

Social accountability in situations of conflict and fragility

Donor support to social accountability in fragile and conflict-affected states is a relatively new phenomenon. It has emerged with the lessons that top-down anti-corruption approaches have often failed and different approaches are needed to improve state accountability to its people. With increasing support to fragile and conflict-affected states, donors should focus their efforts to: identify and support local accountability measures; strengthen partnerships across sectors, as well as demographic and geographic divides; and support collaborative governance and capacity building to strengthen the social contract between state and society in the wake of crisis.



Accountability challenges in fragile and conflict-affected states

Fragile states are home to 14 per cent of the world's population, and up to 33 per cent of the world's poorest people, according to the World Bank.¹ A third of all aid to developing countries goes to fragile and conflict-affected states. While there is no clear agreement on the concept of fragile states, they are generally noted for their limited ability to govern a population and territory, and build mutually constructive and reinforcing relations with society.² The consequent developmental and security risks threaten the long-term livelihoods of communities and present some of the most complex challenges faced by the international community.

In the context of post-war reconstruction, the threat of a potential return to violence is high, state capacities and responsiveness are weak and aid is often abundant. High levels of aid often create opportunities for the misuse of resources, conditions of high inflation and unrealistic conditions that breed resentment and reduce state actors' interest and incentive to deliver public goods. Trust and legitimacy are lacking as social cohesion has broken down, while citizens' expectations are high in the context of abundant resources. The failure to fulfil state functions and build accountability in the immediate years after war creates high risks for corruption and renewed violence. In this period of high hopes and expectations, there is nevertheless often little emphasis from donors and partner governments

on public access to information and strengthening local accountability mechanisms.³

What is social accountability?

Social accountability relies on civic engagement, whereby ordinary citizens participate directly or indirectly in holding providers to account.⁴ Identifying who are appropriate facilitators of social accountability depends on the context. Channels such as civil society organisations often link citizens and the state, building accountability through community mobilisation, training, dialogue and collective action. Through this dynamic process, public officials are called on to inform stakeholders and to justify their behaviour, actions and results. They also may be sanctioned accordingly. Social accountability engages social movements that demand accountability through mechanisms other than the traditional vertical channels (elections) and horizontal channels (legislatures and institutional checks and balances) of formal political accountability.

Much of the learning and knowledge of social accountability derives from groundbreaking initiatives in Brazil, India, Malawi, the Philippines, South Africa and Uganda. In India, the organisation Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) was successful at combining community budget monitoring with freedom of information through social audits of the rural employment guarantee programme in poor communities. This blazed the trail for a national mass movement that culminated in the India Right to Information Act in 2005. The social movements that overthrew corrupt regimes in a range of countries from Asia to the Americas since the mid-1980s were a combination of direct action and heightened awareness raising. They set the stage for greater demands for accountability to the people, including poor and marginalised communities.

Current social accountability initiatives include a range of activities to strengthen transparency, accountability and citizen engagement. They include participatory budgeting, and budget monitoring and analysis, such as public

expenditure tracking surveys and social audits. They comprise of: citizen report cards, community scorecards and citizens' charters; public hearings and citizens juries; community development plans and integrity pacts; e-governance and interactive community radio. The appropriate social accountability tool will depend on the level of citizen capacity and governance in a particular context. Public hearings, for example, may not be suitable in a volatile context where confrontation with public authorities may lead to violent conflict.

Studies of social accountability initiatives point to several "success factors" in building accountable, transparent and responsive states. Stocktaking of social accountability initiatives in the Asia and Pacific Region, carried out by the World Bank, showed that initiatives that used advocacy and communication strategies led to greater social accountability gains than those that did not. Effective advocacy chains that link together different actors for greater social accountability involve the gathering of robust and systematic data and reflecting the communities' pressing needs. This requires: efforts to build capacity to generate, analyse and disseminate findings; evidence-based advocacy and social mobilisation, ensuring that findings and reports reach and influence intended targets using various media.⁵ A similar exercise in Anglophone Africa showed that building civil society's technical expertise in financial management and budget analysis, and approaches to working with the state to overcome mistrust and political resistance were critical factors in the success of independent budget analysis, monitoring and advocacy. Combined with consistency in government recording of data, such efforts have yielded positive results such as budgetary adjustments to support citizen priorities.⁶

Why social accountability in fragile and conflict affected states?

