

WHAT NEXT FOR STRATEGIC SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY?

This is the sixth note in a six-part series discussing whether the social accountability field is ready to design, implement, fund, and learn from strategic interventions. This note sums up what we found looking at the first two rounds of GPSA applications and prompts us to think about concrete steps to push the field forward.

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I. THE GPSA AND STRATEGIC SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

We wrote this “Are we Ready for Strategic Social Accountability?” note series with the aim of connecting insights stemming from social accountability work and colleagues’ experiences that has puzzled us for some time. We have argued and heard for quite some time that political savviness and strategic thinking may be a way forward for development partners to contribute to voice, representation, transparency and accountability. We have experienced first-hand the ways in which this kind of thinking can sharpen and enable improved social accountability work. We also know that acting on our collective experiences and lessons learned is tough and rare. We agree with those who have focused on funders’ responsibilities to create enabling conditions for strategic social accountability.

However, we had good reasons to think that if a funder created the space for a new way of going about its business, the field might still not be quite ready to take the leap of faith required.

In thinking out-loud about these issues, our goal is modest. **We hope we can stimulate some thinking about what funders and grantees can do individually and collectively to act on key issues for generating social accountability.**

There are compelling, well-known reasons for the social accountability field to move beyond general statements such as “context and politics matter” or “we need to celebrate learning from successes and failures” to infusing our actions (and plans of action), policies, and procedures with concrete elements that reflect our commitment to our promises. The GPSA is breaking new ground in the development and social accountability fields by proactively and overtly acknowledging that the change it pursues requires confronting political issues in a strategic manner.

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To access the complete Notes series, go to www.thegpsa.org

We cannot afford to miss the opportunity to learn from the GPSA's experience. Improving our approach to social accountability will not be easy. It requires funders, civil society organizations and our partners to become politically informed actors, engaging with public officials and forming political coalitions. This is a risky proposition that calls for asking tough questions about the incentives that actors face, having more honest funder-grantee conversations, learning from our (and others') mistakes, and using this intellectual and practical capital to improve how we go about our work. We are deeply aware that the context for work in social accountability and development often fails to encourage learning and hinders the application of this knowledge to our decision-making.

The GPSA, as a funder, taking ownership, and embracing risks (as are [others](#) and [here](#)), is taking the lead in applying a more open, long-term and adaptive approach to social accountability funding. This vision is captured in the GPSA's brand new [theory of change and results framework](#). **The GPSA's more daring innovation may be to set goals for itself and ask those who want to receive funding to learn about the political dimensions of their work and act on the knowledge in very concrete ways** (also see [here](#)). This [theory of change and results framework 2.0](#) builds on research, evidence, and experience. It acknowledges that, in order to for GPSA-style strategic social accountability to work, a key assumption needs to hold:

"The GPSA's theory of change also assumes that CSO grantees have sufficient knowledge, experience, and capacity for social accountability initiatives, building multi-stakeholder coalitions, and developing collaborative relationships with state actors. Prior knowledge, experience, and organizational capacity are particularly important for the GPSA's problem-driven and strategic political economy approach as this approach requires grantees to step back and assess the power dynamics and political context in which they work, and to strategize about where they are most likely to be able to influence decision

making processes. This approach requires grantees to have a degree of political sophistication, analytical ability, and capacity for reflection that not all civil society organizations may have."

The application process is one of the instances in which we can check whether the GPSA's deeds match its words and whether its assumptions about its CSO grantees hold. To be sure, the discreet process of submitting an application for funding does not reflect the activism and capacity of all society organizations' (h/t Albert van Zyl). It does, however, help make an important aspect for the feasibility and sustainability of many civil society organizations' daily work: the search for funding. In many cases, it also sets up the parameters and baseline of what many colleagues in CSOs and elsewhere will learn by doing, researching, evaluating, and sharing their formal and tacit knowledge. Thus, we used the wealth of information from the GPSA application process to give us a starting point to consider as we work towards improving the quality and likely impact of social accountability.

Our approach to drawing lessons from GPSA Applicants:

- Selection of a sample of 40 of 644 GPSA applications
- Scored each 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

Keep in mind that 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 the GPSA's selection process and our methodology? Check out [GPSA-Note 1](#).

Below, we recap our analysis in the series, add more food for thought, and provide some recommendations regarding the way forward.

II. TAKING STOCK I: CSOs' READINESS FOR STRATEGIC SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

To sum up our findings: while a few CSOs meet a number of the GPSA's assumptions about their political capabilities, the majority fall short in conveying that they have the requisite capacity to propose strategic social accountability projects. **Our findings regarding the four strategic components analyzed in this series are recapped below:**

A-Strategies that harness the context (GPSA Note 2): While many applications attempt to target specific problems, in many cases both the policy and political analyses are limited. In turn, the strategies that applicants proposed failed to take full advantage of the local political context in which they operate, overlooked ongoing sector reforms and incentives of key decision-makers or threatening vested interests, and ignored the fact that many factors that shape social accountability chains are outside of their immediate control. Without a documented understanding of the incentives of public officials to accommodate social accountability, the prospects for the collaborative mode of engagement that the GPSA seeks to support will be weak.

B- Strategies that are responsive and multi-pronged (GPSA Note 3): Only a quarter of applications addressed all the strategic components that would be required to achieve results. Few applicants were able to justify why the strategies they proposed were adapted to the current political environment and instead proposed the use of generic social accountability tools.

