

USAID Office of Food for Peace Strategy Consultations

Social Accountability and Governance

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Disclaimer: These notes do not necessarily reflect the views of the USAID Office of Food for Peace (FFP) or The TOPS Program. Various stakeholders' views are reflected in the notes.

The FFP strategy team is currently working with the following definition of social accountability:

Social accountability is about the processes, approaches, and tools by which community members, who are the users of public basic services, voice their needs and preferences, demand improved and effective public basic services, and hold public officials and service providers accountable for weak- or non-performance. It is, on the one hand, about strengthening the demand side of good governance.

However, as a key element of good governance, on the supply side, social accountability also requires that government officials and public service providers develop and establish feedback and response mechanisms and procedures to listen to community grievances and demands and to respond appropriately in a timely manner and be answerable for non or inadequate performance and responses.

Icebreaker

Participants were asked to consider what social accountability means. They were then asked to write down one word that describes social accountability. Here is a sample of responses obtained:

- Dignity
- Local
- Responsiveness
- Commitment
- Voice
- Integrity
- Responsibility
- Collective
- Responsibility
- Transparency
- Inclusivity
- Agency

Panel Discussion

Three panelists were sent questions in advance. Each took turns answering a question first, with others weighing in and supplementing the response. The audience was then given an opportunity to comment.

Panelists:

- Mara Russell, CARE
- Randy Tift and Bill Walker, World Vision (WV)
- Bob Groelsema, Catholic Relief Services (CRS)

1. What can you tell us about the power of social accountability to transform lives and communities? What have you witnessed and what potential do you feel is there?

Randy and Bill Respond

WV colleagues see FFP programming similar to WV programming because it is multisectoral, integrated, community-based, and longer term. In deepening work around social accountability and governance, FFP programming is well-suited to support government change through its activities.

Finding partners for implementation is important. All too often, we turn only to NGO or civil society organizations but many communities, or community members, are not represented by civil society organizations. Communities themselves are the real owners of development objectives. Implementing partners can act as a facilitator between communities, government, and service providers. An action plan can result. Communities are empowered to monitor. Greater involvement by government and communities can lead to greater sustainability.

Bob

Decentralization and democratic openings in recent years have created space for this concept of social accountability, which has not been around very long. Actual mechanisms around social accountability are more recent. Demand for better services has occurred with increased citizen action. There is a virtuous cycle that can be developed. Education on civic awareness can lead to changes such as improved infrastructure (street lights, drains for runoff preventing flooding). This led to better market organization, which increased the tax. Elected officials now had tax money to work with fund these kinds of improvements on a long-term basis. These seem like simple steps, but they led to important changes.

Social accountability leads to simple incremental steps that build in significance as they build trust and a sense of ownership over time. Transforming lives and communities is a long-term process.

Mara

Getting the basic understanding on how social accountability works is a key first step. People need ways to convey their concerns. If the mechanisms are in place and people are given a training on how to use the processes (who, what, when, where, how, why), people can become more empowered. People need to learn how to engage in the decision-making process and advocate for entitlements in communities. It is necessary to build skills to understand what is needed as well as what is possible along with more practical skills, such as budget management. An example from Bangladesh is a woman with no literacy from a poor background who was amazed that she was able to serve on a council making decisions within a community. Most resign to their fate. However, if we enable people with knowledge and provide them the opportunity to serve, this creates tremendous opportunity for change.

2. Some say that agency is fundamental to social accountability. Do you agree? If so, how can we best engage with marginalized populations to strengthen individual and community agency?

Mara

Agency is fundamental to accountability. Knowing how to engage with government processes is really critical. It's about empowerment and building not only the knowledge around how to do things, but building the confidence in people to take action. Making the processes accessible and transparent is crucial. Social analysis, understanding power dynamics in local contexts, and working with people in a participatory manner can help people realize their power to change the situation, looking at issues of balance and gender as well as youth engaging in power issues is important. Facilitating community-level decision making and communication are critical. Working to make sure everyone's voice is heard effectively is needed (for example, interviewing men and women separately), creating a safe space in dialogue and input mechanisms to enable the inclusion of marginalized groups. Committees and complaint mechanisms allow for people to voice their concerns.

People need to be given the opportunity to own and manage their own resources, tools, and planning throughout the process. For example, a community that failed to take ownership of an infrastructure project caused the infrastructure to fail. This has significance for how we implement our own programs.

Tonya (with CARE, online)

Engaging communities builds their capacity to engage and voice their concerns. It also increases their knowledge of factors that impact them; ensures that we unpack disaggregate impacts, priorities, needs. If engagement is done in a gender sensitive way, i.e., engaging women and men separately and together; improves program targeting; improves sustainability of impact, i.e., by identifying solutions in partnership with the community, which recognizes the value inherent in their local knowledge and perceptions; and helps identify socially acceptable and feasible solutions. Facilitating discussions among local populations and local officials builds capacity of both to engage with each other.

