avoiding engaging formal authorities. Across our research sites, people were commonly <u>incentivised to resolve things locally rather than escalating to higher level public authorities</u> or duty-bearers.[43] Involving higher level public authorities can be more costly – both in time and 'fees', or require more social capital, language skills, or knowledge than people have. It can also be seen to indicate that communities are not able to resolve their own issues. In Myanmar, cultural norms combine with authorities' low legitimacy and poor track record to make self-reliance at a local level a preference in some conflict-affected areas.[44] In Mozambique, it was expected that local party officials and customary leaders would solve problems without them reaching the district or municipal administrations.[45] A whole range of problems and disputes were resolved by people in – often informal – local leadership roles without involving any external or higher-level authorities. They dealt with issues ranging from land disputes to domestic abuse, sexual violence, and thefts. <u>Self-provision was very common</u>. It included self-protection through vigilante groups in Mozambique,[46] or community-enforced punishments and pooling of resources in Myanmar.[47]

When they do need to engage others to solve problems, people in these areas do this through a web of governance intermediaries. These intermediaries act on their behalf, mediate between them and others, or sometimes provide solutions themselves. We found them to be essential to the functioning of local governance; they were the grease that oiled the governance system. They sometimes resolve people's problems directly, or make decisions about disputes, and sometimes escalate or negotiate with others, including formal authorities, to find a solution. Sometimes they organise self-provision, and sometimes they mobilise people in collective action to make claims on authorities, or protect their interests. For example, in Pakistan, <u>one intermediary organised for women to occupy a disputed parcel of land</u>, retaining it for community use.[48] The intermediaries that our households reported to be important to them were diverse, including political party brokers, community activists, elected or customary village leaders, and retired government officials. Intermediaries often held widely acknowledged informal leadership and intermediation roles,

> **❝❝** *... there is an almost generalised feeling that, despite injustices and poor service delivery, they are unable (individually or collectively) to confront these when trying to engage with different authorities, including the state itself. With this feeling of inability and therefore demand-side weakness, accountability spaces tend to be top-down, not claimed by the community, and confined to the will of the chiefs....* **❞❞**
>
> **Who Can We Count On? Authority, Empowerment and Accountability in Mozambique** (Chaimite et al, 2021, p.41)

rather than official positions, although these distinctions generally didn't matter to community members. Different patterns emerged in different contexts. For example, in Pakistan, <u>intermediaries roles were frequently "dynastic"</u> – passed from parents to children.[49]

Women can be very effective intermediaries despite highly patriarchal structures that generally present additional barriers for women. These systems of informal local governance and intermediaries are overwhelmingly populated by men, presenting additional barriers for women to access resources.[50] Women report needing to go through men for all kinds of services or to get issues resolved due to prevailing gender norms. They very often rely on male family members or male intermediaries to connect to authorities or to have problems outside of the household resolved. Women regarded as important intermediaries by households often play a role limited to issues seen as concerned more with women than men's 'domains' – domestic disputes, sexual violence, access to health services, and child welfare. Sometimes male and female intermediaries work together to respond to or to take advantage of gender norms –

> **❝❝** *In Myanmar, community members in one village tract had engagements with not only the Myanmar government and the Myanmar military, but also with both the administrative and armed wings of five different ethnic administrations.* **❞❞**
>
> **Understanding Governance from the Margins: What does it mean in practice?** (Barnes et al., 2021, p.6)

for example based on who can enter a household, or who is most able to de-escalate conflict. In the few cases we found where women hold official positions in local governance or are the go to intermediary outside of these gendered issues they are often very successful, despite it challenging established norms. However, their authority or breadth of responsibility was often challenged and undermined by men. For example, in Mozambique there has been a push for the ruling party to be seen to include women in governance roles, **but once in these roles women were side-lined or not given actual authority** to make decisions.[51] This mirrors the findings on women's political inclusion in party structures discussed below.

People often see non-state authorities as having a more important role in resolving problems than the state. These include customary authorities and leaders, armed groups, parallel administrations, and political movements. **The authority and legitimacy of a wide range of authorities was common across all our research locations.**[52] Even where they may not have a formal governance role, people see them as holding responsibility for decisions around goods and services, justice, and security. When there are a variety of authorities present there are often options of who to go to when a problem arises. One of the roles of intermediaries is to make the choice of which authority to take a particular problem to, if they don't resolve it themselves. Choices of which authority to approach are affected by a range of things, including authorities' history of effectiveness and timeliness in resolving issues, their proximity and accessibility, the costs of going to them, and how they treat people. Authorities often overlap, sometimes

cooperating and sometimes actively competing with one another. This was especially the case in Myanmar, where there are parallel authorities to the Myanmar government led by ethnic minority groups in many areas.[53]

Key implications for policy and practice

- Intermediaries' key role needs to be acknowledged by policy-makers and practitioners. Their influence on solving everyday governance problems and controlling access to public services deserves more attention.

- In conflict-affected contexts strengthening of solidarity networks and social capital, trust between people and public authorities, and expectations and cultures of accountability are important outcomes to focus on.

- Fine-grained analysis is needed to create policy and develop programmes that engage with people's preferences for community-based governance and solutions, understanding the roots of these, and aspirations for any alternatives.

- Governance programmes need to be based on a more granular understanding of how people see authority and which authorities they choose to go to, rather than an idealised notion of what good governance should look like.

Further reading and resources from our research on: **Understanding Governance from the Margins**

Covid Diaries

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck we shifted our research focus to try to understand how our sample of intermediaries were responding to the health emergency. Interviewing intermediaries largely by phone over the first months of the pandemic we found that most of them had stepped up and were part of emergency responses, complementing and supplementing state action. This included forming and enforcing local rules to protect people's health, organising the distribution of relief supplies and emergency aid, and **being an even more active link to higher level authorities that were making decisions**.[54] We saw they were crucial

in deciding who in their community got help, what information got through to people, and how it was interpreted. Through this work we also discovered significant issues based on a lack of trust between households and authorities – including **a lack of trust in public health information or the seriousness of the virus, and frequent disregard for national policy prescriptions** at a local level.[55] In Myanmar, working with the FCDO governance programme the Centre for Good Governance, we worked to share our research findings in real time with development actors designing Covid-19 response measures.

Women's political participation and collective action

Our research

The roles women play in social and political action and their experiences of political agency was a cross-cutting theme of our research, and the focus of a number of studies. A4EA research explored the barriers to women's political participation and action, as well as the ways in which they are overcome, including how women, as individuals or a collective group, are able to secure responses and accountability from authorities. Relevant studies included:

- An experimental design looking at **factors enabling greater electoral turn-out by women** in urban Pakistan

- Analysis of **women's political participation in Pakistan and in Nigeria** more broadly, and especially the role of gatekeepers and intermediaries in enabling or limiting this participation

- Surveys exploring **women's agency at the household level and how it was affected under Covid-19**

- **Survey and interviews with women parliamentarians in Pakistan**, exploring how they enabled reforms, and the barriers they face in the political system

- Case studies of women's collective action, including **action for accountability on sexual harassment**, and popular protests on safety and security

- Action research with a **women's collective action platform in Mozambique, and activists in university settings seeking to act against sexual harassment in Egypt**

What we found

In fragile settings, women's political agency is limited in multiple ways by gendered social norms, including at the household level. Our research in Pakistan shows how deeply entrenched norms in the household severely restrict the agency of women, **especially when it comes to political participation**.[56] These deepened even further under Covid-19, strengthening household inequalities in housework, caring roles and access to health care, including women's ability to choose to have a vaccine.

