



Photo Credit: Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

A Governance in Action Guide

MAY 2019



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
What is Social Accountability?	4
Why is Social Accountability Important?	7
Social Accountability and Fragility	8
Key Learnings from the Evidence on Social Accountability	9
Selecting and Implementing Social Accountability Mechanisms	15
Measuring the Impact of Social Accountability Initiatives	21
Conclusion	23

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Introduction

Social Accountability and Mercy Corps' Good Governance Approach

Mercy Corps' good governance approach elevates the voices of vulnerable communities and increases their inclusion in decision-making, while simultaneously promoting responsiveness and accountability among governance institutions and service providers. Starting from the bottom up, Mercy Corps works to empower and engage citizens and promote a skilled and connected civil society that is better able to demand services and good governance from decision-makers. In parallel, Mercy Corps works to increase the responsiveness and accountability of decision-makers by engaging directly with local governance actors and by supporting mechanisms by which their constituents can hold them to account.

We also strengthen relationship building, constructive deliberation and increased trust by facilitating repeated interactions between diverse communities and sectors and enhancing the capacity, networks and inclusivity of local organizations to support a skilled and connected civil society. This approach creates a foundation for communities and institutions to tackle the underlying causes of the world's toughest challenges, working collaboratively to build secure, productive and just communities

The Mercy Corps good governance approach incorporates four strategic, inter-related pillars:

- 1) Empowered and Engaged **Citizens**
- 2) Responsive and Accountable **Decision-Makers**
- 3) Skilled and Connected **Civil Society**
- 4) Relationship-building, constructive deliberation and **increased trust**

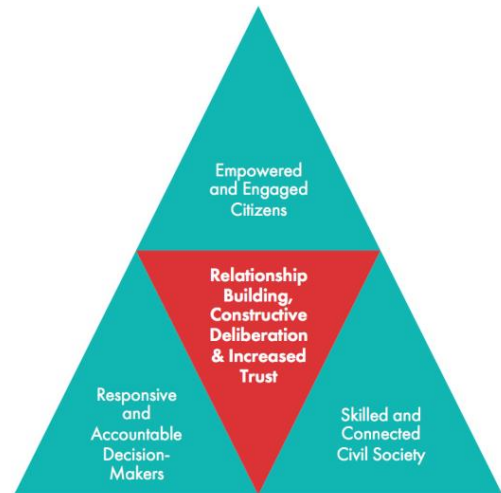


Figure 1: Mercy Corps' Good Governance Approach

Purpose of this Guide

This Guide supports teams as they operationalize the second and fourth pillars of the good governance approach and supports communities to establish social accountability mechanisms and strategies. It provides the basic theoretical underpinnings of social accountability, describes how social accountability fits into good governance, helps teams understand the benefits of building social accountability into their programs, and outlines key considerations for selecting social accountability mechanisms. This Guide is designed to accompany our **Social Accountability Toolkit** which describes the most common social

accountability mechanisms and outlines step-by-step processes for implementing them. We recommend starting with this Guide for the big picture of social accountability and then using the Toolkit for detailed support in selecting and implementing the mechanisms.

What is Social Accountability?

Social accountability, also known as “**bottom-up**” **accountability**, is a form of civic engagement that builds accountability through the collective efforts of citizens and civil society organizations to hold public officials, service providers and governments to account for their obligations.¹ Social accountability is the avenue through which **citizens are empowered to hold their leaders to account**. In social accountability, ordinary citizens and civil society organizations are considered the primary agents of change and participate directly or indirectly in demanding accountability from government institutions, service providers or businesses.

Social accountability is operationalized through the implementation of a range of tools or **social accountability mechanisms**, which comprise “the broad range of actions and mechanisms, beyond voting, that citizens can use to hold the state to account, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts.”² Although social accountability seeks to build citizen power vis-à-vis the state, it is seen as distinct from the political accountability of elected officials, where citizen voice is usually delegated to representatives between elections. This distinction makes social accountability an especially relevant approach for societies in which representative government is weak, unresponsive or non-existent.³

Social accountability is an evolving umbrella category that includes a range of strategies to amplify citizen voices and improve responsiveness of the public and/or private sector. These mechanisms can be initiated and supported by the state, by citizens, or both, but very often they are demand-driven and operate from the bottom up.⁴ Ultimately these tools aim to increase the transparency and responsiveness of governance in many arenas, ranging from local service delivery to national processes of policy formulation.

¹ UNDP (2013). [Reflections on Social Accountability](#): Catalyzing Democratic Governance to Accelerate Progress Towards the Millenium Development Goals.

² McNeil, Mary, and Carmen Malena, eds. [Demanding good governance: Lessons from social accountability initiatives in Africa](#). World Bank Publications, 2010.

³ A. Joshi, P. Houtzager **Widgets or watchdogs?** *Public Management Review*, 14 (2) (2012), pp. 145-162

⁴ UNDP (2013). [Reflections on Social Accountability: Catalyzing Democratic Governance to Accelerate Progress Towards the Millenium Development Goals](#). http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/documents/partners/civil_society/publications/2013_UNDP_Reflections-on-Social-Accountability_EN.pdf

Table 1.
EXAMPLES OF COMMON SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS⁵

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen report cards • Citizen scorecards • community monitoring • Town halls • public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms (e.g. complaint boxes, hotlines) • participatory planning tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social audits • participatory budgeting • public expenditure tracking • gender budgeting • citizen juries and other forms of public hearings • information campaigns through public radio, television, social media
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Accountability in a Governance System

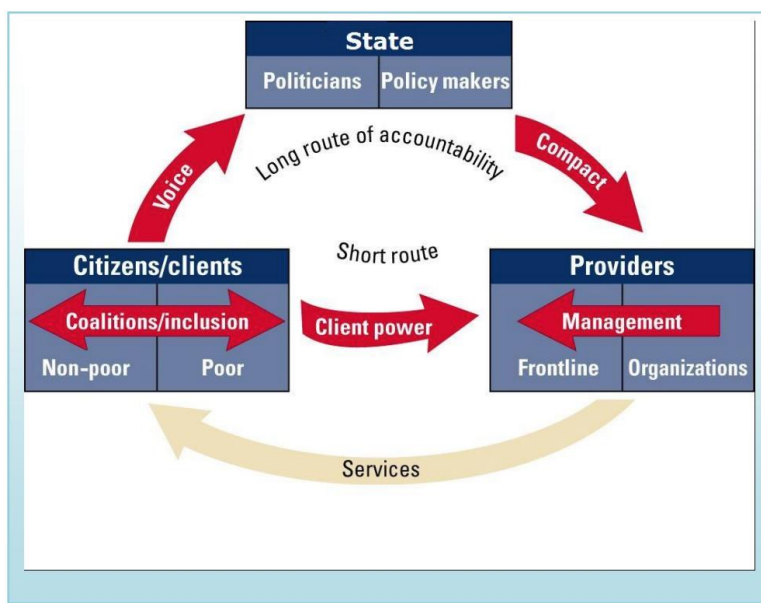
There are several ways to conceptualize the way accountability works in an overall governance system and the way social accountability mechanisms fit into that system. Two of the most common are presented below.

