



## Social accountability

### Introduction

This bulletin focuses on the accountability of government actors toward citizens through citizen or civil society organizations (CSOs) led efforts to hold government accountable. Democratic governance recognises citizens' rights to demand accountability and public actors' obligations to be accountable. Accountability is the obligation of government to account for or take responsibility for their actions. Government has internal mechanisms for accountability that involve checks and balances between arms of government, administrative rules and legal procedures as well as auditing systems. Social accountability refers to approaches by which citizens, CSOs and other non-state actors hold government and service providers accountable for their performance. It relies on civic engagement, that is, through ordinary citizens and/or CSOs, to directly or indirectly demand accountability from government. Social justice and human rights are assured when citizens, who have a key role in enhancing government's accountability,

reduction of corruption and improvement of public service delivery seek answers, responses and redress.

### Background to social accountability

Social accountability has always been existent. Its purpose and level of efficacy varied between communities and countries over time. Periodic elections of public officials have been used for political and social accountability. They have however been viewed as inadequate for continuing social accountability. Internal government accountability mechanisms that involve political checks and balances, administrative rules and procedures, auditing requirements, and law enforcement agencies like courts and the police can be called "supply side". With the supply side governments are responsible for provision, management and evaluation of the accountability measures. Citizen, CSO and other non-state initiated social accountability is the "demand side". Good governance proponents have been calling for the strengthening of the "demand side" of accountability to run parallel to and

complement the supply side of accountability. The demand side of accountability amplifies citizen voices and can achieve desired responsiveness from government.

“Demand” accountability is not entirely new. Citizens have always used demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and public interest lawsuits to pursue social justice and human rights. While reviewing the development agenda in 2001 and 2004 the World Bank identified social accountability as a more effective tool for making governments accountable to their citizens. The social accountability involved participatory data collection and transparency in information management centred on public participation and engagement with the state. This allowed citizens to engage with governments to have their voices heard and to negotiate for change. This was motivated by the World Bank goals of promoting poverty reduction and effective and sustainable development. Social accountability was adopted in different countries at different times. The growth of civic society as Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), pressure and interest groups has been aiding social accountability.

### **Tools of social accountability**

The main tools for social accountability are as follows:

- *Participatory public policy making:* examples include Constitutional outreach meetings where citizens indicate their expectations on what the Constitution should contain.
- *Participatory budgeting:* examples include CSO-led analysis of the impact and implications of budget allocations, demystification of the technical content of the budget, awareness-raising pointing out discrepancies between government policy priorities and resource allocations, and public education campaigns to improve budget literacy through publicisation of draft budgets of local authorities for public input.
- *Public expenditure tracking:* examples include publicised accounting statements by parastatals, local authorities and release of expenditure statements by government departments to relevant Parliamentary Committees.
- *Citizen monitoring:* examples include the creation of independent citizen oversight committees or watchdog groups to monitor service delivery or the state's compliance with rules, regulations and principles.
- *Evaluation of public services:* examples include the positive or negative reviews of health services and the use of relevant complaints processes.

## **Importance of social accountability**

The accountability of government is essential for good governance and a prerequisite for an effective democracy, development effectiveness and citizen empowerment. Social accountability allows ordinary citizens' access to information, opportunities to express their needs and demand accountability from government. Without it their governments can disillusion citizens. Governments can lack incentives for improved performance and cease to be legitimate. Development effectiveness can deteriorate as a result of poor policy design culminating in poor public service delivery. Feedback from service beneficiaries is essential to improve service delivery. Genuine feedback is however achieved more through social accountability as opposed to internal government mechanisms for accountability that, like elections, can be rigged. Equity-based resource allocations, exposure of corruption and mending the gap between service supply and demand have been achieved through social accountability. Although social accountability has no guarantees, when successfully implemented it can result in:

- Poverty reduction
- Sustainable development
- Improved public service delivery
- Empowered communities
- Transparency

## **Main determinants for achieving social accountability**

Social accountability is only possible when citizens have the right to demand accountability and government has an obligation to be accountable. Constitutional provisions for such rights and obligations forms the base for social accountability. Additional determinants include:

- mechanisms for information exchange, dialogue and negotiation between citizens and the state;
- willingness and ability of citizens and civic society to actively seek government accountability;
- willingness and ability of politicians and civil servants to account to the people; and
- enabling political, legal, social, cultural and economic factors.

A disabling environment does not promote social accountability.

## **Social accountability in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwean civic society as CBOs, NGOs, pressure and interest groups have been doing the following on social accountability:

- educating citizens on human rights and service delivery
- sharing critical information on rights and government performance

- promoting citizen dialogue, feedback and consultation with the government
- demanding improved government performance.

Government has shown the capacity to be able to respond favourably by adopting Constitutional provisions proposed by civic society in 2013. Some policy and practice changes have also emanated from citizen demands.

Social accountability has however not always paid off in Zimbabwe. Citizen voices have not always been heard or received adequate responsiveness due to the following:

- restricted political space for the operation of civic society
- Government's non-compliance with Constitutional provisions on freedoms of the media, expression, assembly, association and privacy rights
- harassment and intimidation of civic society

- selective application of the law enforcement as a way of deterring social accountability.

### Recommendations and conclusion

Social accountability is required in Zimbabwe for the realisation of the nation's ideals and aspirations; to ensure that the Constitution is being adhered to; to address past injustices; to promote good governance and transparency and to manage corruption. Zimbabwean society has had civic society organisations not just complementing the role of government in facilitating development but also in calling for government to be accountable. It is essential for government and citizens of Zimbabwe to initiate actions that citizens, communities and CSOs use to hold government accountable for their decisions and actions. These include citizen participation in public policy making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking and citizen monitoring of public service.

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