Social Accountability for Citizen-Centric Governance: A Changing Paradigm

I. INTRODUCTION

The Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) held its second annual Forum on May 12-13, 2015, in Washington, DC.

The Forum brought together civil society organizations, academia, businesses and governments from all around the globe, to provide an important and unique space to reflect on social accountability theory and practice, and brainstorm together about the future social accountability agenda. The Forum focused on understanding different dimensions of social accountability, challenges in implementing social accountability approaches, and the role that social accountability can play in realizing citizen-centric governance.

The discussion framed around five dimensions of social accountability: a) the importance and dynamics of constructive engagement between citizens and governments to realize effective social accountability; b) framing social accountability approaches as political economy interventions that can impact political economy dynamics; c) the significance of coalition building that brings together actors with shared interests for social accountability; d) the interaction between citizen trust and social accountability as the two build on each other; and finally e) understanding social accountability intervention within an accountability system. Another topic that dominated the discussion was the challenges in scaling social accountability approaches, both across the geographical regions and also vertically through different levels of government.
Professor Fox of American University started the discussion on these dimensions, which was then followed up by a deeper exploration during workshop sessions. In the first set of workshops, 14 GPSA partners presented their experiences of implementing social accountability approaches in seven sectors including Education, Health, Water, Infrastructure, Municipal Services, Extractive Industries and Youth. The cases discussed challenges and lessons learned in each of the five dimensions mentioned above, and in scaling up and across the social accountability approaches. These workshops were followed by sessions that focused on each dimension, which were subsequently discussed in the plenary session.

In addition to the sessions that focused on the dimensions, there were a number of plenary sessions that discussed approaches to strategic social accountability. The Discussion with World Bank President Jim Yong Kim was the highlight of the Forum, where President Kim discussed the importance of social accountability in governance, and the development agenda, particularly in the World Bank’s work. In other plenary sessions, participants discussed issues such as what the paradigm shift in development toward strategic social accountability would look like, and what makes social accountability an effective mechanism in solving today’s problems, especially in the light of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Forum presented a great opportunity for participants working in the field of social accountability in different capacities to share their experiences, learn from other experiences, and most importantly reflect on the lessons learned and examine these from various perspectives. It provided an opportunity for networking where scholars, practitioners, and policy makers could build relationships and networks for future collaborations, including coalitions for co-learning.

This note summarizes the proceedings of the Forum and sums up some of the debates in the social accountability field that took place during the Forum.
II. PROCEEDINGS

The Forum started with opening remarks from Mario Marcel, Senior Director of the World Bank Governance Global Practice. He welcomed the participants and reiterated the importance of social accountability and citizen engagement for the governance agenda. He emphasized the significance of the Forum in providing a space where various actors in the social accountability field can come together to deliberate on challenges and opportunities. Christopher Stone, President of the Open Society Foundation, delivered the keynote address. He stressed the importance of including citizens in decision-making and oversight in governance worldwide for inclusive and effective development. He praised the World Bank and GPSA for taking a leading role in this agenda.

Following the keynote address, Magdalena Lizardo from the Government of Dominican Republic, Jan-Willem Scheijgrond from Philips, Danny Sriskandarajah from CIVICUS, Shaheen Anam from Manusher Jonno Foundation Bangladesh and Rakesh Rajani from Ford Foundation discussed how the paradigm is shifting in social accountability and how to move this agenda of strategic social accountability forward. Cyril Muller, Vice President of the World Bank, chaired this session. They also discussed the challenges and hurdles that they have encountered or expect to encounter in moving this agenda forward, but ended the discussion on a positive note, suggesting that social accountability and citizen engagement in governance processes is the “new normal.” Please see more discussion on this topic in the last section of the report.

