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Rights in Action

# Voice for accountability: Citizens, the state and realistic governance

## Initial findings from an innovative evaluation of donor interventions

### Key points

- Improved citizen-state relations are central to a realistic agenda on good governance.

- Voice does not automatically lead to accountability: voice without concrete mechanisms to effectively hold the state accountable is not likely to achieve change.

- Donors' interventions are not sufficiently tailored to the local political and socio-economic context.

When do citizens' voices and demands result in improved state responsiveness, transparency and accountability? First, when the citizenry is active in shaping policy priorities and demanding greater openness and responsiveness from the state. Second, if state institutions view their responsibilities to citizens as central. In reality, however, the state in many developing countries is not sufficiently accountable to its citizens, whose voices often remain unheard or are simply too weak to have any influence.

Recent work on a multi-donor evaluation commissioned by seven Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors[1] looks at policies and interventions funded in an attempt to address the thorny issue of how the relationship between citizens' voice and state accountability works in practice.[2] The terms 'voice' and 'accountability' often mean different things to different people in different contexts or traditions. For example, from a human rights perspective, 'voice and accountability' refers to the relationship between right holders (citizens) and the duty bearer (the state). In the field of governance assessment, 'voice and accountability' is a key indicator encapsulating a broad range of factors, from freedom of expression and respect for civil liberties to free and fair elections and the just rule of law.[3] Box 1 contains an operational definition of these terms.



Accountability is key for their voices to be heard

The relationship between voice and accountability is central to the debate on realistic governance: i.e. how good governance can be operationalised in practice.[4] Linking 'voice' and 'accountability' can only be meaningful when citizens have the knowledge and power to make demands, and those in positions of power have the capacity and will to respond. Research suggests that three implications follow:

- Focusing solely on either voice or accountability is not enough. Often donor initiatives focus either on voice (e.g. funding to create spaces for citizens' voice) or accountability (e.g. an initiative to strengthen state capacity to respond) (see Box 2).

- Voice does not always lead to accountability. The circumstances in which voice leads or contributes to greater accountability vary with

and accountability' into their strategies, policies and programmes varies considerably, depending on their own priorities and approaches.

Despite donors having policies to enhance 'voice and accountability', translating these approaches into effective projects and programmes is not always straightforward. Box 2 provides a broader breakdown of a selection of 'voice and accountability' interventions.

The evidence on the effectiveness and impact of these programmes, when available, is patchy and not sufficiently focused on the key features of the citizen-state relationship. Partly as a consequence of this evidence gap, assumptions are often made, particularly by programme designers and implementers, as to how the relationship between 'voice and accountability' works in practice, leading to unrealistic expectations of what the intervention can deliver.

Against this context, this multi-donor evaluation is both timely and important. It provides a unique opportunity to assess the extent to which current approaches are effective and, crucially, to begin to fill some of the evidence gaps around the 'voice and accountability' relationship. As such, the evaluation is an important learning opportunity which should contribute to improving future practice.

## Evaluating donor 'voice and accountability' interventions

The design and pilot phase (see Box 3) of the evaluation provide some important lessons on the most useful approaches for evaluating 'voice and accountability', as well as some initial findings which should be taken into account and further investigated during the case studies.

The choice of evaluation approach is of paramount importance, for two reasons:

- The absence of adequate baselines and indicators against which to measure progress and the complexities of attribution make the application of simple results or performance-based approaches difficult.

the political context. A linear causal relationship in which increased voice automatically results in greater accountability cannot be assumed and could lead to unrealistic expectations about what increasing citizens' voice alone can achieve.

- A focus on the relationship between citizens and the state helps to bridge the divide between, on the one hand, those concerned with state building, reform processes and institutional capacity and, on the other hand, those with a more 'bottom up' perspective focusing on active citizenship, support for civil society and participatory approaches. Simply put, 'voice and accountability' is where these two traditions meet.

## 'Voice and accountability' in practice: Donor approaches and experience

A thorough review of donor policies revealed that while 'voice and accountability' does not constitute a distinct sector for most donors, the relationship between citizens' voice and state accountability is increasingly a feature of their policy documents,[5] mostly as a dimension of promoting democratic governance or a rights-based approach to development. Not surprisingly, the way in which donors and other development actors incorporate 'voice

- There is a lack of tangible models that enable the identification of the conditions under which 'voice and accountability' interventions work effectively, including reference to the broader socio-economic, political and legal context in which interventions are carried out.

