ARTICLE

Understanding accountability in practice: Obligations, scrutiny, and consequences

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Summary

Motivation: Attempting to increase authorities' accountability for their actions has become a mainstay of development practice in recent decades. Yet commentators suggest that these efforts have reached an impasse, in part because of conceptual fuzziness regarding the core ideas of public accountability.

Purpose: This article explores what we can learn about accountability processes and practices from recent multi-country research into citizen–state relations. I explore three concepts that emerge as important from this material and which might also be useful in broader thinking and development practice: obligations, scrutiny, and consequences.

Methods and approach: The empirical material analysed comes from the five-year Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) research programme, which focused on Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan, and explored a range of experiences of people interacting with public authorities, and the efforts of international donors and activists to improve these interactions.

Findings: The analysis suggests the advantage of paying more attention to (1) the range of obligations from which accountability emerges; (2) what enables citizens to engage in active scrutiny of authorities; and (3) a broad set of consequences of accountability claims. Within this framing, the A4EA material highlights the relative importance of felt

obligations and the social contract over formalized entitlements, development of capacities and spaces for informed citizens to actively question authorities, and of outcomes where authorities accept responsibility for their actions or the status quo as well as experience direct sanctions.

Policy implications: Efforts for greater public accountability might be sharpened by identifying what would represent effective scrutiny against felt accountability obligations, and what spaces, capacities, and opportunities are required for that. Incorporating a better understanding of the consequences that come about from accountability claims could help create better measures and understandings of success, and what generates it.

K E Y W O R D S
accountability, citizen-based monitoring, governance, scrutiny, social accountability

1 | INTRODUCTION

Enhancing public accountability has become a key plank of development practice and policy in recent decades (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). Many have argued, however, that with increasing attention both in development and in popular usage the concept itself has become fuzzier and ill-defined, leading to challenges in understanding what works, when, and how. In this article I suggest that rather than resolving this fuzziness through more precise definition and narrowing of the concept there is much to be gained from unpacking what goes on in the substance of public accountability relationships, adopting a more grounded approach. Drawing from such an exploration I discuss three concepts related to accountability relations: *obligations*, *scrutiny*, and *consequences*. The significance of these concepts emerged from inductive analysis of empirical evidence from the Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) research programme, which I use to illustrate different aspects of each concept.

Dubnick (2014) has argued that accountability has become a "cultural keyword"—a contested term whose precise definition is less significant than what its use tells us about our political and social moment. As the term has ascended in public discourse it is common for any call for an individual, institution, or business to take responsibility for their actions to be cast as demanding accountability. Bovens (2010) refers to this as treating "accountability as virtue"—a general catch-all understanding of good governance. Such conceptual debates also play out within the field of international development, despite or perhaps because of the popularity of accountability-oriented programmes in recent times. The seminal World Development Report of 2004 accelerated an interest in how accountability processes and relationships might stimulate better service delivery for the poor, weighing in behind approaches now widely recognized as the sub-field of *social accountability* (World Bank, 2004).

Social accountability practices emphasize the role of citizens in actively monitoring public services and engaging directly with those tasked with providing them (Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2016; Hickey & King, 2016; Joshi, 2013; Joshi & Houtzager, 2012). The widespread adoption of these practices has led to a rich body of practitioner experience, theorization, and evaluation. Particular attention has been paid to the contextual factors that matter for citizens

to hold authorities accountable through these means, highlighting the role of governance norms, histories, and the nature of prevailing citizen–state relations (Grandvoinnet et al., 2015; O'Meally, 2013; Tembo, 2012). Fox (2022) concludes, however, that the field is at an impasse, with mixed and contested evidence on what works and how, and much conceptual fuzziness that mirrors the concerns of Dubnick (2014) and Bovens (2010).

One approach to resolving such conceptual fuzziness is to drive for more parsimony and precision in definition (Lindberg, 2013; Dubnick, 2014). But doing so risks narrowing the field of vision and overlooking the many real-world encounters between people and authorities that are relevant for understanding contemporary accountability relationships. Analysing such encounters in a more grounded way offers a different approach, expanding the repertoire of concepts that underpin these relationships in ways that might help us to understand them better, and how they might change. I take this latter approach here, based on evidence accrued over five years of research sponsored by the A4EA programme and using illustrative evidence from 10 studies from the programme. Several of the studies from which I draw explore initiatives or actions that fit the description of social accountability offered above, but they all sit within the somewhat broader conception of *societal accountability* offered by Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000), which refers to the ways in which citizens exercise oversight and control of authorities and those who serve them. The studies I use as illustrations include research on the experiences of marginalized people interacting with public authorities through formal and informal claim-making as well as protest and resistance, and exploration of the efforts of activists and international donors to improve governance through accountability-related projects and reforms.

The A4EA programme researched these interactions and efforts in places with a particular set of contextual conditions; contexts where relatively new democratic practices sat alongside those that are more autocratic, where state formation and legitimacy was a work in progress, and where sub-national conflict and violence complicated governance relationships. These conditions present a range of challenges for accountability-claiming and the development of more accountable public governance, but they also offer important insights into accountability relationships and behaviours (Joshi, 2023). Not only are these quite common conditions across the world, but the absence of well-established public expectations and institutions of accountability mean that accountability relations in these places were a work in progress. Exploring attempts to claim or institute accountability for public policy and authorities' actions against this background gives rich insights that are not driven by theorization derived from the historical experience of long-term democracies and relatively stable states.

