GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Learning in Social Accountability: Reflections from GPSA's Brown Bag Lunch Seminars

Brown Bag Lunches, or BBLs, form an important part of the Knowledge and Learning activities of the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA). Over the last three years, the GPSA has hosted a large number of BBLs in which GPSA Partners and Grantees, as well as World Bank colleagues, showcase their social accountability initiatives and research, share some of their learnings and elicit feedback. The presentations and discussions have been rich and illuminating, highlighting the gains the field has made, but also the challenges we face. In this Note, we pause and take stock of the discussions and deliberations to see what we have learned to date by reviewing the BBLs, identifying a number of key themes which have emerged and highlighting some of the lessons. A complete list of the BBLs, referenced here by the names of the lead presenters, is provided in the appendix of this publication.

Citizen Engagement – Drivers, Challenges and Institutions

Several of the BBL discussions focused on understanding citizen engagement, looking at the mechanisms through which social accountability can improve the capacity and willingness of citizens to engage, raise their voice and provide feedback. They also discussed the challenges of this process, especially in sustaining citizen participation over the longer term.

The BBLs featured initiatives that focused on stimulating citizen engagement with an aim to improve accountability by providing information. Cordaid discussed their Open Results Based Financing program – an approach whereby program payments are made based on specified outcomes. Indicators of progress are presented in an online forum in a structured way, and are validated by local communities, which is then used to make financing decisions. The incentive of releasing funding ensures that communities remain engaged in the process (Cordaid). São Paulo Network in Brazil explained how they use information to empower citizens to engage with the government. They publish key Quality of Life indicators at the district-level on the Internet and conduct annual surveys of the population's perception of quality and access to different public services. This information provides a benchmark

to civil society, governments and various organizations to monitor progress over time (São Paulo Network). Similarly, several more initiatives where information is provided through digital technologies to encourage citizens to engage with the government to demand accountability were also presented and discussed in other BBLs (World Bank; background research for WDR on digital technologies).

The discussion of how information can stimulate citizen engagement also identified some caveats. Forms and framing of information is critical, whether it is disseminated through digital technologies or through traditional means. BBL discussions also emphasized the importance of ensuring that information is 'actionable,' and that it is accompanied by a space where action can be taken. Accessibility of information by all groups within the society is essential, and sometimes is not easy to achieve (World Bank - background research for WDR on digital technologies). For example, in summarizing findings of their research, the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) highlighted that participation in Brazil remains uneven across genders and races. São Paulo Network also highlighted the same challenge.

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Even when all these conditions are met, information alone cannot be sufficient to engender citizen action, as some discussions pointed out (e.g. World Bank - background research for WDR on digital technologies; Center for Social Control - El Centro de Contraloría Social y Estudios de la Construcción Democrática, CCS – CIESAS Mexico). Citizens' trust was also highlighted as an important determinant of citizen engagement with the government; if citizens do not trust their government or believe that the government will respond to their feedback, they tend not to engage (World Bank MENA flagship). It was also discussed that participation processes remain subject to elite capture and manipulation of political interest. Ensuring inclusivity when citizens' voice is channeled through digital technology may be even more challenging than through traditional methods due to the digital divide. Affluent and more educated citizens are more likely to provide feedback when engaging through digital technologies (World Bank; background research for WDR on digital technologies).

In addition to inclusiveness, achieving and maintaining authenticity of participation – so that participation is not reduced to 'ticking a box' – remains problematic, especially in contexts where citizen participation in various stages of service delivery processes has been accepted as a legal requirement. Various BBLs (such as SSAAT, CCS-CIESAS, São Paulo) suggested that legal requirements for participation are necessary but not sufficient to encourage participation of citizens in governance processes; while they can set the tone it remains imperative to keep pushing for more than what is required by the law. The Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) identified several criteria that can be used to assess the authenticity and effectiveness of citizen participation during their BBL. For example, the speakers suggested that the purpose, intended outcome and process of citizen participation should be transparent.

Building capacity of citizens to meaningfully and effectively participate also remains a challenge (São Paulo, CCS-CIESAS, World Bank South Asia). Citizens' lack of knowledge of their own rights, and their limited understanding of how the government and accountability relations work can also

sometimes create hurdles for social accountability initiatives. In some policy areas, for example in fiscal policy, citizens need specialized knowledge to be able to participate (GIFT). Many presenters therefore highlighted the need for capacity building of citizens and civil society for effective social accountability.