In the next session, Professor Jonathan Fox presented his take on the five dimensions of strategic social accountability. His power point presentation can be found HERE. As Hassan Cisse said, “These dimensions form a fundamental part of bigger agenda of engaging in strategic social accountability.” These dimensions had been identified before the Forum to frame the discussion and include: Constructive Engagement, Political Economy Intervention, Coalition Building, Citizen Trust and Accountability Systems. He also discussed the challenges of scale in social accountability.
These dimensions were also used to frame the discussions in the workshop sessions. Two workshop sessions were held— one on each day of the Forum. On the first day, following Professor Fox’s presentation, participants broke into seven groups categorized by sector; the sectors included Health, Education, Water, Municipal Services, Infrastructure, Extractives and Youth. In each session, colleagues from around the world shared their experiences of designing and implementing social accountability in their sectors. Each of these case studies examined how their cases played out along the five dimensions. They also highlighted challenges and lessons learned in scaling social accountability interventions. These presentations can be found HERE.

These parallel sessions were followed by GPSA Partner Sharing Sessions. Participants decided on four topics that were to be discussed in parallel groups. These topics included knowledge and learning, monitoring and evaluation, gender in social accountability, and grant-making and capacity building.

The day ended with an award ceremony to honor the recipients of the first GPSA Leadership in Social Accountability Award. More details about the ceremony and the award recipients can be found HERE.

From left to right delegate accepted the award for Mr. Zaman (Bangladesh), Mrs. Ech-Chenna (Morocco), Mr. Licona (Mexico), Mrs. Sandu (Moldova), Mrs. Juliana-Soliman (Phillipines), Mr. Tanko (Ghana), Mr. Grajew (Brazil) and Award Ceremony Host S. Pradhan, World Bank Group
On the second day of the Forum, the discussion with World Bank President Jim Yong Kim was the highlight. President Kim was introduced by Corazon ‘Dinky’ Soliman, Secretary for Social Welfare in the Philippines. Melanie Walker, Senior Advisor to the President, moderated the discussion. President Kim emphasized the importance of social accountability and citizen engagement in reaching the World Bank’s twin goals of eliminating extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity. He praised the GPSA as a “wonderful community of practice” and said that he was “very impressed” by the work that it is doing to help the World Bank achieve this goal. He emphasized the need to scale social accountability initiatives to national and programmatic levels, rather than being confined to projects.

A second round of workshops followed the discussion with the President Kim. Following up on the previous day’s workshop that focused on sectors, five parallel sessions focused on the five dimensions namely, constructive engagement, political economy intervention, coalition building, citizen trust and accountability systems. In each session, an expert started the discussion which was then followed up by open discussion among the participants.

These workshops discussed a number of topics. Participants in the constructive engagement session discussed incentives of citizens and governments to engage constructively, and how that is balanced with disruptive engagement. In the political economy intervention session, participants discussed how changing political dynamics – while complex– is inherent to social accountability. Discussions in the coalition building session focused on understanding the characteristics of effective coalitions, and identifying a path toward building successful coalitions. The session on citizens’ trust talked about the essentialness of the concept of citizens’ trust to social accountability. In the accountability systems session, participants discussed how social accountability mechanisms interact with other components of accountability systems in a country, and how they can make each other more effective. For more detailed discussions of these dimensions from Professor Fox’s session and from the workshop sessions, please see last section of this report.

After these parallel workshops, participants broke for lunch with the World Bank Executive Directors and Advisors. Hassane Cisse, Director of Governance and Inclusive Institutions at the World Bank, and Alister Smith, Executive Director from Canada, Ireland and the Caribbean, delivered opening remarks. The intention of the lunch was to provide a chance to the participants to talk directly to their representatives in the World Bank.
Lunch was followed by a plenary session. Forum participants gathered to hear from five experts who reported back on the discussions from the parallel session on social accountability dimensions held earlier in the day. Madina Aliberdieva from Oxfam Tajikistan reported back from political economy intervention session. Vinay Bhargava from Partnership for Transparency Fund presented his takeaways from the constructive engagement session, while Lindsay Coates from InterAction presented her insights from the coalition building session. Nick van Praag from Keystone Accountability reported back from the session on citizens’ trust, and Paul Healey from DFID provided his insights from the session on accountability systems. Their remarks were followed by a Q&A session with the participants. Please see the last section for more details.

