Helpdesk Research Report

Social protection accountability

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Question

What demand and supply side tools, mechanisms and approaches have been used to improve accountability in social assistance programmes, and what is the evidence of their impacts? Where accountability mechanisms have been built into social assistance programmes, what have their stated objectives been (i.e. improving quality of delivery, reducing fraud and corruption, empowerment, or others)?

Contents

1. Overview

Accountability and good governance are strong themes of development interventions in general, but have yet to be applied systematically to social protection programmes. This rapid literature review collates evidence on the use of accountability mechanisms in social assistance programmes[1].

Social assistance accountability mechanisms usually focus on two main areas: (i) the flow of information and (ii) the flow of funds (Bassett et al., 2012). Most programmes have implemented a series of audits, spot checks, grievance redress mechanisms and other good governance principles. There is also a broader understanding of accountability as providing social justice and empowerment to citizens, but there is much less discussion and evidence on this in relation to social protection programmes.

In general, much of the literature is focused on best practice, lessons learned, the theory and principles of accountability, and policy guidance. There is **little systematic evidence** on whether accountability mechanisms have improved programmes or had effects on human development outcomes. There is

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[1] In this report, the enquirers requested that 'social assistance' includes cash transfers, in-kind transfers (food, assets and vouchers), public works and policies such as fee waivers which reduce the cost of essential services.

description of tools but little evidence on whether they work. However, most tools are commonly considered in the policy and programmatic literature to be effective, drawing on evidence from other areas such as service delivery accountability. This report is therefore limited in presenting evidence on whether accountability tools have had impacts.

- **Grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs):** These are the formal channels through which beneficiaries can register complaints (Bassett et al., 2012). There is mixed evidence on their effectiveness: some programmes resolve all complaints and some resolve very few. GRMs generally achieve internal programme accountability and not broader social accountability.

- **Social audits:** These allow beneficiaries and communities to review and provide feedback on programme implementation (Bassett et al., 2012). There is good case study evidence from Andhra Pradesh that social audits have improved beneficiaries' understanding of the MGNREGS, which has led to improvements in programme implementation (Giannozzi & Khan, 2011).

- **Audits:** Audits are most commonly used to oversee financing and ensure appropriate use of financial resources (Bassett et al., 2012). There is little explicit evidence on whether these have increased accountability, but there is a strong assumption in the literature and case study evidence that changes do occur as a result of audits.

- **Citizen report cards and community scorecards:** There is strong evidence on their effectiveness at improving services, but very little on their effectiveness at improving social protection programmes.

- **Rights and obligations:** Some programmes adopt a rights-based approach, which provides broader social accountability from state to citizens. There is evidence that social protection programmes have improved perceptions of the state and strengthened citizen-state ties (Samuels & Jones, 2013).

- **Spot checks:** Many social assistance programmes use these rapid evaluations but there is no evidence on how this specifically enhances accountability or performance.

- **Performance-based incentives:** Providing additional funding based on results might improve performance (UNDP & UNCDF, 2011). There is no information on improving accountability, although there is evidence on improved programme performance.

- **Database crosschecks**: These examine whether information on beneficiaries matches information from other public databases (Bassett et al., 2012). This improves beneficiary targeting accuracy and therefore programme performance, but there are no studies explicitly discussing evidence of impacts on accountability.

- **Local-level politics:** Some evidence that mayors in charge of an effective social assistance programme may be re-elected. This political incentive may encourage first-term representatives to prioritise safety nets, which leads to good management practices (UNDP & UNCDF, 2011).

- **Informal feedback:** This is many beneficiaries' main interaction with programmes. It is unclear to what degree these conversations have impact on programme implementation, or whether feedback is carried higher up the chain of command (Samuels & Jones, 2013).

2. Accountability

The WDR 2004 posits accountability as a set of principal-agent relationships between policy-makers, providers and citizens (Bassett, Giannozzi, Pop & Ringold, 2012). In this framework, "governance in social protection can be defined as the set of incentives and accountability relationships that influence the way in which providers are held accountable for their behaviors and ability to deliver services with quality and efficiency." (Bassett et al., 2012: 6).

