



## Social Accountability Research Workshop

Co-organized by GPSA, MAVC and TAI

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Initiatives designed to improve transparency and access to information in order to advance citizens' ability to hold government and its agents accountable have consistently gained prominence in development practice and policy in the last few decades. Various terms 'social accountability,' 'citizen-led accountability,' 'participatory governance' or 'demand for good governance,' these initiatives aim at promoting the active engagement of citizens in public decision making and holding government accountable. The idea is that these initiatives can contribute to improved governance, better service delivery, enhanced empowerment of citizens and can deepen democracy. However, there is an accepted understanding across the field by scholars and practitioners alike that how we can best support these impacts through social accountability is still subject to debate. Knowledge gaps exist.

In the last decade or so, scholars and practitioners have devoted significant resources in responding to these knowledge gaps. Most of the energy has been spent in assessing the impact of these initiatives using various methodologies ranging from qualitative case studies to randomized trials. As a result, there is a growing body of empirical evidence. While some studies show strong positive impacts of certain social accountability initiatives in one context, others suggest that the impact of a similar initiative has been minimal in another context.

Interpreting this evidence has resulted in the understanding that in order to ask questions of impact it is important to understand the approaches through which the impact occurs, and under what context. It has also highlighted the importance of working with the grain and limitations of tool-based approaches. We need to know more about the factors that enable social accountability approaches to be effective and the circumstances that hinder their effectiveness. It is now clear that politics and power dynamics underpin the impact of these approaches – an observation sometimes not welcome by external supporters and funding organizations. Moreover, it is not a linear process; when citizen engagement leads to change it often involves complex pathways. In order to assess the impacts, therefore, it is necessary to understand the theory of change underpinning each initiative in a particular setting. This sophisticated understanding can guide the design and strategies of new initiatives as well as help us devise better methodologies to measure their impact.

While some headway has been made in reaching more sophisticated understanding of underpinnings of social accountability initiatives and their interaction with various contexts in which they are applied, the research is still in nascent stages. When research has led to lessons learned, uptake of these lessons on the ground has been insufficient. Such analytical research is particularly difficult in social accountability field as the concept has diverse intellectual roots and audiences, and spans various disciplines. Questions

of power dynamics and social change are as pertinent as the issues of performance management and collective action. Therefore, it is imperative that future research agendas within the social accountability field emerge from collaboration between scholars and practitioners across various disciplines.

To that end, this workshop, organized by the GPSA, with MAVC and TAI, provided a space for scholars and practitioners from various fields to come together and help inform the future agenda for collaborative research in social accountability field. Academics, scholars, practitioners as well as representatives from donor organizations shared their current social accountability research agenda and brainstormed on how to move forward in addressing the knowledge gaps that exist in the social accountability field. Donor organizations also reflected on their role in advancing social accountability agenda.

As Robert Hunja, Director of Public Integrity and Openness in Governance Global Practice at the World Bank, said “opportunities for exchange of ideas and collaboration [across multiple fields] do not happen naturally,” this kind of forums are essential in moving social accountability research agenda forward. Roby Senderowitsch, Manager of the GPSA at the World Bank, reiterated the need for these forums and underscored GPSA’s commitment to “support knowledge generation to advance social accountability agenda.”

This note summarizes key messages of this workshop. The next section provides a brief summary of workshop proceedings. The third section summarizes on-going research on social accountability as shared by the participants, and identifies knowledge gaps and challenges that still remain, as articulated by the participants. Fourth section summarizes the discussion on how to move forward collaboratively on this research agenda.

## Workshop proceedings

The workshop was attended by academics from around the world. In addition, senior executives and senior researchers from a number of different think tanks, international NGOs, and donor organizations attended the workshop. World Bank staff from different departments and practices also participated.

Robert Hunja, Director of Public Integrity and Openness in Governance Global Practice at the World Bank opened the workshop by underscoring the importance of such meetings in encouraging productive collaboration that is necessary for making advances in the social accountability field.

Roby Senderowitsch, Manager of the GPSA, began the discussion on current status of research in the social accountability field. Roby spoke about how the GPSA, together with their Grantees, are moving beyond adversarial relationships to a constructive engagement, and from political economy analysis to political economy interventions. As part of understanding constructive engagement, he outlined the need to better understand how ‘adversarial’ can be an incentive for ‘constructive’. He spoke of GPSA’s interest in the concept of citizen trust in public institutions, and how it frames and shapes the relationships. Incorporating a wider perspective, he advocated for a move beyond the short-route for accountability, by connecting social accountability to the broader accountability systems in each country. Finally, he spoke of the need to better understand and trial alternative mechanisms to fund this social agenda, beyond grants.