I adopt what has been called a "relational" approach to accountability (O'Kelly & Dubnick, 2014, p. 3). This recognizes that real-world accountability processes involve complex social relations between a wide range of actors at a particular point in time, and through which expectations are set up and actions measured against them. Taking this relational approach grounds the study of accountability in practices of governance, rather than procedural ideals. Using this starting point to analyse the evidence from A4EA studies suggests first the importance of thinking about how different kinds of social and political *obligations* on authorities to answer for their actions lead to different accountability dynamics, and how the absence of those obligations might stall accountability-claiming initiatives. It also points to the usefulness of assessing the extent to which purported accountability mechanisms enable *scrutiny* on the basis of these obligations, including in the way that spaces for scrutiny are constructed, relevant information provided, and citizens are enabled to actively question authorities.

Finally, review of the A4EA evidence suggests approaching the *consequences* of such scrutiny in relatively open-ended way, beyond explicit and formal sanctions, recognizing too the benefit of citizens receiving justifications and answers, and the acceptance of accountability obligations by those in positions of authority.

In Section 2, I introduce the case material used in the analysis and outline the analytical approach. In Section 3 I explore the obligations that ground accountability relations. In Section 4 I look at the ways that citizens engage in scrutiny of authorities. Section 5 focuses on what this body of empirical material has to say about the consequences of accountability claims. In Section 6 I conclude, highlighting ways that attention to these three ideas might sharpen understandings of accountability processes and efforts to generate public accountability.

2 | ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The empirical evidence I analyse was generated by the five-year Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme (A4EA). This programme explored dynamics of social and political action, empowerment, and accountability in studies covering 22 country contexts but with a primary focus on Myanmar, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan. These four countries were selected as contexts that were experiencing ongoing internal conflict along-side some level of democratic governance. They have many differences, but during the research period they shared poorly institutionalized formal public accountability practices, reducing tolerance for public scrutiny of authorities and dissent, relatively recent histories of authoritarian, military, and colonial governance, and instances of internal conflict and violence that further complicate citizen–state relations (Anderson et al., 2022, pp. 13–14). They scored similarly in the World Governance Indicator Voice and Accountability measure—below the global average but between averages for low-income and lower-middle-income countries.[1] They are close to the global average overall in the composite Accountability Index produced from V-Dem data (Coppege et al., 2022). As such they are not unusual or exceptional contexts by any means, but, rather, closer to the norm. They were also contexts where accountability politics were "live"—with expectations from both citizens and authorities on who should be accountable and for what being actively contested, and various actors, including international development actors, seeking to influence these developments.

A4EA sponsored multiple linked research projects. These were in some ways diverse but shared important conceptual and definitional starting points, and some cross-cutting questions. Common starting points included the examination of accountability as fundamentally relational, deeply related to (gendered) power dynamics, a focus on accountability of authorities to citizens, and a recognition of the importance of contextual characteristics (especially those associated with conflict and authoritarianism noted above). These shared orientations can be seen in the mate-rial, for example, in the focus on how citizens organize to make accountability claims of authorities. Giving findings from a family of studies like this assures broadly similar definitions, and also means that multiple studies with similar orientations can be explored for each country context.

Researching accountability processes requires an "entry-point" in a chain of events, actions, and reactions. One approach is to work back from clear *instances* of accountability, investigating the preceding actions and the context in which they played out.[2] A "positive outlier" or "islands of effectiveness" approach like this has merit, but starting with an observed outcome and working back misses the "almost accountability" or partial wins that seem likely to be more common. It also focuses more on what enables public accountability, rather than what gets in the way of it. The research programme approach focused on social and political dynamics more inductively; exploring what account-ability relations, claims, and changes were playing out in particular sites and cases of contention, donor-sponsored development programmes, and citizen–state interfaces. Whether instances of accountable governance or improve-ments in accountability relations emerged was therefore left an open question.

While the A4EA research projects shared conceptual starting points and research questions they did not adopt a single framework for analysing accountability dynamics and outcomes. To explore what they might say overall about accountability relations, the research material was reviewed and coded following an iterative process that allowed wider themes and patterns to emerge. This process was informed by a review of accountability-related literature and my own involvement in supporting the research programme over four years, including regular engagement with the principal researchers on each project, inputs into analysis of research findings, and co-authorship of a number of project-specific and synthetic research outputs. Material coded included published and unpublished reports, working papers and articles, and outputs from internal analysis. Quotations used come from these sources. Research part-icipants gave their permission to be quoted directly in these sources.

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[1]In 2020 the Voice and Accountability average percentile rank for low-income countries was 24.99, and for lower-middle-income countries was 42.12. Compared to all countries, the percentage rank for Nigeria was 32.37, Mozambique 31.4, Pakistan 23.19, and Myanmar 21.74, according to Worldwide Governance Indicators data (Kaufmann & Kraay, n.d.).

[2]Such an approach was taken in one specific project of the A4EA programme, which sought to learn from historic cases, largely outside the programme focus countries, summarized in Joshi (2019).

Based on this analysis process I draw illustrations from the findings of 10 of the A4EA research projects in the sections that follow, half of which were multi-country studies, all of which were undertaken in the four programme focus countries.[3] These include: a longitudinal panel survey on everyday governance interactions between people and authorities in conflict-affected sub-national areas in Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan (Barnes et al., 2021; Chaimite et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2021; Myanmar research team, 2021a, 2021b; Posse et al., 2022; Wazir et al., 2022), qualitative studies of protest politics and popular mobilizations (Aina et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2018, 2021; Javed et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Khan & Taela, 2022), studies of initiatives sponsored by development donors (Anderson et al., 2019, 2020; Aremu, 2022; Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019; Khan & Qidwai, 2021), an exploration of the accountability politics of Commissions of Inquiry in Nigeria (Oosterom et al., 2021), and a study of how popular culture was used to express dissent and to call for accountability in Mozambique (Manhiça et al., 2020; Taela et al., 2021). All of these studies were qualitative, primarily using semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gain insights into accountability dynamics.

