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What makes "difficult" settings difficult? Contextual challenges for accountability

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Summary

Motivation: It is increasingly common for international development actors to work in difficult and fragile settings, yet much of our understanding of accountability through social and political action comes from more stable settings. As an increasing percentage of the world's population live in places characterized by fragility, it is essential to understand the context for accountability in these settings.

Purpose: This article proposes a framework based on three domains of contestation: natural resources, identity, and legitimacy. Based on this framework, it unpacks the constraints towards progress on accountability in difficult settings, and the challenges in creating an environment for citizen claim-making.

Methods and approach: The article draws on research from a five-year Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) programme which focused on examining social and political action in Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Research papers from the programme were analysed together with a close reading of existing literature to decipher the common traits hampering citizen action and state response in difficult settings.

Findings: The core argument is that a weak state and the prevalence of non-state groups vying for power are fundamental to difficult contexts in three different domains: natural resources, legitimacy, and identity, in which underlying

contestation generates conflict, violence, and fragility. The three domains are set within two structural factors: historical legacies and social norms. The article traces how contestation in these domains within structural factors influences the behaviour of powerholders as well as the outlook of citizens who could make accountability claims.

Policy implications: The article concludes by suggesting that lessons for development actors attempting to promote accountability in these settings are: to "work with the grain", e.g. recognize the context and work with it; explore possibilities for change at the local level, e.g. where alliance building and networking might be more feasible; and look for the small wins—because in a context fraught with difficulties, small achievements such as overcoming fear should be counted as a success.

1 | INTRODUCTION

How do processes of social and political action for accountability unfold in difficult settings characterized by authoritarianism, violent conflict, restricted civic space, and fragility? Is our accumulated experience of these processes from relatively stable settings equally applicable to these difficult settings? Are difficult settings like each other in the underlying drivers and visible symptoms they exhibit? If not, how might we think about these contexts, so that we can get some purchase on the potential for accountability-oriented social and political action within them?

Working in difficult settings or "fragile contexts" has become commonplace for international development.[1] This is because the majority of the world's poorest live there.[2] The trend is also influenced by the increasing number of countries now considered as "fragile" for one reason or another.[3] Consequently, there is an urgent need to understand what these "difficult settings" consist of, in order to appreciate how they affect people's behaviour in making accountability claims.

Difficult settings share some common features (Boege et al., 2009; Ferreira, 2017; Grimm et al., 2014). These are places which are characterized by multiple and fragmented forms of state and non-state authority. States here suffer from low levels of legitimacy among large swathes of the population. Institutions of governance are weak and unstable. As a result, governance occurs through changing and unpredictable formal and informal structures. This

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[1]International donors invest substantial proportions of their portfolios in countries classified as fragile states. Member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) spent 63% of their net country-allocable official development assistance (ODA) on fragile contexts in 2018 (Desai, 2020).

[2]The World Bank estimates that by 2030, 2.3 billion people will be living in fragile contexts (World Bank, 2022).

[3]Since definitions of fragility, fragile states, and fragile contexts have changed over the past decade, it is not possible to quantify the increase in countries considered fragile. Desai shows that the OECD's States of Fragility report identified 57 fragile countries in 2020, up from 50 in 2015, and 43 in 2010 (Desai, 2020).

fragmentation is mirrored in society: prevailing ethnic and religious cleavages divide society and are used by powerful actors for leverage in conflict. Civic space for voice and accountability is heavily restricted. Frequently, colonial legacies of authoritarian governance, repression, divide-and-rule tactics, and significant militarization have left their mark. In many of these contexts the armed forces form an independent, and powerful, political force. Often, the presence of valuable natural resources or other high-value commodities, such as drugs, provide a funding base for conflicting groups. Links with international organized crime often go hand in hand with conflict among different factions. These are places where authority is consistently and frequently challenged and under threat, and where the social contract is broken, uncertain, or incomplete.

Yet, a descriptive account, however rich, does not take us far enough. There is a need to connect these features of difficult settings to their underlying drivers and understand their effects on the ability of people to hold authorities to account. In this article I propose a framework for thinking about these contexts that enables us to understand the sources of instability and vulnerability, and the ways in which they can influence social and political action. The framework focuses on three "domains of contestation": natural resources, identity, and legitimacy. These, I argue, are key arenas in which deep-rooted underlying contestation leads to expressions of fragility, conflict, and violence which pose challenges to progress on accountability. Unpacking the different elements of these contexts through "domains of contestation" allows us to understand the depth of the constraints to action, the degree of tractability of the challenges posed, and the potential entry points for creating enabling environments for accountability-focused progressive social and political action.

The framework was developed partly from a close reading of some of the literature that focuses on these contexts, and partly inductively, drawing on our field research in Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan. All these countries have areas afflicted by conflict, with armed groups contesting state legitimacy: in Mozambique in the north, with a growing Islamic insurgency, along with pockets of armed Renamo opposition; in Myanmar, the ethnic groups in the border areas; in Nigeria, Boko Haram in the north and armed groups in the oil-rich Niger Delta; and Pakistan in the northern provinces with heavy Taliban influence. They are also places with histories of colonization and authoritarian rule, with strong influence of the military in politics (including periods of military rule, earlier in Nigeria, and more recently in Pakistan and Myanmar).

Twenty-two key research papers produced over the five years of the programme were coded and analysed to pick out contextual features that recurred repeatedly in A4EA research sites and had a bearing on social and political action. We explored the extent to which these features were deeply embedded in societies (through historical legacies and social norms); and/or were a result of various actors contending for power around the three domains of contestation. We then analysed the effects they had on citizens' ability to make accountability claims.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In Section 2, I elaborate on some of the conceptual models that are used to explain citizen–state relations in difficult settings, including ideas about "hybrid" governance, "negotiated" democracies, and "arbitrary" states. Section 3 turns to the proposed framework and illustrates the ideas based on empirical examples from A4EA research. In Section 4, I elaborate on the ways in which contestation in each of the domains affects the behaviour of power holders in terms of exacerbating contestation and responding to citizen action. At the same time, I take up similar questions about the effects of these domains on citizen-based social and political action. The fifth and final section concludes with some thoughts on the implications of the framework for development policy and programmes.

2 | GOVERNANCE IN DIFFICULT SETTINGS?

