



Democratic Accountability in Service Delivery A Synthesis of Case Studies

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(International IDEA)**

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Summary

Democratic accountability refers to the many ways in which citizens, political parties, parliaments and other democratic actors can provide feedback to, reward or sanction officials in charge of setting and enacting public policy. Well functioning accountability mechanisms are believed to provide incentives for governments to work in the best interests of citizens. When it comes to the more concrete dimension of service delivery, the critical role of accountability is still a matter for debate. Only a few empirical studies have explored the links between democratic mechanisms and public services, especially when it comes to the roles played by representative political institutions such as political parties and parliaments.

International IDEA's Democracy and Development programme has therefore embarked on efforts to stimulate greater debate and increase knowledge about the impact of democratic accountability on services. The long term aim is to identify the specific areas by which accountability arrangements result in stronger incentives for governments or service providers.

This document serves as an introduction to various papers that describe the projects in which some of those connections are analysed. International IDEA selected these projects from more than 60 submitted and assessed in 2010, as they highlight some common themes and lessons critical for understanding democratic accountability in the context of service delivery. The selection reveals that in the countries studied, formal democratic channels for accountability are subject to a number of challenges, including weak and sometimes non-credible political institutions. In the light of such a deficit, most of the studies have a narrow and exclusive focus on the role of civil society organizations in advancing accountability. In spite of this, they show successful attempts to improve public services by advocating specific policy shifts. Many of these agents explicitly avoid using confrontational strategies and try instead to support governments in future provision. This introduction discusses whether these strategies are conducive to improving accountability in the long term.

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1. Introduction

International IDEA has set out to understand the potential for democratic accountability to provide greater incentives for improved service delivery. The institute is working on a methodology for assessing accountability arrangements in specific sectors or services and identifying areas of reform, building on the broader and well-known state of democracy assessment methodology. At the same time, in an open and competitive call for papers in 2010, it invited researchers and practitioners to present analyses of the workings of concrete democratic accountability arrangements. International IDEA wanted to identify cases in which accountability mechanisms had a discernible impact on service delivery. Although limited in scope, the selection was conceived as a first step in the task of sketching some answers to the pressing question of *what works*.

International IDEA is now sharing the pieces for dissemination. This paper introduces them while providing some preliminary critical analysis of their findings, with a view to identifying some common themes and lessons.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the rationale behind the work on democratic accountability and how the case studies fit into IDEA's efforts to generate knowledge in this area. It addresses very briefly the failures of some young democracies to 'deliver on development' and proposes that these failures may also be understood as accountability deficits. It also raises the concern that political institutions and actors are quite often overlooked in efforts to strengthen accountability. Section 2 discusses the concept of accountability, with an emphasis on the aspects of accountability which are this paper's focus. The paper puts forward the proposition that effective and sustainable democratic accountability requires that both social and political accountability mechanisms are present and at work. Section 3 analyses the case studies, outlining and discussing the experiences of each. This analysis seeks to identify common themes and lessons and to pin down some central factors for effective accountability. Section 4 provides conclusions.

1.1. Key concerns for working on democratic accountability

Arrangements that allow citizens and their representatives to hold their governments to account, by either rewarding or punishing them, are often seen as the cornerstone of representative democracy.¹ Accountability arrangements, it is said, constrain political power and can therefore prevent its exercise from turning into abuse.² As Diamond puts it, without credible restraints 'democracies tend to remain shallow, corrupt and incapable of guaranteeing basic liberties' and that is often the case for the newer and least developed democracies.³

In reality, however, many democracies suffer from weak accountability mechanisms such as faulty elections, weak parliaments and non-credible political parties unable to fulfil their democratic roles.⁴ Some have found in such deficiencies an explanation. For Goetz, for instance, many critical human development deprivations, including the lack of resources and services, can be traced back to lack of genuine accountability.⁵

Goetz is not alone. Others support the idea of accountability as a critical development factor. Sen, for example, argues that accountability – in particular its electoral variety, the power to vote representatives out of office – provides incentives for governments to work in the best interests of their citizens.⁶ He finds accountable governments in a better position to develop and implement policies that reflect the needs and views of the public. This theory is

supported by Collier, for example, who suggests that elections promote ‘better’ economic programmes and, ultimately, economic development: ‘faced with an election a government needs to adopt policies that are good for citizens, in order to stay in power’.⁷ In sketching this link between accountability and development, Kauffmann’s analysis of the World Bank Institute’s Worldwide Governance Indicators makes the case for a strong correlation between accountability and higher levels of income.⁸ Similarly, Easterly has found a strong correlation between accountability and the effectiveness of governments at delivering goods and services to citizens.⁹

Most of this knowledge, however, relies heavily on indicators that capture formal recognition of rights and freedoms – not actual practice. The precise mechanisms at work that link one (accountability) to the other (development) are central to understanding how accountability institutions perform in reality.

The growing interest in the role of accountability is not only in the scholarly literature. International development cooperation is infused with accountability in its search for effectiveness. Here, however, there is a greater focus on the so-called short route to accountability, meaning the direct relation between the state and its citizens. There have been relatively few attempts to collect experiences of the workings of formal political arrangements for bringing governments to account. IDEA’s initiative on democratic accountability seems timely and relevant therefore, as it seeks to bring the political dimension of accountability back into the picture. The essential roles played by key democratic institutions such as parliaments and political parties cannot be overlooked as this risks undermining formal democratic institutions with a mandate to represent the people.

IDEA’s initiative focuses on service delivery. The reason for this is that service delivery is considered to be central to socio-economic development. Incentives to engage in service delivery are also believed to be high for both citizens and the state. Citizens depend on effective delivery of services for their daily lives, and the state will be perceived as more legitimate if it delivers services in line with people’s demands.

