

Producing Social Accountability? The Impact of Service Delivery Reforms

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1 Introduction

We know that, in poorer countries, effective public services are vital for poverty reduction. Episodes of ill-health, often caused by poor water quality or sanitation and lack of access to good healthcare, are a major reason why people fall into poverty. Education appears to be the single most important route for exiting poverty (Krishna 2007). In most countries, the responsibility for adequate provision of such basic services lies with the state. Yet state-provided public services often fail poor people. When poor people turn to an unregulated private sector to access services, they are hit twice – they frequently pay more than the better-off for services that are often of poorer quality.

The recent adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by industrialised countries has served to focus the attention of the development community on the constraints to universal coverage. While lack of adequate funding is part of the problem for some countries, the main problem lies in the inability of institutions to deliver for a wide variety of structural reasons, including lack of adequately trained personnel, lack of authority at lower levels of government, corruption and inadequate incentives for improving performance in public agencies. Consequently, there is some consensus that public sector reform is part of any strategy to improve public service delivery. At the same time, there is no consensus on the best means to organise institutions for the delivery of public services. Among the various attempts at public sector reform, three broad trends stand out – pluralisation, decentralisation and institutionalised participation. While there are different ideological bases for proposing each of these reforms, they can be grouped under two broad categories: what one

might call ‘choice’ reforms that are underpinned by market mechanisms and ‘voice reforms’ that seek to strengthen accountability mechanisms.

This article argues that the key to understanding the potential of accountability mechanisms for improving service delivery are the processes through which collective actors engage over time with the state in shaping policy. When collective actors participate in service delivery reforms, they are more likely to engage in social accountability actions that monitor reform implementation as well as increase the uptake of reforms by people.

To make this argument, this article draws upon an approach which focuses on the iterative processes of state–society interaction through which the nature and capacity of state and collective actors are shaped: the polity approach. Polity-centred analyses suggest that the way state institutions are organised will influence who engages in collective action and around what types of issues (Skocpol 1992; Houtzager 2003). Reforms of the state – including pluralisation, decentralisation and institutionalised participation – can have significant impacts on the incentives faced by potential collective actors. By tracing who participates at foundational moments of policy changes, we can see how the reform process enables some actors to ‘engineer’ an ‘institutional fit’, while constraining others (Houtzager 2003).

The recent literature on social accountability provides a good analytical frame to see the ways in which collective actors can hold states to account through non-electoral mechanisms (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). While this literature offers promising insights into the conditions under which social accountability is likely to be successful and the mechanisms through

which it operates, it has said less about who engages and why collective actors demand social accountability under some conditions and not others. To understand the processes through which social accountability emerges and is sustainable, we need to analyse the impact of recent changes in state institutions on collective actors and trace the dynamics of their involvement with the state in policy reforms, implementation and subsequent efforts at sustaining social accountability.

The argument unfolds in the following fashion. The next section traces the logic of the recent reforms of the state that have moved from the 'choice' dominated reforms of the new public management to a focus on accountability as exemplified by the *World Development Report 2004* (World Bank 2003). Section 3 outlines why the social accountability approach represents an advance on thinking about accountability and highlights some of the theoretical and empirical issues it raises. Section 4 shows how taking a polity approach to understanding the involvement of collective actors in social accountability might help highlight the conditions under which social accountability is likely to emerge and be effective. Section 5 concludes by outlining a research agenda shaped by such a polity approach.

2 Service delivery reforms

2.1 Emphasising choice: new public management reforms

Not long ago, in the 1990s, as a part of the wave of state reforms, new public management (NPM) was viewed as the solution to improve public sector performance in service delivery (Hood 1991). Underpinning NPM was a diagnosis of the problems of the public sector based in public choice theory. Rent-seeking public officials with little incentives to act in the 'public interest' were unlikely to pay attention to improving performance. Subjecting them to the pressures of the market or market-like mechanisms, it was assumed, would give them the right kind of incentives. Techniques well developed in the management of private enterprises – contracting out, performance-based contracts, the creation of autonomous agencies, separation of policymaking from implementation, user fees, citizen charters and technology-driven complaint mechanisms – were applied to the public sector to various degrees (Hood 1991). Unfortunately, there has been little systematic research that traces these public sector reforms through to their impact on the quality of service

delivery. And there is little evidence to show that these techniques worked in the complex social and political environments of developing countries (Manning 2001; Polidano 2001).