Long and Short Routes to Accountability

The World Bank distinguishes between two overarching routes for accountability in a governance system: the short route, whereby the citizens exert an influence directly on a service provider, and the long route, whereby citizens influence politicians and policy makers, who in turn influence providers.⁶

Both involve articulated public demands for improvements of citizen “voice”. The two routes to accountability are illustrated by Figure 1. Periodic elections at the national and local levels represent the most common form of “long route” accountability in which citizens respond to the performance of elected officials via their vote. However, elections occur infrequently and in

Figure 1: Key relationships of power and accountability



Source: *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People*, Washington, D.C. The World Bank and Oxford University Press, Washington, D.C.

⁶ World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People, World Bank and Oxford University Press, Washington, DC

many contexts do not leave citizens feeling that their voice has been heard on the specific issues relevant to their day-to-day lives.

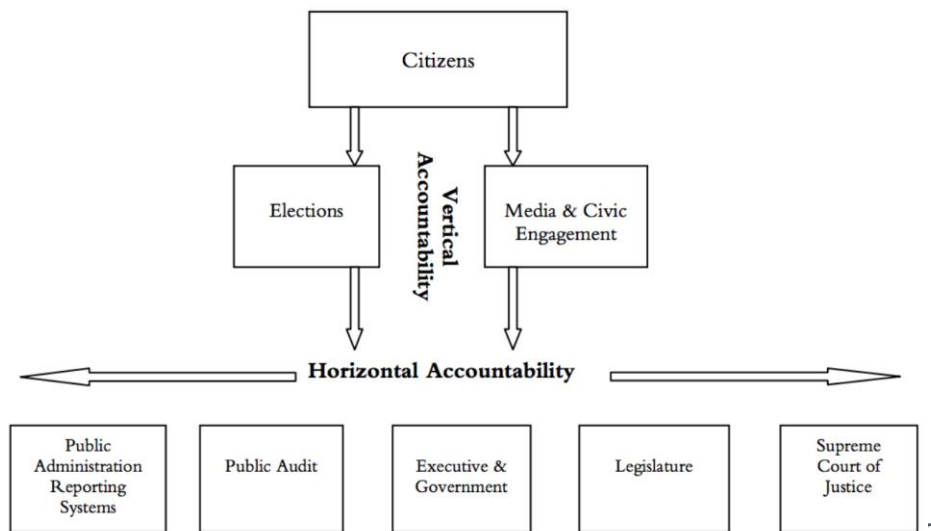
Short route accountability can be exercised on a more continuous basis through social accountability mechanisms. Based on “voice” rather than votes, social accountability initiatives provide a channel for direct political participation. These forms of accountability offer an especially relevant approach for societies in which “long route” accountability mechanisms, such as electoral institutions and representative government, are weak, unresponsive, or non-existent. The social accountability mechanisms in Table 1 above are examples of “short route” accountability.

Horizontal and Vertical Accountability

Another way to conceive of social accountability is through a horizontal and vertical framework. Horizontal accountability refers to the mutual oversight embedded in the state’s institutions of checks and balances. It includes the branches or structures of the state (legislature, judicial bodies, ombudspersons, etc.), which provide formal, institutional checks and balances to guard against abuse of power.

Vertical accountability on the other hand, originates outside the state and refers to political accountability relationships between citizens and their elected representatives. This includes everything from periodic elections to the grass-roots efforts of citizens to influence government decisions. Social accountability efforts are vertical when citizens make demands on the state, whether inside or outside of electoral channels, as illustrated in the diagram below. Social accountability mechanisms are vertical forms of accountability.

FIGURE 2. HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL FORMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

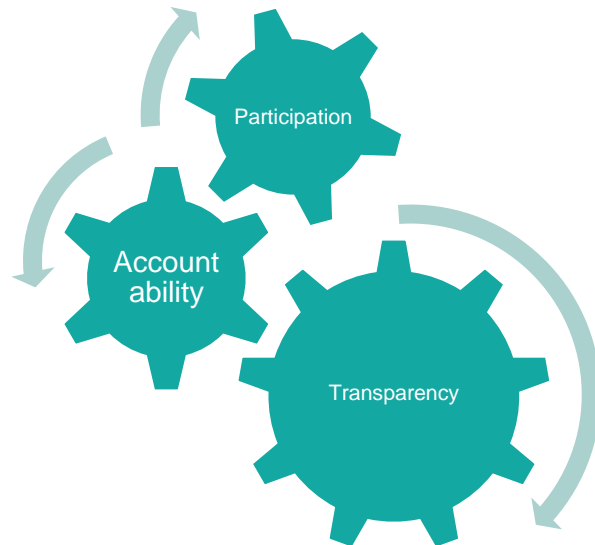


⁷ Note that public audits are distinct from social audits. A public audit is a financial audit of a public entity, whereas the term social audit refers to accountability tools used to understand, measure, verify, and improve government performance more broadly.

Building Blocks of Social Accountability

The broad concept of social accountability can be disaggregated into three distinct yet inter-related building blocks:

- ✓ **Transparency:** The collection, analysis, dissemination and monitoring of information related to government policies and programs.
- ✓ **Accountability:** Collaborative and incremental approaches to bringing together citizens and power-holders for dialogue, deliberation and feedback.
- ✓ **Participation:** Inclusion of citizens, including marginalized groups, in the process of policy-making or implementation as a means of oversight.



In order for social accountability to flourish, each of these building blocks should be present throughout the governance system and embedded into the structure of decision-making processes and bodies.

