

## ANSA-Africa

### Strengthening accountability systems and institutions

Social accountability is gaining interest in developing countries, particularly in Africa, largely because it helps to reduce poverty and promote effective and sustainable development.

To explain the concept of social accountability, it is important to start with a concrete definition of accountability. **Accountability** can be defined as the obligation of power-holders to account for or take responsibility for their actions towards citizens and, in particular, towards poor people, who represent the most vulnerable group when it comes to access to basic service delivery. "Power-holders" include officials in government, private corporations, international financial institutions and civil society organisations.

Government officials and bureaucrats are accountable for their conduct and performance. In other words, they can and should be held accountable to (i) obey the law and not abuse their powers, and (ii) serve the public interest in an efficient, effective and fair manner. Many government officials are aware of their accountability and are seeking strategies to help implement ways to improve the accountability of their office.

Accountability of public officials is the cornerstone of good government and a prerequisite for an effective democracy. However, in many countries, especially developing ones, the government fails to deliver key essential services to its citizens due to problems such as: misallocation of resources, leakages/corruption, weak incentives or a lack of articulated demand. Similarly, governments often formulate policies that may go against the actual priorities of the poor. These problems are perpetuated because policy makers, service providers and citizens often have different (sometimes conflicting) goals and incentives, which they fail to realise because of lack of communication.

In a public sector context, **social accountability** refers to a broad range of actions and mechanisms that citizens, communities, independent media and civil society organisations can

use to hold public officials and public servants accountable. Evidence suggests that social accountability mechanisms can contribute to improved governance, increased development effectiveness through better service delivery, and empowerment.

### **Driven by demand from citizens and community groups**

Social accountability helps ordinary citizens to access information, voice their needs, and demand accountability between elections. Emerging social accountability practices enhance the ability of citizens to move beyond mere protest towards engaging with bureaucrats and politicians in a more informed, organized, constructive and systematic manner, thus increasing the chances of effecting positive change.

Mechanisms of social accountability can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both, but very often they are demand-driven: they operate from the bottom up, with citizens informing governments of their needs. One important mechanism of accountability in democratic states is elections. But elections still only allow citizens to select among a limited number of individuals or political parties. They do not offer citizens the opportunity to express their preferences on specific issues, to contribute in a meaningful way to public decision-making or to hold public actors accountable for specific decisions or behaviors. On the other hand, the public sector, or supply side of service delivery, also often seeks ways to receive and act on community input.

For this reason, social accountability offers a broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens, communities, civil society organisations, independent media and government agencies can use to hold public officials and servants accountable. These include, for example, participatory public policy making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, citizen monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery. These mechanisms will be discussed in future Building Blocks articles.

The most important benefit of social accountability initiatives is that they can lead to citizen empowerment, particularly of vulnerable groups that include the poor, especially women, children and ethnic minorities. By enhancing the availability of information, strengthening citizen voice, promoting dialogue and consultation between the three groups of actors and creating incentives for improved performance, social accountability mechanisms can go a long way towards improving the effectiveness of service delivery and making public decision-making more transparent, participatory and pro-poor.

This summary of social accountability is an edited excerpt from "Social Accountability: An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice", by Carmen Malena, with Reiner Forster and Janmejay Singh, published by The World Bank in its Social Development Papers series, December 2004.



**About ANSA-Africa:** The Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in Africa (ANSA-Africa) was established in December 2006 as a joint initiative between the World Bank and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of South Africa, with the following goals:

- To develop collaboration across Africa on social accountability and demand-side governance initiatives;
- To provide technical assistance to greatly enhance the quality of social accountability initiatives in different countries;
- To deliver training programs on specific tools and techniques;
- To share country experiences and lessons from social accountability and demand-side governance initiatives, promote and build on Africans' expertise in this area; and
- To establish and strengthen a network of social accountability practitioners and the stakeholders drawn from government, research institutions and civil society.

Yours for the growth of social accountability,

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