2. Exploring the concept of democratic accountability

2.1. Definitions

The concept of accountability is widely used in different fields and its exact definition may vary accordingly. In the papers analysed, accountability is generally defined using the broadly accepted principal-agent model: A is accountable to B if A has to explain and justify his/her actions to B, and B is able to sanction A in case of misconduct.¹⁰ Thus defined, accountability can also be seen as a relationship of power, where the less powerful ‘principal’ has the right to ask the more powerful ‘agent’ to explain his/her actions, and has the capacity to impose penalties for poor performance. What makes accountability *democratic* – the qualifier which is IDEA’s central interest – is the grounds on which the account holder performs its request. Ordinary citizens can, for example, vote political leaders in and out of office, a legislator or legislative committee oversees the executive branch, and a media outlet or a group of citizens requests information from public officials, because in a democracy there is a minimum set of guarantees and freedoms that entitle them to do so.

2.2. Types of accountability

Different sorts of accountability arrangements are credited in the literature. For instance, one popular distinction is between vertical and horizontal accountability.¹¹ In representative democracies, the most important type of vertical accountability is elections, in which voters can reward or punish the elected representatives by voting for a particular party or individual. Elected politicians in turn often delegate responsibilities, such as the delivery of public services, to non-elected civil servants with particular technical expertise. In such cases, the civil servants are accountable to the elected representatives, who in turn are accountable to the citizens.¹²

Horizontal accountability refers to checks and balances within the state structure, that is, the procedures for government institutions to hold each other to account and ensure that no agency stands above the rule of law, or intrudes on the rights and privileges of another.¹³ Such arrangements include the formal oversight mandate of parliaments to monitor executive power. The judiciary as well administrative bodies for control and oversight such as ombudsmen, the attorney general, audits, anti-corruption commissions and human rights offices are also included in this category.¹⁴ In sum, there are different types of horizontal accountability, including political oversight and judicial and administrative accountability.

Apart from the horizontal-vertical distinction, there is another between political and social accountability. Political accountability refers to the formal, legally binding channels for bringing governments to account, including elections and arrangements for parliamentarians and opposition parties to monitor the executive branch.¹⁵ Social accountability provides alternative ways for social actors (citizens, civil associations and the media) to direct demands to politicians and public officials, and to voice complaints through direct action, either formal (petitions, participatory mechanisms, etc.) or informal (public protests, rallying and public debate).¹⁶

A distinguishing feature between political and social accountability mechanisms is the extent to which they provide effective sanctions. Political accountability mechanisms have several effective means of sanctioning at their disposal, including recalling mandates, holding referendums, initiating impeachment processes or calling a vote of no confidence (in parliamentary systems). Social accountability mechanisms have to rely more on discursive ways of challenging the government.¹⁷

Another distinction, relevant to this introduction, which has been pointed out by Goetz, is to be found between forward looking (*ex ante*) and retrospective (*ex post*) accountability. Retrospective accountability refers to the idea of office holders having to account for their actions *after* they have taken them.¹⁸ Strictly speaking, this is accountability in its purest form. Forward-looking processes for influencing policies and legislation *before* they are decided are usually described as processes for increased responsiveness.¹⁹

2.3. Advancing a democratic approach to accountability

International IDEA is concerned with democratic approaches to accountability in service delivery that encompass democratic actors and channels for accountability of both the social and political types described above. Political institutions such as parliaments and political parties are believed essential from a democratic perspective as they compete for representation through elections, and have a mandate to hold governments to account. Their centrality cannot be neglected because of their democratic origins and influence on public

policy. Social movements, grassroots organizations and groups of citizens are also important from a democratic perspective to the extent that they represent citizens' interests and act on their behalf. Their source of legitimacy is different (e.g. the right to assemble, freedom of information, freedom of speech, etc.) but equally democratic.²⁰ They perform a different type of representation, and due to power inequalities within civil society it cannot be easily assumed that all civil society organizations represent the interests, needs and demands of 'the people'. There is a need to keep in mind that many civil society organizations, in particular professional NGOs, can be expected to fight for a special interest that benefits relatively few in society.²¹ Similarly, IDEA focuses on media outlets as both channels and actors, as they amplify other accountability efforts and make requests for information that is later made available to citizens, contribute to public agenda setting, and give a voice to critical comments on government activities.²²

IDEA focuses on the channels that have the greatest leverage for increasing political participation. The non-elected autonomous institutions for horizontal oversight and control such as ombudsmen, fraud offices, and the like, are not the focus in this approach. However they do have important roles to play in bringing governments to account.

As is described above, IDEA's approach assumes that accountability has the potential to improve service delivery. It also tries to bridge both social and political accountability because they are more effective when working together.²³ The argument is that while social demands and mobilization can provide immediate, short term results by voicing complaints, demanding information or arranging street protests, formal political institutions are needed to make accountability arrangements sustainable. Social actors can, for example, support the capacity of political institutions to monitor governments by supplying data and information, and evidence shows that social activities such as street protests often need to be supplemented by formally binding means in order to bring governments to account. Our literature review also calls for better understanding of the political motivation for office holders to stay accountable to the citizenry and of the need for effective formal sanctions in case of government inaction or misconduct.²⁴

The idea that types of social and political accountability are more effective when combined has also been put forward by donor agencies. Rocha et al. point out that donor projects in accountability involving both government institutions and civil society organizations and/or the mass media are the most efficient at getting results. The explanation given for this is that effective accountability requires that both functional political institutions and effective citizen demand work together.²⁵

3. Analysing case studies on accountability

This section analyses and compares the case studies. It introduces the case studies, their purpose and limitations, outlines the experiences in terms of both political and social accountability and seeks to identify common themes and lessons.

