Civic Engagement and Public Accountability: An Analysis with Particular Reference to Developing Countries

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Abstract: The role of civic engagement in ensuring public accountability has become a catch word in recent years. Over the years, there has been dissatisfaction with formal state mechanisms as well as newly introduced market mechanisms. Now there is a consensus that social accountability mechanisms based on civic engagement can hold public officials accountable by complimenting state accountability mechanisms. However, there are a number of contextual factors facilitating as well as inhibiting the effectiveness of social accountability. This paper intends to (a) explore and analyze cross-cultural evidence of social accountability in the developing world and (b) evaluate the claims of the advocates of social accountability in view of the socio-economic and political dynamics.

Introduction

Improved public service performance is a serious concern for the developing world. It is on top of the agenda of national development plans and programs. Despite all efforts, the lack of improved performance of public officials remains an incessant phenomenon. While there are many factors responsible for the poor performance, the lack of public accountability is considered a major one. Accountability is not only a hallmark of democratic governance; it is an essential element for improving the performance of public officials. Accountability is linked to ‘almost every conceivable aspect of good governance’ (Jayal, 2008). It is an important ‘instrument for fighting three vices such as corruption, clientelism and capture’ (Ackerman, 2005). Historically, with the development of modern governing systems, different institutional mechanisms have been developed in most countries. Particularly, developed countries have built up a wide range of formal institutional mechanisms in controlling public officials. The developing world is not also far from this trend. In most countries, there are parliamentary, judicial, executive and other horizontal means to control public administrative actions. Their effectiveness is not uniform. While the developed world has demonstrated enormous success most developing countries still lag behind in enforcing formal institutional mechanisms.

While the importance of the formal institutional mechanisms cannot be denied, market- and society-based approaches have cropped up in recent years to make public accountability more meaningful. Voluminous researches have been conducted on the formal institutional and market-based approaches. Concerned scholars and practitioners have now started giving attention to the society-based approach to public accountability. This society-based approach is based on civic engagement in various forms. There is now a consensus that civic engagement is an essential requirement for public accountability under any circumstances. When the state is strong and formal institutional mechanisms are effective, it plays a supplementary role. When the formal institutional mechanisms are in
disarray, civic engagement compensates institutional weaknesses. However, this is not a straight-forward equation. Other socio-political and economic factors play important role in shaping and reshaping the civic engagement terrain for public accountability.

This paper is an attempt to assess the role of civic engagement in making public officials accountable. The paper has the following objectives:

- Locate and analyze the position and role of civic engagement in the discourse on public accountability.
- Provide cross-cultural evidence of civic engagement and its role in the public accountability regime.
- Evaluate the claims of the advocates of the civic engagement discourse in view of cross-cultural evidence and socio-economic and political dynamics.

The findings indicate that theoretically, there are lots of merits that civic engagement possesses in enforcing public accountability and there are also piecemeal efforts across nations in its favor. However, it still remains an illusion as to how civic engagement would be effective on a larger scale as an important means of public accountability in the developing world.

**Civic Engagement and Public Accountability**

Accountability of public officials is an essential ingredient of democratic governance. Without the accountability of public officials, the essence of democracy cannot be realized. Ackerman defines accountability as “pro-active process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behavior and results and are sanctioned accordingly” (Ackerman, 2005: 6). According to Bovens (2007), accountability can be defined from two perspectives: accountability as an icon and accountability as an institutional arrangement. Accountability as an icon serves as a synonym for many loosely defined political concepts, such as transparency, equity, democracy, efficiency and equity (Behn, 2001). However, Bovens (2007) argues that accountability as an icon is loaded with evocative overtones and less useful for analytical purposes. He thus turns to accountability as an institutional arrangement which is now getting currency in the wider discourse on public accountability. Thus, accountability can be defined as a “social relationship in which an actor (an individual or an agency) feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other (a specific person, an agency or a virtual entity such as the general public)” (Bovens, 2007). According to Schedler, accountability involves “the obligation of public officials to inform about and to explain what they are doing and enforcement, or “the capacity of accounting agencies to impose sanctions on power holders who have violated their public duties” (Schedler, 1999).
Historically, the formal vertical and horizontal mechanisms have played important role in ensuring accountability of public officials. Horizontal mechanisms are internal to the state. These include:

- political (legislature)
- fiscal (auditing)
- administrative (public service rules and regulations and supervision).
- legal (anti-corruption agencies, ombudsman, judiciary)