Social assistance accountability mechanisms usually focus on two main areas: (i) the flow of information and (ii) the flow of funds (Bassett et al., 2012). These include:

Table 4: Examples of Control and Accountability Mechanisms

Program activities	Supply-Side	Demand-Side
Beneficiary selection and enrollment	• Audits • Spot-checks • Database crosschecks • Grievance redress • Policies to ensure access to information	• Participatory methods of selection/ validation • Third party monitoring • Appeals processes
Service delivery and/or payment of benefits	• Audits • Spot checks • Process evaluation • MIS	• Social audits • Scorecards/ report cards • Beneficiary surveys • Complaints and appeals
Grievance redress	• Complaints-handling systems	• Complaints and appeals
Exit	• Spot checks • MIS • Database crosschecks	• Complaints and appeals

Source: Bassett et al., 2012: 55.

Demand side accountability seeks to provide channels for citizens and beneficiaries to hold providers and policymakers accountable, through feedback and responding to complaints (Bassett et al., 2012). It is commonly agreed in the literature that community involvement and participation in designing, implementing and monitoring a social assistance programme has positive effects on beneficiaries' understanding and buy-in. This improves their ability to hold providers accountable, which in turn improves human development outcomes (Giannozzi & Khan, 2011). Much of the literature on accountability in social assistance focuses on this concept of facilitating community participation and oversight.

Social protection can play a role in broader social accountability by strengthening the state-citizen contract and transforming the social relationships which entrench poverty and vulnerability (Samuels & Jones, 2013). Participation in programme governance can empower marginalised groups by providing access to decision-making and building new horizontal and vertical relationships (Samuels & Jones, 2013).

However, there is little evidence that participation has increased empowerment or changed structural inequalities in the specific context of social protection programmes. Some authors note that beneficiaries may not possess the resources to protect their rights, speak up against powerful elites, and provide the necessary feedback to programme implementers which would improve the programme (Barrett, 2008). Beneficiaries of social assistance programmes tend to be the poorest and most excluded, and therefore the least likely to have the voice and power to hold service providers accountable (Giannozzi & Khan, 2011).

Women may also be less likely than men to have their voices heard and therefore less likely to hold programmes accountable to women's specific needs.

Supply side accountability mechanisms are conducted by the service or programme provider, and often aim to ensure appropriate use of financial resources and improved programme management (Bassett et al., 2012).

The World Bank emphasises that setting clear roles and responsibilities among providers is a prerequisite for making accountability relationships work (Giannozzi & Khan, 2011). Most social safety nets operate across government ministries and institutions, with overlapping responsibilities and incentives, meaning clarity and coordination is essential (Giannozzi & Khan, 2011). In a five country study, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) have shown that beneficiaries perceived programme staff to have multiple roles and responsibilities, including relying on community volunteers and/or social workers with parallel responsibilities (Samuels & Jones, 2013). These multiple roles mean that staff are unable to perform all their duties effectively. Clearly delineated responsibilities from the outset are shown to be important for establishing lines of accountability (World Bank, 2007).

One general issue for low- and middle-income countries is the **capacity** to conduct the processes outlined below. For example, the Employment Generation Programme in Bangladesh does not conduct sufficient ongoing monitoring to be able to establish whether there is any error, fraud or corruption in the programme (Van Stolk & Tesliuc, 2010). There was too little information to understand any causes of leakage or to devise strategies to address this (Van Stolk & Tesliuc, 2010). Staffing of social assistance programmes can cause problems of accountability if staff are over-stretched and under-resourced. Capacity for data collection and implementation thus shapes the options available to a social assistance programme, and potentially limits governance structures (Giannozzi & Khan, 2011). A related GSDRC Helpdesk report examines the issue of capacity building for social protection systems (Rao, 2014a).

Improved governance is understood to improve targeting errors; error, fraud, and corruption; improve coverage and therefore contribute to human development (Giannozzi, & Khan, 2011). It is generally accepted that all programmes will lose some resources to error, fraud and corruption (Subbarao, del Ninno, Andrews, & Rodríguez-Alas, 2012). However, this amount is almost never quantified in developing countries, which means there is very little evidence on whether mechanisms to address this have any impact (Subbarao et al., 2012).