Such deep-seated norms are also expressed in barriers to voting and political participation. A4EA **analysis of women's political participation in Nigeria** highlighted extremely low numbers of women standing for elected office, and lower electoral turnout by women, with significant regional variation.[57] A4EA research in Pakistan found that subtle processes socialise women into non-political roles, and result in a **'gendered psyche' that makes women feel invisible** and irrelevant to the electoral process.[58] The largest barrier to women's participation was found to be men's views about women's political engagement and the conditions under which it is appropriate for them to vote or take political action. **One A4EA study** found direct links between men's negative views of women's independent political action and low electoral turnout of women in the same households.[59] But women's electoral participation can be increased. A field experiment run by A4EA showed that **targeting male**

gatekeepers in campaigns promoting women's right to vote increased women's electoral turnout – with an 8 per cent increase in turnout if both men and women were engaged.[60]

Male gatekeepers within political parties also limit women's participation, despite formal gains in representation. Male-dominated political party bodies and their rules limit women's aspirations to elected office by creating perverse incentives for women to be appointed rather than elected, limiting their access to party funds, and expecting women to stand down in favour of male candidates.[61] Our work in Pakistan shows that while there have been formal advances establishing reserved seats and quotas for female candidates at national and provincial levels, women parliamentarians still face a significant uphill battle in establishing or deepening their political careers. In northern Nigeria, only 8 per cent of elected offices are held by women, compared to 18 per cent in the south.[62] This low representation is partly explained by the dynamics women face within parties – exclusion from party leadership structures, parties' reluctance to award tickets to women on competitive seats, and women's underrepresentation in the lower ranks of party workers – and partly by broader societal, religious, and ideological discrimination. In Pakistan, even after they are elected, women legislators continue to be excluded from political spaces. **They experience silencing, verbal sexual harassment and on occasion threats of violence from male colleagues**.[63]

Nevertheless, women frequently collectively organise at the frontline, develop strategies for gaining attention from powerholders at national

> *Our evidence suggests that for women to turn out in larger numbers, they must feel included in the political process and must be able to see how their political participation can strengthen the accountability bargain.*
> **Invisible Citizens: Why More Women in Pakistan Do Not Vote**, (Cheema at al, 2019, p.22)

and local levels, and in some cases, emerge as key leaders of the resistance against oppression. Women can and do navigate restrictive norms and mobilise using gender specific ways that reduce the risk of repression from state security agencies and other non-state actors.[64] In Pakistan, women protest leaders **use support from political parties and the feminist movement to amplify their claims** and mitigate the risks of contention.[65] In Mozambique, histories of women-led **protests become part of a supporting narrative for future action**. We found two factors that lowered the degree of resistance women face from their communities by violating social norms around women's presence in public or political activity. One was if women are seen to protest on issues that are about protecting the men and the community's interest. The other was if public space for men has shrunk and the risk of violence against men is high. Often women find ways to protest that are gender-specific and maintain some community norms around gender roles, making their involvement in protest more socially

Collective action on sexual harassment

Our edition of the *IDS Bulletin* on **Collective Action for Accountability on Sexual Harassment** brought together global perspectives to highlight action taken by women in 11 countries. The *Bulletin* challenged the Western-centric framing of sexual harassment campaigns as part of the #MeToo movement, and highlighted the risks of associating the two – including providing further ammunition to those that accuse women defending their rights as 'westernised' or pushing a Western agenda. The *Bulletin* argues that collective action "is critical for transforming sexual harassment into an issue that is everybody's business".[73] It notes that triggers to collective action on sexual harassment often come from single high-profile cases or events, but rest on

long-term work of community-building activism led by women, and long-held frustrations at the inaction of authorities. It engages with the complexity of what accountability for sexual harassment looks like, when formal accountability routes are so often biased against women. Whilst mobilisations might have positive benefits themselves for participants in terms of solidarity and empowerment, achieving accountability is harder – even where campaigns have achieved some policy change on paper. It also comes with risks, including of backlash against women and men taking action. The *Bulletin* edition has wide take-up, including by parliamentarians campaigning on sexual harassment issues in the UK.

acceptable. For example, they may foreground their identities as concerned mothers or wives, or role in defending the honour of the community.[66]

Through expressions of collective agency, many women report a sense of increased critical awareness (power within) and a collective sense of belonging and ability to act together (power with). However, this sense of empowerment may not be enough to change accountability relations with the powerholders. Our research shows that women acting collectively were very often successful in securing some response from authorities, including military authorities. Women's **collective mobilisation around sexual harassment** has helped to change the power equation in favour of women's rights, even if it hasn't brought about fully accountable systems.[67] Women leading localised protests around issues of rights and service provision in Pakistan and Mozambique reported increased political awareness and agency through their activism.[68] Such successes – state responses, shifts in power, a new sense of political agency – may however be limited to specific events, or may be fleeting. The challenge is whether and if these successful incidents germinate seeds for change – creating a legacy for public engagement by women, and more systemic accountability outcomes over time.

Policy interventions and autonomous action that builds women's political agency and networks of solidarity have been key in advancing gender equality efforts in these contexts. In Pakistan we found advances in women's political presence and power were aided by cross-party women's caucuses in national and provincial parliaments, often resulting in substantive policy gains.[69] The combination of civil society support to women politicians with donor support to their work on legislative reforms has led to a number of significant gender equality policy outcomes since the quota for women in elected bodies was restored and increased in 2002.[70] We found that **donor-funded accountability programmes can play an important role** in supporting women's paths to empowerment, political participation and conflict prevention, but that this success depended on a network of well-functioning local NGOs able to reach women in their communities, and was challenged by increasingly closed political space.[71] **Donor support to women-led campaigns can also be important**, even if symbolic rather than financial. For example, the BBOG campaign in Nigeria **used international platforms and support to amplify its message** and strengthen its claims.[72]

Key implications for policy and practice

- In contexts where men act as gatekeepers but have relatively permissive attitudes and norms they should be actively engaged in interventions that aim to increase women's social and political action and participation. This can be achieved through targeting actions at both men and women at the household level, but care needs to be taken not to instigate patriarchal backlash from men who hold less permissive attitudes.

- There needs to be greater awareness among political parties about the importance of women voters for governance as well as their potential to act as pivotal voters. Political parties need to directly engage with women to reduce their perception of being "politically invisible." This will involve deepening their cadres of women workers and giving women greater representation in the pool of candidates that they nominate, and beyond reserved seats.

- Women's political agency can be built in conflict-affected contexts, working in bottom-up ways defined by local actors. Women's groups at a neighbourhood or village level are important examples, allowing discussion of government performance, and learning how to make more effective demands from their national, provincial, and local representatives.

- International solidarity with and financial support to grassroots women's organisations is crucial. Donors should be allies here, rather than agenda-setters. Restrictions on foreign funding and tighter legal controls on NGOs are impeding support for women's organising, network-building, and advocacy, but finding ways to do so is critical to build a legacy of empowered women ready to mobilise when political space opens.

