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# SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

What does the evidence really say?

Comments welcome

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# So what exactly *is* social accountability?

Social accountability strategies try to improve public sector performance by bolstering both citizen engagement and government responsiveness

- ▶ In practice, social accountability (**SAcc**) is an **evolving umbrella category** that includes:
  - ▶ Citizen monitoring/oversight/feedback on public sector performance
  - ▶ User-centered public information access/dissemination
  - ▶ Public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms
  - ▶ Citizen participation in resource allocation decisions, such as participatory budgeting
- ▶ SAcc is one of many good governance strategies – some overlap and are mutually reinforcing
- ▶ So – there is a menu of options, but how do we know what works?

# What does the evidence of SAcc impact tell us?

- ▶ Many excellent literature reviews already exist...
- ▶ For many, the evidence so far seems inconclusive - now what?
- ▶ Keep in mind widely varying expectations - from “magic bullet” to “just hype”

## Let's reframe the question:

How can rethinking the evidence help to address the “what next?” question?

# Preview of the argument:

If one unpacks the impact evaluation evidence, it actually tests two very different approaches under the broad SAcc umbrella: tactical and strategic

- ▶ **Tactical SAcc approaches**

- ▶ Are bounded interventions (also known as tools)
- ▶ Are limited to society-side efforts
- ▶ Assume that information provision alone will inspire collective action with sufficient power to influence public sector performance

- ▶ **Strategic SAcc approaches**

- ▶ Deploy multiple tactics (mutually-reinforcing tools)
- ▶ Encourage enabling environments for collective action
- ▶ Coordinate citizen voice initiatives with governmental reforms that bolster public sector responsiveness

Rereading evaluations through this new lens, it turns out that:

- ▶ Evidence of results of tactical approaches is mixed
- ▶ Evidence of results of strategic approaches is much more promising

**Takeaway: Coordinate pro-accountability reforms from both society and the state, through a sandwich strategy**

First, let's consider how we read the evidence...  
What assumptions do we make?

- ▶ If the evidence is mixed, what does that really mean?
- ▶ Do specific cases of lack of impact “disprove” the broader concept?
- ▶ Do specific cases of positive impact “prove” the broader concept?
- ▶ What would “proof of concept” for SAcc look like?
- ▶ What is “proof of concept,” anyway?

# What is “proof of concept?”

## AND HOW DOES IT HELP TO THINK ABOUT “WHAT WORKS?”

The term is widely used in scientific, medical and engineering fields (6 million hits)

### ▶ What makes an idea convincing?

- ▶ “Proof of concept (or principle)” refers to the demonstration that a proposed idea functions as predicted.
- ▶ Acceptance of such evidence requires a precise definition of the concept, as well as testing under conditions that would suggest possible generalizability

### ▶ The path from theory to practice can be long and uneven

- ▶ For example, the “theory of change” behind vaccines originated in 1796...
- ▶ Yet even now, they only work for certain diseases, to some degree, with specific substances and doses that are only discovered after extensive experimentation

- ▶ The point of this example is that even “high impact” solutions to problems may have only partial impacts, only under certain conditions, only for certain problems

### ▶ “The *‘proof of concept, followed by experimentation’* approach is a useful alternative to framing the question as “does SAcc work?” – a formulation that assumes:

- ▶ A dichotomous, yes-or-no answer
- ▶ The answer can be based on a relatively small number of experiments
- ▶ SAcc is expected to work all by itself, in the absence of other good governance reforms

# Evaluations of SAcc interventions that find low impact suggest broader propositions:

- ▶ **Information is not enough.** Impact evaluations have tested the proposition that local dissemination of service delivery outcome data will activate collective action, which will in turn improve service provider responsiveness.
  - ▶ Several influential studies find no impacts (Banerjee et al 2010, Lieberman, Posner and Tsai 2013, Keefer and Khemani 2012)
- ▶ **Bottom-up monitoring often lacks bite.** Impact evaluations have tested the proposition that local oversight of public works, by itself, can limit corruption
  - ▶ Community monitoring may have no impact (Olken 2007)
- ▶ **Induced participation in local development is often captured.** Many studies have documented development outcomes of both community-driven and decentralized social investments, which are widely seen as SAcc-related
  - ▶ A major meta-analysis of top-down local development found very mixed results (Mansuri and Rao 2013)

