

Citizen action for accountability in challenging contexts: What have we learned?

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Summary

Motivation: While much is known about how citizens mobilize and make claims for accountability in more democratic, stable, and peaceful settings, little is known about how accountability dynamics work in more challenging contexts—those more democratically weak, politically fragile, and affected by legacies of violence and conflict.

Purpose: This article introduces a special issue that brings together findings from across the Action for Empowerment and Accountability programme. The programme explored citizen action for accountability and citizens' experiences of governance in Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, Egypt—countries that reflect challenging conditions now common in many places across the world.

Methods and approach: We introduce and summarize the key findings of eight commissioned articles—some which explore specific themes across the body of research, and some that report findings of particular multi-country studies. We analyse these findings in relation to what they tell us about the contextual factors that matter, the strategies adopted, and the consequences of citizen-led social and political action.

Findings: We find a number of contextual challenges for citizen action that are common, though not unique, to these settings. Despite authoritarian governance histories, and

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norms of fear, low expectations, and patriarchal exclusion we see diverse examples of social and political action, both open questioning of authorities and dissent and more under the radar and mediated responses. Such efforts have led to increased visibility of grievances, increased citizen agency, some concrete responses from authorities, and evidence of progressive norm change.

Policy implications: We argue that even in challenging contexts there are prospects for finding some space for productive citizen engagement and citizen-led social and political action. These are more likely to be found from taking a “citizen-eye” view to relevant governance dynamics, actors, and identifying the most important issues. Networks and alliances, including with donors, are significant. But accountability goals in such contexts need to be realistic and recognize the importance of small steps and establishing the building blocks of better governance.

KEYWORDS

accountability, citizen action, civic space, fragile settings, governance

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2013, *Development Policy Review* published a special issue on the impact of transparency and accountability initiatives. In it, the authors argued that since 2000 “transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) have taken democratisation, governance, aid and development circles by storm” (Gaventa & McGee, 2013). Carothers and Brechenmacher referred to this as a “new consensus” in which accountability, along with transparency, participation, and inclusion, had become nearly universal features of “policy statements and programs of international development organizations” (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014, p. 1). At that time, there was little scholarly research on the impact of this range of rapidly developing TAIs around the world. The 2013 special issue brought together reviews of the evidence, including social accountability and service delivery, budget initiatives, freedom of information and transparency, and aid transparency—all of which were expected to increase the influence that citizens' voices and action could have in holding authorities to account.

Since that special issue, the field of accountability has continued to grow, with dozens of studies, articles, conferences, and global networks focusing on the theme, including, the Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI), the Global Partnership on Social Accountability (GPSA), and the Accountability Research Centre. Not only has accountability emerged as a separate field of study, but the demand for greater accountability also appears increasingly in popular discourse. First emerging in development studies in the context of accountability for service delivery (World Bank, 2003), now the word is a rallying cry for social movements, whether in demands for gender and racial justice as in the #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter movements, for police reform (e.g., #EndSARS in Nigeria), or for climate justice, including accountability to future generations (Fox, 2022).

At the same time as the field has grown, the conditions under which citizens may demand accountability have also changed. A decade ago, while development studies had some concerns over the challenges of achieving citizen-led strategies for accountability in “fragile settings” (Marc et al., 2012; McGee & Kroeschell, 2013), overall there was an

optimism among democracy proponents that the world was on a general trend towards more expansive and more inclusive democracies. Citizen-led accountability strategies were seen not only as a form of strengthening service delivery to users and consumers of government services, but also, more radically, as a means of deepening democracy, through direct citizen participation in governance processes, beyond voting (Gaventa & McGee, 2013, p. 57). A decade later, optimism regarding the possibilities of inclusive democracies is now waning. Following a long period of democratic expansion and opening of democratic spaces around the world, recent years have seen the growth of authoritarianism and closure of that space in many countries (CIVICUS, 2020; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021).

With these changing trends, the potential of accountability to achieve more effective, inclusive, and responsive governance has begun to be questioned. In 2022, Jonathan Fox, a leading accountability theorist, argued that “fuzziness” surrounding the concept means that “the idea is up for grabs” and that “ambiguous or contested language can either constrain or enable possible strategies for promoting accountability” (Fox, 2022, p. 9). Moreover, in the face of “top-down governments and threats to civic space,” he posits that “the accountability field is at an impasse” (Fox, 2022, p. 8).

With the 2013 issue of *Development Policy Review* as a departure point, this special issue addresses the core questions of whether, how, and under what conditions citizen-led social and political actions can contribute to accountability in more challenging settings. What are the strategies used, and with what outcomes? Drawing from research projects carried out as part of the work of the Action for Empowerment and Accountability Research Programme (A4EA) in Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, and, to a lesser degree, Egypt, this special issue of the journal explores these questions and what it means for rethinking accountability in settings which are democratically weak, politically fragile, and affected by legacies of violence and conflict.

Each of the countries in which A4EA worked had some level of democratic opening (up until the coup in Myanmar in February 2021); yet at the same time each has histories of authoritarian and military rule, marred by historical and ongoing violence in substantial pockets of their nations. Over the course of our research (2015–2021), the trend towards authoritarianism and closing civic space increased in each of these countries, spurred on in many cases by the “lockdowns,” and the accompanying tightening of civic freedom restrictions seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (McGee, 2023). The A4EA countries reflect conditions that are now common in many places around the globe. Rather than being exceptions to an otherwise democratic world, they reflect the new normal.