3 | OBLIGATIONS

Accountability relations are grounded in obligations that parties have to one another. The existence of these obligations lays the ground for accountability claims to be made, and they produce the opportunity for, or legitimate the possibility of, sanction or consequences. Mark Bovens suggests that accountability starts with the obligation that one party has to "justify his or her conduct" to another (2007, p. 450). Bovens describes these obligations existing between an actor and a "forum," a term that highlights that obligations may be with a collective rather than an individual, and alludes to a degree of public judgement taking place based on them. O'Kelly and Dubnick suggest the use of two metaphors in addition to the forum; the *agora* as the "fundamental social milieu from which reasons, purposes and norms emerge", and the *bazaar*, in which "people develop relationships…rooted in their trading with others" (O'Kelly & Dubnick, 2014). These also suggest the public nature of accountability relationships and highlight that obligations might have different characters or respond to different logics and norms. In this section I explore the nature of different accountability obligations surfaced and explored in the A4EA research studies.

Whether and how these obligations exist requires investigation both to better understand the variety of ways that accountability obligations might arise and be shaped, and also because some of the studies reviewed highlight that *assumed* accountability obligations might not be felt in practice. Citizens may have few expectations of authorities, particularly where they have historically delivered little (Barnes et al., 2021; Chaimite et al., 2021). They may also view the authorities not through the lens of obligations, but in more paternalistic, or clientelist, terms. For example, study of women-led protests in Mozambique found the state portrayed by activists "as a father who can give good gifts to his children" (Khan & Taela, 2022). It is also important to note that whether or not accountability obligations exist is subjective; either party might perceive them to exist but whether that perception is shared is an empirical question.

In this section I discuss obligations of four types: those that arise broadly from the social contract, the narrower fiscal contract, stated entitlements or rights, and more general promises and commitments from authorities, including those made as part of election processes. In organizing the types in this way I move from the most to the least durable—from those that seem most deeply embedded in social and cultural norms to those that are likely to be most liable to change quickly.

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[3]For further detail on these projects see cited works or the information provided for A4EA on the Institute of Development Studies website (Institute of Development Studies, 2023).

3.1 | The social contract

The social contract can be understood as the bargain(s) struck between citizens and the authorities that govern them—and the rights and responsibilities this bargain implies for both. In classical political theory it is associated with establishing authorities' legitimacy to rule. I use it here in a broad way that involves not only this more overt citizen–authority bargaining but also expectations that may be commonly felt, but less crystallized. Understanding accountability through a social contract lens has become gradually more common in the development literature in recent years (Anciano & Wheeler, 2021; Hickey & King, 2016; Joshi, 2007; Joshi & Houtzager, 2012).

A4EA research on social and political action related to fuel prices and electricity provision concluded that "subsidies and/or affordable access to energy are seen as citizens' rights, part of the social contract governing citizen-state relations" and that the centrality of fuel and electricity in everyday life means that "the denial of energy needs amounted also to a denial of the right to work or eat" in the eyes of citizens (Hossain et al., 2021, p. 39). In resource-rich Mozambique and Nigeria, ordinary people felt they had a fundamental claim to the energy produced with those resources—otherwise expropriated to meet other countries' energy needs or profit elites (Hossain et al., 2021). In Pakistan, the research found that "urban consumers, in particular, have become accustomed to seeing access to electricity as a state-granted prerogative, one which is defined as an intrinsic part of the social contract with the state" after successive periods of access to the electricity grid framed as a development dividend and reward for political loyalties (Javed et al., 2021, p. 10). As one focus group member discussing access to energy their urban area explained, "if the hakoomat [government] is not ensuring that our fans stay on during the summer months, what good is it there for?" (Javed et al., 2021, p. 11).

3.2 | The fiscal contract

The fiscal contract is the subset of the social contract where obligations arise from resources transferred or entrusted to authorities in return for some expectation of service or public goods (Levi, 1989). These resources might include natural resource wealth, as in the examples above, but most discussion of the concept relates to taxation.

Taxation was explicitly explored in a longitudinal study of how marginalized people experience governance in conflict-affected areas of Mozambique and Myanmar. In Mozambique, formal taxation by the state was not common for these largely low-income households. But the research did find a range of fees and charges, and community contribution to pooled funds at a local level. Often these payments were made to informal or customary actors, and with no sense of this forming a relationship with wider or national authorities (Chaimite et al., 2021). In Myanmar, taxes paid to (sometimes multiple) higher-level authorities were not associated by research respondents with any entitlement to services (Myanmar research team, 2021b). However, fees, charges, and expected donations to village funds, including compensation of village leaders for their work, did create obligations between them and those paying in.

Other A4EA research in Myanmar found that localized taxation presented an important entry-point for accountability-oriented development projects. Evaluation of a sub-national social accountability programme noted that new forums created by the project were often used by citizens to query local fees, charges or tolls, or to call for action in petty corruption in relation to these, or to query what that revenue was being used for (Anderson et al., 2019).

3.3 | Entitlements

Perhaps more prosaically, entitlements to specific services and access to particular goods or treatment that are set out in a formal way by authorities are also sources of obligations. Often the literature groups these under the general term "standards," and some work in the development literature points to sector-specific "settlements" of

expectations and standards (Batley & Mcloughlin, 2015; Hickey & King, 2016). Much development-sector work on social accountability takes entitlements as a starting point—encouraging or enabling citizens to monitor services for performance against entitlements such as service charters, codes of conduct, staff attendance, and supply of goods such as medicines or school textbooks.

