

**Dr. Samuel Paul
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**Social Accountability and
its Relevance to
Development¹**

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Social Accountability and its Relevance to Development¹

Introduction



When I was a little boy a man knocked at our door in Highfields, a township in the then Southern Rhodesia. My father opened, and the man gave him a form to sign. My father asked, ‘what’s this’? The man said, calmly, ‘it’s about refusing to be ruled by white people’. My father signed, and the man left.

As an older man several years ago, I met the Deputy Prime Minister of an east Asian nation to discuss a study I had led in the country, on the enabling environment for social accountability. We could hardly hear each other as scores of citizens were beating their drums loud outside in the square. They were protesting government corruption. I remarked that perhaps if there had been effective government channels for citizens to air their issues they might not be making noise outside.

I have reflected on these episodes and many more, understanding better the Highfields moment and the loud drums of the square. As it was in Highfields and in the square, so it is now, and even more so: Citizens everywhere want to have a say in matters that affect their lives, whether it’s their governments’ policies, how public funds are managed or the workings of global institutions such as the World Bank.

Sometimes they have protested – as happened in the square, other times they have raised petitions – as in Highfields - or engaged collaboratively with government to tackle problems and find solutions – what we support in the Global Partnership for Social Accountability-GPSA.

Citizen Agency and Public Accountability

Citizen engagement for public accountability - another way to think about social accountability - is now a firmly established tenet of many functioning democracies. In a paper I co-authored in 2012 we frame social accountability as “an approach to governance that involves citizens and civil society organizations in public decision-making and in holding government accountable for its actions especially in the management of public resources” (Bousquet et al. 2012).²

The civic activism and quest for democracy of the past decades especially following the end of the Cold War have been challenged by the headwinds of political repression, autocracy, and democratic transitions that fell short. Yet, one feature of citizen agency runs through these experiences like a scarlet thread: citizens have continued to make their legitimate claim on governance, to make their voices count and to be directly involved in its processes.

¹ My colleagues Florencia Guertzovich and Maria Poli provided invaluable guidance and input in the preparation of this paper. Alina Koenig and Yasodara Cordova supported with some syntheses. Emilie Fokkelman and Craig Hammer help me with great suggestions. I owe them all a debt of gratitude.

² This definition has obvious limitations, framed within the context of our work in the World Bank. We understand social accountability, in its fuller meanings, to encompass much more including links to empowerment and rights of citizens and obligations of public authorities as duty bearers.

Social accountability is predicated on the understanding, supported by empirical research³ that it is not enough for citizens to vote at the ballot box. Elections do not guarantee that the elected governments will design effective policies, that they will formulate equitable and responsive budgets and spend the money prudently, that they will deliver high quality health and education, infrastructure and water supply and sanitation and take care of the most vulnerable. Elections do not guarantee that officials will not be corrupt and steal the public's money.

In our Participation and Civic Engagement team in the early 2000s we produced a social accountability brochure we titled: *'From Shouting to Counting'*. That message continues to resonate today. It was important for democratic transitions to demonstrate that citizens could pivot from the clamor for political change and participation in elections to actions that can help to improve governing.

Following the Orange and Velvet revolutions in *Ukraine and Georgia* there was a galvanizing of citizen action to tackle endemic corruption and hold governments to account for how they were using public resources, along with social accountability to ensure efficient delivery of healthcare and other services. These efforts continue.

In the Philippines, the famous People Power political revolution pivoted to the business of enforcing the accountability of government institutions. Citizen performance audits complement government audits, budget transparency is enabling civil society to track public expenditures and citizens, through '[checkmyschool](#)' and other innovations, are monitoring schools performance using the internet.

In Indonesia, following the ouster of President Suharto, citizens pushed for new legislation on freedom of association and expression, and undertook citizen-based accountability initiatives in community-driven development, natural resource management, education, and local government.⁴

Yes, even in MNA, despite the disappointing political trajectory of the 'Arab Spring', civil society in Egypt and Tunisia and beyond, pivoted decidedly to developmental accountability as it pushed for right to information and budget transparency, as well as monitoring of public services from cash transfer programs to health and education. The World Bank is supporting some of these measures in the region.

To these countries can be added many more including the 40 or so countries implementing GPSA supported social accountability.

And this great nation of India is a towering example of citizen action working for government accountability. You have among the most pro-public accountability citizenries anywhere, with world famous initiatives and others less known yet equally potent.