The growing interest in governance in difficult settings has unleashed a vigorous debate around whether these settings are best understood through the lens of fragility, authoritarianism, or "hybridity." Each lens offers a slightly different focus on features of citizen–state relations in nation states. The authoritarianism lens focuses on autocratic, non-accountable governance, and the challenges posed by the centralization of despotic power and its effects on

democratic processes, including accountability. It provides valuable insights into issues such as the use of structural violence by the state, or restrictions on civil liberties and civic space. The fragility lens tends to focus on ideas about stability and statehood, with fragility viewed as a failure to establish stable states (Gisselquist, 2015; Ziaja et al., 2019).[4] More recently international development institutions have expanded definitions of fragility from beyond political and security to include environmental, social, and economic aspects (Corral et al., 2020; Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development, 2018; Natalini et al., 2015).[5] As a consequence, "what has been gained in breadth, has been lost in rigour" (Luckham, 2021, p. 6).

Recent scholarship has attempted to shift to a "hybridity" lens encapsulated as understanding how governance actually occurs in difficult settings. A key starting point of this literature is the presence of a multiplicity of state and non-state actors who fulfil what are usually functions of the state. Rejecting the notion of "failed states," a significant strand of this literature instead coalesces around the notion of "hybrid" governance: the idea that governance occurs through complex processes in which non-state actors emerge to fill the gap that weak states leave (Bagayoko et al., 2016; Meagher et al., 2014).[6] Such analysis points out that traditional structures of authority are enmeshed with state institutions modelled on Western notions of the state, and the resultant compromise produces a different logic in terms of governance (Boege et al., 2009). As Oosterom et al. (2021, p. 443) write:

> institutions in these settings are not only not 'embedded', but operate within a system of authority so fragmented, that governance is truly 'hybrid'. In these contexts, power is less asymmetric, than it is negotiated and produced through multiple state and non-state forms of authority.

Such fragmentation of authority is evident at several levels: (1) between state and non-state actors; (2) between central, regional, and local government; and (3) between different parts of the state (Lorch, 2017). Variously labelled as governance without government, arbitrary states, negotiated statehood, real governance, and twilight institutions; ideas around hybridity attempt to highlight governance in difficult settings "as the outcome of complex negotiations between a number of actors, groups and forces" (Meagher et al., 2014, p. 1). What unites these ideas is an effort to describe how governance takes place on the ground in areas where the state is absent or weak, and where other institutions, groups, and actors come to the fore.

These ideas of hybrid governance have been further deepened by scholars examining how state and non-state actors react to and interact with others, while simultaneously attempting to fulfil key state functions of security, authority, and service provision. I illustrate some of these developments here. First is the issue of security provision. There is a growing literature on rebel governance, which uses various frameworks to explain how armed non-state actors interact with populations and formal states regarding security (Justino, 2019). Less attention has been drawn to state behaviours that attempt to retain centralized control in the context of limited capacity, and threats from other actors. An exception is Tapscott's (2017) work examining the role of the Ugandan state in establishing security in the border areas, which shows how the state at times works together with non-state vigilante groups and at other times criminalizes them. She suggests that the state deliberately perpetuates what she calls "institutionalized arbitrariness"—using "harsh and seemingly arbitrary interventions to produce the state as hegemonic in citizens' imaginations, while in practice it remains generally materially absent" (Tapscott, 2017, p. 268).

Second is the related issue of state and non-state actor legitimacy. Of importance for all forms of public authority, is what Risse and Stollenwerk (2018) call "empirical legitimacy": social acceptance by the population of the state's right to rule. Lund (2006) highlights how non-state actors seek legitimacy by mimicking state-like behaviours and

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[4]Although fragility is a commonplace term in development discourse, it has no agreed definition and its value as an analytical concept is debated.

[5]Elsewhere, I argue that fragility is fundamentally political: a breakdown of the social contract due to the failure of political processes to establish robust institutions that can help resolve economic, security, social, and/or environmental challenges.

[6]It is important to note that hybridity is a feature of many stable states; what makes difficult settings different is that state actors usually have less influence in shaping hybrid arrangements.

institutions, what he calls "twilight institutions." A key issue is how and whether such hybrid arrangements become normalized, institutionalized, or are seen as socially legitimate. Third, on the question of service provision, there is a significant body of work on how state and non-state actors can co-produce services, through various institutional configurations (Joshi & Moore, 2004; De Herdt & Titeca, 2016).

These developments on the concept of hybridity call for more focused attention on questions about accountability in difficult settings. Although thinking about citizen-led accountability has matured considerably since the 2000s, our evidence about these processes comes largely from relatively stable settings (Fox & Halloran, 2016; Joshi & Houtzager, 2012; Kosack & Fung, 2014). For example, Fox (2015) shows how support for improving accountability tends to be tactical and projectized, with limited impacts. Instead, he argues for the need for strategic approaches which help strengthen the hand of pro-accountability actors against structures and actors that support the status quo. This calls for coalitions and multi-pronged strategies that work across different levels of the state. While such understandings point to the political and institutional underpinnings of accountability processes, they may have limited traction in difficult settings where there is little guarantee of security for those demanding accountability, restrictions on civic space, and limited institutionalization of the state. In our own research under the Action for Empowerment and Accountability Research Programme (A4EA) over four years, we did not find many instances of robust accountability gains (Joshi, 2019). Instead, we found incremental progress through small shifts in constituent elements, e.g. people's increased confidence when it came to asking questions of authorities or shifts in public discourse about obligations (Anderson, 2023). Difficult settings thus might require different approaches to accountability that take into account features of context including legacies of conflict, violence, and authoritarianism.

In this article I build on ideas of hybrid governance by unpacking the underlying drivers of contestation and the implications for holding public authorities to account. What structural socioeconomic features form the terrain for contestation and conflict among different actors and groups? How do prevailing non-state actors interact with each other and with existing state structures? And how does this contestation affect relatively vulnerable populations and their ability to claim accountability? In other words, what makes difficult settings difficult? This political unpacking of difficult settings from the standpoint of accountability forms the starting point for the proposed framework that focuses on political contestation by competing powerholders around resources, identities, and legitimacy in different domains.

