

Oxfam learning program on social accountability
Phase I: Online discussions

Summary of Discussion Points from Week 1 Chat

1.0 As actions that involve citizens demanding accountability from government officials, service providers, and other power holders, social accountability build on a number of assumptions:

1.1 It is grounded on the idea of the social compact wherein people select their leaders or representatives in government (through elections or other process) who are then vested the power to make certain decisions and to act for the public good. In turn, these public officials are then expected to report back to the public and thus be held accountable for their conduct. Social accountability, by strengthening the demand-side element to the accountability equation, acts like a “glue” that enhances the “stickiness” of the social compact.

1.2 Social accountability upholds and starts off from some values, ideals, and principles that have come to underpin the social compact in democratic societies. Social accountability initiatives put into practice basic citizens’ rights of information, association, voice, and negotiation. Such actions also build on and aim at the realization of good governance principles like transparency, accountability, and participation. In pushing for improved development outcomes like better service delivery, protection of people’s rights, and improvement of people’s welfare, social accountability actions uphold values like justice, equity, inclusiveness, etc.. Many such values that have shaped the idea of the social compact and defined frameworks for active citizenship, have been articulated largely from the experiences of Western democracies. It would be interesting to look at how the social compact, for instance, is understood and articulated within societies in the East Asia and Pacific region. What are the possible implications for approaches to constructive citizen engagement?

1.3 Social accountability complements internal accountability mechanisms of the state (involving legal restrictions on discretionary power, systems of checks and balances, fiscal and administrative procedures, and oversight functions). One reason for social accountability approaches was in fact the perceived weakness of these internal accountability mechanisms in many countries (even in developed ones). What if these “supply-side” accountability mechanisms are already working effectively, is there still a need for demand-side approaches? Does social accountability present an intrinsic value to a democratic set-up (like “deepening democracy”)?

2.0 There are enabling conditions for social accountability. These include democratic institutions, decentralized governance arrangements, supportive legal and policy frameworks, spaces and processes for citizen participation, citizens’ awareness of their rights, availability of information, organized and capable citizens’ groups, networks of citizens’ groups that

are able to leverage this strength effectively with government, cultural appropriateness, etc.

2.1 Can social accountability approaches be used or applied to help create these enabling conditions? The dynamics of citizen engagement is such that it has the potential to create, deepen and expand the conditions that could nurture its own growth. In cases when most of the supportive conditions are not present or are weak, the importance of identifying effective entry points or openings, creative strategies, allies within government, and appropriate messages to stakeholders are brought more to the fore.

2.2 For social accountability actions, as in the case of other approaches to citizen engagement, it may be relevant to evaluate not only how these initiatives impact on governance and development outcomes, but also on how they are able to sustain and expand opportunities and spaces for continued engagement.

3.0 Power relations should be considered when doing social accountability. We need to be conscious of how such approaches or engagements are actually transforming the unequal distribution of power and access to information or resources among different stakeholders.

3.1 We need to assess how social accountability approaches are able to transform power relations not only between civil society organizations (CSOs) and government, but also among CSOs and between CSOs and communities. For instance, different vulnerable groups may have varying interests. And one strategy of the state in dealing with civil society has been to pit one sector's interests against the other. There is thus a need for multi-stakeholder spaces wherein CSOs and vulnerable groups can reach consensus on their demands. But, how do power relations play out and are changed in such spaces? How are the interests of poor women as a vulnerable group highlighted and considered in these spaces?

4.0 Some challenges in terms of advancing social accountability in Oxfam's country work:

4.1 In Vietnam, these include raising people's awareness of their rights, building local capacities for engagement, working with or towards strengthening the state's internal accountability mechanisms, further enhancing and expanding the enabling environment for constructive citizen engagement with government.

4.2 In the Philippines, Oxfam's programs need further support in terms of strengthening the capacities of vulnerable groups to negotiate with government, and in improving the inclusion of vulnerable groups', particularly poor women's, interests in the negotiation process. The learning group has raised the idea of assessing the quality of citizen engagement with government in their programs as a possible project under the learning program.

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