

JSRP Paper 20

Theories in Practice Series

Citizen-Led Accountability and Inclusivity in Pakistan

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December 2014

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Abstract

This ‘theory in practice’ paper examines the experiences of citizens groups seeking to hold Pakistan’s elected representatives and governance institutions accountable. A sustained period of democracy, ongoing devolution plans and increasing space for civil society suggest the beginnings of a favourable context to improve the demand side of governance. At the same time, however, Pakistan continues to score low on development indexes and parts of the country suffer from insecurity. The latter reflects state-society relations, with various groups fighting to change national and local distributions of political and economic opportunities. Nonetheless a recent citizen-led accountability programme across both conflict-affected and peaceful constituencies has reported significant success in mobilising volunteer groups to demand the resolution of local issues. This paper asks how these groups organised and examines the strategies that contributed to their successes. In particular, it focuses on the tensions between the programme’s drive for ‘inclusive’ citizens groups that raise demands, and the need for such groups to work in ways that acknowledge the power and politics of their local contexts. While in some cases this led to innovative solutions to local problems, in others it may have strengthened the divisions and networks that support unaccountable governance. It is hoped the findings will add to debates over the worth of citizen-led accountability programmes where strong societies, weak states and conflict shape governance.

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“Citizen engagement is a precarious thing to do”
(STAEP programme staff member)¹

Introduction: Pakistan’s poor performance, violence and new opportunities

In 2001 Easterly argued that ‘Pakistan is the poster-child for the hypothesis that a society polarized by class, gender, and ethnic group does poorly at providing public services’ (Easterly 2001). Indeed, compared to countries with similar levels of growth, Pakistan continues to underperform on indicators of education, health, sanitation, fertility, gender equality, corruption, democracy and violence (UNDP 2013). A potential cause can be found in the prioritisation of government spending on debt servicing and the military.² It is arguable, however, that budgeting does not provide a complete picture.

Additional causes are hinted at by indexes that cover the ability of citizens to engage in the processes central to accountable governance. For example, the World Bank’s 2011 World Governance Indicators (WGIs) scores Pakistan poorly, with ‘Voice and Accountability’ (conceptualised as the ability of citizens to participate in selecting their government, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the freedom of the media) declining since 1996 (Kaufmann et al. 2008).³ Combined with evidence from recent perception surveys, such indexes reveal that corruption and unresponsive governance is undermining confidence in the state (PRC 2012; AAWAZ 2013; Rana et al. 2013).⁴

Further complicating matters, in many areas of Pakistan governance is negotiated against a background of violent conflict. Indeed, since 2001 a simmering insurgency in Baluchistan, political-criminal turf wars in Karachi, sectarian violence in southern Punjab and militancy in the regions bordering Afghanistan have claimed around 49,000 lives.⁵ While the protagonists often argue that they fight for social justice, most observers have focussed on their links to criminal networks, interpretations of Islam or supposed desire to split the country along ethno-linguistic lines. This not only obscures the connections between insecurity, horizontal inequalities and the prevailing political order, it perpetuates the fiction that much of Pakistan rejects peaceful politics.

In recent years, however, a number of developments have given those interested in change cause for optimism. Most notably, in 2010 constitutional amendments laid the groundwork for a devolution programme; a development that has been described as a ‘negotiated legislative revolution’ (UNDP 2012). This was followed in 2013 by laws that will, for the first time, institute partisan politics in local government elections and

¹ Stakeholder interview 15/04/14.

² For example, in terms of gross domestic product, debt servicing was 2.5% in 2009 and official military spending 2.8% in 2010 (not including spending on paramilitary forces), compared to 2.4% for education in 2010 and 0.8% for health in 2010 (UNDP 2013).

³ WGI averages for Pakistan –1.14, South Asia –0.69 and Sub-Saharan Africa –0.64 (WB 2013).

⁴ In the PRC (2012) survey 22 percent of respondents reported that ‘for someone like me, it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have’.

⁵ Raja, M. ‘Pakistani victims: War on terror toll put at 49,000’. *The Express Tribune*, March 27, 2013. This caused Pakistan to slip to 157 out of 162 countries in the Global Peace Index for 2013 (GPI 2013).

Pakistan's first democratic transition of power. These developments arguably benefitted from the explosion of civil society in the 1990s and 2000s (Hassan and Sabir 2011).⁶ Furthermore, mass protests from 2007-2009 to reinstate the deposed Chief Justice and end emergency rule demonstrated the power of organised citizens backed by the media.

At the same time, international and domestic NGOs are increasingly focussed on empowering citizens to engage in 'substantive democracy', including demanding public goods and rights from the state.⁷ Often labelled 'citizen-led accountability', 'social accountability' or 'voice and accountability', such efforts go beyond punishing unsatisfactory politicians at the ballot box and encompass ongoing, iterative state-society interactions aimed at encouraging the state to fulfil its obligations (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006; Joshi and Houtzager 2012).

One such programme, Supporting Transparency, Accountability, and Electoral Process in Pakistan (STAEP), was supported by the UK Department of International Development (DFID) and The Asia Foundation from 2011 to late 2014.⁸ It had the broad target of 'More effective, transparent, and *accountable governance* that addresses the critical challenges facing Pakistan today', which it hoped would lead to 'Democratic processes in Pakistan [that are] are more open, inclusive, efficient and accountable to citizens.'⁹ Indeed, STAEP firmly embraced the idea that an accountable state and democracy requires vigilant and informed citizens, actively participating in politics in between elections.

As part of its programming STAEP trained and supported 200 volunteer constituency relations groups (CRGs) to raise demands with state officials and politicians. Over the course of the programme the CRGs identified 44,000 citizen demands, of which 26,214 were brought to the attention of power-holders. The programme did not keep accurate information on how many of these demands were met. Nonetheless, DFID's evaluations marked the CRGs out as a success, with praise given to their inclusivity, volunteerism and ability to advocate for constituency level issues 'against a background of acute need and weak state institutions' (Bari and Hamid 2014).

Little is known, however, about how STAEP's drive for inclusive CRGs worked in practice or how it affected their ability to negotiate the politics of accountable governance, especially in conflict-affected areas. Thus, this paper has two main aims: Firstly to present empirical evidence for what the CRGs were able to achieve both in relatively peaceful and in conflict-affected contexts; and, secondly, to interrogate the meaning and reality of 'inclusivity' within the programme. It is hoped that the

⁶ 'Civil society refers to all voluntarily-constituted social relations, institutions, and organizations that are not reducible to the administrative grasp of the state' (Swift 1999). To paraphrase Kaldor, civil society activity consists of 'negotiating, pressuring, bargaining and influencing the centres of economic and political authority' (Kaldor 2003).

⁷ Substantive democracy is often seen as a necessary advancement on procedural democracy, with the latter referring to the holding of elections, and the former as encompassing all the formal and informal institutions that work to check abuses of power by states and hold them accountable (Rakner et al. 2007). While not the sole focus of this paper, some suggest that this turn towards accountability is driven by donor organisations and is, therefore, likely to be short-lived and unable to succeed (Shah 2014).

⁸ STAEP was also initially funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

⁹ STAEP's intended impact and outcomes are taken from the log frame used by staff to track its progress. *Italics* add by author for emphasis.

research findings will feed into ongoing debates on supporting citizen-led accountability in contexts where strong societies, weak states and conflict shape governance.

The next two sections provide an overview of the literature on accountability and political settlements and situate it within studies of governance in Pakistan. The following section uses this discussion to outline the research rationale and methodology. The last two sections present the research findings and discuss what they may mean for theory and practitioners.