³ Geddes, 1994; Varshney, 1999; Przeworski, Stokes & Manin, 1999; Stokes, 2003 in Ackerman, 2003

⁴ World Bank, 2003

I mention MKSS - Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan – MKSS’s instrumental role in bringing about your robust right to information law and empowerment of citizens to use it; going from there to using social accountability towards creation and strengthening of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act – NREGA program.

And 25 years ago, Dr Samuel Paul had the vision to create the Public Affairs Center, an important milestone in the evolution of social accountability. Thousands of policy makers, executives, practitioner and communities world-wide have been impacted by PAC. Professionals have received training in social accountability that went beyond the Citizen Report Card, PAC’s signature program!

Yes, ‘beyond the Citizen Report Card’. An enduring legacy of Dr Paul’s was his contribution to the development of citizen monitoring of rural roads construction, starting here in India, which has been replicated in several countries.

Youth for Social Development (YSD), which took part in the pilots that Dr Paul had helped to advocate, used social accountability to improve construction of roads in Odisha’s Gajapati district under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana scheme⁵.

Construction was running 5 years behind schedule. YSD used information strategies to raise villagers’ awareness of PMGSY and correspondent entitlements and trained them to use the Right to Information law for government accountability. Trained “Citizen Monitoring Teams” monitored the entire public procurement process and tracked roads construction for compliance with official specifications, using specially designed tools which Dr Paul had helped to broker⁶.

YSD combined accountability with collaboration with public authorities, NGOs, elected officials and the media, through interface workshops, to examine audit findings and jointly draw-up remedial plans for government to act on. Inefficiencies and corruption were uncovered, contractors and officials were alerted to discrepancies and corrective measures were taken including termination of particular tender agreements.⁷ YSD’s collaborative social accountability was laudable.

PAC has been in many ways the ‘go to’ institution for social accountability. In November 2005 teams from the World Bank Group converged here as part of our own learning about social accountability and especially the application of the Citizen Report Card. I have written about that experience in the Silver Jubilee Commemorative Volume.

The World Bank and Social Accountability

But we did not come to PAC from nowhere. We were on our own journey. In our institution, citizen engagement and social accountability were becoming integral to our understanding of the determinants of effective governance and development.

President James Wolfensohn’s 1996 “cancer of corruption speech” marked a turning point, making government accountability an important factor in our policy dialogue.

⁵ Prime Minister’s Rural Roads Program – the largest ever rural roads construction project to be undertaken in India if not in the world.

⁶ Through a partnership with RASTA, a rural roads firm of retired road construction engineers

⁷ “Enabling Community Monitoring of Rural Roads Project: Youth for Social Development” undated YSD report.

That year we launched the Participation Sourcebook (1996), creating the institutional mandate to work directly on governance and participation in World Bank-supported projects⁸.

Several key milestones created momentum for advancing social accountability in the World Bank:

The 2000/2001 **World Development Report (WDR) “Attacking Poverty”** recognized public accountability as an integral component of empowerment and poverty reduction, as did the World Bank’s Empowerment Framework.⁹

The **2004 WDR Making Services Work for Poor People** gave strong impetus to social accountability, making citizen agency a factor in the accountability of the state and service providers for more effective service delivery.

The World Bank’s **Governance and Anti-Corruption Strategies** of 2007 and 2012, amplified the message that social accountability and citizens’ demand for good governance were essential to tackling the corruption challenge.

All these developments provided important guideposts for our institution and reflected the thirst we had for solutions to the pressing governance challenges that involved the citizens themselves.

The **Arab Spring** in 2011 was a critical juncture; citizens challenging political and economic exclusion and in search of a new social contract with their governments¹⁰.

Enumerating the World Bank’s response, President Robert Zoellick said: “Civic participation matters to development....Investments in civil society and social accountability will be as important to development in the Middle East and beyond as investments in infrastructure....”

Bank support for the new **Affiliated Network for Social Accountability** in the Arab World was announced, to support social accountability practitioners in the region and the work of participatory governance.¹¹

The GPSA was established by our Board of Directors in 2012 with the explicit goal to strengthen country-level governance and improve service delivery through sustainable, strategic support to CSOs social accountability and collaboration with governments.

The GPSA has its place in the global efforts to equip civil society and amplify the voices of citizens as agents of change. Our point of departure, though, is ‘collaborative social accountability’ that is linked to the working of governments.