While much is known about how citizens mobilize and make claims for accountability in more democratic, stable, and peaceful settings, little is known about the repertoires for accountability used in more “challenging” settings.¹ The A4EA programme sought to understand how such contexts affect the possibilities for citizen-led action for accountability, the strategies and tactics used, and with what consequences. Drawing from the substantial body of research produced, the articles in this special issue journal offer a synthesis of core findings in relationship to key themes of the work.

Each article, though stand-alone in its own right, goes more deeply into a particular theme or puzzle emerging from our work. The first four synthesis articles take a bricolage-like approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Pratt et al., 2022), commonly used in qualitative research, to weave together narratives from diverse sources. In the article following this introduction, Joshi (2023) probes the question of context, asking “What makes ‘difficult’ settings difficult?” and develops a framework for thinking about some of the key features that influence the possibilities for accountability action in these contexts. Turning to forms of social and political action for accountability, Gaventa (2023) argues that, despite the contextual challenges faced in hybrid (partially democratic, partially non-democratic) regimes, a rich and diverse tapestry of citizen action may be seen. Drawing on multiple A4EA cases, he outlines eight strategies or “repertoires of action” which emerged. Following this, Nazneen (2023) focuses on women’s agency. Despite the sticky social norms and informal practices which affect women’s ability to participate in formal and protest politics, she finds that women do participate at the frontline, even in these difficult contexts, using gender-specific repertoires

¹Throughout this article we use the term “challenging” to refer to settings which are democratically weak and autocratic with fragile institutions and affected by legacies or ongoing violence and conflict. Other articles in this special issue may similarly use the term “difficult” settings (Joshi, 2023).

to organize claims and make claims on authorities. Anderson (2023) then examines what the A4EA body of work suggests for ways we analyse and think about accountability—focusing on the importance of a diverse set of obligations that ground accountability relations, the ways that citizens engage in the scrutiny of authorities, and some of the consequences of citizen-led accountability claims on authorities.

The next three articles are based on focused multi-country projects undertaken as part of the A4EA programme. Anderson et al. (2023) draw on a unique governance diaries method that was used to understand how everyday governance occurs in areas of conflict in Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan. In the article on closing space under COVID-19, McGee (2023) presents a comparative study conducted in the period following the lockdown (March–December 2020) in Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan, using events analysis, interviews and “civil society observatories.” The work on donor interventions by Nadelman et al. (2023) draws on comparative case studies within and across three countries, carried out under a common set of methods and questions. And in the final article, Mohmand and Anderson (2023) reflect on the challenges of conducting research in these settings, drawing on participant observation throughout the programme, as well as a focus group and interviews with researchers on the front line about their approach.

The articles build on the empirically grounded richness of the programme as well as the broader literature to unpack the challenges posed for citizen action towards accountability in these difficult contexts. Common issues emerge, including already fragile citizen–state relations, closing and more repressive civic space, norms of fear and passivity emerging from legacies of conflict and violence, and the nature and legitimacy of authority itself. At the same time, we find that, even in these settings, a rich tapestry of action does occur, often outside the usual spaces, and employing a variety of strategies. But can we say that these contribute to increased accountability? Here the evidence is more varied, yet on balance suggests that while gains are often fleeting, they do contribute to concrete changes which can offer building blocks for longer-term change. Rather than abandon the search for accountability in increasingly authoritarian settings, we argue that the agenda is more important than ever but requires changes to core assumptions and approaches in how and why accountability actions matter.

In the remainder of this introductory essay, we outline A4EA's overall research approach to generating the body of evidence used by the articles in this issue (Section 2). We then briefly review some of the key debates in the field since the 2013 *Development Policy Review* issue, focusing particularly on issues of scale, strategies, and consequences of citizen action for accountability (Section 3), followed by an overview of the themes and insights into these questions found in the articles in this special issue (Section 4). Finally, in Section 5 we examine the implications of these findings for how development actors—policy-makers, civil society actors, donors, and others—can support social and political actions towards accountability in challenging settings.

2 | RESEARCH APPROACH

Over the period 2015–2021, the A4EA research programme brought together more than 100 researchers from 25 research organizations to explore a common research question: how and under what conditions do social and political actions contribute to empowerment and accountability in settings with histories of conflict, violence, closing democratic space, and fragility? The articles in this special issue offer a synthesis of findings from the research, which produced over 200 outputs (IDS, n.d.). While each article is meant to stand alone, several features of the overall programme shape their approach.

First, it is important to recognize that A4EA, like many such large-scale donor-funded research programmes, was a consortium of partners drawn from universities, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), each of which had its own approaches, interests, and capacities.² Increasingly a trend in development research and more

²While we worked with a number of organizations, core partners included: the Accountability Research Center (USA), Collective for Social Science Research (Pakistan), Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (Pakistan), Institute of Development Studies (UK), Instituto de Estudos Sociais

broadly, such collaborative partnership approaches have huge benefits, allowing learning across contexts, disciplines, and perspectives. Yet, they also face multiple challenges now well documented in the field, including power imbalances among partners, communication across time and space, and managing those differing capacities and interests (Fransman & Newman, 2019; van Wessel et al., 2023). For comparative research, these challenges can be all the greater. There is a need to balance rigour and comparability, while also balancing local realities and priorities, including differing levels of experience, time, and resources across partners.