The power and politics of accountability

Donors and academics argue that the accountability of governance institutions matters for human development (WDR 2004; O'Neil et al. 2007; DFID 2008; Devarajan et al. 2013). Indeed, following Sen (1999), many hold that the powerlessness that stems from unaccountable governance is a constitutive element of poverty, and that citizens' political participation will lead to equitable public goods provision, pro-poor policies and the realisation of rights.¹⁰

More recently, accountable governance has been linked to successful institution building and stable state-society relations. It is argued that legitimate and 'effective public institutions evolve through a process of bargaining between the state and organised groups in society' (Unsworth 2007; Whaites 2008; Gunby and Eldon 2009) and that accountability can reduce the horizontal inequalities that delegitimise the state and plunge societies into violence (Eyben and Ladbury 2006; Pearce 2007; Galtung and Tisné 2009; Hilker 2012). Thus in weak and conflict-affected states accountability is championed as a way to prevent citizens from turning to competing authorities for a sense of identity and for public goods, and as a route through which they may contribute to reform processes.¹¹

While some organisations aim to work on the supply side of accountability by directly reforming governance institutions; many demand-side programmes focus on strengthening relationships between citizens and states, with the former helped to find their 'voice' in order to encourage the latter towards 'responsiveness'.¹² Voice refers to the capacity of people to express their views and demands to power-holders through formal and informal channels (Goetz and Gaventa 2001). Thus a monthly

¹⁰ Much of the literature breaks accountability relationships into two types: 'vertical' and 'horizontal' (DFID 2008; Harris and Wild 2013). Vertical accountability focuses on citizens' ability to hold elected representatives and governance institutions to account through formal processes such as elections and complaint mechanisms, or through informal actions such as lobbying or protests. Horizontal accountability is concerned with state institutions holding one another accountable, as with ombudsmen or human rights commissions. The two accountability types can overlap and reinforce one another (Blair 2011; Joshi 2013). Related to this idea, a third 'diagonal' or 'hybrid' accountability relationship is said to occur where citizens involve themselves in the state's horizontal accountability institutions (Goetz and Jenkins 2001).

¹¹ Hirschman (1970) referred to the phenomenon of turning away from unsatisfactory organisations as 'exit' and argued that if unhindered by 'loyalty' it can undercut 'voice', thereby reducing the chance for such organisations to reform or adapt to new circumstances.

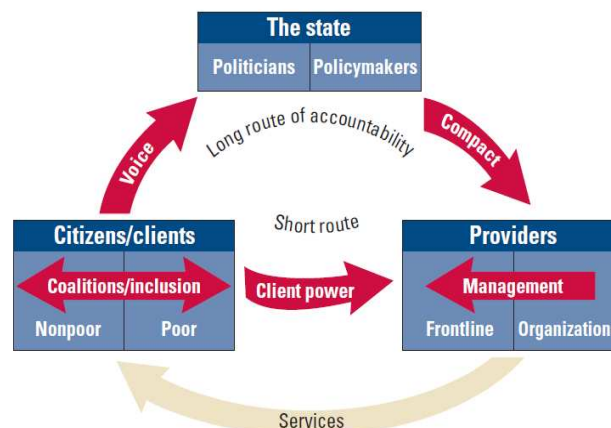
¹² The concept of supply and demand sides to public goods provision is a purely analytical tool. Indeed it is recognised that the line between the suppliers and demanders of public goods can be indistinct, and that viewing accountability relationships as a matter of market-clearing is unlikely to be helpful.

meeting at which citizens engage politicians, or the production of issue-based newsletters by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) increase voice. While responsiveness can be understood as ‘whether public polities and institutions respond to the needs of citizens and uphold their rights’ (DFID 2007).

Citizens’ voice and the state’s responsiveness, however, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for accountability. Indeed, accountability only occurs ‘if A is obliged to explain and justify his actions to B, or if A may suffer sanctions if his conduct, or explanation for it, is found wanting by B’ (Goetz and Jenkins 2002). Thus, accountability requires that citizens have information on which to act and that transgressors are sanctioned. This can prove difficult if governance institutions are inaccessible or secretive, and if those being held to account are unmoved by social norms or the prospect of political penalties. It may be impossible if they control the means of violence and are willing to use them.

Much of the theoretical scaffolding for citizen-led accountability programmes is found in the *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for the Poor* (WB 2003). The report’s ‘accountability triangle’ details two main routes to accountability: firstly the ‘short route’ which describes relationships between citizens and officials working in governance institutions. For example, a parent-teacher association is a direct means by which citizens can scrutinize the running of a public school and encourage education ministries to sanction underperforming or corrupt teachers. Secondly, the ‘long route’ which describes the ability of citizens to engage politicians who, ideally, respond by dispersing resources, reforming governance institutions or enacting new policies.

Figure 1: Key relationships of power



(Source: *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for the Poor*)

As the report argues, however, the triangle ‘is not reality, because it portrays only one direction in the relationships between actors. Rather actors are embedded in a complex set of relationships, and accountability is not always the most important’. Indeed much of the literature justifying accountability programmes says little about

the numerous ideas, interests, informal institutions and contests that shape governance. Nor does it describe the difficulties that citizens have in engaging officials and elected representatives due to, amongst other things, poverty, illiteracy, cultural norms, or insecurity. Furthermore, the triangle does not show how the ‘chain of delegation’ that links actors involved in governance grows more complex as states take on new responsibilities, co-produce public goods with, or are captured by, non-state actors (Joshi and Moore 2004).

Such problems are compounded by arguments that accountability relationships are affected by a limitless list of contextual variables (O’Neil et al. 2007; DFID 2011). On the supply side these may include international pressure for states to reform governance institutions or conflict. While on the demand side they can include the ability of citizens to organise through the use of new technologies, or an influx of donor funds for grass-roots political activity.¹³ Thus Joshi (2008) concludes: ‘The overarching lesson seems to be, not surprisingly, that the context matters. Political economy factors, the nature and strength of civil society movements, the relative political strength of service providers, the ability of cross-cutting coalitions to push reforms, the legal context, and an active media all appear to have contributed in varying degrees to the successful cases’. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that analysts struggle to attribute accountability to specific policies or development programmes (McGee and Gaventa 2011; Pande 2011).

To address this complexity, recent years have seen a renewed focus on the ‘power and politics’ of accountable governance. For some, this involves systematic efforts to uncover common constraints to accountability across contexts, with accompanying theoretical work to further specify what is meant by concepts such as ‘incentives’ and ‘institutions’ (Wild et al. 2012; Hariss and Wild 2013). For others, the focus is on recognising the uniqueness of each context (Ramalingam et al. 2008; Andrews 2012). This includes accepting that mainstream political economy analysis is ill-equipped for understanding complex political problems, particularly if inequitable public goods provision is framed in terms of market failures, rational self-interest is assumed, and institutions are depicted as stubbornly path dependent (Hudson and Leftwich 2014).

As an alternative, concepts from political science such as ‘ideas’, ‘agency’ and ‘power’ are added to the political economy literature’s focus on ‘structures’, ‘institutions’ and ‘incentives’ in order to help analysts understand the contexts shaping, and possibilities for, accountable governance. However, some commentators doubt that outsiders can adequately grasp local contexts and design politically sensitive programmes. Thus, they argue that efforts should concentrate on supporting local problem solving, facilitating collective action among stakeholders, and providing organisations with the room to experiment and adapt to political challenges (Booth 2012; Tembo 2012; Devarajan et al. 2013). While these important debates are too vast to adequately cover here, they inform this paper’s analysis of the research findings.

¹³ The author acknowledges the ongoing debates over whether donor funding helps, or hinders, such activity that cannot be addressed here.

Pakistan's politics of common sense

The concept of political settlements can help analysts interrogate the power and politics of accountable governance in weak and conflict-affected states. Although definitions differ, the literature focuses attention on how historical legacies and uneven distributions of power allow coalitions of elites to limit political and economic opportunities to themselves and their clients (Khan 1995, 2010; Fritz and Menocal 2007; DFID 2010b; AusAid 2011; Laws 2012). To retain their monopolies and influence, these coalitions often include elites both outside and inside of the state. However, unlike formal power-sharing deals or peace agreements, political settlements should be understood as ongoing informal agreements that are constantly under negotiation and subject to change as actors' powers wax and wane.

Further exploring the logic of political settlements, the literature suggests that coalitions of elites may choose to gradually strengthen, institutionalise and legitimise their domination through the provision of public goods and the extension of rights to ever greater sections of the population.¹⁴ However, faced with finite resources, these concessions often focus on the elite's supporters and exclude competing groups. If those excluded perceive their access to opportunities to be unrepresentative of their power and they have the ability to use violence then open conflict can ensue. Thus North et al. (2007) view the distribution of power within elite coalitions as central to maintaining peace and Di John and Putzel (2009) argue it frames the possibility of political and developmental outcomes.

