

## ***Chapter 3***

### **Taking a systems-wide approach to accountability in developing countries**

*This chapter sets out what an accountability systems approach might look like and the implications for development agencies' policies and practices. To avoid blueprint assistance, it underlines the advantages of a systems-based approach to accountability, engaging a wide range of actors and institutions, including parliaments, political parties, elections and the media.*

Accountability works as a system, involving a wide range of actors and institutions alongside information flows and patterns of influence and incentives (Figure 3.1). Conventional modes of accountability support, however, often do not adequately capture the dynamic and interlinked nature of domestic accountability. Adopting a systems-wide approach (or systems approach) can avoid supply-driven, top-down, blueprint assistance targeted only at formal accountability institutions. Instead, it can help donors to understand the specific country context and do much more to work “with the grain” of local institutions and reformers. This chapter sets out what an accountability systems approach might look like and the implications for development agencies’ policies and practices.

## **Towards a systems-wide approach**

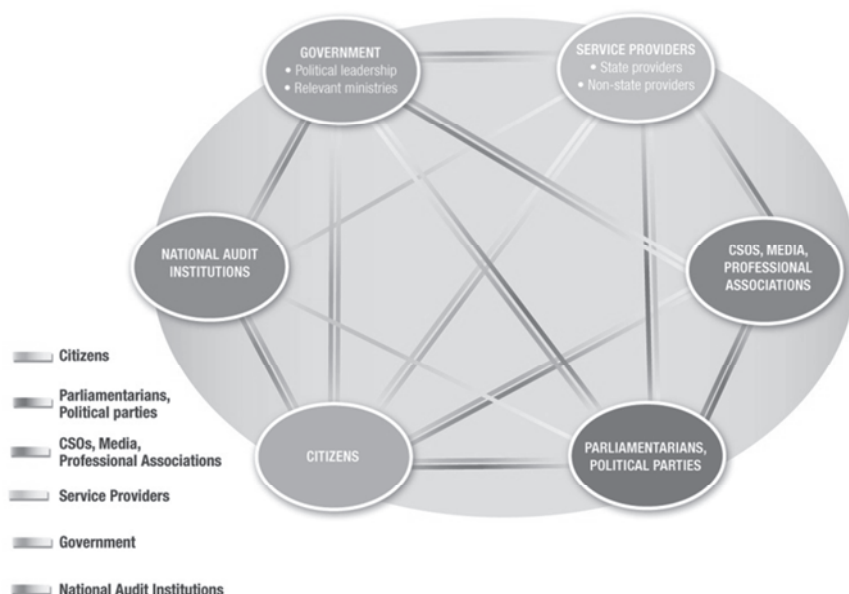
The point of departure in a systems approach should be to understand the particular accountability problem (or function) to be addressed and then to work back from that to the wider system or network of relevant actors and institutions. Working backwards like this reveals which stakeholders with whom to work. Crucially, it does not prejudge who to support and it also means working with what is already in place.

For instance, in Peru and Mali, a systems focus on accountability in the budget process revealed the importance of engaging with a wider network of actors and institutions:

- In Mali, the ability of the *Bureau du Vérificateur Général* to audit the government was directly linked to the quality of information it was able to collect from line ministries; in turn the ability of civil society and parliament to call government to account was directly linked to their access to reports from the *Bureau du Vérificateur Général*. In the education sector, the successful functioning of local school committees was dependent on effective multi-stakeholder processes that brought local counsellors together with citizens and decentralised education administrators. In health, local clinic associations have been set up to manage health services and bring together community members, health practitioners and local authorities. The circular relationships and mutual accountability processes among these various actors shows how a systems approach would better align both the supply and demand sides of accountability in Mali.
- In Peru, the decentralisation process meant that intervening with many actors in a few targeted regions offered the best opportunities for promoting multi-actor systems of accountability while at the same time supporting decentralisation.

In Mozambique, by contrast, donors have continued to support individual institutions rather than build accountability relationships between and among institutions. Stakeholders argue that donors need to do more to consolidate relationships and networks where they already existed. For example, they proposed that the Poverty Observatories, which bring together government, civil society and international partners, could be strengthened to become multi-stakeholder arenas where government could respond – and therefore be more accountable – to citizens’ concerns (Box 3.1).