IDEA made a call for papers in late 2009. Because of the particular interest in political accountability as well as in understanding the linkages between different actors and channels of accountability, the authors were explicitly requested to include information on the roles played by political institutions and how social actors and political actors interacted in bringing governments to account.²⁶

Most of the 70 abstracts submitted focused on social actors demanding accountability or service delivery improvements and only weakly touched on how social actors interact with political institutions in holding governments to account. This initial indication seemed to confirm that accountability initiatives tend to be designed to be social rather than political. IDEA tried to overcome this overlooking of the political dimension of accountability by selecting those submissions best suited to address the role played by political institutions.

The seven selected papers cover a total of 20 cases. Although not a large enough number from which to draw general conclusions, there are interesting lessons and patterns worth highlighting. As Table 1 shows, the cases are widely different in content, but most of them emphasize the role of civil society in advancing accountability, mainly within the health and education sectors.

Table 1: Papers included in this study

Title	Cases	Summary	Author
Tracking Textbooks for Transparency, Improving Accountability in Philippine Education	The Philippines	This paper analyses the role of CSOs in monitoring the procurement and distribution of schoolbooks. It discusses the reasons why CSOs entered into a formal partnership with the state and points out some achievements in terms of reduced costs and increased timeliness of deliveries.	Aries A. Arugay
Voices from the Ground: Does Strengthening Demand for Better Services Improve Supply?	Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America	Based on the experiences of sixteen watchdog organizations from thirteen countries this study illustrates how NGOs can successfully push for specific improvements in the governance or implementation of health and education services by means of independent research and advocacy	Courtney Heck and Courtney Tolmie
Learning from the Successes and Failures of the West Cliff Flats Residence Association	Durban, South Africa	The study illustrates how a community-based organization was able to stop illegal power cuts and evictions in its neighbourhood by means of street protests, lawsuits and in the end by cooperating with the local government.	Rebecca Hinely, Barak D. Hoffman and Orlean Naidoo
Do Accountability Mechanisms in Safety Nets Improve Access to Social Services? The case of Brazil's Bolsa Família	Brazil	The study analyses a semi-governmental mechanism for accountability called social control councils. Through this mechanism beneficiaries are suppose to provide feedback on health and education services. However as beneficiaries have been heavily underrepresented in these councils and membership tends to be skewed towards the local government, they have not been able to function as intended.	Anja Linder
Strengthening the Roles of Political Parties in Public Accountability: A Case Study of a New Approach to Political Party Assistance	Kenya	The study assess to what extent the 'Centre for Multiparty Democracy-Kenya' has been able to assist political parties in their key roles between the citizens and the state, and to enhance accountability. It has created a platform for inter-party dialogue and helped to enhance mutual trust between parties, but the long-term results of the centre's activities are yet to be fully assessed.	Renée Speijcken

Title	Cases	Summary	Author
The Role of Strategic Alliances between NGOs and Local Media in Making Health Care Services Responsive to the Poor in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia	Makassar City in Indonesia	The study describes how NGOs and the local media were able to push for the adoption of a new Mayor's Decree for universal healthcare in Makassar City, Indonesia. Decentralization efforts and a strategic alliance between the media and NGOs are highlighted as major reasons behind the achievement.	Darmawan Triwibowo
Why Politics Matters: Aid Effectiveness and Domestic Accountability in the Health Sector. A comparative Study of Uganda and Zambia	Uganda, Zambia	The study highlights the implications of aid for domestic accountability relationships. It points out the difficulties for political parties, parliaments and civic organizations to hold their governments to account for the use of aid resources within the health sector. Aid that is off-budget is seen as particularly challenging since there are few mechanisms for accountability actors to access reports and evaluations.	Leni Wild and Pilar Domingo

3.1. Political accountability arrangements

This section outlines and discusses the main arenas and institutions of political accountability: elections, political parties and legislators. Although these arenas and institutions play a role in the cases, their workings are limited for a number of reasons.

3.1.1 Elections

In a democracy, electoral accountability is the most institutionalized way for citizens to reward or sanction elected representatives. If held regularly, elections are believed to create strong incentives for office holders as well as the opposition to act in the best interests of citizens.²⁷ However, there needs to be a credible opposition, providing voters with a choice, if elections are to promote accountability in an effective way.²⁸ Voters also need to 'use their ballots as a means of punishing or rewarding the past performance of politicians'.²⁹ As is shown in many of the studies, these requirements are not always met.

All the countries studied have established formal electoral processes, opening up a formal channel for accountability. Their concrete workings, however, are highlighted as problematic in several ways. In Zambia and Uganda, opposition parties are 'weak' and 'unable to act as a political counterweight to the ruling party'.³⁰ Without needing to describe these weaknesses in detail, the fact that there has been no alternation in power in Uganda since 1986 or in Zambia since 1991 supports the idea that voters have poor real choices. However, long-standing domination by ruling parties is not necessarily a direct result of weak opposition parties, faulty elections or genuine democratic support for the party in power. Each element may play a role simultaneously.

In countries such as Indonesia and Kenya, parties do not take up issue-based positions. Ethnic divisions may prevent them from doing so, as in the case of Kenya, where politicians frequently use ethnic-based arguments to pursue office.³¹ In Indonesia, it is argued that linkages between citizens and politicians tend to depend heavily on clientelist networks.³² These trends pose a problem of decreased incentives for parties and politicians to work in the best interests of all citizens. If voters do not base their decisions on performance, but rather on ethnic belonging or clientelist relations, it is hard to see how elections can have any

sort of disciplinary effect on the elected representatives. In the long run these tendencies can reduce the effectiveness of elections as channels for accountability.