Why is Social Accountability Important?

Social accountability is foundational to the social contract, or **citizen-state relationship**. When employed strategically and with the buy-in of citizens and government, social accountability mechanisms have the potential to fundamentally transform the citizen-state relationship into one that **fulfills the needs of citizens and realizes the obligations of power-holders**. Social accountability mechanisms put information about the quality of services and the process of government decision-making squarely into the hands of an active citizenry. They establish formal or informal channels and incentives for citizen-government deliberation, thus empowering citizens to act on information to advance reforms for their benefit. In this way, even the most marginalized groups can have a voice.

Obviously, the introduction of a single tool or mechanism cannot by itself transform complex historical, political and social dynamics, especially entrenched social inequalities, power struggles and mistrust among key stakeholders. Instead, a strategic social accountability approach aims to respond to the specific social accountability challenges present in a particular context, spur citizen demand for improved governance and services, mobilize citizens and government into coalitions for action and facilitate iterative opportunities for engagement between government and citizens.

Social accountability mechanisms are therefore an important entry point to improve the way citizens interact with government over time. They can contribute to the following objectives:

- **increased trust between citizens and government** through iterative and constructive interactions
- **strengthened norms and expectations** of inclusive, participatory and transparent decision-making
- more **responsive and higher quality service delivery** that benefit marginalized groups in society

Social accountability enables an environment in which citizens exercise their voice and service providers are answerable to them.⁸The ultimate goal is to evolve the citizen-government relationship into one where obligations are realized, quality of service provision are improved, and ultimately citizen welfare is advanced by means of structured and meaningful participation of citizens in governance.

Social Accountability and Fragility

Accountability challenges can be particularly acute in fragile and conflict-affected states characterized by limited state capacity, institutional instability and corruption, low levels of social cohesion, and the lack of a widely accepted social contract between citizen and state. The World Bank estimates that two billion people currently live in countries where development outcomes are affected by fragility, conflict and violence. By 2030, 46% of the global poor could live in fragile and conflict-affected situations.⁹

Fragility may negatively impact state and non-state actors' motivations for mutual trust-building, the nature and strength of civil society led movements, citizen expectations of the state, willingness to question authority and protection from reprisal. A lack of trust in public institutions and ruling elites as well as experience of the state as a source of conflict or oppression during a recent war may result in citizen disengagement from formal accountability and redress processes or use of alternative channels. Civil society may be fragmented into a range of groups and interests, and 'community' associations may be captured by local elites who do not represent their members' needs and, in some cases, use them to exploit vulnerable groups, particularly women.¹⁰

The OECD defines state fragility as a “lack of capacity to perform basic state functions, where ‘capacity’ encompasses (a) organizational, institutional and financial capacity to carry out basic functions of governing a population and territory, and (b) the state’s ability to develop mutually constructive and reinforcing relations with society.”

⁸ https://transparency.am/files/publications/1457166569-0-814669.pdf?utm_content=buffer0873c&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

⁹ “How can fragile and conflict-affected states improve their legitimacy with their people.” World Bank Blog. January 26, 2017. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/01/26/how-can-fragile-and-conflict-affected-states-improve-their-legitimacy-with-their-people>

¹⁰ Social accountability in situations of conflict and fragility. U4 Anticorruption Resource Center. U4 Brief: December 2011. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_doc_17.pdf

In the immediate years after a conflict, the failure of the state to fulfill its functions and build constructive relations with society creates a high risk for corruption, potentially resulting in grievance and renewed violence. However, while building social accountability may be most challenging in areas of high fragility, it is precisely during the post-conflict period, when hopes and expectations are high, that social accountability approaches are most needed to reduce the likelihood of relapse back to violence.

In fragile states we must of course ensure that we first do no harm. There can be risks in encouraging communities to challenge entrenched power dynamics. It is important to consider all security concerns and to identify allies among power holders. (See section below on key lessons.)

Key Learnings from the Evidence on Social Accountability

A growing body of empirical research analyzes the impact of social accountability mechanisms on a range of governance outcomes, such as citizen engagement, inclusion, participation in decision-making and the quality and responsiveness of public services. A discussion of the results from the most influential studies is provided in Annex 1, and a full list of empirical resources is provided in Annex 3.

Rather than asking, “does social accountability work,” it is more relevant to frame questions in terms of the degree to which – and the conditions under which – an institutional change initiative would work.

The studies of social accountability mechanisms show mixed results. In some cases, social accountability interventions have had a positive impact on creating citizen pressure to improve service delivery and have led to gains in the quality of services, including increased access, improved relationships, improved technical performance and improved maintenance of infrastructure.¹¹¹² In other studies, similar initiatives had little impact on responsiveness of government or quality of service delivery.¹³ And in some contexts, social accountability mechanisms had difficulty gaining traction altogether. While the evidence does not support a simple blanket conclusion that social accountability “works” in all cases, it does help to illuminate **under which conditions social accountability mechanisms are more or less likely to succeed and which factors hinder or enable success.**

Many of the social accountability interventions that have produced meager results are based on assumptions that turn out to be weak, such as “information is power;” “decentralization brings the government closer to the people;” “community participation is democratic;” and “community voice can (by

¹¹ Lara S. Ho, Guillaume Labrecque, Isatou Batonon, Viviana Salsi, and Ruwan Ratnayake, [Effects of a community scorecard on improving the local health system in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: qualitative evidence using the most significant change technique](#), DfID-International Rescue Committee.

