Collaborative Social Accountability

Our journey to put collective action at the center of our practice

This year’s upcoming report of the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) coincides with the 15th Anniversary of the World Development Report (WDR) “Making Services Work for the Poor”, that helped put social accountability on the development map. The social accountability practice has come a long way since then.

At the GPSA, we’ve been privileged to take the pulse of this growing area of practice for a significant part of the journey. With that in mind, in this Annual Letter we reflect on our learning, hoping this can inspire all of us to imagine ways social accountability can help to address development’s many emerging challenges, including the fractures in our societies exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and citizen movements and protests across the world.
We believe that citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) should be front and center in efforts to build our societies into more inclusive and resilient ones. In this letter, we highlight key insights about the journeys of in-country civil society groups leading social accountability practice, our role in those journeys as a global partnership anchored in the World Bank, and about social accountability processes and conditions that affect them.

Building on the lessons of 311 partners working in 73 countries and about 7 sectors, we have deepened our commitment to addressing the disconnect between people’s unmet demands and government action. We have learned that when they engage to focus on the problem at hand, civil society, citizens and public sector actors are better able to deliver solutions collaboratively - especially when they prioritize learning. See, for example, the exciting results from Wahana Visi on improving maternal, newborn, infant and child health services in Indonesia.

We are also mindful that the conditions for civil society and social accountability have been a mixed story, with some countries doing well and others experiencing challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated some of the problems and some government measures have constrained civic action.

We believe that governments ought to be accountable to citizens for the policies they make, the programs they design and deliver, and how they spend money. But when there is failure, how we achieve accountability is very important. We have learned
from research that focusing only on scrutinizing and verifying government actions can have limited value in our problem solving.

Last year, we launched our fourth call for proposals, engaging 53 GPSA countries in the process. We are now set to provide flexible grants and non-financial support to 9 CSO-led coalitions for collaborative social accountability. We have already begun working with these groups and World Bank country and sector teams to find and build synergies between civil society-led social accountability and ongoing public sector reforms.

In the 15 years since the 2004 WDR, we have learned that the short route and long route (to accountability) frameworks have limits. Our practice and a recent review of evidence has shown that often, when social accountability mechanisms are isolated from public sector processes they are not as effective as collaborative governance. And yet, collective action requires efforts that build bridges, as we learned in Sud Kivu thanks to the work of CORDAID.

The GPSA’s relatively small experimental investments, we learn, can seed highly fruitful practices that can inform governments beyond individual GPSA projects. This is possible through World Bank or other development partners’ projects. The new evaluations of our first set of grants in Moldova and Ghana, among others, validate this insight.

Moreover, lessons from social accountability for health and education suggest that while money is important, significant value comes from sustained nonfinancial aspects such as brokering the relationship of CSO partners with government by World Bank teams, implementation support, mentoring, facilitation and capacity strengthening. It also comes from systematic learning from global partners.

Our ongoing dialogue with grant partners, as well the evaluations of their work, have informed a revision of our Theory of Action, an
opportunity to take full account of the 15 years of social accountability practice in re-defining our work. This means addressing blind spots and harnessing new opportunities to improve our practice. An example that comes to mind is to better amplify the relational nature of collaborative social accountability.

This Theory of Action, along with a revamped monitoring and evaluation, knowledge and learning system, seeks to use insights and lessons from implementation to inform tailored support to specific grants and improve portfolio performance. They will also strengthen the social accountability evidence base and help to advance knowledge for GPSA networks and the broader field.

We are excited about Scaling Social Accountability for Health: Leveraging Public Policies and Programs, an initiative with several partners and funded by the Center of Excellence for Development Impact and Learning. This will enable us to explore the causal mechanisms and conditions through which social accountability interventions work and scale.

The GPSA’s 2019 Global Partners Forum – our most successful to-date, according to participants, inspired reflection on the evolution of social accountability practice. Convened jointly with Public Service Accountability Monitor, Human Rights and Development Trust Fund, and Open Society Foundations, its theme of “Social Accountability and the Challenge of Inclusion”, was explored in plenaries and breakout sessions that were so fully subscribed. We rededicated ourselves to amplifying the collective knowledge of diverse partners who can deliver collaborative approaches even beyond GPSA grants.

We close with an important piece of organizational news: In 2019, we moved to the Social Sustainability and Inclusion Global Practice (SSI) of the World Bank. We look forward to strengthening the links between social accountability and social inclusion, social resilience and empowerment, including synergies with community-driven development.

If you would like to dig deeper, we invite you to read our upcoming report. We are confident what we have learned will also inspire you in your social accountability journey, and we truly thank you for your partnership.

GPSA Team