The case of Indonesia raises an interesting issue related to the accountability implications that stem from presidential or parliamentary systems of government. The study suggests that directly elected mayors are likely to be more responsive to citizens' demands since there is a direct link between them and voters. Direct election of executives (as in a presidential system) is therefore preferred over indirect elections through elected councils (as in a parliamentary system).³³ Proponents of parliamentary systems, however, suggest that directly elected heads of government may become too responsive to populist demands because of the direct link to the voters combined with a relatively independent relationship with parliament.³⁴ Previous research from Bangladesh and Nigeria, for instance, suggests that some of the worst cases of corruption and ineffectiveness are associated with the direct popular election of mayors since they are 'armed with a mandate' from the people and the legislature has limited means to monitor their actions. In order to avoid misuse of power, the study suggests that it might be better for heads of government to be elected by a council to which the executive has to report on a regular basis.³⁵

3.1.2 Political parties

Political parties have a fundamental role to play in advancing democratic accountability. They are the ultimate representation vehicle for policymaking and because they are held accountable for their actions by voters, there is a reasonable expectation that they will carry out this role in a way that improves citizens' lives. They also have a central role as account holders. Opposition parties have a strong incentive to monitor the actions of the ruling party and to come up with credible policy alternatives in order to win the next election.

However, parties often fall short in fulfilling this role. Carothers has argued that political parties in many new democracies are in a state of crisis due, for example, to corruption, weak structures, leader-centrism and weak ideological bases. This can make them the 'weakest link' in the democratic chain, and mean that they are seen as the 'least respected institution in many countries'.³⁶

The studies confirm the many challenges that political parties face. In Uganda and Zambia corruption is a problem among political parties;³⁷ in the Philippines party leaders are perceived as 'abusive and corrupt';³⁸ in Kenya, clientelism overshadows interest in citizens' well-being as 'many politicians show an extreme self-interest and use public office to supply patronage networks'.³⁹

A low level of institutionalization of political parties is a problem that affects policy commitments. In Kenya, parties tend to be dependent on party leaders, to lack members, and to be fluid and extremely short-lived. For example, they are mostly active around election time but between elections they are 'virtually nonexistent'.⁴⁰ This latter problem is to some extent also illustrated in the case of Durban, South Africa. Local party representatives are described as 'people who came to the neighbourhood only right before elections, made promises and promptly forgot them after the election'.⁴¹

Although descriptions of these problems are very broad and general, it is quite clear that there is an issue of credibility, and political parties are therefore not seen as relevant for accountability. Speijcken discusses the reasons why parties behave as they do and how these problems can be addressed. Her study aims to assess the extent to which the Centre for

Multiparty Democracy-Kenya (CDM-Kenya) has been able to assist political parties with their key role as intermediaries between citizens and the state in order to enhance accountability. Created as a platform for inter-party dialogue, CDM-Kenya has helped to enhance mutual trust between different political parties.⁴² Systemic failures persist, however, and the long-term results of the centre's activities are as yet unclear.

3.1.3 Legislators

The position of parliaments in both vertical and horizontal accountability makes them central accountability actors. As Hudson has well summarized, parliaments: *represent*, by collecting, aggregating and expressing the concerns and preferences of citizens; *make policies*, by sanctioning laws that make up the legal framework of a country; and *oversee* the executive's actions, by keeping an eye on the government's activities and calling it to account.⁴³ Perhaps because parliaments are made up of political parties, the challenges they face in making governments accountable are similar to those of political parties.

The studies of Zambia, Uganda, Indonesia and Kenya suggest that in general terms parliaments lack the capacity to carry out their mandate to monitor the executive in an effective way. For example, in Zambia the parliament is given 'too little time to be able to go through the budget properly during budget planning', which means that it 'rarely questions its content'.⁴⁴ In Makassar City the local parliament has 'little technical capacity to go through the budget proposal properly', and, like the case of Zambia, the budget is therefore often 'endorsed without much negotiation'.⁴⁵ In Zambia, the weakness of the parliament is believed to be related to the long-standing domination of a single party, which has 'contributed to political practices of clientelism, patronage and widespread corruption'.⁴⁶ In the case of Makassar, while new legislation has strengthened mayoral fiscal authority in the past 10 years, the local parliament has seen its oversight mandate reduced.⁴⁷

In the cases of Zambia and Uganda, the 'logic of dominant party rule' may have contributed to weakening the parliament.⁴⁸ In Kenya, it is the presidential system that is believed to be the underlying reason for weakness, since it 'reduces the role of parliaments, grants excessive power to the president and emphasizes personalities over issues'.⁴⁹ There are important differences between the role of the legislative branch in parliamentary systems and its role in presidential systems. In the former case, the government's survival depends on a vote of confidence by parliamentarians, while in a presidential system the government has a more independent role vis-à-vis the legislature because its head is also popularly elected. It is difficult to draw any general conclusions about the pros and cons of presidential systems vis-à-vis parliamentary systems.

The case studies identify a number of weaknesses in political accountability. Some problems seem to relate to formal rules and regulations. The mandate of parliament, for example, has formally diminished in Indonesia and the presidential mandate outweighs that of parliament in Kenya. A second problem is capacity constraints on the implementation of formal rules, where they exist. Other problems relate to underlying political practices, such as clientelism or corruption. In the Philippines, the 'comprehensive, complex and sophisticated set of accountability institutions' is undermined because of 'abusive and corrupt political leaders', which illustrates this problem.⁵⁰

In the light of these weaknesses, there is an increasing interest in alternative ways of advancing accountability. Hence, the role of civil society receives much attention in the scholarly literature on accountability, and in international development cooperation.