Roby Senderowitsch, GPSA Program Manager, then engaged the audience in a role-playing activity to reflect on the discussions of the past two days. Participants volunteered to play the roles of government officials, civil society and private sector in negotiation to solve an accountability issue in public service delivery.

In the last session of the Forum, Keith Hansen, Vice President of the World Bank, had a lively conversation with the Forum participants. After Keith Hansen provided his remarks on the importance of the social accountability agenda for governance, a number of participants presented their impressions of the Forum and the lessons that they will take away from the event to apply to their work.

### III. MAIN TAKEAWAYS FROM THE FORUM ON SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AGENDA MOVING FORWARD

Social accountability and citizen engagement is the new ‘normal’ in the development and governance agenda

There is a consensus that for effective development that improves lives of people across the globe, it is essential to include citizens’ voices and feedback in every stage of the development process – from decision-making to oversight of government function. When governments listen to the citizens’ voice, engage with them and respond to their feedback, conditions on the ground improve.

A number of Bank staff highlighted that social accountability is instrumental in achieving the World Bank’s goal, including President Kim, who remarked, “Social accountability is the key at
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the World Bank to achieving our goals of alleviating extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity.” Similarly, Keith Hansen stated, “We [at the World Bank] see social accountability as an integral part of, not only our work, but of the whole development and governance agenda.”

It is clear that the relevant question to ask at this stage is not whether the shift toward social accountability is happening or not, but how quickly development practitioners and international organizations can embrace this agenda and respond.

There are many drivers that are shifting the paradigm toward greater citizen engagement and social accountability in development. Citizens are actively involved in furthering this agenda. There is a wide awareness among citizens that engaging with government is not only their right, but can also change their lives. Another significant driver of this paradigm shift is the proliferation of information and digital technologies that not only disseminate this information widely, but have also made communication among citizens and between citizen and governments quick, easy and affordable.

While a couple of participants challenged the idea of a paradigm shift, most participants agreed that there are challenges in mainstreaming social accountability and citizen engagement in governance processes. “Trajectory of openness is unstoppable … there is inevitability that power would come back to citizens’ hands,” as Danny from CIVICUS stated.

Social accountability is a greatly effective but a messy and time-consuming process and requires long term commitment and a commitment to adaptive learning.

The World Bank and development community has embraced the citizen-centric approach to governance in which citizen participation and engagement forms the basis of all government decisions. World Bank sees this approach as paramount to achieving its goals of eliminating extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity. It has been committed has been committed to increasing citizen engagement in governance processes, and has already taken steps to mainstream social accountability in its engagement with governments by committing to ensure 100% beneficiary feedback in all its lending operations.

Social accountability is a crucial component of this approach to governance by promoting citizen engagement and government accountability to citizens. It enables citizens to provide feedback on and voice demand for improved service delivery.

Social accountability is an integral component of citizen-centric approach to governance.

As social accountability becomes an integral part of development agenda, it becomes imperative that it also becomes an added value for lending institutions. Institutions that have the skills and
incentives to promote social accountability and citizen engagement get an edge over others that do not value these crucial elements of development policy.

Given the importance that the World Bank has accorded to social accountability and citizen engagement in its operation, it has a competitive edge over other lenders. Its unique position allows the Bank to not only support civil society participation but emphasize the idea of citizen engagement, transparency and participation in every interaction that it has with the Government. Chris Stone challenged the Bank to build upon this role and become “the preferred lender, and the preferred forum for dispute resolution, among civil society worldwide. And why? Because of its commitment to transparency and accountability, because of its confidence in citizens, and because of its support for civil society.”

