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MODULE II:

Theme: SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

TOPIC: Challenges for Social Accountability and the Way Forward: the Ghanaian Experience

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I. Introduction

The whole of Africa, and indeed the developing world is steeped in corruption and economic mismanagement so much so that various forms of panacea which have been tried in the past have not succeeded. The practice of social accountability, its tools and methods, seem to be a plausible attempt at solving this problem since it has a number of success stories in various countries.

While celebrating the success of this practice, it is very necessary to consider the challenges of the process so as to confront them with effective strategies. The challenges which have been faced by those who have put these methods into practice and how these were confronted will be good lessons for all.

How sustainable is this process given the fact that in its implementation there might be winners as well as losers? Will the losers be prepared to yield and allow the process to proceed, or will they sabotage it before it is birthed? Are the vulnerable and marginalised populations, who will benefit, ready to be drawn into the process, given the fact that socio-cultural influences prevent some populations from demanding their rights or changing the status quo? Is the developing world ready for this process? What legislations are in place to back the process? Who should initiate the practice; government, civil society, international NGOs, local NGO’s or the private sector? What is the way forward?

The paper attempts to find responses to these and other questions by giving an overview of the process of social accountability and situating it within the Ghanaian context. Examples from other countries in the developing world will be referred to as well.

2. Overview of Social Accountability

Social accountability discourses and practices are given much weight in recent times because they are considered to be an important element of the new paradigm in present day development practice. Social accountability enhances good governance and promotes democratic principles, especially in the developing countries where the poorest populations in the world are found and the notion of accountability is ‘totally missing’. Apart from gross mismanagement of state resources in this region, duty bearers/power holders render services as if they are doing citizens a favour while cultural, political and technical reasons keep citizens silent. A study of the situation was conducted and is captured in the World Bank Report (2004), titled *Making Services Work for the Poor*, a document constantly referred to in most discussions on social accountability. This report gives empirical evidence as to why service provision in developing countries is poor and not effective, citing various administrative lapses such as corruption, inadequate or nonexistent monitoring among others. In a nutshell, lack of social accountability practices, which to some extent could be considered as an alternative to the status quo, has been identified as the main reason for the deplorable state of affairs.

Apart from the study cited above, others (Malena, Forster & Singh, 2004) have also been conducted on why top-down approaches to development alone cannot bring about significant poverty reduction. Arguably, all these findings informed the recommendations captured in the World Bank documents. Decentralization, local government reform, and civic participation in decision making as well as the involvement of poor people in improving services are some of the recommendations made by the World Bank Report.
In a bid to advance modern development practices, the implementation of some of these suggestions mentioned above have been undertaken in countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Ghana, Bangladesh and a few others. The process involves duty bearers/power holders reporting on their activities to citizens, which includes the disenfranchised and the poor. The latter are empowered to demand accountability and participate in decision making, thus improving the outcomes in human development (ibid). Reports have it that the results have been remarkable (REAP report, 2007).

3. Traditional Accountability Processes

Traditional activities for demanding accountability which include public demonstrations, street protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism, and public interest lawsuits were and are still being employed by social groups such as the Committee for Joint Action (CJA) in Ghana, Nigeria and many other countries. Journalists (in both the print and electronic media) also do their bit.

The public sector, which is the domain of the government, mostly relies on top-down external control mechanisms such as the Auditor General, Parliamentary Select Committees, the Ombudsman and other means, to ensure accountability. The fact that the developing world finds itself in such an abysmal situation with all these mechanisms in place shows how porous the mechanisms are.

Social accountability is not a magic wand but another way of ensuring inclusiveness and social justice in society, therefore the traditional ways of ensuring and ‘demanding’ accountability could be either modified or integrated. Whether these traditional accountability mechanisms should be completely done away with in the process or integrated, depends on the particular country in question.