Figure 3.1. **A model accountability system for budgeting**



A systems approach to accountability will also ensure that support to specific actors will be 1) balanced (thus avoiding chronic and growing gaps in capacity and the scope for “capture” by dominant accountability actors); and 2) more inclusive (e.g. reaching community-based groups, social movements, the private sector, trade unions, professional associations and others). Similarly, it will strengthen the scope for more comprehensive approaches that facilitate linkages and connections across different actors or processes engaged in specific accountability functions – often crucial for achieving lasting change or greater impact.

### Box 3.1. The Poverty Observatory system in Mozambique

The Government of Mozambique established the Poverty Observatory as part of its efforts to evaluate and monitor implementation of its poverty reduction strategy. The observatory is a consultative forum operating at the national and regional level which brings together government representatives, civil society and international partners. The Poverty Observatories in theory play important roles in informing citizens of their rights and responsibilities in relation to public goods and service delivery. However, some stakeholders argue that their impact has been undermined, as these fora remain largely consultative and are not a substantive platform for mutual accountability and power negotiations (da Silva Francisco and Matter, 2007).

This links to a number of emerging political economy insights that question approaches focused exclusively on either the “supply” or “demand” side of accountability (CFS, 2010; Booth, 2011). The case studies of Uganda, Mali and Peru reveal that citizens can often be hindered from realising their demand potential by a variety of social and political factors (such as patronage patterns, power imbalances, cultural attitudes, or individual shortcomings such as illiteracy and disempowerment). These factors tend to be particularly powerful barriers to women’s ability to demand accountability. This is illustrated by Peruvian women’s limited access to official channels like the *Defensoría* complaint system (see Annex 1, Peru Case Study). This means that assumptions about latent citizen demand need further study to more fully understand the wider incentives at play. They also reveal the importance of supporting the connections or channels which can bring together demand and supply-side actors.

## Implications of systems-wide approaches for policy and practice

What are the implications of systems-wide approaches for changing practice? This section highlights the main issues and steps for approaching accountability support on a systemic basis.

### ***Identify the core accountability problem or function and the wider political economy***

First, the design of any accountability programme needs to start with a strong understanding of the wider political economy and an initial analysis of the key accountability problem or function to be addressed (see Chapter 2).

A systems-wide approach requires a well-founded diagnostic assessment of the relevant accountability system. It may be particularly helpful to adopt a problem-driven approach in identifying the core accountability gaps or weaknesses to address (but with a focus on the *functions* of accountability rather than just the *forms* of accountability). For example, if particular accountability weaknesses are identified in overseeing budgets or in government's responsiveness to service delivery needs, this should sit at the heart of any programme of support. From this, different dimensions of political economy analysis and stakeholder mapping can identify the key actors and institutions and the pivotal entry points for support.

It may prove especially helpful to ground accountability support in concrete issues. For example, in Peru a fruitful approach has been to focus on health issues as an entry point for political party support. USAID's support to *Acuerdo de Partidos Politicos en Salud* (Political Party Agreement in Health) has helped create consensus among political parties on important health reforms (Box 3.2). While it has not been linked to parliamentary assistance (a remaining gap), it is a useful example of linking political party support to core sectoral concerns and issues.

### Box 3.2. USAID support to political party platforms in Peru

USAID's support to political parties in Peru has focused on a specific sector – health – in an effort to stimulate endogenous political platforms and cross-party engagement in health policy making. Participating political parties were supported in their efforts to 1) generate health information and data; and 2) strengthen their capacity to analyse health priorities and advocate for reform. One approach was to develop a novel cross-party consensus on a “Political Party Agreement in Health”. The project has also created space for other advocacy organisations to put forward policy proposals. This has reportedly been successful in influencing the platforms adopted by parties, although a lack of enforcement remains challenging since there is little monitoring to ensure that platforms are then implemented by participating parties.

