

Contributor: Esuna Dugarova

Current Function: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

Time: 2013/04/05

Subject: Accountability in Public Governance in China and Its Implication for the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Based on Dugarova (2012), I will provide a case study on the use of web-based mechanisms in China and their impact on government accountability. I will further draw implications for the role of responsive and accountable public governance in the post-2015 development agenda.

Web-based mechanisms play an important role in shaping the social landscape of China. As of 2012, the user base of web-based mechanisms in China exceeded 500 million. These online mechanisms which include blogs, social networking sites and microblogging services are considered to be cost-effective and convenient online tools, which enable users to share information, participate in discussion and express their views in real time. Due to the increasing popularity of such mechanisms, online networking has inevitable implications for social stability in the country that goes beyond the virtual world. They enable Chinese citizens to provide comments on the issues that concern them in an open and direct manner, which in turn allows the government to gain insight into public opinion across the country, monitor corruption and improve its services.

In her examination of Chinese citizens' feedback through web-based mechanisms, Dugarova (2012) has shown that large-scale cases like a Wenzhou train accident and a Wukan revolt which took place in China in 2011 raised heated discussions in the online sphere and caused a large amount of discontent and criticism among Chinese citizens. Such criticism seems to be two-sided: on the surface, it concerns the government's inefficient management of the issue in question, whether it is rail service, school funding or land use, but on a deeper level, it touches upon the underlying system of governance and addresses critical problems of corruption and social injustice. The dilemma that the Chinese government faces here is the promotion of economic development on the one hand and the control of information flow on the other. While the government can set the outer limits of what is and is not acceptable, it cannot control everything that occurs in the online sphere. However, there are several ways in which the government could benefit from these online mechanisms and make use of the citizen feedback to improve service delivery. In particular, the government can increase public access to accurate, relevant and timely information, and enhance monitoring of local government's performance, which would lead to more transparency in government activities.

As Dugarova points out, the key point here is to use online mechanisms constructively, and this concerns both the government and citizens. That is, netizens (i.e., people who are actively involved in online activities) should provide specific comments on what particular issues worry them, provide valid evidence for their arguments, and make clear suggestions on how they would like these issues to be addressed. The government in turn

should make efforts to respond to citizens' concerns, acknowledge their input and take this into account in the legislative and policymaking process. It is therefore important for the Chinese government to maintain an interactive communication channel with citizens, and this needs to be implemented with patience, commitment and responsibility. A meaningful and positive approach by the government towards the citizen feedback would be to treat such web-based mechanisms as (i) a useful source of information that provides insight into public opinion, (ii) a practical tool that can help them to address problems that concern citizens, and (iii) a valuable instrument to tackle official malfeasance.

From the cases examined in her study, Dugarova has concluded that online mechanisms empower citizens, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, by providing them with opportunities to voice opinions and influence authorities. There are two critical factors to making these mechanisms function effectively. The first is the need for citizens to express their views without fear of political, economic or social retribution. The second concerns the availability of apparatuses which could ensure that demands are heard by appropriate officials who have the authority to respond, and that they are received in a manner that will result in accountability. She has further stated that web-based mechanisms fulfill the function of bridging the gap between the Chinese government and citizens in that they engage both sides in a dialog that could lead to an increase in government accountability and contribute to the improvement of social stability.

From this, I maintain that in order to make public governance work for the post-2015 development agenda, a greater focus on accountability and transparency is needed. In particular, this will require an improved access to web-based mechanisms, enforced legal mechanisms and a more transparent performance monitoring. This would respond to the needs of people from marginalized and disadvantaged groups in the South and would further provide them with greater voice in processes to set and monitor the post-2015 agreement, ultimately leading to better development outcomes.

Reference:

Dugarova, E. (2012). *Web-based mechanisms for citizen feedback in China*. Report, Social Development Sector, East Asia and Pacific Region, World Bank