Social Accountability’s Evolution and the Lessons that We Have Learned

The 2004 WDR “Making Services Work for the Poor” became a watershed moment for our understanding of social accountability in service delivery. It advocated the power of poor people to directly make service providers accountable for the provision of public services instead of taking the more cumbersome ‘long route’ of challenging policy makers who in turn must try to exert control over providers.¹²

⁸ WB Governance Global Practice note, 2018

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ World Bank, 2011: Supporting Social Accountability in the Middle East and North Africa, Lessons Learned from Past Political and Economic Transitions

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Guertzovich, 2018

This framework led to an exponential growth of social accountability initiatives which sought to operationalize it.

Over the years, however, it was evident that many of these efforts tended to be disassociated from broader governance reform efforts, even if their efficacy in improving service delivery outcomes has been affirmed in various studies.¹³

Here in India, for instance, one study found that parents in three states were empowered by information on school outcomes and helped to improve oversight capacity of communities as well as tangible learning outcomes including increased teacher effort in classrooms (Pandey, Goyal, and Sundararaman, 2011).¹⁴

We have now come to understand the limitations of the short route in the face of the complex systems in which governance reforms and public service delivery are situated, with practitioners beginning to grapple with “second generation” social accountability interventions, informed by insights about underlying principles of why and how interventions work.¹⁵

The 2017 **World Development Report on Governance and the Law**, offered a useful diagnosis when it concluded that, often, bad policies persist and good policies do not get implemented, because individuals and groups in different societies do not have the capacity and willingness to commit, cooperate and coordinate to achieve the goals necessary for public governance and policies to be effective.

Another reason noted was the exclusion of certain people and groups from the bargaining process in the policy arena.

This 2017 WDR put governance front and center, re-defining it as *“The process through which state and non- state actors interact to design and implement policies within a given set of formal and informal rules that shape and are shaped by power.”*

Established for the purpose of improving governance through social accountability, the GPSA’s unique model transcends the short and long routes of accountability and is anchored in the concept of ‘collaborative social accountability’ that is worked out ‘in a programmatic or operational space in the middle’. (Guerzovich and Poli, 2014)

Social accountability is ‘collaborative’ when civil society actors adopt non-confrontational strategies aimed at collectively solving problems and delivering results. This is opposed to confrontational, advocacy-oriented social accountability strategies that are based on civil society’s countervailing power (Fung and Kosack, 2014; Guerzovich and Tsai 2014; Guerzovich and Schommer 2016).

The GPSA’s approach benefits from the comparative advantage of the World Bank and its ability to convene and broker state-civil society collaboration to solve governance problems, as well as its broad partnerships and knowledge services (Poli and Guerzovich 2014).

¹³ 2016 DFID funded review of 50 projects in diverse contexts revealed that social accountability processes almost always lead to better services, with services becoming more accessible and staff attendance improving, including for marginalized groups (Holland, et.al. 2016).

¹⁴ In Guerzovich, F; Poli, M. and, Fokkelman, Social Accountability and Citizen Engagement for Learning Experiences from the [GPSA]’s projects in education

¹⁵ Ibid; Carothers

But we are not alone in embracing this collaborative approach. Many organizations do, including the Public Affairs Center. They may use different language – but the principles are the same. Yet, we recognize the diversity and uniqueness of civil society and development partners’ social accountability strategies, and that social accountability is highly contextual. Strategies that may not exhibit these specific characteristics may, in specific contexts and at particular times, be appropriate.

However, the arc of our seven years of experience in more than 40 countries bends towards collective commitments, cooperation and joint actions across the state-civil society divide as the more promising path. Indeed, the most effective routes to complex behavioral and policy changes in the public arena have been shown to be those that go beyond individual social accountability “tools” and stand-alone CSO

efforts, to harness multi-stakeholder collaborative processes aimed at problem-solving.¹⁶

In one of the GPSA-supported programs, the Malawi Economic Justice Network, together with a broad civil society coalition, tracked delivery of instructional materials, collaborating with the Supplies Unit of Malawi’s Ministry of Education. Trained School Monitoring Teams worked with School Management Committee members, Parents-Teachers Associations, and Mothers’ groups as part of the process. The losses were cut by 85% in four years and there were changes in behavior: students, teachers and local communities now exercised prudent stewardship of instructional materials, cooperated more, and parents participated more in the schools’ activities.

This and many other GPSA projects across the sectors - water, social protection, agriculture and local government - have also taught us the importance of CSOs’ understanding of public sector institutions’ constraints and needs.