However, in accountability initiatives weaknesses within political institutions are too often taken for granted. Rather than identifying specific problems to be tackled, political institutions are often treated as obstacles to find a way around. The view of social actors as ‘an attractive alternative to inefficient political institutions’⁵¹ is also reflected in the case studies.

It is understandable that people use social mechanisms to make their claims and demands, but an exclusive focus on social actors is highly problematic from a democratic point of view. The core democratic functions that parties and parliaments fulfil (at least in theory) in representing citizens and structuring political choices can not be expected to be taken over by social actors. Civil society organizations have severe limitations of their own when it comes to interest representation as they themselves are not subject to democratic control. Many of the types of group that receive so much attention and funding, such as advocacy NGOs, have weak member bases and relatively weak links to citizens. They can therefore be expected to follow the agenda of relatively few in society.

It is also striking how the literature on civil society, including most of the case studies in this collection, tends to neglect political aspects by excluding the role of political actors from their analysis altogether. Political circumstances and the opportunities for cooperation between social and political actors for example are rarely addressed. Neglecting political actors is not likely to contribute to improving the situation. If anything, it may undermine their legitimacy still further.

3.2. Social accountability mechanisms

We now turn to the social mechanisms for accountability, which are the centre of attention in most of the case studies. The idea of civil society organizations demanding accountability from the government is not new. It has long been an important aspect of democratic theory, and civil society organizations are referred to as catalysts of accountability. According to Goetz, the number and visibility of social accountability actors are increasing as civil society organizations demand that public authorities directly answer to the people affected by their actions.⁵² The case studies illustrate how both civil society organizations and the media increasingly take up roles of *monitoring* or *advocacy*, or a combination of both.

3.2.1 Independent monitoring and advocacy

Social actors have been able to contribute to concrete changes in service delivery in many of the case studies. Heck et al. describe how 16 watchdog organizations (research institutions, think tanks and advocacy NGOs) in 13 countries undertake independent investigations of how health and education services are performing, and then turn their findings into feedback for governments. In this way organizations have successfully been able to push for specific improvements in the governance or implementation of health and education services.⁵³

What is important to point out, however, is that changes are usually brought about by campaigning for a specific policy change – what can be called prospective or forward looking accountability. In Ghana, for instance, a research NGO discovered high levels of teacher absenteeism in primary schools and was able to convince the Ministry of Education to introduce certain changes to improve the situation. Rather than pointing out failures by the current administration, and holding it accountable for those failures, the NGO framed its feedback in a non-confrontational forward-looking manner. It pointed out problems that others potentially had caused, which the current administration had a chance to resolve. This

can be seen as a constructive way of providing feedback and having certain suggestions adopted, but it may be problematic that the organization explicitly avoids confronting the current government for its failures, and stresses learning over punishment.⁵⁴

In Makassar social actors have taken on roles in both monitoring and advocacy. A new mayor's decree on universal health care was adopted following demands expressed in the media and by local NGOs. This example illustrates how NGOs can make use of the local media to effectively raise specific policy issues, and how the media can play an active supporting role. Both newspapers and the broadcast media provided opportunities for citizens to express concerns directly to government officials.⁵⁵

3.2.2. *Participating in formal monitoring*

Two other examples illustrate how civil society takes on more formal roles in monitoring service delivery. In the case of the Philippines, watchdog organizations were formally invited to monitor the procurement and delivery of textbooks to primary schools through an internationally funded project, the National Textbook Delivery Programme. These efforts, according to the author, have contributed to reducing corruption and achieving more timely delivery.⁵⁶ Another example is the semi-governmental mechanism for social control in Brazil's conditional cash transfer programme, Bolsa Família. The programme seeks to reduce poverty by providing poor families with a minimum income on condition of taking up access to education and health services. Implementation is monitored through *social control councils*, which are supposed to include representatives of both the government and beneficiaries. These councils could be an important accountability mechanism but beneficiaries are so severely underrepresented that they do not function as intended.⁵⁷

3.2.3 *Protests*

In contrast to strategies aimed at building 'trust relationships', protest entails an element of open confrontation that – if incremental – has the potential to boost a sense of empowerment. The case of the community-based West Cliff Flats Residents Association in Durban campaigning to avoid evictions and power cuts may illustrate the pathway that leads to protest: residents judged ineffective engaging with both politicians and public officials.⁵⁸ In this concrete case the local council had no incentive to address the ward's concerns. The ward was not only marginal in terms of electorate as its composition did not correspond to the median voter – a poor neighbourhood in a relatively wealthy constituency – but was also marginal in terms of representation as its only councillor was an opposition party politician. This resulted in no access to public resources, which translated into unresponsive public servants as there was no likelihood of being held to account by politicians.

While staging protests is most often a successful strategy to draw public – or at least media – attention to specific problems, the impact on achieving real change shows a mixed record. That is at least what the South African experience shows: there is no straightforward relationship between mobilization and accountable government. However, this organization was able to put an end to illegal power cuts and evictions in the community by means of protests and formal lawsuits against the government. The association's management of the problem – that is, breaking a bigger problem into smaller manageable ones – was a central factor that boosted its confidence and improved its internal organization.

3.3. Central factors

Having outlined the working of both political and social accountability mechanisms, we now consider some central themes and underlying factors for success. What can we learn from these cases? What strategies were successful? Are there circumstances under which governments are more or less open to demands?

The discussion mainly focuses on social aspects, since these were the main focus of many of the cases. We start, however, by looking at some factors that also encompass political aspects.