A4EA worked to deal with these challenges head-on in both its governance structures, and its highly collaborative processes of working. Its overall approach was inductive in nature (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Thomas, 2003), setting out to pursue the core question, not to test a pre-set framework or typology, and using an iterative approach to gradually deepen its insights. Within the overarching research, specific projects and subthemes were chosen collaboratively, linking the broad research theme to the specific contexts and interests of the diverse, multi-partner research team. Sequencing the phases of the research was helpful in doing this. In the first phase, we carried out a broad range of exploratory projects, deeply embedded in partners' priorities and settings, 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 on more specifically comparative research themes and questions which emerged from the first phase, guided by similar methods and approaches, and supported by collaborative relationships and trust built in the first phase, with each co-led by at least two of the research partners.

Throughout, much effort went into collectively building common frameworks, methods, and understanding of the core messages and results, with researchers from all the countries. Annual meetings of the core partners, and frequent smaller online meetings of working groups, offered ongoing opportunities to synthesize findings across the portfolio, and to adapt and refine the approach collectively over time. While in the last two years of the programme COVID-19 limited face-to-face meetings, we nevertheless met online and across time zones for collaborative working—including, for instance, one group doing weekly coding of their findings via online meetings, a process made easier by the relationships established in earlier face-to-face meetings (Mohmand & Anderson, 2023). Consequently, we believe the findings presented here reflect contributions from the full range of researchers involved in the project.

Across the projects, accountability was understood as a relational concept between citizens and authorities (Bovens et al., 2014; Schillemans et al., 2021), the nature of which we sought to interrogate further. In understanding these accountability relationships, the research largely took a “citizen-eye” view to the questions of how authority is understood, and how citizens, especially marginalized groups, make claims, express grievances, seek to have their voices heard and to hold authorities to account. In pursuing these questions, we applied a variety of methods—qualitative and quantitative, participatory and experimental, conventional and more innovative (Mohmand & Anderson, 2023). Of particular note was the “governance diaries” method (Anderson et al., 2023), elaborated further in Loureiro et al. (2023), which gives a bottom-up view on how citizens perceive and engage with authorities.

With this perspective, our core research themes 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 primary focus on Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan.³ While each country is, of course, different, they were chosen as they share common features. These include histories of authoritarianism and military rule, conflict and violence, and often fragile or weak political institutions. At the time of the research each country had constitutional provisions for at least a minimal level of democracy, and thus represented neither fully closed, autocratic settings, nor fully open, democratic settings, but something of an in-between, hybrid setting, as Gaventa (2023) elaborates further in his article. These countries were chosen from a longer list of possibilities shaped

e Económicos (Mozambique), Human Rights Commission (Pakistan), Itad (UK), Kaleidoscopio (Mozambique), Oxfam Great Britain, Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (Kenya), Spaces for Change (Nigeria), and Fórum Mulher (Mozambique).

³Egypt was originally a focus country, but we were not able to continue working there in the second phase due to security concerns. For further information on the programme and country contexts see Anderson et al. (2022).

also by other more pragmatic factors, including the experience, contacts, and relationships of the key researchers, as well as being key countries of interest to the donor, then the UK Department for International Development (now part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office).

The nature of the research sites, of course, also affected how the research would be carried out. As the final article in this special issue (Mohmand & Anderson, 2023) suggests, “fragile citizen–state relations make the research process and its associated relationships *themselves* more fragile, indeterminate, and tentative.” Throughout the work, our research teams faced enormous challenges, including issues of access, trust, security, and ethics around risk and consent. Navigating these challenges required working strategically. The programme relied heavily on building long-term relationships with partners and researchers located in or near to the subnational contexts in which the research was being conducted. While many of the frontline researchers were new to some of the research approaches being used, the programme carried out intensive collaborative capacity building and learning across the teams, seeking to create a community of practice which could collectively discuss and verify research findings. Given the uncertain and changing conditions of security and conflict on the ground, later compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic which restricted in-person field work in many settings, the programme itself had to adapt throughout. Importantly, the long-term nature of the programme allowed the opportunity to deepen trust relationships between researchers and respondents, helping also to ensure the rigour and accuracy of results (Mohmand & Anderson, 2023).

While researchers from each of the core research themes produced their own synthesis work (IDS, n.d.), towards the end of the programme it became clear that much could be learned from further synthesis across the rich body of work from both research phases, leading to the articles in this issue. While each article describes its synthesis approach more specifically, they all draw upon a selection of cases from the A4EA collection for their empirical material, to go beyond the contribution made by any of the earlier studies, and to speak from across the body of a work to larger debates and literatures.

3 | THE CHANGING ACCOUNTABILITY TERRAIN: SCALE, STRATEGIES, AND OUTCOMES

To locate the key themes that emerge from our research, we start with a brief recap of current debates in the field. Since 2013, a vast literature has continued to explore the meanings, strategies, and impacts of accountability, particularly citizen-led or social accountability. From this rich array of evidence and scholarship, we pick three key lines of debate which are particularly relevant to the question of action for accountability in more challenging environments.

First and foremost, recent literature has paid growing attention to questions of scale. Given that there is an overall consensus among scholars and practitioners that the uneven successes of citizen-led accountability have largely been felt at the local level, several attempts have been made to move our thinking beyond the local and to take accountability work to larger scale (Fox, 2016; Guertzovich et al., 2022). One approach is to look at the “accountability ecosystem” as a whole and identify entry points that offer the greatest leverage (Halloran, 2021). In this vein, Fox’s (2016) call for strategic approaches which are “vertically integrated” (that work to tackle accountability relations at all levels simultaneously) has received increased attention (Aceron & Isaac, 2016; Amakom et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2020).