World Bank also help bring private sector to the table, because as President Kim said, “We can take what [civil society] is telling us and translate these into direct conversations with governments and private sector.” This competitive advantage is highlighted by GPSA’s collaboration with Phillips that aims to improve accountability in the health sector around the world to bring better services to communities.

Social accountability is a messy process. In the words of Rakesh Rajani from the Ford Foundation, it is good messiness that requires hard work as it is “about negotiation of power usually between entrenched interests and others who have been excluded.” There are also a lot of risks involved that could lead to unintended circumstances if the processes are not tailored to the local context. Paul Healey from DFID stressed the importance of historical context in mediating the effectiveness of social accountability approaches, “Any social accountability venture takes place in a historical context. The players, the organizations and the rules – all make up that historical context.”

This messiness means that that there is no linear progress, and we need to keep this in mind when planning social accountability approaches and measuring progress. More crucially, this also means that the social accountability community as a whole needs to make a commitment to adaptive learning. As Keith Hansen, Vice President of the Global Practices at the World Bank, remarked, “[Since] there is no single pathway forward, the only way to get there is through trial and error, and continuous course correction.” In the words of Rakesh Rajani, “[Progress in social accountability] is about learning lessons and insights.” We need to understand “how to create learning cultures,” that means “getting feedback and intelligently using that feedback.” He added that in order to achieve this, “the most important coalition we need is ... learning coalition, where we can learn lessons and share insights of what works, where, and in what contexts.”
Engagement with the government is a necessary process for effective social accountability. As Madina Aliberdieva from Oxfam Tajikistan noted, “It is impossible to bring social accountability changes by working only with civil society; we need to work with governments at the national and local level and build relationship with formal and informal structures.”

While complex, engagement with the government as part of social accountability is possible – and is happening -- in all contexts from democratic societies to contexts where political environment is restricted. This engagement starts with identifying champions and pro-accountability actors in the government. In some contexts, these champions exist and are identifiable, while in others this process may not be straightforward. Even in these complex environments, there is room for constructive engagement to collaboratively solve problems.

Engagement is a long and energy-consuming process. Sometimes, it takes significant time to even build an environment that creates space for engagement with the government on a particular issue. Therefore it is important to set realistic expectations at the outset. It is also not a one-off thing; the relationship between governments and civil society has to be constantly nurtured.

The persistence of civil society and citizen groups has played a key role in making this engagement possible and fruitful. In addition, providing governments with clear information about the problems and clearly articulating the value-added for the government from this engagement are key. This kind of communication can also help civil society recognize and acknowledge constraints faced by the government, which in turn can lead to further collaboration in solving public service delivery issues.

Many social accountability mechanisms such as citizen report cards and social audits provide spaces for citizens and government to engage, through interface meetings and creation of joint work plans, for example.

An important point to note is that constructive engagement also includes conflict. Shaheen Anam from Manusher Jonno Foundation, a GPSA grantees explained, “There is potential of conflict between the two sides [government and civil society]. But it is our [civil society’s] job to work things through.” There is also room for disruptive (or adversarial) engagement, where disruptive and adversarial approach can complement constructive approaches, by creating space for constructive engagement, for example. We need to understand more substantively how and when this transition takes place, and how social accountability interventions can leverage this relationship.

Aly Lala from Concern Mozambique summed up this tension best, “If we don’t push for change then change is less likely to happen. But when you push for change, you have to make sure that...
that you are not pushing too hard. Otherwise, you will lose that confidence and trust relationship [with the government] that is important for [social accountability].”

Citizen trust is a fundamental component of the social accountability process and cannot be ignored moving forward.

Citizen trust is not only a pre-requisite or an outcome of social accountability, but also a fundamental component of the social accountability process. As Mario Marcel suggested, “Trust is the main deliverable; it is the main reflection of the impact of governance... when you have trust in institutions then it is easier for citizens to understand what governments are aiming to do and it is easier to raise their concerns and generate feedback that make public policies work better.”