Shifting the level of analysis, some practitioners have posited the importance of 'secondary political settlements', understood as 'arrangements among powerful local elites to control political competition and governance below the national level' (Parks and Cole 2012: 18). These settlements are often connected to, and follow the same logic as, their national level cousins. Indeed these connections can provide local elites with the ideologies and resources to enforce their domination. This can involve the localisation of exclusions to specific geographical, ethnic, religious, or lineage groups. However, some local elite coalitions may reject links with national level elites, particularly if they are in conflict with the state. In such cases they may derive power from international actors or the exploitation of local resources and communities. Thus, secondary political settlements are important for understanding how opportunities are distributed at the local level and how horizontal inequalities can drive conflicts between social groups or between citizens and the state.

Recent literature supports a depiction of Pakistan as made up of an exclusionary national level political settlement, connected to multiple local political settlements (Fennell and McCollugh 2012; Kaplan 2013; Zaidi 2014). At the national level a shifting coalition of large landowners and industrialists; senior military officers, civil servants and the judiciary; and members of the provincial (MPAs) and national assemblies (MNAs) dominate. These elites pass the leadership of business empires and political parties along tightly controlled lineage lines. Pakistan's local political settlements consist of coalitions of landowners, businessmen, district and ministry

¹⁴ As defined by author Douglas North (1990), this paper understands institutions as 'the [formal and informal] rules of the game in a society'. These rules shape human interactions and cause transgressors to be sanctioned.

officials; and informal power-holders such as criminal, religious and militant leaders. These elites divide their attention between securing their national level patrons' interests, including votes during elections, and stripping the state of its resources (Lyon 2002; Wilder 1999; Mohmand 2011). To do this they occupy local government offices from which they reward client groups and charge others for access to state institutions. Pakistan's national level political settlement, however, has frequently had to be renegotiated and in some areas has failed to establish strong connections to local political settlements. Furthermore, when their interests are perceived to be at risk, the army has periodically interrupted this arrangement and seized power (1958-71, 1977-88, and 1999-08).

Research is uncovering the way in which Pakistan's political settlements maintain themselves during periods of relative stability. It suggests that social structures such as caste, clan, and tribe can retard social mobilisation and keep client groups dependent on patrons (Cheema 2007; Mohmand and Gazdar 2007; Javid 2011; Lieven 2012). Furthermore they prevent the benefits of economic growth from equitably 'trickling down' to ordinary people, especially women, the poor and minority groups (Gazdar 2007; Nelson 2012). It has also been shown that households headed by females or those without land are likely to be excluded from patronage networks that facilitate access to public services (Chaudhry and Vyborny 2013); and that local power-holders prevent isolated communities from collective action that may improve their condition or challenge the *status quo* (Shami 2010). Similarly it is argued that intermediaries between citizens and governance institutions prevent them from claiming their rights and, sometimes violently, reproduce elites' power (Wilder 1999; Martin 2013). This includes the use of state institutions, such as schools or the police, to generate rents, reward allies and persecute opponents. Given these findings, some suggest that it is the strength of Pakistan's informal, societal institutions and the weakness of the state's that perpetuates its exclusionary political settlements.

Nonetheless, to formally secure their dominance elites prevent party politics at the local level and run lavish election campaigns that price out newcomers (Malik 2011). They also limit mainstream constitutional rules in regions they fear will challenge the centre, such as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). At the same time, the workings of governance institutions are kept deliberately opaque (Khan et al. 2013). Indeed their staffing and operating procedures are largely impenetrable to all but the members of a bureaucracy widely perceived as corrupt and, in some instances, illegitimate (Alavi 1972; Niaz 2010). For their part, Pakistan's military rulers have thrice instituted devolution programmes that critics have accused of rewarding local clients, crushing grass-roots politics and centralising power (Cheema et al. 2006). Thus, although state institutions are often present and their rules partially enforced, they are intimately involved in the reproduction of elite privilege.

Beyond these obstacles, it is questionable whether many Pakistanis have the time, wealth or educational levels to organise for accountability. More worrying still, Pakistan's record of fatal attacks on journalists and political activists suggests that those that do risk persecution (HRW 2013). Similarly, as a history of coups and political detentions attest, populist leaders and disruptive politicians are far from immune to violent ends (Talbot 2009; Martin 2013). Thus there are strong disincentives for those wishing to challenge the *status quo*. This provides further space for exploitations and exclusions by public officials, politicians, and informal

power-holders. Indeed, for Akhtar (2008), this has led to ‘a politics of common sense’ in which the majority acquiesces to the logic of Pakistan’s political settlements.

Sub-national conflicts, development and inclusivity

In Pakistan accountable governance is also curtailed by a number of ongoing ‘sub-national conflicts’ (Parks, Colletta and Oppenheim 2013). Many involve ‘the presence of an armed political movement with ethno-nationalist motivations that is seeking greater self-rule through increased political autonomy from the central government, greater control over local resources and economic activity, or outright separation’ (Parks, Colletta and Oppenheim 2013). For example, along Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan Pashtun militants find places of refuge from which to attack the state, set-up private fiefdoms and run transnational criminal enterprises. In such areas the state can find it difficult to extend its writ and struggles to retain its legitimacy (Lamb 2012). Indeed within the border region the state’s representatives face daily threats and their authority is contested by ‘the political *mullah*’ (local religious leaders) (Akhtar 2010).¹⁵

Under such circumstances a mixture of officials, elected representatives and non-state actors compete to dominate governance arrangements. However, as these competitions often involve abuses and the exclusion of particular groups, they can set the conditions for further cycles of violence. Thus many of Pakistan’s sub-national conflicts seem unaffected by periods of relative stability, economic growth, or peace agreements. The decades old conflict in Baluchistan is a case in point, with violence returning after long intervals.¹⁶ Violent histories and mistrust of the state can work to entrench the practices and networks that distance citizens from power-holders and governance institutions. In this sense, it is arguable that the variables affecting accountable governance are somewhat more complex in conflict-affected areas.

Nonetheless, donors aiming to support peaceful politics and encourage development in places characterised by such dynamics are increasingly focusing on the idea of ‘inclusivity’ (DFID 2010a; OECD 2011; Carpenter, Slater and Mallett 2012). To flesh out this idea many draw on the political settlements literature’s focus on credible coalitions. For example, the security focussed *World Development Report 2011* argues for ‘collaborative, inclusive-enough coalitions’ which ‘restore confidence and transform institutions and help create continued momentum for positive change’ (WB 2011). However, as with the report, donors are largely reticent about the political processes through which inclusive coalitions might be formed; nor do they provide guidelines as to when such coalitions can be considered inclusive enough (Luckham and Kirk 2013). Indeed DFID has only recently begun to design a research agenda that asks: how much? Of what type? And under what conditions? (Jones et al. 2012).

For its part, the mainstream academic literature on political settlements is also of limited help. For example, the argument that all the powerful elites, including those with the potential to use violence, must be included for developmental coalitions appears difficult to operationalise (Di John and Putzel 2009; Khan 2010). For instance,

¹⁵ Italics added by the author.

¹⁶ Fearing that they may be underrepresented in the new state, Baluchistan’s leaders have fought the government since Pakistan’s inception.

should elites that lack legitimacy due to unpopular policies or past abuses be accommodated within such coalitions? Furthermore does the approach allow for elites to be held accountable for future failures, such as poor governance, exclusions, or violence? Within the literature there are also few recommendations as to at which level practitioners should focus their efforts, with the relationships between national and local political settlements only just beginning to be explored (North et al. 2012). The overwhelming focus on elites also has little to say about the potential role of citizens. Indeed they largely appear as passive recipients of the public goods and rights dispensed by elites.

Sketching out an alternative, The Asia Foundation's recent reports suggest supporting the mobilisation of marginalised and excluded groups with the aim that they form alliances with more powerful actors and are able to advocate for the reform of governance institutions (Parks and Cole 2010; Parks, Colletta and Oppenheim 2013). Indeed it is hoped that through their empowerment these groups will be able to enter into negotiations with elites and change the terms of the political settlement(s). However, as with the wider political settlements literature, the reports warn that unless undertaken carefully this approach risks being perceived as a threat to dominant elites, and may lead to instability and violence.

Regardless of the current ambiguity, the notion of 'inclusivity' is increasingly mainstreamed into development programmes in weak and conflict-affected states. As it meets attempts to support and empower excluded groups it will have to negotiate calls to acknowledge, and sometimes to work with, the power and politics of diverse contexts. As demonstrated by the absence of case studies and policy advice, this poses many unanswered questions. At their core is a tension over whether supporting inclusivity and working politically are two sides of the same coin or best approached apart. This tension is unlikely to be overcome by technical solutions and will require honest conversations about the obstacles to, and drivers of, inclusive development.