However, whether scale is possible depends very much on context. In the 2013 *Development Policy Review* issue, Gaventa and McGee (2013) argued that three key conditions help to enable successful citizen-led accountability strategies: (1) the level of democratization (including the freedom of association); (2) the political environment (including internal champions who can support accountability provisions); and (3) enabling legal frameworks and incentive structures within which political leaders and bureaucrats operate. And yet, as we have seen, very few of these conditions hold in many parts of the world today. Indeed, Grandvoinet et al. (2015) point to the absence of enabling factors in what they call “constrained settings,” including weak state–society relations, divided political society and low state capacity, intra-society conflict and constraints on citizen action, and the low capacity of many civil society

organizations (CSOs). Nevertheless, the authors do point to possibilities for action, even given these constraints, at moments when incentive for reform or greater citizen engagement align, and on concrete service-delivery issues.

A second related and hotly debated topic involves strategies used to achieve accountability, either locally or at a larger scale. While the 2013 *Development Policy Review* issue did not address issues of strategy directly, it did warn of the risk that, within aid and development circles, TAIs “were increasingly being used within an efficiency paradigm, with scant attention to underlying issues of power and politics” (Gaventa & McGee, 2013, p. 6). Sharing similar concerns, Fox pointed to the differences between “tactical” and strategic approaches to the promotion of citizen voice to contribute to public-sector performance (Fox, 2015, p. 346). Tactical approaches often involve weak forms of accountability, which assume that making information available, combined with tools for using it—such as citizen report cards—will make a difference on their own. Strategic approaches, on the other hand, involve multiple forms of action, and also combine increased voice with “teeth,” e.g. governmental reforms that will bolster the likelihood of government response. This distinction has led to what some observers have called a shift from “Accountability 1.0” to “Accountability 2.0,” (Carothers, 2016) and implies a move from access to information to the capacities to use that information, from tools to more organized collective action, to monitoring delivery, to more active engagement in the political process, and from creating open governance to challenging and changing power relationships.

Within these broader strategic discussions, there is also the vexing problem of whether citizen groups should take a collaborative or confrontational approach to authorities and service providers, given that there are significant power imbalances between them. Some international institutions have been strong advocates of a collaborative approach that focuses on identifying “win-win” areas where progress can be made relatively quickly (Global Partnership for Social Accountability, 2020). Others, including activist citizen groups, have challenged this thinking, arguing that confrontation with power is essential to achieving lasting success. In a study of large-scale accountability programmes in Mexico, for instance, Fox (2020) finds that the most effective programmes involve building “countervailing power” through institutionalized power sharing and through support for multi-level social organizations, though even these risk elite capture over the longer term. More recently, Aston and Guertzovich (2022) have distinguished between strategies which focus on building countervailing power (which they call resistance pathways) and more collaborative approaches which seek to create dialogue and learning with authorities (which they term “resonance” pathways). Again, we know very little about how these strategies play out in more challenging and constrained contexts.

A third point pertains to evaluating impacts and the expectations that we can have of citizen-led accountability efforts. The core focus of the 2013 special issue of *Development Policy Review* was on the impact and effectiveness of TAIs, as well as how these are measured or understood. Reviewing dozens of studies which were emerging at the time, the work pointed to some evidence of positive outcomes of TAIs in five areas: better delivery of services, better budget utilization, greater state responsiveness, building spaces for citizen engagement, and empowerment of local voices. However, these were presented with a great deal of caution. As the authors argued: “where we find positive evidence in one setting, this is often not corroborated – and sometimes even contradicted – by findings in another setting where different, or even similar, methods have been used. The evidence base is not large enough to begin to assess overall trends – there are simply not enough good impact studies” (Gaventa & McGee, 2013, p. s16).

Since the 2013 review, further studies have assessed the impacts of accountability strategies, though still they provide a mixed picture of what these impacts might be and when they occur (Arkedis et al., 2021; Boydell et al., 2020).⁴ Most of the evidence points to improvements in public services, or the reduction of corruption as the most common and easily achievable outcomes (Holland, 2017; Waddington et al., 2019). Other expectations, such as improved governance, better state–society relations, increased social trust, and nurturing active citizenship are viewed as long-term goals and often remain elusive to document, if they are studied at all (Waddington et al., 2019). Further, scholars' and practitioners' expectations might be quite different from those held by citizens or accepted as

⁴It is not our purpose here to provide a review of these studies, as other meta evaluations have done this (Fox, 2015; Holland et al., 2016; Lodenstein et al., 2013; Molina et al., 2017; Westhorp et al., 2015).

obligations by public authorities, an issue often posed in terms of what matters within the particular social contract of a given place (Anderson, 2023; Hickey & King, 2016). Despite the various studies, a decade after the 2013 review in *Development Policy Review* there is still little consensus on how to measure the impact of accountability efforts nor, indeed, how to define success (Fischer-Mackey & Fox, 2022).

These key debates and the large underlying body of evidence from stable contexts they draw on, offer limited guidance for understanding processes in challenging settings. Foremost, in challenging settings, instability means there is no clear predictable accountability ecosystem. With multiple authorities, overlapping jurisdictions, and prevailing uncertainties, the system itself is not clearly visible to those seeking accountability. Instead of co-ordination of efforts across levels of the governance system, accountability action is more likely to be observed at the subnational level, which may offer insights into possibilities, but not prescriptions at other levels. Moreover, when regimes are repressive with limited tolerance and shrinking civic space, a resistance (or confrontational) pathway to change may not be realistic, and yet hostile authorities may not be open to more collaborative strategies either. Indeed, power holders may not even accept general obligations towards citizens, undermining any efforts towards claim-making. Moreover, with limited resources and fragmented governance systems, improvements in services may not be a good measure of success, so other metrics may be more relevant.