Further reading and resources from our research on: **Women's Political Participation and Collective Action**

Citizen-led strategies for empowerment and accountability

Our research

Throughout our research, A4EA work examined multiple ways in which citizens mobilised to express their voice and make demands for accountability. Our work in this theme included:

- A major cross-country comparative study on **protests related to energy provision** in Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan

- Studies of key campaigns, such as the **BBOG movement** in Nigeria

- A specific focus on **women-led protests in Mozambique and Pakistan**, interviewing those involved to get insiders' perspectives

- Exploration of **citizen action challenging sexual harassment** in many countries

- Tracking of **civil society responses under Covid-19** in Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan

What we found

A rich repertoire of citizen-led social and political action exists despite authoritarian governance styles and real risks of reprisal, including actions that are 'under the radar'. In settings of repression and closing civic space there may be expectations that we will see little social and political action, or that where it occurs it will be more violent due to the absence of peaceful channels for voicing dissent.[74] In fact, A4EA research has found a diverse repertoire of citizen-led action. At times these actions may be more disguised or hidden from the view of public authorities, and other times they may become more open and direct. At times they may take the form of fleeting or small-scale street protests, while at other times they grow into larger and more sustained social movements, for example in the case of BBOG in Nigeria. Even under the rapidly closed civic

space associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, a variety of civic responses emerged, <u>ranging from protests on health and harassment issues, citizen monitoring of public Covid-19 funds, and direct protests on their misuse</u>.[75] In the BBOG campaign, and at the start of the pandemic, online spaces became increasingly important for communication, engaging, and mobilisation – though recently we've seen increasing clampdowns on these online spaces, and a return to on-street protests as well.

At other moments and places, citizens may choose not to challenge authorities directly, but still work together 'under the radar' to provide their own services through self-provisioning and various forms of mutual aid. We found this, for instance, in rural and conflict-affected areas of Myanmar, where histories of fear and cultural norms discourage challenging authorities directly, and the legitimacy of those authorities was under question. Citizens worked together to create their own services, whether around education, electricity, or burial arrangements, often organised by local intermediaries, and sometimes with the direct or implicit support of authorities.[76] During the Covid-19 pandemic we also saw an explosion of forms of mutual support and self-help, with local groups supporting one another to provide needed services and resources for survival.[77] Such horizontal forms of assistance, with or without the support of local authorities, are critical expressions of agency, even where they don't include more upward or vertical claims for accountability.

Cultural expressions of dissent and critique of the status quo are also important forms of social and political action. At certain moments, forms of cultural expression may become important ways of expressing demands for accountability, sometimes more disguised and sometimes very public. In Mozambique, for instance, <u>hip-hop was found to be an important way of conveying demands for public accountability</u> which expands the repertoire of action beyond the limited occasions when citizens' views are expressed in public protests or formal political participation. Studying the lyrics of popular hip-hop songs our researchers found recurring themes including voicing of grievances and calls for popular action on the economic situation, political-military conflict, corruption, police, public transport, and the role of external donors.[78] Across our work we saw music, memes, graffiti, and other forms

> **❞** *… lyrics emerge as a vehicle to amplify subdued voices in a context where critique of those in governments can result in reprisals.* **❞**
> **Shaping Social Change with Music in Maputo, Mozambique** (Taela et al., 2021, p. 5)

of cultural expression emerging as a source of expression across a variety of issues and demands. For example, the importance of memes in sharing the collective experience of energy shortages and price rises stood out.[79]

Moral outrage and a lack of formal opportunities for citizen voice can prompt intense collective protests, particularly on key trigger issues such as safety and security, and access to energy. While citizen collective action remains 'under the radar' in many cases, at other times we see the

▼ **Excerpt from graphic stories produced by A4EA representing stories of women-led protests in Mozambique.** ILLUSTRATION BY ALESSANDRA PAES, STORY BY CARLOS OSVALDO. FULL GRAPHIC AVAILABLE AT WWW. PODERUSAS.COM

EVERYBODY WAS THERE, FROM ALL NEIGHBORHOOD BLOCKS. THE ROAD WAS BLOCKED, AND EACH PERSON HAD A UNIQUE WAY OF EXPRESSING THEIR FEELINGS. SOME SANG, OTHERS DANCED, SOME CRIED, AND A FEW WERE SIMULATING THAT THEY WERE GIVING BIRTH.

www.poderusas.com

I was a part of my mother's protest

THERE WAS ALWAYS A FIGHT HERE, FOR DECADES NOW. ALL BECAUSE OF THE LAND. THE MILITARY WANT TO TAKE OUR LAND, AND WE DON'T ACCEPT THAT, OF COURSE. THERE HAVE BEEEN SO MANY MEETINGS AND NO SOLUTION.

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Don't leave your voice in nobody's hands
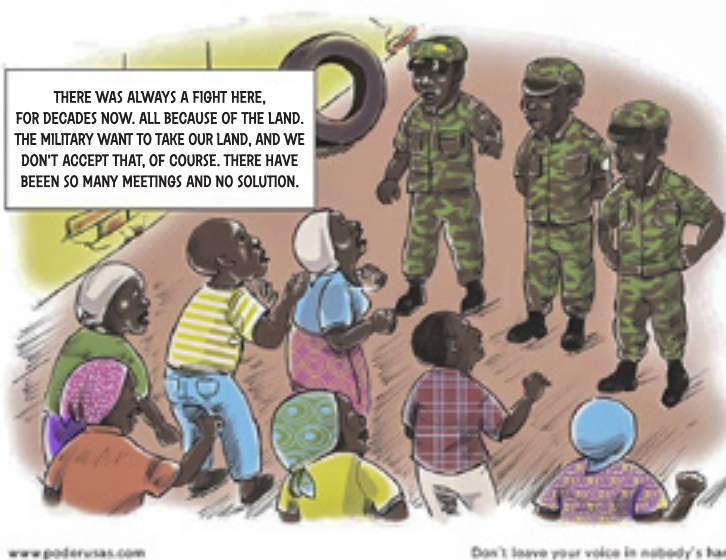
emergence of intense protests in the same places. Even in the face of potential reprisals, people engage in direct forms of action on the streets using a variety of protest tactics. These actions often emerge from a sense of moral outrage – the sense that "enough is enough" – and **when there is an absence – or distrust – of other more institutionalised channels for engagement**.[80] We also saw such outrage focus on issues which became more salient during the pandemic, including public health, access to education, and the protection of livelihoods.[81]

Safety and security were key issues for people across our research, perhaps unsurprisingly given the histories of violence and conflict they had experienced. Perhaps more surprising is that the sense of moral outrage around insecurity was often a trigger for collective social and political action led by women. In Nigeria, for instance, the kidnapping of the Chibok girls by Boko Haram led to the formation of the highly visible BBOG campaign. While this began as a movement around a single event its **agenda grew to consider other issues of safety and security** – and the government's accountability for them.[82] Later, in

> **❝** *Many people perceived protests to have won power, but these gains could be subverted, stolen or subsumed within other agendas. Meaningful gains in citizen power after energy protests were short-lived and diffuse, dissipating in the absence of institutionalised mechanisms of citizen empowerment, or of sustained civic organisations or movements.* **❞**
>
> **Demanding Power: Do Protests Empower Citizens to Hold Governments Accountable over Energy?** (Hossain et al., 2021, p.63)

2020, the explosive #EndSars movement against harassment by security forces also showed the salience of the need for safety and protection.[83] On a smaller scale, our work in Pakistan unpacks a number of examples of collective action around community security issues. For instance, women from the Hazara ethnic group – who normally were in purdah and out of the public eye – mobilised against the ethno-sectarian killings of their sons and husbands, spending Eid in their community