STAEP and the research rationale

STAEP's attempt to support citizen-led accountability encompassed many of these concerns. Indeed during the inception phase and first year (2009 and 2011 respectively) the programme's managers were keen to recruit CRG members with local connections and influence. They also sought members with relevant skills and knowledge such as government employees, lawyers, social workers and ex-union council members.¹⁷ It was hypothesised that such an understanding of inclusivity would allow the CRGs to draw on the support of existing citizens associations and quickly legitimise their work among power-holders. Indeed programme staff argued that they saw this as a way of working with the grain of local politics.¹⁸

However STAEP's first annual review found significant fault with this approach (Schonveld et al. 2011). It argued that it had created very different CRGs, with some broadly representative of their constituencies, others comprised of members who all

¹⁷ When and where local government elections have been permitted, union or village councils are the lowest tier of elected representatives in Pakistan.

¹⁸ However, in an effort to avoid capture, political party members were barred from joining the CRGs.

knew one another, and some with memberships confined to particular social groups. To address this it was recommended the CRGs be expanded to include those marginalised from public life and excluded from public goods provision due to, among other characteristics, gender, ethnicity, poverty, profession, caste or religion. Furthermore the review argued that given their small size (often between 15-60 members) the CRGs would struggle to address ‘process’ or ‘constituency wide’ issues; thus the inclusion of the voices of excluded groups would justify the CRGs’ inevitable focus on ‘local’ or ‘service’ related issues.¹⁹

Whereas STAEP originally sought to acknowledge and, to some extent, engage existing power structures, it now positioned itself to challenge them. Indeed in the short-term the CRGs aimed to give voice to the excluded to encourage responsive governance, while in the long-run they sought to spurn institutional reforms. The unspoken Theory of Change was that inclusive-enough CRGs working simultaneously across Pakistan’s diverse contexts will create room for the renegotiation of local and national level political settlements.

This approach is particularly interesting for a society within which politics is structured along patron-client networks and the excluded are rarely engaged. It is arguably contentious where local elites speak for marginalised groups and violently respond to challenges to their power. In this sense, the CRGs can be seen as a radical attempt to support citizen-led accountability from which lessons should be learnt. Thus to begin to understand whether STAEP was able to support citizen-led accountability this paper asks: i) to what extent the inclusion and active participation of marginalised groups was possible; ii) how the CRGs’ worked across different contexts, including in areas of high instability and violence; and iii) whether the CRGs worked with, circumnavigated, or challenged their constituencies’ power and politics?

More broadly, exploring citizen-led accountability in Pakistan is important since domestic and international organisations increasingly view it as a means by which to work directly with the intended end-users of development assistance and to by-pass corrupt officials. Furthermore, ongoing debates focus on ways of working politically and creating the conditions for local actors to take the lead. In turn, this raises questions about the importance of acknowledging local contexts and the generalisability of approaches to supporting citizen-led accountability. This paper hopes to add much needed empirical evidence to these debates.

Research design and limitations

The paper is based on three months of research and fieldwork in Pakistan. The first phase consisted of a desk-based review of STAEP’s documentation, including internal programme proposals, annual reviews and publically available material showcasing the CRGs’ work. The second phase comprised in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with STAEP staff, the implementing NGOs, CRG members from

¹⁹ The distinction between ‘process’ and ‘service’ related issues was made by FAFEN’s staff. The former are demands or problems that require institutional reforms and require the involvement of district or national level politicians and bureaucrats. While the latter are local service provision related demands that can be resolved by talking to officials and local-level politicians.

five constituencies and stakeholders (members of Pakistan's development and donor communities).

The five CRGs studied were chosen to allow comparisons between those that served peaceful and those that served conflict-affected constituencies. The former consisted of CRGs in Multan and Lahore; the latter of CRGs in Karachi, Swat and Peshawar.²⁰ While STAEP included an online database that recorded the activities of the CRGs, at the time of the research the database was inaccessible. This meant that case studies had to be chosen based on the researcher's knowledge of Pakistan and the prevailing security situation.²¹

Access to STAEP's implementing NGOs was gained via The Asia Foundation and access to CRG members via these NGOs.²² This placed the researcher in a precarious position as local NGOs often perceive visitors from a programme's head office as having influence over funding decisions. Thus a considerable amount of time was spent gaining their trust and explaining the purpose of 'independent' researchers.²³ Nonetheless the research also benefitted from the interviewee's knowledge that the programme was wrapping-up with little chance of further extensions.

It was also crucial for CRG members to feel able to speak freely about their work. Thus some were invited to Islamabad. Cultural sensitivities also required that the focus groups be split by gender. These sessions included participatory activities that focussed on identifying power-holders in participants' constituencies. Translators were used during focus groups and some of the interviews, otherwise the majority of NGO staff and stakeholders spoke English. Information that could be used against, or to locate, research participants has been removed.

Accountability and inclusivity in practice

Including the excluded

To grasp how STAEP's understanding of inclusivity affected its efforts to promote citizen-led accountability, it is important to begin by asking to what extent the CRGs were successful in including excluded groups. Indeed the programme's early change in direction assumed they could play an active role in the CRGs work. Yet, as this section will show, the composition of the CRGs faced a number of obstacles.

Most of the interviewed CRG members were asked to join by a friend that either worked for the supporting NGO or was already a member. Otherwise they often learnt about the CRG from other NGOs. Indeed many members had a wealth of experience

²⁰ Pakistan's national assembly has 342 seats (272 general seats, 60 reserved for women and 10 for non-Muslims). Constituencies are referred to by their seat number (e.g. NA 125). Among Pakistan's four provincial assemblies there are 728 seats. For both the national and provincial assemblies seats delimitations are based on population size using data from the 1998 census. The census was meant to be repeated in 2008 but is yet to begin.

²¹ Some areas of Pakistan are also off-limits to foreigners.

²² It is also acknowledged that the method of access gave the NGOs the opportunity to select the best or most active CRG members. However for reasons that become clear later, it is doubtful that less active members of the CRG would have provided interesting insights into their structure of activities.

²³ The author is studying for a PhD at LSE and contributing to a research collaboration between the LSE Justice and Security Research Programme and The Asia Foundation. However, he is not directly employed by either TAF or DFID.

of interacting and working for the implementing, or other, NGOs. To explain these findings, interviewed stakeholders argued that NGOs rarely have the time to construct new associations and socialise programme rationales before donors' demands for reporting and results begin to stack up. Thus they use snowballing methods to recruit members for new citizens groups or, in some cases, recycle old associations. Moreover several stakeholders were of the opinion that donors had effectively created two classes of active citizenry: 'social activists' who regardless of the monetary reward are genuinely interested in joining associations that work towards the public good; and 'social contractors' that seek successive opportunities to profit from NGOs or pursue personal agendas, such as career advancement.

It was notable that across the CRGs many of the interviewed members fit the profile of a social activist. For example, the left-leaning leader of Lahore's CRG had worked with domestic and donor-funded NGOs since General Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1978-88). Simultaneously he had forged a career as a political party worker. However during the 1990s he became disillusioned with party politics and resigned to work as a journalist and continue his activism. Eventually he was approached to join the CRG because of his local notoriety and connections with politicians. As with other experienced CRG members, he argued that he joined because of the contacts he would make, the credibility the CRG would lend him, and the skills he would learn. Furthermore, he saw the CRG's focus on collectively lobbying power-holders for accountable governance as a somewhat new and much-needed undertaking. Indeed many social activists considered lobbying to be something they had been doing as individuals for much of their careers.

While the studied CRGs could identify local marginalised groups, they all reported difficulties including them. The most common refrain was that the poor could not afford to travel to the meetings or give up time to attend. CRGs in peaceful areas developed strategies to address these obstacles, including holding meetings outside of business hours or closer to poor neighbourhoods. Yet many also highlighted cultural obstacles. For example, in conservative areas *purdah* (gender based segregation) does not allow unaccompanied women to be in the presence of men and some of the CRGs struggled to be seen as associations in which different social groups could freely interact. Nonetheless as the CRGs matured they had some success in combating such obstacles by publicising their successful campaigns and attending the religious festivals of minority groups. However all of the CRGs reported that sex-workers would not attend meetings because they feared they may be mistreated or reported to the authorities.