# As we interpret these findings, keep in mind:

## DEBATES OVER RCT IMPACT EVALUATION CONTINUE...

- ▶ **The scope of most IE evidence is narrow**
  - ▶ IEs tend to focus on just a few SAcc tools (info dissemination/local oversight)
  - ▶ There is less evidence on grievance redress mechanisms, citizen report cards & scaled-up monitoring
  - ▶ Most field experiments are limited to pilots
  - ▶ Few address already-existing, nationally scaled-up SAcc strategies (e.g., social audits in India, participatory budgeting in Brazil, community food councils in Mexico)
- ▶ **There can be a tension between research and practice.** RCT methods require “unbundled” interventions, to be able to isolate their effects, when practitioners may prefer to try many approaches at once.
- ▶ **Rigor and generalizability are not the same.** Evaluation specialists question the external validity of individual field experiments, as well as their capacity to explain causal mechanisms (Basu, 2013, Woolcock 2013). Even in the medical field, many different RCTs are often insufficient for generalization.
- ▶ **Discussion of “what works” is constrained by limited information on “what happened” in the first place**
  - ▶ M&E is incorporated very inconsistently in WB local development projects (Mansuri and Rao 2013)

# Rereading the evidence through fresh eyes helps...

- ▶ It turns out that some very influential studies of SAcc non-impact do not actually show what many think they show...
- ▶ This rereading reveals limitations of tactical approaches to SAcc...
- ▶ ... and helps to inform tighter, more strategic SAcc propositions

## REREADING THE EVIDENCE THROUGH FRESH EYES HELPS...

Iconic study	"Pop" version of message	Behind that message – what do the findings actually show?	Reframed takeaway
<p>Olken (2007)</p> <p>Village public works in Indonesia (roads)</p>	<p>Top down and bottom up approaches are dichotomous. Top down central audits work, community monitoring can't reduce corruption</p>	<p>Community-based monitoring lacked access to the key info about projects (Olken 2009). Plus, central audits don't sanction, only the threat of community responses gives them the clout to reduce corruption</p>	<p>The central audit works through community response (social sanctions and village elections). So central audits actually work because of SAcc. <b>Top down and bottom up accountability are synergistic</b></p>
<p>Banerjee, Banerji, Duflo, Glenester, Khemani (2010)</p> <p>Village education committees in India</p>	<p>Community oversight doesn't help to improve public service delivery</p>	<p>The village education oversight committees rarely function in practice. Plus, parent reps are chosen by local authorities</p>	<p>Enabling environment was lacking. Actual participation &amp; oversight were minimal. This looks like a <b>"false negative"</b></p>
<p>Mansuri and Rao (2013)</p> <p>Meta-analysis of local development research</p>	<p>Participatory local development often doesn't work - it's oversold</p>	<p>Top-down local development projects are vulnerable to elite capture. Few included SAcc measures. Bottom-up, organic participation was not addressed</p>	<p>Local development initiatives likely to work better if they <b>combine central oversight with SAcc measures</b></p>

## THIS RE-READING OF THE EVIDENCE LEADS FROM TACTICAL TO STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO SACC...

Tactical approach	Yet evaluations show....	Strategic approach
Information is power	For poor people – don't count on it	Information that is perceived as actionable, in an enabling environment, can motivate collective action – especially if voice can trigger "teeth" (state responsiveness)
Decentralization brings government closer to the people	Not so much	Only democratic decentralization brings government closer to the people
Community participation is democratic	Social bias and elite capture are common. Allocating public funds to local elites strengthens them	Community participation processes with enabling environments, involving specific measures to include underrepresented members can be more democratic
Community oversight can reduce "government failure" by itself	Not much, without accountability measures from above	Centralized accountability measures can reduce "government failure" – especially if bolstered by community oversight & sanctions