3.3.1 State design

Decentralization efforts intended to 'bring government closer to the people' and to make it more accountable have been carried out in several of the countries studied. The studies on Indonesia, the Philippines and Brazil give rise to two different views on the effects of decentralization on accountability and service delivery. On the one hand, in Indonesia, the decentralization process is believed to have made politicians more responsive to citizens' demands. Responsive local leaders are often cited as the reason why public services have improved in some Indonesian provinces since decentralization. Triwibowo stresses this as one of the main reasons why NGOs and media actors were able to push the local government to adopt new legislation in the health sector.⁵⁹ In line with earlier empirical research, however, which has shown that decentralization can have mixed results on accountability, the cases of Brazil and the Philippines point in the other direction.⁶⁰ Delegation of responsibilities on service delivery to local branches of government can challenge implementation in several ways. Lindner points out that monitoring and coordination are difficult in Brazil, where responsibilities for public services are delegated to numerous autonomous municipalities. Financial and administrative capacities also tend to differ between different municipalities in this vast country.⁶¹ Decentralization can also increase the opportunities for corruption, as in the Philippines, where a large number of local agencies have become involved in the procurement and implementation of education services. The study shows that the additional people involved make it more difficult to monitor, for example, procurement procedures.⁶²

3.3.2 The importance of timing in the electoral cycle

Are there any situations in which politicians are more or less open to the demands of social actors? Several cases suggest that the timing of advocacy campaigns in the electoral cycle is important. Politicians may be more open to demands in the months leading up to an election. A Ghanaian NGO, for example, was able to use a presidential campaign and media outlets to shine a spotlight on its issue. By working closely with the media, and actively sending out information sheets to journalists about the problem of teacher absenteeism and the specific recommendations developed by the organization, it was able to get good media coverage.⁶³ This is probably one of the explanations for why their suggestions were adopted in the end. The community organization from Durban had a similar experience. It made the municipal government promise to renovate the municipally owned residences in their neighbourhood by disrupting campaign meetings and making their claims directly to the mayor.⁶⁴

The cases studies also show how NGOs have used promises made by newly established politicians to push for specific demands. In both Guatemala and the Philippines it was

perceived as more efficient to cooperate with a newly established government and to make use of its new promises to push for a certain policy change. In Guatemala, on learning that a new minister had come to power and promised to reform education within her first 100 days, research findings were framed to relate to that promise.⁶⁵ The findings could thus be used by the government to fulfil its promise. There were similar experiences in the Philippines, where a new president promised to reduce corruption in the education sector. NGOs decided to cooperate with this new government partly because it seemed so determined to end corruption.⁶⁶

3.3.3 Impact of international development cooperation

The cases from Zambia and Uganda seem to confirm existing concerns about the impact of international development cooperation on domestic accountability, which have for example been highlighted by the OECD Development Assistance Committee.⁶⁷ These case studies argue that aid that is channelled on-budget, meaning through a country's ordinary systems, has the potential to improve domestic accountability, by involving a wide range of actors in the design and follow-up of aid activities.⁶⁸ In reality, however, this opportunity is rarely made use of. Instead, donors tend only to interact with the executive branch of government. It is difficult to determine the exact levels of off-budget support, but the study suggests that the health sectors in these countries receive more off- than on-budget support. This is seen as particularly challenging for domestic accountability in both countries since such support often uses separate reporting structures which are difficult for domestic accountability mechanisms to access. Oversight is thereby undermined, which makes holding the government accountable for health sector performance difficult.⁶⁹ To some extent, this means that international aid may reinforce the unbalanced power relationship between the executive and the legislative branch of government, as parliamentarians are excluded from decisions on how resources are used.

3.3.4 Identifying an ally within the government

A successful strategy for social actors that was highlighted in the case studies was to identify an ally within the government who was willing to help out with data collection, and/or to take forward a specific policy recommendation. Heck et al. point out that having 'a path to a state actor at any level of government can make a difference between good recommendations that are never implemented and those that are adopted with vigour'. Most of the organizations that successfully pushed for policy decisions made contact with politicians or senior civil servants at an early stage, before starting their research activities. In this way, they got hold of information that otherwise would be difficult to access. They also got to know the specific priorities and interests of the government and could frame their research to make it fit with those priorities. Why this is a winning strategy is illustrated in the case of Guatemala: a watchdog organization concerned about the low quality of education decided to undertake research on textbook availability because it had learned that it this was the ministry's top priority. It presented the proposed study to the new minister as a way to support her efforts to improve education. In this way the researchers earned the ministry's trust and gained access to much needed budget and financial records. Once the report was ready, the researchers were able to present it directly to the minister, who in turn adopted several of the report's recommendations.⁷⁰

The cases from Indonesia and the Philippines also underscore the importance of direct informal contacts with government officials. In the former, informal relationships allowed NGOs to get hold of inside information about the policymaking process.⁷¹ In the latter case,

informal contacts are more explicitly described as the reason why the NGO G-Watch was invited to join a formal partnership with the Department of Education.⁷²

How is this kind of relationship established in the first place? Why do government representatives want to cooperate with watchdog organizations? The answer is probably that such cooperation can help government members and officials advance their personal or political goals. Both politicians and civil servants need empirical research in their work, and civil society organizations can help them. Informal cooperation with a research organization willing to address a specific issue may therefore be appealing, provided that the organization is credible and that relations can be kept informal.

The centrality of personal relationships is illustrated in the case study of the Philippines, where several senior officials within the Department of Education had NGO backgrounds. ‘Trustful relationships’ could explain why that particular NGO was invited to formally cooperate with the department.⁷³ Direct contacts as a kind of shortcut to political influence are problematic from a democratic point of view – no matter how good the cause is, priority given simply because of good personal relationships could skew neutrality. Nonetheless, it also shows that understanding the informal specific context pays off.