Vertical mechanisms are external to the state. The most prominent vertical mechanism is election through which citizens can kick the rascals out if they are not happy with the performance. There are voluminous researches on diverse aspects of horizontal and vertical mechanisms of accountability. In recent years, their effectiveness has come under incessant criticisms. Very often, it is difficult for the formal institutions to oversee the entire gamut of government operations. The parliament might have its own problems. Most developing countries are struggling with democratic governance. Parliamentary instruments have limited effects on checking the excesses of the executive branch. The audit office can look at a limited number of audits and very often, their objectives remain unattended. There is hardly any follow-up action against those who misappropriate state resources or abuse power for self interests. Bureaucratic means are always problematic. Judicial means are not also without problems. The constant interference of the executive in judicial matters, huge expenses and structural insufficiency deter many people to seek justice from the courts of law against administrative abuses. Election as a vital mechanism cannot ensure the accountability of public officials on a day-to-day basis. More importantly, there are also doubts about the fairness of election in many developing countries.

Since the mid-1970s, there have been fundamental changes in the public management system in the world. New public management (NPM) has engulfed the administrative reform process all over the world. According to Peters (2001) there are basically four different models of government conceptualized in terms of NPM: Market Government, Participative Government, Flexible Government and Deregulated Government. All of these models have their distinct elements having different implications for public accountability. According to Ackerman (2005), the participative model of government is appropriate for engaging citizens in the governance process, thereby increasing the prospect of social accountability. The market approach assumes that rent-seeking public officials must be subjected to the pressures of the market or business principles in order to involve responsiveness. While the choice or the market approach has been quite robust in recent years and its success in some respects is quite praiseworthy, it is not without problems. It is extremely difficult for the business techniques to work in the complex social and political environments of developing countries (Joshi 2008). In many places, there is no effective competition. Users hardly get adequate information. Most market mechanisms focus on citizens as customers. Those who do not have the ability to pay are automatically excluded from the service delivery system (Haque, 2000). The mode assumes that
“individuals” are responsible for invoking accountability against providers. There is hardly any evidence that the poor people are effective agents in holding either public or private service providers to account and securing greater responsiveness (Joshi, 2008).

On account of the limitations of conventional vertical and horizontal mechanisms and market mechanisms, the focus has shifted to social accountability. It has been mentioned that the idea of social accountability is organically related to civic engagement. The World Bank has defined social accountability as “an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e. in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability” (World Bank, 2004: 1). Social accountability focuses on the ways in which non-state or social actors can hold public officials accountable through various mechanisms.

There are different forms of social accountability as advocated by different scholars. Social accountability mechanisms are external to the state and vertical. Ordinary citizens and their organizations can exert direct and indirect pressures on government officials to account for their performance (Malena et al, 2004). Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000) emphasize the mode of social accountability as sponsored by civil society organizations, social movements and media. Public demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and public interest law suits are commonly used mechanisms. They mostly use voice mechanisms on a collective basis. Social accountability can be catalyzed on demand as and when the situation requires such mobilization. Waisbord focuses on the role of investigative journalism to expose the wrongdoings of public officials. Cunill is of the opinion that through legal reforms the space is created for common people to enforce accountability (cited in Ackerman, 2004).

Isunza has introduced the concept of transversal accountability which emphasizes the role of societal actors in the management of state pro-accountability agencies (cited in Ackerman, 2004). There is a unique combination of the use of participatatory data collection and analysis tools and the enhanced space given to citizens and their groups, thus resulting in a new generation of social accountability practices that emphasize a solid evidence base and direct interaction with state actors (Malena et al, 2004). Thus, different kinds of mechanisms are being used for civic engagement-based social accountability. Broadly the mechanisms are:

- Participatory public policy making
- Participatory budgeting
- Public expenditure tracking
- Citizen monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery
- Raising public awareness about their legal rights and public services
- Citizen involvement in public commissions and hearings, citizen advisory boards and oversight committees.
In social accountability, social actors not only pressure the government from outside, they actively participate in the core functions of the government itself. This is what is known as co-governance (Ackerman, 2004). Reuben has identified the following virtues of civic engagement:

- Improved knowledge of citizens’ needs can help improve public expenditure targeting of social programs.
- Citizens’ report cards help enhance the quality of services.
- Citizens’ feedback improves the allocation of budget resources.
- Participatory tracking and monitoring systems enhance public expenditure effectiveness.

