STRATEGIES THAT HARNESS THE CONTEXT TO GENERATE SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

This is the second note in a six-part series discussing whether the social accountability field is already primed with the knowledge and capabilities to design, implement, fund, and learn from strategic interventions. This note briefly discusses what it looks like to prepare strategies that harness the local political context and whether we are ready for the challenge, by using data from the first two rounds of GPSA applications. The note series presents results from systematic analysis of more than 600 applications submitted to the Global Partnership for Social Accountability.

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I. THE GPSA AND OUR READINESS TO HARNESS THE CONTEXT

The Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) is a new funding facility for civil society organizations working together with governments to solve critical governance and development challenges (more here). In less than two years, the GPSA has opened two Calls for Proposals. It has received a total of 644 applications. A group of 22 selected proposals (Round 1 and Round 2) are receiving a total of $15 million dollars.

GPSA grantees faced a challenging selection process. In this note, we would like to focus on one particular challenge posed by the application form: that applicants elaborate politically informed social accountability projects. That is, the GPSA asked applicants to look beyond tools and to justify why and how their proposed strategies, tactics and mechanisms would make sense to solve a concrete policy problem in a given political and institutional context.

We would like to reflect on 600+ applicants’ responses to this test by looking at whether they presented pro-forma applications or whether they were politically prepared to implement strategic change.

Our approach to learn from GPSA applications:
- Selection of a sample 40 of 644 GPSA applications
- Scored for their strategic political approach
- Extra attention to the best and worst applications
- 4 Components of social accountability strategies coded as present, partial or absent

Our analysis did not fully reassess the country context to determine whether an application responded precisely to local circumstances. Rather, we assessed to what extent the applicant discussed, analyzed and showed evidence of responsiveness to their own assessment of the local context.

Want to learn more about our the GPSA’s selection process and our methodology? Check out GPSA Note 1.

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This note looks into one of the components we identified in our Introduction as a crucial element of this strategic approach to social accountability: What does it mean for strategies to harness the local context? And have GPSA applicants explained how they would do so in their submissions? Other notes in this series focus on other components of strategic social accountability.

II. HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE A STRATEGY THAT HARNESSES THE CONTEXT WHEN WE SEE IT?

The GPSA’s approach to the promotion of social accountability begins with the presumption that policy reforms seldom happen against a clean slate, where all options are on the table and feasible to adopt. There is always a set of contextual issues, including broader governance arrangements and institutional forces (see here, here, and here), that shape the extent to which changes to accountability arrangements are feasible.

Accordingly, the GPSA expects civil society partners to propose contextualized, realistic strategies to contribute to solving a concrete policy problem. To do so, CSOs are expected to present a strategic social accountability proposal that includes:

1. A problem-driven approach, identifying a specific accountability challenge, assessing why the observed dysfunctional patterns are present, and identifying contextualized ways of initiating reform and change (e.g. building on knowledge about what other actors do to address the problem).

One very concrete way in which the GPSA advances this approach is to identify in advance, together with country-level stakeholders, what should be the country-specific focus for its call for proposals at a point in time (see Round 1 and Round 2 country specific calls for proposals).

2. A set of linked tactics and tools that are tailored to the political context and selected on the basis of their feasibility, taking particular account of the incentives of public officials with power and influence over the problem.

3. An approach that harnesses the actors, institutional entry points and reform efforts that exist on the ground (as opposed to ignoring or bypassing them).

Check out the application

The GPSA asked applicants of the second round to provide a justification for the proposed solution(s) justifying (a) which entities or actors in the public sector (including institutions within and outside the Executive branch) is/are interested in obtaining the type of citizen feedback that would be generated by the project, (b) why they need this information and in which ways this information will benefit their positions and interests in order to motivate or incite them to take action.

Effective social accountability processes cannot rely solely on producing citizen information. Instead, it calls for effective engagement of the specific government actors with the authority and know-how to devise and implement a set of interventions that can be combined with what the public sector is already doing to address the problem. (see here, here, here, here and here) Reforms need to proceed step by step, building on existing political resources and accumulating influence inside the very system they are trying to change.

In too many cases, textbook solutions are stalled or reverse because they are only partially implemented, are “politically unpalatable, or trigger unintended consequences during implementation” (see here).
This approach aims to lever technical inputs to solve a specific problem in a politically informed way rather than applying de-contextualized technical solutions.

While this politically savvy way of thinking about social accountability and context generally makes sense for many social accountability experts (see here, here, here, here, here and here), it is harder to find precise guidance on how to sift through hundreds of social accountability proposals and reward those that are consistent with this approach. Examples and evidence of strategic social accountability at work are scarce, too.

In order to analyze a sample of 40 GPSA applications we specified a set of more precise questions derived from the literature on what matters for strategic success, from our past experience, and where we could reasonably expect applicants to provide insights. These questions are spelled out in Table 1. We turn to the results of our inquiry in the next section.