Within conflict-affected constituencies, however, the marginalised are also often one party in an ongoing or recent conflict. This made their inclusion difficult unless they dominated the CRG or were allied to those that did. For example, while Karachi's CRG accommodated a number of different ethnicities (e.g. Pashtuns, Hindus, Christians and Hazaras), they all belonged to groups that view themselves as politically, economically and violently marginalised by the city's Mohajirs. This gave them a shared identity and motivation for joining the CRG. For their part, Swat's economically and politically marginalised Gujars were largely unable to join the local CRG. To explain this, interviewees argued that they have been in a long running contest with the district's Pashtuns. Alongside their poverty, this conflict was stated as a major reason preventing them from joining the CRG which was perceived as a Pashtun association and supported by an NGO founded by a well-known Pashtun

leader.²⁴ Furthermore many Gujars were said to fear that Pashtuns sought revenge for their participation in the 2007-9 insurgency, which included the assassination of many Pashtun politicians and landowners. Thus, in practice, Swat's CRG struggled to include Gujars and remained dominated by Pashtuns.

In contrast to Karachi and Swat, in conflict-affected Peshawar episodes of insecurity were not the result of enmity between clearly defined social groups and the CRG was able to include members with a variety of backgrounds. Indeed the major challenges to the inclusion of marginalised groups were the same as those discussed for peaceful constituencies. This suggests that although new citizens' associations may devise strategies to include groups marginalised due to poverty, gender, caste and ethnicity, they will struggle to include members of violently competing groups. To add to these findings, the next section explores the depth of the CRGs' inclusivity.

A division of labour

Many of the interviewees described a tripartite division of labour within the CRGs. This usually began with all the CRG members, including the marginalised, participating in the identification of, and debate over, issues to raise with power-holders. Following this, a small core group of members with the time, means, and skills led advocacy efforts. Skills deemed relevant to advocacy included the ability to interpret legislation, an understanding of the procedures of the bureaucracy and the confidence to approach politicians. Alongside experienced social activists, members with these characteristics included a female lawyer with a reputation for reminding Peshawar's courts of women's rights; a retired army officer who chose community work over the quiet life; and a journalist with connections to others in his industry.

After the programme's first year and a half, the memberships of the core advocacy groups were argued to have largely remained consistent. However if these groups were repeatedly frustrated in their attempts to elicit a response from power-holders they often turned to those that had connections to senior officials or politicians. Often this meant identifying individuals outside the CRG who had previously been involved in politics or had other dealings with politicians. In practice, this usually meant members of an area's elite coalition such as landlords, religious and business leaders. In this sense, the CRGs included temporary members on a needs basis. However, it is notable that interviewees repeatedly highlighted that the programme asked them not to use such contacts and did not record this practice as a legitimate programmatic activity. Nonetheless it is arguable that three groups animated the CRGs: the inclusive deliberation groups, the skilled core advocacy groups, and a number of ad-hoc members with connections or local influence.

The core groups worked closely with staff from the supporting NGOs, especially when it came to using the tools of accountability such as writing press briefs, organising signatory campaigns or collecting evidence on the performance of governance institutions. Furthermore to address marginalised members' lack of skills and confidence, CRGs in peaceful constituencies argued that they often paired them with experienced activists and together they would attend advocacy meetings. However many of the poorer and uneducated interviewees had not attended a meeting

²⁴ The few Gujars that did join were wealthy, resided in the district's capital or had changed their surnames; factors that were said to have allowed them to transcend their identity as a group opposed to the Pashtuns.

with an official or politician, and those that had could not explain what was said during such meetings. Moreover some could not articulate what the purpose of the CRG was beyond a group within which to discuss local issues.

The core advocacy groups also struggled to include females because they felt unable to travel to meetings unaccompanied by males and were fearful that power-holders would harass them. To address this, a lawyer within Multan's CRG worked to reassure members who experienced such attention and to subtly remind power-holders of their duty of care to citizens. However such mechanisms were not present throughout the CRGs. It was also argued that men, including family members, insulted and threatened female CRG members for their involvement in public gatherings. While educated and older women were largely able to brush off these threats, many others were afraid to ignore them. This presented a great obstacle to women wishing to take part in the activities of the core group as they often involved repeated follow up visits to officials and politicians, and the ability to seize windows of opportunity that might present themselves to the CRGs at short notice.

Given these findings, it is arguable that across the studied CRGs inclusivity was shallow and often only extended to the deliberation phase of their work. Furthermore the core advocacy groups were dominated by wealthy, educated and male CRG members. Nonetheless there was little evidence of resentment within the CRGs. In contrast, it was widely argued that those with relevant skills and connections contributed most. One interviewee even suggested that this division should be formalised, with grass-roots CRGs identifying issues and district level groups working on their resolution.²⁵

Routes to accountability

It has been argued that, in practice, inclusivity did not extend to all areas of the CRGs. However it is also necessary to examine how these associations worked across Pakistan's diverse contexts. Indeed the programme's guidelines were largely assumed to be universally applicable. Yet, as this section shows, the CRGs routes to accountability depended less on the programme's guidelines and more on their members' understandings of the power and politics of their constituencies.

Due to the programme's guidelines, all of the CRGs suggested their usual mode of operation was to take demands to officials in relevant state institutions, the so-called short route to accountability, before approaching elected representatives, the so-called long route to accountability. Yet across the CRGs there was little in the way of an identifiable pattern as to which route was more successful. For example, the Lahore based CRG had most success by approaching politicians, while Karachi's CRG resolved its demands through officials. In contrast, Swat's CRG did not consider it worthwhile directly approaching either state institutions or politicians. Instead members preferred to ask local, non-state influentials to engage power-holders on their behalf. Indeed although the CRGs routinely attempted the programme's prescribed steps to accountability, they all operated under no illusions as to where the power lay in their constituency and concentrated their efforts accordingly. To begin to

²⁵ In the programme's later phases this arrangement was, albeit at the instruction of FAFEN, put in place with the establishment of district government groups (DDGs) and provincial governance groups (PGGs). However at the time of the research there was little information on their activities

understand why, it is necessary to unpick the nature of the CRGs' local political settlements.

In the case of Lahore's CRG, the constituency they served had long held safe-seats for the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Many of its politicians, therefore, enjoyed successive terms within which to extend their power over local officials and governance institutions. CRG members argued that this meant the party's own men dominated governance institutions and unpliant officials had been moved elsewhere. One even dismissed the suggestion that officials would act without instructions from politicians or, conversely, that a local politician could be blocked from dispersing funds by an official (a claim made by a PML-N MPA during an interview). Given this, the CRG focussed its efforts on politicians.

Within Karachi, however, the Pashtun-dominated CRG argued it was largely unable to approach politicians from the constituency's presiding party, the *Muttahida Qaumi Movement* (MQM). On the one hand, the unofficial status of their *katchi abadi* (squatter settlement) and resulting lack of a local development budget meant politicians could easily brush them off; while on the other, a violent turf war between the Pashtun dominated *Awami National Party* (ANP) and TTP, and the *Mohajir* dominated MQM left them doubtful that the latter's politicians would help them. Thus the CRG took their demands to officials within the local municipal office. However this route to accountability was also fraught with obstacles created by the ongoing conflict. Most notably, the office was located in between two warring neighbourhoods and frequently came under attack. Officials also used the conflict to claim they could not safely send government workers into Pashtun neighbourhoods to complete requested works. Furthermore, hinting at the capture of local governance institutions, it was notable that within the municipal office staff kept pictures of the MQM's leader on their desks.

Although they tried both the short and long routes to accountability, Swat's CRG members argued that they often turned towards locally influential actors, such as *imams* (religious leaders) and *khans* (wealthy landlords) to deliver their demands to Swat's power-holders. However, while Swat was nominally under civilian authority, since their successful operation to drive militants out of the district in 2009 the CRG argued Pakistan's army had been the *de facto* power-holders. Indeed all decisions on development spending were said to be taken by local area commanders, with officials and politicians relegated to carrying out their instructions. Although the army ran a citizens hotline for those wishing to report local issues, CRG members felt unable to use it due to the legacy of mistrust, rumour and fear left by the conflict. Instead they suggested that nothing would get done unless an influential actor mediated between themselves and the army. In practice, however, many influentials hesitated to help the CRG. To explain this, some members argued that influentials had moved their assets from Swat during the conflict and therefore no longer had any interest in local issues. Others said influentials were themselves reluctant to pressure the army as they relied on them for protection from militants believed to be still at large. These answers capture the CRG members confusion over exactly how Swat's political settlement had shifted since the conflict and, below the army, where the balance of power now lay.