Malena et al (2004) have identified three reasons for social accountability: improved governance, increased development effectiveness and empowerment. The idea of civic engagement-based social accountability is based on the premise that that society is a powerful force for strengthening government accountability. It has the capacity to deepen democracy. Social accountability mechanisms enable citizens to voice against governmental injustices, seek access to information, express their needs and concerns and demand accountability between elections. A constructive engagement is developed between the state and citizens.

Social accountability enhances development effectiveness. Active citizen participation helps allocate resources allocated properly, minimize corruption and engender demands. In addition, social accountability retains the comparative advantage that the state has over the market in the provision of public goods, natural monopolies, basic necessities, and goods that require long term planning and development (Ackerman, 2005: 9). One essential thrust of social accountability is to combine “participatory monitoring of poverty with a process of empowering citizens to demand accountability from government for poverty reduction investments, while at the same time, supporting government (especially at local government levels) to improve its capacity to engage with citizens for the benefit of promoting reforms in poverty-targeted policies, budgets and programs” (Apusigah, 2009:13).

Unlike the market, social accountability ensures social inclusion of the poor people. It is based on the language of citizens’ rights and empowerment. It facilitates the inclusion and social justice more directly. It enables the poor people to get information on their rights and give feedback to state decision makers. By doing so, it increases the voices of the poor people and enhances the chance of greater responsiveness of state actors to the needs of the poor people (Ackerman, 2005). Citizens’ collective and intuitional activism represents “a shift towards augmenting the limited effectiveness of civil society’s watchdog functions by breaking the state’s monopoly over responsibility for official executive oversight” (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001: 365).
It is worth mentioning here that social accountability initiatives cannot and should not work in isolation of other mechanisms. They are expected to complement state horizontal accountability mechanisms. In fact, when some horizontal mechanisms are open to civic engagement they produce effective results (Malena et al, 2004).

Goetz and Jenkins (2001) have emphasized five key institutional characteristics of social accountability:
- Legal basis of civic groups’ participation within institutions of public sector oversight;
- Civic groups’ continuous presence throughout the process of the agency’s work;
- Well-defined procedures for the conduct of encounters between citizens and public sector actors in the meeting;
- Civic groups’ access to public information; and
- Civic groups’ right to dissent and report directly to legislative bodies.

Ackerman (2004) suggests that participatory mechanisms have to be institutionalized in order ensure participation of the poor people and make the administration accountable. First, strategic plans of the concerned government departments could make a focused commitment. Second, new agencies can be created to serve the purpose of social accountability. Third, there could be a legal framework to enforce participatory mechanisms.

Although social accountability is beset with a strong theoretical back up and some success stories in the developing world, the socio-economic and political contexts may pose serious constraints in realizing the objectives of social accountability. Already, a number of concrete cases have demonstrated that even the best objectives of social accountability are being perturbed by unfavorable social and political contexts. Particularly, in the developing world extreme inequality, poverty, and undemocratic political situations pose considerable threats to the autonomous actions of social-actors-led civic organizations. The undemocratic elements within the state structure always create hurdles. They are reluctant to give any space to civic organizations. There are instances of corruption and capture by those who are either at the helm of power structure or allied with the power structure through the clientelist networks. Access to information is another crucial element for social accountability initiatives. Unless relevant information and documents are available to civic groups, they cannot generate pressures.

The effectiveness of social accountability initiatives also depends on the strength of civic organizations. Here strength implies the ability to sway initiatives, attract members and mobilize them. However, in many countries, their strength is impaired by internal strife, undemocratic elements within the groups, clientelist nexus with state decision makers and so forth. In order to extract better results, civic organizations and the state have to work in tandem. While it is erroneous to
depend exclusively on state horizontal mechanisms as there could be instances of manipulation, it is equally not desirable to depend on civic organizations, as their efforts could be thwarted by the state. Therefore, the synergy between these two sectors is vital for producing best results in the public accountability regime.

**Cross-Cultural Evidence**

Over the last two decades or so, social accountability initiatives have proliferated all over the world. This section will sketch a number of initiatives undertaken in different parts of the developing world and identify the critical factors of success and/or failure.