4 | INSIGHTS FROM OUR RESEARCH

What, then, are the possibilities, strategies, and consequences of citizen-led accountability in the face of these challenges? A4EA's deep empirical research provides new insights into the ways in which citizens hold authorities to account in challenging contexts, bringing into focus issues perhaps not as clearly seen in more stable settings. In particular, we organize our findings around the three core themes in the accountability debate explored in the previous section: (1) how contextual conditions affect the possibilities for citizen-led action; (2) the repertoires and strategies used for voicing accountability demands in these more closed and difficult contexts; and (3) the outcomes which we might expect in such conditions. We turn to the implications of these findings for accountability work.

4.1 | Why and how context matters for taking accountability actions to scale

How does social and political context affect whether and how citizen-led accountability strategies emerge, and the possibilities of taking these to scale? Joshi (2023) asks the question "what makes 'difficult' settings difficult?" Her core argument is that "fundamental to difficult contexts is a weak state and the prevalence of non-state actors vying for power," particularly across three key domains of conflict: natural resources, legitimacy, and identity. She also argues that we need to pay attention to structural factors, including historical legacies and social norms.

The historical legacies in the A4EA countries include colonialism, which shapes the state and how it is viewed by its citizens as well as how social groups interact with one another. Equally important is the history of state-led repression, shaped by periods of military rule, which have limited the space for collective action, often suppressing it with authoritarian power and violence. Historically, each of the countries has also employed nationalist narratives—"based on ethnic identity, religion, a role in freedom struggles or some combination of these" (Joshi, 2023)—to shore up their own legitimacy and to discredit dissent.

McGee's (2023) article picks up on these historical factors, arguing that the COVID-19 pandemic created the opportunity for governments to deepen their authoritarian control over civic space. Drawing from the work of Naomi Klein on the shock doctrine (Klein, 2007), she argues that the COVID-19 crisis led to the strengthening and consolidation of a new "governance shock doctrine," including elements of "securitization" of the public health emergency, suppression of dissent, extension and centralization of executive powers, curtailment of press freedoms, and tightened regulation of civic space, including online space."

As Joshi (2023) and other articles point out, the space for citizen action is shaped not only by institutions of power and control, but also by perhaps more subtle social norms, which themselves arise from long historical traditions of authoritarian control and associated legacies of powerlessness and lack of agency. Joshi points to three sets of social norms as having particular consequence for citizen–state engagement.

The first are patriarchal norms, a theme which is also picked up by Nazneen (2023). Such norms not only limit how women see their own agency, resulting in a “gendered psyche” (Cheema et al., 2021), but also affect how male gatekeepers and intermediaries contribute to limiting women’s engagement in political issues.

Second, there are the norms associated with attitudes to authority, a theme explored in further depth in Anderson et al. (2023). Using a unique “governance diaries approach” to examine how marginalized groups perceived authorities (Loureiro et al., 2023), this work finds that, in most instances, these groups do not go to the state to solve their problems, either due to cultural norms of not being seen to cause trouble or low expectations of state response. Taken together, these norms in turn affect how people perceive their own agency, often internalizing norms of political passivity or fatalism, reinforced by legacies of military rule and authoritarianism which discouraged or repressed citizen scrutiny and action.

Third, legacies of fear, reinforced by heightening reprisals and violence, limit whether and how citizens choose to speak truth to power. Weak states limit expectations as to whether authorities will deliver, even when the perceived and real risks of collective action are overcome. Fragmented and competing authorities make this landscape more complex and difficult, as citizens need to navigate formal and informal rules and institutions to speak out, much less to have their voices heard. Weak or non-existent social contracts (Anderson, 2023), contribute to a breakdown in political trust, while ethnic, religious, and other conflicts, often encouraged by authorities, and with roots in colonial rule, erode social trust and cohesion as well.

In such contexts debates about the best pathways to achieve scale perhaps need to take a back seat to more urgent concerns about how to confront constraints to citizen action in the first place: overcoming fear, creating a sense of expectation and obligation, building or protecting safe spaces for engagement, and establishing trust and relationships between stakeholders.

4.2 | Strategies and repertoires for claiming accountability

What, then, are the implications of such contextual factors for strategies and repertoires of citizen-led action for accountability? How do citizens take action where low levels of democratization limit civic space and the ability to mobilize; where authoritarian governments are unwilling to share information or engage with citizens, either in constructive dialogue or in response to more confrontational “name and shame tactics”; or where authorities either lack the capacity to respond or, more probably, are using their power to monitor and repress those who do speak out?

Some theorists have argued that in such settings of repression 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 (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). However, as Gaventa (2023) argues, even in these difficult conditions we find a diverse repertoire of citizen-led action, which should not be discounted or ignored. Drawing from A4EA case studies, he presents a unique typology of eight forms of citizen action that emerged in these contexts, including more hidden forms of cultural resistance, crafting solutions under the radar, and indirect claim-making via intermediaries. Sometimes citizen action becomes more public and contentious through the emergence of public protests, social movement campaigns, or NGO-led advocacy. At other moments, even in these somewhat closed settings, donor programmes create opportunities for dialogue and deliberation, or citizens can engage through electoral or parliamentary means. These strategies of citizen action from below may vary over time, and often exist in dynamic interrelationship with one another.