3 | DOMAINS OF CONTESTATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT DIFFICULT SETTINGS

Observers would agree that a combination of a limited and/or weak state and the prevalence of non-state groups vying for power in various arenas are core features of difficult settings. The structural weakness and fragmentation of public authority found in difficult settings raises the question of who to hold to account for the provision of what public goods. As the hybrid governance lens discussed above highlights, diverse actors enjoy legitimacy among difficult settings' populations and take on key state functions including the provision of security and basic public services. At the time of the A4EA research, among the countries we studied, Myanmar exemplified an extreme case of this--where Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) control territory and effectively act as states in many places. In Pakistan, at the periphery, the Taliban and other Islamic militant groups control how local governance functions. Further, there are ever-present challenges to political power. In Nigeria, Boko Haram is a dominant presence in the north, and other groups vie for power in the oil-rich regions of the Niger Delta. Mozambique, too, has faced growing incursions of radical Islamic extremists in the north, and a prevalence of armed opposition party Renamo groups in other pockets. Religious groups also influence politics: in Myanmar the powerful MaBaTha (the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion); in Pakistan the rise of various factions of political Islam; and in Nigeria the presence of multiple Islamic and Christian groups. As in most countries, the state itself is not monolithic, there are various factions within the state in these countries that have their own interests and might be at odds with one another. An important

significant independent presence is that of the army, which is a key player within politics in Myanmar (Tatmadaw) and Pakistan (the ISI directorate). Moreover, the sub-national level is an important space: there are struggles for power between the state and sub-national units in all four of our focus countries due to ambiguous and incomplete processes of decentralization and federalism. And finally, international actors—international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), bilateral and multilateral agencies, private-sector business, regional political actors, and international organized crime form part of the terrain influencing the actions of domestic state and non-state actors.

The questions then are: in what arenas are these diverse groups vying for power; and what are the substantive issues at stake? Below, I elaborate on domains of contestation as a framework for thinking comparatively about these arenas and issues. These are domains, in which due to historical, structural, or cultural features, power distribution is unresolved. The notion of domains involves several assumptions: (1) that there are significant arenas of governance and social order where expectations, standards, and access to power are unsettled; (2) that there are active forces and groups seeking to reach resolution; and (3) most likely, these diverse groups and actors are looking for very different resolutions. An important feature is that these are interrelated, overlapping areas; not discrete, and not likely to be amenable to single strategies, resulting in what are often called "wicked problems," where interconnectedness means that progress in one area can create new challenges in others (Head & Alford, 2013).

Similar frameworks to that presented below have been used in various ways by others to provide some analytical purchase on contexts of fragility, violence, and conflict. Many frameworks focus on the arenas of high risk and vulnerability—social, economic, environmental, political, and security (see States of Fragility Reports: OECD, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022), UNICEF's Programme Framework for Fragile Contexts (UNICEF, 2018). These frameworks provide symptoms of the underlying problems, e.g. vulnerability to violence and crime, without pinning down the causes of the problems. Closer to the approach in this article is the World Bank's (2018) *Pathways for peace* report, which identifies several arenas of contestation—access to political power, governance of land and resources, equitable delivery of public services, and justice and security. However, it does not draw attention to social norms, historical legacies, or the domain of identity-based conflict. The framework proposed here presents a deeper structural look at the underlying issues and offers the notion of a wicked problem as a leitmotif throughout the analysis as compared to other more mid-level symptom-focused frameworks.

In difficult settings the overarching environment is shaped by two structural features of context—entrenched social norms and historical legacies. Within these structural features are the three substantive domains that form the focus of contestation. Taken together (as depicted in Figure 1), these five factors influence how powerful state and non-state actors behave, how citizens act, and the interactions between them that may or may not lead to accountability. I elaborate each of these in turn below using examples from our research sites. The idea is to expound why they are key for governance and illustrate how they manifest within our research contexts to set the stage for the next section which looks at their effects on claim-making and accountability.

3.1 | Structural features

3.1.1 | Historical legacies

Among the numerous ways in which the past shapes the present, three factors stood out in our research: colonial legacies, state-led armed repression in the context of conflict, and nationalist narratives. These are interrelated, and the effects these factors have are complex, nuanced, and mediated through social structures and the collective memory of specific episodes. Each of the four A4EA research countries have received deep and detailed attention from historians, to which I cannot do justice here; my aim is to illustrate key points.

First, colonial histories. All four countries were at some point colonies of Western powers that ruled the territories in ways aimed at strengthening their own power. In South Asia, the British had an explicit approach of "divide and rule." In Myanmar, this involved preferential enlisting of ethnic minorities into the military, giving them power,
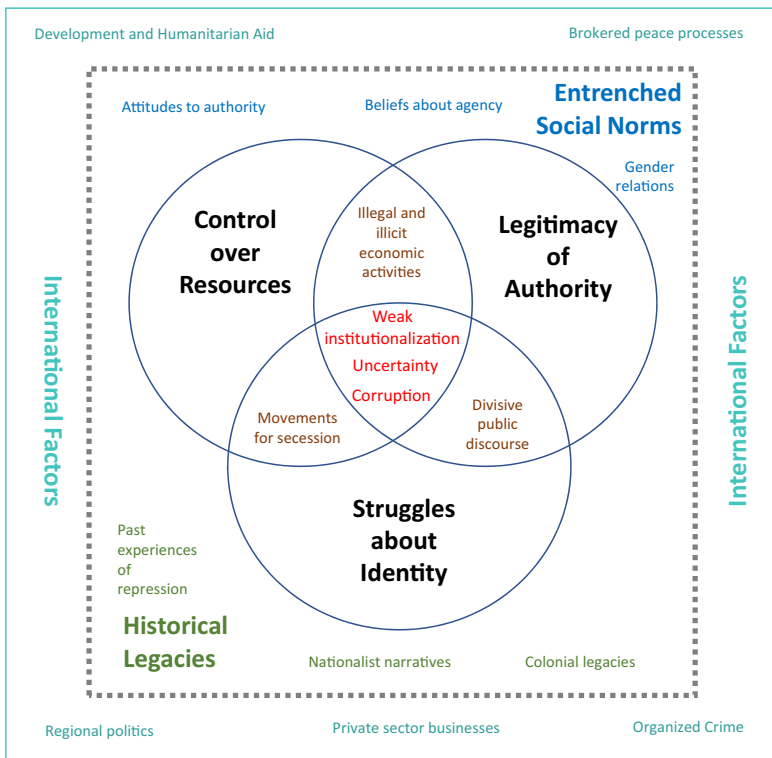
FIGURE 1 Domains of contestation: A framework.