Such entitlements are not, however, always very legible to citizens—either not made public or accessible (for example in relevant languages, or in clear public communications). Accordingly, increasing citizens' awareness of entitlements was found in A4EA research to be an important part of development projects and initiatives to increase public accountability. UK aid programmes in this vein showed that they commonly included a "consciousness-raising" component (Anderson et al., 2020, pp. 20–24). Programme designers posited that citizens' awareness of their rights and entitlements was a crucial building block in generating citizen action and engagement with governance systems. The extent of participation in these efforts, and in some cases the measured changes in people's awareness of entitlements and confidence in exercising rights, were common parts of those programmes' monitoring and evaluation frameworks (Anderson et al., 2020, pp. 42–44). Khan and Qidwai (2021) highlight the perceived value of such activities in one UK-funded programme focused on empowering women and marginalized groups to engage with authorities and make accountability claims in Pakistan. Social accountability work in Myanmar also served to clarify entitlements to the public, sometimes in ways that allowed citizens to push back against corruption (for example overcharging by officials) or service delivery that fell below standards (Anderson et al., 2019).

3.4 | Commitments and promises

Even more specific than stated entitlements to services are commitments and promises made by authorities to citizens. Similar to entitlements, surfacing such commitments is sometimes part of development-sector approaches to increasing public accountability, on the basis that they allow citizens to locate a specific accountability target and make more precise claims. Thorne (2020), for example, argues that "knowledge of a precise promise, or commitment, gives strength to demands for accountability from citizens," based on social accountability activities in Kenya.

Relevant promises might come from individuals. The social accountability activity researched in Myanmar highlighted how public hearings were used to surface commitments and promises from public officials and politicians. These commitments formed the basis for officials' accountability in future forums (Anderson et al., 2019). One of the cases of protest explored in Mozambique prompted a presidential visit to the neighbourhood involved and a promise of a new pedestrian bridge, following the death of a child crossing the road (Khan & Taela, 2022). Promises might also come from political parties. Study of popular expressions of empowerment and accountability through song in Mozambique found a common critique of the "unfulfilled promises" of the Frelimo government in terms of democracy and development (Manhiça et al., 2020). Less explored in these cases are promises as part of electoral competition, including for clientelist gains. Some of the studies did highlight how citizen demands and mobilization generated responses from political parties, including through manifesto commitments ahead of elections. For example, the work on electricity access in Pakistan noted that the degree of contestation made fixing electricity supply an electoral issue (Javed et al., 2021), and energy-related protests in Mozambique influenced parties' electoral agendas (Hossain et al., 2021). However, these particular kinds of promises may deserve particular attention in other contexts.

Exploring the A4EA research material highlights a diversity of sources and types of obligations that are relevant for accountability relationships between citizens and authorities—suggesting that taking a wider scope is a helpful starting point for identifying the characteristics of accountability relations, and how they are acted on. These types, while potentially useful in other analyses, are not necessarily exhaustive—the key point being that empirical questioning of the root of accountability claims is important in any analysis. Efforts to generate accountability claims or stimulate accountability from authorities would seem to be on shaky ground if those obligations are not recognized in the first place. It might be more productive to target action where obligations are clearly felt, or on making those

obligations more legible might be more productive. The next section moves on to look at what might happen on the basis of accountability obligations, exploring this through the idea of scrutiny.

4 | SCRUTINY

The second aspect of accountability processes I explore concerns how citizens scrutinize the performance or exercise of power of those obligated to them in some way. The idea of scrutiny is commonly used in discussions relating to intra-government accountability (for example, decisions being brought into parliamentary scrutiny), and in relation to the media's role in examining public conduct, but perhaps less so in relation to situations by which citizens seek explanations and render judgement on authorities.[4] As a term it implies some power on the part of the scrutinizer, which appeals not only normatively but because it raises questions about whether purported accountability processes can be part of empowering citizens vis-à-vis authorities. It also implies an active process.

I look at three elements of scrutiny. First, I discuss the nature of *spaces* in which scrutiny can take place, drawing on literature that discusses spaces for participatory governance more generally. The discussion includes spaces that are more formal and dominated by authorities, those created to develop better citizen–state relations at a local level, and acts of citizens claiming public space to render judgement. I then look at the role of *information*. I explore how information is commonly seen as critical to accountability processes. I focus on the importance of identifying information that can support processes of scrutiny or be produced through them—so information that can be used to activate accountability relationships. The third sub-section explores how the *ability to question* is part of enacting scrutiny. This is often implied in the literature, for example through references to the "discussion" or "dialogue" stage included in many analyses (Brandsma & Schillemans, 2013, p. 956). However, analysing A4EA research suggests thinking more sharply about the ability of citizens to actively question authorities would be productive. Importantly, these different facets of scrutiny are interdependent; for example, questioning relies on a degree of information, and some available space to raise questions.

4.1 | Spaces

The terms employed above that suggest that accountability relations exist between a given actor and a forum also work as a metaphor that brings our attention to the specific spaces in which accountability processes play out. Grandvoinnet et al. (2015) acknowledge this in placing the nature of "citizen-state interfaces" prominently in their conceptual model of social accountability processes. The substantial body of work looking at the nature of spaces created for broader participatory governance purposes (for example, Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Gaventa, 2006; Goetz & Gaventa, 2001) is also instructive here. This work reminds us that such spaces are imbued with power dynamics both past and present, and their outcomes contingent on the political processes and actors that surround them.

Two cases from the research explored how scrutiny took place in spaces that allowed for relatively formalized representation of citizens. One looked at Commissions of Inquiry (CoIs) in Plateau State, Nigeria—bodies established to investigate outbreaks of violence and authorities' responses. The research found differing views on whether their degree of formality was constructive (Oosterom et al., 2021). Some participants from civil society argued that the "legalistic" approach and presence of lawyers alongside witnesses made these spaces inaccessible to them. Others maintained that the Commissions were not formal *enough* for the task at hand, for example lacking the power to compel testimony or order (rather than simply recommend) sanctions. Another study explored the Extractive

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[4]Richard Mulgan (2000, p. 557) refers to external scrutiny as the "original core" of the concept of accountability, arguing that this sense has been lost in the expansion of the use of the term to include various "internal" obligations that people might find themselves under, and a wider range of actions that might keep the powerful in check.

Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) process in Mozambique, which included mandated civil society representation in a national Multi-Stakeholder Group (MSG). It found that this citizen–state interface did not in fact enable civil society organizations (CSOs) to hold government accountable for regulation of extractive industries and their revenue. One CSO member of the MSG criticized the government's commitment to dialogue in that space, referring to it as "superficial" and noting that participation was delegated to junior officials (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019, p. 35).

Another set of cases covered the creation of new citizen–state interfaces by development donors and CSOs. For example, Anderson et al. (2020) reviewed a group of UK-funded aid programmes. Common in these was a focus on more localized engagement directly between citizens and officials or local politicians, rather than the high-level and formal engagements of the CoIs or EITI examples, and within the A4EA research these spaces seemed to hold more promise for developing accountability relationships. Research on the Aawaz programme, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in Pakistan, found the importance of newly created *khuli katcheris*—translated both as "open forums" and "open courts." These gathered local government officials to hear complaints and demands of members of the public, and in particular women. Khan and Qidwai found that these engagements "sensitised officials to take them [women] seriously" (2021, p. 62), and noted that many grievances were able to be resolved in these spaces (2021, p. 43). Separately, Anderson et al. (2019) analysed the practices and outcomes of a non-government organization (NGO) programme in Myanmar that focused heavily on creating new, ad hoc meetings between public officials and citizens. While described in the programme literature as public hearings, in practice they were often advertised somewhat less assertively as "public talks," and were found to provide new opportunities for dialogue, including giving officials space to justify their actions (Anderson et al., 2019).

The research strategy of focusing on citizen-led social and political action also revealed a number of examples of space being claimed by citizens in the public sphere through campaigns, movements, and acts of protest. Sometimes these involved taking up physical space—for example the street protests explored in Hossain, Aremu et al. (2018), Hossain, Agbonifo et al. (2021), Khan et al. (2021), and as part of the strategies of the Bring Back Our Girls movement in Nigeria (Aina et al., 2019). Notable in the tactics of the latter was the daily demonstration at the Unity Fountain in Abuja, which members vowed to sustain until their demands were met (Aina et al., 2019), invoking the notion of accountability to the *agora* noted above. Although this claiming of space did not involve the kinds of dialogue and deliberation we might expect to see in more formal accountability processes, they were in some ways scrutinizing—in the sense that they emphasized to authorities that citizens were watching, and judging, their actions.

4.2 | Information

Information plays a significant role in many discussions of accountability processes. Schedler (1999) argues that this is precisely because the exercise of power is opaque, and those owed accountability will have imperfect information. In much usage it is taken to mean specific information that an actor owing accountability gives about their conduct or performance. Many see supply of this information as addressing the problem of information asymmetries—see, for example, its use in Mechkova et al. (2019). In development-sector discourse it is often expanded to take in broader data on service performance, in the case of social accountability often revealed through citizens' own monitoring efforts (Joshi, 2014). Accordingly, Fox (2007, p. 668) argues that "the power not only to reveal existing data, but also to investigate and *produce* information about actual institutional behaviour" can play an important part in getting answers from authorities. Discussion of information in accountability processes also sometimes takes in broader issues of public transparency. However, eliding transparency and accountability risks assumptions that accountability flows automatically from transparency, or even seeing the two concepts as being one and the same (Fox, 2007).

Bovens (2007, p. 453) notes that transparency itself "does not necessarily involve scrutiny by a specific forum." Exemplifying this, the research on the EITI process in Mozambique found that although it had brought important information to light, this information raised as many questions as it gave answers, and had important gaps. For example, the 2017 EITI report omitted important information on State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and beneficial

ownership of extractives companies (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019). Furthermore, despite the efforts of CSOs and advocates, the EITI had not stimulated the public scrutiny anticipated. The research found that "with the exception of the resettlement advocacy work…neither CIP nor the EITI reports have been used as sources for further state investigation, public protest, or led to state prosecution" (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019, pp. 19–20). Researchers found multiple reasons for this, including the limited reach of the information, partly to communities where mining and gas exploration were taking place, and a lack of tangible actions that citizens could take.

Closer to Fox's argument about the role that information production can play in accountability processes is the experience documented in the public hearings in Myanmar. The research on these found that a substantial subset of the questions posed by citizens in these forums were focused specifically on demanding transparency, particularly on public finances. There was evidence of both proactive and reactive information disclosure associated with these hearings, and some evidence that information disclosure had led to service improvements and accountability claims (Anderson et al., 2019). In a similar vein, greater transparency of public finances was found to be an outcome of donor-supported action in two Nigerian states (Aremu, 2022). The most compelling link between information disclosure and accountability processes in this case came through the use of the information in active scrutiny—for example, when used by citizens' groups to physically inspect new infrastructure projects and compare what contractors had done to what they had claimed payment for (Aremu, 2022).

The kinds of citizen-based monitoring noted above were major strategies of donor-funded programmes studied by A4EA (Anderson et al., 2020). The EVA-BHN programme in Pakistan, for example, trained volunteer community members to undertake assessments of health centre delivery and performance, and service-user experience. Findings were presented to health centre staff and service managers, highlighting areas of underperformance, and therefore actively using information to scrutinize those responsible. The Citizen Engagement Programme in Mozambique used community-scorecard techniques to surface similar information for health and education services. In this case data were aggregated nationally to present evidence of citizen experience to national authorities, as well as generating facility-level remedial actions. However, outcome evidence gathered for the donor typically focused on service improvements and citizen satisfaction, leaving largely unexplored the dynamics that linked these with accountability claims or public scrutiny (Anderson et al., 2020).