The evaluation framework developed by ODI[6] takes into account these important lessons and it adopts a theory-based approach which seeks to expose and explain the implicit assumptions and theories of change (how x contributes to y) that underpin complex development interventions. A theory based approach to evaluation can contribute to a better understanding of the causal/impact chains linking activities, outputs and results, by allowing exploration of multiple causal strands as well as multiple levels of causality.

## Emerging findings and policy recommendations

The first phase of the multi-donor evaluation pointed to some tentative, but nevertheless important findings and recommendations to be investigated further during the next phase.[7]

### The context for 'voice and accountability'

**Institutions and the 'rules of the game'.** Overwhelmingly, the strongest message emerging from recent donor evaluations of 'voice and accountability' interventions is that they must be tailored to the political context. This implies that interventions should take into account the formal and informal 'rules of the game' between and among different state and societal actors. How these rules are set and, crucially, how they function in practice, depends on the power dynamics at play between these groups. An analysis of the political context should therefore go beyond an adaptation to local conditions, such as the availability of organisations for donors to work through. It should also explore the causes of poor governance, not just the symptoms, as well as how societies and states are transformed.

**Donors should explore the applicability of more flexible and context specific interventions in support of 'voice and accountability'.** Donors are often aware of the contexts in which they operate and this is increasingly evident in their analytical and strategic documents. However, the intervention analysis and the pilot case studies suggest that, in practice, their interventions are not always flexible enough to respond to emerging challenges or opportunities. This is partly explained by donors' own political and institutional incentives often based on corporate priorities or on their own political frameworks regarding the type of state and society they are aiming to foster.

**The role of informality.** Informal systems and processes, particularly at the local level, matter. In relation to settling disputes, for example, informal local mechanisms in negotiations and litigation cases can be very effective. However, it is important to recognise that informal arrangements are not without limitations or risks. Not all groups are necessarily represented, and in some cases there is a risk of rein-forcing discriminatory practices (e.g. women being discriminated in the name of traditional values, or faith-based judicial systems which do not respect individuals' rights). These systems often lack the necessary checks and balances and this can make it difficult in practice for donors to work with the grain of informality, although actual experience is still very limited.

### Channels for voice : Mechanisms for accountability

**A variety of channels is needed.** A lot of effort is dedicated to identifying, engaging with and building the capacity of the 'right' state and civil society actors. Whilst this is key, it is neither easy nor enough. Donors increasingly recognise the importance of engaging with a wide range of channels to support the citizen-state relationship, including the media, political parties, citizens' watchdogs and parliamentarians. Yet the actors involved in their programmes tend to be the 'traditional' partners such as international or national NGOs or the government (at national and local levels). This is due partly to practical reasons (e.g. high

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**Box 3: 'Voice and Accountability': applying the evaluation framework in Benin and Nicaragua**

The evaluation framework for 'voice and accountability' is based on five key components: opportunities, constraints and entry points for 'voice and accountability'; institutional, organisational and individual capacities; voice and accountability channels; changes in policy, practice, behaviour and power; broader development outcomes. The framework was piloted in Benin and Nicaragua. Below we provide some examples drawn from the application of the framework in these two countries, although more details on the applicability of the framework will emerge from the five case studies currently under way.

**Channels for 'voice and accountability':** one of the key components of the framework is to investigate the role and functioning of the different channels needed to strengthen 'voice and accountability', which crucially should not focus on actors only, but also on the mechanisms and processes to achieve change.

The community radio stations in the Borgou region in Benin, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation, offer some useful insights into how channels for citizens' voice can contribute to enhanced accountability of the state at the local level. The radio stations broadcast at village and district level and offer live spaces for individual citizens to voice their opinions and concerns, as well as more structured exchanges with public bodies responsible for service delivery resources management. The radio acts as a channel for citizen voice and as a mechanism to demand transparency and accountability. The stations' own internal governance and accountability arrangements are key to ensuring their credibility and legitimacy. Regular reporting to the governing board ensures feedback and consultation with community members as well as credibility vis-a-vis the government structures that it aims to hold to account.

**'Voice and accountability' and aid effectiveness:** one of the evaluation questions focuses on lessons to date on donors' effectiveness with particular reference to the principles enshrined in the Paris Declaration such as harmonisation.