Energy protests

In-depth comparative studies of energy protests in Mozambique, Pakistan, and Nigeria illustrate each of the key findings in this section. Rights to and access to energy are a frequent trigger of action, and source of contention on what states owe their citizens as part of the social contract. In Pakistan, the research **documented 456 protests on access to electricity** in the period between 2007–2015.[87] In Mozambique and Nigeria, both countries rich in energy resources, national level fuel protests in the face of cuts to fuel subsidies have led to some of the largest and most significant protests in recent times.[88] A **global study of energy protests in 41 countries** between 2005–2018 found that these protests are more likely, and most significant in size or visibility, in countries with high levels of national resources yet relatively weak forms of governance.[89]

Our work explored citizen perceptions around access to energy, in contrast to the dominant view of energy policy as a highly technical and expert domain. Accessible energy is increasingly becoming necessary for survival in these contexts – for heating and cooling, cooking and transport, communications and information. Yet it is often expensive, intermittent and felt to be riddled with corruption. We found a deep sense of anger and injustice, and an expectation of reliable and affordable access to energy as a right. In the absence of more institutionalised channels in which citizens could raise their deeply embedded grievances around their perceived right to energy, **citizens mobilised on the streets to make their demands known, often using memes and songs to convey outrage on these issues**. In many cases, such as the fuel strike in Nigeria in 2012, these protests rapidly spread, until some concessions were made by authorities, though these gains were often not sustained.

The contentiousness of this issue creates a wicked problem for global efforts to transition away from carbon fuels. The meeting of popular demand for access to energy through subsidised carbon-based resources is part of a bargain that provides governmental and economic stability in the short term, but serves as a disincentive for transition to a post-carbon economy in these resource rich countries.

graveyard decorated with photos of their dead relatives, or tossing their bangles at the gates of the provincial assembly to demand the state protect their families against violence.[84]

Direct action and protest often get responses from authorities, and form part of gradual shifts in power relations, but these gains are too often fleeting. While these forms of collective action are significant, we found that they could also be very fleeting – they could erupt quickly, but then also often subside. There are important exceptions, such as the sustained BBOG campaign, but this required **the development of strong leadership and well-coordinated organisational structures**, which many more spontaneous protests lack. Without such structures, when civic space tightened, new spaces for engagement could be taken away. When protests subsided, and media withdrew, the sense of power that had been gained could be dissipated. But such actions represent important cracks in the system – bringing previously invisible and visible issues to the table, creating a sense of agency amongst previously silent actors, and slowly shifting norms on what is possible in public places and expected from public authority. Often even fleeting protests exacted responses from authorities, followed by a subtle re-adjustment of the broader social contract or political bargain.[85] But rarely did we find that these examples of collective action by themselves lead to a change of the overall rules of the game, or fundamental redistributions of power.[86]

> ▌▌ *...it is necessary to address institutional failures to hear and respond to citizens' energy concerns. There is no guarantee that improving citizen participation in energy policymaking will resolve this wicked problem. But enabling citizens to voice their energy grievances through non-riotous means is an entry point to date untried in countries with large fossil fuel subsidies and a history of mass protest.* ▌▌
>
> **Demanding Power: Do Protests Empower Citizens to Hold Governments Accountable over Energy?** (Hossain et al., 2021, p.10)

Key implications for policy and practice

- There is a much broader 'ecosystem' of collective action than is often recognised by many actors who promote citizen engagement and accountability. More attention should be paid to the ways in which citizens raise their voices outside of institutional channels, and how these could be coupled with formal mechanisms.

- Collective forms of action and inaction may sit side by side within the same countries, or even communities, and vary rapidly across scales and moments. New approaches to political economy analysis are needed to help to measure and identify these sparks of energy and 'pulse of the streets', and to consider their potential for reform and change.

- Few accountability reforms and programmes focus on the key triggering issues we found in these settings – such as safety and security and access to energy. Action on accountability needs to explore approaches for these critical areas, and others that stimulate popular demand – rather than focusing on traditional areas of service delivery alone.

- The achievement of a just energy transition globally will only be possible with much greater engagement of citizens about the energy policies that affect their lives. Diverse citizen perspectives need to inform work on the climate emergency and energy transitions.

Further reading and resources from our research on: **Citizen-led Strategies for Empowerment and Accountability**
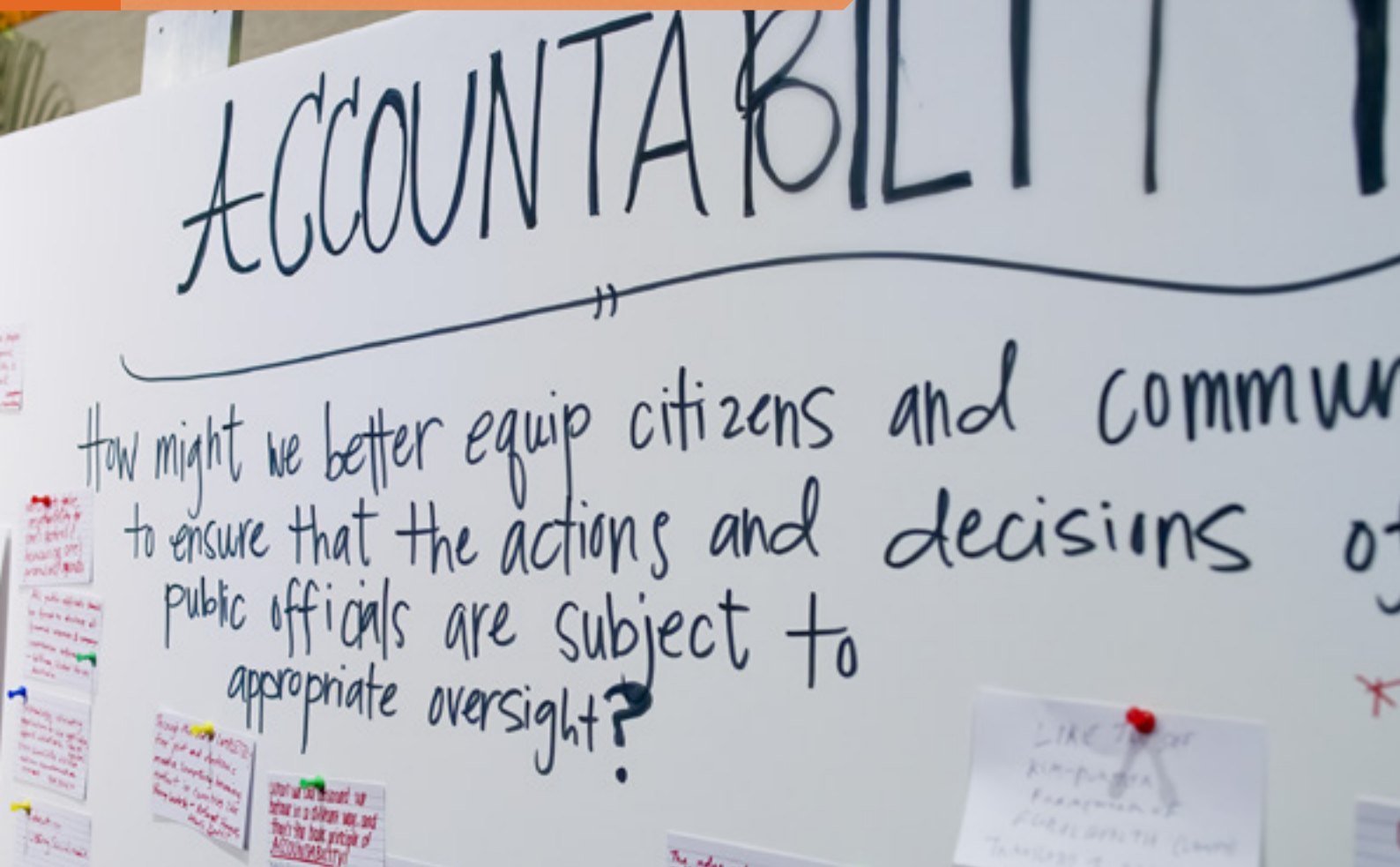
Our research