So, the first critical lesson learned is that the complexity of governance - centrally, the willingness of groups to share power and to cooperate towards common public goals, and of implementation challenges, especially in service delivery, calls for multi-stakeholder, collaborative engagements that combine accountability of public authorities and solving problems together.

A second critical lesson learned is that there are viable pathways to scaling and sustaining social accountability, but the possibilities are enhanced when CSOs work closely with governments, rather than piloting small scale exercises isolated from public delivery chains, especially when disconnected from higher levels of public management.¹⁷

Governments can scale up and institutionalize social accountability through specific legislation (e.g. laws mandating participatory mechanisms; programs or strategies (e.g. the National Nutrition Strategy in Indonesia integrating the practices and lessons of the GPSA supported project).

A third lesson is that the **dependency on social accountability tools**, whether report cards, social audits, “civic tech” or “gov tech”, grievance redress mechanisms, citizen charters and more

¹⁶ Florencia Guertzovich, Maria Poli, and Emilie Fokkelman

¹⁷ Guertzovich and Poli, 2019

– can undermine sustainability of outcomes when they are not linked into broader socio-political dynamics and networks working for change.

Reporting on its evaluation of the World Bank’s citizen engagement program in 2018, the institution’s Independent Evaluation Group pointed to the need for “thick” approaches to citizen engagement, which combine multiple tools and approaches that enable collective action and public sector responsiveness (World Bank 2018).

Fourth, we have learned the importance of adaptive programming to the success of social accountability projects. At the project level, GPSA adaptive grant making enables CSOs’ to adjust strategies and operational plans in order to respond to evolving and dynamic contexts. This means being highly flexible in budget allocations and definition of indicators, among others.¹⁸

In our Mongolia project flexible funding enabled the CSOs to move resources from some project components towards the process that proved vital to linking with national education reforms, even if that was not in their plan at the start. Donors’ funding models need to empower CSOs to take informed, strategic risks.

Opportunities for Taking Social Accountability to its Next Level?

What are some of the priorities and imperatives, for social accountability to go to its ‘next level’ as a relevant instrument of development? I offer a few recommendations:

Tackling fragmentation of CSOs’ actions and social accountability processes: We cannot journey into the future of social accountability with ‘business as usual’ approaches, with traditional social accountability models that rest on stand-alone CSO interventions. To become a vehicle for sustainable and resilient agency at scale, social accountability processes need to add to more than fragmented CSOs actions and to interact strategically with public service delivery chains¹⁹. This is what we mean by social accountability processes that work at the “programmatically or operational space in the middle.”²⁰

AFIC²¹ and the Uganda Contract Monitoring Coalition and the government of Uganda have established a collaborative, mutually reinforcing dynamic between them, creating opportunities for government uptake of the coalition’s operating models to improve the public contracting system. Read my blog about this here: <https://www.thegpsa.org/stories/how-social-accountability-helped-gpe-financing-do-more-uganda>

This approach will require important shifts at two levels. First, for CSOs, in designing their social accountability projects, to more proactively embrace cooperation strategies. Competition can breed fragmentation. Second, for funders to disincentivize siloed projects no matter the appeal and incentivize approaches that harness collaborative social accountability and, where possible, can integrate into ongoing public sector reforms.

¹⁸ Poli, M. and F. Guertzovich (2016b). The Global Partnership for Social Accountability: Adaptive Learning with the Grain. Draft Technical Note. The Global Partnership for Social Accountability. For internal Use.

¹⁹ Poli and Guertzovich (2016a; 2019) cf. Fox, J. (2016). “Scaling Accountability Through Vertically Integrated Civil Society Policy Monitoring and Advocacy,” IDS Working Paper, Brighton: Institute for Development Studies/Making All Voices Count, December, 2016

²⁰ Guertzovich, Poli and Fokkelman Social Accountability and Citizen Engagement for Learning: Experiences from the Global Partnership for Social Accountability’s projects in education - unpublished

²¹ Africa Freedom of Information Center, GPSA partner

In the 4th GPSA Call for Proposals, a selection criterion was the existence pathways to such potential integration.