As important as citizen trust is for governance and development, it is a complex phenomenon that has economic, political, social and psychological aspects. Citizen trust is also not a stand-alone component, but intricately related to constructive engagement – both build on each other. Some level of trust among stakeholders is necessary for engagement to start, and engagement in turn builds this trust further. The onus of building trust lies with both governments and civil society. As Magdelena Lizardo from the Government of Dominican Republic emphasized, “We need both civil society and government [to take the responsibility of building mutual trust]. The governments should be able to listen to complaints from the civil society. At the same time, civil society should also be able to listen to government’s explanations and understand the constraints that the governments face. In this way they can collaborate in solving complex issues.”

In some cases, this minimum level of trust may not exist. In these cases, while challenging, it is possible and crucial to create an environment where this trust can be built for social accountability to take root.

There are many reasons for distrust – many of them are based on pre-conceived notions of the other actor. Therefore, facilitating communication is employed as a first step in building trust. Joint meetings and trainings, state and citizen working groups, and other avenues that provide opportunities for citizens and the state to sit together can initiate the process of building trust. Especially when this communication is based on data that provides evidence of the problem, it becomes easier to engage government and civil society in a constructive dialogue. When emphasis is not on power-holders to fix problems, but collective responsibility in joint working problems, both stakeholders develop respect for each other.

Assessing a concept as complex as citizen trust is challenging, yet necessary to be able to make progress. The level of engagement is a potential indicator of citizens’ trust; it is expected that when citizens trust the process or their government more, they would be more likely to engage. Clearly, social accountability and development practitioners need to spend more effort in constructing indicators that can assess citizen trust.
Coalition building is a necessary process for social accountability. Coalitions provide its partners with greater legitimacy by allowing them to advocate their interest from a stronger vantage point, and extend the reach of their message. Coalitions also allow various actors to pool their resources, leverage the expertise of its members, and ensure that the message is informed by a diverse range of perspectives. Most importantly, coalition building helps build crucial links across actors and helps knowledge sharing and learning.

Coalitions work best when created or assembled for a specific and clear objective for a limited life span. Successful coalitions are also grounded in shared interests, have clear terms of engagement and an explicit understanding of agreeing to disagree.

It is hard to decide on the parameters of coalition membership. Coalitions that have fluid memberships tend to work best; members should be free to join and leave at their discretion. However, at the same time, making the cost of leaving and non-participation in the coalition should be high. The membership should be varied, especially, including interlocutors who can connect CSOs with the government as coalition members can be helpful.

The process of assembling a coalition is also significantly affected by the host country’s legal framework regarding the freedom of expression and assembly. Convening and maintaining coalitions also require resources. A significant issue in coalition building arises from the source of funding and its impact on coalitions’ agendas, objectives and operations. Membership of the coalition can also be significantly affected by the source of resources. For example, who is invited to join the coalition can significantly affect its working, efficacy and objective, and is a decision that is sometimes dictated by the funding source.

There is a consensus that in order to improve accountability systems in a context, it is essential to “think and act politically” or think of social accountability as political economy interventions. As Keith Hansen, World Bank Vice President suggested, “Social accountability is really about empowerment – in a sense to change the balance of power.” These sentiments were reiterated by Roby Senderowitsch, GPSA Program Manager, as he remarked that social accountability is not only about “listening to the beneficiaries; and it’s not just about feedback loops, it has a fundamental political angle.” Hassane Cisse, Director of Governance and Inclusive Institutions also expressed that “social accountability process is also about creating political space for those who do not have power.”

Development is highly context-dependent and is greatly affected by political economy dynamics. Therefore, we need to understand these dynamics to improve accountability in the delivery of public services. We need to especially identify the potential winners and losers of social accountability approaches are inherently political economy interventions.
accountability approaches, in addition to identifying pro-accountability actors. Identifying the potential losers helps in creating a strategy to successfully deal with their opposition.

