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Accountability in fragile states[1]

Abstract

This paper examines two cases, Uganda and Nepal, to identify the determining features and prerequisites for the establishment of citizen-government accountability structures within fragile and conflicted environments. Particular emphasis has been placed on understanding the sequencing and relative importance of key stages of development and support that can be provided in the establishment of the mechanisms. This is aimed at helping interested parties target their support and build a greater understanding of the timeframe for the development and utilisation of this type of citizen-government interaction. The paper does not examine the effectiveness or appropriateness of accountability mechanisms per se, but rather attempts to identify prerequisites within civil society that are required to be present in order for a range of mechanisms to work.

This paper is specifically intended to be relevant to countries such as South Sudan, Somaliland and South Central Somalia.

The issue. How can effective accountability mechanisms be developed in fragile state environments?

Improving service delivery in fragile states is an urgent priority; it helps meet basic humanitarian needs and ameliorates the root causes of conflict and instability while also enhancing government legitimacy and citizen-state trust. Yet in fragile contexts the state is often unable or unwilling to provide services, and 'long route' or political accountability is non-existent or ineffectual. In these situations, strengthening 'short route' or social accountability can be an effective means of improving both governance and service provision.

This report examines donor funded accountability mechanisms currently in use in two fragile states, Uganda and Nepal, and is based on research carried covering both primary key informant interviews from donor agencies and civil society organisations and secondary information sources. The differing levels and types of fragility in these countries make direct comparison of the effectiveness of mechanisms difficult but still allow for the extraction of general lessons with a more universal applicability.

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[1] This piece is derived from the report commissioned by Allan Duncan, KPMG IDAS Associate Director and Head of the Fragile and Post-Conflict States unit on" Accountability in Fragile Sates: Lessons from Nepal and Uganda". by Adam Alagiah, Daria Oulianova, Elena Pietschmann, Vasundhra Thakur London School of Economics, 2011. This is one of a series of short pieces from KPMG IDAS Advisors designed to show the practical application of development experience. The series covers Fragile States, Private Sector Development, Governance, and Organisational Development and Performance Improvement and is edited by Julio Garrido-Mirapeix, Partner, and Abijah Kanene, Manager – Market Intelligence Learning and Knowledge, IDAS Africa.

Nepal

Nepal is a fragile state which has only recently emerged from conflict. Political infrastructure is weak and civil society is fragmented hampering implementation of pro-poor policies. In most cases, however, poor services are the result of government inability, rather than unwillingness, to provide them. Reflecting this context, most mechanisms in operation are targeted at building social cohesion, mobilizing citizens and facilitating citizen-state interactions. The full case study examines initiatives representative of these trends, and identifies the key mechanisms determining their success: (1) community empowerment via increased access to information and community-led capacity building; and (2) citizen-state engagement via a communications platform and network formation among multiple stakeholders.

Uganda

Uganda on the other hand exhibits a more subtle type of fragility. The country has registered impressive economic growth figures since the end of the civil war. Yet the Ugandan state is still considered fragile with regards to social effectiveness and social legitimacy, while the prolonged conflict in the north continues to exert a destabilising influence. Poor services tend to be a combination of government inability at the national level and unwillingness at the local level. These conditions are thus ideal for targeted social accountability initiatives to generate improvements in service delivery and in governance at the local level.

Main Findings

This section highlights the main themes identified as determining the success or failures of the mechanisms examined in both countries.

Sustainability

A central observation for most accountability mechanisms examined was a chronic failure to consider their sustainability or broader implications in the societies targeted. For initiatives that aim to 'empower' citizens, success by definition implies long-term empowerment. Where empowerment is ephemeral or subsides after the end of a project, one would consider empowerment to have failed. Unfortunately, in both country examples and relevant literature, this issue was rarely given adequate consideration. The relative absence of documentation on the long-term sustainability of accountability mechanisms obviously does not translate to an understanding that there is an implicit long-term failure for any of the programmes. However, as significant resources are channelled in social accountability programmes globally a great rigor in the analysis and support to this aspect of the work requires to be undertaken.