3. Tools

Grievance redress mechanisms

GRMs are the formal channels through which beneficiaries can register complaints (Bassett et al., 2012). These can be within government agencies; independent; or use the judicial system (Bassett et al., 2012). GRMs often focus on targeting and exclusion errors (Samuels & Jones, 2013).

The UNDP and UNCDF (2011) point out that grievances are **best handled at the local level**, as this is an appropriate first level of recourse. Ethiopia's Food Security programme relies on the lowest *kebele* level appeals committees to hear and resolve issues, with the expectation that the *kebeles* report back on resolutions to the higher-level *woreda* (UNDP & UNCDF, 2011). This also allows complainants to appeal to the higher level if they feel they have been dealt with unfairly at the lower level. Similarly, Argentina's Jefes

programme has a toll-free hotline to address questions, but also has a high-level Commission in the Ministry of Labor to handle escalated complaints (Van Stolk & Tesliuc, 2010).

Beneficiary complaints are quite often channelled through local leaders. Beneficiaries in Kenya and Uganda chose to bring a complaint to a parish chief who then carries it to the programme implementers on their behalf (Samuels & Jones, 2013). This was preferred over other mechanisms such as telephone hotlines.

Bolsa Família has four GRM channels: (i) toll-free hotlines managed by the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) that provide information and collect complaints; (ii) emails and letters sent to the Bolsa Família address, which are processed by the MDS; (iii) complaints made to publicly constituted councils at the municipal level; and (iv) a public oversight network (Bassett et al., 2012). The Secretariat examines complaints and takes action, but many local level complaints are addressed by municipal level programme coordinators.

The Philippines' Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino CCT uses a publically accessible database to enter and track complaints, which are received via text message, websites, Facebook, Twitter and a telephone hotline (Bassett et al., 2012). In 2010, 80 per cent of complaints were related to payments.

Yemen's PWP receives complaints through a complaints box at the worksites. An officer gathers complaints, reviews them and takes action, and reports back to programme management on the complaints and the actions taken every month (Bassett et al., 2012; Subbarao et al., 2012). Similarly, Mexico's Prospera (previously Oportunidades) has complaints boxes at the pay points (Van Stolk & Tesliuc, 2010). Prospera has an extensive complaints handling system (Chêne, 2010).

Effectiveness

HelpAge International conducted a review of GRMs for cash transfer programmes, which concluded that GRMs make **limited contributions** to effectiveness and efficiency of programmes (Barrett, 2008). The authors attribute this to design flaws in the mechanisms. Community-based mechanisms have too few resources, and are liable to elite capture and bias, failing to counteract discrimination and low-level corruption and political manipulation (Barrett, 2008). Formal mechanisms are often robust but divorced from the grassroots (Barrett, 2008). Barrett (2008) suggests that GRMs lack a focus on entitlements and rights, which would enhance empowerment and social cohesion. This broader approach to accountability is not usually part of GRMs, which tend to focus on internal programme accountability.

The literature on GRMs sometimes provides information on **how many complaints have been resolved**. For example, the World Bank's Pakistan Flood Emergency cash transfer programme resolved 49 per cent of eligibility appeals and 85 per cent of complaints, with 139,841 of these resolved appeals resulting in acceptance for inclusion and issuance of cash transfer debit cards (Rao, 2014b). The Philippines' PPP has a resolution rate of 100 per cent, with an average time of 32 days in 2013 (World Bank, 2014). Most of the resolved complaints are to do with exclusion errors, while other forms of complaints may need to be referred and are thus not resolved from the complainant's perspective (World Bank, 2014). The PPP GRM system is generally considered to work well and run smoothly (World Bank, 2014).

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, it was quite common for respondents to say that their complaints were never followed up and nothing changed as a result (Samuels & Jones, 2013). There was a strong feeling of being disempowered and lack of voice in the programme. Complaints are registered either in complaints boxes or verbally to programme officers who register the complaint with the Complaints Unit.