Several A4EA research projects explored what kinds of actions and approaches provide meaningful opportunities for citizens to engage productively with authorities, including in the approaches of development donors. For example, we looked at:

- How far **Commissions of Inquiry** set up in Jos State, Nigeria offered opportunities for accountability following episodes of ethno-religious violence

- The links between **extractives sector transparency in Mozambique** and citizen action

- The approaches and interactions of several donor-funded empowerment and accountability programmes, including their use of **adaptive management approaches**, and **multi-level strategies**

- The operationalisation of the **World Bank's Citizen Engagement commitments** in projects in our contexts

- How far **World Bank programmes in five contexts** were able to build countervailing power over time

What we found

CSOs and donor-funded programmes can create space and support enabling conditions for citizen engagement in governance in conflict-affected settings, though power dynamics can be hard to shift. Our studies found clear gains from programmes that sought to create new opportunities for civic engagement. The *Aawaz* programme in Pakistan was found to **create genuine opportunities particularly for women to engage in civic affairs**.[90] Also in Pakistan, the *Empowerment, Voice and Accountability for Better Health and Nutrition* project was able **to generate grassroots involvement in assessing the quality of basic health services**, and link that strategically not only to resolution of specific problems but to underlying health sector policies and programmes.[91] The *Deepening Social Accountability* programme in Myanmar developed critical skills amongst grassroots CSOs to question authorities' actions in ways that lowered risks of reprisal and were seen as constructive by government officials.[92] In Nigeria, generations of donor-supported actions taken both by government and CSOs have opened opportunities

⌃ Debates about accountability recorded at a World Bank 2014 Youth Summit. A4EA research looks at how various development institutions try to build public accountability through their actions.
PHOTO: SIMONE D. MCCOURTIE, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

and developed new ways of doing things that increased citizen oversight of public procurement, and increased public engagement with budget-setting.[93] We found that by challenging dominant norms on gender, women's voting and political participation could be strengthened through CSO intervention, even in the highly patriarchal setting of Pakistan.[94] **Outside links with social movements and CSOs** were also important for women making progress towards gender equity in Pakistan.[95]

The picture is not wholly positive, however. It can be hard to create pro-accountability incentives and spaces that work well. Often, they simply replicate power inequities or social divisions. For example we found that **Commissions of Inquiry set up in Nigeria** were unable to effectively provide full accountability for episodes of ethno-religious violence because of political incentives and tussles between levels of state and federal authority. The social fragmentation at the source of the violence was simply played out again in spaces and processes initiated by Commissions, including by CSOs.[96] It is also hard to create genuine incentives for citizens to engage when there are many reasons not to. For example, exploration of efforts to increase transparency in the extractives industry in Mozambique found numerous barriers to disclosed information being used effectively by citizens, **including limited engagement by those driving transparency efforts with the people most affected by extractive industries themselves, and high costs of being seen as critical of government**.[97] Assessment of World Bank efforts to increase citizen engagement found **a tendency towards 'thin' mechanisms such as one-off consultation** that fall short of enabling citizens to engage in oversight of actions taken with Bank support in country – although also some notable exceptions.[98]

Spaces and opportunities often change quickly, but they potentially have long-run gains in empowerment and citizen capacities to engage in social and political action for accountability.
It is common to question the sustainability of donor-supported actions. In several of the cases of success noted above newly created spaces for citizen engagement closed down after the end of external funding. There were also important contextual shifts associated with this – for example increased antagonism towards civil society and the activist public from authorities in Pakistan, and the massive

> ❚❚ *Donor programmes to nurture civil society space and empower citizens appear even more valuable where the gains of a democratic transition may be rapidly slipping away. Due to the drivers of Pakistan's fragility, external pressures on democratic spaces and civil society remained high during the two programmes' life cycles, therefore enhancing the external donor's value in enabling an environment for citizen voice in social and political action.* ❚❚
>
> **Donor Action in Pakistan: A Comparative Case Study of CDIP and AAWAZ** (Khan & Qidwai, 2021, p.64)

setback of the military coup in Myanmar. However, we also saw how even fleeting opportunities built capacities that can outlast the political moment and are not necessarily reliant on external resources. Research on the Aawaz programme found that the actions taken **supported women to make demands of authorities and engage in civic affairs in ways that were experienced as empowering**, and enabled those women to continue civic engagement following the end of the programme.[99] The skills of civic mobilisation and questioning authorities developed through social accountability work in Myanmar may last, and may serve to support resistance to the new military rule. However, donors' tendencies to focus on measuring short-run policy change and immediate 'outputs' that simply evidence activity **limit our understanding of these long-run effects**.[100] Only longer-term retrospective studies can detect these impacts – for example, **the positive legacy found** in such a study of World Bank support for national ethnic land rights reform in Colombia.[101]

Even partial political openings can allow donors to support multi-level approaches that bolster countervailing power. By countervailing power we mean sources and centres of power that have a chance of challenging those that dominate social and political decision-making.[c] Exploration of how multiple UK-supported development programmes worked across scales – engaging social and political actors from the sub-national to the national and beyond, and creating links across sub-national areas – **found that this approach offered potential to shift power relations**.[102]

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[c] Fung and Wright (**2003:260**) define countervailing power as 'mechanisms that reduce, and perhaps even neutralize the power advantages of ordinarily powerful actors'.

Multi-scalar strategies were seen to strengthen citizen's ability to navigate governance systems to resolve problems and claim accountability, and bolster pro-accountability coalitions' internal solidarity and external legitimacy – as proposed in **one of the A4EA inception phase papers.**[103] The multi-level strategies used were also reported to establish more significant pressure for reform than exclusively sub-national or national approaches. The advantages of joining grassroots civil society actors' perspectives and evidence with regional and national advocacy campaigns and opportunities were particularly highlighted. This was also a finding in a review of five historic World Bank programmes, exploring how far they offered the chance of building countervailing power, which emphasised **the need for bridging the gap between national-level political opportunities and specific constituencies at the grassroots.**[104] One of the ways that successful projects did this was to provide direct support for scaled-up representative organisations to engage institutionally with governments over the allocation of resources. Of course, such direct support to social organisations comes with risks and complexities. For example, study of the **BBOG movement in Nigeria** and **work with NGO Forum Mulher in Mozambique** highlighted the risks – both perceived and actual – that donor involvement reduces the legitimacy and connection to the grassroots of campaigns.[105]

> **❝** *Countervailing power involves bargaining power – the leverage needed both to question authority without reprisals – and to get those in power to listen. Countervailing power can be expressed in either adversarial or collaborative terms, but it is constituted by actors or institutions with some capacity to tangibly push back and constrain the abuse of power.* **❞**
>
> **Contested Terrain: International Development Projects and Countervailing Power for the Excluded** (Fox, 2021, p.2/3)