4.3 | Questioning

Although "voice and accountability" has become a common umbrella term in development-sector governance initiatives, rather little attention seems to have been paid to what kinds of voicing is important for accountability. In this part of the section I look at questioning as a specific use of voice in processes of scrutiny. The act of questioning appears in several conceptualization of accountability in the literature. Goetz and Jenkins (2005, p. 197) argue that "accountability, by definition, implies voice – the accountable agency is 'answering to' an articulated question." It is a key part of the obligations expressed by Bovens (2007, p. 450) in his definition, allowing a forum to render judgement. Brandsma and Schillemans (2013) argue that the importance of the quality of deliberation or dialogue in accountability processes, implying questioning, is underplayed within the public administration literature on accountability.

Scrutinizing questions are not always welcome of course, and A4EA research shows how the act of questioning is constrained by both threats of reprisal and a lack of belief that any answers will be given in some contexts. In Mozambique, for example, study of the EITI process found multiple contextual pressures that led to people avoiding questioning the government (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019). When asked whether and how they might use data on extractive industry investments to challenge authorities, one respondent explained that "people are afraid to ask accountability questions" because of the financial involvement of the ruling party in extractive-sector businesses (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019, p. 25). However, the literature suggests that even in more closed spaces there are often specific "windows of opportunity" for public scrutiny (Fooks, 2013; Grandvoinnet et al., 2015; Nixon et al., 2017). The A4EA studies support this finding.

The social accountability programme studied in Myanmar provides several insights into the processes of questioning authority in contexts where this has recently been taboo, or indeed punished. The public hearings or talks organized under this programme were structured around citizens asking questions and receiving explanations from officials. But these events were highly negotiated and choreographed; questions were submitted to officials in advance so that they would not lose face by not having an answer, and questions themselves were carefully worded on the advice of NGO staff to avoid political "red lines" (Anderson et al., 2019). Nevertheless, analysis of the kinds of questions raised highlighted that some did tackle potentially tricky issues. Questions about sensitive topics such as poppy cultivation for opiate production, compensation for land grabs, and the spending of local taxes were all directed to local officials (Anderson et al., 2019). The process of wording the questions in advance was also a tactic on the part of the programme managers. They explained to researchers how they worked with citizens or CSOs to ensure that questions were targeted at securing justifications, disclosure of information such as budgets, and commitments—rather than opinions or statements of policy. In other words, there was a specific focus on scrutinizing questioning. This was reported to change officials' behaviour on some issues, with one programme implementer claiming that departments cracked down on various forms of petty corruption as "they came to know that they would be questioned" in these spaces (Anderson et al., 2019).

Questions can also be raised outside organized citizen–state interfaces. Research in Mozambique framed political song, and specifically popular hip-hop lyrics, as an act of voice, referring to these as acts that "speak back" to government (Manhiça et al., 2020, p. 21). The research found that through song "musicians demand that government authorities be accountable to citizens, with specific reference to political participation, right to information, public consultation, and the provision of public services" (Manhiça et al., 2020, p. 9). The framing of poor public services and corruption as denials of rights and highlighting the "unfulfilled promises" of the ruling party connect with the importance of different kinds of accountability obligations discussed above (Manhiça et al., 2020, p. 29). Musicians also questioned or rejected the accuracy of media reports and government information (Manhiça et al., 2020). The research on the Bring Back Our Girls campaign noted how activists strategically issued public statements scrutinizing the government's promises and performance—including for example, publicly challenging statistics released by government on how many of the abductees had been rescued (Aina et al., 2019). It also reported that this "biting advocacy" of the movement led to an audience with the President of Nigeria, although also that he left abruptly when unable to answer activists' questions (Aina et al., 2019).

Thinking about what it takes to scrutinize authorities seems helpful in a number of ways. It alerts us to the need to keep in mind the physical spaces in which authorities and citizens can engage in accountability-serving dialogue, and the ways in which these spaces can be subverted, constructed, or claimed. Focusing on whether information generated or provided actually enables scrutiny might deepen analysis of what happens in these spaces. The importance of questioning as a particular expression of citizen voice points to circumstances where it is perhaps more likely that active scrutiny is taking place. These dynamics are also central to understanding the consequences of accountability claims and processes, which I move on to next.

5 | CONSEQUENCES

The final component of accountability processes I analyse relates to the consequences of public scrutiny. I focus on positive consequences from the perspective of those claiming accountability, in terms of behaviour of those called to account. The idea of consequences is often used as an analytical category in relation to accountability processes (Brandsma & Schillemans, 2013). However, attention within this category often focuses only on obvious negative sanctions for specific individuals or groups. The A4EA research material suggests that a broader set of consequences should also be in the frame of analysis. I look at three kinds of consequences; accepting responsibility, answerability, and sanction and reward.

5.1 | Accepting responsibility

Responsiveness on the part of authorities to citizens' preferences and demands is not necessarily an indicator of accountability, although it is often conflated with it (Mulgan, 2000).[5] Fox (2022, p. 25) argues the key distinction here is that responses can result from discretion, rather than any requirement. Mulgan (2000) argues that responsiveness may come about from a variety of motivations and causes that are not based on accountability relations or external pressures. They also make the case that a frequent conflation of *responsibility* and accountability removes the focus of accountability processes on external pressure towards an obligated party. I argue, however, and the A4EA evidence supports this view, that the *accepting of responsibility* as a result of public scrutiny is important. It seems especially so where that responsibility has not been taken before, for example in contexts where institutional accountability is less well developed. Accepting responsibility or obligations sends signals that some kind of accountability relations exist, that some expectations are reasonable, and in some cases might indicate positive progress in itself. Accepting responsibility also opens the possibility of further consequences for the party involved, and further claims. Bringing responsibility into our frame of analysis also opens possibilities for going beyond individual accountability to include the breadth of political responsibility for the "unaccountable status quo" (McGee, 2020, p. 64).