One of the key reforms implied by NPM was the creation of competition through the *pluralisation* of services enabling users to exercise 'choice'. Pluralisation is expected to increase choice by increasing the number of providers and the variety of services they provide. Pluralisation also entails the separation of policymaking and provision, thus increasing the ability of policymakers to sanction poor performance by providers. *Decentralisation* and the privatisation of services often accompany pluralisation. By allowing state and non-state providers to flourish at the local level, the market is expected to cater to a greater diversity of needs, allowing users to choose providers that best meet their needs in terms of price and quality.

Demand-side mechanisms, such as vouchers that stimulate competition between providers, are commonly used alongside pluralisation to improve service performance. These involve the channelling of resources directly to households or third party institutions responsible for securing services for a defined group of people who can then choose the best provider. The advantages of such approaches is that they ensure resources reach intended beneficiaries and they strengthen institutions that can influence providers to perform better (Standing 2004). In Bangladesh for example, under a government programme, the provision of stipends for girl scholars has improved their enrolment in schooling, enabled families to choose which schools they attend and reduced drop out rates (GHK 2005). While such programmes provide incentives for poor families to prioritise education and choose their preferred facility, they also, by increasing choice, create incentives for providers to respond and strengthen the power of users *vis-à-vis*.

A large part of these reforms developed under the rubric of NPM were of a managerial nature, largely intended to improve public services by changing the incentives faced by providers. The impact of choice on basic services is assumed to work through the invisible hand of the market; no further action on the part of the state or users is necessary. There have been many criticisms of this choice strategy as a means to improve services – in many places there is

no effective competition and users do not have adequate information about the true quality of services.

2.2 Emphasising voice – accountability reforms

More recently however, greater attention is being focused on the lack of accountability mechanisms between users and public service providers. The analysis of the *World Development Report* of 2004 entitled 'Making Services Work for the Poor' exemplifies this focus on accountability (World Bank 2003). The central argument is that accountability relationships between the key stakeholders in service delivery – citizens, policymakers and service providers – are not transparent, formalised or effective. This, the report argues, leads to a whole host of problems that plague services – inadequate spending on basic public services, the skewing of service provision towards the rich, inadequate coverage particularly for the poorest people, lack of resources at the point of delivery, corruption, absenteeism of staff and ultimately poor quality of services.

The problem is evident in three sets of relationships between the key actors. First, mechanisms to ensure that governments adopt policies that meet the needs of their citizens (including the poorest ones) are weak. Politicians simply do not have incentives to improve service delivery when political institutions enable them to win and retain power by appealing to religion, caste or ethnicity rather than developmental performance. Citizens have few channels to be heard other than through the ballot box. The lack of information on the performance of politicians, social fragmentation along religious and ethnic lines and a lack of credibility among the population about political promises, creates a climate in which there are few incentives for politicians to focus on improving services (Keefer and Khemani 2003; Batley 2004).

Policymakers in turn do not have effective ways of holding service providers accountable. This can be a particularly acute problem when providers are part of the state itself (as is common in many countries where services are directly provided by the state) and there is little transparency or clarity in the state's expectations and providers' responsibilities. Horizontal channels of accountability – through the legislature or public institutions such as ombudsmen – have largely failed to oversee the work of providers. Finally, in most polities there are few

mechanisms for citizens to hold service providers directly accountable for service delivery.

Thus, the debate has shifted from managerial reforms to a focus on the potential for abuse of power and position by politicians, public officials and providers (public or private) and the importance of empowering end-users in a countervailing fashion. As the 'long route' of accountability has failed (from citizens electing policymakers who fail to check providers), greater emphasis is being placed on the 'short route' of accountability (directly between citizens and providers) (World Bank 2003).

This has resulted in reforms such as institutionalising direct user participation and decentralisation, which are expected to improve voice and consequently provider responsiveness (Mallick 2006). A variety of mechanisms to strengthen voice are now commonly advocated: formal computerised complaint systems, single window cells, and citizen charters are being used to increase the ability of users to interact easily and directly with providers. In Hyderabad, India, toll-free complaint numbers installed by Metro Water (the semi-autonomous water authority) have been used successfully to log complaints as well as a management tool to improve frontline employee performance (Caseley 2003). Streamlining of the complaint system for all urban services in Mumbai by a non-governmental organisation (NGO)-initiated and managed information system has been successful in reducing the time taken to resolve complaints as well as to hold responsible departments accountable (PRAJA 2000).