Although the CRGs were tasked by the programme to try the short and then long route to accountability, in practice, members quickly came to know where to focus their attention. In this sense, they were experts on the power and politics of their own

political settlements. Indeed the next section outlines how, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the CRGs developed strategies to get things done.

Getting things done

Service related issues, such as repairs to infrastructure, the staffing of facilities or the unmasking of corrupt practices, accounted for the vast majority of issues that the CRGs raised across contexts. This section shows, however, that within conflict-affected constituencies the CRGs' activities were somewhat structured by the severity of the obstacles they faced. Nonetheless they used the opportunity presented by STAEP to organise and pursue activities that drew on their members' strengths and addressed local challenges.

While service related issues occupied the lion's share of the CRGs' attention, it was notable that the technical tools of accountability, such as institutional score cards, budget monitoring and right to information requests, were rarely used. This was surprising considering the training CRGs had been provided with. In explanation, CRG members in peaceful constituencies argued that as volunteers they could not collect enough data to support strong advocacy cases and that power holders would simply dismiss information requests. Furthermore legislation outlining citizens' rights to information is relatively new to Pakistan and it was suggested many officials had not heard of it. In conflict-affected constituencies these problems were said to be compounded by persistent insecurity and the difficulty of approaching governance institutions that may be captured by one or another party to a conflict.

It is arguable, however, that conflicts not only hindered the use of the tools of accountability, but also caused the CRGs to forge their own paths to public goods provision. For example, frustrated by the army's domination of governance and development spending, Swat's CRG developed a unique role for itself: it began to represent citizens during local *jirgas* (non-state Pashtun justice forums). Interviewees argued this addressed an important local need as unresolved disputes were a driver of violence and local courts were yet to address their case backlogs. Furthermore it allowed the CRG to assist marginalised Gujars, many of whom were said to have joined the insurgency due to dissatisfaction over long-running disputes with Pashtun landlords they accused of a multitude of abuses. Female CRG members also used the opportunity presented by the CRG to collectively mediate disputes between husbands and wives. Indeed they argued they had effectively set up their own *jirga* to offer an alternative to the patriarchal and antiquated rulings they suggested male elders handed out. Many of the CRG members that were involved in these roles drew upon skills learnt from dispute resolution workshops run by other NGOs operating in Swat. Nonetheless they used these skills to develop a training manual for other CRG members engaging *jirgas* or mediating disputes. Although FAFEN tacitly supported the CRG's innovation, this activity was not recorded as one of the CRG's successes as it could not be justified within STAEP's aims.

For its part, Karachi's CRG also developed strategies to overcome the numerous obstacles to responsive governance. Frustrated with the often-heard complaint that municipal workers could not safely enter Pashtun neighbourhoods, it often sought to persuade the local municipal office to release vehicles and tools so CRG members could perform service-related tasks themselves. This included cleaning up after the

Eid al-Adha (Islamic holiday) sacrifices and installing manhole covers over open drains. Furthermore concerned by the municipal authority's lack of progress on registering their *katchi abadi* as one of Karachi's official towns, the CRGs' members begun fulfilling the necessary bureaucratic requirements to speed up the process themselves. This included surveying and recording the location of the neighbourhood's households and presenting the information to the authorities. Given the rampant insecurity, interviewees reasoned that getting things done in this manner was the best strategy for addressing local service related issues and for putting pressure on the municipal authorities to recognise their neighbourhood.

While all of the CRGs focussed on service-related issues, evidence suggests the turmoil of recent and ongoing conflicts demanded some devise strategies and roles that got things done regardless of their difficult circumstances. In Swat this led to involvement in the dispensation and provision of justice, while in Karachi it induced a form of 'co-production', with both governance institutions and the CRG providing resources to address local issues (Joshi and Moore 2004). In part, both of these adaptations allowed the CRGs to circumnavigate their constituencies' power and politics at the same time as they fulfilled needs created by exclusionary practices and institutions. Broadening the discussion, the next section examines whether the CRGs' efforts across peaceful and conflict-affected constituencies may have contributed to or weakened accountable governance.

Working politically and engaging the local elite coalition

Although it has been argued that the CRGs were experts at identifying where power lay with their constituencies and at adapting their routes to accountability or public goods provision accordingly, further evidence is needed to begin to uncover whether they contributed to accountable governance. Neither the number of demands raised and met, nor their innovative strategies, reveal whether the CRGs challenged the structures and processes upholding Pakistan's exclusionary political settlements. Thus this section explores whether the CRGs worked with, circumnavigated, or challenged local politics.

Conversations around working politically in weak and conflict-affected states often include fears that programmes may reinforce exclusionary or oppressive networks and institutions. Nonetheless many of the CRGs felt it was necessary to engage local non-state power-holders and work with the grain of local politics. For instance, the CRG serving Peshawar often approached *maliks* (Pashtun tribal leaders or village heads) for permission to arrange meetings among communities. This was important since, particularly after the widely publicised use of a polio campaign to track down Osama bin Laden, many locals believe NGOs to be covers for foreign organisations with malign intentions. NGO workers are often attacked and many choose not to identify as being funded by foreign donors. Similarly, Karachi's CRG had to convince community elders, most of whom supported the ANP, that they were not working for their political rivals the MQM. Thus the CRG had to portray itself as a potential tool for the elders, even though they did not explicitly support one agenda or social group over another. This was achieved by arguing that it could act as a platform for all the constituency's marginalised groups to act collectively. In this sense, to get things done the CRGs had to tread a fine line between the competing ideas, interests and contests in their constituencies.

To tread this line, the CRGs often relied on a mixture of local political knowledge, insider information and contingency. For example, in Multan the CRG aimed to resolve the issue of a broken water plant. The suspicion was that the plant's management committee was keeping maintenance funds for themselves. By chance, the constituency's MNA was disqualified from his seat and a by-election called. Wishing to endear himself to the local community and in need of votes to occupy the vacated seat, the disqualified MNA's son promised to fix the plant and instructed a party worker to aid the CRG. Following the son's successful election the worker identified funds within his MNA's discretionary development budget and the CRG used this information to lobby for the plant to be fixed. Interviewed CRG members argued that without the fortunate by-election and the party worker's knowledge of the budget they would have been unlikely to have resolved the issue.

While it is arguable that by working with the grain of local politics the CRGs were able to achieve their short-term service related aims, on occasion it also allowed them to develop opportunities that could lead to their long-term goal of institutional reforms. For example, Multan's CRG was also involved in setting up a new management committee for the aforementioned plant. Throughout the process it argued that it needed to appease both the existing committee members and the Department of Health; the former because of their links to politicians and continuing legitimacy in the eyes of the community, the latter because they wanted some of their own men on the new committee. Thus the CRG ensured the final composition of the committee included members from both camps. Nonetheless, reasoning that they could act as a check to its capture by either of these groups, the CRG also encouraged one of its own members to sit on the committee.

However not all CRGs were as subtle as that in Multan. Some chose to directly confront the everyday norms and practices that obstruct accountability. For example, a female CRG member from Peshawar repeatedly visited an unresponsive MPA in his personal *hujra* (meeting area) to deliver the CRG's demands. In Pashtun culture *hujras* are reserved for men and exclude women since they are not believed to play a role in politics. Thus it could be argued that the member's mere presence challenged this patriarchal institution. In another example, frustrated with their MPA's absence from his constituency, Swat's CRG erected 'WANTED' posters around the district's capital and took out an advert in a local newspaper asking for information on his whereabouts. Furthermore, as discussed, Swat's CRG involved its female members in dispute resolution and sought to represent the constituency's marginalised Gujars in *jirgas* dominated by Pashtun elders. The bold actions of these CRGs represent direct challenges to the everyday norms and practices that distance power-holders from citizens, contribute to exclusion and underpin unaccountable governance.