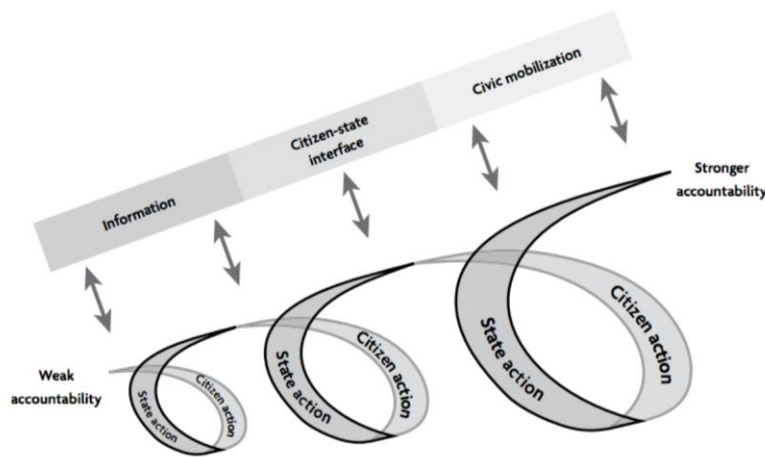
¹² Björkman, Martina and Svensson, Jakob. [Power to the People](#): Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment on Community-Based Monitoring in Uganda, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 124, No. 2 (May, 2009), pp. 735-769,

¹³ Banerjee, A., Rukmini B., Duflo, E., Glennerster, R. And S. Khemani (2010). [Pitfalls of Participatory Programs](#): Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Education in India. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, Vol. 2, Issue 1: 1-30.

itself) influence public service providers.”¹⁴ Field evidence indicates that these propositions need to be further specified and made context-specific.

Based on lessons learned over decades of implementing social accountability programs, practitioners have identified several requirements for success, regardless of the specific social accountability tool or mechanism.¹⁵ The primary prerequisites for success include: access to public information, capability of citizens to voice their needs, and state capacity to respond to these needs. Bringing these elements together requires mobilizing both individual citizens as well as broad coalitions to move forward reforms. Figure X. illustrates the iterative process by which these components interact.

FIGURE 3. THE ITERATIVE NATURE OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY (WORLD BANK)¹⁶



Below are key lessons synthesized from the growing evidence-base on social accountability mechanisms.

Lesson 1: Importance of contextualization

Social accountability approaches must be context-specific

Context is a key determining factor in the ability of social accountability mechanisms to produce changes in government responsiveness and citizen engagement. Attributes such as overall stability, institutional trust, social capital, community values/norms, citizens’ self-perceptions, capacity for collective action among community members, and the incentive structures faced by service providers are the starting point to the development of effective social accountability strategies.¹⁷

¹⁴ Fox, Jonathan A. ["Social accountability: what does the evidence really say?."](#) *World Development* 72 (2015): 346-361

¹⁵ Adapted from R. Nierras. Social accountability and child rights. Governance, Social Accountability and Children’s Rights: A Report on the Learning Event of Plan UK’s Meeting of Governance Coordinators and Advisors (London, Plan UK, 2010).

¹⁶ Grandvoinet, Helene, Ghazia Aslam, and Shomikho Raha. 2015. Opening the Black Box: The Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability. New Frontiers of Social Policy series. Washington, DC: World Bank.

¹⁷ Abigail Barr, Truman Packard, Danila Serra. [Participatory Accountability and Collective Action: Evidence from Field Experiments in Albanian Schools](#), April 2012, World Bank,

The World Bank describes **six contextual domains that impact the success of any social accountability intervention:**

- capacity of civil society,
- willingness of government to respond to social accountability mechanisms;
- inter-elite relations;¹⁸
- state-society relations and mutual expectations of the entitlements, roles, and responsibilities between state and citizens;
- intra-society relations;
- global dimensions.¹⁹

These dynamics are complex and often difficult to fully ascertain in a specific context. For this reason, scholars and practitioners are increasingly championing **Political Economy Analysis (PEA)** as the basis for any social accountability intervention in order to identify and design programming for the specific dynamics and power relationships that stand in the way of accountable and transparent governance in each unique setting. Political economy analysis can range from in-depth, months long processes to briefer, less resource intensive analyses. A wide assortment of PEA tools and approaches exist²⁰.

《 **POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS**

“PEA is the attempt to find out what is really ‘going on’ in a situation or what lies behind the surface of the immediate problem, for example whether competing interests exist... PEA helps us to unpack all the issues previously lumped into the ‘political will’ box.” Alan Whaites Senior Adviser and Head of Profession, National School of Government July 2017 UKAID.

Inclusion: In addition, social accountability interventions must **actively encourage both the inclusion of voices and the representation of those who have often been excluded** because of gender, age, ethnicity, caste or class. If we fail to consider historically marginalized groups before establishing social accountability programs, we risk further isolation and disempowerment.

Preparation and Context Analysis: Assessing contextual factors that enable or hinder social accountability. As part of preparation for programs involving social accountability mechanisms, it is critical to conduct a comprehensive context analysis or political economy analysis in order to understand power dynamics and potential challenges and/or conflict among stakeholders. This includes understanding public policy, identification of intervention areas, selection of facilitators, and securing cooperation of relevant service providers, government leaders and civil society.

¹⁸ Inter-elite relations comprise the horizontal power relations between the political and economic elites that access and control state structures; the underlying relationships and incentives that underpin political “will” (McLoughlin and Batley 2012)

¹⁹ O’Meally, S. C. 2013. “Mapping Context for Social Accountability: A Resource Paper.” Social Development Department, World Bank, Washington, DC

²⁰

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766478/The_Beginner_s_Guide_to_PEA.pdf

Lesson 2: Information in and of itself is insufficient

Fundamental to most social accountability mechanisms is the **collection, aggregation and analysis of information on government activities** and the dissemination of that information into the hands of the public. Therefore, it is important to have a clear strategy for gathering information and sharing it through the most contextually appropriate mediums, including traditional media, social media, and social and political networks. Information should be translated into relevant languages, articulated simply and clearly and presented in appropriate formats.

However, **information alone is unlikely to improve collective action or government response.** A number of impact evaluations have tested the proposition that dissemination of information, such as service delivery outcome data, will activate collective action by citizens, which will in turn improve service provider responsiveness. The findings of the majority of these studies show that merely making information available is insufficient. **Several other criteria also need to be in place.**

1. In order to empower citizens, information needs to be perceived as actionable – for example, providing information that allows citizens to compare the services they receive with the services received by others.
2. Second, for a citizen to be able to act on information, an enabling environment needs to reduce fear of reprisals via external allies who can reduce the actual and perceived risks and costs often inherent in collective action.
3. Third, incentives for information-led action increase with the likelihood that the state will actually respond to voice.