Yet many of these efforts are focused on the *individual consumer*. This is problematic for three reasons. First, these mechanisms largely focus on people as 'consumers'. They often do not leave space for the claims of those (particularly the poor) who are not served at all by providers. Second, despite the creation of direct channels for reaching providers, it is not clear why users would use them if there is no mandate (and related sanctions) for providers to respond. We know that there are high transaction costs for exercising voice, particularly for poor people, and without credible sanctions for lack of responsiveness, such tools lack bite. Third, these mechanisms largely place responsibility on *individuals* to invoke accountability against providers. It is however not clear that, even if adequate incentives existed for poor citizens to engage and make claims,

individual citizens will be able to do so. In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that individual citizens in poor communities are effective agents in holding either public or private providers to account and securing greater responsiveness. Rather, as the next section highlights, collective action is essential for the poor if direct accountability is to work.

3 Social accountability

The recent literature on social accountability has focused on the ways in which social actors can hold governments and politicians directly accountable through mechanisms other than elections (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006; Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000; Ackerman 2005). Traditional forms of political accountability – vertical mechanisms such as elections and horizontal mechanisms such as institutional checks and balances – have often failed to ensure an effective watch on the use of public authority. In response, a number of social movements have emerged that demand accountability through other channels – what is now being called ‘social accountability’.

Social accountability differs from traditional accountability in three main ways. First, in contrast to traditional accountability, social accountability is expected to be more effective because it works in the period between elections using both institutional and non-institutional channels. Przeworski (2006: 329) attributes the rise of social accountability to the declining role of political parties to respond to the populace, having lost their ‘socially integrative functions’. Second, rather than the limited conception of community mobilising for narrow self-interests in electoral politics, social accountability actors seek to institutionalise durable societal control over policies by enabling collective actors to exercise voice in deliberative processes that monitor public decisions. Thus, social accountability agents are not pressure groups or interest groups in the traditional sense that lobby for particularistic benefits. Rather, they often demand accountability for activities that are already sanctioned by the law. Unlike lobbying groups or corporatist organisations, their actions are within the public domain. In fact, they use the public domain to highlight issues, bring to bear on reputations and gain broader political support. Because of these reasons, collective actors working for social accountability often frame their claims in terms of legality and rights. Consequently, social accountability is expected to work through three main strategies – social

mobilisation, the judiciary and the media (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). In some countries, the newly created spaces for institutionalised participation in governance have been used for social accountability (Fung and Wright 2003; Cornwall and Coelho 2006). In addition, pressures generated through social accountability can activate traditional horizontal accountability mechanisms. Finally however, social accountability differs from traditional accountability mechanisms in that it is not mandatory. Losers in elections have to concede power. Those who are targets of social accountability strategies are not required to concede; it is assumed that the force of media, public debate, reputational damage and the triggering of traditional accountability mechanisms will have the intended effects.

Social accountability thus offers a useful analytical frame for understanding ways through which services might be improved through collective action. However, different scholars emphasise different elements of social accountability – for example, whether they are procedural or outcome related. Goetz and Jenkins (2004) emphasise that the new social movements for accountability are focused on outcomes of public actions, and not as much on the appropriateness of procedures followed. Others focus on procedural deviations in the workings of government and highlight corruption. Moreover, social accountability measures can be retrospective (social audits) or prospective (budget analysis). Furthermore, much of the literature from Latin America has focused on social accountability in the area of civil and political rights (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006), whereas in other parts of the world, it is social and economic rights that are at the forefront of the social accountability agenda.

While these varying emphases are largely a matter of strategic choice based on the countries and contexts in question, there are two fundamental issues on which scholars differ that deserve attention for analytical reasons.