As the following three cases show, challenging or undermining the *status quo* was not without risks, both for the CRG members and the citizens they served. For example, a female CRG member raised the issue of overcharging for medicine at the dispensary at which she worked. Following the meeting a fellow member told her husband, who worked for the health ministry, what had transpired. The husband proceeded to pressure her to drop the issue, reasoning that fellow ministry workers do not snitch on one another. Fearing that she might lose her job, the member did as she was told. She argued that she had little choice as the platform did not have mechanisms to address such threats. In this sense, the CRG was unable to challenge the power structures within the community within which they worked.

In another example, the CRG from Kohistan was informed by security guards of several schools that had been closed due to understaffing. In response the CRG began lobbying local officials and organising the community to collect further information on the schools. However upon learning of the CRG's activity local *maliks* detained and tortured the guards. Rather than fearing the exposure of some sort of corruption or misuse of the schools, interviewees argued the *maliks* were concerned that their authority was undermined by the direct relationship between CRG and community members. Indeed Kohistan's isolation was argued to be a major factor in preserving power-structures that alienate its population from the outside world, including state institutions. To placate the *maliks*, to secure continued access to community members and to work on reopening the schools the CRG was forced to repeatedly seek the elders' permission.

Lahore's CRG's attempts to hold a local crime boss accountable for petty street robberies, however, presents an example of how a CRG was able to overcome the risks that came with challenging the *status quo*. The crime boss in question was rumoured to be protected by the local police chief in return for a share of his profits. Furthermore, in a veiled threat, the crime boss had discreetly let the CRG's leader know that he was also a hit-man for a senior politician. While it was argued that these connections made the CRG's attempts to get the crime boss arrested unsuccessful, it was also revealed that they were able to register a small victory. It came when the crime boss pressured an elderly widow into selling her property for many times below the market value. In response the CRG organised citizens to occupy the house and successfully returned it to the widow. Interviewed CRG members reasoned that they were able to take this action because of the combined weight of their numbers, the support of the local media and appeals to local ideals of respect for the elderly.

It is arguable that in all three of these cases the coercive nature of local power and politics required CRGs to make difficult decisions. In the first case the decision to drop the issue of overcharging at a medical dispensary demonstrated the CRG's limits when faced with a threat to one its members. The second gained the CRG access to a marginalised community at the potential cost of legitimising its violent leaders. And the third showed that although the CRG was unable to achieve its ultimate goal of removing a predatory crime boss, through collective action it may be possible to overcome the risks associated with confronting such an actor and offer a measure of protection to vulnerable members of its constituency. In this sense, when challenging the *status quo* the CRGs had to decide when it was right to work with the grain of local politics for short term gains, back off all together, or adopt roles that may protect their communities from the worst excesses of local power-holders.

These types of dilemmas were found across both peaceful and conflict-affected constituencies. However they were especially prevalent when CRGs turned to local influentials, many of whom are describable as members of the local elite coalition, to help them raise a demand or hasten an issue's resolution.

For example, frustrated with the lack of progress on repairing an overflowing canal that runs the length of several of Lahore's neighbourhoods, the CRG turned to a local landlord. She was contacted as her *dera* (place where leaders meet their followers or socialise) was a large house directly facing the overflowing canal and she already knew members of the CRG. Under interview, she claimed that she 'supports' 5,000 - 6,000 local women. Asked what she meant, she confided that she facilitates their

access to the police, manages a small hospital trust and runs an NGO focussed on women's issues. Pressed as to why she does this, the landlord argued that ordinary people are scared to approach state authorities and that landlords, contrary to popular opinion, are wealthy individuals who feel obliged to help their community. To resolve the issue, the landlord used her connections to the daughter of Nawaz Sharif (at the time the leader of the opposition to the government) to secure a meeting with Shahbaz Sharif (Nawaz's brother and the Punjab's serving chief minister). Following this, the landlord decided to become a fulltime member of the CRG.

Beyond the obvious location of her *dera*, it would be naïve to suggest the landlord did not benefit from her role within the CRG. Indeed ethnographic literature argues that members of Pakistan's local elite coalitions must retain a measure of popular legitimacy as they work to strengthen the networks that reproduce their domination. Seen through this lens, the CRG presented an opportunity for the landlord to demonstrate her power to her followers and form bonds with fellow elites. Thus while the CRG worked with the grain of local politics to fix the canal, the involvement of the landlord, perhaps unwittingly, strengthened the networks that retard accountable governance.

In a similar example, members of Swat's CRG confided that they often turn to a local influential to help them negotiate with the army or contact politicians. They reasoned that he helped the CRG because he was from the same village as them, some of them were his relatives and he was the owner of the local NGO funded by STAEP to mentor the CRG's members. It is arguable that by helping the CRG the influential was able to demonstrate his power, direct resources towards his lineage group and assure his own NGO fulfilled STAEP's programmatic requirements. Furthermore it was notable that members of the CRG who lived outside his village argued that they rarely considered approaching him to assist with matters in their locality as he was not interested in helping them unless he was contesting an election (which he had not done during the programme). Nonetheless those interviewed did not resent this favouritism and argued that this is normal behaviour for influentials who are logically only interested in helping their clients. Indeed they made few connections between the influential and the accountability of governance in their constituency.

These examples demonstrate that despite their desire to get things done, CRGs that worked with the actors and institutions that arguably underpin unaccountable governance in Pakistan may have strengthened the very structures that reproduces their own subordination. Thus, despite their ability to work subtly with the grain of local politics, in many instances there was a tension between the programme's drive for 'inclusive' citizens groups that raise demands and the CRGs' own efforts to resolve issues through means that acknowledge the power and politics of their local contexts. The final section discusses what this may mean for future research and for efforts to promote citizen-led accountability.

Conclusion: Acknowledging power and politics

In a recent article Joshi and Houtzager (2014) lay out two possible agendas for those interested in citizen-led accountability. In the first, they suggest that research could continue to focus on large quantitative studies in an effort to find generalisable rules as to which kinds of accountability tools work under which conditions. While in the

second, they call for close examinations of the evolutions of, and challenges to, citizen-led accountability programmes in the types of contexts practitioners are interested in working in. They argue the second research agenda allows for more attention to be paid to both the political realities within which programmes take place and the agency of the citizens organising to promote accountable governance. In many respects, the preceding fine-grained exploration of STAEP's CRGs adopted this second approach. Yet, as the following discussion shows, it raises a number of questions for the theory underpinning citizen-led accountability programmes. These questions should be explored through further research or, at the very least, considered by programme designers working in contexts where strong societies, weak states and conflict shape governance.

Inclusivity

Although STAEP aimed for an expansive operationalisation of inclusivity that engaged marginalised, skilful and influential citizens, the reality of Pakistan's diverse contexts and political contests presented many obstacles to this goal. For instance, in the studied conflict-affected constituencies it was not possible to include marginalised groups that stood in opposition to the CRGs' dominant members. Furthermore it was found across the CRGs that the majority of advocacy activities were undertaken by a core group of educated and comparatively wealthy members, many of whom had significant experience of activism. In practice, therefore, inclusivity was shallow and only extended to the deliberation phase of the CRGs' work.

While there was little evidence of these core groups capturing the CRGs or ignoring the demands of their fellow members, such a division of labour poses a danger to inclusive decision making processes and the realisation of shared objectives. This danger is compounded by the findings that some of the CRGs' members had little understanding or oversight of the group's wider activities. Discussing this, one stakeholder feared that Pakistan's contemporary citizen-led accountability programmes are creating an additional layer of gatekeepers between citizens and the state. Further research is needed to explore this possibility and to determine whether the demands discussed during community deliberations were taken up and pursued by the CRGs' core advocacy groups or if they pursued their own agendas.

The possibility of citizen associations being captured may be somewhat mitigated by training marginalised members to take part in the core group's activities and through the institutionalisation of mechanisms that make their activities transparent. This training, however, should not focus on the traditional tools of accountability, such as citizen score cards or governance monitoring, which even the CRGs' educated and experienced volunteers struggled to employ. Rather it should concentrate on improving members' understandings of the theory underpinning citizen-led accountability, the state's obligations and the role of the free media. This will allow more members to question the core group and follow their progress. It may also encourage wider conversations within marginalised communities about opportunities for, and routes to, political change. Furthermore such training may eventually widen Pakistan's pool of 'social activists' that stakeholders suggested appear in one programme after the other.

