

GPSA Brown Bag Lunch Series  
***Reconceptualizing Accountability in the Developing World  
through “Accountapreneurship”***

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Sponsored by:



**Presenter:** Blair Glencorse, Executive Director, The Accountability Lab

**Discussant:** Raymond Muhula, Public Sector Specialist, World Bank Liberia Office

**Concluding remarks:** Jeff Thindwa, Practice Manager, Governance and Inclusive Institutions Directorate, World Bank

**Chair:** Roby Senderowitsch, Program Manager, Global Partnership for Social Accountability

### ***TAKE-AWAY MESSAGES***

- Solution to the problems of lack of accountability involves getting people interested in actively contributing to the fight against lack of accountability. It is about encouraging citizens to participate in the accountability campaign and helping them understand the reasons and consequences of their participation. The campaigns that are incentivized by funding from donor organizations tend to distort incentives that may in the end prove harmful.
- Government, however, remains an important part of the equation. Sustainability or real impact of accountability initiatives becomes a reality only if government is also involved in the process. Social accountability initiatives become sustainable when they are institutionalized. Moreover, public officials' engagement is necessary in order to ensure that they change their behavior to support accountability.

## **I. ABSTRACT**

Roby Senderowitsch, Program Manager of Global Partnership for Social Accountability chaired this discussion. He introduced the presenter and the discussant and introduced the work of GPSA in his opening remarks. Blair Glencorse, Executive Director of the Accountability Lab, then introduced work of his organization while highlighting how their organization is approaching social accountability differently. The presentation was followed by a lively discussion. Jeff Thindwa, Practice Manager of the Governance and the Inclusive Institutions Directorate at the World Bank provided the concluding remarks in which he underscored the importance of citizen engagement to realize the goal of accountable governance systems.

## II. ACCOUNTABILITY LAB

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The accountability lab partners with civil society organizations in the developing world to build sustainable tools for new and innovative approaches to bolster accountability. It deploys new tools with an emphasis on experimentation and learning from failure. It engages relevant actors and builds communities of “accountapreneurs” that can curate and propagate alternative ideas to allow for scale and impact.

## III. WHAT THE LAB IS DOING DIFFERENTLY

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**“If we could make governance and accountability as popular in Africa as soccer, then we know we have achieved what we are trying to do. So maybe this is what Innovation lab has begun to do”**  
(Raymond Muhula)

Broader systematic scope: Accountability lab thinks of accountability as a much broader problem rather than focusing on one symptom of it, such as corruption. It believes that lack of accountability is caused by systematic issues. Bribe-taking is not the only indication of lack of accountability but rather it has to do with multidimensional issues such as state capture and undue influence of various actors. Thinking on accountability has not been as advanced and rich as the practice itself. Accountability lab wants to change that and takes a broader perspective of the context and not just the technicalities. The fact that they are called an Accountability lab rather than Corruption lab is indicative of their broader scope.

Funding differently: Accountability lab argues that only providing large amounts of funds to CSOs to work on issues of lack of accountability is not productive. There are many examples of countries where large amounts of funds have not helped solve the problem. Moreover, funding can exacerbate the problems as it can sometimes distort incentives of various actors. For example, when World Bank or other international organizations fund civil society organizations to undertake accountability work, these organizations become Bank’s clients at the cost of accountability work. In addition, this also makes accountability work largely supply driven. Therefore, Accountability lab provides very little funding to its partners. Rather it focuses on partnering with local civil society organizations and bases its work on creating and sustaining cost-effective relationships based on trust and cooperation.

Friend-raisers rather than fund-raisers: Accountability lab argues that solution to the problems of lack of accountability lies in getting people interested in doing the right thing for the right reasons and actively contributing to the fight against lack of accountability. Therefore, instead of fund-raising activities, Accountability lab focuses on supporting commitments – encouraging different members of a community to participate in the accountability campaign and helping them understand the reasons and consequences of their participation – what it calls “Friend-raising.” Ultimately, success for accountability initiatives lies in scaling up the vision of building stronger accountabilities rather than the organization. In doing so, Accountability lab helps activists from different countries build their own labs to solve problems of accountability in their own context. Taking risk and supporting innovation: There has also been a lack of creativity in trying to find solutions for the lack of accountability. This lack of creativity is generated by the fear of failure. When you engage with people from different reference points in a way that they understand and relate to the problem, innovative ideas come through. Accountability lab aims to support these innovative ideas even if it means taking more risk. It aims to

combine accountability and entrepreneurship so that the lab becomes incubators of innovative ideas on accountability. Instead of fearing the failure, lab embraces it and learns from it.

Sustainability through voluntarism: Social accountability field struggles with making its solutions and programs sustainable. There are very few examples of projects that continue to operate once the organization funding the project leaves. Accountability lab emphasizes voluntarism to support sustainability of the projects; when local organizations working on accountability do not care only about the money but also about the issues, they are more likely to keep working on it even when funds from donors have stopped. Keeping this in mind, the lab focuses on youth as agents of change. As they are less entrenched in patron-client networks and are more energetic, they tend to care more enthusiastically about the issues of accountability and are willing to support these initiatives more actively.

The other pillar of the lab's sustainability strategy is its attempt to generate some kind of revenue, for example as user fees.

