

## Helpdesk Research Report

# Interventions for collective action and accountability

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## Question

*Please identify examples of interventions that have addressed collective action failures and increased accountability.*

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## 1. Overview

Collective action, has a relatively long history in political science and economic theory (e.g. Olson 1965), but its application to governance programming in development is a relatively new phenomenon. As such there is little evidence of interventions that have been specifically designed to address collective action failures and increase accountability. There is, however, a range of literature relating to collective action and accountability interventions from which to draw inferences that may address both.

This report identifies several articles, reports and blog postings relating primarily, but not exclusively to accountability interventions, that provide insights into how a collective action approach might be used. As well as providing a conceptual background to collective action and accountability, this report identifies some of the emerging evidence relating to convening and brokering networks, the evidence examining the social dynamics that affect collective action, and how the nature of the public good or service can affect propensity for collective action.

## 2. Collective Action and Accountability

Though the term collective action has been used to refer to any group-related action, the concept of collective action in political science and economics refers specifically to the provision of public goods through the collaboration of two or more individuals. The concept of collective action in political science and economics became popular following analysis by Mancur Olson into collective action constraints and challenges (Olson 1965). This analysis highlights that collective action problems result particularly with regard to certain, pure public goods – those where it is not possible to prevent others from benefiting from the good (non-excludable) and one person’s consumption of the good does not affect another’s consumption (non-rivalrous). Hence there are incentives for individuals to “free ride” on the efforts of others, benefiting from the public good without contributing to it. A typical example is clean air, where it is not possible to prevent anyone from using it, and where one person using it does not stop someone else from also using it, but where ‘free riders’ – i.e. polluters – can still breathe in the clean air while doing nothing themselves to contribute to it. Getting free riders to contribute to ensuring the provision of the public good is thus a typical collective action problem. Evidence suggests that small groups may more easily succeed in collective action efforts, but as groups become larger they become more difficult to coordinate and have higher costs (Olson 1965). In other words, encouraging a community to stop polluting a much-needed stream is likely to be easier and lower cost than stopping entire countries from polluting the atmosphere. Without incentives to counter these increased costs large groups will fail to achieve collective action goals (Olson 1965). Individuals may seek out short-term benefits for themselves alone, despite being better off when others contribute to the collective action (Ostrom 2004). They may even refuse to contribute to the public good even if they know it would be in their own best interest, because of distrust in others’ ability to free ride. This result is known in the literature as a collective action failure.

Interest in collective action in terms of development research and programming has risen in the past year or so, particularly as a result of a small number of studies. One is the synthesis report from the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP). The synthesis report of the programme advocates conceptualising development, and in particular governance issues, as a collective action problem (Booth 2012). It states that “development actors face collective action problems at many different levels that prevent them acting in the ways conventionally expected. Good development institutions are ones that address problems of collective action in the particular circumstances in which they arise” (Booth 2012a: 3). The collective action approach to governance problems sits in contrast to the principal-agent approach which is “where one party to a relationship (the principal) requires a service of another party (the agent) but the principal lacks the necessary information to monitor the agent’s performance in an effective way” (Booth 2012a: 9). The principal-agent challenge is focused on having the agent comply with the principal’s desire despite this ‘information asymmetry’.

Another study that argues the importance of a collective action approach over a principal-agent one looks specifically at why anti-corruption programming has been unsuccessful, concluding that there has been a ‘mischaracterisation of the problem’. Based on interview data from Kenya and Uganda, Persson et al. (2012) conclude that though “contemporary anti-corruption reforms are based on a conceptualization of corruption as a principal-agent problem, in thoroughly corrupt settings, corruption rather resembles a collective action problem” (Persson et al. 2012: 1). They emphasise that the failure of anti-corruption reforms is primarily a coordination problem, and that an equilibrium emerges that depends on shared expectations about others’ behaviour in relation to corruption. The implementation of anticorruption reforms is what is termed as a ‘second order’ collective action problem. Second order collective action problems relate specifically to policing collective action or essentially punishing free riders so as to

maintain cooperation (Ostrom 1998). Similar findings emerge from a study by Marquette (2012) on religion and corruption in India and Nigeria, where interview and focus group respondents widely condemned corruption but also often justified their own corrupt behaviour, given the systemic nature of corruption in both countries. Levels of social and political trust were very low – including trust in religious organisations - and concerns regarding free riders were high. This suggests, again, that corruption may be a typical collective action problem. Marquette argues that, “It is not just important that the existing social environment condemns corrupt behaviour; it needs not to be seen as ‘normal’” (Marquette 2012: 24).