The research suggests that the un-computerised system hampers the ability of staff to respond, and technological support would help improve the system.

Dual roles of programme officers can cause problems in GRMs. Ethiopia's PSNP has suffered from having the same people responsible for beneficiary selection and adjudicating appeals (Barrett, 2008). These overlapping roles mean there is a conflict of interest which potentially undermines the fairness of the appeals process and its ability to meet its objectives (Barrett, 2008). These dual roles make the GRM less effective. The World Bank highlights that an independent line of appeals will help reduce errors in beneficiary selection (World Bank, 2007). Most of the Latin American CCT programmes have GRMs combining government and independent mechanisms (Bassett et al., 2012).

However, ombudsmen or oversight committees for handling complaints may be quite far removed from beneficiaries (Barrett, 2008). A sophisticated, formal system in Argentina has undermined its effectiveness as it is divorced from the grassroots and inaccessible to the most vulnerable (Barrett, 2008).

In a review of GRMs in Indonesia's four main social assistance programmes, the authors provide almost no information on whether the mechanisms are considered to be effective (OPM, 2012). However, they do note that there is a very low level of awareness of the possibility of grievance redress, and that **complaints were rarely voiced** for fear of receiving no response, appearing ungrateful, or revealing ignorance. In Sub-Saharan African programmes where social assistance is seen as a gift, there is a low level of complaints registered because beneficiaries did not feel they should complain about a gift, and/or they feared losing the programme (Samuels & Jones, 2013). The fear of being withdrawn from the programme is also strong in Yemen (Samuels & Jones, 2013).

In Mexico's Prospera programme, evaluations have shown that the citizen complaints system has not been effective in safeguarding the rights of beneficiaries (Hevia de la Jara, 2008). Individual action appears not to be strong enough to counterbalance elite interests, which can overpower the poor. Collective action may be more fruitful.

Social audits

Social audits allow beneficiaries and communities to review and provide feedback on programme implementation (Bassett et al., 2012). They are often conducted by a local civil society organisation, which reviews process compliance, and operational rules and regulations, and present results in a public hearing (Subbarao et al., 2012). They primarily seek to improve transparency, but can also help raise awareness about the programme, promote redress, and improve outcomes (Subbarao et al., 2012).

India's **MGNREGS public works programme** has legally mandated the use of social audits (Subbarao et al., 2012). These have been institutionalised successfully in Andhra Pradesh, with all districts undertaking at least one social audit since 2006. Village auditors collect information on the programme and share it in village information sessions, where citizens can discuss the scheme. This is part of the MGNREGA's wider commitment to transparency based on legal and international human rights commitments.

In **Panama**, participatory social audits are used to review the health programme Programa de Atencion Integral de Servicios de Salud (PAISS) (Bassett et al., 2012). Social auditors are created by selecting representatives of civil society groups and training them in social audit techniques. They then interview beneficiaries, and meet on an annual basis with the programme providers and Ministry of Health staff to discuss the findings and develop a common action plan.

Effectiveness

Social audits in Andhra Pradesh have improved beneficiaries' understanding of the programme, which has led to improvements in programme implementation (Giannozzi & Khan, 2011). Subbarao et al. (2012) provides a detailed case study of the history and management of these audits.

The audits have resulted in a large amount of **staff dismissals and inquiries** against staff, and identification and recovery of misappropriated funds. However, the scale of redress may be too low to be considered effective – action has been taken against only half of implicated staff, and recovery of only 23 per cent of misappropriated funds.

Although officials are required to attend the audit public hearings, in the initial stages little action to address findings was taken. In January 2011, the secretary of rural development created a 'vigilance cell' which is mandated to **follow-up on decisions** made at the public hearings. This cell is independent of programme implementers and the auditors. The social audit itself therefore became a fact-finding process, and a platform to voice grievances.