### Table 1: Key Questions to Identify Strategies that Harness the Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Does the project identify a concrete problem?</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Does the project identify what is being done by others to address it?</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Does the project identify the public officials with the authority and capacity to change the processes/outcomes being targeted?</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Does the project identify the incentives of those with power and influence over the problem?</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Does the project tap on the existing incentives of the various public sector institutions with influence and power over the issue to respond in a positive direction to the intervention, change or seek to strengthen those incentives?</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Does the project assess the expected range of responses of public officials to the interventions?</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Does the project treat institutions as they operate, rather than as ‘perfect’ formal institutions?</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Do the project components and plan of activities complement existing actions that public officials are already taking?</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Does the project explain why their choice of social accountability tools is realistic and likely to be actionable and effective, given the structure of the policy process in their context and the political incentives and constraints facing key government actors?</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Does the project disaggregate the information that it will generate across the different information users being targeted? [Matching different types of information/feedback to different users and levels of information intake]</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Does the project make a case of how the feedback loops the project seeks to create, linking citizens to public officials, comes to fill/close a feedback gap? And how does it complement existing reform processes?</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Does the project identify actors with vested interests in the status quo and develop appropriate strategies to overcome or bypass vested interests?</td>
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To check out the kind of analysis we did for each application check out Box 1.

**BOX 1**

*It’s your turn now: how politically savvy are you regarding context?*

Imagine you are thinking about implementing a social accountability project in the education sector in an imaginary country. Imagine you map entry points, stakeholders, and contextual factors that formally should affect the delivery of education and those political economy factors that affect the delivery in practice. *An example of what this analysis might look like is provided in the figure below.*

With these pictures in mind, would you design and implement the same social accountability strategy and intervention or not? What would you do?

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III. DO APPLICATIONS INCORPORATE THE POLITICAL CONTEXT INTO THEIR ANALYSIS?

Much has been written about the importance of mapping context to conceptualize, implement, and learn from social accountability interventions, as we noted above (for a comprehensive study see here).

Many of our colleagues agree with the idea that “context matters,” too. But can we structure the wealth of formal and tacit knowledge about the role of contextual factors in applications for GPSA funds?

Our in-depth qualitative analysis of a sample of 40 applications provided the following insights:

• More often than not, entries identified a specific problem (24 out of the 40 in our sample did). However, even these applications focused on broad problem definitions, without providing evidence and data to show the status of the problem, or mentioning what public sector institutions (or other actors) are already doing to address it.

• In those cases where proposals identify a specific problem (e.g. corruption in contract execution in agriculture) the diagnosis of the problem is usually incomplete, lacking a systemic analysis of its causes. There is rarely a detailed justification for why and how the proposal would help to lever action to change the status quo. For instance, no grant application in our sample identified actors with vested interests in the status quo that might oppose or block social accountability efforts.
• Similarly, the entries do not fully convey a CSO’s recognition of the many factors that may be outside of its control in a messy, political environment. While more than half of the entries we reviewed identified the public authorities that are responsible for making decisions on the specific policy area, 24 out of the 40 proposals failed to provide information about what these stakeholders and institutions were already doing. Most also failed to link what the project is proposing to do to what these public authorities are already doing to solve the problem. Only 17 out of 40 applicants proposed strategies that would complement existing actions public officials are taking. The opportunities to make impact and align incentives with public officials were much clearer where applicants explicitly spelled out ongoing reform efforts and entry points.

• Only five entries went further to identify the incentives of those with power and influence over the policy area, and only one assessed the expected range of responses public officials might have to the proposed intervention. Without making these assessments, applicants are betting on a social accountability approach that “should” influence policy makers, without taking into account how public sector decision-makers would actually respond to the initiative. More than half of the entries failed to explain why the choice of social accountability tools is realistic and likely to be actionable in the context of the existing policy process. An example illustrates this pattern. Many entries propose to train a wide range of stakeholders by providing them information that is not clearly relevant or actionable – only a handful refer to specific methodologies and indicate that these have worked for other problems or in other communities (for a critical take on the role of training in development see here). Even these entries fail to explain whether these successes are transferable to their own context.
• Much literature and tacit knowledge has concluded that providing information is not enough to generate social accountability. If we look deeper into information interventions, in the few cases where applicants do describe what stakeholders and institutions are already doing, they fail to explain the specific channels that they envision or anticipate to be used to share information on a periodic basis. In very few cases do they propose to use concrete channels to engage stakeholders. Many colleagues often explain that we need to pay more attention to what kind of information is relevant and action-able for concrete target audiences (see here, here, here, here and here). Yet, 31 entries out of 40 did not match the different types of information/feedback to specific target users of the information. The mode of interaction with government proposed by applicants can also help illustrate the point. Engagement is too many times a matter of meeting with government, signing a memorandum of understanding, and then proceeding to generate feedback, package “Monitoring Reports” (or publishing it on websites) and then waiting for the problem to get solved.

### IV. Recap

In short, there is a large gap between expectations about what strategic social accountability means for the GPSA and the actual practices applied by most CSOs. In their applications, GPSA applications often miss too many key political considerations to be able to specify a plan of action that harnesses the local context and promotes strategic social accountability.

We conducted similar analysis regarding other qualities of GPSA applicants’ proposed strategies in notes 3 through 5: Are they responsive and multi-pronged? Do they pick partners and allies that bolster their social accountability efforts? Do they employ adaptive learning?

In GPSA note 6, we look at the bigger picture to think about concrete steps we can take to support more strategic, politically savvy social accountability.