which some scholars argue is the root of the social cleavages that are at the heart of the current sense of grievance and conflict (Brenner & Schulman, 2019). Chaimite et al. (2021) point out that Mozambique is experiencing a crisis in authority, which "is a product of the post-independence state's failure fully to transform Portuguese notions of authority, its coerciveness and militarization, its blurring of distinctions between state and party, attacks on spiritual authority, and inability to deliver or protect economic progress" (Alexander, 1997, as cited in Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 27). Similarly, in Nigeria, Oosterom and Sha (2019) suggest that the contestation over "indigeneity" and its complexity must be understood against the historical background of colonial rule in the Middle Belt states, in which:

> "the British had given powers to Hausa settlers over Christian groups. Christian groups in the post-colonial period claim they wanted to 'free' themselves from the domination of northern Muslim groups, whereas people in the north allegedly tried to 'northernize' public offices that were held by people belonging to southern and western groups … Since the democratic transition in 1999, political power in the state has shifted to Christian 'indigene' groups, while Muslim 'settler' groups became politically more marginalised" (Oosterom & Sha, 2019, p. 11).

These legacies have influenced how social groups view each other as well as their perspectives on state authorities, affecting aspirations and expectations.

Second, and related, is the history of state-led repression. The four post-independence states failed to break with the colonial traditions of control. Their governments have been intolerant of dissent, particularly political opposition, and at times have imposed direct military rule. In Mozambique, Frelimo has retained its stranglehold on power since independence (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019; Pereira & Forquilha, 2021). In Pakistan, Myanmar, and Nigeria, all coun-

tries which have undergone periods of military rule and related violence, collective action has been met with violence and repression. Consequently, there is an atmosphere of fear born out of trauma, and an unwillingness to confront authority that limits potential for accountability action (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019, Loureiro et al., 2021; Myanmar research team, 2021).

Finally, there are nationalist narratives that have been promoted by the governments in these countries. The governments use these narratives to reinforce social cleavages and portray themselves as the only credible, legitimate force. In Myanmar, this has meant the paramountcy of the Bamar population and the Burmese religion as the sole flagbearers of nationhood. In Mozambique, similarly Frelimo has cloaked its policies in rhetoric that suggests it represents the liberation struggle and therefore is legitimate. As one A4EA research interviewee noted, "Speaking against the government is interpreted as unpatriotic, traitor and against the ideals of the state" (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019, p. 28). In Pakistan, nationalism has taken the form of hostility towards "Western" agendas, and a clampdown on Western-supported NGOs (Mohmand, 2019). Claiming legitimacy through nationalist narratives based on ethnic identity, religion, a role in freedom struggles or some combination of all these forms part of the strategies of the authoritarian governments in our research.

3.1.2 | Social norms

Social norms shape what people expect, aspire to, and are comfortable with in citizen–state engagements. In this respect the norms that stand out in our research relate to gender relations (particularly patriarchy), attitudes to authority, and beliefs about agency.

First, and unsurprisingly, all the contexts are dominated by patriarchal norms. For the most part, these norms limit whether women can participate in public spaces, and how they might engage. These norms often mean that men control women's political engagement, and such norms are deeply entrenched and internalized by women, effectively resulting in a "gendered psyche" (Cheema et al., 2019). In Nigeria, extremely low numbers of women have stood for elected office, and when combined with a low female voter turnout, this can make them relatively invisible in political processes (Oladapo et al., 2021). Even when women engage in local politics, they are shut out of male-dominated spaces, and have to deploy other strategies to get heard. In Pakistan, for example, a female political broker sends her son to represent her in spaces where women are not allowed (Loureiro et al., 2021).

Yet, there are also opportunities offered by prevalent conflict which enable women to assume leadership because of prevailing views about gender. In one conflict-affected site in Myanmar, women were preferred as village leaders during periods of active conflict, partly as they could negotiate with armed groups without being perceived as a threat (Myanmar research team, 2021). In another case in Mozambique a husband-and-wife team leading a residents' association relied on the wife's social and political connections to connect with higher levels of authority (Chaimite et al., 2021; Nazneen, 2023).

Second is the question of attitudes to authority. In Mozambique, several respondents mentioned an unwillingness to confront authority: "Historically we are a passive people," and "it is not in our DNA, our culture to hold a government accountable through political action" (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019, p. 28). In Myanmar, norms of deference to authority and a concern with "face saving" has shaped interactions with public officials. As the Myanmar research team (2021) notes, the Burmese sociocultural concept of *Anade*—to prevent actions that cause embarrassment, offence, or inconvenience to others—is strongly embedded in social, political, and moral practice. One illustration of this was a public hearing process that brought communities and public officials together, where questions were screened in advance so that they would not result in the officials' losing face (Anderson et al., 2019).

Third is the issue of beliefs in the efficacy of one's own agency. In South Asia, there is widespread religious belief in fate, which limits how far people think their own actions will achieve results. In Myanmar, the Myanmar research team (2021) notes, "on the whole, when respondents had a problem they needed to solve, high levels of both fatalism

and the desire not to stand out were evident in how they spoke." This general attitude can lead to "wanting to make problems non-existent or small, and not stand out or to escalate issues" (Myanmar research team, 2021).

3.2 | Domains of contestation

The two contextual features elaborated above—historical legacies and social norms—shape the three domains of contestation—control over resources, struggles about identity, and legitimacy of authority—that are elaborated below.

3.2.1 | Control over resources

It is no accident that many settings considered difficult are rich in natural resources. The concept of the "resource curse" spells out the key challenge: countries that are rich in natural resources (especially those having controllable point sources of extraction) tend to be less responsive to their citizens as they do not need to raise funds for state functions and functionaries through general taxation (Ross, 2015). Consequently, control over resources is key to political power in these contexts. Natural resources, particularly extractives, appear often as arenas for contestation, as well as focal points for accountability claims and institutional challenges. Informal and illicit economies, organized crime, and corruption are often the result.