There are a number of social accountability initiatives in Asia that have attracted attention from all those concerned. In India, *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) or Workers and Peasants’ Power Association, Public Affairs center (PAC) are some of the important civic groups that have rendered valuable services in holding state officials accountable. Right to information has been one of the cornerstones of accountable administration. In the past, there were many abuses such as non-payment of wages or under-payment, personal aggrandizement of council officials and so forth committed by local councils against the rural poor people. Against this backdrop, a non-political movement known as *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) was launched. Initially, diverse strategies such as sit-ins, rallies, lobbying with the government, music, puppets, street theater etc. were used. Finally, the MKSS became victorious when the government of Rajasthan incorporated the government notification that the people have access to the records on *Panchayet* expenditure and photocopy the records. The government finally enacted the Right to Information Act in 2000. The MKSS used public hearings through which the discrepancies between what was written on paper and what was given to the rural laborers could easily be identified. Through this, the laborers got fair wages, fictitious names on the pay roll could be identified and other kinds of anomalies could be detected. The MKSS is no more confined to Rajasthan. It has moved to other Indian states and works with similar groups on right to information issues. It is worth mentioning here that the federal government of India eventually passed the Right to Information Act in 2005. This legislation applies to the federal, state and local governments in India.

There have been perennial problems of essential public services such as water, electricity and health in India. Mismanagement, customer dissatisfaction, and corruption were quite rampant in the past. Frequent smaller movements were waged in the past against the unresponsive and corrupt public officials. However, things did not change much. PAC, a Bangalore-based NGO, came forward with a noble idea to improve the service delivery system of essential public services. PAC has introduced report cards that seek citizens’ opinions about different public services (Rahman, n.d.). These report cards provide the citizens to
express their opinions about the state of different public services. PAC and other NGOs take up citizens’ concerns with relevant authorities and the later take initiatives to rectify problems. The initial experiment started with health services of the municipality. Feedbacks received from citizens were circulated among experts and NGOs. A number of recommendations were placed before the Bangalore Municipal corporation and health experts. The Municipality in principle accepted many of the recommendations and initiated reforms in health services. Based on this experiment PAC now conducts survey using report cards for all essential services on all India basis (Paul, n.d.).

The relative success of these two social accountability initiatives has to be seen in the context of the democratic set-up of Indian society and space given to the civil society organizations. However, to sustain the tempo, much more needs to be done which is discussed in the last section.

Bangladesh has got some experience of social accountability initiatives of different magnitude. Although popular participation in development programs is always emphasized by state decision makers in the policy pronouncements, this has never been realized properly. Rahman (n.d.) has identified a few experiments of social accountability initiatives in Bangladesh. The notable ones are the projects taken up by the Hunger Project (NGO), the Social Development Foundation of the World Bank, Care-Bangladesh (NGO), and the Agrogati Sangstha (NGO). Most of these initiatives were stationed at the Union Parishads (UPS), the lowest tier of local government structure. However, of all the initiatives taken so far, the Sirajganj local government development project (SLGDP) has been the most comprehensive one in terms of contents and coverage. The Bangladesh government with financial assistance from the United Nations Development Program and United Nations Capital Development Fund undertook this project in 2000. The project was ended in 2006. The project has proved that “UPs can be participative, transparent and accountable to the community if funds are provided with the right incentives, some procedural changes are made, and a grass-roots based participatory planning and monitoring system is adopted” (GoB et al, 2007: 7). The major innovations of the project were:

- Devolved performance-linked funding
- Open budget sessions
- Participatory planning
- Infrastructure and service delivery
- Enhanced transparency and accountability
- Participatory performance assessments of UPs
- Improved measures for central government oversight of UPs
- Innovative procedures for enhancing women’ participation
- Local resources mobilization
- Dissemination of lessons learned for policy change

So far participatory planning is concerned, there was effective participation of around 10 percent of the typical adult population in the decision making process.
This is in contrast to earlier practices where there was only nominal participation of UP members and the rural development bureaucracy was the de facto actor. The project also provided the scope for systematic mapping and problem analysis, scheme identification and prioritization through local facilitation volunteers. UP-approved projects were implemented, monitored and maintained by community committees. Budget meetings were usually attended by 100-500 people. Community's priorities and concerns were always taken into consideration. While women were the objects of intervention in the past, the project provided the scope for more active women’s participation. UP women members were trained. Thirty percent of local committees were chaired by female members. Thirty percent of funds were earmarked for women. Women played crucial roles in scheme identification, prioritization, implementation, supervision and monitoring. Several methods were used to assess the performance of UP members. The assessment was done once a year in a particular day in presence of local people. There were also assessment workshops where 100-300 (including 20-30% women) local people participated. In addition, public score cards were used. Most importantly, there were links between the results of the performance assessment and funding and capacity building activities of UPs (World Bank, 2007).

