

Social accountability: What does the evidence *not* really say?

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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 we are 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?
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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?