# Next steps towards assessing “proof of concept:”

There is substantial evidence that SAcc strategies can help to deliver tangible development impacts, across a wide range of countries and sectors

## CLEAR-CUT POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT IMPACTS (LARGE N STUDIES ONLY)

Sector	Country	Tool	Impact	Key sources
Education	Uganda	Dissem of \$ info	Less leakage	Rienikka & Svensson (2004, 2009)
Education	Uganda	Participatory monitoring	Ed outcomes	Barr et al (2012)
Education	Kenya	Ctty hiring of teachers	Teacher effort & ed outcomes	Duflo et al (2012)
Education	India	Dissem of \$ info & parent roles	Teacher effort & ed outcomes	Pandey et al (2011)
Education	Indonesia	School co-governance	Ed outcomes	Pardhan et al (2011)
Local govt	Brazil	Participatory budgeting	Lower infant mortality	Gonçalves (2013), Touchton & Wampler (2013)
Local govt	Mexico	Participatory budgeting	Increased basic service coverage	Díaz-Cayeros et al (2013)
Local govt	India	Participatory budgeting	Improved targeting	Besley, Rao, Pandey (2005), Chaudhuri, Harilal, & Heller (2007)
Health	Uganda	Participatory monitoring	Improved health outcomes	Björkman & Svensson, (2009), Björkman, de Walque, Svensson (2013)
Local elections	Brazil	Dissem of audit info	Electoral accountability	Ferraz and Finan (2008)
Public works	India	Social audits	Less wage theft	Shankar (2010)
Public works	Indonesia	Local dissem of audits	Less leakage of road funds	Olken (2007)
Water	Int'l	Co-governance	Econ, social & sustainability impacts	Narayan (1995)
Water	India, Sri Lanka	Co-governance	Econ, social & sustainability impacts	Krishna & Uphoff (2002), Uphoff & Wijayarathna (2000), Isham & Kähkönen (2002)
Targeted food subsidy	India	Access to info	Access to ration cards w/o bribes	Peisakhin & Pinto (2010)

# When SAcc works, *how* does it work?

## THREE EXAMPLES...

Study	Findings	Causal explanation
<p><b>Community monitoring of health services in Uganda.</b> Björkman and Svensson (2009) test a report card process designed to encourage voice, avoid elite capture and facilitate periodic dialogue with health workers</p>	<p>Reduction in infant mortality in treatment communities (33%), increased use of outpatient services (20%) and overall improvement of health treatment practices (immunization rates, waiting time, absenteeism)</p>	<p>Community discussion &amp; assessment of service performance, plus facilitated direct negotiation of expected actions with service providers encouraged them to improve performance</p>
<p><b>Participatory budgeting in Brazil.</b> Both Gonçalves (2013) and Touchton and Wampler (2013) document long-term Brazilian municipal spending priorities, comparing those with and without participatory budgeting (PB)</p>	<p>PB municipalities = 169 of 5,561 (in 2000), with 27% of nat'l pop. They allocated a larger share of funding to sanitation and health services (avg &gt; 3% higher), reducing infant mortality rates (holding per capita budgets constant)</p>	<p>PB encourages authorities to provide services that meet needs of otherwise underrepresented citizens &amp; creates frequent citizen checks on promised actions</p>
<p><b>Targeted access to information in India.</b> Peisakhin and Pinto (2010) test the Right to Information Act with a field experiment that compares different application strategies for food ration cards.</p>	<p>Bureaucrats ignored most applicants, but those who also filed information requests about the status of their application &amp; district level processing times were consistently successful. Only bribery produced comparable results.</p>	<p>Since India's RTI law very rarely sanctions non-compliance, the proposed explanation is that mid-level administrators fear that RTI non-compliance may slow their professional advancement</p>

# To recap:

- ▶ Reassessing evaluations with both strong and weak impact findings informs the reframing of SAcc propositions from **tactical** to **strategic**
- ▶ This involves taking a harder look at the nature of the SAcc actions, taking into account the enabling environment and government response incentives/capacity
- ▶ Here is one way to boil it down:

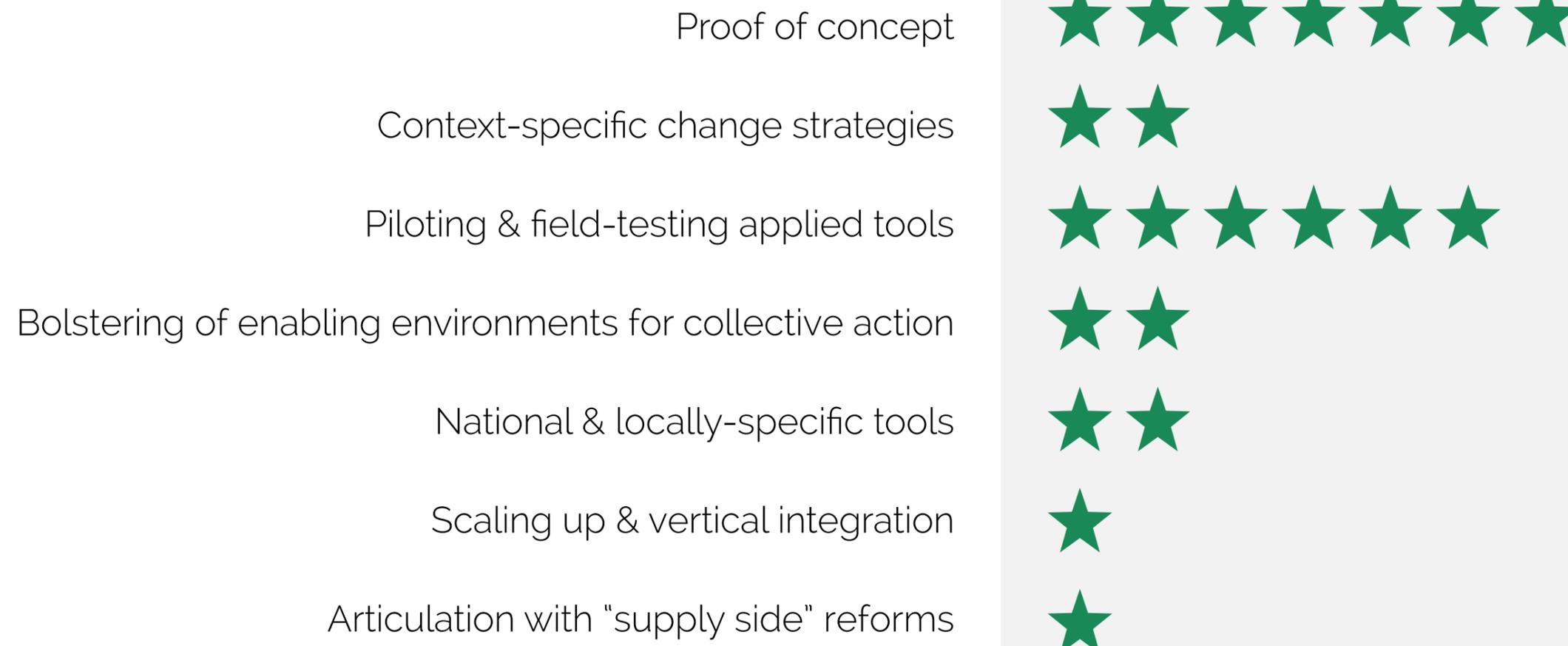
Which SAcc version?	Core SAcc action	Evidence	Broader implications
Tactical	Local dissemination of info on service delivery outcomes & resource allocation	Mixed	Exclusively demand-side interventions may be based on unrealistic assumptions
Strategic	Dissemination of info in coordination with measures that actively enable collective action, influence service provider incentives and/or share power over resource allocation	Positive	Governance reforms that coordinate voice with responsive capacity are more promising

