## GPSA Brown Bag Lunch Series
# *Citizens, Governance, and Outcomes in India: Lessons and Frontier Issues from the Field*

### February 10, 2015 | World Bank HQ, Washington, D.C.

Sponsored by:

**Opening Remarks:** Jeff Thindwa, Practice Manager, Governance and Inclusive Institutions, World Bank
**Presenter:** Simon O'Meally, Governance Specialist, World Bank
**Discussants:** Mark Robinson, Director, Governance, World Resources Institute & Jonathan Fox, Professor, American University
**Moderator:** Seema Thomas, Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA), World Bank

The BBL featured presentation by Simon O' Meally, Governance Specialist at the World Bank. Aheli Chowdhury, co-author of the paper, joined the discussion through audio. The presentation was based on a working paper that aims to understand factors that mediate the effectiveness of social accountability approaches, and proposes how to move forward. The paper synthesizes research and induce messages from social accountability projects in India that apply to a broader context. The presentation shared some of the initial findings of the working paper. Mark Robinson and Jonathan Fox shared their insights. Their remarks were followed by discussion with the audience.

## I. METHODOLOGY AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The study defines social accountability as a process within a social, cultural and institutional context rather than as a bounded intervention or tool. Authors suggest that social accountability can be categorized into three buckets: a) watching that means involving societal actors in the process of verification such as social audits; b) bridging includes strategies for subjecting elected representatives and state functionaries to scrutiny such as through complaint tracking and capacity building of officials; and c) facilitating that include attempts to improve delivery by brining stakeholders together, for example, in Citizen Report Cards. This broader definition allows us to put more emphasis on understanding social and political process than otherwise.

The findings are based on a desk-based meta review of 63 cases in India. 163 cases were selected initially but shortlisted to 63 depending on the robustness of evidence, the quality of documentation of evidence, and

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relevance to the research questions. Jonathan Fox pointed out that there is usually a selection bias in what gets documented that also biases the findings.

One of the discussion participant suggested that it may be worthwhile to take a broader survey of initiatives that are not called social accountability initiatives per se but share the same goal of eliciting state responsiveness through citizen participation. Other participants suggested that it would be helpful to make a distinction between social accountability initiatives that are led by the government and the ones that are initiated by the citizens.

## II. FINDINGS

The study clustered the outcomes in three areas a) construction of citizenship and strengthening of practices of participation assessed by improvement in awareness of rights and rates of participation, and strengthened democratic practices such as demanding information from government officials; b) Responsiveness and accountability of the state assessed by improved delivery of public goods and services, reduced leakages and improved implementation of government schemes; and c) more inclusive forms of government, which would mean improvements in awareness and access to information for traditionally marginalized groups and improved access to jobs and entitlements by vulnerable

The study has highlighted a number of factors that mediate the effectiveness of social accountability activities. Foremost is the role of political society that includes formal and informal institutions and political and bureaucratic institutions. In a number of cases state 'action' was found to be critical for achieving goals. The study also showed the importance of enforcement or 'teeth.' Lack of enabling environment conducive to enforcement was the most frequently cited barrier to impact. In addition, the study showed that the interventions that are adopted to and harnessed locally important issues and capacities seemed better able to drive change. Prior histories of social accountability and public participation also had an impact; stronger previous experience appeared to have contributed to stronger capacities for both citizens and government officials. Lastly, the form and function of information – the extent to which information was accessible, user-friendly and actionable – shaped the traction and impact of cases.

Finally, the study suggests that social accountability initiatives can contribute to a range of positive outcomes but need to get better at measuring and explaining results. Secondly, strategic approaches with state-society coordination rather than bounded intervention on society-side via 'tools' appear more promising. While the policy debate is moving forward but the progress is slow. Old mental models of supply/demand and citizen v. government still dominate in the policy circles, and sometimes funders' incentives can discourage the use of strategic approaches.

## III. MOVING FORWARD: FRONTIERS OF THE NEXT GENERATION OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The study also identifies six frontiers where practitioners and scholars need to think and act differently to make social accountability more effective. First, the study suggests we need to open the 'black box' of the state i.e. we need to understand underlying drivers of state response and right actions in response. This would also mean optimizing political-social accountability synergy and better linking with the accountability systems in the

country. Most importantly, this would point us toward astute constructive engagement with the state. One of the participants during discussion suggested that it would be important to look at the cycles of state and citizen action; citizen action can lead to state action that can further increase incentives for citizen action. Another participant highlighted that in addition to governance and social accountability literature, relatively new field of public service can also throw light on these issues.

Second, focus on coalitions of pro-accountability actors from state and society (sandwich strategy). Third, we need to ensure that enforcement accompanies all social accountability initiatives – in other words, we need to make sure that voice has teeth that are also able to bite. Fourth, social accountability initiatives must use systematic approach to promoting inclusion. Shallow approaches to inclusion can reproduce inequalities and exclusions. Fifth, we need to tailor social accountability to macro and micro-contextual factors.

Last but not the least, the study confirms that information is rarely sufficient but is necessary. This observation implies that information is treated as only of many inputs for solving a given accountability problem and requires further intervention to become effective. Forms and accessibility of information is critical. As Mark Robinson, one of the discussants, cautioned that when sometimes practitioners think that information is accessible, it may not be reaching all intended audiences. Even when information reaches people, he suggested, issues of power and a number of conditioning variables may prevent them from acting. Therefore, he suggested, we need to be more rigorous in understanding what we mean by information, how to make it accessible and the impact it has on citizen action. Moreover, it is important that information is 'actionable' and is accompanied by a space where action can be taken.

There was also a discussion that there is a need to understand theory of change between strategic social accountability and twin goals of the World Bank of reducing extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity. For example, social accountability can improve the implementation of social protection interventions that boost shared prosperity.

## IV. REFLECTIONS

The presentation and discussion during the BBL highlighted the importance of constructive engagement between citizens and state. It was clear that in order for social accountability to be effective it cannot only focus on citizen participation but must focus on understanding incentives of public officials. These efforts must also be accompanied by attempts in building pro-accountability coalitions that cut across citizens and state. It also emphasized that the distinction between demand and supply side of social accountability is not helpful in practice; it is the interaction between the state and society that leads to better accountability on the ground.

The discussion also endorsed the idea that social accountability approaches can have impact on broader institutional outcomes like citizen trust in addition to improving service delivery outcomes. At the same time, it indicates the urgency that we need to better understand the mechanisms that lead to these changes to ensure maximum effectiveness.