It is important to note that the studies usually refer to partnerships made directly with executive officials rather than opposition parties or mediating agencies of government.⁷⁴ To ally with a ministry official or politician in power is apparently perceived as a more effective strategy than trying to influence political parties or using other formal democratic mechanisms. The idea of allying with an opposition party is not discussed in detail, in spite of the fact that they ought to have mutual interests. It seems reasonable to believe that NGOs prefer to cooperate with actors who they believe have political influence. The tendency to contact ministerial officials implies that these actors are thought to yield more power than opposition parties. Another explanation may be that NGOs want to be perceived as supporters rather than opponents of the government, as is discussed below.

3.3.5 Forward-looking, collaborative strategies

There are several examples of civil society organizations using collaborative approaches to get what they want in this selection. As is mentioned above, some NGOs seem to avoid pointing out government failures. Instead, they choose to frame feedback in a constructive manner, and to focus on what can be improved in the future. The NGO studied in the Philippines acted in a similar way. Knowing that formal institutions often fail to hold the government to account, it decided to promote the Department of Education’s future improvement rather than punish its past. In two other cases, it is suggested that social actors have switched from confrontational to more cooperative approaches. The above-mentioned Durban community organization, for instance, started out by openly criticizing the local government through street protests. However, it was not until it changed from confrontational to more collaborative strategies that it was able to reach a compromise solution with the local government. The community organization ‘ended its civil disobedience and started to peacefully engage with the municipality to address the problem and in return the government stopped power cuts and evictions’.⁷⁵ Later on this agreement resulted in a joint housing renovation plan and a plan for private ownership. However it can be questioned whether it was the new ‘constructive collaboration’ that made the government listen to the organization or the implicit ‘threat’ of continued confrontation that explains why the government decided to respond to the demands.

In a similar way, Indonesian NGOs decided to ‘alter their strategies from being confrontational to becoming more of a partner to the government and participating in the formal policy process’. This strategy is believed to be ‘instrumentally effective’, and entails giving up direct confrontation.⁷⁶

These friendly ways of approaching governments seem effective at having specific policy changes adopted, but they are limited in terms of holding politicians to account. The organizations do not have any means to sanction governments that fail to stick to their promises. How can this trend of collaboration be understood? Organizations might not really be aiming to advance accountability in general, but only on specific issues. Collaboration may well be effective for that purpose. The trend could also indicate that people to some extent have given up on the idea of enforcing retrospective accountability. It may seem more productive to try to support a new government than, for example, to start court cases or investigate corruption allegations when such mechanisms have proved ineffective in the past. In this sense, collaborative strategies may be seen as a way for civil society organizations to survive in a dysfunctional formal accountability system. Nonetheless, retrospective mechanisms for accountability are needed to guarantee that elected representatives do what they promise in the long run.

3.3.6 Shortcomings of social actors

There are major concerns about how representative social actors are and about legitimacy. Apart from member-based organizations such as labour unions, community-based organizations, and so on, civil society organizations are rarely subject to democratic processes and do not have to answer for their actions to members. In fact, many of these groups, in particular professional NGOs, have surprisingly weak ties to the public. As Heck et al. point out, NGOs ‘rarely interact with citizens and community organizations’ and therefore ‘may not be a good vehicle to carry forward the voices of citizens’,⁷⁷ mirroring an observation made by Rocha Menocal when evaluating donors’ work on voice and accountability in Bangladesh: ‘NGOs often are unable to build true consensus’ and ‘simply advocate what they think is the best solution, due to lack of time and resources’.⁷⁸ Even if many civil society organizations see themselves as working for a good cause, their inability to represent the interests of citizens may reduce their credibility as accountability actors.

Many civil society organizations receive funding from abroad, including just about all the organizations included in this collection. This may reduce their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. As is highlighted in the donor evaluation mentioned above, there has been an explosion of civil society organizations and activism since the 1990s, and donors have undoubtedly played an important role in enabling such growth. However, and as is pointed out in the same study, there is a risk that foreign funders gain too much influence over the objectives of the organizations they support.⁷⁹ Some organizations may be willing to change their agendas in order to attract funding. Some civil society organizations may even be established to take advantage of funding opportunities rather than in response to citizens’ demands.⁸⁰ We cannot know whether external funding has affected the goals and strategies of the civil society organizations included in this study. It is interesting to observe, however, that many of the organizations seem to make use of the so-called short route to accountability, which emphasizes direct relationships between civil society and the state, and which has received preferential attention from donors and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank.⁸¹ The cooperative approaches used by some of the civil society organizations examined can also be traced back to donor strategies. According to Youngs, coalitions between civil society organizations and ministries in advancing accountability are

‘the new box to be ticked on donor checklists’ and fieldwork from the Middle East suggests that civil society organizations feel that they are pushed by donors into such coalitions.⁸²

Social mechanisms have also been criticized for their lack of sustainability. Mejía Acosta, for example, highlights their inability to secure accountability in the long run.⁸³ The case studies confirm that civil society organizations often engage in short term advocacy at a specific point in time. Is this short term character really a problem? Why should social mechanisms strive to become more sustainable or institutionalized? The flexible, informal character of social mechanisms could be regarded as an advantage rather than a weakness as it allows them to address emerging problems and concerns in society. However, they are not suitable as the sole accountability mechanism. There also need to be formal institutional arrangements in place to ensure sustainability and continuity, among other things.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper has analysed and compared a number of case studies on the subject of democratic accountability in service delivery with the objective of identifying general themes and lessons. The case studies addressed a variety of issues and were widely different in content. However, a number of lessons can be drawn from the analysis.

The case studies reveal that existing formal accountability systems are dysfunctional in many countries due to weak formal mandates, the capacity constraints of parties and parliaments or underlying political practices such as clientelism or corruption. Furthermore, the work indicates that few efforts exist to strengthen political accountability. Efforts to strengthen social accountability are much more common and some of them have had positive effects, leading to concrete improvements in service delivery. A number of lessons can be drawn from these experiences.