Sequencing

A common issue that was identified throughout the research was the relative lack of differentiation by both donors and international NGOs to varying capacities of civil societies. This resulted in relatively sophisticated mechanisms being supported within civil society environments that were unable to adequately utilise them. Differentiating between alternate functional states of civil society groups and environments and providing technical support to further develop their institutional and individual capacities can have a significant impact on the subsequent outcomes of their uptake and use of accountability tools in support of their core mandate.

Given the multifaceted and shifting nature of fragility, there are few standard trajectories taken by fragile states. As such, offering conclusions on the ideal order of interventions in fragile states is not practical. However, it is possible to specify which components to prioritise for successful accountability mechanisms. Set out below are examples of the type of support and programmes that were identified as most effective at each stage of civil society development. The paper recognises that there is a greater complexity of categories of states of civil society, as well as, multiple stages being present within a single environment; however, the scope of this work necessitated a simplification of the strata of these stages of development.

- **Emerging civil society,** within this context, development of internal management and communication structures allows groups to articulate and present issues and form pressure groups including ad hoc and permanent linkages between other similar interest groups. Consequently, concentrating on development of core functionality of civil society groups was found to provide the greatest return on donor investment and support;

- **Low to medium capacity civil society,** where groups have basic management functionality development of information gathering, analysis and communication skills were identified as key to improving their utilisation of social accountability mechanisms that were supported by donor groups;

- **Functional sophisticated civil society,** where groups are effectively operating then developing negotiation skills for interactions with government bodies, advocacy and communication skills were identified as improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the accountability work being undertaken.

Technology

There are exciting possibilities for the incorporation of new technologies, such as mobiles phones, into accountability mechanisms. It is crucial that these technologies be used and accessible to citizens, and that civil society have the capacity to utilise them effectively. However, often the tools used in these mechanisms can be seen as the end in themselves. Although technology clearly has significant potential for expanding the geographical range and possibilities of the work carried out by civil society, it should be recognised that it is only effective in the short-term within a functioning system and it is the development of the system itself that we should focus on.

What works and what should we focus on

As stated above, there is no set sequencing of interventions that should take place within any given fragile environment for the support to civil society for accountability mechanisms. However, set out below are the key elements of support that should be addressed in order to develop a functional and effective institution.

- **Create demand.** Within fragile and conflicted states there can be a disenfranchisement of citizen interaction with State processes and decision making. This separation of State and citizen can result in low levels of expectation and therefore demand for accountability from the citizens and civil society. Using a rights-based approach, education can be provided to develop the expectation of service delivery by governments and local authorities. This situation is particularly relevant to countries such as South Sudan where the government has been largely absent in the provision of services such as health, education and sanitation. This has subsequently precipitated the general perception that these basic services are provided by external actors such as the UN or NGOs.

- **Build relations with government.** For citizen-government accountability mechanisms to be effective they must be seen to be contributing to the State rather than be directly adversarial and confrontational. Supporting the development of relationships and understanding between civil society and government bodies can contribute towards ensuring that the voice being developed in the civil society will be not only heard but acted on with government.

- **Support capacity to gather information.** It is very common for civil society groups to gather as much information and data as they can and perceive the information accumulated as an end in itself. This situation can often lead to a deluge of data which produces outputs of limited relevance to the government bodies originally targeted. Consequently, building capacity within these groups to identify what is important and how to access unavailable information can significantly contribute to the quality and effectiveness of the outputs of any accountability process.
- **Develop analytical and communication skill.** Information is of little use unless it is analysed and then used in an efficient and effective way that directly adds value to a process of accountability or decision making. Building institutional and individual capacity to identify, filter and process data available to them can directly influence the quality and credibility of the outputs of accountability mechanisms.

Conclusion

The overriding conclusion from the case study analysis is that the key factors determining the success or failure of accountability initiatives are the choice of appropriate mechanisms relevant to the contextual variables. The predominant categories of contextual factors that thus emerge are as follows:

- Civil society capacity

- Availability and access to information

- Government support for improving accountability.

Within each category are important nuances and sub-categories which should be considered. Depending on which of these factors or combination of factors is weak or lacking, different mechanisms should be implemented and are likely to succeed.