Accountability Collectives: Rather than asking partners to write cumbersome monthly briefs, the Lab organizes "Accountability Collectives". These are inclusive meetings every quarter to which all local partners - and other guests - are invited. At this meeting, attendees can report on progress, network with and learn from each other, and understand where synergies and potential partnerships may exist. The Lab staff then report back and write-up progress made. This practice feeds into the lab's overall goal of supporting productive relationships, and generating new and innovative ideas.

Organization: Two significant organizational characteristics of the lab also makes it different from other organizations that are working on the issues of accountability. First, the lab staff argues that their operation is lean and is a small member outfit, which makes operational and administrative costs negligible. Second, in the spirit of transparency, all its finances are completely open and available on their website, including the salaries of their personnel.

#### IV. INNOVATION LAB PROJECTS

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The presenter highlighted a number of projects that the lab has supported in Nepal and Liberia. Some are listed below.

Nalibeli, Nepal: Accountability lab supported local activists who created a wiki site called Nalibeli, which crowd-sources step-by-step instructions on how to access government services in Nepal, such as how to obtain a passport, how to apply to university, or how to make a complaint at the District Administrative Office. They are also working to develop an offline component, connecting citizens with government resources on the ground. Accountability lab hopes that this initiative is sustainable over time because of voluntarism of individuals who provide information on the website. The website has become extremely popular.

Accountability Film School, Liberia: Accountability lab supported an initiative in which a Liberian filmmaker established Accountability Film School to help young people use film as a tool for social change. Since Liberia is an oral society where most information is transmitted orally and through visual communication, films are an excellent media to initiate conversations about the ideas of accountability. At the end of each class, students write and produce their own short documentaries about an issue they care about in their communities. The films have been showcased at Accountability Film Festival, and at video clubs in local communities. These films dealt

with a range of issues including trash in the street to sexual harassment to the lack of clean water in the communities. Moreover, students learned marketable skills during this training.

Open Justice Initiative, Liberia: Accountability lab supported an activist in Liberia to help enhance the accountability of the local justice system. Open Justice Initiative seeks to do two things on a periodic basis: a) carry out a survey among citizens to judge perceptions of local justice in 4 neighborhoods in Monrovia; and b) generate a scorecard to assess the efficacy and fairness of courts at the local level. Following these initiatives, attendance of judges in the local court increased significantly.

## V. CHALLENGES TO THE INNOVATION LAB APPROACH

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### Connection with the government is absent:

**“At the end of the day to ensure sustainability but also legitimacy you need to involve supply side”** (from a participant).

One of the biggest challenges for the Accountability lab highlighted in the discussion was the absence of connection with the government in its initiatives. There was an over-riding view that sustainability or real impact may not become a reality if government is also not somehow involved in the process. A number of reasons were pointed out. First, social accountability initiatives become sustainable when they are institutionalized. The lab’s reliance on voluntarism may not be sufficient (see below). There is a need to find a connection between these projects and strengthening national accountability systems, for example Congress, ombudsman institutions, and supreme audit institutions. Second, these impacts are truly impactful only when government changes its behavior and becomes responsive to citizens’ demands. Transparency and citizen activism by itself may not lead to this change without meaningful engagement with public officials. In addition to the citizens, a case also needs to be made to the public officials that they can be the beneficiaries of accountable systems. In addition, by engagement with government officials can also improve the legitimacy of these initiatives.

The presenter pointed out that they have initiated some complementary efforts in engaging public officials within their initiatives. However, he also indicated that the collaboration with the World Bank in this regard would be very helpful, as the Bank has convening power and established relationships with the governments.

### Reliance of voluntarism for sustainability:

**“Sometimes [citizens in post-conflict contexts] they want to mind their own business and not worry about collective engagement and agitation”** (Raymond Muhula)

Another challenge for the lab’s work pointed out by the participants of the discussion was the reliance on voluntarism for sustainability of its initiatives, and the assumption that citizens have answers to their problems and given the opportunity they can solve the problem of lack of accountability by bringing the issues to the public. Many participants argued that citizen action in most contexts is not easy to encourage, especially in post-conflict contexts. There may be activists but citizen action on a large scale is less prevalent. More importantly, to keep citizens engaged in collective or advocacy action over longer term is even harder. Especially in environments where state-society relationship is already tense, there may be additional constraints to collective action such as fear of reprisal.

### Measuring impact

Measuring impact is a challenge in many fields and the Accountability lab is not immune to this challenge. It is difficult to find indicators that do justice to the change the lab is aspiring to achieve. It is also very costly to collect data. Nonetheless, the lab has taken a number of initiatives to measure impact of their initiatives. For example, the lab conducts pre and post-project qualitative surveys with relevant stakeholders. They are also working with other organizations, such as the Impact Hub, who regularly collect feedback data.

## VI. WAYS FORWARD

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**“We need to make a case to the citizens that what is happening in the government has a strong link to their destiny” (Jeff Thindwa).**

There is consensus on the idea that in order to solve issues of accountability it is imperative that citizens at the grass root level need to be involved. One way out of lack of accountability trap is to raise awareness among citizens that their active involvement in fighting for accountability is worth the effort. More than just volunteerism, there is a need to encourage broader citizen participation. However, it is easier said than done. Motivating citizen action for the right reasons is a complex and complicated process affected by a whole range of social, political and economic factors. At the same time, engaging with champions within governments and taking them along this journey is also necessary.