Different donor-funded programmes seeking to increase empowerment and accountability can mutually reinforce one another, miss opportunities to do so, or end up undermining one another. When multiple donors seek to support social and political change in the same contexts their programmes have a range of interactions, with several possible effects.[106] A4EA research evidenced how donor programmes could create synergistic relationships between sets of action. In Nigeria, UK FCDO investment in capacity building and citizen mobilisation was refocused to help subnational governments reach the targets set by a new World Bank project, which added new momentum and incentives for reform.[107] In Pakistan, we saw **how a UK-funded programme successfully took advantage**

Assessing World Bank Citizen Engagement Commitments

How far do international actors use their leverage to embed citizen engagement and increased opportunities for public accountability in their work? A4EA partner the Accountability Research Center (ARC) looked at this challenge in relation to the World Bank.[116] The World Bank has established an institutional commitment to incorporate citizen engagement in project design, launching a strategic framework to guide project teams. ARC developed a tool to assess the degree to which projects fulfil this commitment, piloting it with 57 World Bank projects in four A4EA countries. The tool also went further, analysing as well how far key ingredients for real citizen oversight and accountability were included in the project designs. **The analysis indicated differences between country project portfolios** – with a greater 'density' of citizen engagement measures in Nigeria and Mozambique than Myanmar and Pakistan – and a preference for one-off engagement rather than ongoing citizen oversight or mechanisms. Measures chosen tended towards those designed to 'report up' within the World Bank, rather than 'report out' to citizens at large. The analysis produced was welcomed by citizen engagement advocates within the World Bank. In September 2020, the World Bank's Citizen Engagement and Social Accountability Global Solutions Group incorporated three of the four key recommendations from an A4EA policy brief[117] in a presentation on how to move forward with the Bank's commitments. The tool developed through this work has subsequently been used in multiple country contexts, and ARC has supported a network of civil society advocates to use it as part of their advocacy and project monitoring.

of a previous set of interventions, recruiting activists and mobilisers whose skills were honed under an earlier programme and using their skills and connections to increase women's registration to vote in the same areas.[108] Importantly, these synergies didn't come about through traditional 'donor coordination' mechanisms, but largely through the freedom for those implementing them to opportunistically make the necessary links between programmes.[109] Whilst these are positive examples, there were also missed opportunities – with a number of instances of donor action running in parallel on the same issues and in the same places without this positive reinforcement. Importantly, donor actions can also undermine one another. We saw this in the case of programmes supported by the UK FCDO and World Bank in Nigeria, where competing incentives for subnational governments potentially rolled back progress made previously towards transparency in public procurement, and patient progress towards more citizen involvement generated by one programme was undermined by the lower bar set by the other.[110]

Conflict and fragility increase the need for flexibility and adaptation, including allowing those who operate at the frontline to respond fluidly to changing political opportunities and risks. Ambiguity, uncertainty, and rapid, sometimes unpredictable, openings and closure of opportunities were key features of A4EA contexts. Explorations of several ongoing donor programmes suggests this challenges traditional donor approaches of standardised models and requirements, **and places more emphasis on the growing trend for adaptive, agile, and politically informed ways of working**.[111] This work distinguished between adaptive delivery on the ground, adaptive programming by implementing organisations, and adaptive governance by donors. In practice, there is a great deal of agility in citizen-led and donor-supported actions at the frontline level, often resting on the politically savvy and day-to-day astute judgements of those most directly involved in that action.

Examples include the careful tactics of activists and reformists supported by the FCDO in **Myanmar** and **Nigeria**, acutely aware of political risks and windows of opportunity, and constantly adjusting their tactics to sustain coalitions for reform.[112] Adaptive approaches also allowed for **programmes to re-focus following political shocks**.[113] However the architecture at the programme governance level is often not as flexible as it needs to be to support this frontline adaptation to context –

both internally within donor agencies, and in the incentives and expectations they place on their implementing partners.[114] Key in this is the need for trusting relationships between the different layers of actors, and an active shared management of risks. Taking more flexible approaches to theories of change and output expectations is also crucial, given how quickly assumptions are challenged as the work plays out and the context changes.[115]

Further reading and resources from our research on: **Enabling Citizen Action**

Key implications for policy and practice

- Increasing the accountability of public institutions depends on building countervailing power amongst citizens and reformers. Institutional development needs to be undertaken hand-in-hand with supporting organised citizens that can engage with new spaces and opportunities, and requires careful analysis of how far prevailing political dynamics might capture or undermine these opportunities.

- Understanding how enabling actions support reform requires more nuanced, long-term approaches to measuring change and outcomes. Monitoring and evaluation strategies around empowerment and accountability should focus on longer-term change and the building of capacities and capabilities, rather than short-run activities and policy reforms.

- Donor architecture and management practices have further to go to enable the flexibility and agility required to work effectively on issues that rely on political opportunities and rapidly shifting contexts.

- Donors and organisations looking to support pro-accountability reform need to recognise themselves as social and political actors, and the potential for their efforts to undermine or confound each other. This includes seeing other externally supported actions and agendas as part of the shifting context they are working in, and trying harder to agree shared levels of ambition and act synergistically.

11 Research, communications and partnerships

Undertaking research in fragile and conflict-affected settings is fraught with risks, dilemmas, and trade-offs – all the more when researching issues of social and political action, empowerment, and accountability. In our five years of working together we've learnt important lessons about what it takes to undertake research on such issues rigorously and safely, communicate our findings effectively, and collaborate across a multi-country research consortium.

Lessons on research methods and research ethics

A4EA's research used a range of methods, including action research, qualitative enquiry, large-scale surveys, and experimental designs. Seven lessons emerge across these efforts.

1 **Engage over the long term, using research methods and questions that surface the 'citizen's-eye' view.** Much A4EA research was designed to understand the 'political economy from below' and marginalised people's perspectives. Often this required engagement with research participants over the medium to long term. For example our **governance diaries** work interviewed people in the same research sites monthly over a period of years, and the civil society observatories we set up to **monitor civic space under Covid-19** met monthly during the research. Our work on protests was strengthened by engaging directly with those involved in the action.

2 **Go local and invest in well-positioned research teams.** Our research in conflict-affected areas was enabled, and made far more robust, by empowering and supporting researchers in those localised contexts, with appropriate support to enhance their skills where that was needed. Researchers with a close connection to research sites had a greater ability to read and navigate risks as things changed. They also add grounded understandings and contextualisation of concepts that increased research validity – for example identifying the best ways to talk about abstract concepts like empowerment and accountability in numerous languages, rather than using simple translations.

▲ **A4EA researchers taking part in an annual partnership meeting. The A4EA research consortium included partners from across our focus countries, and meeting together built valuable relationships as well as joining up different research strands.**
PHOTO: GARY EDWARDS

3 **Take a multi-pronged and contextualised approach to secure access and get research approvals.** We needed to maintain multiple 'broker' and 'gatekeeper' relationships at the national and sub-national level to sustain access to research sites. The importance of these kinds of relationships ensured we could get to the places we needed to, and enabled us to build trust with communities and research participants. It also helped to negotiate the complexities of formal and informal permissions needed to undertake our work. Given the tendency for repressive forces to use formal research approval processes to police research and target surveillance, we gave priority to community-level approvals negotiated by trusted brokers.