# Taking stock: Is SAcc approaching an “early middle” stage?

## Stages of SAcc development

## Estimated degree of development

LOW HIGH



# This brings us to a set of “next generation” challenges, including:

- ▶ **One-off tools or multi-pronged strategies?**
  - ▶ Experience with individual SAcc tools is ahead of broader strategies that involve multiple, mutually-reinforcing tools
- ▶ **How can citizen oversight efforts address the problem of “squeezing the balloon,” when anti-accountability forces redeploy or deflect challenges to their impunity?**
  - ▶ There are often missing links between local community voice and national citizen policy/oversight
  - ▶ Citizen oversight needs to scale up and vertically integrate to address accountability gaps throughout the governance “supply chain”
- ▶ **SAcc will have more bite if voice is bolstered with “teeth”**
  - ▶ Few voice-led initiatives are coordinated with relevant governance reforms to encourage government responsiveness (i.e., audit/anti-corruption investigative bodies, information access reforms, ombudsman, access to courts, etc.)

**THIS MEANS CONSIDERING SACC IN BROADER CONTEXT, WHICH INVOLVES RECOGNIZING...**

SACC is one of many approaches to pro-accountability governance reform

Bolstering public sector accountability	Involves
Legislative oversight	Accountability to constituents, policy monitoring/oversight capacity
Universal suffrage	Fully registered electorate, freedom of association, secret ballot, independent administration of elections
Administration of justice	Investigative capacity, fairness/rights, speed, judicial independence
Mass media	Independence, investigative capacity, national reach
Social and environmental protections	Minimum standards, public impact assessments & prior consent
Policy monitoring and evaluation	Broad coverage, independence, dissemination of findings
Public information access	Proactive dissemination of user-centered info, independent recourse & adjudication of denied requests
Anti-corruption agencies	Independence, investigative/audit & enforcement capacity
Social accountability	Citizen capacity for oversight & voice can bolster the other pro-accountability strategies

# From silos to synergies...

## Considering how challenging it is to pursue any of these pro-accountability reforms:

- ▶ No single approach is “complete” in its capacity and reach.
- ▶ Therefore, none are sufficient by themselves
- ▶ Pro-accountability public institutions in low-accountability environments are likely to remain weak if isolated from each other
- ▶ Strategic approaches would integrate SAcc with other governance reforms (not just add it on at the back end)

## For the World Bank:

- ▶ Country Strategy and Country Systems approaches to mainstreaming both top down and bottom up governance reforms could bolster “voice plus teeth”
- ▶ The Governance Global Practice could enable:
  - ▶ Analytical work to understand how different governance reforms can be mutually reinforcing
  - ▶ Incentives for collaboration across WB sectors and “business lines”

# Next steps for pro-accountability governance reform:

## INVEST IN STATE-SOCIETY SYNERGY

**Theory of change:** Construction of accountability is driven by coalitions of *pro*-accountability forces across the state-society divide, acting to offset *anti*-accountability forces – which are also linked across the state-society divide

### Key characteristics:

- ▶ **Point of departure:** Anti-accountability forces in both state and society are often stronger than pro-accountability forces
- ▶ This imbalance of power leads to self-reinforcing “low-accountability traps”
- ▶ **Entry point:** Can government reformers change the environment for collective action?
- ▶ If so, then civil society collective action and oversight can in turn empower government reformers
- ▶ Invest in interlocutors: Bridging social capital can encourage coalition-building between pro-accountability actors in both state and society
- ▶ Accessible negotiation and adjudication processes can mitigate conflict
- ▶ Assume that both subnational variation and discontinuous change are likely
- ▶ This process of mutual empowerment is also called “co-production” or “co-governance”

**Sandwich strategy:** Shorthand for coordinated coalitions among pro-accountability actors embedded in both state and society

Relevant sources include: Ostrom (1996), Evans (1996), Fox (1992, 1996, 2004, 2007), Putnam (2000), Woolcock and Narayan (2000), Heller (2001), Borrás (2001), Fung and Wright (2003), Houtzager and Moore (2003), Ackerman (2004), Fung, Graham and Weil (2007), Baoicchi, Heller and Silva (2008), Abers and Keck (2009), Gaventa and McGee (2010), DRC (2011), Tembo (2013), O’Meally (2013), Gaventa and McGee (2013), Touchton and Wampler (2013)

# Conclusion

## KEY ISSUES FOR BOTH RESEARCH AND LEARNING BY DOING:

### So far, the evidence tells us:

- ▶ Tactical SAcc shows that information is often not sufficient
- ▶ Strategic SAcc bolsters enabling environments for collective action, scales up and brings government responsiveness in

### How to bolster state-society synergy?

- ▶ Don't count on an invisible hand to bring "supply" and "demand" for good governance together
- ▶ How does the political economy of cross-sectoral coalition-building work?
- ▶ What investments in bridging social capital/interlocutors pay off?