Addressing particular capacity gaps: The kind of collaborative social accountability we are advocating requires CSOs to develop multiple skills sets: organizational, civic, operational and analytical capacities.²² Given the focus on collaboration, ‘civic capabilities’ are particularly salient to CSOs effectiveness. Public sector institutions likewise need capacities to engage with citizens. For collaborative social accountability to work requires designing interface modalities that go beyond generating feedback, and that integrate joint problem-solving, follow-up actions and responses – all the way from frontline service delivery to higher levels, across public management chains²³.

Positioning social accountability in fragile, conflict and violence affected settings: The projection is that by 2030, 62 percent of the world’s poor will be living in countries suffering from fragility, conflict and violence. The 2018 UN and World Bank report.

Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict argues for a shift toward prevention through inclusive and collective interventions. It calls for increasing people’s stake in governance, creating conditions for citizen voice and access to power, mechanisms for addressing grievances as well as space for dialogue, as the key to enduring peace.

Moreover, there is emerging consensus among scholars that when citizens collaborate with state actors meaningfully, service delivery can strengthen state legitimacy – vital to sustaining peace.

The relevance of collaborative social accountability in FCV contexts derives from the expectation that it has the potential to contribute to coalition building for addressing real grievances, mediating societal and state-society dynamics (Grandvoinet, et.al. 2015). We have conducted pilots in this respect that have shown promise, and view this as an important frontier for collaborative social accountability.

Social accountability and its interaction with the role of media: Another important consideration for the future of social accountability is how it interacts with media²⁴ to increase effectiveness. This can be complicated because segments of media have been captured and politicized, and many, especially in low income countries, are resource-constrained. The GPSA has partnered with the Social Accountability Media Initiative of the Aga Khan University’s Graduate School of Media and Communications, to help build civil society skills to leverage media strategically in order to advance social accountability and improve governance. The project’s roundtables have convened media, government and CSOs in several countries, facilitating tripartite collaborations in using evidence to bring solutions²⁵ to pressing governance problems especially in service delivery. Media’s role of storytelling, reporting, disseminating information, channeling and amplifying citizen voice and as its own public accountability agent, gives it a potentially significant place in social accountability strategies and the multi-stakeholder coalitions that are central to effectiveness - despite the risks stated above, which have to be

²² Poli and Guertzovich (2016a).

²³ Ibid

²⁴ A narrow reference to print and broadcast media

²⁵ SAMI report, August 2019

managed. CSOs and development partners will do well to re-imagine media engagement in their strategies to advance social accountability.

Social accountability and the new technologies: The new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) – ranging from open source software, artificial intelligence, machine learning, Interactive Voice Response²⁶, Short Message Service,

internet access and more – are already transforming how people engage and the public’s interaction with state and other institutions. ICTs are creating powerful platforms for data generation, increasing availability and efficiency of data collection tools, accelerating real-time transmission of data (enabling timely service delivery and other solutions), facilitating two-way or multi-participant information flows²⁷, and many more benefits. But there are important caveats including privacy, safety and security risks - from the misuse of citizens’ information. A 2017 study by Peixoto and Sifry (Eds) found that civic-tech drastically lowered the costs for government to establish channels for citizens to make their concerns heard, but that government responsiveness remained the same, at best²⁸. The study highlighted the risk of civic technologies empowering the already empowered and leaving those traditionally excluded behind. It called for technology to work in combination with traditional channels of engagement. As practitioners, policy makers and funders we are cautioned to consider that the technologies are servant, not master. Neither can they replace the mediating roles of civil society institutions nor usurp deliberative processes. Harnessing ICTs’ benefits must be accompanied by alertness to their limitations and risks, and actions to mitigate them.

6th GPSA Global Partners Forum from November 19 to 21

Finally, let me invite you to join us at the 6th GPSA Global Partners Forum from **November 19 to 21**. This year we address the all-important theme of “*Social Accountability and the Challenge of Inclusion*”. You will find our [Forum Brief](#) informative and you can register for attendance via our [Forum web page](#). The [Reading List](#) and [blog section](#) on that page offer materials we have been considering in developing the Forum theme. You are also encouraged to submit proposals for breakout sessions and speakers, [here](#). If you have questions or comments, please reach out to us at gpsaforum@worldbank.org.

²⁶ Lakhani, Sadaf, How can New Technologies be Used for Strengthening Social Accountability? World bank Presentation, July 30, 2019.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Source: Peixoto, Tiago and Micah Sifry (eds). 2017. Civic Tech in the Global South: Assessing Technology for the Public Good. World Bank and Personal Democracy Press: Washington, DC and New York, in World Bank Governance, 2018.