These remarks were followed by short introductions by all participants of their current research work and areas of interest concerning social accountability.

After the introductory session, Jonathan Fox made a presentation and identified research questions that, in his opinion, needed to be answered to further the research agenda in social accountability. These questions ranges from understanding state’s role and motivations in responding to citizens’ voice and

closing the feedback loop to understanding the relevance of scale for social accountability both vertically and horizontally. He also asked the researchers to focus on the kind of accountabilities – preventative and reactive – when defining the goals of social accountability approaches. Then, participants broke into smaller groups to deliberate on the relevance of these questions for future social accountability research and later reported the results of their discussion to the plenary. Participants also suggested themes that they thought were most relevant for social accountability, some of which were then discussed in the breakout sessions later in the afternoon. Joel Hellman, Chief Institutional Economist at the World Bank joined the participants over lunchtime and discussed how GPSA's work is related to other strategic areas of the World Bank such as Citizen Engagement initiative. He underscored the importance of social accountability as an important pillar of development agenda and the relevance of gatherings like the research workshop to advance this important pillar.

Next, participants discussed four themes in breakout groups. These themes included a) the role of the state, b) sectoral approaches to social accountability, c) the systems approaches to accountability including vertically integrated strategies, and d) the enabling environment and pre-conditions for social accountability. The groups later reported back to the plenary about their in-depth discussions and further deepened the discussion on these themes.

The day closed with final remarks from Jonathan Fox and John Gaventa who reflected on the day's proceedings. Roby Senderowitsch presented the closing remarks. In addition to thanking participants and underscoring the importance of the day's deliberation in advancing social accountability research, he stressed that it is only the first step toward setting up a collaborative agenda. Last section of the note summarizes the closing remarks.

## Current research focus and challenges

Participants identified a number of areas and research questions that they are currently exploring and/or thought need to be investigated to advance our understanding of social accountability practice.

One of the themes that resounded throughout the day asked how social accountability research should engage with broader questions of politics and power, whether it is using power analysis to understand better social accountability or to explore the impact that social accountability approaches may have on power relationships. Related to this question is that of understanding state action and response for effective social accountability approaches -- its motivations for incorporating meaningful citizen participation in public-decision making processes and in responding to citizens' demand of accountability. These questions are essential in not only providing 'teeth' to citizens' voice but also to support citizen state interfaces, for example, through constructive engagement between state and society. Citizen action, the other side of the social accountability equation, also remained a prominent theme during the workshop. The need to understanding the conditions under which citizens engage, and are able to devise and coordinate collective action resonated among many participants.

Questions of identifying aspects of context that matter for social accountability approaches and how these aspects interact with these interventions remained an important theme of discussion throughout the day. Some participants also brought up the discussion of understanding context for social accountability through sectoral approach, as some sectors share institutional characteristics that matter for effectiveness of social accountability interventions. Similarly, the theme of scaling up and across social accountability approaches – moving beyond local level and integrating horizontally with accountability institutions within country systems -- occupied participants' deliberations. Last but not least, participants discussed how to increase the uptake of knowledge and evidence generated by scholars and practitioners, and from past efforts..

The rest of the section elaborates on each of these themes as they were discussed during the workshop as per participants' suggestions for future research, and pulls together content from both breakout sessions and from various discussion sessions that took place throughout the day.

### *Power and politics*

There was a general consensus that effectiveness of social accountability approaches depends on a complex web of incentives, interests, and political and economic power relations. Purely technical solutions (a tool-based approach to social accountability) have proven limited. Practitioners and scholars agreed that in order to achieve promised impacts of social accountability approaches we need to understand political and power dynamics (at the local and national level) and navigate complex political, economic and social interests of a multitude of actors including of adversaries of social accountability agenda. This also refutes the dichotomy of long and short route of accountability (WDR, 2004) and rather suggests that these two routes are intricately related. In short, participants argued that we need to 'put politics back in' the research of social accountability field, and engage deeply with the implications of power and politics.

They argued that this analysis will allow practitioners to think more analytically about the kinds of coalitions or multi-faceted action that might be more effective in the face of opposition.