4 **Be prepared to change tack, and build in flexibility and adaptation.** Conditions on the ground in fragile contexts can change rapidly, and political events can alter what is sensitive and salient overnight. Adapting to these changes whilst maintaining rigour required extra effort of our research teams. Often the ability to collect primary data changed, requiring adjustments to research strategies – for example to find new ways to triangulate findings, or change timescales and ways of working, such as undertaking interviews by phone and online instead of face-to-face. Field researchers needed clear parameters and permission to make these adjustments in real time.

5 **Build in sense-making throughout.** Having a research design that involved field researchers and participants in sense-making and interpretation was crucial. This is partly because of the lack of existing data and information, but also because of the necessity for embedded researchers to make regular decisions about adaptations and compromises in research strategies. It also helped overcome the difficulties of getting a good contextual understanding of different sub-national contestations, dynamics, and cultures.

6 **Maximise the benefits of dialogue and reflection for those participating in research.** Well-constructed research processes can have a number of benefits for those taking part, and one we found most important was the ability of research to create space for dialogue and sense-making by participants themselves. Some researchers spoke about the importance for their research participants of 'giving testimony'. Our civic space observatory panels were designed to allow members to collectively strategise in

the face of shrinking space. Events to validate research findings with participants were found to be both cathartic and prevent lived experiences being toned down in the re-telling.[118]

7 **Constantly balance risks against quality.** It can be tempting to take on unnecessary levels of risk to ensure research is rigorous. We had regular conversations about and made regular adjustments to balance the security of our research participants and researchers (both immediate risks, and also from oversight by security institutions) with the rigour and validity of the research. Ultimately 'do no harm' principles need to win out – even where participants were keen to be involved we sometimes dropped research sites because risks became too high.

Lessons on communication and uptake

We successfully used many tried and tested approaches to stakeholder engagement and research communication - including face-to-face events, media engagement, extensive publication of blogs and academic outputs, and targeted online communications channels. However, we also needed to adapt these approaches given our highly sensitive research topics and the volatile and insecure settings in which we were working. Five lessons stand out from our approach.

1 **Leveraging consortium networks and targeted stakeholder engagement.** The A4EA consortium involved a range of organisations with excellent networks that we were able to leverage to increase our audiences and relationships. Relationships developed with external key stakeholders right from the start of the programme and throughout also opened the doors for influence. Often these stakeholders became champions of the work, making connections for us, and encouraging uptake. Many joined ongoing programme structures such as our international Advisory Group or Country Reference Groups.

2 **Adapting communication and output formats to non-academic audiences.** Engaging the diverse stakeholders we identified required outputs that were more accessible than our academic publications. A4EA research teams successfully experimented with a range of communication formats, including the use of animation, **storytelling graphics**, and a photographic exhibition as well as blogs, **podcasts** and videos.

3 **Communicating 'behind the scenes'.** Much of our research on Myanmar could not be published during the research phases, given significant risks to the researchers and institutions involved. Researchers still achieved effective influence by building up a coalition of interested organisations – holding invited briefings with donors, INGOs, and trusted partners, and combining our evidence alongside others so it couldn't be pinpointed to one particular person or organisation.

4 **Compromising on publication, authorship, and acknowledgement practices to protect researchers.** It is often expected that research programmes 'trail' their work by sharing emerging findings. In our most complex contexts and research sites it was crucial that communication waited until fieldwork was fully completed and could not be interfered with by security agencies or other powerful actors. In some cases, and in agreement with researchers themselves, we also published work using pseudonyms or anonymously, or left out details of field research teams and partners in publication acknowledgements because of the risk this would pose to them – even though not giving due credit felt uncomfortable.

5 **Taking a flexible approach to branding.** Visibility and association with international donors and institutions can strengthen credibility for some organisations. However, **these associations can also put the research and partners at risk in politically volatile settings**, especially where Western support can be portrayed as outside interference. We developed a flexible approach to branding which allowed partners to make decisions on when and how to use our brand. This was a useful way to navigate different circumstances and ensure neither the research process nor the partners safety was compromised. Funder sensitivity and flexibility on branding was also invaluable.

Lessons on working in multi-country research partnerships

The A4EA research consortium involved multiple and diverse partners across several countries. The consortium included university-based research centres and networks, international and national NGOs and a private consultancy. Recognising our different strengths and positions, we established key principles for working together early on, including transparency and communication, overall guidance by a steering committee of key partners, and annual meetings to learn, reflect and adjust.

As in all such large research consortia, there are many lessons of how to build and maintain equitable and effective partnerships. For A4EA, these included the importance of:

1 **Sequencing and working iteratively.** Working in several phases was crucial in A4EA. In the first phase, we were able to carry out a broad range of exploratory projects, which not only refined research questions, but also allowed researchers to learn from one another and to build more common understanding across contexts. By the second research phase, we were ready to focus in on some more specifically comparative research themes and questions, guided by similar methods and approaches across contexts.

2 **Co-constructing the research agenda.** Partners were actively involved in co-constructing the research themes and approaches in a way that tried to balance various interests and contexts, while being consistent with the overall research questions for the programme.

3 **Collaborative approaches to cross-country comparison.** A great deal of effort was necessary in our work to build common frameworks, methods, understanding and synthesis of results across contexts with significant differences, and researchers from different disciplines. It relied on investing significant time and building good relationships, which in A4EA we developed through regular in-person meetings early in the programme, sustained online in later stages.

4 **The value of partners embedded in broader networks.** While sometimes research partners are chosen and assessed based primarily on their research skills, a commitment to broader principles such as stakeholder uptake and to knowledge of subnational research sites broadens the criteria for how partnerships are constructed. Partners' networks, positioning in relation to sub-national areas and identities, and own social and political engagement, were key for A4EA.

5 **A commitment to mutual learning and targeted capacity building.** A commitment to learn from one another, to provide opportunities for early career researchers, and to strengthen research capacities across the consortium leads to longer term benefits even after the research programme is over. Our more experienced researchers learned about the challenges of doing research on the front lines of difficult contexts, and researchers who had rich contextual knowledge, but less formal research training, came away with new skills to apply in the future.

12 Afterword

Over five years (2016–2021) the A4EA research programme has produced a wealth of important findings on the crucial issue of how we can strive for greater citizen empowerment and public accountability in challenging settings. While our conclusions are drawn largely from our four focus countries of Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan, democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism across the world make the findings from these contexts relevant in other places as well.

The A4EA approach has been to understand the lived experience of governance relationships in these settings. We've taken a bottom-up view on understanding what issues are important, where and how they are addressed, and what motivates civic action or inaction. Our focus has been on where civic energy is rather than where it might be directed or expected to be, the foregrounding of women's experiences in activism and accountability claiming, and the framing of accountability dynamics as fundamentally about building countervailing power. We have not found democratic accountability as a steady-state outcome that it is easily achieved in these settings, but rather an aspiration and ongoing struggle. This requires us to look at fundamental questions of how to re-build the social contract, to re-understand accountability as a path with many intermediary steps along the way, and to see it in a broader framework of protecting space for citizen-led collective action.

Any summary of such a wide body of work as A4EA has produced will come with limitations – and attempting to draw lessons from granular, context-specific studies always risks over-generalising or losing nuance. As much as we hope our effort here gives the reader food for thought, we also hope to inspire people to look in more depth at some of the many publications and studies A4EA has produced. The **thematic 'reading lists' of A4EA outputs** at the end of this document are a good starting point, and **our website** and **research repository** will continue to be updated as final publications come out.