There is evidence that the social audit has improved people's **awareness and knowledge** of the MGNREGS and how it is supposed to work (Subbarao et al., 2012). It is suggested that this increased knowledge is the reason for the increased uptake of the programme in areas of Andhra Pradesh compared to other areas which did not have an audit (Singh & Vutukuru, 2010). It also had impacts on increasing people's confidence in approaching public officials. It has taken root in Andhra Pradesh, with most government officials buying-in to the process. However, the social audit has not improved efficiency in the payment process (Singh & Vutukuru, 2010).

In Kenya, beneficiaries were involved in participatory monitoring and evaluation of the programme (Samuels & Jones, 2013). It is unclear how effective this has been, but respondents reported positive feelings about their involvement, feeling that their opinions were valued and that they would like similar opportunities in the future.

Audits

Audits are most commonly used to oversee financing and ensure appropriate use of financial resources (Bassett et al., 2012). Typically, audits aim to ensure that (i) disbursement procedures and systems are followed; (ii) basic accounting records are maintained and updated; (iii) internal control systems are adequate; and (iv) expenditures are eligible under the programme (Bassett et al., 2012). There is little explicit evidence on whether these actions have increased accountability, but there is a strong assumption in the literature and case study evidence that changes do occur as a result of audits.

Colombia's CCT Familias en Acción conducted a systems audit in response to identifying risks including unreliable data, irregular or inaccurate payments, and unauthorised access to data. The audit reviewed the whole of the Management Information System to determine whether the MIS ensured confidentiality and security, accurate management reporting, and documentation. The audit therefore identified opportunities to improve the MIS.

Brazil's Bolsa Família has an independent auditor which undertakes regular random-sample audits, annual financial audits, and reviews specific cases and evaluations (Van Stolk & Tesliuc, 2010).

Mexico's Prospera has a twice-yearly audit of beneficiaries and providers, to check on compliance with procedures (Van Stolk & Tesliuc, 2010). Much of the information and evaluation reports are publically available.

Citizen report cards and community scorecards

Citizen report cards provide quantitative feedback on user perceptions on the quality, adequacy, and efficiency of public services (Bassett et al., 2012). Community scorecards (CSC) are qualitative monitoring tools used for local-level monitoring and performance evaluation by communities (Bassett et al., 2012). Communities discuss social service performance and agree on a score, while the service performs the same self-assessment. Then a meeting is held between the community and the service provider to discuss the results and agree a joint action plan. Although both tools are fairly commonly used to monitor services, they are not always directly linked to social protection programmes. There is strong evidence on their effectiveness at improving services, but very little on their effectiveness at improving social protection programmes.

Tanzania used a Community Scorecard to assess a community-based CCT (Evans et al., 2012). The CSC sought beneficiary and service provider feedback on the programme in general, and the quality of health and education service delivery. The evaluation conducted CSCs in 20 communities through: an input tracking matrix, a self-assessment scorecard, a community scorecard, and an interface meeting. The process was conducted by an independent firm. The results from the CSC revealed deficiencies in health and education which were not necessarily picked up by the accompanying surveys and focus groups. In particular, communities reported high impacts on education, which only appeared modest in the household surveys.

Malawi's Social Action Fund Project 3 uses a comprehensive community scorecard process and a citizen report card (Bassett et al., 2012). In the CSC, the process is aimed at influencing the quality, efficiency and accountability of services (Kajumi, 2006). The first round reviewed 500 communities, led by the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development. Kajumi (2006) does not provide information on whether actions were carried out, but community knowledge about the programme increased, and communities expressed interest in continuing their oversight of the programme.

Rights and obligations

Establishing social protection as a human right provides a broader social accountability from state to citizens. Not all social protection programmes adopt this approach. India's MGNREGA gives a legal right to employment, and is also supported by a right to information law (Subbarao et al., 2012). Ghana's Social Opportunities Project, a public works programme, draws on several legislative acts to support accountability. These include Acts on public procurement, financial administration, and local government, and a central government audit agency (Subbarao et al., 2012). In the five country study by ODI, many beneficiaries viewed social assistance programmes as a gift rather than a right (Samuels & Jones, 2013).