The results of the SLGDF project were quite satisfactory in terms of the role of effective popular participation in development activities at the local level. Accountability of UPs, participation of women, equitable distribution of benefits, community participation in planning, implementation and monitoring of UP activities, reduced corruption were many of the outcomes of the SLGDF project. The success has prompted the GoB and other development partners to upscale the project further (GoB et al, 2007: 7).

There are some other piecemeal social accountability initiatives. In most of these cases, traditional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played the pioneering role. The distribution of khas land (unutilized government-owned land) and leasing out of jalmahals (water bodies) among the poor people, the enforcement of minimum wage legislations and assuring a fair allocation of Vulnerable Group Feeding cards are some of the examples where NGOs have had relative success.

The government owns a substantial portion of lands which remain unutilized. This has been the bone of contention of the land reform policy in Bangladesh for many years. Despite the policy pronouncement, governments have found it difficult to distribute khas land and jalmahals among the destitute people who can rely on these resources for their livelihood. Traditionally, the influential people including rural elites in cooperation with the land and rural local government offices have ensured their control over khas land and jalmahals (Barakat, 2006). This situation is all too common and tends to underline the fact that the advantage elite groups enjoy over other weaker sections of people in Bangladesh society (Devine, n.d.). While this is a common scenario, there are some exceptions where NGO
interventions helped the poor to have rights over these resources. The cases of *Samata* in Pabna, and *Prashika* and Caritas in many parts of the North-West signify the impact of NGO activism in securing greater access for the poor to *Khas* land (Devine, n.d.; World Bank, 2002). However, Devine has raised one caution. There is no guarantee that the landless poor will have automatic access to *khas* land and other public resources. Being a member of concerned NGOs is an important eligibility criterion in securing access to public resources and services. That means, if the poor people do not have membership with NGOs, there is every possibility of being excluded from the allocation process. “Even when NGOs play a key role in managing access to different policy opportunities, the poor still have to negotiate through intermediation and this requires on their part compliant and client-based behaviour” (Devine, n.d. p. 23). Barakat (2006) observes that one of the lessons that the success stories reveal is that the poor should be attached to progressive political parties, social organizations and poor-friendly NGOs in order to fight against administrative injustices and the rural elites.

There are a number of successful social accountability initiatives in Africa. McNeil and Mumvuma (2006) have identified and analyzed a number of such initiatives in Anglophone Africa. Social accountability initiatives undertaken by civil society organization is a timely intervention which has coalesced with other pressing challenges such as decentralization, the need to fight poverty, and the need to improve service delivery for the poor. In most cases, impacts are not visible but they are expected to be in sight in the long run. The Institute for Policy Alternative in Ghana is a civil society organization that has initiated social accountability in community monitoring of poverty reduction project. The main driving force behind the initiative is the desire on the part of citizens to get involved in assessing the performance of the government’s framework policy for poverty reduction and its attendant financing of the delivery of public services and influence the public service delivery system for improved public services. Both community and citizen scorecards were used for this purpose. The community scorecard differs from conventional surveys, which use individuals as unit of analysis. The Institute for Policy Alternatives also organized interface meetings between the community and service providers at the local level. Ten community organizations across Ghana were sensitized and organized to undertake pilot projects on social accountability in relation to community monitoring of poverty reduction efforts.

This intervention provided the scope for participation for the rural poor people in assessing the performance of local government officials. They also spoke to these officials directly at the interface meetings about different anomalies in the service delivery system. Along with these the Institute for Policy Alternatives also executed some other activities such as tracking access to basic education and quality health care, tracking resource allocation and public expenditure and assessing their impact on beneficiaries by using participatory tools and so forth.

Though there is no immediate discernible impact of the intervention, its results have future implications. The process has not been institutionalized at the
governmental level. But the government recognizes the importance of the initiatives. For instance, the National Development Planning Commission has developed a partnership with the Institute for Policy Alternatives and is using citizen report card in assessing the performance of different government service providers. The methodologies are also being widely used by other non-governmental organizations across the country. The overall impact is that a pattern of skill acquisition and capacity building has emerged. Citizens are much more conscious about their rights and becoming acquainted with government policies (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006: 44).