It goes without saying that the process of social accountability, in the form of participatory data collection and analysis tools combined with enhanced space and opportunity for citizen/civil society engagement with the state, empowers the entire citizenry. It has also been found to be crucial for sustainable governance as well as policy making, but all these benefits not withstanding, its introduction has been slow in Ghana. One cannot rule out the fact that like many other attempts at good governance in the developing world it is fraught with myriad challenges and therefore relevant, country specific strategies need to be formulated.

Arguably, this cautious introduction of the process might be seen as attempts to prevent a backlash.

Both the traditional and modern accountability practices are therefore being used selectively and complementarily because there are times when the only recourse left to civil society is to ‘shout’. The ‘shout’ occurs mostly when the political situation might not favour a constructive partnership between civil society and the state or a point has to be made urgently. In Ghana, the CJA does most of the ‘shouting’ but does not always achieve the desired results, since it is seen more as a political and elitist movement than
a development oriented one. Public sector oversight committees also do their work but more often after civil society has cried ‘foul’ or some ‘concerned citizens’ have taken to the streets. In recent times, the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education in Ghana had to call some accountants and heads of schools to testify before it after anomalies had been detected in the accounts of various schools. The whole country is waiting to see what sanctions will be applied- that is the Achilles heel of our governments, it really takes political will to do this.

4. Challenges

Social lays emphasis on solid evidence base and encourages direct dialogue and negotiation with government counterparts. Various methods and practices are used in the process, some specific methods are participatory public policy-making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, and citizen monitoring and evaluation of public services (see Table 1 below). Suffice it to say, all these methods have their own challenges to which possible solutions need to be found if the process is to be sustained.

Individuals or groups such as civil society organisations, government agencies, parliamentarians, communities and other actors can initiate any of the practices listed in Table 1 below, but how often do governments do this?

In the same way various strategies can be used but the choice of a particular strategy will depend on the issue identified, the culture of the people and the political climate at the time as is depicted in Fig 1. Strategies such as research, monitoring, planning, civic education, media coverage, coalition building “vary according to the extent to which they are institutionalized, independent, collaborative or conflictive” (Sourcebook, 2005). The choice of the right strategy calls for expertise on the part of the initiator of the process, which might in itself be a challenge.

Challenges not withstanding, Ackerman, (2004b) suggests that as much as possible, it would be more fruitful to set up arrangements of “state-society synergy” which might lead to rewards for both sides (a win-win approach).

Some Ghanaian Civil Society Organisations such as Social Enterprises Development (SEND), Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) and the Rights, Empowerment, Access, Participation (REAP) project of The Ark Foundation, Ghana might have best practices to share with other countries. Uganda and Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya and Zimbabwe have shared their experiences in previous presentations. What might pose as a challenge to some countries might have a solution in the Ghanaian experience and vice versa.

The processes involved in social accountability need to be designed properly and this takes a lot of time as well as resources, this in itself is a challenge, but the long term benefit for the particular nation compensates for this. The issue cannot therefore be discussed without looking at the political situation/context of the country/community, technical expertise to train field workers and community members. As a result of this, most ‘pro-accountability entrepreneurs are CSO’s dependant on external funding.
4.1. The Social Enterprises Development (SEND)

The mission of the organisation is to promote livelihood security and equality of men and women through participatory development and public advocacy in West Africa.

This organisation has been involved in public expenditure tracking and was involved in tracking the use of the HIPC funds given to Ghana. The publication of the book; WHERE DID THE HIPC FUNDS GO? Did not go down well with the government and the deputy minister for economic planning responded with a press conference debunking the claims made in the book.

To undertake the research, District HIPC Monitoring Committees (DHMC) were formed. They were made up of the ordinary people in the communities who have grouped themselves into Community Based Organisations (CBO). These include women groups, farmers associations, associations of the disabled, youth associations. These have been trained to ask questions, and comment on issues.

The challenge here is that even though SEND is empowering the CBOs to demand accountability, it is funded by an international NGO. If these funds are stopped will the CBO’s continue to monitor activities by Power Holders/Duty bearers? How sustainable is the project?