Participants reported some projects that are delving into understanding the role of politics. It was also argued that in addition to understanding how politics matter for social accountability, we also need to understand the extent to which social accountability can have an effect on politics and power relationships. Can social accountability empower groups of citizens vis-à-vis the state, especially the vulnerable groups? Can social accountability help improve citizens' trust on state, through what mechanisms and in what contexts? Can social accountability approaches impact state-society relationships? Most importantly, can citizen voice help reduce the extreme inequality and if so, through what mechanisms? These questions, while recognized as imperative in understanding social accountability remain elusive and require further research.

The notion of social accountability was linked to democratic accountability. The discussion focused on understanding linkages between both of them. Participants discussed that there is a need to understand if social accountability can change power relationships in a way that promotes democratic citizenship and help build a social compact between citizens and state that is based on democratic principles.

### *Unpacking various elements of context for SA effectiveness*

There is an urgent need to understand how social accountability interacts with context. In the last decade or so, social accountability research has unequivocally suggested that context matters for social accountability. However, exploring what aspects of context matter and how these aspects interact with social accountability has recently caught more attention by scholars.

An upcoming World Bank report (Social Accountability flagship titled "Opening the Black Box") analyzes various contextual aspects that tend to have an effect on the effectiveness of social accountability approaches. Scholars have also focused on more specific aspects of social, political and economic attributes of context in an effort to understand the interaction of these specific attributes with social accountability approaches. For example, researchers are interested in questions such as: whether socio-economic conditions affect social accountability; how characteristics of political parties interact with social accountability effectiveness; how culture mediates the effectiveness of social accountability approaches; how institutional characteristics and state institutions matter for social accountability

effectiveness; does the nature of the state or the political regime have an effect on the social accountability system?; and does social accountability work better in strong states?

Other researchers have looked at the interaction between context and social accountability through a different lens. They ask what successful social accountability interventions look like in different contexts (CARE and ODI) and what practical implications different contexts have for social accountability practice. Some scholars have also attempted to identify aspects/characteristics of 'enabling environment' i.e. characteristics of a context that are conducive to successful social accountability approaches.

Researchers are also interested in understanding how the presence of ICT can affect social accountability approaches. Some researchers also highlighted the need to understand how social accountability can be applied in fragile and post-conflict contexts; what are the specific challenges and unique advantages of applying social accountability approaches in fragile settings?

Another crucial question was raised during the workshop: what happens when a specific context is not conducive to successful social accountability approaches. In other words, how should the practitioner respond when a contextual analysis suggests that applying social accountability approaches in that particular context is not likely to result in desired outcomes? How do you build an 'enabling environment' in such a context? How should the expectations of impact be aligned in those cases? What should be the time frame for impact assessment?

### *Citizen (collective) action*

Participants noted that citizen action is a fundamental aspect of social accountability; if citizens do not mobilize to demand accountability from the government, social accountability initiatives remain unsuccessful. Participants reported a number of current research projects that deal with different aspects of collective action.

DFID is focusing on understanding characteristics of contexts where social and political action happens, and processes through which this action can reshape contexts, particularly in the building of inclusive and accountable relationships and institutions. World Vision's research concentrates on exploring dynamics of collective action at the local level. At the same time, researchers are focusing on more specific questions of collective action, such as understanding how citizens' low trust on public institutions impact their tendency to take action and exploring ways in which this equilibrium of low trust and low action can be reversed.

While acknowledging that citizen action is better understood than state action, it was suggested that more in-depth research is needed to understand dynamics of citizen action. Understanding the conditions under which citizens act and engage with the government is imperative for advancing the social accountability agenda. Does policy environment and political landscape determine citizens' motivation to act? How are these effects different for men and women, youth and elders? What are the dynamics of these relationships? What are the processes through which citizens organize to bring about change? How does ICT change dynamics of collective behavior? Why do citizens exit from the market or self-provide basic services rather than taking action to demand services from the government? These are some of the questions raised during the discussions that require further exploration. Researchers suggested that social accountability practice can benefit from related fields such as behavioral sciences to when trying to answer these questions.

### *Understanding state-action and role of state*

There has been an increasing recognition in the field of social accountability research that in order to make social accountability effective it is imperative to understand state action and response -- its motivations for incorporating meaningful citizen participation in public-decision making processes and in responding to citizens' demand of accountability. This understanding is crucial in order to fulfill the purpose of greater accountability as a result of citizen engagement, or in Jonathan Fox's words, give teeth to citizens' voice or to close the feedback loop; after all, it is the state that has the responsibility to enforce accountability.