The article by Anderson et al. (2023) deepens this analysis further, especially on the more hidden end of the spectrum. This research reminds us how rare it is for marginalized households to engage with formal authorities at all, given histories of mistrust, fear, and low expectations. Rather, they may first turn to ways of working “under the radar” to provide their own services, such as burial societies and savings groups, policing and security, or even dispute

resolution. These alternatives to engaging with the state or authorities can be seen as acts of crafting alternative institutions, following Kashwan et al. (2019) or, in Hirschmann's terms, adopting exit rather than voice (Hirschmann, 1970).

When they do engage, they often do so via a large web of intermediaries, like village leaders in Myanmar, customary authorities, such as chiefs in Mozambique, or panchayats in Pakistan, and brokers or “fixers” who negotiate with political parties in all countries. Building on and extending a growing body of work on how citizen action and access to public goods are highly mediated in the post-colonial state (Auerbach & Kruks-Wisner, 2020; von Lieres & Piper, 2014), Anderson et al. (2023) contribute to our understanding of the characteristics of intermediaries and their sources of legitimacy, as well as issues of access and equity in how they play their role. Reflecting the diversity of strategies discussed in Gaventa's (2023) article, they show that in contexts of multiple authorities, intermediaries may approach different actors in different ways, depending on the issue and the local context.

Elaborating this theme, Anderson (2023) argues that to understand which forms and spaces of social action are important, we need to understand more clearly the obligations which give rise to such action. These include the nature of the social contract between citizens and the authorities which govern them, the fiscal contract (such as taxation), popular understanding of official or felt entitlements, and the promises and commitments that authorities have made. In this context, Anderson examines the importance of “scrutiny”—“how citizens scrutinize the performance or exercise of power of these obligations”—as an important form of citizen action. He then examines the spaces in which scrutiny can occur, both formal and informal, the types of information which enable scrutiny, for instance through citizen monitoring, and the importance of the ability to ask scrutinizing questions, specifically in settings in which such public scrutiny has historically been undermined or avoided.

Going beyond the more hidden and informal pathways by which citizens may exercise voice in difficult contexts, or the forms of public scrutiny, Nazneen's article (2023) focuses on how women exercise their agency in these settings—individually, as voters, claimants, and brokers of services, and more collectively, as protestors and social movement activists. Here the theme of mediation continues, however in this case through discussion of how male gatekeepers can limit women's access to public forums and their ability to engage with authorities directly. Nevertheless, the article shows that at key moments women do exert collective agency, such as through protests, often using a range of gender-specific repertoires, such as employing identities of “political motherhood,” to appeal to and to shame male public authorities.

Continuing the theme of how citizens mobilize to make claims and express voice in difficult contexts, the article by McGee (2023), which largely focuses on civic space, repression, and centralization of authority tightened under COVID-19, also shows that even in such conditions, civic action remained strong, using a combination of strategies. In some cases, civil society actors *weathered* the shock and restrictive measures, in other cases they found ways to navigate or *circumvent* the measures, while in others they directly and vocally *countered* them.

Together the articles in this volume contribute various insights to our understanding of strategies of citizen action in more authoritarian, closed, and fragile settings. First, they illustrate that, despite the difficult contextual features described in the previous section, strategies and repertoires do exist, ranging from the informal to the formal, the hidden and the more visible, and the contentious to the more collaborative. Second, the articles give insights into the triggers of such action, pointing to the need to understand the accountability ecosystem not only in relation to state authorities, but also in relation to the multiple and often fragmented forms of authority found in such settings. These can limit clear lines of accountability, while also allowing citizens and their intermediaries to “forum shop” across authorities (Anderson et al., 2023), or to use diverse strategies at different moments and with different actors (Gaventa, 2023).

Moreover, they show that, in such settings, the very tightening of civic and democratic space can in fact be a spark for new action, creating new opportunities for change rather than working to limit social and political action. For instance, building on Waylen (2015), Nazneen (2023) argues that the shrinking of political space for men provided an opening for women to use their gendered identities to mobilize on women's issues. While significant, the closing civic space found under COVID-19, also led to mobilization on new issues, with new actors and coalitions emerging. While in some cases repression can limit citizen action, in other cases we argue, it can actually escalate or provoke action (Osa & Schock, 2007, as cited in Gaventa, 2023).

The articles also point to the important role of allies and extended networks in amplifying claim-making from below, with important implications for how to work at scale, even in challenging settings. The article on “everyday governance,” for instance, finds that even though intermediaries may be informal leaders, they are densely “connected through active networks of communication, bargaining and allocation of responsibility” that enables them to raise issues across different decision-making levels and across spaces. In the case of women’s activism, Nazneen found that protest leaders engaged with “multiple allies, including religious and ethnic associations, political organizations and feminist groups, to mitigate the considerable risks caused by their disruption.” McGee found that as new issues were increasing in salience under COVID-19, including around health, access to education, and gender violence, new actors and coalitions became more visible, including trade unions, professional associations, private actors, media advocates, and even links to political parties. External actors, such as donors, can help to create and protect new spaces for citizen scrutiny (Anderson, 2023), while links to external celebrities can also be important to strengthen the legitimacy of internal movements, as we see in the case of the Bring Back our Girls movement in Nigeria (#BBOG) (Atela et al., 2021 cited in Gaventa, 2023). All of these networks and linkages helped to enable the scaling of citizen action in otherwise constrained spaces.