C- Strategies that pick partners and allies that bolster social accountability efforts (GPSA Note 4): Applicants were eager to find formal partners to work with—especially other CSOs, and to a lesser extent, media and academic organizations—, but gave less attention to justifying what contribution they would make or why it might be in their interests to form a coalition or partnership. The full arc of potential partners and informal allies for building reform coalitions was insufficiently considered. The challenges of collective action in forming new coalitions for social accountability were neither acknowledged nor addressed.

D. Strategies that employ adaptive learning (GPSA Note 5): While the formal elements of monitoring, learning and evaluation were sometimes present, the purposes to which learning could be put were rarely made explicit; learning from past experience to inform the project proposal was near absent with only two CSOs considering alternative strategies; only a quarter of applications took advantage of learning for course correction; and learning was not sufficiently constrained in scope to provide recommendations that were adapted to local context.

III. TAKING STOCK II: THE GPSA'S PERFORMANCE

The GPSA is trying to learn from the past and navigating uncharted territory in terms of promoting strategic social accountability. In writing this series, it is making an effort to evaluate its own assumptions during the selection process of grantees. So, we want to finish this stocktaking exercise with some insights about how the GPSA's application, review, and selection processes performed in their efforts to assess the fit between the GPSA's strategic approach to social accountability and civil society organization's' proposals.

What's in a funders approach?

The key building blocks of the GPSA's strategic approach to social accountability are two: 1) Up-to date knowledge and evidence about when, where, how, and why social accountability has more chances to work to achieve governance and development goals; 2) Insights about the way in which the resources of the GPSA, The World Bank and its partners are more likely to add value to the social accountability field.

Others' views from the field: check out Ruth Levine's thoughts about identifying funder-grantee fit [here](#).

To do so, we need to discuss each one of the two Rounds of applications individually first and then collectively.

Our quick take away is that during the Round 1 call for proposals the application template introduced concrete questions regarding the four dimensions of strategic social accountability we have identified. While we checked the top 3 applications and concluded that we were looking for information that at least some applicants provided in their submissions, we also found that incorporating strategic political considerations is rare and is only very weakly correlated with the evaluation score that [Round 1 expert reviewers](#) gave the 20 applicants we reviewed for this series of notes. The top-scoring projects in our random sample do not seem to have received high scores because they were politically-savvy, but do better on other dimensions of performance. Our analysis only allows for speculation regarding the reasons underlying this outcome:

- It is possible that the limitations of our methodology have something to do with the findings. We are working with existing material and looking for information we think we could reasonably expect to find. Our key questions are not written overtly in the applications. We cannot guarantee applicants shared the same expectation and understanding.

- It may be that the quick rush to launch the operations of the GPSA did not lend itself to initially design the ideal application review process for its purpose. If the GPSA had had the luxury of time, it may have done stakeholder consultations to test how applicants understood the template and used this information to perfect the application before launching the first call for proposals.

- Conceivably, what we are seeing in Round 1 is a phenomenon [Tom Carothers and Marina Ottaway](#) identified some time ago: there is an understandable but problematic tendency for CSOs to speak the language they have learned to speak to donors to ensure their funding, at the expense of language that speaks to the specific problems and political challenges of their contexts ([h/t Rachel Ort](#)).

- We can speculate that the tendency of GPSA reviewers to reward business as usual may have spoken louder than the GPSA's cutting edge approach. This may have affected how Round 1 reviewers scored applications (for a recent funder argument on the trade-offs of working with CSOs that know the system see [here](#)). The GPSA's politically informed approach may have gotten lost in translation.

- There may be fundamental capacity limitations in the analytical skills of CSOs that undertake social accountability interventions that prevent the translation of their on-the-ground experience into strategic planning for new interventions.

The GPSA took a cue from this experience in Round 1 and adapted its application, review and selection processes (it also reviewed its results framework and theory of change). For instance, the GPSA simplified and refined its application from round 1 to round 2 in order to better signal the importance of strategic social accountability.

After looking at round 1 and 2 applications systematically, we can affirm that simplifying/clarifying/ writing more direct application questions prompted CSOs to identify political components of their strategies and be clearer about their project. With different questions, applicants focused on different aspects of the political process in their responses. **On aggregate this seems to have improved responses**

among the high-scoring applicants by a substantial margin. Despite the positive changes, Round 2 applicants still failed to specify clear, comprehensive approaches to all four strategic criteria mentioned above. **Even the best proposals continue to overlook crucial components of strategic political thinking which may put the overall coherence of the project at risk.**

IV. WHAT NEXT?

The scope to broaden the GPSA's strategic approach will therefore depend on a rapid accumulation of political astuteness and analytical capability by CSOs, but also on a dynamic interface between the GPSA and grantees. Reflecting these challenges in the new theory of change and results framework, the GPSA has revised and course-corrected its own strategy. The theory of change and results framework puts renewed emphasis on harder work with the program's partners on strategic capacity development and learning to meet real world demands. This includes, for example:

- **Aligning the structure of incentives with the vision:** GPSA is taking steps to reward grantees for integrating strategic social accountability into their projects; grantees and the GPSA itself are encouraged to correct their courses of action as a result of proactive political analysis and contextual changes affecting their targeted problems and in turn, their operational planning (instead of being penalized for recognizing weakness).

- **Bridging GPSA components:** The GPSA aims to integrate closely the Grant-Making and Knowledge components. This means, for instance, that knowledge activities must be tailored to GPSA grantees' needs to work on improving and adapting strategic political economy aspects of their GPSA projects and their organizational capabilities. The bet is that by critically thinking and learning together about individual experiences, grantees will be better able to identify opportunities, constraints, and risks and act accordingly.

- **Creating and sharing knowledge about strategic social accountability:** The GPSA seeks to be more purposeful about creating the opportunities and spaces for reflection, research, and exchange – instead of hoping this will happen automatically.



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