Some participants shared their research in understanding state action. Professor Lily Tsai from MIT is looking at the kind of citizen feedback state officials respond to, in what condition and under what circumstances. Professor Stefan from GMU is exploring why central government in Russia encourages local governments to promote citizen participation in non-profits.

Overall, however, there was recognition that research is limited in this area. Understanding state action is complex; state in many contexts where international organizations work cannot be understood in Weberian terms. It is not a monolithic entity rather it is a sum of different parts and comprises individuals, and evolves constantly. In order to understand state action there needs to be a granular understanding of incentives of these different entities within the state at different levels, including the understanding of informal networks. Researchers also suggested that the field of behavioral science can enrich our understanding of these issues.

Understanding state actions and incentives is also needed in supporting constructive engagement between state and citizens. An analysis of state actors can also help better understand the role of reformers and the mechanisms that create room for reform.

### *Issues of scale -- horizontal and vertical*

Participants agreed that scaling up and across social accountability approaches remain a challenge. We are limited in our current understandings of 'scaling up', and in the implications of really supporting accountability efforts across scales. First, we need to move beyond the focus on local level, that is, from the relationship between service providers and citizens at the local level to the relationship between state and citizens in the form of social contract at greater scale. (This also resonates with the issue of bringing power analysis back in social accountability research). Participants observed that even if social accountability works at the local level, applying the same approach to regional and national levels is not straightforward. One participant called this a 'district-level bottleneck.' Also, there is need for further understanding of how promoting social accountability at the local level would influence accountability systems at the national level; what are the mechanisms through which social accountability approaches have an impact on policy-making at the national level.

Second, participants mentioned that practitioners as well as academics need to understand how we can scale social accountability horizontally, or in other words, across various sectors and across large geographical areas. Moreover, there was a clear consensus among participations that we need to make efforts to ensure that social accountability approaches are integrated within country systems and established accountability institutions such as Ombudsman, Supreme Audit Institutions and Anti-corruption agencies in a country. How should social accountability strategies change in order to ensure integration with country systems? How can we ensure that social accountability researchers do not lose focus on vertical accountability as both are inter-related? What are the challenges?



Participants suggested that in order to address these challenges social accountability research needs to incorporate analysis about multiple actors at multiple levels and their interactions simultaneously – what some participants called ‘systems approach’ or ‘ecosystem approach.’

### *Gap between knowledge and practitioners*

An important challenge identified is the gap between knowledge and evidence generated by social accountability scholars and the use of this knowledge by practitioners. Many participants were concerned that the knowledge produced by social accountability scholars is not always translated into practice which prevents its uptake by practitioners for their work on the ground.

Some participants are attempting to address this challenge. For example, Results from Development Institute is exploring mechanisms that civil society can use to best leverage existing information, and to learn from its own efforts – so-called ‘learning by doing.’ Similarly, other participants were interested in pedagogies of learning for practitioners and understanding the mechanisms through which knowledge generated can be imparted to practitioners so they use it on the ground.

A specific area where there is a gap between analysis and practice is the use of political economy analysis to inform the design and implementation of social accountability approaches. Despite sophisticated understanding of political economy, integrating this knowledge in design and implementation of social accountability approaches – or moving from political economy analysis to political economy intervention -- remains a challenge.

### *Civil society as social accountability partners*

Given the importance of civil society organizations in implementation of social accountability approaches, workings of CSOs was an important topic in the discussion. Participants discussed various aspects of the role of CSOs and the need to further understand it.

Participants agreed that legitimacy of civil society organizations is an important issue. Since they play an important role in implementing social accountability interventions it is imperative that citizens perceive them as legitimate and representative of their interests. Participants suggested that there was not enough understanding of how to build this legitimacy.

This question becomes even more complex when we consider the issue of funding. CSOs are usually either funded by the donors or their governments. In both situations, lines of accountability are blurred. When CSOs are primarily funded by the donors they are perceived to be accountable to the donors and in the latter case to the government. In this situation, CSOs legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens becomes questionable. How can then in this environment CSOs be made accountable to the citizens, which is necessary to increase their legitimacy? Related to this issue is the issue of sustainability of these organizations. As long as they are dependent on funding by outside sources, the question of their sustainability will remain. Participants emphasized that delving into these questions and finding appropriate solutions to these issues is essential for CSOs to remain important player in the social accountability field.