In Myanmar, Global Witness estimated that the jade trade alone accounted for USD 31 billion in 2014, little of which found its way into official state coffers (Global Witness, 2015). The powerful Tatmadaw, which retains its hold on power, is highly dependent upon jade revenues, as are many EAOs. In Mozambique, there have been high levels of conflict around natural gas extraction in the north, and conflicts between established communities and communities displaced and resettled by mining companies. According to the 2017–2018 EITI report, the extractive industries' contribution to the Mozambican government's revenue amounted to 17% (EITI, 2018). In Nigeria, conflicts around oil have been well recorded (Adeyeri, 2012). As an A4EA research paper notes, "the control and distribution of natural resource benefits has continually fanned the flames of political crisis in Nigeria" (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Ibeh, 2020, p. 3). On the one hand, militias in the Niger Delta regularly sabotage the extractives industry, while on the other a coalition of civil society organizations and unions protest the mismanagement of oil revenues (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019; Newell et al., 2022). In our research, Pakistan is the only country without significant natural resources; however, contestation here is more about control of the territory itself, due to its geopolitically significant location between India, China, and Afghanistan. The contestation over controlling resources in these areas spills over into communities, pitching resource-rich regions against each other, and against the state.

The presence of contestation around valuable natural resources can affect people's social and political action in unexpected ways. On the one hand, the resulting conflicts are high-stake, likely to be violent, and can generate fear in citizens who would like to avoid getting involved in them. On the other, the presence of natural resources, particularly extractives such as oil or gas, can lead to increases in people's expectations, for example, that the state should provide cheap sources of energy, a point that has been well evidenced by research (Hossain et al., 2021).

3.2.2 | Legitimacy of authority

Contexts of hybridity are almost by definition places where multiple governance actors—including armed state and non-state actors, civil society (broadly drawn), segments and tiers of parties and bureaucracies, as well as customary authorities—compete over authority, territory, and roles in governance. In such areas, "ruling" or governance, seen as the process through which social coordination occurs in order to produce and implement collectively binding rules or public goods, depends upon the legitimacy of state (or non-state) actors as it enables rule without constantly resorting to force.

For fledgling democracies such as pre-coup Myanmar, or countries emerging from military rule such as Pakistan which have limited state capacity, legitimacy is the key to rule, critical for stability and prevention of deterioration into conflict. And while there are many sources of legitimacy, what really matters is what scholars have called "empirical legitimacy," the social acceptance by the population of the state's right to rule (Risse & Stollenwerk, 2018).

In the four focus countries, legitimacy is being contested intensely in pockets of conflict, but also simultaneously at the national level, through political challenges as well the threat of coups. Myanmar is the extreme case, in which the political legitimacy of the elected government (prior to the military coup) was threatened by the military (Tatmadaw), as well as seriously undermined by the ongoing civil war in the ethnic minority and border regions. EAOs have some legitimacy with populations, although the extent to which acceptance of rule is voluntary or forced remains a question. As one A4EA researcher noted, "As key governance actors, and viewed as legitimate by communities, it makes sense for EAOs to be treated as 'formal' within their sphere of operation, even if not seen that way by the wider system" (Myanmar research team, 2021). In Mozambique, political challenges from the Renamo strongholds, combined with the Islamic insurgency in the north (and the government's ineffectiveness in dealing with them) continue to threaten stability. In Pakistan, the government is unable to exercise effective jurisdiction over large swathes of its territory in the border areas.

What these cases suggest is that fragmentation of authority is both the cause of a lack of legitimacy as well as an outcome of it. A concern with shoring up legitimacy is evident in continuous attempts to centralize power, rapid changes and ambiguities in processes and institutions, and ongoing violence and repression. In places where authorities lack legitimacy—power is enforced through repression (rather than consent) and there are very limited possibilities for accountability claiming. Yet, on the positive side, competition for legitimacy might drive authorities to be more responsive and accountable.

3.2.3 | Struggles over identity

Countries experiencing conflict and fragility are often places with strong social cleavages. Specifically, here I mean identity-based social cleavages, which are predominantly ascriptive (e.g. ethnicity, religion), but can also be political (e.g. members of opposing political parties or other intersecting identities which are often the basis of mobilization and social group formation). The resultant conflicts include tension around who has political rights within the polity and also include processes of legitimizing some groups and delegitimizing others, all of which can manifest in misinformation, divisive rhetoric, and active exclusion from entitlements.

All four of our focus countries have a history of ethnic and religious conflicts. In Nigeria, the dominant cleavages are based on tribal affinities, however, Christians and Muslims have also historically been in conflict. Myanmar's ethnic conflicts have been termed the longest running civil war in history (UNHCR, 2010). For example, Kachin state alone consists of six ethnic minorities all seeking self-determination. Conflicts in the region have led to more than 96,000 people living in internally displaced people (IDP) camps in Kachin, and a strong anti-Bamar sentiment prevails (Myanmar research team, 2021). Myanmar's conflict has huge implications on the fragmented governance experienced there, with different EAOs acting as government in several areas where the central government is weak.

Mozambique's northern region, Cabo Delgado has faced Islamic insurgents since 2017, which has resulted in over half a million people being displaced. Moreover, there is a simmering conflict between the opposition party Renamo's armed militants and the ruling Frelimo party (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019). In Pakistan, Shias, Hindus, Christians, and Ahmaddiyas have been historically vulnerable, and been the subject of sectarian violence which peaked in 2007. In 2013, militants attacked religious minorities and their places of worship, increasing tensions. Such violence reduced somewhat after the 2013 elections. However, the Taliban and other terrorist groups have only worsened the position of minorities in the country (Khan & Qidwai, 2021). In Nigeria's Plateau State, there has been ethno-religious conflict between the "indigene" and the "settler" communities. The indigene community is largely Christian and the
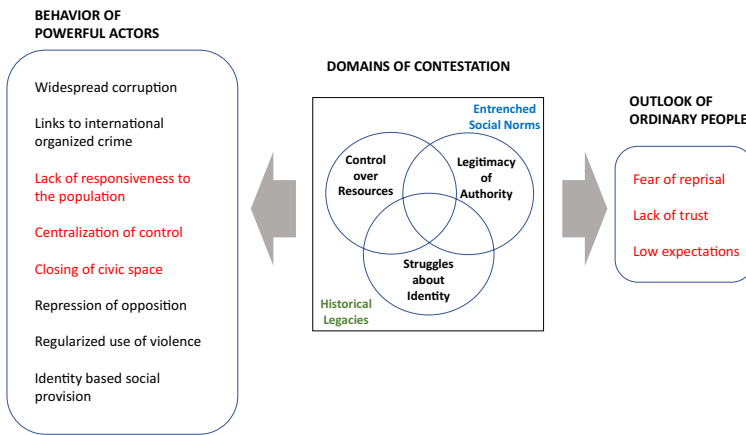
BEHAVIOR OF POWERFUL ACTORS