Uganda has set a unique example of social accountability of a public sector program. The Ugandan Community-led HIV/AIDS Initiative, popularly known as CHAI, is a glorious example of how public service providers are held accountable to service-receiving citizens. As part of public sector reform, the Ugandan government has recognized the importance of bottom-up accountability and incorporated this within poverty eradication action plan (PEAP). There is a national strategic framework on HIV/AIDS. The Ugandan CHAI has been developed in line with this strategy which is a PEAP-consistent sectoral policy and planning instrument (Awio et al, 2007). The project has overall three components – national, district and community. It is the community component where programs are directly implemented and reported on by organized community groups. Though the bureaucratic district AIDS/HIV committee is responsible for initiation, appraisal and approval of the projects, vital inputs are sought from the community facilitators in terms of getting organized, defining and prioritizing their needs. The district technical committee makes it sure that there is evidence of participation in identification of the problems and prioritization of solutions by the community members. In other words, there must be a participative planning process in identifying and prioritizing the projects and electing community project committees. The district committee further corroborates the information by holding discussion with potential beneficiary community members. The role of the community project committee members are crucial as they are directly involved in implementing the projects. They are given basic training in simple management skills. Awio et al (2007: 217) observe:

Community group members contribute to the management of all the key processes of service delivery, participating in planning: planning and budgeting for activities, cash flow management, implementation of approved activities, monitoring and reporting.

In the overall process, multiple accountability relationships are found. The community groups and the community project committees have to report to the community stakeholders through written reports, oral briefings during local and council meetings and informal information sharing during the course of executing planned activities. The community groups as a whole also have to submit written financial and progress reports to parish councils, sub-counties and district local governments. Awio et al (2007) observe that the Ugandan CHAI initiatives
provide a unique case where genuine local participation in diverse aspects of a project is ensured and the impacts are positive. They have singled out social capital as a critical factor for relative success. Social capital has played a significant role in driving the community groups in achieving efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. For the Ugandan CHAI, the commutarian approach has performed better than the NPM approach in enforcing public accountability.

There have been some successful social accountability initiatives in Latin America. Participatory Budget (PB) in Porto Alegre municipality in Brazil is a glaring example of how citizens participate in different aspects of the budgetary process. This PB was instituted in 1989. However, it did not start automatically. It was civil society that instituted this idea of a participatory budget. More importantly, it was the city government that opened the space and civil society readily grabbed the opportunity. Therefore, “the design of today’s PB arrangement arose after a period of intense negotiation and participation both within the new government and between the new government, civil society groups, and involved citizens” (World Bank, 2004). There is a unique process. The city is divided into 16 distinct regions and below that neighborhood. The budgetary process begins with public meetings at the neighborhood level. Every year, more than 14,000 citizens discuss the previous year’s performance, discuss and prioritize projects for the upcoming year. They also elect their delegates to the regional meeting. They also elect delegates on five themes covering such areas as education, transportation, health and taxation. The assembly in each region further elects their representatives to work in the citywide Participatory Budgetary Council (COP). The COP plays a crucial role in the process in that it is responsible for citywide budget plan and consolidates and prioritizes the proposals from regions and theme groups (Blair, 2008). At all these levels such as neighborhood, district and citywide, there is genuine popular participation and decisions are made through intense debates, negotiations and the use of sophisticated weighted voting systems designed to “assure a fair distribution of resources, with an emphasis on helping the most needy areas of the city.” The municipal council discusses and approves the proposals. However, the delegates from all regions, neighborhood and COP monitor the whole process of approval (Blair, 2008).

There have been marked improvements in the city’s infrastructure, health, education and transportation systems. In 1989, only 46 percent households had access to the sewerage network. The percentage rose to 85 percent in 1996. Similarly, access to running water increased from 80 percent to 98 percent during the same period. Marked improvements in road infrastructure and transportation were also visible. Depilated roads were paved and poorer districts were connected to the public transportation system. These facilitated the movements of ordinary workers and school going children. The percentage of school enrolment increased significantly (Novy and Leobolt, 2005; Rahman, n.d.). The
effects on redistribution and empowerment and accountability have also been quite remarkable (Blair, 2008; Novy and Leobolt; World Bank, 2004).

- The poor and women have earned a sense of belongingness with the state. Their participation has been quite higher compared to pre-PB periods. One estimate suggests that one third of the poor population has taken part in the process. Participation of women and black population is noteworthy. Their participation has had significant implications for elections as well (Blair, 2008).