Constructive Engagement

Constructive engagement between governments and citizens was highlighted as an increasingly important characteristic of social accountability approaches. Many participants of the discussions argued that constructive engagement with the government is critical to achieve results. The initiatives where civil society and government officials cooperated with each other based on shared interest and common goals turned out to be the most successful. Several review studies presented at the BBLs affirmed this viewpoint. The Overseas Development Institute's comparative study comprising four countries concluded that it is essential to work with and through the state by building coalitions across state and non-state actors (World Vision-ODI-CARE). Similarly, a review of 33 initiatives found that CSOs that engaged governments, in addition to encouraging citizens to raise their voices through digital technologies, were more successful in generating government response as compared to the CSOs that did not engage governments constructively (World Bank, background research for WDR on digital technologies). In addition, IPEA's research on the impact of social policy in Brazil showed that interventions that provide space for constructive engagement with the government, empower reform-minded public officials to form coalitions with citizens to achieve pro-poor outcomes (IPEA).

Many initiatives that were presented in the BBLs included engagement with the government as part of their strategy. São Paulo Network engages with politicians and publishes guides to improve government officials' capacity to respond to citizen participation (São Paulo Network). The Center for Social Control in Mexico also takes various steps to build capacity of government officials (CCS – CIESAS Mexico).

Discussions in BBLs also examined the incentives of government officials to engage with the citizens. It was argued that when government officials see that public participation in fiscal policy can help government bolster internal accountability and curb corruption, they become advocates of social accountability initiatives (GIFT). They come to see citizens as partners in achieving accountability and efficiency. These sentiments were reiterated during other BBLs as well (Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency, SSAAT). It was suggested that, having seen these benefits, governments are pro-actively seeking citizen participation in governance processes to an extent that it represents a new era of citizen-centric governance (SSAAT).

> Social Accountability initiatives are more successful in generating government responsiveness when they engage governments in addition to engaging with citizens.

While it is crucial to build a relationship with the government, it is also complex. Many presenters and participants agreed that relationships have to be built over time and require constant dialogue and negotiation (Cordaid; CCS- CIESAS Mexico). It was also suggested that some sectors like health and education may be more conducive to building trust and working collaboratively (Cordaid).

The discussions also highlighted some strategies that can help the process of constructive engagement. For example, some discussions emphasized that the approach of engagement with

the government must be one of problem-solving rather than confrontation (Cordaid; CSS- CIESAS). Some participants highlighted the role that information and data can play in incentivizing the government officials to engage with civil society by clearly demonstrating how civil society engagement can improve outcomes (Cordaid). It was also suggested that it is essential to understand the incentives of all involved stakeholders including of government officials before social accountability initiatives are launched. Identifying a clear champion from the government's side can be a key to success (GIFT).

Political Economy Analysis and Intervention

Many participants suggested that social accountability intervention is fundamentally a political process, and that their effectiveness depends on a complex web of incentives, interests, and political and economic power relations. Therefore it is imperative that development practitioners understand the political context where a social accountability intervention is to be implemented to ensure that it is tailored to a specific context. The analysis should examine political and power dynamics and incentive structures of a multitude of actors, including of government officials at different levels.

> Without ensuring that the social accountability initiative is designed to take into account, and operates within, the political environment these initiatives are likely to have only a limited impact in improving government accountability.

Without ensuring that the social accountability initiatives are designed in consonance with the political economy environment, as well as without aiming to impact these dynamics, social accountability interventions will only have limited impact in improving government accountability (World Bank- background research for WDR on digital technologies; World Vision-ODI-CARE).

CSOs – Accountability, Legitimacy and Financial Sustainability

CSOs in different forms (NGOs, non-state actors) are an integral part of the development equation. They play an important role in implementing development and social accountability approaches. In order to be effective, they should be accountable to their primary constituency – citizens and the public - as well as to donors; they should also be legitimate and represent the interest of their constituencies in an inclusive way. The issue of accountability and legitimacy is related to the issue of their financial sustainability. Reliance on outside funding and lack of financial sustainability of CSOs creates onerous levels of financial accountability and can also pervert their incentive in ways that can affect their legitimacy with citizens. Many BBLs raised these issues and started a discussion on how to overcome these challenges.