Lesson 3: Engage both citizen and state actors

Both the supply and demand side of the governance system are important

Social accountability interventions will only achieve their aims

if equal attention is paid to improving the state's capacity and willingness to respond as is paid to enhancing the role of citizens.²¹ Local voices that challenge authorities are by themselves likely to be ignored or squelched. Bottom-up monitoring alone often lacks sufficient clout to make a significant change in government behavior.²²

Citizen action that has the backing of allies within the state who are both willing and able to get involved has a much greater chance of addressing impunity. Where this is not possible, strengthening or forging linkages between citizens and other citizen or civil society counterparts to build countervailing power will increase the likelihood of success. Institutional change strategies that promote both citizen

THE ROLE OF DECENTRALIZATION

Contrary to popular belief, the evidence shows that decentralization does not in itself lead to greater accountability. Only those local governments that are pushed to be more democratic are likely to become more responsive when bolstered by the increased funding and authority that comes with decentralization.

J. Fox, Accountability politics: Power and voice in rural Mexico

²¹ Grandvoinet, Helene, Ghazia Aslam, and Shomikho Raha. 2015. Opening the Black Box: The Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability. New Frontiers of Social Policy series. Washington, DC: World Bank.

²² Fox, Jonathan A. "Social accountability: what does the evidence really say?." *World Development* 72 (2015): 346-361

“voice” **and** the state’s institutional capacity to respond to citizen voice are therefore more effective than singular demand-side tactics completely divorced from the broader supply-side actors. In a review of over 25 empirical studies on social accountability interventions, the evidence was most positive for “sandwich strategies” that combine empowering coalitions of pro-accountability actors in both the state and the citizenry to trigger virtuous circles of mutual empowerment.”²³

Our interventions must therefore consider how to build commitment and buy-in for social accountability interventions not only at the community or civil society levels (demand side) but also in the relevant public officials and government institutions (supply side). We must engage and build capacity both among citizens and state actors.

Engaging citizens: Raising community capacity to articulate demands

This includes raising the awareness of citizens, building confidence and capacity for engagement, and building networks and coalitions. Training and utilizing skilled facilitators from the communities themselves is critical to the success of social accountability in order to gain maximum trust of both communities and government partners.

Engaging State Actors: Preparing government to respond to citizen demands

Just as citizens must be prepared to engage with the government, government must also have core competencies in order to implement social accountability within their day-to-day work. Local officials must have the skills, power, and revenue-raising opportunities to respond to needs articulated by citizens. An integral component of this is the presence of enforceable sanctions, or consequences, for public officials who perform poorly or are not answerable to citizens. Finding allies within government, even at the very local level, is an important success factor for social accountability efforts. In addition, social accountability mechanisms must identify a “hook” or incentive pathway to encourage state willingness to respond to citizen demands. Below are five ways in which social accountability interventions have been effective in garnering responsiveness on the part of state actors.

Five ways social accountability mechanisms can induce state responsiveness

1. By appealing to the personal or professional integrity of public officials
2. By appealing to a government’s existing instrumental interest in improving service delivery and efficiency
3. By linking SA mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of the state’s own “horizontal” accountability framework using existing diversity within state institutions
4. Leveraging government-endorsed, donor-financed initiatives

Coalition Building: Supporting the creation of **coalitions of pro-accountability actors** comprising both community (including civil society) and state actors increases the likelihood that advocacy, lobbying and campaigning work that follows up on the delivery of commitments is most effective.

²³ id.

Lesson 4: Be Strategic

Inserting a social accountability mechanism into a given context is in itself insufficient

Given the considerations outlined above, it is critical to take a comprehensive, strategic approach to social accountability, rather than focusing primarily on a specific tool. According to a meta-analysis of evaluations of social accountability mechanisms,²⁴ social accountability approaches can be roughly divided into two primary branches: narrow, tool-based approaches and comprehensive approaches.

- 1) **Tool-based approaches** are more narrow interventions, often limited to “society-side” efforts to project voice; they assume that access to information alone will motivate localized collective action, which will in turn generate sufficient power to influence public sector performance. These approaches tend to focus primarily on the implementation of an individual tool.
- 2) **Comprehensive approaches**, in contrast, deploy multiple, coordinated tools and tactics, including but not limited to, information dissemination. They encourage enabling environments for collective action by creating explicit platforms and linkages between citizen voice initiatives and supply-side reforms to both reduce perceived risk and bolster public sector responsiveness. These are often referred to as “voice plus teeth” approaches. Comprehensive approaches are iterative and long-term; recognizing that the process of increasing accountability takes time.

The evidence shows that the impact of singular tools on governance outcomes is mixed, whereas the evidence of the impact of comprehensive approaches is much more promising. Likewise, in the most recent World Bank²⁵ and USAID²⁶ guidance on social accountability, both have shifted away from “tools-based” approaches that focus on technocratic fixes in favor of a context-driven, political analysis approach, which is more adaptive and can **build on linkages and synergies between stakeholders** that affect accountability.

◀ FACILITATING CITIZEN-STATE INTERFACE:

Successful social accountability systems require bring government and citizens together to exchange their findings, initiate dialogue and agree on interventions. Includes instruments such as scorecards, audits and budget analysis to engage with a government, either by using existing formalized spaces for participation in planning or policy cycles or by developing new ones.

²⁴ O’Meally, S. C. 2013. “[Mapping Context for Social Accountability: A Resource Paper.](#)” World Bank, Washington, DC.

²⁶ <http://gpsaknowledge.org/knowledge-repository/social-accountability-a-practitioners-handbook/#.V4ej4PkrKUK>

Selecting and Implementing Social Accountability Mechanisms

To determine which mechanisms will best operationalize social accountability in a given context, a good starting point is to return to the three building blocks of social accountability—transparency, participation, and accountability—and examine which of these are most critical in your context. Each tool emphasizes one of these building blocks over another. However, inevitably there is significant overlap and most tools address two or three at the same time. The table below categorizes social accountability tools generally by focal area.

Social accountability looks different in every context. Not every tool or recommendation is appropriate in every situation. This guide presents a range of options to be chosen from, tailored, and adjusted. The accompanying Social Accountability Toolkit provides more in depth guidance on how to implement each tool and adapt it to the local context.

FIGURE 4

Transparency	Accountability	Participation
Information campaigns Citizen charters Town Halls	Community scorecards Public Expenditure tracking Grievance redress mechanisms Citizen Report Card Social Audit	Participatory budgeting Participatory/ community planning

Different tools have different advantages depending on the desired accountability outcome as well as resources available for implementation. For example, an information campaign that seeks to publicize government spending may improve transparency through the dissemination of information but might lack concrete mechanisms for feedback and interface between citizens and government, thereby not significantly contributing to actual accountability. Alternatively, a community planning process may ensure participation and inclusion, but if there is no mechanism to transmit the community-identified needs to government officials then the process does little to strengthen answerability or accountability of the government.

