



Democracy and the post-2015 development agenda: the importance of transparency and accountability in service delivery

Introduction

There is an overwhelming consensus that national policy choices matter for development. This is why democratic governance has an essential place in the framing of the post-2015 development agenda. Democracy matters for development in the following ways: democracy opens up space for citizens to participate in and define the development agenda; democracy provides the free flow of information necessary for an economy to develop and for governments to be accountable to their citizens; democracy can facilitate equitable distribution, and contributions, to society which are essential for sustainable development, and finally; attributes of democratic governance such as *transparency and accountability* are essential to development processes

This policy paper focuses on one specific aspect of democratic governance and how it contributes to development, namely *transparency and accountability in service delivery*. The human right of citizens to have a say in public decision-making is fundamental to sustainable development. Transparency and accountability are both essential components of citizen participation in decision-making on development issues.

Questions

How do citizens demanding and exercising their human rights result in improved state responsiveness, transparency, and accountability?

How can the mechanisms by which openness, transparency and accountability contribute to development be improved?

Policy Challenges

Citizens' voices and demands result in improved state responsiveness, transparency, and accountability when: (a) citizens are active in shaping policy priorities and demanding greater openness and responsiveness from the state; and (b) if state institutions view their responsibilities to citizens as central. In reality, however, the state in many developing countries has neither the capacity, nor the space or the incentives to be sufficiently accountable to its citizens, whose voices often remain unheard or are simply too weak to have an influence. The challenge is not to make one set of people getting another set of people (in this case, the government) to behave better. It is rather a matter of both sets of people finding ways to act collectively in their own best interest, and identifying options for effective service delivery reforms based on a mix of incentives and sanctions aimed at changing the relationships between,

and distribution of resources among, the actors and hence their behaviour.

Research and Policy Debates

The emphasis on accountability (which, in turn, is dependent on openness and transparency) comes from two quite different ideological streams. On the one hand, New Public Management (NPM), which emerged in the 1990s, emphasized the use of market mechanisms within the public sector to make managers and providers more responsive and accountable through vertical accountability within organizations, e.g. performance based pay. In addition, NPM regards citizens as individual consumers who could choose their preferred service provider, complain through hot lines or, alternatively, exit in favour of other public or private providers. On the other hand, and at the same time, social movements were arguing that governments had an obligation to protect and provide basic services as human rights that were protected under constitutions. Advocates of human rights-based approaches identified ways in which rights could be legislated and progressively achieved. This approach was distinct from NPM in that it emphasized the collective and public good dimensions of accountability.

Accountability as a central theme of the debates on *service delivery* took root after the World Development Report (WDR) of 2004 which identified failures in service delivery squarely as failures in accountability relationships. By showing how the so called 'long route' of accountability (via elected politicians and public officials through to service providers) was failing people living in poverty, the WDR argued in favour of strengthening the so called 'short route'—direct accountability between citizens and service providers. The WDR sparked off a spate of work that examined ways of strengthening the short route: from amplifying citizens' voice and human rights, increasing openness/transparency, and enhancing accountability.

What does the evidence say?

Research conducted and experiences compiled by International IDEA and others in recent years have resulted in a number of lessons that can inform policy making and implementation.

First, "*short route*" mechanisms to accountability are insufficient unless they can trigger *political, judicial and administrative accountability* such as public investigations into abuse of authority or corruption; formal sanctions like fines for discrimination in the provision

of services; or the voting out of office of a government that does not perform. Competition for political power is necessary, creates new impetus for reform, and may bring key allies of government into positions of influence, often in synergy with collective action from below.

Second, several studies highlight that citizen-led initiatives have impact when there is willingness from the public sector to support attempts to improve accountability whether at national or sub-national levels. Such willingness could be in the form of sympathetic reformers within government or by changing incentives of public providers through carrots, depending on the context.

Third, collective action, rather than individual action, appears to be more effective particularly in reducing corruption and empowering citizens. This could be because collective accountability mechanisms are better suited to use by people who are poor and vulnerable and are more likely to result in improved *public* good benefits as opposed to the *private and individual* benefits that can be the outcomes of individual action.

Fourth, accountability or transparency mechanisms that have the potential to trigger strong sanctions are more likely to be used and be effective in improving responsiveness by providers. Without the threat of effective sanctions (and resulting impacts), citizen mobilization is difficult to sustain in the long run.

Fifth, information and transparency are a necessary but not sufficient condition for desired outcomes to be realized. An active and independent media seems to be a critical part of several of the successful cases.

Sixth, in general, more time is spent drafting laws and policies, and on strategies, plans and budgets, in proportion to the time spent on monitoring what actually happens in practice. This is where ICT4D can be very useful for transparency purposes, for instance through mobile applications for monitoring of the reality at health centres, schools, water posts, public offices issuing title deeds, or agricultural extension services. Moreover, ICT4D can improve quality public services by enabling a better understanding of preferences as well as more efficient public spending.

Finally, and most importantly, accountability and transparency require capacities and space to respond, whether the service provider is public or private. Often successful initiatives have constructive engagement and dialogue between providers and citizens about potential reforms as part of the process of demanding accountability. The evidence to date suggests that there is a balancing of tension between demanding accountability and engaging with providers to understand the constraints they face. Information, dialogue, negotiation and compromise are key elements of such engagement.



Photo: Helena Bjuremalin, taken at the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion, Peru

Post 2015-Recommendations

- *Democratic political processes are fundamental to inclusive development.*
- *Parliaments, political parties and other political actors play a pivotal role in democratic political processes, as they can represent the interests and human rights of citizens.*
- *Democratic political processes are particularly important in deliberations on budget allocations for service delivery, as such policy choices matter for development and for the interests and human rights of men, women, boys and girls.*
- *Greater transparency of government budgets and spending enables better oversight, better access to credit, better policy choices, and better service delivery in the interests of citizens.*
- *Democratic accountability mechanisms are crucial to delivery of quality services for inclusive development, in particular free and fair electoral processes; democratic political parties; popularly elected parliaments with legislative, oversight, budget, representation and conflict management functions; ombudsman offices; and national audit agencies, at national as well as sub-national levels.*
- *Constructive engagement and dialogue between service providers and citizens about potential reforms should be part of the process of demanding accountability.*
- *Effective incentives as well as sanctions are necessary to promote actual responsiveness of service providers to citizens.*
- *More attention should be paid to local knowledge production on challenges relating to service delivery and, subsequently, in opinion building through independent academic research; pluralistic think tanks; research capacities of parliaments and political parties; and quality journalism.*
- *The use of ICT4D should be leveraged and digital freedoms ensured to improve citizens' trust and the relevance, quality, equality, openness and transparency, predictability, effectiveness and efficiency of public services. While doing so, it is necessary to address remaining digital divides, e.g. between men/women; older people/youth; able bodied/people living with disabilities; rural/urban; and rich/poor to promote availability and access to quality services for all.*