- Since there is transparency in the whole budgetary process, PB has significantly reduced the scope for personal aggrandizement of local bureaucracy. On the way, it has also improved the accountability of public office since their activities are within the purview of citizens.

- Traditional patron-clientage does not have significance as in allocations of resources are not based on dyadic relationships. Rather, a set of public elements such as assemblies, lists of previous access to goods and necessity criteria determine the distribution of material benefits (World Bank, 2004).

- PB has also reduced the familiar propensity of the capture of service delivery agencies by the rich people. There is certainly a pro-poor bias in the whole process and since the poor actively participate, the power of money has been replaced by the power of voice (World Bank, 2004).

Despite the great implications that PB has engendered some drawbacks have surfaced in recent years. It is argued that PB has succeeded in an area which has traditionally been rich and bestowed with good administrative infrastructure. It would be interesting to see how it works in poverty-stricken areas (Blair, 2008). Moreover, the vivacity that PB in Porto Alegre had in previous years seems to be gradually disappearing. For instance, Fox (2008) reports that the meeting in 2008 showed less enthusiasm among the residents and political officials.

Discussion and Implications for Public Accountability

The case studies discussed above have wider implications for public accountability. There is no dispute about the fact that civic engagement plays an important role in public governance in general and public accountability in particular. However, there are some contextual factors that may impede or facilitate civic engagement in public domain. Also there is a question of scaling up social accountability initiatives and it is interesting to see how they work in wider contexts. The Indian case studies reveal some interesting findings. Indian democracy is on a strong foothold now. Despite this, state institutions responsible for horizontal accountability have not played effective roles. In this case, civic forums have contributed enormously. The democratic set-up has also facilitated the process. The Right to Information Act is a case in point. The fact that the RTI is in place does not automatically guarantee that civic forums can avail the opportunity. While in India, civic forums successfully took the advantage of this Act, in Bangladesh civic forums are far from this trend though there is RIA
in Bangladesh as well. Therefore, it can be presumed that democratic governance is more tolerable in engaging civic forums in horizontal accountability. More importantly, democratic governance helps institutionalize the integration.

Another important lesson derived from the case studies is that the existing local government set up can be an important area of social accountability intervention. The Bangladesh case study in Bangladesh bears testimony to this. The advantage is that local governments are already near the door steps of common people. If there is good intention, they can really translate this good intention into productive social accountability initiatives. Traditionally, local government offices have been the dens of corruption and patronage distribution. But this particular project was devoid of these vices. Critical factors could be the institutionalization of the process, the devise and enforcement of incentives and constant presence of aid officials. Again, it would be interesting to see how does the format works on a larger scale as the decision has already been taken to scale up.

It is not always easy to involve civic forums in public governance. The very nature of political culture and bureaucratic bungling pose stupendous threats to effective participation of civic groups. Lack of political commitment in implementing reforms has remained a perennial problem in most developing countries (McCourt, 2003). A few case studies indicate that if there is political will and commitment many problems relating to civic engagement can be overcome. The Ugandan case study clearly indicates that the communitarian approach based on social capital is much more effective than the conventional horizontal as well as NPM mechanisms in invoking accountable performance from the service providers.

Numerous problems can be identified. One particular problem is the undermining of the existing local government system to promote social accountability initiatives. The Mexican case is in point. Brautigam (2004) rightly observes that PB in Mexico substituted an elected local government system which was expected to facilitate social accountability initiatives. The fact that local government institutions are inflicted with corruption, social divides and clientelism (Haque, 2008) does not vindicate the point that a parallel structure has to be instituted. In that case, there is a need for vigorous reform of the existing local government system which further needs strong political will and commitment.

One of the key issues is the skill level of civic forums to substantiate their claims against the state officials. This can be done on a few occasions with the voluntary engagement of a few enthusiastic professionals. Unless civic forums are well-equipped with substantive skill base it would be difficult to sustain the tempo of social initiatives. There is evidence that civic forums are even dependent on the donors not only for financial resources but also for the development of context-appropriate social accountability tools and methodologies (World Bank, 2006). Based on Indian experience Goetz and
Jenkins (2001) observe that to be effective civil society organizations need different types of resources such as time, money and literacy and technical skills which may not be available all the time.

