

In countries where systems of formal accountability to communities are only recently emerging – such as in Vietnam – everyday resistance of people to official policy, that creates strain in policy implementation and becomes manifested in official monitoring, was in the past an important basis for communicating to the government. This was the case in collective farming, in housing and in trading.

In a sense, a country run by a highly committed socialist party and its bureaucracy has the advantage that central planning is also coupled with central monitoring. This is not so in market-based economies like the Philippines or Indonesia. But in centrally planned and monitored countries the practice of ordinary people that deviates or veers away from the official guidelines for implementation immediately reaches the eyes and ears of party officials. There is, in effect, a hotline that directly connects people to the highest officials. This is absent in other countries where the problem is more often one of neglect and not that of overbearing top-down paternalistic effort to assiduously mobilize people for achieving public welfare and national targets in various fields. In the Philippines we have so many laws and mandates that have no funds to back them up. There is also very little monitoring that happens. This is probably why there is a rising advocacy today for a rights-based approach. We are not sure if Cambodia is more similar to Vietnam or if it is more similar to the Philippines and Indonesia.

When contexts are different, the instruments for social accountability will probably vary as well. If the mechanism of everyday resistance is a good mechanism for changing the local behavior of bureaucrats and for putting policy options on the agenda of policy makers, then perhaps the documentation of the extent and strength of everyday resistance to official policy is a potent instrument – as long as the documentation reaches the correct venues. It may even be possible to create a constituency/or allies within the party bureaucracy, especially in the case of local bureaucrats who already understand the impracticality of top-down policy and agree to the viability of popular alternatives – these people can i) provide information on the manner in which the documentation can be framed or presented so that it will be easy to connect the proposals with discussions that are already going on ii) these local allies (in contradictory locations) will also be helpful in pinpointing party leaders and reformers in the bureaucracy who are already receptive to the modification of policy – initial contact with these people can be in the form of matters that they will be at ease in responding to such as policies that postpone some targets, make minor reallocations. Let's allow them to give people the inch that people are asking for so that the encounter will enable communities to assess if they can already ask for a yard.

So if everyday resistance created policy change in collective farming from the 1950s to the 1980s, one might ask if a similar kind of change is also going to take place in other fields. We need to ask several questions before proceeding:

There were protests and spontaneous public action against corrupt party officials in 1997. What were these protests about? Were they about corruption in particular kinds of services, were they in relation to access to resources?

What prerogatives were devolved to local people's councils? Was the decentralization about policies that had to be changed more quickly than the national government can manage – in the manner that it accommodated change in collective farming and its associated services?

I will mention policy areas and you tell me if local people's councils are empowered to decide or recommend changes to these:

please list the areas of policy and service delivery that are most important to the stakeholders in communities that you work with.

Access to information on the design, location and budget of future projects? local or national?

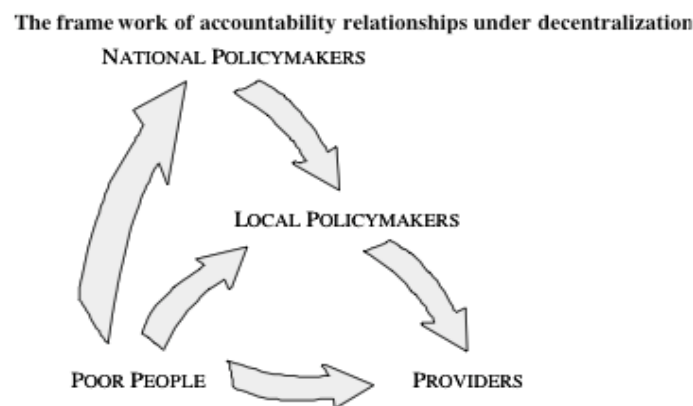
Funds for training, vocational educational and adult education? local or national ministry?

Salaries for teachers and appointment of school administrators?

financing and operation of water impoundment systems and canal maintainance and irrigation expansion?

Surely, it is important to understand the delineation of policy-making, implementation and service delivery realities. Even under a decentralized set-up, we know that the actual practice can vary from one place to another – an Ausaid report claims that this is the case in Vietnam because of the lack of specifics in many areas (which can be good and bad). It will also be important where the social accountability is weak: which node has weaknesses (legal, financial, organizational capacity knowledge), which accountability links need to be strengthened. And you would need to ask this not just for every locality, but also for every problem that needs to be addressed.

figure 1



For every important local problem that needs to be addressed we need to understand what the pressure points are see the drawing I am sending to your emails. Can you tell a story about education, or about the particular province that you are working in.

We have already mentioned three kinds of social accountability activities or sub-objectives above:

- i) recruiting constituencies (mid-level bureaucrats such as those who connect local and national policy makers or service providers and the policy makers from these two levels
- ii) touching base with policy champions who can change policy at the national level
- iii) documenting things that people are already trying to do: on an everyday basis in education, in other areas of government services – these can be the germ of policy or priority alternatives that speak more strongly than words – it would be good to document these in a manner that strengthens the capability of constituencies and policy champions to legitimize the counter proposal.

Annex:
Local governance in Vietnam – Law 29

Information. Local officials are obliged to provide detailed information about a broad range of issues, from national laws to local projects. This includes the decisions of commune people's councils as well as commune budgets, land use plans, results of investigations against corrupt officials, and the enforcement of law and order. Information is to be disseminated in public meetings, or through written documents, public postings or public address systems.

Consultation. Most local government initiatives require public discussion prior to being decided by commune people's councils and committees. The regulations list long-term socioeconomic planning, land use plans and the nomination of candidates to stand for commune people's council elections. In addition, they also cover the mobilization of residents' contributions to infrastructure construction as well as the implementation of national plans on environmental protection, health and water. The views of local residents are to be gathered through questionnaires, feedback boxes or public meetings.

Approval. Local officials must seek majority popular approval for a number of activities, including public works that require contributions from residents. In addition, approval must be obtained for fund-raising plans, for various activities related to maintaining law and order, and for setting up boards to supervise construction projects. Implementation is to take place through public meetings or referendums. If the commune people's committee deems decisions to be inconsistent with relevant laws, however, it can refer them to the district people's committee for review.

Supervision. There are a number of local issues which are "to be supervised and inspected by the people", including the commune budget, land management, results of investigations against corrupt officials and social services. This also applies to the general activities of the people's committee and the implementation of its decisions. Implementation is envisaged through the establishment of people's inspection boards or through mass organizations. In addition, residents are entitled to make proposals and complaints, as well as request information from local officials about issues of concern to them.