



## CENTRE FOR THE FUTURE STATE

### ***Social accountability and service delivery***

Research in Brazil, India and Mexico illustrates the importance of collective action to improved service delivery for the poor. Collective actors can impose social accountability, even where formal accountability mechanisms are weak. Public policy reform processes have an impact on the ability of collective actors, such as NGOs, to exercise social accountability—a strategy that imposes political and reputational costs on providers for service delivery failures. Collective actors that are involved in negotiations at key moments of policy reform and are linked to policymakers in strong networks crossing the public-private divide are more likely to be able to both influence policy and to continue to monitor service delivery in the medium to long term.

#### ***What is social accountability and why is it important?***

Reforms intended to enhance service delivery through providing opportunities for *individuals* to hold service providers accountable, for example through citizen charters or institutionalisation of citizen participation, often do not benefit the poorest in society. There are significant constraints on the agency of poor individuals that restrict their ability to exercise individual accountability, and these are exacerbated by the power inequalities between poor individuals and government officials or other service providers.

In contrast, social accountability relies upon *collective* actors, such as NGOs, neighbourhood associations and the media, to use their ‘voice’ to make failures public. By doing so they are able to impose political and reputational costs on service providers. This may in turn trigger other more formalised modes of accountability such as legislative oversight or prosecution in the court system. Social accountability can be exercised ‘on demand’, in contrast to electoral accountability, that can be exercised only when elections are held. In addition to dealing with shortfalls in service provision according to existing rules and standards, social accountability has the potential to broaden the debate and to address whether existing rights and processes are satisfactory.

#### ***What makes collective action to improve service delivery more likely?***

Public sector reform has an impact on the opportunities and incentives collective actors face to hold service providers accountable. The way services are reorganised or delivered can lead to the emergence of new actors and institutions, strengthen or weaken existing actors and create opportunities for new alliances between various collective actors or between public and private actors.

Research findings show that the likelihood that social accountability will be effective increases when:

- Collective actors representing the poor are involved in policy negotiations at key moments of public sector reform.
- Collective actors are able to engineer some institutionalisation of their role in monitoring service delivery that enables them to access policymakers in the medium to long term.
- Collective actors are able to draw upon networks of relationships that cross the public-private divide.

### ***Policy implications***

- *The poor may benefit more from reforms that allow collective actors to hold service providers accountable than from reforms that rely upon individual action*

Policymakers should consider the circumstances under which collective actors are likely to mobilise and make ongoing demands for accountability.

- *Policymakers should reassess the importance of 'autonomy' for civil society*

Although it has often been assumed that involvement of collective actors in policymaking will lead to them being co-opted by the state, it may in fact lead to greater social accountability. Participants in policymaking have a stronger interest in the implementation of policies when they have been involved in policy processes. Involvement in policy negotiations may also increase the ability of actors to ensure their role in oversight of service delivery is institutionalised, thus facilitating social accountability and policy influence over the medium to long-term.

- *The interaction between state and society is important*

It is not only the characteristics of individual actors that affect their influence on policy and ability to organise effective collective action. Public policy makers and civil society leaders operate within networks of relationships that link public and private sectors and affect how civil society organisations can engage with the state. Such networks are diverse and are rooted in historical and contemporary political, social and cultural contexts. They affect who is able to influence policy and the strategies they adopt to do so. Actors with strong connections to policymakers will be in a better position to influence policy.

- *Development partners should reassess how they engage with civil society*

It is necessary to consider the positioning of collective actors within networks and how this affects their ability to influence policy. Strengthening those who

are well positioned and have connections with influential state actors will have greater impact than working with marginal organisations. Donors might invest in strengthening networks connecting policymakers to the grassroots or facilitate the formation of linkages between actors within civil society and between them and state agents.

Having stressed the importance of collective actors to attaining accountability in service provision for the poor, it is important to consider the claims of such organisations to representation, particularly when they have no formal membership or mandates. Although less formalised claims to representation should not be entirely dismissed, the introduction of formal membership and mechanisms for debating and adopting policy positions might be encouraged. This could help increase the accountability of civil society organisations when they engage in policy negotiations; increase their credibility and their access to the policymaking processes (because they can 'deliver' their publics); and increase the potential for poor citizens to gain access to the state and to public services.

### ***Collective actors and reform of the healthcare and social assistance sectors in Brazil***

The variation between healthcare reform and social assistance programmes in Brazil demonstrates the impact of the design of public policy reform on opportunities for collective action. When collective actors were involved in policy reforms their accountability functions were strengthened as they could influence the design of institutional mechanisms in order to remain involved in monitoring implementation. The reform processes also demonstrated the importance of alliances across the public-private divide in promoting reform and organising accountability.

#### *The impact of public policy on opportunities and incentives for collective action*

Data from São Paulo, Brazil, demonstrate much higher levels of social accountability for the health sector, where collective actors played an important role, than for social services. This is in part a reflection of the different institutional models adopted in each sector.

Through involvement in public policy processes, collective actors concerned about healthcare were able to negotiate the creation of participatory bodies that facilitated their access to decision-making centres over the medium term. The public health movement obtained guaranteed seats for collective actors on health policy councils and there are many points during the service delivery process at which citizens and agents of the state come into contact, including local health posts and participatory councils, the regional coordinating body and the municipal health council.

In contrast, cash transfer programmes in Brazil were deliberately designed to bypass civil society intermediaries, seen as corrupted and politicised. The nature of the programme and the arrangements made for its implementation offered little opportunity for collective actors to mobilise or demand accountability. There are less contact points around which people can mobilise than were evident in the health

sector. Although there are complaints mechanisms for individuals these are of limited use to the poor.

Although social assistance programmes that did not entail a significant role for collective actors have assisted their poor beneficiaries, in the longer term marginalising civil society may be problematic. Collective actors might have been effective in ensuring that eligible families were on cash transfer lists, monitoring of implementation, negotiation of improvements or facilitation of effective communication with beneficiaries.

#### *Alliances across the public-private divide*

Although research in São Paulo found that actors holding positions on formal participatory councils were relatively marginal to policymaking processes, influential connections between the state and actors representing poor and marginalised groups existed outside of these institutions. Issue networks permeated the state, and members of networks held key positions within the public sector. This meant they had multiple formal and *informal* channels through which to influence policy.

The range of actors involved in health sector reform processes included the military (supporting expansion of social rights as a route to legitimisation); progressive technocrats in the bureaucracy (supporting rationalisation of services as a response to a fiscal crisis); and the Sanitarista reform movement. The private sector was also involved, being an important service provider.

#### ***Further reading***

Houtzager, Peter; Joshi, Anu and Gurza Lavalle, Adrián (eds) (2007) *State Reform and Social Accountability: Brazil, India and Mexico*, IDS Bulletin 38.6