Learning by Doing: Implementing Social Accountability in Rural Villages in the Kyrgyz Republic

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“We understood that with the help of local residents we could achieve transparency in performance of local self-government bodies, as well as their accountability to citizens”. Yaguzova Budeza Harasanovna, Chairperson of VHC-1, Aleksandrovka village

Empowering citizens and public officials to engage in joint-problem solving for improved health determinants is not easy. The Development Policy Institute (DPI) and the Association of Village Health Committees (AVHC) have partnered to do just that in 25 villages in the Kyrgyz Republic, through a GPSA sponsored project. As a result, since mid-2014 citizens and public officials in those villages have been developing capacities (willingness and resources) to work together to identify and find solutions to their problems. Throughout this process, the Project team has had to adapt to numerous challenges and unexpected realities. This blog is about this adaptation experience.
Difficult Context: The legacy of communist rule in the Kyrgyz Republic has made it particularly difficult to bring about an accountable, inclusive approach to problem solving. In addition to a minimal tradition of public participation, public authorities and citizens alike have become accustomed to relying on donor assistance to address problems. Donor funding plays an important role, for instance, in solving waste problems in Isakeev village and transportation problems in Kyzyl-Kyshtak village. This GPSA-funded social accountability initiative, whereby citizens and governments have been empowered to identify, prioritize, and solve their own problems, was foreign to the target communities.

Problem Solving requires a Change of Perspective: An enormous hurdle to overcome was the notion that others would solve people’s problems. This project placed special emphasis on empowering local villagers to understand they could resolve issues by working together. In some of the villages this shift of mentality led to concrete changes on the ground. A villager in Manas said, "Now the roads are passable, they became easier for children to get to school. It is great to have people with initiatives in the village, who are not indifferent to the problems of their community. They are ready to solve the problems on their own and to mobilize others". To be sure, some VHCs were not ready to continue to work, which we discuss in another post.

Power and Gender - Lessons and Course Corrections: Most of the leaders of the VHCs and those participating in the PRA (participatory rural assessment) processes have been women, whereas most of heads of LSGs (local self-governments) and local deputies are men. As the project unfolded we discerned certain problems in finding a common language across the parties. VHC leaders struggled to effectively negotiate with heads of LSG, which was most acute in southern regions where patriarchal foundations are strong. Some female leaders needed to be more persistent in order to get meaningful responses from male heads of LSG. We have also observed the most effective tactic for women to address gender challenges is to showcase a higher level of knowledge on LSG issues. For example, claiming actions and supporting requests with proper references to specific laws or norms was often able to win the trust of local officials. We are considering how to incorporate this insight into our broad plan of action moving forward.

Building on partnerships: Early results have depended to a large extent on the ability of DPI and AVHC to work together and to rely on each other’s core expertise and strengths. In turn, AVHC was also able to strengthen relationships with local VHCs as well as with LSG and local communities.

Furthermore, AVHC has helped augment the project’s impact: it is spreading information about the project to all its members and using what it has learned in a similar project in 28 municipalities. It also organized 25 PRAs in non-pilot neighbor VHCs. The Heads of the pilot VHCs helped their neighbors to roll out PRAs and budget hearings using the experience gained through the project.

Did your social accountability journey go through similar challenges to adapt? How do you deal with complex civil society partnerships? And how do you go about linking local level work with national decision-making systems? We will be following up on the later issue in a related blog post.

This blog post is part of a series of blog posts aimed at capturing the progress of projects supported by the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA). These will highlight key aspects of conversations between the civil society groups leading the projects, their World Bank partners, and the GPSA’s Capacity Building Team. They offer key lessons about the project’s implementation to date. including some examples
of adaptive management and learning for strategic social accountability. Curated by the GPSA Communications and Capacity-Building areas.