### *Understand the linkages between formal and informal institutions*

Looking at domestic accountability systems from a sectoral perspective may allow for finer grain analysis of the key incentives and dynamics at play, and the linkages between formal and informal “rules of the game” and institutions. For example, informal agents such as traditional chiefs can be significant actors in the provision of basic services in some countries, with implications for accountability systems (Box 3.3). In addition, understanding the role of informal institutions is particularly crucial in supporting domestic accountability for gender-sensitive policy making

because these tend to regulate the personal and family issues central to women's lives. They can also be more accessible to women than formal alternatives, even though they may risk providing discriminatory outcomes (Castillejo, 2011; Chiongson *et al.*, 2011; Swaine, 2003). However, informal institutions have often been ignored in accountability programmes focused only on formal institutions. Providing support directly to informal actors and institutions can be problematic for external actors: the examples from Mali show how a first step can be to integrate into programme design and implementation recognition of the role these actors play in practice.

**Box 3.3. The role of traditional chiefs in service delivery  
and taxation in Mali**

At the time of this study (2011), development partners in Mali's education sector had started to apply some lessons learned about the importance of engaging with informal, traditional accountability systems, such as traditional chiefs. Working through local NGOs, customary authorities were to be consulted early in the process of setting up new school committees so as to foster their buy-in and support. Pilot projects on taxation were also reaching out to customary authorities, which formerly had the power to raise taxes and which may consider government taxation efforts as a threat to their status. In some cases, hybrid arrangements emerged, such as local councils working with customary authorities to help collect government taxes. These adaptations accommodated the fact that the chieftaincy system can have a significant impact on tax compliance at the local level – and that any attempts at reform which conflict with traditional authorities are unlikely to be successful.

*Source: OECD (forthcoming), Donor Support to Domestic Accountability: Budget Processes and Service Delivery in Mali, OECD, Paris.*

Understanding the linkages between formal institutions and informal practices can also ensure more feasible approaches to accountability reform. The Mali case study highlights that sound analysis of these relationships can be particularly crucial where women's rights are concerned. In 2009 a decade of lobbying by women's groups led to a draft family law which significantly extended women's rights. Yet, despite having been a strong backer of the draft law and despite its adoption by Parliament, the President ended up not signing it. He was forced to admit that the population did not fully support the new code, following extended protests by tens of thousands of religious activists who were against provisions giving more rights to women. The President returned the draft law to legislators, explaining he did so for the sake of national unity. In this case, "best fit" or incremental approaches were needed in order to progressively realise rights commitments, particularly in the face of domestic opposition. This

underscores the importance of understanding how religious, cultural and social values and norms may affect reform agendas.

### ***Build linkages and relationships across accountability actors and institutions***

While conventional approaches to social accountability often focus on strengthening demand in response to weaknesses in the state supply of accountability, recent political economy research points to the need instead to identify bridging channels that bring together citizens and the state (CFS, 2010; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008; Booth, 2011). Thus the work of the Centre for the Future State has emphasised that support to a particular set of actors (such as CSOs) alone is not particularly effective. Instead, support should be directed to “broad based alliances” which bring together a range of actors with common interests in reform (and which cross public-private divides) (CFS, 2010). The GOVNET case studies identified a number of examples where support was explicitly designed to facilitate multi-stakeholder coalitions or to build stronger relationships between different groups, actors and institutions. While the evidence base for this approach is still thin and should urgently be deepened, emerging examples are very promising.

In Uganda, for example, USAID’s Linkages initiative explicitly seeks to support the links between actors, including at local levels, while in Mali a number of programmes seek to strengthen decentralisation processes by bringing actors together (Box 3.4). A Danish project to support accountability for gender-sensitive policy making in Mali by bringing together women parliamentarians, local politicians and civil society activists is another encouraging example. Where support is focused on a particular event or moment of political transition, such as elections or significant devolution of power, it seems to be particularly important to be as comprehensive as possible, so that support works across the many domestic institutions and sectors involved in the process.