Conventional approaches to strengthening accountability through formal political channels often fail in fragile states. Enforcement based anti-corruption interventions, such as the establishment of an anti-corruption commission, often fall short because they lack independence from the executive and long-term support from the donors, and end up having unintended, destabilising consequences. An effective anti-corruption agency requires conditions that are often lacking in fragile settings, including a functioning judiciary or full prosecutorial powers for the agency and an effective and credible system for registration and fiscal transparency, including asset declarations for all senior officials. Such interventions typically require long-term commitment by the government and key donors, and an enforcement strategy that is an element, but not the driver, of wider institutional reforms.⁷ With the weaknesses in legal systems, enforcement-led approaches in fragile states may be highly politicised and detrimental, with cases of prosecution of high-profile leaders resulting in backlash that can undermine rule of law and fuel conflict.⁸

This points to the tension between short-term needs in fragile and conflict-affected states and the long-term investment required for accountability and trust to take root. Key challenges remain in building collaborative governance and capabilities from the bottom up, ensuring greater access to information, and enabling citizens to use that information to hold leaders accountable. In fragile and

conflict-affected states, where aid and natural resources create an enormous opportunity and potential curse, sound management and trust are needed to ensure the dividends of peace and stability.

Social accountability challenges in fragile and conflict-affected states

While social accountability in fragile states is a relatively recent phenomenon in governance discourse, evidence on citizen engagement,⁹ including in fragile and conflict-affected states such as Niger and Nigeria, highlight the challenges posed by elite capture, violence and coercion. Participating organisations may be co-opted or viewed as agents of external forces. These risks are exacerbated where there are limited means for citizen protection and voice, high factionalism and weak security. As social accountability inherently changes the status quo, those seeking change, particularly if they act alone, may do so at great risk.

Social accountability initiatives may be further limited where it is difficult to mobilise citizens. In addition to security restrictions, this may be due to a lack of coherent leadership or voice within civil society and limited access to information and means of communication. Facilitators of social accountability, such as community-based organisations, often experience difficulties in securing funding and finding the right staff to manage their operations, mobilise and train citizens, engage authorities and stimulate collective action. Those who are drawn to participate in such work may be motivated more by financial or political incentives than commitment to serve the public good. Understanding and addressing such incentives often presents dilemmas when supporting social accountability in contexts of poverty, conflict and marginalisation.

Challenges to social accountability also relate to how information is managed by service providers. Across various countries, different departments of the same government have generated and recorded inconsistent data, leading to frustration when trying to accurately assess effectiveness of government services.¹⁰ Discrepancies across political/administrative districts and sectors have created challenges in consolidating and verifying information on key services such as health and education.

Capacities of both state and non-state actors are often limited in fragile and conflict-affected states. International transparency initiatives, for example, which tend to focus on the supply side of information, have demonstrated the need to support capacities on both the demand and disclosure sides, across all stakeholders. Where civil society is weak or fragmented and government is unable to produce, manage and disseminate information, ongoing support to strengthen skills and systems to collaborate, monitor and use information is often lacking.

Examples of social accountability in fragile and conflict-affected states

Through the Network for Integrity in Reconstruction, civil society organisations in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Nepal, Palestine, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste have received organisational support and built their capacities through peer learning and South-South cooperation. Through collaborative engagement, they help institutionalise social accountability from the ground up to

empower people through access to information, community engagement in monitoring and decision-making and improved infrastructure and service delivery.