Widespread corruption

Links to international organized crime

Lack of responsiveness to the population

Centralization of control

Closing of civic space

Repression of opposition

Regularized use of violence

Identity based social provision

DOMAINS OF CONTESTATION

Entrenched Social Norms

Control over Resources

Legitimacy of Authority

Struggles about Identity

Historical Legacies

OUTLOOK OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

Fear of reprisal

Lack of trust

Low expectations

FIGURE 2 Features of difficult settings and their impacts.

settler population largely Muslim. The conflict is about rights and access to political economic powers (Oosterom & Sha, 2019).

While intersecting identities (ways in which different dimensions of people's identities work together) are critically important in all contexts, in difficult settings, rapid changes and fluidity of events, mobilization of ethnic and religious identities by powerful elites combined with existing tensions between groups and contending sources of legitimacy make them particularly significant to understanding social and political action (Cheema, 2017). In difficult settings, the possibility of mobilizing broad swathes of society in pursuit of common interests might be difficult (Earle, 2011). In sum, where strong social cleavages are apparent, it is hard to form broad-based coalitions and social movements.

4 | WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF INCREASED CONTESTATION ON ACCOUNTABILITY?

We have discussed and elaborated the three domains in which contestation occurs within the backdrop of historical legacies and social norms. The contestations occur at different levels within the governance system and are highly interconnected: shifts in one domain lead to changes in other domains. And contestations manifest differently in local contexts leading to a kind of hyper-localization of factors and processes.

Powerful actors caught up in these battles of contestation tend to behave in ways that undermine any potential for the creation of accountable forms of public authority (although such behaviour might result in temporary pockets of stability). The resulting vicious cycle has all the elements of a wicked problem: where there seems to be "'no root cause' of complexity, diversity, uncertainty, and ambiguity—hence, there is no root cause of 'wickedness' and no single best approach to tackling such problems" (Head & Alford, 2013, p. 715). Simultaneously, citizens become collaterally affected by such contestation, leaving them divided due to political manipulation, traumatized by repression, with low expectations and a lack of trust in authority.[7] External actors (e.g. donors, the private sector, criminal gangs) are also often involved in these processes, both in their exacerbation (e.g. through

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[7]Powerful actors are conceived here as those wielding public authority, either because they have coercive power (are armed) or have a degree of legitimacy (either internationally or locally). They include external actors, such as donors, international businesses, or cross-border organized crime. We define citizens here as people with rights, even if these are not fully recognized by the state. They are usually at the receiving end of the actions of powerful actors.

aid dependence or organized crime) as well as their mitigation (e.g. development assistance,[8] or regional political peace processes).

We find some commonality in the ways in which these contextual features tend to influence the behaviour of powerful actors (both state and non-state), as well as the outlook of citizens vis-à-vis accountability. Figure 2 shows the range of these effects. While all of these have important interlinked effects, some (in red) emerged most strongly from our research, and I elaborate those in the rest of this article.

4.1 | Behaviour of powerful actors

In difficult settings, powerful state actors find themselves in competition with other actors in various domains as outlined above. As a result, their main preoccupation is to focus energy on gaining and/or retaining power. Where there are insecurities about the capacity to head off challengers, powerholders exhibit short-term thinking and attempt to maximize profits from their position. Thus, one sees high levels of corruption, links with organized crime, high levels of opposition repression through violence and appeals to a narrow identity-based set of supporters. Three adverse effects emerged from our research as particularly important for accountability relations.

First, the prevalence of alternative sources of revenue (including aid flows) makes powerful actors become indifferent and unresponsive to the needs of their populations. The incentives for state and, especially, non-state actors to fund governance regimes through control over valuable natural resources are enormous when compared to funding governance through taxation, which requires significant state capacity and responsiveness to citizens. The reasons are many: extractives are easily captured and controlled, fragile economies are usually struggling economies, so the overall tax base is relatively small, and the attention of elites is diverted to winning the conflict rather than strengthening the fiscal social contract. This is not to say that taxation is ignored; but rather taxation can be coercive and not a key source of revenue for the state. As a result, accountability claims based on fiscal social contracts are unlikely to have traction, yet the possibility of citizen action based on rights to a share of resource revenues remains (Newell et al., 2022).

In all four countries, tax/GDP rates are low, and the taxes collected do not seem to be underpinned by a fiscal social contract. In A4EA research, an interviewee in Mozambique asked, "who will have the courage to come here and tax us, after what they have done to us?" referring to their precarious situation caused by resettlement (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 21). Meagher (2018), looking at the informal economy in Northern Nigeria finds that histories of coercion around taxes, a limited definition of informality, and the interaction of the informal economy with ethnic and religious differences point to difficulties in using taxation to rebuild accountability.

Second, a reliance on natural-resource revenues, combined with constant threats from challengers, naturally leads to efforts by the governing elite to centralize power and control (Kazemi & Soares de Oliveira, 2022). And at the centre, state institutions (parliament, legislature, judiciary), the military, and political parties are often intertwined and compromised, undermining any possibility of horizontal accountability mechanisms.