Some successes are difficult to sustain unless there is “constructing alliances” between civic forms and state officials (Ackerman, 2004: 458). There is a need for developing the culture of this constructing alliance. With heavy confrontations or blood shed, some concessions can be gained from the state. But in the long run this does not have significance. There are examples that some progressive officials cooperate with the civic forums. This temporary engagement gives some successes. But once these officials are transferred somewhere or removed from the positions, the whole initiatives get disarrayed (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001). More importantly, without broad-based institutional basis, civic engagement may become a misnomer because they lack any substantive decision making power (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001). Therefore, the institutionalization of civic engagement has been given a top priority. A critical element in the process is a legal standing guaranteeing substantive jurisdictions of civil society organizations. However, a mere legal framework may not work if there is no conducive political environment. Moreover, civic groups’ continuous presence in performing oversight functions may be unrealistic in unfavorable socio-political contexts.

Substantive jurisdictions given to civic forums must not dissociate the target population from the political society. Raja (2008) quoting Chaterjee observes that it is political society that can ensure that the disadvantaged people pressurize the government to negotiate their entitlements. Therefore, democratic development should strive how the poor could be integrated to the political society. It is also true that decentralized local government and its engagement with the poor work better where there is conducive political environment. The cases of Kerala and West Bengal in India are the glaring examples (Ahmed, 2008). Heller et al (2007) have elaborated how genuine civic engagement has been ensured in the local government offices. The left government in Kerala came to power in 1996 and implemented its electoral promise “People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning.” Three sets of impacts are discernible:

(a) The participatory planning in panchayets. Civil society inputs were significant.
(b) The constitution of participatory publics exemplified by the authoritative contributions of Gram Sabhas and Task Forces.
(c) The overall development performance of the participatory structures is quite significant.

This underscores the importance of the capacity of the state exemplified in political, administrative, institutional and technical spheres (Walis and Dollery, 2001). It should be mentioned here that civic forums cannot bring out fundamental changes in the accountability regime if their efforts are not tied up with efforts to increase and accentuate state capacity. When the authority of the government is at stake, how can civic forums contribute to accountability? If the
dominant political culture of the country is clientelist and elite capture is a common phenomenon, how can civic forums integrate the poor and ensure their participation in accountability? Political capacity exemplified by effective political institutions such as parliaments and parliamentary committees, and participatory local governments is of vitally important. Here again, the concept of political society is pertinent as this can effectively integrate the mass people into the mainstream development efforts. If they are ineffective, civic forums have very little to offer. However, for effective public accountability developing country states should first concentrate on improving their state capacity. In a developing country context, even if there are established democratic institutions, clientelism of various forms, routinized forms of social exclusion and the failure of public legality may undermine proper citizen-based forms of participation. In that case there is a need for “democratic deepening” with explicit objective of direct citizen participation in diverse activities (Heller et al, 2007). Once they are in order, civic forums would have enough space and play effective roles in the accountability regime. Otherwise, we can only see some “success stories” here and there without any sustainable institutional basis.

Conclusion

Accountability is an essential component of modern day governance in all countries. While historically internal state mechanisms have played significant role in ensuring public accountability, in recent years, their significance has come under incessant criticisms. The new mode of governance has given rise to the market and society-based mechanisms in ensuring public accountability. This paper has looked the society-based mechanisms. More specifically, the role of civic engagement in accountability embodied in the concept of social accountability has been elaborated theoretically and empirically. A number of cases around the developing world have been discussed. These case studies demonstrate that social accountability initiatives have played significant roles in improving the accountability of public officials. The paper has identified contextual factors facilitating or inhibiting social accountability initiatives. Political commitment, democratic governance, and level of development of civil society organizations are some of the factors that have facilitated apparent success of these initiatives. It has been noted that though apparently many social initiatives have succeeded but some weaknesses are also profound in the functioning of civic forums and other relationships. For instance, the issue of technical competence in carrying out horizontal audit function on the part of civic forums is doubtful. The question is for how long they can mobilize professional volunteers to carry out this function. In some cases, the benevolence of state officials has also facilitated the success. Their departure from the scene has deteriorated the level of civic engagement. Some civic forums have their weaknesses too. In the case of Bangladesh, it was found that clientelist practices within NGOs make it difficult for them to play an effective oversight role. This paper recognizes the important contributions of civic forums in public accountability. However, their success should not be at the cost of undermining more established conventional
state mechanisms. The development of political institutions, strengthening audits institutions, anticorruption agencies and ombudsman should be prioritized. Civic forums would play much more important role while working within a more conducive democratic political environment. In convenient political environment, it will be also easier to cement a genuine institutional linkage between the citizenry and the state.
References