The idea of the DHMC attracted several communities and traditional leaders asked for the formation of such committees in the traditional areas. Some District Assemblies also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Organisation.

4.1.1 Monitoring the School Feeding Programme: Whose decision counts (SEND, 2008).

This year the organisation monitored the school feeding programme and came out with astonishing revelations.

4.1.2 Findings

- It found that grassroots structures of the programme were not adhered to.
- That the principles of effective decision making, planning and coordination were not adhered to
- Effective monitoring of financial accountability was also compromised because several channels were used to disburse funds for the programme.

It is worthy to note that for this particular monitoring exercise, the Ghana School Feeding Programme signed a memorandum of understanding with SEND

4.1.3 Challenges

Its major challenges are difficulty in conducting face to face interviews especially with those who are to be held accountable and inability to acess information. “Information on financial dealings should not be disclosed”

Some community members are also uncooperative due to fear of intimidation from superiors, other community members as well as officials of the district assemblies.
4.1.4 Way Forward
They are still embarking on their sensitization programmes for both citizens and power holders/duty bearers.
Send is determined to Monitor implementation of pro-poor policies and provide alternative perspectives on how the impact of policies could be enhanced.

The Rwandan experience is a deviation from the norm, where a government institutes an accountability day and ensures that public officials account to citizens.

The National Assemblies instituted in Ghana by the present government, to some extent, is a form of accountability mechanism but the forum is too ‘official’ and citizens who can afford to travel to the venue are allowed to ask just one or two questions. The poor and disenfranchised who cannot afford to travel to the venue of the assemblies are therefore effectively barred.

Having been schooled on the various tools by the previous presenter, if an enabling environment, the right time or opportunity is not taken advantage of before a particular tool is applied, the whole process might do more harm than good. In the same vein, a country’s history, culture and political history need to be considered as there is no one size fit all ‘tool or mechanism’ that can be applied at all times and places.

Apart from the above mentioned factors, the dynamics of the process is such that the key actors could change depending on the context. For example in certain communities such as the East Akyem district in Ghana’s Eastern Region, The Ark Foundation, Ghana and the local CBOs took the lead in the social accountability process while the local government was resistant to change but through the use of negotiation, training, lobbying and other means it was won over.

In other cases, such as the Rwandan example, government opened up spaces while civil society came in later. In many instances in Ghana and other developing countries, international organisations such as Ibis, Action Aid, Rights And Voice Initiative and a host of others have been the driving force that propelled the local NGOs into action.

The examples mentioned above go to buttress the point that there is no ‘overall strategy for all actors independent of place and time and this in itself poses a challenge. The ‘pro-accountability’ actor will therefore, do well to first identify some key issues that need to be resolved, determine the strategy to be used, train those on the supply as well as the demand side on the approach each side could adopt and adapt before starting the process.
5. **Specific Challenges Faced By Some Methods and Tools.**

Although the benefits of Participatory Budgeting (PB) are well known and even practiced in some countries and municipalities, the well known example of Porto Alegre (Brazil) is a showcase for all developing countries. This example is not full proof but has some shortcomings as well which need to be properly and carefully managed:

When the financial management of a government is poor, executing the process becomes a problem because citizens will raise questions on issues that cannot be properly explained and this will rather undermine the process instead of sustaining it. Another point is that citizens might assume governments have enough money and thus demand services and goods that cannot be delivered and this might also weaken the process. This will be the turn of events when authorities are not transparent or do not provide a budget forecast, thus giving false expectations.
Table 1: Examples of Social Accountability Practices

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Government Function</th>
<th>Social Accountability Process</th>
<th>Social Accountability Mechanisms and Tools</th>
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| Policies and Plans  | Participatory Policy Making and Planning | - local issue forums  
- study circles  
- deliberative polling  
- consensus conferences  
- public hearings  
- citizens’ juries |
| Budgets and Expenditures | Budget-Related Social Accountability Work | - participatory budget formulation  
- alternative budgets  
- independent budget analysis  
- performance-based budgeting  
- public education to improve budget literacy  
- public expenditure tracking surveys social audits  
- transparency portals (budget websites) |
| Delivery of Services and Goods | Social Accountability in the Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Services and Goods | - public hearings  
- citizens’ report cards  
- community scorecards  
- public opinion polls  
- citizen’s charters |
| Public Oversight | Social Accountability and Public Oversight | - CSO oversight committees  
- local oversight committees  
- ombudsman |

