Social accountability: What does the evidence not really say?

Social Accountability Research Workshop
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Comments welcome
Five broad sets of questions for discussion:

1) How do feedback loops really close?
2) How to really bring the state back in?
3) What kind of accountability are we looking for?
4) How to identify the relevance of scale for SAcc?
5) How to bring vertical accountability back in?
1.A – After the launch of so many voice-led feedback loops, why have so few actually closed?

- Are ICT-led feedback loops like the Loch Ness monster metaphor – often cited by enthusiasts but rarely documented in practice by third parties? (from Gigler, Bailur & Anand 2014)
- Data is not a synonym for user-centered information. “Raw” can mean hard to digest. How can relevant, accessible, actionable information empower action?
- Why has Fung et al 2007’s powerful concept of targeted transparency had such limited uptake?
1.B – How can analysis of the relationship between information, voice and action draw more effectively from literatures on collective action and social movements?

- Much of the SAcc literature has basically tried to reinvent the wheel, ignoring most prior relevant literature on collective action
- Voice has been widely framed in the SAcc literature merely as the disembodied aggregation of individual opinions
- In contrast, the social movement lit emphasizes collective identities, embedded social networks, framing, visionary/representative leadership and cross-sectoral coalitions (this is without even addressing direct action)

These literatures would underscore perceptions of risk – which reminds us of the need to bring in the *fear factor*
2.A - Voice is nice, but who really listens, and why?

- A great deal of research is concerned with documenting voice – especially ‘uptake’ in response to initiatives intended to stimulate and project voice.
- Less research documents whether and when state managers and service providers actually listen to citizen voice...
- Even less research turns this empirical question into an analytical question: *How and why do they respond appropriately?*

To find answers, we need to *bring the state back in* – to the research agenda.
2.B – Yet just asking what motivates state actors implicitly questions the conventional wisdom

- Much research on voice and accountability assumes that bureaucrats respond primarily to a combination of carrots and sticks (only external, no internal motivations).
- Much analysis *imputes* motivations to state actors based on their externally visible actions. This is not the same as understanding their actual motivations.
- For example, when teachers don’t show up for work – it matters whether the reason is that they are really political operatives – or whether they have not been paid in 5 months and are instead driving a taxi...
- This question involves getting *inside* the state to understand what motivates bureaucrats... which points us to institutional ethnography.

*Might service providers’ degree of commitment to their professional mission matter? If so, this moves research ‘upstream’ towards training and recruitment decision-making*. 
3 – How can research disentangle preventative vs reactive approaches to accountability?

- Analytically, are the dynamics of accountability strategies that respond to past problems (reactive) necessarily distinct from approaches that try to influence future behavior (preventative)?
- Most SAcc efforts emphasize prevention of future problems vs. recourse for past abuse
- If voice-led efforts lead to a response yet lack either answerability nor sanctions, where is accountability?
- Efforts to bridge SAcc with legal empowerment (recourse) approaches are still incipient
- Given the weakness of most formal recourse/grievance systems, what kinds of informal sanctions can be most effective at influential future behavior?
4. How can the vertical integration of CSO monitoring and advocacy bolster SAcc impact?

- Both INGOs and MDB have primarily promoted a locally-bounded approach to SAcc
- This leaves out the rest of the “supply chain” of vertically integrated power structures
- Effective CSO responses might require parallel processes that are also vertically integrated
- Could vertically integrated CSO oversight mitigate the “squeezing the balloon” problem?
- How can vertical integration be combined with horizontal grounding (broad social & geographic coverage)?

What kinds of research strategies could test these propositions?
5. **How can research disentangle social and political accountability?**

- The 2004 WDR popularized the proposition that the long and short routes to accountability are separate.
- Yet in practice, both public sector managers and frontline service providers are rarely insulated from electoral politics.
- The politicized delivery of public services is widely used as a tool of electoral control.
- Lack of vertical accountability often undermines both horizontal and social accountability.
- In these “low accountability traps,” lack of SAcc can also undermine vertical accountability.
- How can citizen voice and oversight weaken the manipulation of public services to maintain electoral power?
To conclude:

*Politics clearly matters for SAcc, but how might SAcc matter for politics?*