Engaging with marginalized populations is about facilitating their linkages to local officials in ways that acknowledge the value of the populations' contributions.

Randy and Bill

Not only agency that matters, but collective agency. Collectively, actionable knowledge is at the core. It is inclusive. Action has to be informed by the most marginalized.

The best mechanisms are going to be grounded in everyday reality. In the education context, for example, social accountability may not address textbooks or curricula, but everyday needs like the availability of toilets or school lunches. But, meeting these needs is going to remove roadblocks to participation and build confidence in the potential for responsive change.

Bob

What we do not want to do is take advantage of the information communities have to give without giving back (i.e., collect data without providing programming). Nor do we want to make the error of proliferating community groups that will not be sustainable or are not community driven.

Audience Responses

- Social accountability mechanisms and incentives must be in place at multiple levels of the system, from the community up to the district and national levels of government. If there is not support up the chain, the bottom-up approach will not be sustainable. The role for FFP and its implementers will change at different levels, but all are critical.
- We need to keep the issue of time poverty in mind in setting up social accountability mechanisms. Participation by community members takes time, and it is often the most marginalized who have the least of this scarce resource.
- Social accountability should be discussed as political accountability. What are the incentives for those appointed or elected to respond? In working through community-based organizations (CBOs), approaches need to strengthen CBOs generally, but also a CBO's capacity to approach political leaders. People need to hold themselves accountable for the same standards they expect from others.
- Access to good information and transparency cannot be lost. Knowing what the current laws are drives action. We need to help community groups know how to continue to access current and relevant information post project.

3. What does it mean to look at social accountability from a systems perspective? What systems do we need to influence both impact and sustainability? Think not only of citizen demand but also the supply of quality services and other public goods by governments, institutions and community groups.

Bob

There are multiple ways to look at systems. One option is as three separate systems. The first is that the private, public, and civic society spheres need to work together for good results. The performance of one impacts the other. This is a holistic system. There are different layers and formalities within all three of these spheres.

A second system is to look at the political, economic, social, and culture sphere. Some of the same elements will appear.

Lastly, in thinking about systems, a third way is to think of concentric circles. The inside circle is the individual, and accountability starts with the individual. The next layer is the household, followed by family/extended family, community, political jurisdictions, and so on.

Bill

People have to think about how all of these systems work—the individual, household, family, community, government, and so on. A key question is how community members see the systems that most impact their lives. Mutual accountability is about balancing power (gender, age, status, and ethnicity) and must be addressed. If the evidence is mapped of contextual factors and mechanisms, pathways can be identified. The community must set their own agenda and goals using relational knowledge. Patterns of outcomes can be identified.

Mara

What are the constraints in the way of service delivery or sustainability? What are the systems of incentives in place? Are they discouraging progress? Proper incentives can encourage social accountability. Learning how to work with the government and hold them accountable is a nut to crack, but it may be a breakthrough. There may be bottlenecks in the government layers that prevent systems from being transformed. Bottlenecks may occur in the middle, and breakthroughs occur when alleviating bottlenecks. A different set of skills may be needed to work with governments and improve the capacities of those we work with to achieve social accountability. We do not necessarily hire these types of people.

Audience Responses

- FFP programs cross from post-conflict to stable contexts. Social accountability demands vary in these environments. In especially fragile environments, government buy-in may not be possible or the institutional structure may not be in place. But, sustainable impact may not occur if there is not buy-in from all levels.
- How are local government units funding their efforts for services? The political will and capacity may be there, but it may be difficult if obtaining resources further up the chain is fruitless.
- Looking at accountability from a systems perspective requires investment in local and national government capacity to engage their citizens. This has come up in the global climate discussions, as governments are tasked with creating multiple plans that should (if done well) cross multiple ministries and engage citizens. Governments often lack capacity to work across ministries or engage citizens, especially when engagement must happen outside the capital. We need to build capacity here, too.
- Social accountability occurs on a number of different levels. What is the environment of social accountability a project is trying to accomplish in the program area and what is the project's accountability to the community? There is a social contract. What does the contract look like, what does it look to achieve, and what are the broader objectives?

Small Group Work

Question: What are the major constraints that you have faced in supporting social accountability and how have you addressed them? What have you learned from your experience you feel we should carry forward into the future?

Response Highlights

There is a need to address power dynamics at every level. At the household level, understanding power dynamics will help ensure the marginalized are engaged. Similarly, power dynamics will shape the level and quality of participation at the community level. In host country governments, it is important to understand how these dynamics are embedded in policy or in the relations within and between ministries, who, due to specific power dynamics, may be concerned about their own interests rather than in protecting the interests of others.

Social cohesion might be difficult, especially in post conflict environments where trust is questioned. If we are not inclusive and do not listen to the marginalized, we may actually be magnifying the power dynamics at play.