All four countries exhibit signs of such centralization and fusion of the military, state, and political parties. Ongoing political contestation and struggles over identity serve to rationalize centralization as a means of ensuring stability. Examining the situation in Pakistan, key informants suggested that "political, ethnic and religious tensions were being exploited to create a law-and-order situation, to justify returning to a highly centralized regime of governance" (Khan et al., 2020, p. 30). In Nigeria, in 1966 the central government reversed the fiscal autonomy granted to its states post-independence and retained control over natural resources (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Ibeh, 2020). Communities point out the injustice of having to bear the environmental costs of extraction, while receiving few resources in return (Newell et al., 2022). Centralization and domination of all public institutions is also evident in Mozambique: "The dominant

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[8]For example, development agencies work on "social cohesion" as a way of addressing violence; or on the "legitimacy" of nascent states in their dealings with their populations through improving public services.

party structure makes separation of powers between the executive, judiciary and legislation blurred, providing the space for power and resources to be centralized in the hands of the same party members and sympathizers" (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019, p. 5). Overall centralization also enables clientelism, corruption, and state capture (Kazemi & Soares de Oliveira, 2022).

Finally, and most significantly, fragile regimes have a propensity to close civic space (Hossain et al., 2018). The drivers of closing civic space lie in contestation over legitimacy—to prevent alternate political formations from gaining legitimacy, and partly to prevent accountability demands, and subsequent potential loss of legitimacy among existing supporters. Globally, there has been a focus on the narrowing of political space for citizens to exercise voice, agency, and control, and on rising forms of intimidation and violence against civil society actors (Anderson et al., 2021; Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; CIVICUS, 2020). Powerholders have acted to limit political opportunities for opposition, public scrutiny, or even opinions, through physical harassment and threats; criminalization under the guise of national security and using prosecution for punitive purposes; subjecting civil society organizations to restrictive operating rules; severe restrictions on media reporting; stigmatization and negative labelling (e.g. terrorists); and co-opting newly created spaces. As one research participant from Pakistan said, "there is currently no space to breathe" (Khan et al., 2020, p. 32).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these tendencies of simultaneous repression and polarization (McGee, 2023). In Nigeria, A4EA research suggested that:

> the shoot-at-sight directives to security operatives to shoot any person that tries to escape from quarantine and isolation centres, deploying maximum force including military action to enforce compliance with safety protocols such as wearing of face masks, social distancing and ban on public gatherings—compounded by the overzealous conduct of security forces during the lockdown evince how securitized emergency measures are causing unwarranted fatalities, violating human rights and shrinking the civic space (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Ibeh, 2020, p. 11).

At the same time, civic space is restricted selectively—it is open for those advancing identity-based polarization agendas: for example, the Pakistan government was "unwilling, or unable to rein in religious gatherings and protests during the lockdown" (Khan et al., 2020, p. 9).

4.2 | Outlook of citizens

The adverse effects outlined above and their influence on powerful actors affect the prospect for grassroots social and political action in various ways. Primarily, citizens in such difficult settings have little power to change the overall structural factors that drive contestation in the three domains or the behaviours of powerholders that result. Contextual features—historical legacies and social norms—are powerful influences on people's outlook. Their outlook and behaviour reflect their coping and resilience mechanisms rather than challenging powerful actors to meet their needs. This is not to say that people are inert; people do undertake a range of political actions to express their discontent through cultural voice, political protest, or formal electoral processes (see Gaventa, 2023; Nazneen, 2023; McGee, 2023). Indeed, the focus of the A4EA research programme was on instances of social and political action which did occur, albeit in unexpected ways and places (Anderson et al., 2022; Joshi, 2019). Here I focus on how the contextual features described above shape people's outlook and their rationale for inaction.

The key features of people's outlook in difficult settings that need underscoring are fear, lack of trust, and low expectations, which guide much of their action in response to the contextual challenges (Figure 3).

Foremost among these is fear, which is widespread in settings with long histories of authoritarianism and violence. As Márquez (2016, p. 220) suggests:
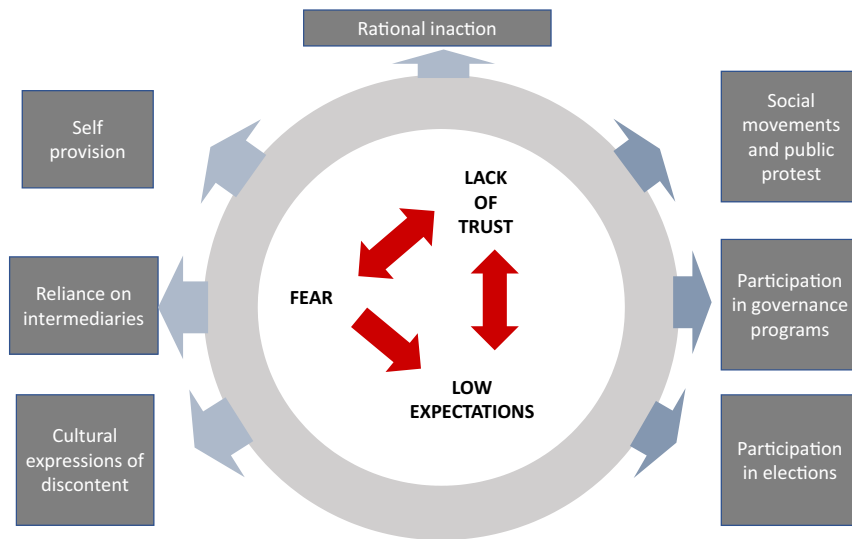
FIGURE 3 People's behaviour constrained by cycle of fear, mistrust, and low expectations.

> people in such regimes are typically aware of the risk of open contention against the regime. This awareness manifests itself in an atmosphere of pervasive fear, discouragement, and cynicism (Pearlman, 2013). And given these risks, the decision to protest does not typically make much sense in purely rational terms.

While this may be more extreme for marginalized groups, it also affects the middle classes, who can serve as allies for mobilization and social and political action.

It is the fear of immediate reprisal, fear of being mistreated and disrespected, and the fear of being discriminated against in future interactions. These fears are well justified: numerous examples from A4EA research highlight the ways in which fear prevents people from acting to claim their rights or seek redress for their grievances. Voices from Myanmar articulated this extensively. One male farmer said, "We were born while the bullets were flying and we don't feel safe or secure" (Myanmar research team, 2020, p. 31).

Second, in countries with histories of violence and conflict, fear and distrust are interlinked. The absence of trust in authorities means that citizens have little incentive to overcome fear to seek out authorities for problem solving: people may see little point in making demands of others, as they do not trust that things will change, or think their demands may result in negative consequences for themselves or their families. What was interesting in Myanmar was that distrust appeared not to be solely based on the person's own experience, or that of close friends and family, but rather on a "historic narrative or collective belief of authorities being ineffective" (Myanmar research team, 2021). In Pakistan and Mozambique, most people avoid going to the police for solving crime, because they do not trust them (Chaimite et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2021).