Source: Social Accountability Sourcebook,

The quality of the participation of stakeholders in the participatory budgeting process will always pose a challenge. How can the most marginalised groups, the middle class and the private sector be brought together to brainstorm on development issues? not to talk of the inclusion of academia.

Each class of people has its peculiar needs. Marginalised groups, as has been cited in the Ghanaian national assemblies concept might not be able to leave their work and possibly afford the transportation to the venue. In effect might participate in the process. The knowledge disparities between the citizens might also pose a challenge and make it impossible to have any quality encounter, thus also affecting equity of final budget priorities.

Government needs time and resources to organize the PB activities including the provision of budget information which is crucial, yet many governments lack the capacity to undertake the activities. Civil Society Organisations have therefore ‘captured the
process’ and in Ghana. Local/ governments/ central government are therefore invited to participate instead of initiating the process.

Some elected officials are threatened when citizens attempt to make inputs into the budgets or question some items which have been included. In Ghana, even before the national budget is read, excerpts would have leaked out to journalists, who in turn throw the information into the public domain. A national debate ensues, which one is tempted to believe is taken note of by the powers that be, but this is speculative.

On the local government level, in the areas where CSOs like The Ark Foundation, SEND and IDEG work, communities are equipped to demand to be part of the process of budgeting. Some District Chief Executives who initially proved difficult have, with the use of sensitization programmes, the appropriate negotiation skills, become allies to the community based organisations in their localities. These activities have not yet covered 25% of the districts in Ghana and so we have along way to go.

The issue of sustainability of these processes is very real. It has been suggested that when their demands are met some constituents abandon the processes, but in here lies the challenge for the facilitators of the community training programmes. The communities should be made aware of the short, medium and long term befits of the process and the need to sustain it.

When the process is given a political flavour, “opposition parties are less keen to mobilize their constituencies and support the PB process”.

In an election year, communities become polarised along party lines and this sometimes affect the quality of participation as “discussions turn into political debates. Political changes in the administrations can potentially disrupt the PB process, particularly when PB is used as a political tool” (Sourcebook, 2005)

5. **Way Forward**

Governments should reduce the language used in budget documents to the level of citizen’s understanding as transparency and an understanding of governments fiscal constraints will help improve credibility and governance.

The process of PB can also reduce public mistrust of government and citizens will know what to demand from government, this will also make them own the budget.

6. **Citizen’s Score Cards and Citizen’s Report Cards**

The use of these tools deserve special mention. This method involves data collection but a major challenge here is the assurance of the credibility of the data and using them wisely. One cannot forget that the developing countries have a large proportion of illiterate people, how can illiterates effectively use the cards unless they are taught and this involves different kinds of resources?

All the various methods and tools have one or more constraints but all these cannot be discussed in this paper.
7. Conclusion

Generally it could be said that availability of resources, both financial and human, are very vital to the success of the social accountability process.

A principal challenge of social accountability initiatives is to ensure that the voices of poorer and more marginal groups are not drowned out or dominated by more powerful and vocal groups but in most cases this is exactly what happens. When social accountability processes are not managed properly they might encourage elite capture of the processes thus defeating its main objective.

Governments overdependence on donor support to CSO’s for the initiation of the process is not the very best because it could endanger the process. Since socio-cultural practices, to a large extent also act as inhibiting factors to the process it will take the political will of state actors to sustain an initiative of social accountability. Are they prepared to do so?

References


REAP (2008) Activities of the REAP PROJECT after the Two Year Contract. Unpublished report by the coordinator; Mr. Abass Sbabe