As the world shifts, the research agenda moves on. New questions and newly salient issues emerge. As always, there is more to explore. Rising authoritarianism brings with it new forms and practices of power. What are those new forms of power and how are they manifest – including across online and virtual spaces? Will the long-run effects of the Covid-19 pandemic be to strengthen that authoritarian turn, or inspire re-negotiations of citizen-state relations that open space for accountability claims? What forms of citizen action and research will influence those trajectories?

Over its journey, the A4EA programme itself has navigated unexpected twists and turns. Closing space in several of our focus countries also meant closing research space. The Covid-19 pandemic, changing priorities, and budget reductions also challenged us. Together these factors drove significant adjustments to our work along the way. And yet, we are pleased at what has been learned and accomplished. The research has been widely used, with methods such as our governance diaries approach widely replicated by others. We have been able to influence changes in policy and practice in each country in which we worked and internationally. And, perhaps most of all, it is the less commonly measured results from such research that may have the longest legacy – the new skills and insights learned, the relationships and networks built, the spin-off projects that have emerged.

For this, we want to thank all of those who have been part of this journey – the many dedicated, creative, and adaptable researchers that contributed to the work, our consortium Steering Committee and institutional partners, our advisory and reference groups, the programme support officers, and of course, the FCDO and its programme officers with whom we have worked.

Find out more

Check out our **thematic reading lists** at the back of this document

See all **A4EA publications online**

Find out more about projects on our **website**

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Endnotes

[1] Carothers and Brechenmacher, 'Accountability, Transparency, Participation, and Inclusion'.

[2] Repucci and Slipowitz, 'Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy Under Siege'.

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Appendix 1: Key publications by research theme

Space for Citizen Action Reads

Shorter reads

Blog: Malfunctioning Democracy: Attacks on Pakistani Journalists Amidst the Pandemic

Blog: Protests in a Time of Corona

Longer reads

What Does Closing Civic Space Mean for Development? A Literature Review and Proposed Conceptual Framework

Navigating Civic Space in a Time of COVID-19: Mozambique Country Report

Navigating Civic Space in a Time of Covid: Nigeria Country Report

Navigating Civic Spaces During a Pandemic: Pakistan Report

Navigating Civic Space in a Time of Covid: Synthesis Report

Understanding Governance from the Margins Reads

Shorter reads

Blog: Mediating between the state and its poor and marginalised during Covid-19

Blog: Silencing social media weakens accountability to poor and marginalised

Blog: Perceptions of Covid-19 in Mozambique and the influence of "intermediaries"

Blog: Some Exciting Progress on Governance Diaries

Blog: Reaching another layer: exploring the benefits of the A4EA research programme

Policy Brief: Covid-19: A Stress Test for Trust?

Policy and Practice Paper: Understanding Governance from the Margins: What Does It Mean In Practice?

Longer reads

Governance Diaries: An Approach to Governance Research from the Ground Up

Who Can We Count On? Authority, Empowerment and Accountability in Mozambique

Accountability Bargains in Pakistan

Women's Political Participation and Collective Action Reads

Shorter reads

Blog: Why are women still excluded from public decision-making in Mozambique?

Blog: Pakistan's Participation Puzzle: A Look at the Voting Gender Gap

Blog: How did Covid-19 affect women's autonomy and access to healthcare in Pakistan?

Blog: Why did Covid-19 increase women's care and housework in Pakistan?

Blog: Covid-19 gendered exposure and perceptions in Pakistan

Blog: Lessons for conducting phone-based surveys during Covid-19 and beyond

Blog: Understanding gendered experiences and impacts of Covid-19 in Pakistan

Policy Brief: Seeking Accountability, Nurturing Empowerment: Lessons from the BBOG's Movement in Nigeria

Policy Brief: Empowering Women Politicians in Pakistan: Views from Within

Policy Brief: Supporting Women's Empowerment in Pakistan: Lessons for Donors

Policy Brief: Beyond the Religious/Secular Binary Trap: Keeping the Focus on Gender Equality

Longer reads

Beyond Tweets and Screams: Action for Empowerment and Accountability in Nigeria – The Case of the #BBOG Movement

Women's Political Participation in Pakistan's Big Cities: Evidence for Reform

Women's Political Participation and its Predictors in Northern and Southern Nigeria

The Empty Promise of Urbanisation: Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

Women in Politics: Gaining Ground for Progressive Outcomes in Pakistan

Collective Action for Accountability on Sexual Harassment: Global Perspectives

Binary Framings, Islam and Struggle for Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

Challenging Binaries to Promote Women's Equality

Invisible Citizens: Why More Women in Pakistan Do Not Vote

Canvassing the Gatekeepers: A Field Experiment to Increase Women's Voter Turnout in Pakistan

Women and protest politics in Pakistan

Women organising in fragility and conflict: Lessons from the #BringBackOurGirls movement, Nigeria

Citizen-led Strategies for Empowerment and Accountability Reads

Shorter reads

Blog: **Healthcare Workers' Mobilization in Pakistan**

Blog: **2020 in Review: Pakistani Students and the Pandemic**

Blog: **Are fuel riots the food riots of the 21st century?**

Policy Brief: **Using Social Media for Long-Haul Activism: Lessons from the BBOG Movement in Nigeria**

Policy Brief: **Shaping Social Change with Music in Maputo, Mozambique**

Policy Brief: **Energy Protests and Citizen Voice**

Longer reads

Demanding Power: Do Protests Empower Citizens to Hold Governments Accountable over Energy?

Demanding Power: Struggles over Fuel Access in Nigeria

Demanding Power: Contentious Politics and Electricity in Pakistan

Energy Protests in Fragile Settings: The Unruly Politics of Provisions in Egypt, Myanmar, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe, 2007–2017

Alternative Expressions of Citizen Voices: The Protest Song and Popular Engagements with the Mozambican State

Collective Action for Accountability on Sexual Harassment: Global Perspectives

Navigating Civic Space in a Time of COVID-19: Mozambique Country Report

Navigating Civic Space in a Time of Covid: Nigeria Country Report

Navigating Civic Spaces During a Pandemic: Pakistan Report

Navigating Civic Space in a Time of Covid: Synthesis Report

Enabling Citizen Action Reads

Shorter reads

Policy Brief: **Beyond Information Disclosure to Achieve Accountability in the Extractive Sector**

Policy Brief: **How Do World Bank Projects Commit to Citizen Engagement?**

Policy Brief: **Supporting Women's Empowerment in Pakistan: Lessons for Donors**

Longer reads

Commissions of Inquiry in Plateau State, Nigeria

The Role of External Actors in Supporting Social and Political Action towards Empowerment and Accountability with a Focus on Fragile, Conflict- and Violence-Affected Settings

Adaptive Programming in Fragile, Conflict and Violence-Affected Settings. What Works and Under What Conditions? The Case of Institutions for Inclusive Development, Tanzania

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Sound of One Hand Clapping: Information Disclosure for Social and Political Action for Accountability in Extractive Governance in Mozambique

How Does the World Bank Build Citizen Engagement Commitments into Project Design?

Contested terrain: International development projects and countervailing power for the excluded

How Do Donor-led Empowerment and Accountability Activities Take Scale into Account? Evidence from DFID Programmes in Contexts of Fragility, Conflict and Violence

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