Beyond the Short versus Long Accountability Route Dichotomy: Using Multi-track Accountability Pathways to Study Performance of Rural Water Services in Uganda

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SUMMARY

Performance of social service delivery is often linked with effective accountability. Accountability studies increasingly acknowledge that studying one type of accountability relation at a time is too restrictive. Our study aims to correct for this and explores the effectiveness of combinations of different accountability mechanisms. We take the World Development Report's accountability triangle as a starting point and adapt it in three ways. First, we refine the long route to accountability into three tracks by differentiating between the three groups of demand side actors; political accountability (opposition), citizen-led, and civil-society-led social accountability. Second, for each track we take into account the demand and supply side and the availability of supply–demand interfaces. Finally, we adopt a holistic approach through the simultaneous incorporation of both the short and long (with the different tracks) routes. To test its usefulness, we use our refined accountability framework to study the accountability constellations and their link to performance in Uganda's rural water sector. Building on QCA, our findings identify the long three track route (supply—interface—all three demand actors) and the citizen-led social accountability route as viable routes to high water service performance in Ugandan districts. Additionally, a set of new hybrid accountability arrangements are identified while—contrary to theoretical assumptions—the short route (clients to service providers) does not prove effective.

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1. Introduction

Inequitable access to water, low functionality of existing water sources and insufficient quality of available water are key issues in the daily life of many citizens in developing countries (Bakker, Kooy, Shofiani, & Martijn, 2008). Uganda, with only 64% of the rural population having access[1] to an improved water source (Ministry of Water & Environment, 2014), lags behind the world average and it is faced with large in-country differences. Some districts reach almost full coverage (95% in Butambala), others have as little as 25% access to safe water (in Kaabong) (Ministry of Water & Environment, 2014).

Accountability is often put forward as a remedy to address poor service delivery performance. The World Bank (2004) introduced the accountability triangle which distinguishes a long and a short accountability route (see Figure 1). The long route—where citizens

first need to influence policy makers (e.g., through elections), which in turn should influence the service providers—is plagued with numerous deficiencies (World Bank, 2004:6). The short route—where citizens as clients directly demand accountability from local service providers—is expected to yield better results, hence the report promotes investment in this short route so as to bypass the problems of the long route.

The accountability triangle has encountered some criticisms. First, the short route and the long route should not be studied in isolation from each other because they are intertwined, they interact and may thus produce complex sets of accountability pathways (Devarajan, Khemani, & Walton, 2014; Halloran, 2016). Second, short route studies tend to overlook important actors such as civil society (Devarajan et al., 2014; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Added to this, we would argue, the strong emphasis on civil society and citizens also overlooks the potential power of political opposition to demand accountability which can support the endeavors and demands of other actors. Third, since the demand for and supply of accountability do not work in isolation from each other, Fox (2015) points at the need to study the interaction between both.
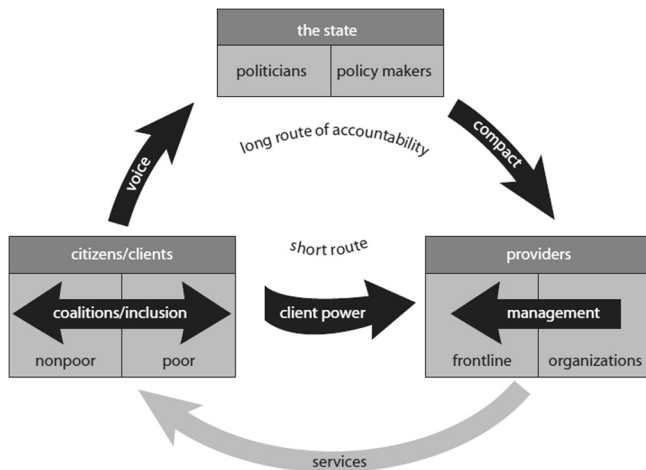
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[1] Access, or coverage refers to the percentage of people that collect water from an improved water source. The indicator for access to rural water supplies is defined as "*percentage of people within 1 km (rural) of an improved water source*" (Ministry of Water & Environment, 2014).

Figure 1. The accountability triangle in service delivery. *Source*: World Bank, 2004, 49.

Gershberg, Gonzalez, and Meade (2012) argue that these short-comings should not lead to discarding the accountability triangle because the holistic model allows to accommodate the critiques. This article proposes a refined analytical grid to study accountability. This adapted grid allows to bring in more complexity in that it can research different accountability routes and how their interaction may explain service delivery performance. In this particular paper we look into rural water services in Ugandan districts.

Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) we find that our refined accountability framework has a clear added value. It allows to holistically map accountability constellations, providing a helicopter view of the accountability ecosystems in place which explain high or low performance. The QCA analysis confirms the theoretically expected "full" track solution (in which all demand side actors, all interface and the supply side actors are present) hinted at by several scholars (i.e., Fox, 2015; Halloran, 2016), but our framework also shows that the citizen-led social accountability track can be a viable pathway to high performance. The framework allows for the identification of three new hybrid constellations combining elements from the political and social accountability (both citizen-led and CSO-led) track as leading to high performance. Finally, our framework shows that—in the case of rural water services in the Ugandan districts under review—the short route is no pathway to success.

This article first presents the adapted WDR Accountability triangle and then moves on to the empirical part. In the final section we draw some conclusions.

2. Critiques on the WDR accountability triangle

The 2004 WDR framed the issue of access and quality of service delivery in a triangle of accountability relations (see Figure 1 below). The argument was very straightforward. If a poor person buys a product in the market, she can hold the provider directly accountable. Yet, if a poor person wants to use a service, she is not able to demand accountability directly from the provider. Citizens must first influence policy makers/politicians, and the policy-makers in turn must influence the providers. This is the "long route" to accountability, which is based on citizenship entitlement. The many weaknesses that overshadow the long route (e.g., the powerlessness of poor people, lack of information and knowledge, elite capture, clientelism)[2] partly explain the poor quality of services. The WDR put out a strong call to strengthen the "short

route" of accountability to increase clients' voice and direct power over providers, because it was expected to improve access to and quality of social services. On the ground, this has taken the form of citizen monitoring of services, generally through a specific technique or methodology (e.g., citizen scorecards, social audits, user committees) (Björkman & Svensson, 2009). The underlying assumption is that transparency (access to information) combined with participation would lead to more accountability which in turn would improve service delivery (Halloran, 2016).

The above-mentioned assumptions and pathways to improved accountability and service delivery have produced some critiques.

First, the short route should not be studied in isolation from the long route and more generally from the wider context. Halloran (2016) refers to accountability as an ecosystem in which different social actors,—formal and informal—institutions, processes, mechanisms are active at different levels and in different directions. Accountability should thus be seen as a complex, adaptive system (Halloran, 2016). As such, the long route may to a large extent set the stage for the short route. The level of state responsiveness (the supply side of accountability), and the political incentive structure (long route) in place will influence the disposition of local service providers to be accountable and to respond to local demands (short route) (Devarajan et al., 2014). The largest contribution to developmental outcomes has come about when multiple forms of engagements were used jointly, a finding which was also supported by qualitative evidence highlighting the need to combine several voice strategies at once (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012:2407; Halloran, 2016; Joshi, 2017).

Second, social accountability heavily emphasizes the idea of citizen-led engagement (Halloran, 2016), while neglecting civil society-led engagement. Civil society-led engagement should not be overlooked, as citizen engagement through collectivities such as associations and social movements might be an important source of change (Halloran, 2016) or perform much needed "watchdog" functions (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012). Another reason for considering civil society is that they can influence political incentives (i.e., working within the long accountability route) (Devarajan et al., 2014). In terms of political accountability mechanisms, there is also—the often neglected—role of the political opposition in government bodies (which form part of the long route). Elected by citizens, but not in power, yet in a position to push for government accountability, these actors can play an important role in beefing up pressure on the government and this may interact (positively/negatively) with other accountability attempts.

Finally, Fox (2015) alludes to the implicit but often problematic assumption in many accountability interventions that demand automatically generates supply and vice versa. This seems to suggest that demand and supply will "naturally" meet each other as if an "invisible hand" is at work (Fox, 2015). In most environments however, multiple actors can demand and supply accountability, in varied ways, and, quite importantly, the interface spaces where supply and demand meet may or may not be functional. Hence, within each of these dimensions variation is possible: certain demand actors may or may not be very active, some suppliers may be more or less responsive, and if interface spaces are available they can bring together supply and demand actors. Systematically disregarding claims becomes more difficult if and when institutionalized channels exist between for example civil society organizations and the local governments exist. As such the demand side alone, even when provided with information and strengthened in terms of voice, may not achieve the desired results. Voice thus also needs teeth (Fox, 2015).

In sum, what the above critiques all have in common is the call for a more holistic approach to studying accountability. The interplay of multiple accountability arrangements in the long and short

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[2] For a good overview of flaws see WDR, 2004:6–12.