One lesson is that direct contacts with government officials seem to be important for getting recommendations adopted successfully. By contacting civil servants or politicians at an early stage, before starting accountability demands (e.g. an advocacy campaign or investigation), civil society organizations can earn the trust of officials, get hold of information that otherwise would be difficult to access, and frame their demands to make them fit the priorities of the government. Several cases also suggest that the timing of advocacy campaigns in the electoral cycle is important because politicians may be more open to demands in the months leading up to or following an election. Social actors can for example use political campaigns to shed light on their own demands. There are also examples of organizations making use of promises made by newly established governments to advocate for specific concerns.

The above leads to a realization that there is a focus on what can be improved in the future instead of punishing past mistakes or failures. Such forward-looking, collaborative practices seem to be effective at getting specific suggestions adopted but may prove ineffective at making officials stick to their promises in the long run. Once civil society organizations avoid confronting the government this leaves few means for providing officials with systematic feedback.

An overall conclusion is that more effort is needed to balance political and social accountability efforts. Social actors are not suitable as the sole form of accountability, since they often engage in short term advocacy at a specific point in time. There also need to be

formal arrangements in place to ensure enforcement and continuity. An exclusive focus on social actors is also problematic from a democratic point of view, since the core democratic functions in representing citizens cannot be expected to be taken over. Civil society organizations have severe limitations of their own when it comes to interest representation as they themselves are not accountable to those they claim to represent. An issue that would need further attention and research is how social and political actors could interact to make governments accountable, and how such cooperation can be encouraged.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bellamy et al. (2010)

² Schedler et al. (1999)

³ Diamond (1999)

⁴ Goetz (2005)

⁵ Goetz (2005)

⁶ Amartya Sen (1999); similar arguments are put forward by Schedler et al. (1999)

⁷ Collier (2011: 288)

⁸ Kaufmann et al. (1999) Among other things, they find that one standard deviation improvement in accountability leads to a 2.5-fold increase in per capita income. Accountability is measured as electoral accountability, freedom of expression, freedom of association and a free media.

⁹ Easterly (2006)

¹⁰ Schedler (1999: 17)

¹¹ O'Donnell (1999)

¹² Schedler (1999)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ O'Donnell (1994)

¹⁵ Mainwaring (2003)

¹⁶ Mejía Acosta (2010)

¹⁷ Joshi (2008)

¹⁸ Goetz (2005)

¹⁹ IDEA (2008)

²⁰ See International IDEA (2010) on which actors are in focus in IDEA's democratic approach to accountability.

²¹ Rocha Menocal et al. (2008)

²² International IDEA (2010)

²³ Mejía Acosta (2010)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Rocha Menocal et al. (2008)

²⁶ IDEA (2009)

²⁷ See e.g. Pettit (2010); Schedler et al. (2010); Mejía Acosta (2010)

²⁸ See e.g. Robert Dahl (1989)

²⁹ Weghorst et al. (2010:12); see also Collier (2011)

³⁰ Wild et al. (2010:2)

³¹ Speijcken (2010)

³² Arugay (2010)

³³ Triwibowo (2010)

³⁴ Mejía Acosta (2010)

³⁵ Crook (1998)

³⁶ Carothers (2006:3)

³⁷ Wild et al. (2010:11)

³⁸ Arugay (2010: 6)

³⁹ Speijcken (2010:16)

⁴⁰ Speijcken, (2010:16–17)

⁴¹ Hinley et al. (2010:19)

⁴² Speijcken (2010)

⁴³ Hudson (2007)

⁴⁴ Wild et al. (2010:10–11)

⁴⁵ Triwibowo (2010:17)

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- ⁴⁶ Wild et al. (2010:11)
- ⁴⁷ See Triwibowo (2010:17–18)
- ⁴⁸ Wild et al. (2010:10)
- ⁴⁹ Sprechen (2010:17)
- ⁵⁰ Arugay (2010:6)
- ⁵¹ Triwibowo (2010:3–9)
- ⁵² Goetz (2005:8)
- ⁵³ Heck et al. (2010)
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Triwibowo (2010)
- ⁵⁶ Arugay (2010)
- ⁵⁷ Lindner (2010:19–20)
- ⁵⁸ Hinley (2010)
- ⁵⁹ Triwibowo (2010)
- ⁶⁰ Crook (1998)
- ⁶¹ Linder, p. 4
- ⁶² See Arugay, p. 9–11
- ⁶³ Heck et al. (2010)
- ⁶⁴ Hinley et al. (2010)
- ⁶⁵ Heck et al. (2010)
- ⁶⁶ Arugay (2010)
- ⁶⁷ ‘Sustained aid dependence tends to skew accountability outwards by crafting incentives for governments to be accountable to donors rather than their own citizens’; ‘aid flows often are channeled outside the formal budget process which makes nearly impossible for parliaments, parties, auditor general, etc. to have a say in how resources are used’ (see Hudson 2009:8)
- ⁶⁸ Wild et al. (2010)
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ Heck et al., p. 17
- ⁷¹ Triwibowo, p. 16
- ⁷² Arugay, p. 12.
- ⁷³ Arugay (2010:12)
- ⁷⁴ Heck et al. (2010)
- ⁷⁵ Hinley et al. (2010:22)
- ⁷⁶ Triwibowo (2010)
- ⁷⁷ Heck et al. (2010:14)
- ⁷⁸ Rocha Menocal et al. (2008:44)
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ Hudson (2009)
- ⁸¹ See, e.g., World Bank (2003)
- ⁸² Youngs (2011:5)
- ⁸³ Meija Acosta (2010); see also Goetz (2005)

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