The great majority of social accountability projects show some degree of impact on power dynamics. For example, some projects report that there is a sense of empowerment or improved self-esteem as a result of social accountability interventions so that more people feel empowered to put forward their demands. Some cases also report the impact of social accountability on the mindset of government officials as well so that they are more conducive to understand the accountability relationship with the citizens as a result of social accountability interventions. However, understanding the impact of social accountability on political dynamics remains elusive and needs further exploration.

Changing power dynamics is a daunting task and poses a contradictory challenge; in order to change political dynamics, political elites sometimes need to cede power and accept the rules that render themselves vulnerable. Consequently, in many contexts, limits are imposed on civic space. For example, the role of civil society is accepted in technical area of service delivery but as soon as they start ‘acting politically,’ they are sanctioned by the state in some way. Shrinking space also tends to lead to self-censorship when civil society focuses on service delivery without challenging power relations (which in many ways also limits their ability to improve public service delivery). This is a true dilemma that limits the ability of civil society to act, even if they have resources to undertake political economy analysis and possess the will to tackle power dynamics.

Any social accountability campaign takes place within an existing accountability system that has been shaped by history. The accountability system impacts the effectiveness of social accountability work, as the culture of the accountability institutions and their internal incentives can make or break social accountability campaigns. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how social accountability approaches situate in the overall accountability system.

In addition, social accountability efforts should aim to bolster accountability of the overall system, as Professor Fox suggested, “Bolster the weak and challenge the captured” institutions to promote accountability in the country as a whole. For example, social accountability mechanisms can provide accountability institutions with valuable real-time information that institutions like Ombudsman can use to bolster internal accountability, and also respond to citizens’ feedback in a more systematic way.

On the other hand, these accountability institutions can bolster the impact of social accountability interventions. There are cases in which working with institutions such as Anti-
Corruption Commissions and Ombudsman Offices have proven to be helpful. There are also examples of fruitful collaborations with other accountability institutions such as parliaments or legislative branches. There is also an argument to align social accountability better with political accountability. As Professor Fox mentioned, “We need to take political accountability seriously.” However, understanding how these two types of accountability are related, and how they can be leveraged to affect each other, is limited.

Most importantly, linking social accountability efforts with the overall accountability system also helps bring social accountability work to scale. When social accountability initiatives link with the accountability systems, they are institutionalized and are more likely to become sustainable.

Scaling up of social accountability means much more than replication – it means spreading social accountability across various sectors (such as water, health, housing, among others) as well as integrating social accountability vertically from the local to the national level. Not all service delivery problems can be solved at the local level and in many cases it becomes essential to involve higher levels of government. The strategies that work at the local level also need to be adjusted so that they are effective at other levels of government.

Scaling up and across is the new challenge for social accountability, as President Kim stated in his remarks at the Forum, “The fundamental challenge is to spread the good ideas and take them to scale. It can’t be just about pilot ‘projectology’. It has to be now ‘scaleupology’. How do we get there?”

In order to truly achieve scale and become sustainable, social accountability mechanisms may need to be institutionalized and become part of policymaking apparatus and legal framework. There are many examples to show that it is not only possible but is very much happening.

CSOs have become fundamental development partners and have played an invaluable role in promoting social accountability. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that civil society also remain accountable. GPSA, international donors, social accountability practitioners and CSOs themselves should analyze the dynamics of funding and its impact on their agenda. Funding can sometimes have a negative impact by distorting incentives of the civil society. There are cases where significant amounts of funding have led to the proliferation of ‘briefcase NGOs,’ weak links with government, and destructive competition among CSOs. Most importantly, funding can negatively impact the link between CSOs and their own constituency of citizens. All development actors have a responsibility to ensure that as Shaheen Anam said, “Citizens are at the center of what we do.”