> The issue of accountability and legitimacy is related to the issue of financial sustainability; reliance on outside funding and lack of financial sustainability of civil society organizations creates pressure for accountability.

GreatNonProfits shared their model of how they contribute to CSOs' accountability (GreatNonProfits), through an online platform which acts as a collector of beneficiary reviews about social programs implemented by NGOs, primarily in the United States. Donors and beneficiaries

submit reviews of their experiences and this is collated and shared publicly. Discussions suggested that this model may not be readily applicable to developing countries, where there may not be reliable databases of CSOs, and communication can be difficult due to poor network coverage and illiteracy. Most importantly, local culture may also discourage citizens to voice their opinions.

Reliance on outside funding can create additional pressures for accountability. Funding can distort incentives of various actors, where NGOs and other CSOs can become the donor's clients at the cost of accountability to their foremost constituency, i.e. citizens. Therefore it is imperative to find ways through which NGOs can become financially sustainable. This will not only help them become more accountable to citizens but also reduce their reliance on donors and make their programs more sustainable (The Accountability Lab). Several potential initiatives were discussed that could put NGOs on the road to financial sustainability. Building the brand of NGOs by helping them solidify their organizational reputation for objectivity, reliability and by consistently showing positive impact of their work can help NGOs attract funding from donors rather than NGOs applying for funding from the donors. Similarly, by selling impact bonds and by re-framing their activities and information created as by-products of their work, NGOs can raise their own funds (Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies).

The discussions also focused on the role of donors in ensuring that funding does not distort accountability relationships and CSOs remain accountable to citizens. It was suggested that donors should focus on partnering with local civil society organization and should base their work on creating and sustaining effective relationships based on trust and cooperation rather than on funding (The Accountability Lab).

Linking Social Accountability with the Country Accountability Systems

Many initiatives discussed in the BBL sessions highlighted the importance of accountability systems – a network of inter-dependent institutions and actors including parliament, civil society organizations, media, and state accountability institutions (Ombudsman Offices, Supreme Audit Institutions and Information Commissions). For example, in Citizen Participatory Audits (CPA) in Philippines, citizens (through civil society, academic groups, and community members) work with Commission on the Audit (COA) – an independent government institution – to audit government programs (Commission on Audit, Philippines).

In addition, the experience of the Citizen Visible Audit (CVA) in Colombia was presented, whereby citizens participate in the supervision of resources managed by small local governments through public hearings at several points during the project. CVAs also use media to encourage citizen participation and to disseminate results from the public hearings. Village Social Audits in Andhra Pradesh were also discussed. These audits are carried out by the Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency (SSAAT), which is a government body within the Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh.

These discussions highlighted crucial roles played by these state horizontal accountability institutions. The most crucial role that was highlighted of these institutions was to link citizens to the state; these institutions were described as "gateways for citizens into government" (Ombudsman roundtable) by providing information and mediating contact necessary for holding government accountable (SSAAT; Commission on Audit, Philippines). Moreover, citizens' engagement with these institutions can also help build their capacity; as citizens engage, they begin

to understand governance processes better and are able to apply this knowledge in other areas (Commission on Audit, Philippines; SSAAT). They also gain technical knowledge e.g. of Public Financial Management processes when they participate in activities like audits. In addition, civil society and accountability institutions such as Ombudsman Offices can increase each other's impact by sharing information and leveraging each other's legitimacy (Ombudsman roundtable; Commission on Audit, Philippines). By interacting with citizens, state accountability institutions can also access local knowledge that may not be otherwise available to the them, thereby making their work more effective and relevant (Ombudsman roundtable; SSAAT). There is also potential for these institutions to improve citizen's trust. In this respect, their role becomes even more crucial in fragile countries (SSAAT).

> Accountability institutions such as the Ombudsman institutions can act as gateways for citizens into government by providing information and mediating contact necessary for holding government accountability.

All discussions, however, emphasized that these institutions can make these contributions only if they have a significant degree of independence, and if their resources are not controlled by vested interests.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Last but not least, a significant issue discussed during BBLs was monitoring and evaluation of social accountability activities. While the base of evidence on 'what works' in social accountability has grown over the last few years, the empirical evidence is still lacking. Many studies that discussed findings on the impact of social accountability activities in a wide range of contexts were presented. These studies used a variety of methodological techniques including comparative case studies, mixed-methods and multi-modal approaches, meta-reviews, and quantitative approaches (for example, see World Bank South Asia; IPEA; World Vision-ODI-CARE; Boise State University).