4.3 | Understanding outcomes and consequences

While our work thus points to important lessons about possibilities and strategies for citizen action even in challenging settings, what impacts does such action have? While the articles in this special issue do not focus specifically on the measurement debate, they do point to at least four types of outcome which might be considered useful intermediary steps towards more accountable governance.

First, as Gaventa and Nazneen observe, in settings where certain issues and voices have long been suppressed, gaining visibility itself becomes an important win, bringing new issues and voices to the public agenda. For instance, an A4EA-supported study of political song in Mozambique points to how this was used to build public awareness of corruption, and to “publicise and amplify a collective sentiment” (Manhiça et al., 2020, p. 26). Women’s protests in Mozambique and Pakistan brought concrete local issues to the public arena, exacting at least recognition of them by government authorities, thus disrupting gendered norms of silence (Fox, 2022; Khan & Taela, 2023).

Second, in settings with a long history of fear and repression, A4EA research highlights how citizen action can create a sense of agency, an awareness of rights, and skills, and capacities for public engagement that may have previously been suppressed. Nazneen’s article gives examples of where women’s protests contributed to increased critical awareness and a collective sense of the ability to act together. These in turn contributed towards “the skills and capacities for public engagement and a sense of collective identity” among the women protestors (Nazneen, 2023). Similar conclusions are reached in studies of citizen engagement in donor-supported accountability projects (Anderson, 2023) or in cases where intermediaries were able to mobilize members of their community to challenge authorities’ action or inaction (Anderson et al., 2023).

Third, such increased capacity and actions in turn contribute to gaining a response from authorities. In response to women’s protests over road safety in Mozambique, for instance, the President of Mozambique came to the community and undertook to improve infrastructure. #BBOG secured practical responses from the Nigerian government on issues of security, and arguably the release of some of the abductees (Atela et al., 2021, cited in Nazneen, 2023). Donor-supported initiatives often led to new forms of citizen–state engagement, which could count as successes on a number of concrete issues (Anderson et al., 2020).

Finally, the A4EA studies also point to examples of progressive norm change. These include increased expectations of transparency, changes in a sense of rights as well as obligations and responsibilities, and changes in norms regarding inclusion. One case of donor-supported action explored by Nadelman et al. (2023) notes how long-standing CSO efforts supported by a donor programme in Nigeria made routine the expectation that citizens should have oversight of public works funded by government. Anderson (2023) highlights the impacts of some donor-support

programmes on concrete opportunities provided to citizens to question authorities, ask difficult questions, and have oversight of public finances, potentially indicating increased acceptance of public oversight on the part of authorities.

While creating visibility, building political capabilities, exacting responses from authorities, and norm change are all important, several of the articles question whether these constitute fundamental shifts in power or contributed to larger systemic change. Gains were often fleeting and sometimes reversed (Gaventa, 2023; Nazneen, 2023). And as Anderson (2023) reminds us, drawing on work by Mulgan (2000) and Fox (2022), “responsiveness of the part of authorities to citizen preferences and demands is not necessarily an indicator of accountability.” Nazneen (2023) notes that instances of political empowerment and women’s greater ability to navigate gendered governance norms do not necessarily add up—at least in the short term—to changes in these norms, but did increase abilities to navigate them.

Building further on mainstream accountability literature, Anderson (2023) provides a useful framework for understanding the importance of even small gains in these contexts. First, he argues, “accepting of responsibility as a result of public scrutiny” is important in these contexts as it “sends signals that some kind of accountability relations exist... and opens the possibility of further consequences for the party involved, and further claims.” Second, Anderson cites examples of where *answerability*—“the requirement for an actor or authority to give account of their actions (or inaction),” a key component of most definitions of accountability—was also present. Finally, while the A4EA research found few examples of *formal sanctioning* through official scrutiny mechanisms, it did point to a number of examples of sanctions of officials arising from popular mobilizations, or at the local level where informal village leaders felt that the threat of sanction from the community meant that they were answerable to them.

What is striking about the A4EA findings, compared to the literature on measuring the outcomes of accountability interventions in more stable settings, is that they focus less on the “tangible” results like service delivery, but more on the impacts on governance processes and the intermediate gains that may be necessary to create longer-term change. Despite the odds faced in settings with long histories of authoritarian rule, small gains can be found which in turn have the potential to become significant building blocks for more systemic change by nurturing a culture of accountability between citizens and sources of authority.

5 | IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, the articles in this special issue suggest that the agenda for strengthening citizen-led accountability—long an important plank in governance reform and democratic assistance—is at a crossroads. On the one hand, in a context of rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, the need for ways through which citizens can scrutinize authorities and hold them to account is more critical than ever. But at the same time, the very trend of weakening democratic norms and institutions, along with closing spaces for engagement makes this harder, posing fundamental challenges for theories of change that focus on citizen-led action as a pathway to improving public accountability.

The view among some is that in this new context the accountability agenda has lost its usefulness. On the contrary, rather than abandon this important agenda, we suggest that a new set of strategies and approaches is needed for it to be effective in the light of current contexts of diminishing democratic space. The articles in this issue suggest several key implications for donors, governments, and CSOs working to strengthen empowerment and accountability processes in such settings (see also Anderson et al., 2022).