Global transparency initiatives – such as the Medicine Transparency Alliance (MeTA), the Construction Sector Transparency (COST) initiative, and the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI) – are proving to be useful platforms for building multi-stakeholder accountability networks. Experience with these initiatives suggests that in order to create successful and sustainable multi-stakeholder dynamics, group memberships need to be balanced, representative and formalised to ensure motivation and continuity. National regulatory and sectoral institutions also need to be involved, as well as the private sector and civil society organisations. These initiatives underscore the need for rigorous understanding of the political economy

context and for acting politically to influence and help diverse stakeholders work together on specific accountability issues and functions.

#### **Box 3.4. Accountability support to multiple actors in Uganda and Mali**

In Uganda, the Linkages programme aims to strengthen democratic linkages within and among the Ugandan Parliament, selected local governments and CSOs, as well as to build their capacities to enhance accountability and improve service delivery (Tsekpo and Hudson, 2009). Linkages supports a number of parliamentary committees and the shadow cabinet – including outreach through policy forums. It also funds CSOs to: 1) run budget conferences at district level to strengthen participation in budget processes; and 2) provide training and capacity development to other, smaller CSOs. In this way, it supports links between, within and among different stakeholder groups.

In Mali, the *Programme d'Appui aux Collectivités Territoriales* (PACT) seeks to strengthen the capacities of communes in order to improve their performance and build synergies between actors promoting social and economic development. The *Programme de Gouvernance Partagée* (PGP) focuses on strengthening local democracy by working with citizens, civil society organisations and communal authorities on peacebuilding, statecraft and economic development. Its training programmes are designed to improve the efficiency, accountability and transparency of local government, its engagement with civic organisations and media coverage of decentralisation.

#### ***Assess and identify promising leverage opportunities and weak links***

A systems-wide approach can help to reveal particularly weak links and potential areas of stronger leverage by: 1) identifying where capacity support and emerging opportunities exist to promote accountability; 2) providing a fuller understanding of the relationships among transparency, access to information and accountability; and 3) highlighting where there are particularly weak links in process or in the relationships among actors.

Greater awareness of the inherently dynamic nature of accountability systems opens up opportunities to recognise and respond to moments of transition or transformation. Social media and mobile communications technologies are increasingly shaping how people interact with politics and accountability around the world. New information and communication technologies have added new channels and platforms for citizens to hold their governments to account. Support for accountability needs to incorporate the fact that these technologies are changing the rules of the game completely and constantly. Examples such as Twaweza – which makes use of both new and old technologies to expand citizens' ability to



access government information and hold leaders accountable in East Africa – signal how accountability systems are evolving in many countries, and how they are shaped by technological transformations, among other factors.

New technologies (including forms of social media) can have huge potential for facilitating such bridging channels, although their impact will depend on the processes, institutions and reforms they can tap into. Examples from Uganda, Mali and Peru suggest that more could be done to promote citizens' access to media and mobile technologies as well as to enhance citizens' media literacy and safety. This includes access to media products and infrastructure, as well as the ability to make sense of information and to use it in appropriate ways (Chapter 9). But this must be grounded in a strong understanding of local dynamics and incentives.

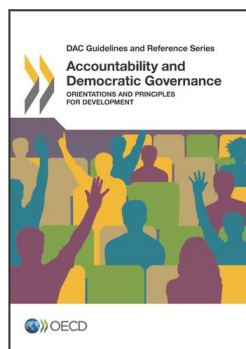
Moving onto transparency of information, Peru is instructive in this respect, as it has legally enshrined efforts to improve transparency. The *Transparency and Access to Public Information Law* (2002) stipulates that all information generated by state entities is public (with only limited exceptions for national security and confidentiality), and that it should be easily accessed at both national and local levels. All public agencies are therefore required to establish an online transparency portal which provides information on budgets, spending, purchases, plans and activities, and where citizens can request access to any information not available online.

While donor support in Peru is being channelled towards these formal processes, GOVNET research reveals that poor enforcement (including weak rule of law) and capacity gaps are eroding the impact of this legislation. The bulk of donor support is focused on activities such as supporting public agencies to publish more information online – but does little to address or combat local-level realities. In particular, little attention has been paid to the different experiences of women or other marginalised groups in trying to access and use these institutional channels for accountability. A systems-wide approach, underpinned by strong context analysis, might allow for more effective engagement with these dilemmas.

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