At present, the potential of a collective action approach to input into development programming is unclear. There is, as yet, insufficient evidence to design what can be termed as “collective action” interventions and when such an approach would be favourable over one that builds on principal-agent thinking. In particular there is little in terms of evidence on collective action interventions that specifically deal with accountability.

There is, however, a great deal of literature from which it may be possible to elicit lessons applicable to incorporating a collective action approach to programming. There is also emerging evidence on development programming that incorporates a collective action ‘lens’ in evaluation and analysis. Some of this evidence is based on programmes that incorporate a collective action approach from the beginning while others that apply a collective action lens retrospectively. In the latter category, however, caution should be exercised, as neither the research nor the policy interventions were designed to tackle a specific collective action problem.

It must also be emphasised that “generic solutions are unlikely to work” (Booth 2012a: 3) and instead a tailored intervention is best. Where there is a failure in achieving development objectives, it is important firstly to verify whether this is actually attributable to collective action failure. Collective action solutions need to be used specifically to address defined collective action problems. If there is a collective action failure, accountability interventions are only appropriate if it is clear that this addresses this failure. Not all issues to do with accountability are collective action problems and the same is true vice versa. Furthermore, any intervention must not provide new, deleterious incentives that make achieving the development objectives more difficult. Further research is needed to identify to what extent donors can overcome collective action constraints, such as by improving buy-in or creating social sanctions or incentives, while not creating perverse incentives or closing down space for local ‘trust-building’.

### 3. Convening and brokering networks

A number of studies emphasise networks and convening and brokering such networks. There is currently insufficient evidence to verify to what extent external actors can induce collective action in situations where none exists.

Based on case studies from Brazil, Mexico and India, Unsworth (2010) argues that there are opportunities for collective action to bring about social accountability, though the application of the term ‘collective action’ in this study seems to relate more to ‘group action’ than collective action as defined by Olson (1965). In particular she draws attention to the **policy networks around public services**. It is important to understand the “complexity and diversity of state-society relations around service delivery, and the importance of history and context in shaping the way policy networks are structured and the opportunities for collective actors to influence them” (Unsworth 2010: 44). The research finds that:

- Policy development that includes user groups in the process is more likely to produce models that subsequently allow collective actors to hold service providers accountable.
- Local collective action can bring about social accountability where formal mechanisms are weak; this is more likely where networks exist with public actors.
- The configuration of networks across the public-private divide is what is most influential in understanding the effectiveness of policy networks, rather than the personality characteristics of key individuals.
- Participation by all actors in policy reforms enhances subsequent collective action by them.

Unsworth (2010) argues that for those seeking to promote collective action the policy implications are:

- A thorough and sensitive historical and political **context analysis** is vital, as is an open mind and an avoidance of pre-determined models.
- **Invest in strengthening networks that have a strong vertical reach** (from policymakers to the grassroots).

Recent case studies highlight the prominence of networks and the potential that external actors can play in convening and brokering these networks. Green (2013) describes Oxfam's convening and brokering project that helped **bring stakeholders together to build trust and work on issues together**, in this case on water and sanitation in Tajikistan. This project helped set up an Interministerial Co-ordination Council (IMCC) and a wider network of actors. Oxfam's project facilitates the meetings and helps the Chair, in this case the Minister of Water. The network is made up of a minimum of 55 people from different sectors – 17 government ministries and agencies, UN agencies, international NGOs, academia, the media, Tajiki civil society organizations, the private sector and parliament. This approach has led to an emerging set of public policy and partnership initiatives. Key lessons from the study are:

- Rather than focus on either service delivery or advocacy based on a 'shopping list of policy demands', it was better to adopt an open approach, admitting that the solution is not clear and it is best to work together to find one.
- In this role as 'convenor' or 'broker' Oxfam greatly benefited from its established credibility and knowledge but also their 'international brand'.
- Oxfam also benefited from not being vulnerable to political pressure in the same way a local NGO might be.
- Acknowledging failure publicly helped create the basis for a coalition to find new solutions.
- It can be faster to synergise and build on existing legislation and projects, rather than starting from scratch.
- Good research and 'killer' facts, for example on pertinent but previously overlooked existing legislation, helped create conditions for policy change.
- Facilitation and support of the network meant speaking with, and addressing concerns, of each member organisation separately and in some cases individuals inside the member organisation.