> The impact of social accountability approaches cover a wide range from instrumental impacts of improvement in service delivery, to less tangible effects of improving state-society relationship and deepening democracy.

In addition to presenting findings of various studies, discussions pinpointed methodological challenges in assessing the impact of social accountability approaches. The challenge of achieving external validity – the determination whether the results of evaluation were relevant to a wide range of contexts or were limited to the context in which they were assessed – remained front and center of these discussions (World Bank - Citizens, Governance and Outcomes; IPEA; World Vision - ODI - CARE ; Boise State University). Another issue that came up frequently was that of finding the right indicators. The impact of social accountability approaches cover a wide range from instrumental impacts of improvement in service delivery to intangible effects of improving state-society relationship and deepening democracy. Constructing quantitative indicators for tangible aspects of social accountability impacts is difficult, and assessing the tangible impacts is formidable (World Bank - South Asia; IPEA; Boise State University).

Many participants suggested that in addition to assessing the impact, monitoring and evaluation practice should focus on understanding the causal mechanisms through which impact takes place. Moreover, it is crucial to be cognizant of learning as a product of monitoring and evaluation activities, so that they allow for course correction as projects are implemented over time (Helvetas).

Finally, there was also discussion of how the experiences of one country could be used to inform similar initiatives in other contexts. On the one hand, it is essential to learn from experiences of countries that have implemented social accountability approaches, and in some cases replicate the practices that have shown better results. On the other hand, contexts vary and it is essential for initiatives to be informed by and be consonant with the context. In the presence of so much variation it is unlikely that there is a single principle that is applicable to all situations. Discussions suggested that these variations should provide the source of inspiration. Michael Woolcock of the Development Research Group at the World Bank likened learning from variation to the case of medicine – there is no single best practice and every patient is treated according to her own symptoms, while at the same time cases can be instructive about general conditions and how to treat other patients (World Bank MENA flagship).

Appendix: List of GPSA BBLs

Presenter & Title	Date
Helvetas "Dealing with Complexity: The Added Value of Knowledge Sharing, Partnership and Accountability"	November 12, 2013
The Accountability Lab "Conceptualizing Accountability in the Developing World through Accountapreneurship"	January 8, 2014
Greatnonprofits "Citizen Feedback on NGO work"	January 23, 2014
Ombudsman roundtable "The Role of Ombudsman offices in Promoting Good Governance and Effective Service Delivery"	February 25, 2014
IPEA "Social participation in Policymaking: Does it make a difference? Analyzing the Evolution and Effectiveness of Participatory Institutions in Brazil"	April 14, 2014
Cordaid "Voicing the Voice: How does community voice enhance social accountability and improved results on the ground?"	May 19, 2014
Sao Paulo Network "Citizens monitoring Mayors: Multi-stakeholder engagement in the sustainable governance of cities in Brazil"	June 11, 2014
CCS- CIESAS Mexico "Making local government work for the poor in Mexico"	September 23, 2014
World Bank (MENA flagship) "Trust, incentives and citizen engagement: Drivers for improving health and education service delivery in MENA"	November 20, 2014
Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies "Money for Development: Financially Sustainable Social Accountability Models"	December 17, 2014
Commission on the Audit, Philippines "How can Citizen Participation Enhance Value for Money? Lessons from the Philippines in Designing and Implementing Citizen Participatory Audits"	February 5, 2015
Boise State University "Improving Social Well-Being Through New Participatory Institutions"	May 20, 2015
World Bank (background research for WDR on digital technologies) "When and How do Digital Technologies Strengthen Citizen Voice and Collective Action"	May 26, 2015
World Vision - ODI - CARE "Learning from Results: Adapting social accountability projects to contexts and multiple strategies"	January 22, 2015
World Bank South Asia "Citizens, Governance and Outcomes in India: Lessons and frontier issues from the field"	February 10, 2015
SSAAT "Saving Big: When the State engages citizens in public oversight"	June 17, 2015
GIFT "All About the Money: Public Participation in Fiscal Policy"	July 9, 2015