3.1 Social accountability vs. deliberative institutions

Most importantly, there is a need to distinguish between social accountability and deliberative (decision-making) institutions. In social accountability, there is necessarily a reasoned account either of past behaviour or promises of future action. But social accountability by itself does not presuppose

Table 1 Mapping citizen participation in the exercise of public authority

		Deliberative institutions (decision-making)	
		Strong*	Weak (ineffective, unrepresentative)
Social accountability institutions (monitoring)	Strong	Governance Councils, Brazil (health, education, etc.)	Citizen report cards Right to information Expenditure tracking Social audits
	Weak (selective inclusion, co-optation?)	Participatory budgeting, Brazil Participatory planning, Kerala, India Bhagidari, Delhi, India	

*Strong and weak refers to the degree of participation, rather than the outcomes of such participation.

participation in decision-making. Some authors separate the monitoring functions from the decision-making functions, suggesting that social accountability is exercised when ordinary people monitor the use of public authority and, through social mobilisation that invokes the law and uses media campaigns, demand explanations when government actions deviate from what is expected (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006; O'Donnell 2006). Other authors treat fora for direct deliberative decision-making as being part of social accountability institutions (Arroyo 2004; Malena *et al.* 2004). Yet others view the relationship between social accountability and deliberative institutions as an empirical question, asking how the existence of particular spaces for participation impact on citizen engagement, inclusion and deepening democracy (Cornwall and Coelho 2006; Fung and Wright 2003).

Analytically, it makes sense to separate these two ways of participating in the exercise of public authority for they have different implications for when social accountability initiatives are likely to emerge and how they operate (Table 1). It is evident that some participatory institutions are stronger at creating spaces for citizen involvement in public policy decisions (participatory budgeting) than others that do better at monitoring government action (social audits). It would be a mistake to assume that institutions are able to perform well on both dimensions; yet it is precisely such institutions that are of most interest to us.

Part of the reason for this is that there is a tension between whether social accountability institutions

are autonomous from the state or not. Often the credibility of social accountability activities depends upon collective actors distancing themselves from the state, the actions of which they are questioning. If such actors are simultaneously part of deliberative decision making, they could be accused of cooptation by the state and thus lose legitimacy and effectiveness.

A related point is the issue of alliances that cut across the public-private divide. Implicit in the use of social accountability strategies is the fact that collective actors need to have relevant information that enables them to bring to light corruption, distortion or bias in public spending. Yet, given the confrontational nature of accountability demands, it is unlikely that the information is willingly conceded by the state. At the heart of social accountability strategies are alliances formed across the public-private divide, which enable societal actors to gain leverage (through information, access, etc.) *vis-à-vis* the state. These can occur through societal actors occupying the state over time (as in the case of health policy in Brazil, see Dowbor, this *IDS Bulletin*). Or they can occur through the forging of alliances between societal actors representing the poor and sympathetic reformists/groups within the state. Or they can occur when reformists leave public agencies to work with collective actors in civil society (as in the case of the demands for the Right to Information campaign in India – see Pande, this *IDS Bulletin*).

3.2 Class alliances: synergy or antagonism?

Another axis along which one needs to distinguish social accountability mechanisms from traditional mechanisms is the tension between the representativeness of traditional forms of political accountability (elections), in which each citizen gets a vote, and the potential narrowness of social accountability that offers access to those that have the resources to mobilise and use the media and the judiciary (Przeworski 2006). These tensions are highlighted in arenas such as social sector programmes where the middle class can mobilise to gain access and dominate the agenda in participatory institutions, sometimes crowding out the collective action of the poor (Chakrabarti, this *IDS Bulletin*). Middle class citizens can demand accountability from state institutions for not upholding laws which if enforced reduces the access of the poor to urban spaces and resources. The assumption then that social accountability invariably calls to account the interests of the 'broader public' is in question. The ways in which social accountability operates in practice seem important to assessing its potential as a mechanism for improving services for the poor.

4 The polity approach

While the social accountability framing is promising for understanding how non-electoral accountability mechanisms might be used to improve services for the poor, it does not directly help us understand the processes through which effective mechanisms for social accountability come about. Similarly, the work on direct accountability channels (based on NPM) accords a central role to citizen action for improvements in government performance. Yet it too does not highlight conditions under which citizens are likely to mobilise and engage in accountability processes. As argued earlier, there is no reason to assume that engagement will automatically follow from the creation of participatory spaces. To understand how and when such action emerges, we need to take a long-term dynamic and mutually constitutive view of state and society interactions.