The research also suggests that in conflict-affected areas where two clearly defined groups are violently competing over economic and political opportunities it may be

difficult to include them within the same citizens' association. Moreover it may be impossible if violent histories and entrenched identities support fear of "the other" or the association is perceived to be a vehicle for the interests of one or the other group. Nonetheless, STAEP demonstrated that citizens' associations can be built and flourish in difficult circumstances. Therefore, a first step may be to develop mechanisms, and create opportunities for, separate groups that represent competing parties to communicate and coordinate strategies to achieve shared goals. Lessons may be learnt from efforts to support citizens' associations to cooperate across dividing lines in Eastern Europe, South America or Afghanistan.

Routes to accountability

It was found that the CRGs' preferred routes to accountability were heavily dependent on where power lay within their constituencies. Furthermore, for the most part, the CRGs' most active members were revealed to be experts on their own contexts and, when it came to getting things done, hard-nosed realists. Thus, regardless of the programme's guidelines, the CRGs often sought to achieve their aims by working with the grain of local politics. On the one hand, this meant engaging local gatekeepers to marginalised communities and governance institutions. While on the other, it meant focussing their attention on power-holders that they believed would respond to their demands or raise their voice with those that could. This included engaging local influentials who could be described as members of the local elite coalition and, in some cases, responsible for the practices and institutions that underpin unaccountable governance in Pakistan.

While the research concentrated on a small number of case studies and, therefore, does not claim generalisability, it is possible to make a number of observations deserving of further attention. First, working with the grain of local politics may lay the conditions for longer term change. For example, it can be argued that by interacting with local authorities, such as *maliks*, the CRGs introduced new ideas and practices into the public discourse. Often this encompassed showing communities that they could express their views and engage power-holders with the help of, or through, the CRGs. The significance of this should not be downplayed in societies in which access to the state is often mediated by local power-holders that citizens are often socially and economically dependent upon. However programmes need a robust understanding of when working with local power-holders may legitimise oppressive or coercive institutions. Such understandings are unlikely to be provided by outsiders and require frank discussions between front line activists and programme managers of the potential trade-offs of any course of action.

Second, when opportunities arise CRGs should be encouraged to transcend their roles as watchmen advocates and involve themselves in the design or reform of local governance institutions. Indeed, as in the case of Multan's CRG members involving themselves in the setting up of the water plant's new management committee, politically astute CRGs can influence the practices of local bodies and institutions that have lost legitimacy or are no longer fit for purpose. Throughout the research it was found that such opportunities often came to the CRGs' attention through personal contacts or insider information. While this somewhat runs against the ideal model of CRGs identifying issues during community deliberations and then advocating for their resolution, it should be understood as a valuable method of identifying opportunities for positive change. Seizing such opportunities requires that citizens'

associations are networked and share information with other organisations that focus on specific issues or are responsible for the everyday provision of public goods, such as parent teacher associations, professional associations and workers' unions.

Third, the research revealed that the CRGs in conflict-affected Karachi and Swat had developed their own activities and roles due to frustrations with the short and long routes to accountability. To do so they had to look past the programme's guidelines and draw on their members' skills. In part, these innovations should be seen as rational responses to the power and politics of their local contexts, and as indicators of what these groups may prioritise. However more research is needed to discern whose needs they address and if they are contributing to the divisions that affect societies wracked by conflict. This is particularly important if the inability of citizens associations to accommodate opposed groups is common to conflict-affected areas. Furthermore it should be asked if efforts by citizens associations to co-produce public goods with the state or simply to provide them themselves let power holders off their obligations and weaken state-society relations.

These questions cut to the heart of current debates about supporting citizens' groups to take the lead in bottom-up programmes, especially in weak and conflict-affected states that outsiders may have difficulty understanding. Indeed in Pakistan many donors struggle to find ways to negotiate local political realities and support citizens groups, especially where insecurity prevents them from seeing first-hand the results of trainings and spent funds or where they fear citizens groups may use donor funds to engage actors and institutions that contravene international norms around human rights or gender discrimination. Nevertheless, this research suggests that citizens groups are experts on their own political economies and often retain significant agency in the face of considerable challenges which, given the opportunity, they will use to organise collectively to improve their circumstances.

To ease their concerns about how these opportunities will be used, donors should design programme guidelines that are flexible enough to encourage locally led innovations, whilst setting aside time for honest conversations about what citizens' needs may be in any given context, what skills they already have, and how they may be accommodated within a programme's aims. While this is an extremely tall order for large organisations and cross-country projects, emerging research on 'politically smart, locally led development' suggests many programmes are already doing this, even in difficult environments such as conflict-affected Nigeria, Burma and Nepal (Booth and Unsworth 2014; DFID 2014). Furthermore, although DFID's evaluations may not have acknowledged it, it is arguable that STAEP created the room for the CRGs to adopt strategies that addressed the needs of their constituents, whatever they may have been. Given renewed calls for development and governance reform programmes to be locally owned and concentrated on locally defined problems STAEP's lessons should not be overlooked.

Getting things done whilst promoting accountability

Perhaps the biggest dilemma faced by programmes that encourage citizen-led accountability in weak, conflict-affected states with strong societies is the apparent need to engage local non-state power-holders to get things done. This is because such routes to responsive governance risk legitimising and strengthening the actors and institutions that underpin unaccountable governance. This concern is particularly

salient in patronage-based societies such as Pakistan where elites mediate between citizens and the state and have a vested interest in maintaining their grip on local governance institutions.

That all of the interviewed stakeholders acknowledged such practices and argued that things rarely get done without pursuing such routes suggests the theory of the long and short route to accountability is somewhat naive. In this sense, the accountability triangle should be reworked to acknowledge the informal actors and institutions that are central to responsive governance in conflict-affected contexts with weak states and strong societies. It may also want to include the prevailing social norms that underpin governance. Such a reworking would render the accountability triangle specific to each context and necessitate thorough political economy analyses for each locality, but it would strengthen a programme's underlying theory of change and may allow the triangle to become an evolving tool throughout the programme's lifetime.

Highlighting the importance of models that account for the informal determinants of governance, it is notable that the CRGs that engaged local influentials had unsuccessfully tried the short and long routes to accountability, including the traditional tools of accountability, numerous times. Indeed by the time the CRGs sought their help to resolve an issue it is arguable that their own legitimacy rode on the outcome. In support of this assessment, Bano (2012) has highlighted the importance of being seen to get things done in order to maintain and expand citizens' associations.

Programmes may seek to guard against this practice by drawing up lists of actors that citizens' groups may not engage, or by focussing on issues that they know to fall outside the interests of such actors. However in many contexts this will exclude the main route by which citizens approach the state and elected representatives, thereby hamstringing citizens associations in their infancy. Furthermore it may overlook influentials who support change and are well placed to drive institutional reforms. It would also go against the principles of local ownership, including the local definition of problems, which are seen to be important for many programmes.

Given the research findings, an alternative approach may be to support citizens associations to engage influentials on a case by case basis, with deliberations as to the wisdom of each case within groups, and between groups and their supporting organisations. Such deliberations may act as a check and balance to strengthening exclusionary institutions and legitimising predatory actors. Furthermore, discerning who is likely to benefit from the resolution of the issue at hand and whether it crosses factional lines or voting blocs may be a good place to begin. While the fluidity of local alliances makes this more difficult in conflict-affected areas, it is particularly important since associations risk entrenching existing fault-lines if they serve a particular faction's interests or lend its leaders opportunities to legitimise themselves.

Such an approach requires citizens associations to devise long-term strategies to promote accountable governance. It requires that members understand the theory of change underpinning citizen-led accountability and constantly test their own assumptions of how change happens in their contexts and the risks it may entail. In this sense, associations must consistently draw upon and update their knowledge of the power and politics of their local contexts. While outsiders and donor organisations may struggle to see a role in such conversations, evidence suggests they are crucial to

encouraging groups to think politically about their actions and to ensure that as wider range of voices are heard as possible. Yet even when associations are inclusive and politically astute, more work must be undertaken to ensure inclusivity is deep, with marginalised groups having a voice at all stages of the associations' activities. Programmes attempting citizen-led accountability, therefore, cannot assume inclusivity is a short cut to their goal.

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This publication is an output of a research programme funded by UK aid from the UK Government. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies



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The Justice and Security Research Programme is an international consortium of research partners, undertaking work on end-user experiences of justice and security in conflict-affected areas. The London School of Economics and Political Science is the lead organisation and is working in partnership with:

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Conflict Research Group, University of Gent (Belgium)
Social Science Research Council (USA)
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