A recent round table discussion organised by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) brought together academics and practitioners to debate the practical implications of the APPP synthesis report (i.e. Both 2012a) on collective action. As well as the Tajiki case study (Green 2013) the discussion summarised key lessons from a CAFOD case study in Ethiopia (SLRC 2013). Here CAFOD worked with various faith-based groups to help them engage with issues around accountability and helped facilitate the discussion at the local level. Facilitators found that a confrontational style of dialogue did not work well because as it would result in more conflict due to the fractured nature of both the government and

opposition. Consequently they adopted a **“facilitation and dialogue approach”** which began with working with the local governments to make them feel safe about coming into a space for dialogue. CAFOD worked with the local population to ensure the space for dialogue did not become a place where people brought all of their grievances against the government, but instead focused on one set of issues. A number of key lessons emerged including:

- The nature of Ethiopian state systems would not allow local actors to challenge anything coming from the higher up in the government.
- Though a collective action approach can be appropriate for understanding change, the ‘demand-side’ model can be useful to challenge people’s concept of government.

In an analysis on an accountability programme in Malawi, Wild and Harris (2011) conclude that its success was attributable to **facilitating collaborative spaces** or forms of collective problem solving by actors across the supply and demand side. The programme used a mixture of hybrid of citizen report cards, community monitoring and social audits to assess service user satisfaction and community meetings to discuss the performance of public services in the education, agriculture, health, and water and sanitation sectors. This approach requires not just the provision of information, which is essential, but also **identifying the key actors and bringing them together** to produce joint action plans that are implemented and followed up on.

In a blog post, summarising analysis on case studies in Sierra Leone, Malawi and Tanzania, Booth (2012b) highlights how significant local improvements have been achieved with **non-adversarial facilitation approaches**. This is in contrast to several current programmatic approaches that put forward an adversarial relationship between the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ sides of service delivery. Citizens are pitted against state agents, encouraged to monitor service providers and demand their rights. The non-adversarial approach, in contrast, takes into account the penalties that may be incurred by individuals who make formal complaints and recognises that service providers face their own constraints to meet heavy demands with severely limited resources. This approach has sometimes been undertaken without any explicit recognition of the methods actually being used, particularly when reporting to funders.

## 4. Social dynamics

Unsworth (2010) emphasises that the configuration of networks across the public-private divide is what is most influential in understanding the effectiveness of policy networks, rather than the personality characteristics of key individuals. Nonetheless, emerging research identifies individual and social factors that may influence individuals’ propensity for collective action. The extent to which external actors can influence these factors remains unclear.

Community-based monitoring programmes are what would be described as a typical example of demand-side accountability programmes, rather than a collective action effort *per se*. Nonetheless, success or failure in community-monitoring programmes can provide insights into collective action social dynamics. Factors that undermine community-based programmes may well undermine collective action in general.

A randomized field experiment on community-based monitoring of public primary health care providers in Uganda found that community monitoring can play an important role in improving service delivery when traditional top-down supervision is ineffective (Björkman and Svensson 2009). A subsequent analysis of this study looked at why they found variations in the ability of different communities to

manage this process (Björkman and Svensson 2010). The authors found that **social heterogeneity** can explain why some communities managed to push for better health service delivery, whereas others did not. **Income inequality**, and particularly **ethnic fractionalisation**, adversely impact collective action for improved service provision.

In a subsequent study, the same monitoring technique failed to produce similar results in education in India (Banerjee et al 2010), as the Björkman and Svensson (2009) study did in health in Uganda. The authors provide a number of hypotheses for why this occurred including:

- **Local community workers:** The nurses in the Ugandan case were often local while the teachers in the Indian case were generally drawn from outside the community. This may have provided further social incentives.
- **Social prestige:** In Uganda people managed to fire and replace many members of their existing community health committees, unlike in India. Being a member of the health committee in Uganda was a more powerful (and arguably prestigious) position, unlike being a member of the education committees in India.

It may be that these social factors go in some way to address the 'second order' collective action problem of punishing free riders or providing social incentives to work towards long-term collective benefit. Also of note, the Banerjee et al (2010) study found that the only effective intervention (training volunteers to teach on a voluntary basis) had a clear pathway to influencing outcomes that was not reliant on others or transforming the existing systems. It may have been that **mistrust** of others or **poor expectations** (perhaps realistic expectations) of transforming systems prevented collective action in the other interventions tested.

A study based on case study research and survey of 316 villages in rural China found that even when formal accountability is weak, local officials can be subject to unofficial rules and norms that establish and enforce their public obligations (Tsai 2007). These informal institutions of accountability can be provided through solidarity groups – groups based on shared moral obligations as well as shared interests. Villages where these types of groups exist are more likely to have better local governmental public goods provision than villages without these solidary groups, all other things being equal.