There is evidence that the social protection programmes in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Kenya and Uganda have improved perceptions of the state and strengthened citizen-state ties (Samuels & Jones, 2013). Where UCTs were considered a gift instead of a right, beneficiaries did not feel that they had the right to complain or address flaws in the programmes, but that they should be grateful for what they were given (Samuels & Jones, 2013). This weakens the accountability relationship between state and citizen.

Spot checks

These third-party reviews are rapid evaluations which examine design, operational management, institutional structure, payments, and the monitoring system of a social assistance programme (Bassett et al., 2012). They assess a wide range of actions and players and provide the basis for deeper analysis where flaws are revealed. They may also play a deterrent role against fraud and corruption (Bassett et al., 2012). Many social assistance programmes use these in complement with regular audits, but there is no evidence on how this specifically enhances accountability or what impacts spot checks have had.

Colombia's Familias en Acción CCT programme spot checks a random sample of 20 municipalities every six months, using a national external survey team (Bassett et al., 2012). The team interviews staff, beneficiaries and governments on 400 indicators such as enrolment, verification of compliance with conditionalities, payment, appeals, and participation in and quality of health education sessions. The results indicate which aspects are working well and not so well and what changes may be needed.

Ethiopia's PSNP used regular spot checks in the first year of implementation to ensure the monitoring system was working well (Bassett et al., 2012).

Performance-based incentives

These are rare in developing countries, but in principle local governments can be motivated to manage programmes well by providing additional funding or other incentives based on results (UNDP & UNCDF, 2011). Many CCTs have delegated responsibility for management from the national to the local level, but there is no guarantee they will operate well if this is a burden on local governments (World Bank, 2007). Financial incentives based on performance can help with this.

Bolsa Família measures how well municipalities manage beneficiary information and rewards good performers with additional support for administrative costs (UNDP & UNCDF, 2011). Incentives can also be given to service providers, to ensure and reward good performance in e.g. school attendance.

There is no information on whether these incentives improve accountability or accountability relationships per se, although there is evidence on improved programme performance.

Database crosschecks

These examine whether information on beneficiaries matches information from other public databases, to identify inaccuracies (Bassett et al., 2012). This mechanism is considered to improve beneficiary targeting accuracy and therefore programme performance, but there are no studies explicitly discussing evidence of impacts on accountability.

Brazil's Bolsa Família uses internal and external crosschecks of the beneficiary data to verify information on income, identify duplicates and scan for consistency (Bassett et al., 2012). Argentina's Jefes programme undertakes cross-checking on a monthly basis (Van Stolk & Tesliuc, 2010).

Local-level politics

Where local governments and local representatives are responsible for providing social assistance, they are likely to be held accountable through elections (UNDP & UNCDF, 2011). It is suggested this political incentive may encourage first-term representatives to prioritise safety nets, and that this leads to good management practices for the safety net programme (UNDP & UNCDF, 2011).

There is strong evidence from Brazil that mayors are likely to achieve re-election if they have been responsible for effective and publically popular safety net services (UNDP & UNCDF, 2011). This type of accountability is much more meaningful at the local level, although it does have some effects at the national level.

Informal feedback

Many beneficiaries' main interaction with the social assistance programme is in the form of informal conversations on payment days and home visits by programme staff (Samuels & Jones, 2013). Both these occasions provide opportunities for beneficiaries to raise concerns about the programme or comment on efficiency. In the SAGE programme in Uganda, staff informally interview around 20 beneficiaries at the bank on payment day to get their feedback (Samuels & Jones, 2013). It is unclear to what degree these conversations have impact on programme implementation, or whether feedback is carried higher up the chain of command (Samuels & Jones, 2013).

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Key websites

- World Bank – Social Accountability E-Guide: https://saeguide.worldbank.org/social-protection

Other resources

- GSDRC Topic Guide on Service Delivery: http://www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/service-delivery/

- GSDRC Topic Guide on Social Protection: http://gsdrc.ids.ac.uk/go/topic-guides/social-protection

- GSDRC Topic Guide on Voice, Empowerment and Accountability: http://www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/voice/-empowerment/-and-accountability

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