Afghanistan¹¹

Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) has implemented innovative approaches to social accountability in fragile states. They work through local accountability mechanisms, such as shuras (community gatherings) and community development councils to facilitate elections of volunteer community monitors. These monitors, who are rooted in the communities, are then trained to access project information on reconstruction projects selected by the communities, survey beneficiaries and assess the reality of projects on the ground. With a relatively modest investment of US\$3,500 to cover facilitation, training and communication costs for the community monitors, community monitoring can contribute to reducing transaction costs and improve delivery of projects with considerable budgets. Under this activity community monitors followed 184 reconstruction projects valued at more than US\$100 million. IWA understands and supports local accountability mechanisms, including shura elections of community monitors, provincial monitoring boards and joint state-society skill building and decision making to help ensure sustainability beyond their intervention.

Figure 1 details the approach of: mobilising community members; engaging them in the election of monitors and selection of priority projects; monitoring through access to information, beneficiary surveys and site visits; and reporting findings to the community, implementing agencies, the government and donors for more effective governance and reconstruction projects. This approach is reported to have contributed to the delivery of critical infrastructure for nearly 60,000 Afghans and prevented corruption and the misuse of resources.

Liberia

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Tracking Network (PRSTN), a coalition of eight Liberian civil society organisations, is monitoring and engaging authorities in the implementation of the national development plan. They have used household survey questionnaires, focus group discussions,

community scorecards and interviews to assess the level of participation, access to information, accountability, acceptability and availability of the Poverty Reduction Strategy projects. The researchers and communities found that despite the recent passage of the Freedom of Information Act, project beneficiaries could not access sufficient information about development initiatives that affect their communities or counties. In their monitoring of schools, they found that while the Government of Liberia’s education policy provides for 1 teacher to 45 students, there were classrooms with 1 teacher to 80 students. They further found that teachers’ salaries do not provide a living wage, that there were too few chairs for students in the schools and that the sanitary conditions in these schools were extremely poor.

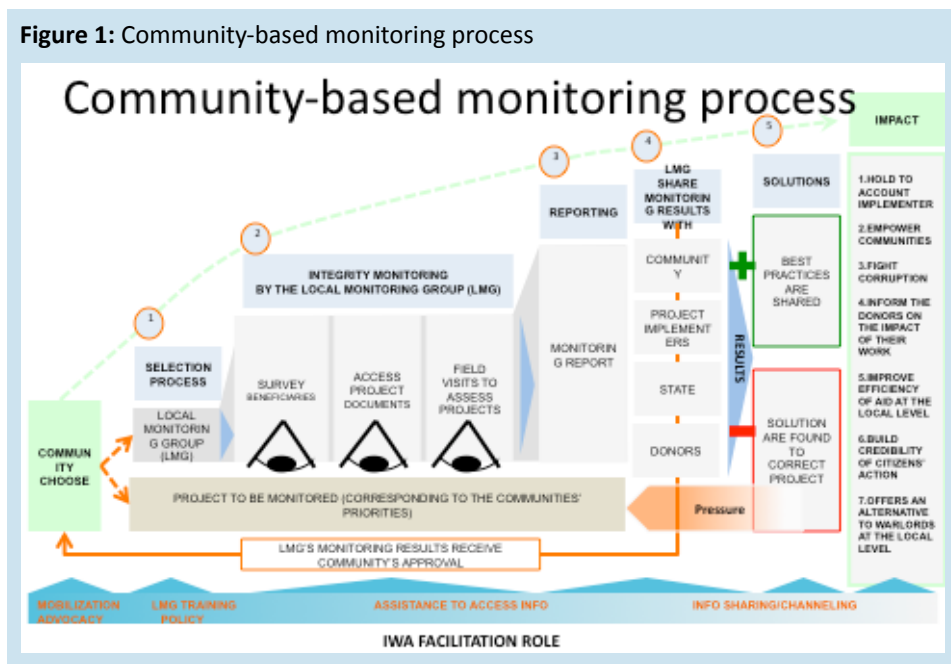
Monitors also noted poor scores on accountability. In Lofa and Bong Counties, for example, participants responded that they cannot hold responsible bodies, including government and contractors, accountable because affected communities are often left out of the decision making process. In Voinjama, Lofa County, communities reported that a grant of US\$82,000 was allegedly given for the construction of a women’s centre, but the money cannot be accounted for and the women’s centre was never constructed. The PRSTN continues to engage authorities at the local and national levels to ensure development funds reach local communities. As a result of PRSTN’s work, the government has committed to integrating citizen feedback in its monitoring and evaluation framework.