Participants also discussed the issue of CSOs relationships with government. In many cases, the relation between CSOs and government is antagonistic as a result of a long history of confrontation. In these situations, CSOs need to learn and be motivated to constructively engage with the government. Understanding these processes is essential to advancement of ‘strategic social accountability’.

In addition, some participants noticed that SA research has been focused mostly on formal CSOs. They noted, however, that there are many other actors as well as structures that can be leveraged for social accountability, such as grassroots organizations, community groups, citizen led oversight campaigns, and citizen committees. Many of these groups are engaged in social accountability (type) practices even if they don't call them as such. Therefore, understanding how they operate and bring about change can help further understanding of the social accountability field.

### *Sectoral approach to social accountability*

Some participants also suggested that there is value in understanding social accountability in a particular sector such as water and sanitation, education, health etc. First, sectors could serve as entry point. This can make the social accountability approach salient to citizens. In addition this approach would also resonate with practitioners. Second, sectors also share contextual and institutional characteristics that matter for social accountability, such as monitorability and incentives of bureaucracies, among others. Therefore, it may be of value to devise social accountability strategies for each sector. Some participants reported that they are in initial stages of exploring these areas but more needs to be done. Other researchers stressed the value of comparing across sectors rather than identifying characteristics specific to a sector, especially if the governance process is centralized. Researchers also underscored the need to balance focus on technical vs. political challenges when looking deeper in a sector, as there may be political and social sensitivities associated with some sectors (such as family planning).

While some participants worked exclusively in specific sectors, others suggested that the application of social accountability approaches should be extended to sectors such as climate change and environment that have previously not been explored.

## Moving Forward

John Gaventa and Jonathan Fox wrapped up the workshop with their final comments. They also suggested some over-arching directions for social accountability research to move forward.

### *Citizen-centric approach*

It is essential that as we move forward we take great care to ensure that citizens remain at the center of this agenda, and are not reduced to clients of service providers or beneficiaries of services. It is also important to ensure that citizens are not involved only in down-stream feedback provision but also participate in upstream processes of policy-making. Therefore, in moving forward, it is useful to think of social accountability processes initiating from citizens and civic groups rather than as part of a project.

### *Understanding theory of change and unpacking full causal chains*

It is essential to understand and clearly lay out theories of change for social accountability approaches starting from the input all the way to the final impact. It is imperative that practitioners articulate the purpose of a social accountability intervention – is it to improve service delivery, reduce inequality or citizen empowerment, for example. These questions will determine the strategies, expected time frame and trajectories of impacts.

Similarly, it is crucial to articulate mechanisms and steps through which one expects an impact to take place, or in other words build a causal chain. Research needs to be done to understand these processes.



### *Social accountability as a means for improving accountability*

Finally, Jonathan Fox and John Gaventa echoed that social accountability is one means among many in available to development practitioners to improve accountability. Talking about social accountability in isolation from other routes of supporting accountability can lead to the impression that social accountability is the silver bullet when it comes to improving accountability, when in fact it is one among other approaches and inter-related with other processes. One needs to consider many of the other factors at play such as accountability institutions (such as Ombudsman), executive checks and balances, electoral politics and protests in addressing accountability challenges.

From the point of view of the analysis and for the sake of research, Jonathan suggested, it may be more productive to think of social accountability as part of the field of accountability studies rather than as a field by itself.

In his closing remarks, Roby Senderowitsch, Manager of the GPSA at the World Bank, echoed the importance of themes that were discussed during the day for the future of social accountability agenda, such as the importance of understanding dynamics of collective action by citizens and state response, as well as understanding social accountability as a more holistic process than an intervention, or targeted only to improve service delivery. He stressed that social accountability should be seen as a crucial means to a society with shared prosperity.

He was encouraged to see that the social accountability field has come a long way even in the last few years. While there are “deep and important knowledge gaps,” and the field is still fragmented, a consolidated common approach to social accountability research and practice is starting to emerge. However, it needs to be moved further, and, he suggested, the most effective way to do it is through collaboration. To this end, the workshops and platforms like this research workshops can play an important role.

This workshop, he reiterated, is part of a longer and broader process, as he underscored GPSA’s commitment in playing a convening role in this process. Following up on the suggestion of the day’s proceedings that social accountability be seen as part of a wider accountability field, he suggested that we may need to increase the space for collaboration by including scholars and practitioners from broader fields of accountability. He emphasized that collaborative events like this workshop will help shape GPSA’s research agenda, and noted the upcoming GPSA Forum as another event for such collaboration.