When designing a social accountability intervention, therefore, teams should consider which focus area to emphasize based on the results of a thorough context analysis. From there, the selected tool or tools may be adapted to the specific context.

Of course, practical considerations are also an important factor in selecting which social accountability mechanisms to use. Every tool requires a different level of financial resource, time commitment, staff capacity and sampling strategy and therefore not all tools will work in each context.

Below is a brief introduction to the most common social accountability tools employed by Mercy Corps programs organized by primary focal area. A detailed description of these mechanisms, along with instructions on implementation, can be found in the Social Accountability Toolkit.²⁷

Transparency-Oriented Tools

Transparency-focused tools prioritize the collection, dissemination and use of information. They are most relevant in contexts where a major barrier to social accountability is a lack of public information about the quality of government services or government decision-making, policies, or expenditures.

Town Halls and Community Consultation

Town hall meetings are an engagement format that allows for **two-way information exchange** so government can gain a deeper understanding of the ideas and concerns of individual community members, while communities learn about the government's perspectives on an issue. **A town hall meeting is an important tool for the government to inform community members about emerging issues, gauge where a community stands and identify and implement solutions to a problem.** During town halls, government officials explain an issue, policy concern or program to communities in an accessible, relevant manner to help their constituents understand the action the government is taking. At the same time, these forums give communities the opportunity to share feedback with government officials on the most pressing and concerning issues that they face. In addition to enabling transparency through two-way information exchange, Town Halls also contribute significantly to increased and inclusive participation in policy and decision-making and could therefore easily fall into the "participation-oriented" category as well.

Citizen Charters

A Citizen Charter is a written, voluntary declaration by service providers about the standards, accessibility, transparency and accountability of services to be delivered. Although not legally enforceable, citizen charters are a kind of contract or agreement between service users and service providers. They outline the quantity and quality of services users are entitled to receive in exchange for their taxes as well as what service providers have the responsibility to deliver as public servants in exchange for their salaries. A Charter can help to change the mindset of public officials; it can encourage officials to move away from the notion that they are powerful over the public and move towards the idea that public officials have a duty as public servants to spend money and provide services, which are funded through taxes, in a way that meets the interests, preferences and needs of citizens.

Information Campaigns

Information interventions aim to encourage accountability by informing people about public services, including what services they are entitled to receive, how to access them and what performance and quality they should expect. Information campaigns implicitly encourage citizens to demand better services by publicizing information about rights, standards and performance. For instance, mass media or radio campaigns can serve as one-way information pathways to communities to increase awareness of the available public services. Typically, information campaigns are implemented alongside other social accountability approaches and tools.

²⁷ [Social Accountability: A Governance in Action Toolkit](#)

Accountability Oriented Tools

Accountability-focused tools support systems and processes that empower citizens to claim rights and services through engagement with public officials. These tools enable two-way feedback loops between citizens and power-holders (e.g. government officials, decision-makers, service providers, etc.) about the access, availability and quality of service provision. These tools promote collaborative and incremental improvements to communities, bringing together the citizens and power-holders, typically around issues of service delivery.²⁸

Citizen Report Cards

Citizen report cards (CRC) are used to solicit user feedback on service provider performance. During a CRC process, quantitative and perception-based information from statistically representative surveys is gathered to reflect the opinions and perceptions of citizens. CRCs can be used to assess a wide range of services, including water and sanitation, solid waste, police and security, street lighting, road and local transportation, health, or education. They are useful tools for establishing baseline information and benchmarking service coverage and performance, as well as for identifying inequities in service coverage and quality. They can measure access, availability, reliability, quality and satisfaction with services; as well as provide information around citizens' willingness to pay for services. CRCs can be a useful tool to capture service provider responsiveness and identify hidden costs and/or corruption. CRCs are most effective when they are employed at the municipal or local government level where the “space” between citizens (clients) and service providers is minimal.

Community Score Cards

The primary goal of a Community Scorecard (CSC) is to positively influence the quality, efficiency and accountability with which services are provided. CSCs provide a participatory forum that engages both service users and service providers. The CSC process is generally conducted at the micro/local level and uses the community as the unit of analysis. It generates information about the quality of a particular service, such as health or education, through focus group interactions, enabling maximum participation of the local community. The resulting discussions can be used as evidence by the community to advocate for improved service availability, performance or equity. CSCs provide immediate feedback to service providers (i.e. clinics or schools) and emphasize immediate responsiveness and joint decision making. CSCs allow for mutual dialogue between users and providers and can be followed by joint monitoring.

Public Audit

A public audit is a form of community monitoring that allows citizens who receive a service to review and cross-check the information reported by the service provider against information collected from users of the service. This form of monitoring can review various aspects of the service delivery process such as whether allocated funds actually reach a health facility, whether people who met eligibility criteria receive social assistance benefits or whether providers show up for work. The results of an audit are usually announced during public gatherings, which are attended by users as well as the public officials involved in management of services and providers.

²⁸ Other forms of accountability exist that are more contentious, such as protests and civil resistance movements. However, this guide focuses on collaborative approaches to accountability.

Social Audits

Social audits are similar to but broader than public audits and can cover a range of issues, although they are frequently used to ensure that a service provider (or other government or quasi-government entity) is adhering to its constitutive documents. Social audits are often used to verify that a committee or board contains proper representation and takes its decisions in accordance with stated policies.

Public Expenditure Tracking

Public Expenditure Tracking is a process that monitors the amount of funds received at each point in the chain of public service delivery from a nation's treasury to the classroom or health clinic where the funds are intended to be spent. This tool seeks to gather information beyond official data and administrative records to understand what actually happens to money that is appropriated for service delivery. Public expenditure tracking usually involves both quantitative research, such as verifying financial accounts to monitor the actual flow of funds; and qualitative research, such as interviewing users of public services about their experiences and assessments of the quality, accessibility and cost of public services.

