Rethinking social accountability in Africa: Lessons from the Mwananchi Programme

Executive summary

Fletcher Tembo, September 2013

> " *There is no substitute for public scrutiny in developing effective and equitable policies…. We therefore call on African governments to set out a bold national agenda for strengthening transparency and accountability to their citizens* "

Kofi Annan, Chair, Africa Progress Panel Meeting, Cape Town, 10 May 2013

Phenomenal economic growth is emerging in many African countries. At the same time, a substantial number of African countries have had several rounds of multi-party elections, which we could assume represents a deepening of democracy. Yet inequality is also increasing, threatening to undermine that economic growth and to erode the achievements already made in delivering the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

Just as remarkable is the growth in investment in initiatives to improve accountability and transparency, aiming to improve governance, enhance development, and empower citizens. But more needs to be done on social-accountability projects, to promote grassroots political governance, and to ensure these investments significantly change the practice of accountability in Africa.

The Mwananchi programme, backed by DFID's Governance and Transparency Fund, ran for five years across six very different African countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia. Three lessons emerge from our deep engagement with social accountability:

a) we must improve our understanding and analysis of conflicting incentives
b) we must embrace and utilise contextual dynamics
c) we must use a framework that identifies and involves game-changing processes of interlocution.

Collective-action theory shows that citizens faced with a common problem will not act in common as a matter of course, even when other actors agree. Each actor is embedded in a complex web of interests and incentives, arising from their closest relationships through to their furthest external influence. In a given context – such as a social-accountability project – these incentives may suddenly spur the actor to action, often in ways we might not expect: to recruit others; to withdraw their involvement; to myriad ways of acting and interacting, which can lead to less than desirable results. 'Interlocution' is the process of addressing this complex web of incentives and actions through actors selected for their game-changing abilities.

Those with the most to lose from these interactions are the powerless and the marginalised, defined both in terms of the way they engage as citizens, and the authority that surrounds them, including that of the state. It is unrealistic to expect ordinary citizens to hold public office-holders to account immediately after voting them into power or mandating them to deliver services to the poor. Current social-accountability programmes largely fail to acknowledge the dynamic nature of these incentive-driven power plays, pursuing instead a technical process which is removed from the contextual reality in which the

citizens and state actors operate. And so the notion of citizen empowerment quickly loses its strength.

It is important to explore these crucial contextual dynamics in a particular way, using this understanding to inform how interventions should be designed and implemented – evolving theories of change, rather than fixing them from the beginning. With this key point in mind, the Mwananchi programme developed a tool that helps to locate the project results chain within the dynamics of the wider environment, using insights from political-economy analysis and outcome mapping.

When we explore the contextual dynamics of a given collective-action situation, it becomes apparent that each situation demands particular change processes, and that these processes can go beyond resolving the problem itself to addressing the incentive structures, rules and structural influences from the wider environment, such as government policies or the allocation of aid. This should be the focus of social-accountability interventions.

This new focus starts with the cultivation of trust-based relationships among the actors involved; then the recruitment of contributions to help the process (such as ideas, resources and other kinds of influence), always bearing in mind that these contributors will also have self-serving incentives and interests. This point – the need to focus the intervention on context-specific interlocution processes – by extension shows us the crucial need to find and support the right interlocutors of change in order to enhance citizen engagement as a mechanism for strengthening citizen-state accountability relationships. And so we must move away from a preoccupation with actors and actor categories, towards a focus on defining the relationships that can enable actors to facilitate, and even enforce, change. Accountability grows out of these relationships; it is cultivated through both the informal and the procedural rules of the game, and their enforcement. This in turn helps to deliver sustainability, in time leading to the 'answerabililty' of public-office

holders: the legal or political obligation of the state to justify decisions to the public.

Our work on the Mwananchi programme leads us to conclude that to achieve effective citizen engagement that transforms citizen-state relationships in favour of the poor, we need to understand and support 'interlocution processes', then 'interlocutors', which work to find solutions to the problems of collective action.

Adopting this approach will have implications on how social-accountability projects are designed and implemented in various contexts. It means a new way of thinking:

» treating social-accountability projects as policy experiments: showing what a good policy would look like and how it could be implemented effectively, and investing in this process
» social accountability as learning to build trust-based relationships: allowing local realities and relationships, rather than imported social-accountability tools, to be the primary drivers of change
» a level playing-field for marginalised citizens: promoting rules that provide political leverage either directly to the poor or to elite interests in such a way that there is benefit for both them and the poor
» gradual movement from 'accountability as responsiveness' to 'accountability as answerability': the application of sanctions formed by actors in a relationship of trust during the process of solving the collective-action problem, with appropriate measures for mitigating risks.

Africa's future lies in finding the key ingredients to build relationships based on trust. The social-accountability framework launched in this paper gives those building that future a new thought process to help deliver effective social accountability.

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www.odi.org.uk/mwananchi-report