The polity approach to social processes is useful for understanding the conditions under which social accountability emerges and how it might work (Skocpol 1992; Mahoney 2000). Analysis of the polity – the space within which political struggles across the public–private divide take place and through which both state and societal capacities and natures

are shaped – are central to understanding failures (and potential successes) of service delivery reforms. The approach, 'views the polity as the primary locus of action, yet understands political activities, whether carried on by politicians or by social groups, as conditioned by the institutional configurations of governments and political party systems' (Skocpol 1992: 41). As Skocpol (1992: 41) argues, the polity approach draws attention to four kinds of processes: (1) the processes of reforms of state institutions; (2) the impacts of state institutions on collective actors interested in specific policy arenas; (3) the 'fit' between collective actors with specific goals and the points of access and leverage afforded by political institutions; and (4) path dependence of policies and social action.

What this implies for collective action and public policy is that the formative moments of reforms matter. Collective actors who are able to engage in the reform process are able to 'engineer fit' between the reforms and their own capacities (Houtzager 2003; Gurza Lavalle *et al.* 2005). Those that are left out of the process might find it more difficult to engage at later stages. The way reforms restructure state institutions impacts the nature and capacities of collective actors to participate in policy processes as well as engage in social accountability. Thus, reforms are not only important for the impacts they have on sectoral outcomes (e.g. improved education) but also for their effects on societal actors.

We can now see how the three broad trends of state reforms – pluralisation, decentralisation and institutionalised participation – might impact on the capacity of collective actors representing the poor to engage in social accountability. The literature on collective action and social movements shows that direct public provisioning can facilitate the construction of alliances between groups of poor citizens and reformist professionals within the state involved in service delivery (Joshi 1999; Tandler 1997; Fox 1992). These alliances are often forged out of direct experience with service delivery. The location of reformist providers within the state can increase their institutional leverage over policy issues (Watson 1996; Dowbor, this *IDS Bulletin*). In contrast, professionals in non-governmental service provision lack leverage within the state to initiate pro-poor reforms. When service providers are fragmented they are driven by market competition and other interests that can prevent them from responding to

citizen needs and are difficult targets for large-scale collective action. The move from monolithic state provision to decentralised, pluralised provision can constrain the opportunities for such alliances. Choice reforms may fragment political actors. In contrast, institutionalised involvement of collective actors in the recently emergent new spaces for participation can create real incentives for beneficiaries to engage collectively with public officials and policy.

The extent to which state reforms of pluralisation, decentralisation and participation enable or constrain collective action is also dependent upon the entitlements people perceive as having. There is increasing evidence that shows how universal legal rights facilitate collective action by the poor (McCann 1998; Pande, this *IDS Bulletin*). Legal rights create collective interests that cut across social divisions, hence making it possible for larger collectivities to form and mobilise. Collective action around legal rights also provides a degree of legitimacy to social accountability actions – a ‘rightfulness’ of one’s claims – that facilitates alliance building with different groups and reduces the likelihood of suppression.

5 Re-framing the issues: an agenda for research

What implications do the arguments presented above have for research? How might research contribute to a better understanding of the kinds of reforms that would improve public services as well as citizen engagement?

First, if we place faith in social accountability mechanisms to have impacts on public service quality,

we need to understand the conditions under which collective actors emerge, gain capacity and engage in social accountability. As argued here, this necessarily means taking a longer term view to trace the iterative processes through which *networks* of collective actors have evolved over the period of the policy reform process and how reforms themselves have shaped the social terrain. The polity approach helps us do this.

Second, research needs to pay particular attention to alliances that cut across class lines and across the public–private divide as these are more likely to underpin successful cases of social accountability leading to improvements in services. How these alliances are shaped and evolve over time will help throw light on cases of successful reforms.

Finally, there is a greater likelihood that collective actors who participate in the processes of state reforms are more likely to directly engage in or facilitate social accountability at sub-national levels. We need research on such ‘moments of opportunity’, through which new social actors participate in policymaking and forge alliances across the public–private and class divide to understand the shape and impact of reforms that follow. Path dependence matters. In contrast to the view that autonomy from the state is a key condition of credible social accountability, engagement is necessary, as Houtzager (2003) argues, to engineer an ‘institutional fit’ between reforms and the capacities of collective actors on the ground.

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