Findings from a Public Expenditure Tracking process can provide evidence of corruption and be used for advocacy and campaigning by detecting specific bottlenecks, inefficiencies and/or misappropriation in the transfer of public goods and resources. In addition, this tool can uncover delays in the allocation of resources through public administration (e.g., salaries, allowances, financing, material, equipment, drugs and vaccines) as well as absenteeism. Expenditure tracking can be undertaken at the local, district or national level, with the unit of analysis often being a frontline service delivery point such as a sub-set of rural clinics or schools within a given geographic area.

Grievance Redress Mechanisms

Grievance redress mechanisms—also known as complaint mechanisms—provide opportunities to use information to influence service delivery. They are formal accountability mechanisms for citizens to give feedback on government programs and services when problems arise. Grievance redress mechanisms are generally the accountability channel of last resort for complaints that are not resolved at the point of delivery. Most grievance redress mechanisms allow individuals to give feedback about services, such as a parent registering a complaint about teacher conduct or conditions at a school. When feedback is aggregated, however, it can be used to influence service provision at the program or policy level.

A well-functioning grievance mechanism:

- Provides a predictable, transparent, and credible process to all parties, resulting in outcomes that are seen as fair, effective, and sustained over time
- Builds trust as an integral component of broader community relations activities
- Enables more systematic identification of emerging issues and trends, facilitating corrective action and preemptive engagement from the side of government²⁹

Sample grievance redress mechanisms may include:

- websites with specific instructions on how to contact government officials
- a designated email address to which citizens can send complaints/feedback

²⁹ <http://www.cao-ombudsman.org/howwework/advisor/documents/implemgrieveng.pdf>

- text message forms to which citizens can send complaints/feedback
- customer surveys at the point of service delivery
- complaints boxes
- phone hotlines
- consultative meetings bringing together public officials with citizens
- “help desks”/ “may I help you?” counters

Participation Oriented Tools

Participation-focused social accountability mechanisms aim to create opportunities for citizens, including marginalized groups, to meaningfully contribute to the process of policy-making or implementation as a means of oversight.

Participatory Planning

Participatory planning is a facilitated decision-making process, led by local stakeholders, to identify and build consensus around a communities’ most pressing needs (e.g. infrastructure, economic development, health and education). The process results in actionable solutions to these issues, incorporating a combination of community, government, donor and private-sector resources. An alternative to top-down or elite decision-making, participatory planning emphasizes the inclusion of marginalized populations that are often not consulted in local development planning and resource allocation. Participatory planning should be linked to formal governance structures, either through direct participation of government officials in the participatory planning process, or the integration of community-identified needs into local development plans and resource allocation carried out by government. Mercy Corps’ CATALYSE Guidance³⁰ and Toolkit³¹ provide detailed guidance on how to operationalize participatory planning.

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting is a mechanism or process through which citizens participate directly in the different phases of budget formulation, decision making and monitoring of budget execution, usually at the local or municipal level. The process typically involves a local authority who presents its budget to the public, specifying the share of the budget to be allocated to local investment. Through a process of dialogue, community members are able to choose for themselves which priorities should be addressed and funded under the local budget. The community is also involved in monitoring the implementation of activities selected through this participatory process. Participatory budgeting can be instrumental in increasing public expenditure transparency and in improving budget targeting. It opens up obscure budgetary procedures to ordinary citizens and helps create a broader public forum in which citizens and governments discuss spending, taxation, and implementation. Participatory budgeting programs are most often implemented at the municipal or local level although there are some participatory budgeting programs at the state and provincial levels.

Social Accountability as part of Food Security Programs

Sustaining food security that are resilient to shocks and stresses requires an enabling environment that facilitates all citizens to access necessary resources and services and apply effective nutrition, income generating and risk-mitigating strategies. Access to resilience capacities is often constrained by social

³⁰ <https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsd/docs/CATALYSEGovernanceInActionGuide.pdf>

³¹ <https://mcdl.mercycorps.org/gsd/docs/CATALYSEGovernanceInActionToolkit.pdf>

norms, as well as by weak local institutions and formal and informal decision-making processes imbued with complex and unjust power dynamics. Poor governance intensifies the impacts of shocks and stresses and, in some cases, can result in grievances that can lead to violence. Our complex food security programs therefore work to transform how the enabling environment functions by bolstering knowledge, shifting perceptions and strengthening networks. This improved function ensures participation, access and agency among marginalized communities; responsive and effective local government structures; and strengthened community and civil society groups. These efforts often integrate social accountability mechanisms to hold local institutions and service providers accountable, including local-level social audits, community feedback mechanisms and various forms of town halls and public hearings.

Implementing Social Accountability in Fragile Contexts

Fragile or post-conflict states provide additional challenges to the implementation of social accountability initiatives, including:

- Legacy of fear and mistrust after violent conflict make it more difficult to mobilize citizens in support of collective action.
- Security restrictions make mobilization more challenging from a logistical and operational standpoint – both for Mercy Corps facilitators and community members.
- Information about services from public officials, clinics, schools, etc. may have been destroyed in the conflict, or were not collected and unavailable for monitoring purposes.
- Discrepancies across political/ administrative districts, especially between areas that have been administered by competing parties to a conflict, create challenges in consolidating and verifying information on key services such as health and education.
- Capacities of both state and non-state actors are limited in fragile states.
- Civil society tends to be more fragmented in fragile states, due to a lack of coherent leadership or voice within civil society and limited access to information and means of communication.
- There is a higher risk for elite capture, corruption and coercion.
- Post-conflict environments often receive an influx of aid and civil society organizations and may be motivated more by financial or political incentives than commitment to serve the public good.

In fragile, post-conflict situations, the necessary preconditions for full-blown social accountability frameworks may not exist; elevating citizen demand without addressing state capacity to respond can lead to increased violence.³² However, even prior to the full implementation of social accountability mechanisms, efforts can be made to build trust in the governance system and restore social capital within communities. Supporting civil society and mobilizing communities to work together to identify and address community needs are all precursors to more formal social accountability efforts. In addition, intentional focus on the relevant cognitive elements of good governance – transparency, accountability, responsiveness, equity, etc. – can be a powerful tool. By explaining the principles, and demonstrating them through all our efforts with government, civil society and community actors, we can highlight how effective and useful they are. For example, using an inclusive and transparent process, the principles can be reflected even in the method of organizing and distributing lifesaving supplies. True social accountability mechanisms can follow when circumstances allow.