Timor-Leste¹²

Since the decades-long independence movement culminated in 2002, Luta Hamutuk (meaning “struggle together”) has been engaging authorities in managing the nation’s budget, natural resources and delivery of infrastructure and services. With over 150 community focal points across the country, Luta Hamutuk conducts community briefings, seminars and training of trainers to share information on the national budget and development project implementation, thereby bridging the state and society. In this nation of just over 1.1 million, Luta Hamutuk has bridged the capital Dili, rural communities and international networks, including the Extractive Industries

Transparency Initiative, bringing together government, civil society and the private sector at all levels.

Collaborative engagement and community monitoring has contributed to the delivery of critical infrastructure for more than 101,660 Timorese people. In Bazartete, a municipality of 63,329 people, evidence-based discussions with the Ministry of Education led to the provision of necessary school rehabilitation and facilities. Community monitors also mobilised to ensure that low quality pipes were substituted with proper materials, so that villagers can today enjoy access to water. In addition to efficiency savings and whistle blowing on project delays and lack of maintenance, Luta Hamutuk’s





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work has led to pro-poor budget allocations, ensuring national funds reach communities across the country.

Conclusions

Donor support to social accountability in fragile and conflict affected states emerged relatively recently. It came with the increasing evidence that top-down anti-corruption approaches were failing. With the consolidation of peace and political stability, there is greater space for social accountability. This calls for strong understanding of the context and drivers of change, analysis and building of state and society's capacities, and locally driven mechanisms to mobilise citizens and address their concerns.

Identify and support local accountability mechanisms

To strengthen social accountability, donors can conduct or commission a mapping of stakeholder capacities and local accountability mechanisms, such as the shuras in Afghanistan and progressive leaders serving citizens at both the community and national levels, such as traditional chiefs who are also members of parliament in Sierra Leone. Knowing who are and how to support social accountability facilitators will depend on the context. In post-war societies, non-governmental organisations or community-based groups who served the public good before and throughout the war may be well placed to build and train networks of change agents, with careful consideration of politico-economic incentives.

Strengthen partnerships across sectors, and demographic and geographic divides

With an increasing number of groups pioneering social accountability initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected states, cross-sectoral partnerships can strengthen understanding of contextual dynamics and possibilities for scale. Social accountability thrives where government has both the

interest and capability to deliver as well as the channels to interact with communities and their representatives.

When these conditions are not present, it is necessary to bridge the capital and periphery, the urban and rural divide, to enable intermediaries, including parliamentarians, civil society organisations and sub-national officials, to convey and act on citizens' concerns. International partners, such as donor and international non-governmental organisations, can strengthen capacities of both state and non-state actors by supporting collaborative skills building, intrastate and cross-country learning and peer support, access to information tools and systems, and networks that drive social accountability. This ensures value for money and sustainability beyond the eventual departure or changing agendas of development partners.

Where possible, support collaborative governance and capacity building to strengthen the social contract

Engagement between state and society is thus necessary to ensure institutional fit between demands, reforms and capacities of providers. Donor support requires strong understanding of who participates at game-changing moments of policy change and how reforms can build inclusiveness and accountability. With understanding of the local context and power dynamics, development partners can play a key role in supporting inclusive political dialogue and settlements, and strengthening accountability mechanisms. This can range from support to statistics offices and information management systems to civic education, joint state-society skill building, monitoring and policy-making. Supporting alliances that cut across socio-economic lines, the public-private divide and local and international partners can strengthen social accountability and deliver development gains, even in the most challenging of settings.

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Notes

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11. For more information on Integrity Watch Afghanistan, please see George Ofori, ed. Contemporary Issues of Construction in Developing Countries, (London: Routledge, 2011), Chapter 11. and <http://www.iwaweb.org/>
12. For more information, on Luta Hamutuk please see Ofori, Contemporary Issues, Chapter 11 and <http://www.lutahamutuk.org/>