Finally, fear and distrust lead to low expectations of any form of public authority.[9] People who had seldom received public goods from the state, and instead viewed it as a source of oppression, had few positive expectations, and instead wanted to be left alone. In many cases with fragmentation of authority and control, people did not know who to approach to solve a problem, which is why they often did not take any action. This was particularly true in Myanmar, where households did not have expectations from government regarding the delivery of services. As the

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[9]In places rich in natural resources, however, people can have expectations that they ought to benefit from these, and these expectations can lead to mobilization (e.g. in the Niger Delta region).

Myanmar research team (2021) put it, "governance problems were generally accepted as being a part of life, with little expectation of problems being able to be addressed—'that's just how it is'."

This iterative cycle of fear and mistrust, combined with low expectations, can lead to a situation where inertia is a reasonable response as people's assessments of the situation leads them to conclude that visible action is unlikely to have much traction. In contexts where fears of violent reprisals are real, inaction is rational. Pakistani women viewed their absence of political participation as a form of agency (Cheema et al., 2019). The internalization of fear and trauma born out of long periods of conflict can lead people to self-censor—and inaction manifests as a rational strategy for the poor and most marginalized, what Pettit (2016) calls "civic habitus."

People weigh the risks of voicing claims against the risks of the harm that might follow. In Myanmar several people raised this issue as a reason why they did not raise problems with authorities, "we would have a greater burden," or "he would harm us after going to jail" (Myanmar research team, 2021). One young man in Mozambique explained his decision not to raise questions about public resources received from extractive industries, "My action alone cannot bring change. My action is filtered through a society that has little activism in its culture. As a young person growing up in Maputo, information will not empower me to confront a state authority, because the police can easily kill you" (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019, p. 26). One might even interpret this unwillingness to act as a feeling of disempowerment, which might be expressed by terms such as "resignation," "detachment," and "exclusion" (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 33).

Rational inaction due to fear compounded the challenges posed for collective action. In Myanmar, when issues affected the whole community, or involved authorities (e.g., corruption), people were less likely to act. We found that the two most common rationalizations for not acting in these circumstances emerged as "praying" or "taking the issue to God," and a sense of hopelessness or resignation. What is interesting is that praying (by both Buddhists and Christians) was perceived as an active rather than a passive action (Myanmar research team, 2021). Similarly, in Mozambique, owners of bars that were robbed preferred not to complain because they "just thank and trust Allah as they are Muslims" (Chaimite et al., 2021, p. 20). Overall, such rational inaction, while reasonable, is not a promising starting point for strengthening accountability.

In sum, in difficult settings, people's outlook is heavily influenced by fear, lack of trust, and low expectations. In an environment characterized by weak and unpredictable formal institutions, people tend to rely on informal networks and actors. In Myanmar, in 2017 during a country scoping visit, the A4EA research team heard that people believe rumours from trusted sources more readily than official pronouncements. Local intermediaries then become an important channel for the most marginalized to access public authorities (Barnes et al., 2021). This suggests that when formulating strategies for empowerment and accountability we need to pay greater attention to social norms, beliefs, informal institutions, and sources of trust and legitimacy.

5 | CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMES

In settings characterized by intense contestation in the domains of natural resources, identity, and legitimacy, accountability claims are curtailed in many ways. Traditional accountability assumptions—that rights-claiming citizens exist, or there is an authority on the other side that "cares"—might be misplaced. We are more likely to see a combination of fear, low trust, and social norms of deference to authority making inaction rational. And though we do find numerous examples of social and political action—both under the radar (cultural expressions of discontent, working through intermediaries, self-provision) as well as on the radar (protests, participation in social movements and elections); people need to overcome considerable challenges, the stakes must be relatively high, and the chances of some response judged to be worth the risks involved.

What do these challenges mean for those attempting to support social and political action in the service of accountability? In these closing comments I highlight some dilemmas and trade-offs and indicate possible entry points for external actors interested in supporting action for accountability.

First, aid agencies can attempt to reduce the effects of contestation in the domains, as well as mitigate its impacts. For example, in the domain of natural resources, external actors could carefully consider the relationship between levels of aid and the level of domestic revenue-raising efforts; they could limit the ability of certain groups to gain from extractives on the international markets; they could support community-based arrangements for natural-resource management based on the context. In terms of mitigating impacts, external actors could support civil society actors, encourage independent media, and reduce the control of centralized elites. While many external actors are already engaged in such work, it helps to think of these efforts together, bearing in mind the framework offered above.

Second, given the diversity of authorities involved, the question is whether to "work with the grain," acknowledging that governance happens through a mosaic of state and non-state actors, and find ways to strengthen participation and accountability within this terrain, or be limited to formal structures and institutions. While there are several trade-offs involved (Myanmar research team, 2021), a key element from the accountability perspective is to start from where people are at in these settings. This means focusing on the public goods people prioritize, working to overcome fear and apathy (or reducing the underlying violence and mistreatment that drive the fear), and starting to build expectations of public authorities (no matter who they are), and nurture a culture of accountability that can be the foundation of an active citizenry.

Third, the multiple permutations of contestation in the three domains among state and non-state actors foreground the notion of hyper-local micro contexts. While problematic in terms of approaching these with standardized templates, they do suggest that there are likely to be localized opportunities for change within overall constraints. For example, alliance building for accountability might be feasible in some contexts where the specific combinations of actors and incentives might offer openings that will not be feasible in other places. Here the sub-national could offer more opportunities for change, as the stakes are likely to be less high, and the potential for creating trust through repeated interactions is greater.

Finally, what this analysis of contexts implies is that the work of strengthening action for accountability is inevitably a long, complex process. One cannot expect external programmes to achieve major changes quickly as some of the underlying conditions for claim-making are neither conducive nor easily fixable as they exhibit the features of wicked problems. In such circumstances one might want to appreciate the achievement of small steps, whether it is the overcoming of fear, creating of expectations, or developing a culture of voicing claims and grievances among the people.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

With a few exceptions (due to issues of security and vulnerability), most of the data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Action for Empowerment repository at https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/12859

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