The articles remind us that, despite the trends towards closing civic space, a range of spaces for citizen engagement does exist, though often outside the formal processes and institutions. Joshi (2023), for instance, highlights the importance of “hyper-local micro contexts,” where “the subnational 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.” Anderson (2023) finds that while “examples of formal spaces were found to offer opportunity for meaningful accountability claims,” carefully created spaces in donor and NGO programmes could offer the opportunity for “scrutinizing questions to be asked—a specific kind of citizen voice.” Gaventa’s (2023) essay identifies eight different strategies

through which citizen action occurred, varying from the ruly to the unruly, and the more visible to the less visible, again arising from shifts in political opportunity structures in relation to both informal and formal state structures. Even in the context of increasingly restricted space under COVID-19, citizens still found a way to act (McGee, 2023). The message is clear: even in less democratic settings, spaces, and opportunities for accountability claiming can usually be found.

How we go about identifying these spaces for action, as well as the issues to be acted upon, is very important. While traditional political economy analysis often gives us strong institutional insights, the essays in this special issue illustrate new approaches that capture the citizen-eye view needed to understand and navigate the complex terrain of governance in these settings. In particular, the “governance diaries” method (Anderson et al., 2023) focused on “everyday governance as it is experienced from the perspective of the governed in places with fragmented public authorities.” The “civil society observatories” used to study changing civic space under COVID-19 (McGee, 2023), along with the in-depth, contextually based approaches, work to improve understanding of grievances and triggers of protest (Gaventa, 2023; Nazneen, 2023). These all help to interrogate and challenge received assumptions about how and where change happens in more closed, authoritarian, and fragile settings.

Such bottom-up analysis helps us understand not only the spaces for action, but also which issues are most salient and likely to provoke accountability demands. The issues we found that galvanized citizen action were not those normally approached in the social accountability agenda, which often has as its starting point government-delivered public services such as health and education. The governance diaries approach found that issues of neighbourhood and village self-governance were most important (such as informal social protection schemes, pooling of resources, and local rules) (Anderson et al., 2023). In other studies, community safety and security, protection from sexual harassment, and access to affordable energy were all flash points for collective voice. Understanding which issues are most salient has important implications for donors and other development actors. As Joshi (2023) suggests, “a key element is to start with where people are at in these settings. This means focusing on public goods they prioritise....”

Similarly, when aid agencies are attempting to improve accountability systems, they need to be aware not only of a citizen-eye view, but also draw on their own “peripheral vision” to see what is happening outside their own sphere of influence and be more aware of the interactive effects of their own interventions with those of other aid actors. This is especially important, argue Nadelman et al. (2023) in difficult settings “where the legitimacy of governance actors and practices is more in question, and where the costs of failure might therefore be higher.” It also implies being more proactive about linking actors and initiatives that promote accountability with other groups which protect the security and spaces for such action, including building networks and alliances with groups that focus on human rights and civic freedoms, promoting open societies, and protecting women’s rights. It also requires learning from work in highly conflictual settings on how to support pro-accountability actors “under the radar.” Looking across the range of actors in the accountability ecosystem (Halloran, 2021), including other donor actors, informal and formal leaders, social movements, as well as more institutionalized NGOs, is critical for successful alliance building for accountability in settings with diverse forms for authority.

These implications suggest that, in the difficult settings we describe, the work for accountability is a long and complex process. At a minimum, a certain level of institutionalization of processes and structures, and legibility of these from the citizens’ view is needed for accountability action to be catalysed. To expect citizen action and institutional reform to result in idealized accountability relations where authorities are routinely answerable and citizens able to effectively sanction them, or where local efforts for accountability claiming are taken to scale, are perhaps unrealistic goals in such settings. 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. In such circumstances we need to track and appreciate the achievement of small steps, “whether it is the overcoming of fear, creating expectations, or developing a culture of voicing claims and grievances among the people” (Joshi, 2023). Even with these, the paths to change are not linear, and setbacks will be experienced as spaces open and close, but, over

time, small steps which change norms and expectations, create capacities, and evolve new governance models, are important.

Most importantly, a bottom-up, citizen-eye approach also challenges assumptions as to who is to be held accountable. In systems with fragmented authorities, citizens may go to different leaders for different issues, sometimes to formal government agencies, but other times informal authorities, whether they be traditional leaders, ethnic militias, or religious leaders (Anderson et al., 2023). Rather than start with a formalized understanding of rights and duties, development actors need to understand the “felt obligations” of authorities, i.e. those whom citizens feel should be accountable for resolution of their issues (Anderson et al., 2023). And as the article on everyday governance argues, “policy-makers need to engage with the diversity of actors and institutions that are taking real decisions that affect people, and indeed the messy ways in which these can overlap” and that “without such an understanding there is a risk on focusing on the wrong actors and institutions and thus wasting resources” (Anderson et al., 2023).

Do these lessons and implications add up to the need for a new accountability agenda, perhaps an Accountability 3.0 for working in increasingly authoritarian countries in which democracy is in retreat? We resist the development fad to create new models or labels in the face of changing circumstances, but these articles do certainly imply the need to adapt dominant accountability strategies to the realities of a changing world. Rather than give up on the aspiration that citizen-led social and political action can be an engine for democratic accountability, we suggest that such actions are needed more than ever to build countervailing power and to hold increasingly authoritarian authorities to account. And, rather than start with the assumptions that such an agenda is not possible in authoritarian and non-democratic settings, looking beneath the surface of what is happening in such settings through a deeply grounded, citizen-eye lens reveals that there is much upon which to build.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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