A4EA studies include various examples where accountability-oriented actions lead authorities to take responsibility for problems or decisions where they might be just as likely to evade that responsibility. Khan et al. (2021) document a range of policy outcomes and commitments from authorities in response to civic mobilizations led by women in Pakistan—including, for example, the regularization of the previously precariously employed Lady Health Workers, and the establishment of a new agency to recover missing children. Aina et al. (2019) conclude that the actions of the Bring Back Our Girls activists pushed the Nigerian government to acknowledge its responsibility for tackling insecurity in the North East, and seeking return of the girls in particular. They also note examples where the military apologized for releasing inaccurate data following activists' actions (Aina et al., 2019). Electricity outage protests in Pakistan led to immediate investment in production as well as, anecdotally, redirection of electricity from other areas to those most affected by outages (Javed et al., 2021). Although these actions were reportedly taken on the basis of public-order concerns, they were also part of establishing the importance of electricity supply as part of the contemporary social contract, rather than as a free-market concern.

Donor-supported accountability initiatives reviewed often included measures that counted problems resolved as a result of new citizen–state engagement. Two programmes alone in Pakistan recorded thousands of issues and demands met, with the clear implication that this involved a new taking of responsibility by officials and authorities (Anderson et al., 2020). An evaluation of one programme in Mozambique concluded that while most schools and health facilities had made service improvements, these largely resulted from better "co-governance" by officials and voluntary school and health management committees, also indicating greater acceptance of public management responsibilities (Anderson et al., 2020). The EVA-BHN programme in Pakistan produced a set of impact stories that traced how local health activists sought out ways to incentivize officials to take responsibility for problems or denials of service—for example engaging the media and religious leaders or appealing to higher-level officials to sanction underperformance (Anderson et al., 2020).

5.2 | Answerability

Answerability is generally discussed in the accountability literature as the requirement for an actor or authority to give an account of their actions (or inaction). Many definitions of accountability include the need for those that owe accountability to provide justifications for their actions. Fox (2022) notes the centrality of answering for actions in

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[5]For example, Fischer-Mackey and Fox (2022) analysed a number of influential field experiments that claimed to make conclusions about accountability and found that their measures largely related to indicators of state responsiveness or general good governance, rather than specifically accountability.

the definition of the term in English. Schedler (1999, p. 14) argues that being accountable "implies the obligation to respond to nasty questions," and describes answerability as the combination of giving information on behaviour or performance and justification of actions. Answers and justification could come in various forms, or through various media and forums.

From A4EA research, Loureiro et al. (2021) argue that in Pakistan the active role of intermediaries and political brokers leads to the creation of "accountability bargains" at the community level. They find that these brokers compete to retain their "clients" or constituencies in part through displaying a degree of answerability—"intermediaries informing, explaining, and justifying what they have done (or not done) to try to resolve a problem" (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 43). However, in contrast to the development of obligations from authorities they argue that "because of the individualistic nature of these bargains...they do not lead to virtuous cycles of improved levels of trust and account-ability – at least not of the system" (Loureiro et al., 2021, p. 43). Chaimite et al. (2021) find a degree of answerability through community-level meetings in Mozambique. They note how officials and local elites hold these meetings to update their constituents on their actions and the parameters set for them from above, and provide evidence that community members understand this as a responsibility of people in these roles (Chaimite et al., 2021). Similar experiences were reported in Myanmar village governance (Myanmar research team, 2021a).

The forums and actions created by donor-funded accountability initiatives were often found to offer some opportunities for answerability. Anderson et al. (2019) found that public hearings in Myanmar provided a degree of answerability of officials and occasionally politicians, with explanations and justifications from these actors in response to public questions. Campaigns and citizen-generated data on the realities of service delivery prompted official explanations and justifications on some occasions (Anderson et al., 2020). The same is true of some instances of protest and citizen mobilization independent of donor programmes. Aina et al. (2019) argue that the Bring Back Our Girls movement saw a degree of answerability—forcing authorities to explain what they were doing to secure the return of kidnapped girls and release more information (although often criticizing the movement or refuting their arguments at the same time).

5.3 | Sanctions and rewards

There is considerable debate in the literature on the centrality of sanctions to the concept of accountability. For some, such as Mulgan (2000), and Lindberg (2013), the application of sanctions is central to identifying whether actors were held accountable. Bovens (2010) argues that the *possibility* of sanction is key, even if it is not exercised. Fox (2007) and Goetz and Jenkins (2005) characterize answerability alone as "soft" and answerability plus sanctions as "hard" accountability. Schedler (1999) holds that answerability is sufficient. They also note the various non-institutional and less visible forms that sanctions may take. Along these lines, Tsai (2007a, 2007b) and Hossain (2010) highlight the role of less visible and institutional social sanctions. In discussing sanctions, it also makes sense to highlight the possibility of positive rewards as a result of scrutiny and account-giving, although the literature is quieter on this possibility.

In general, a lack of formal sanctioning as a result of accountability obligations and processes of scrutiny stands out across the cases reviewed here, particularly more formal scrutiny mechanisms. Oosterom et al. (2021) find that, despite CoIs publishing reports that named perpetrators of violence, there was no evidence that prosecutions of those individuals ensued. Civil society participants lacked faith in the Commissions in part because they did not produce consequences. Aworti and Nuvunga (2019) found that, while the explicit theory of change of civil society anti-corruption organization CIP anticipated that "naming and shaming" perpetrators would prove effective, in effect few sanctions—even informal—ensued. Sanctions were not explicitly addressed in any of the aid-funded social accountability programmes reviewed, and turned up only in examples of consequences for poorly performing members of staff as a result of community monitoring and pressure. For example, complaints about members of health centres or school staff resulted in some degree of punishment as a result of projects in Mozambique and Pakistan (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 33).