The authors argue that solidarity groups must have two particular structural characteristics: they must be 'encompassing', or open to everyone under the local government's jurisdiction; and they must be 'embedding' in that they incorporate local officials into the group as members. In localities with encompassing and embedding solidary groups, citizens and officials are more likely to share **a common set of ethical standards and moral obligations**. When the boundaries of a solidarity group overlap with the administrative boundaries of the local government, embedded officials have a strong social obligation to contribute to the good of the group as effectively the group and the public are the same. Here they can **earn moral standing** for providing public goods and **suffer severe social sanctions** for not doing so. Officials in localities with encompassing and embedding solidarity groups thus have an extra incentive to provide public goods and services to their jurisdiction.

Barr et al. (2012) argue that the decision to participate in collective action is a social dilemma with the effectiveness of any accountability intervention conditional upon individuals' willingness and ability to overcome collective action problems. The strength of the relationship between a given intervention and participatory outcomes is moderated by individual-level attributes and community-level formal and informal institutions that affect people's willingness to cooperate with others in collective action situations. An experimental study on pupils' parents in Albania found that **individuals' willingness to**

**cooperate** with others in a collective action game was closely correlated with willingness to partake in other collective action activities (Barr et al. 2012). Parents who behaved cooperatively in the game were more likely to have participated in the most recent school accountability system and in the most recent parliamentary elections. Districts characterised by more cooperative parents have higher participation in school accountability and higher voter turnout and this finding was robust after controlling for district-specific characteristics.

## 5. Nature of the public good

Though ‘pure’ public goods may be non-excludable and non-rivalrous, not all public goods strictly fit these criteria. Examples of non-excludable, non-rivalrous public goods which are likely to suffer collective action failure are: planting or harvest food together; using a common facility for marketing products; maintaining a local irrigation system or patrolling a local forest to see that users are following rules; and meeting to decide on rules related to these activities (Ostrom 2004).

That said, certain ‘impure’ public goods face similar risks of free-riding. One example is the provision of water services. Kacker and Joshi (2012) argue that piped water systems are conducive to triggering collective action. This is primarily because:

- Piped networks enable relatively **clear boundaries** of user households associated with particular piped systems (or even branches of systems in the case of large systems), unlike public standpipes or informal water vendors.
- Piped water systems require **substantial investments** by the households prior to accessing water. Households acquire a stake in the system operations, creating incentives to demand formalisation and adequate levels of service, by virtue of bearing the cost of service.

Essentially the configuration of these systems encourages small groups to form to prevent free-riding and payments introduce a sense of a right to provision. With services derived from water vendors the investments are not made by households, at least directly. Consequently the stakes are much lower, and erratic or poor services may not generate the motivational force for mobilisation and claim-making.

Though collective action can be successful in helping ensure some public goods or services are delivered, the situation is generally far from straight-forward. In a political economy analysis of water and sanitation sectors in Colombo, Mcloughlin and Harris (2013) argue that “progress is not always a rosy picture of collective collaboration to achieve universal goals” (Mcloughlin and Harris 2013: 18). Instead there is a **continuous process of negotiation and contestation**, and collective action is successful where “the different political and economic incentives of key actors (citizens, politicians and bureaucrats) have on balance favoured a consistent degree of provision” (Mcloughlin and Harris 2013: 18).

The authors argue that their findings are consistent with those that emphasise the importance of paying due attention to collective action problems (e.g. Booth 2012a). However, such public goods provision is better understood by appreciation of the coexistence and complementarity of principal-agent models with collective action models. Neither approach alone is sufficient. The authors argue that “the ability to manage motivational and informational issues that can lead to collective action failures depended on mechanisms that incentivise contributions and allow the actors involved to sufficiently limit potential risks (e.g. free riding, petty corruption)” (Mcloughlin and Harris 2013: 19).

The research on water provision is not, however, consistently positive in terms of allowing collective action to take place. Wild and Chambers (2012) found that in a Sierra Leone case study collective action constraints contributed to the subversion of the water pricing regime. This included pipe breaking; illegal household connections or reconnections installed without registration of customers with the relevant utility; and non-payment by politically powerful users. The ways in which service users avoid payment varied significantly across the socioeconomic spectrum, but the effective immunity from payment created significant free rider problems, with enough individuals avoiding payment to undermine service delivery.

In his background report for the 2011 WDR, Johnston (2010: 12) explains, “Building institutions, acting on their incentives and abiding by their restrictions...requires a belief that others will do so as well. Why should I pay my taxes, refrain from bribing the bureaucrats, and refuse to take petty benefits from the local political boss/warlord if I believe others will continue to do so? Expectations critical to reform will often revolve not just around official behavior and government policy, but also around what I think those other people on the far side of the river are likely to do.” What emerging research on collective action suggests is that *trust* is as essential – if not more so – than accountability, and that accountability programming that breaks down trust through a confrontational approach may make collective action more difficult.

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