³² Before embarking on any activity in a fragile or post-conflict environment, it is important to first ensure that you do not exacerbate tensions. See, [Mercy Corps Context, Conflict and Do No Harm Analysis Worksheet](#).

Measuring the Impact of Social Accountability Initiatives

Measuring the impact of social accountability interventions on governance outcomes presents a number of challenges. Transparency and accountability rarely unfold in a linear manner, making it difficult to discern attribution of a particular mechanisms on complex political and social change. Despite these challenges, **the first step in measuring impact is for program teams to develop a clearly articulated theory of change**, along with explicit assumptions about the causal mechanisms through which this change is expected to occur.

Approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation

Program teams should consider a broad range of non-traditional participatory and qualitative approaches to monitoring and evaluation for social accountability programs. These approaches may be suited to capture and communicate the types of incremental process, behavior, attitude and relational changes. Some examples of possible approaches are detailed below.

Community monitoring of service quality

Changes in the quality of services can be measured through participatory monitoring approaches in which communities generate data on service quality through the “social audit” and “community score card” processes. This includes the involvement of the community in defining, implementing and monitoring the quality improvement process.

Partnership monitoring of service quality

“Partnership-defined quality”³³ approaches encourage service providers and communities to jointly determine indicators for improved quality in service delivery. This approach recognizes that quality may be defined differently by clients and providers. It focuses on providers and clients working together as allies to address problems and can therefore help to overcome negative blame dynamics and support a more productive client-provider relationship.

Outcome Mapping

Outcome mapping shifts the focus from assessing the products of a program to focusing on changes in behavior, relationships, actions, and activities. It is a participatory approach designed to capture complex changes through a set of specially-designed tools to gather information on **behavioral change** among the **‘boundary’ partners** of a project. Outcome mapping is useful in program design, evaluation and systemic thinking and helps to adaptively manage strategies to bring about desired outcomes.³⁴

³³ Partnership Defined Quality – A Tool Book for Community and Health Provider Collaboration for Quality Improvement. Save the Children. January 2003.

³⁴ For more on outcome mapping see: <https://www.idrc.ca/en/book/outcome-mapping-building-learning-and-reflection-development-programs> or <http://www.researchtoaction.org/2012/01/outcome-mapping-a-basic-introduction/>

Most Significant Change

Stories are collected through interviews with program participants. The analysis of stories categorizes each story into one of four domains: 1) changes in service quality (reduced waiting time, polite health workers); 2) changes in relationships between service providers and community members (better communication between health facility staff and community); 3) changes in health outcomes (an increase in the number of community members visiting the health facility); and 4) other changes.³⁵

Quantitative Methods

Traditional quantitative methods are also relevant. For instance, individual or household surveys can be conducted to measure changes in satisfaction with service delivery or self-reported changes in citizen-government relationships and trust.

Secondary Data

To measure changes in quality, access and availability of services, or more long-term outcomes in health and education resulting from improved governance, quantitative data can be collected directly from schools, health clinic facilities and government offices. Higher-level secondary data can also be gathered from ministries or district/regional administrative centers. To measure process changes within government institutions, relevant government policies or other official documents may be reviewed to understand which reform efforts have been undertaken as a result of the process.

Indicators

Indicators should be mapped against the expected outcomes of a Social Accountability intervention and supported by a clearly articulated theory of change. The participation of key stakeholders in defining indicators is critical and should be disaggregated by sex, ethnicity, caste, religious, age or other demographics. Table X. offers a menu of indicators as inspiration for teams to adapt their context.

Table 1. Sample Indicators for Social Accountability Interventions

Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Budgets and public expenditures are regularly made available to the public• % of community members that have received information on local development plans from a government institution (or, media, civil society) on a regular basis• Local government has a strategic communications plan and/or staff resources in place
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Local Government (or government-supported service providers, such as a health clinic, school, water/sanitation department) has an official system for receiving the grievances of citizens• % of citizens reporting that an issue brought to local authorities through a formal grievance redress mechanism was addressed to their satisfaction• % of grievances submitted by citizens to government leaders that receive a response by a relevant actor with authority to address the concern• Formulation of new policies, procedures, or standards at the facility-level for improved quality of service provision

³⁵ Hoffmann, K.D. The Role of Social Accountability in Improving Health Outcomes: Overview and Analysis of Selected International NGO Experiences to Advance the Field. June 2014. Washington, DC: CORE Group.

Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of community members who report that in the last six months they participated in civic engagement activities with government officials and/or customary leaders • Number of local government consultations held with civil society and business groups • Number of interactions in last month between citizens/civil society and local government. • % of local health budget spent on excluded groups
Improvement in relationship between citizen and government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of citizens reporting positive interactions with government/ providers in the last month • % of respondents who believe local government is actively working to solve problems and meet community needs
Service Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance-monitoring mechanisms are in place and regularly applied at the point of service delivery (e.g. clinic, hospital, school) • % of citizens who report satisfactory government services at the local level • Average beneficiary rating of government's ability to be responsive to citizens' needs, as measured on citizen scorecard • Sector-Specific Service Quality Indicators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Health: Reduction in average wait time in clinics; reduction in absenteeism of clinic providers/nurses/doctors; client satisfaction ○ Education: Increase in test scores; increase in student attendance; reduction in teacher absenteeism ○ Administration/Licensing: Reduction in amount of bribes paid; reduction in wait times for receiving public documents

Conclusion

Social accountability initiatives are important tools in any effort to promote better governance and improved service delivery. Social accountability mechanisms can provide citizens with important information and engage and empower communities to act collectively. They can provide systematic and direct feedback to policymakers to help them provide better services and reallocate resources to beneficiaries. Social accountability can change systems dynamics, strengthening governance systems to be more transparent, accountable and inclusive. To be successful, social accountability efforts must be contextual, strategic and address both the supply and demand pieces of the governance system. Citizen demand for better services should occur alongside parallel efforts to build state or service provider effectiveness in interacting with citizens and addressing their growing expectations. Effective social accountability mechanisms engage both citizens and the state in the process of solving collective action problems.

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The Governance & Partnership (GAP) Team

The Governance and Partnership (GAP) Team's mission is to help our global teams apply the most effective solutions to the world's toughest challenges. Our work promotes inclusive and accountable decision-making, equitable civic participation and voice, effective public service delivery and government responsibility building secure, productive and just communities.



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