Some A4EA work did suggest the existence of sanctions arising from popular mobilizations and protests. Khan et al. (2021) explore five cases of contention led by or centrally involving women in Pakistan. A number of these included calls for individuals to be punished for acts of violence, some of which were met. Protests by Hazara women relating to persistent insecurity and sectarian violence did not result in individual prosecutions, but activated some political accountability for individuals. In 2014 they responded to dismissive comments by the Chief Minister of Balochistan by throwing knives against the gates of the State Assembly—an incident that led to his sacking (Khan & Taela, 2022). In all cases, however, these individual sanctions were set against a backdrop of limited systemic or institutional change and, indeed, backlash against activists. There were also examples of sanction and reward through elections. Aina et al. (2019) argue that government inaction in the face of the Bring Back Our Girls movement was responsible at least in part for Jonathan Goodluck losing the 2015 Nigerian general election, with Muhammadu Buhari's victory a positive response to promises to end the insurgency and insecurity in the North East of the country. Javed et al. (2021) argue that protests around electricity outages in Pakistan gave the issue a political salience that determined the outcome of the 2013 general election, with the ousted government being cast as responsible for the electricity crisis, and the opposition being rewarded for prioritizing the issue (Javed et al., 2021).

A4EA studies also found possibilities for sanction and reward at the most local governance level. In Mozambique, individual sanctions for village leaders were explored by Chaimite et al. (2021). Although not officially elected roles, one village chief was adamant that he could be removed from his role for non-performance, citing examples from other villages (Chaimite et al., 2021). The research also heard dramatic examples of threats and physical retribution directed at leaders that were seen to have failed to protect the community (Chaimite et al., 2021). Similarly, village leaders in Myanmar—often elected informally—were found to be subject to community consent and also reported that they could be removed as a sanction for poor performance—although again the research did not find direct examples (Myanmar research team, 2021a, 2021b). In Pakistan, Loureiro et al. (2021) suggest that a degree of choice about which broker or intermediary to go to indicates some power of sanction—with brokers losing cachet and upward bargaining power if they lose their clients, and being rewarded by clients' loyalty if they were answerable to them.

In summary, the A4EA research suggests that we should cast the net more widely in considering what the consequences of accountability action might be. The acceptance of responsibility, or accountability obligations themselves, might represent meaningful change in some contexts and on some issues, especially if those have not previously been accepted. Relationships that require the justification of authorities' actions and answers to public questioning were found both in local governance dynamics and through the actions of donor-supported forums and mechanisms. And, despite the difficulties of claiming accountability from authorities, in many instances there were also examples of both sanction and reward being used by citizens in response to the actions of authorities.

6 | SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

In this article I have explored a number of ideas related to accountability relationships and practices, inspired by the rich empirical material of the A4EA programme. While this material came from a specific and particular set of contexts, the ideas themselves might help to enhance analysis or design of efforts towards greater public accountability elsewhere.

First, understanding how accountability obligations emerge, and what shape they take, might help to sharpen strategies for better governance. Adopting a citizen-eye view means that *felt* obligations of authorities are relevant, not only formalized duties or official entitlements. The evidence explored here supports the proposition by Kirk, writing about one of the donor-funded accountability projects studied by A4EA in Pakistan, that "accountability projects should be as much about fostering societal discourses around citizens' entitlements, the state's obligations and its legitimacy, as they are about the technical tools of accountability, information, and institutional reforms" (Kirk,

2017, p. 13). Understanding accountability obligations seems a crucial starting point to build any momentum for citizen-led claims or engagement in organized scrutiny of public authorities. Exploring how authorities understand their obligations, outside the scope of the material analysed here, would take this further still.

Second, exploration of how far accountability efforts enable active scrutiny of authorities seems similarly important. The two examples of formal spaces were found to offer little opportunity for meaningful accountability claims, largely as a result of underlying social and power dynamics. Less well-instituted spaces created by donor programmes and NGOs were seen to be more promising, at least in the claims of the funders and evaluators of these programmes—but only as a result of careful crafting and choreography. The information that was most useful was highly specific to the accountability obligations called on and claims being made. The analysis also highlights the importance of creating the opportunity specifically for scrutinizing questions to be asked—a specific kind of citizen voice.

Third, the analysis suggests that looking beyond sanctions – often seen as being the most important consequence of accountability claims and public scrutiny – is valuable. In the contexts the cases are drawn from, authorities taking responsibility for a problem (whether specific or the general problems of the status quo) seems a potentially important consequence in itself, and arose from instances of citizen-led scrutiny. Getting answers, the experience of being answered, is also a potentially important outcome. As A4EA research has shown, development-sector approaches risk overlooking these impacts in favour of monitoring for service improvements or policy changes (Anderson et al., 2020).

Against a backdrop of conceptual fuzziness and multiple, sometimes divergent, uses of the concept, exploring accountability politics from the ground up has much to offer. In summary, understanding the obligations from which accountability emerges—or their absence—is fundamental if we understand public accountability as a form of relationship between citizens and authorities. Identifying what would represent effective scrutiny, and what spaces, capacities, and opportunities are required for that, could enhance the efforts of those striving for accountability. Incorporating a better understanding of what consequences come about from accountability claims could move research in this field forward to create better measures and understandings of success.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This article draws on secondary sources, the majority of which are publicly available or in the process of being published.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This article reports analysis of secondary sources.

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