### What kinds of transparency leverage accountability?

- ▶ What kinds of information are most relevant and actionable for pro-accountability stakeholders?
- ▶ What channels for dissemination motivate collective action, empower allies and weaken vested interests?

### Capacity-building counts, but how long does it take?

- ▶ What are realistic timeframes for building "accountability capacity" long-term?

### How can public oversight strategies take scale into account?

- ▶ "Government failure" is often treated as a strictly local, "end-of-the-pipe" problem
- ▶ Can vertical integration of civil society monitoring and action get past "squeezing the balloon" of inefficiency and corruption?

### To sum up - Voice needs teeth to have bite – but teeth may not bite without voice

- ▶ "Voice" is shorthand for both the aggregation and representation of the views of under-represented citizens
- ▶ "Teeth" is shorthand for government capacity for responsiveness, which includes both positive incentives and negative sanctions to reform the public sector
- ▶ The challenge for governance reform is how to trigger virtuous circles, in which enabling environments embolden citizens to exercise voice, which in turn can trigger and empower reforms, which can then encourage more voice...

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## ANNEX 1

Three influential metaphors frame thinking about how to reach accountability:

- ▶ **Pathways** – long vs short route
- ▶ **Markets** – supply and demand
- ▶ **Directionality** – vertical, horizontal and diagonal

## METAPHOR 1

# Pathways to accountability

- ▶ The 2004 WDR set a very influential, path-breaking agenda, framing service delivery performance problems in terms of accountability gaps and pathways
- ▶ The WDR described direct citizen/client engagement with local service providers as the “short route” to accountability, in contrast to what seemed to be the longer route, through conventional political/electoral representation
- ▶ A decade later, mixed results suggest that the “short route” may not be so short after all. Plus, it could use a push from the longer route along the way
- ▶ The 2004 WDR did not yet use the term “social accountability”
- ▶ The long-short route metaphor left out the potential role of other public “checks and balances” institutions, such as the judicial system, audit institutions, or public information access.
- ▶ The 2004 WDR’s proposed solution to service delivery problems – the short route for voice to address frontline service providers – was exclusively local.

## METAPHOR 2

# Markets for accountability:

- ▶ Social accountability is also described in terms of the society-led “demand for good governance,” in contrast to government-led “supply-side” reforms
- ▶ In contrast to the 2004 WDR, this approach emphasizes the potential contribution of checks and balances-type institutions
- ▶ Yet the market metaphor implies that somehow demand will create its own supply, or vice versa
- ▶ The implicit assumption of an invisible hand is unrealistic, suggesting the need to address “market coordination” problems
- ▶ Analysts have questioned this implied dichotomy, proposing change strategies that bridge state and society

## METAPHOR 3

# Directionality of accountability

- ▶ Spatial metaphors emphasize the relational nature of accountability
- ▶ They frame political accountability relationships as either vertical or horizontal, while social accountability is also cross-cutting – diagonal
  - ▶ **Vertical** accountability refers to a principal-agent relationship between voters and elected representatives
  - ▶ **Horizontal** accountability refers to the mutual oversight embedded in the institutions of checks and balances – relatively co-equal relationships that do not fit easily into principal-agent models
  - ▶ **Diagonal** accountability refers to direct citizen engagement with government institutions, through officially-recognized power-sharing and oversight bodies
- ▶ **Dynamic feedback matters here:** When accountability efforts actually work, it is often because initiatives in one arena trigger pro-accountability actions in another (as when electoral pressures or citizen action kicks checks and balances into gear)

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