In Nicaragua, there were some examples of donor collaboration which, although still at an early stage, provide some useful lessons. Three multi-donor funds on different aspects of voice and accountability (civil society, political parties and anti-corruption) have been established supported by most of the key donors working on governance in the country. They have worked collaboratively to establish a single set of objectives per fund, with fund management executed by a single agreed agency, in an attempt to achieve consistency in approaches. Whilst joint action has led to increased donor awareness of each others' work, the funds lack an overarching framework, have yet to reduce transaction costs and have curtailed donors' flexibility to respond to particular issues, priorities or gaps. Furthermore, the funds risk crowding out (and disempowering) home-grown initiatives and civil society, with their fund managers open to the criticism of lacking local representation and accountability (as they respond to donor objectives and reporting structures).

transaction costs in engaging with too many different actors) but also to potential political risks (such as those associated with collaborating with political parties) and the limited experience of working effectively through different intermediaries. A key finding of the first phase of the evaluation is that the legitimacy and accountability of the actors themselves, which is increasingly being scrutinised by others asking whom they represent and with what authority, is a crucial dimension of success and sustainability.

**Donors should do more to support the creation and improvement of accountability mechanisms.** This is key to achieving real change, particularly in terms of state accountability. These include formal mechanisms, including elections and legal processes, as well as informal ones, such as community consultations and citizens' watchdogs. The lack or weakness of these mechanisms is one of the key constraints for 'voice and accountability' to work in reality. Whilst strengthening voice is a desirable endeavour, for voice to impact positively on accountability, there must also be a focus on delivering this voice to the state via concrete mechanisms, and addressing the key concern of 'voice for what'? Building voice without the accompanying effort to strengthen the state capacity and willingness to respond can create unmet expectations.

### Donor support

**Donors should commit to a long term – but realistic – process of change.** This should be reflected in project design and expected outcomes, as well as keeping the evidence base up to date for monitoring and evaluation. Crucially, this should incorporate some element of 'risk-taking'. Research suggests that despite donor interest in 'voice and accountability', particularly at the policy and strategic level, for some it is still unchartered territory at programming level.

**Donors should build on their comparative advan-**

**tages and collaborate more:** Analysis of the 90 donor-funded interventions, corroborated during the pilot studies, indicates that donor harmonisation in relation to 'voice and accountability' is still limited, although this may improve with the implementation of the Paris Declaration. One of the reasons why donors do not collaborate is because not all of them recognise 'voice and accountability' as a clear operational priority at the country level, in comparison to the more 'traditional' sectors (e.g. transport, health, education etc.), nor do they all consistently mainstream 'voice and accountability' as an explicit dimension of their sectoral work. Even if in some circumstances donors prefer to operate independently, particularly if this implies greater room for manoeuvre in more challenging political areas (e.g. corruption and human rights), it is still highly desirable for donors to coordinate their efforts better. This will avoid duplication of efforts whilst allowing them to build on their experience and comparative advantages of working on and with particular themes, actors and processes.

**All donors need to commit to following up on the findings and results:** Too often, evaluations (and joint evaluations in particular) are disconnected from key policy and strategic processes within the agencies which commission them. All agencies involved in the multi-donor evaluation of 'voice and accountability' should take concrete steps to ensure that its findings are used to shape the policy agenda and operational priorities on democratic governance in the future.

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## References and Endnotes

**Endnotes**

1    A core group of DAC partners led by DFID (BMZ, DFID, DANIDA, DCGD, NORAD, SDC and SIDA.) is collaborating on a joint evaluation of development aid for strengthening Citizens' 'Voice & Accountability'. In the first phase of the evaluation ODI undertook a literature review and analysis of donor policies and  interventions, feeding into the development of an evaluation framework and methodology. In the second phase of the evaluation, five country case studies are currently being carried out in Bangladesh, DRC, Indonesia, Mozambique and Nepal. The findings will be synthesised in a report, due in Spring 2008.

2    This paper draws on ODI research in the initial phase of the evaluation, including background research, literature review, interventions analysis and the development and testing of an evaluation framework.

3    See: http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi2007/

4    This relates to the concept of 'good enough governance', see Grindle, M. S. (2004) 'Good Enough Governance: Poverty Reduction and Reform in Developing Countries', Governance 17 (4): 525-48.

5    See O'Neil, T, Foresti, M and Hudson, A (2007), available here: http://www.odi.org.uk/pppg/politics_and_governance/publications/mf_evaluation_voice_litreview.

pdf. Our review only focused on the bilateral donors who participated in the study (see footnote 1).

6    For more details on the evaluation framework see Foresti, M., Sharma, B., O'Neil, T. and Evans, A.: http://www.odi.org.uk/PPPG/politics_and_governance/publications/mf_evaluation_voice_framework.pdf

7    A fuller set of policy recommendations will be provided in the synthesis report at the end of the evaluation process, due in Spring 2008.

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