

Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?

JONATHAN A. FOX*

American University, Washington, DC, USA

Summary. — Empirical evidence of tangible impacts of social accountability initiatives is mixed. This meta-analysis reinterprets evaluations through a new lens: the distinction between tactical and strategic approaches to the promotion of citizen voice to contribute to improved public sector performance. Field experiments study bounded, tactical interventions based on optimistic assumptions about the power of information alone, both to motivate collective action and to influence the state. Enabling environments for collective action combined with bolstered state capacity to respond to citizen voice are more promising. Sandwich strategies can help ‘voice’ and ‘teeth’ to become mutually empowering, through state–society synergy.

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

Social accountability strategies try to improve institutional performance by bolstering both citizen engagement and the public responsiveness of states and corporations. In practice, the concept includes a wide range of institutional innovations that both encourage and project voice. Insofar as social accountability builds citizen power vis-à-vis the state, it is a political process – yet it is distinct from political accountability of elected officials, where citizen voice is usually delegated to representatives in between elections. This distinction makes social accountability an especially relevant approach for societies in which representative government is weak, unresponsive, or non-existent.²

Social accountability (SAcc) is an evolving umbrella category that includes: citizen monitoring and oversight of public and/or private sector performance, user-centered public information access/dissemination systems, public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms, as well as citizen participation in actual resource allocation decision-making, such as participatory budgeting. Yet amidst this diverse array of ongoing institutional experimentation (at both small and large scale), analysts are recognizing the differences between limited tools for civil society monitoring and voice on the one hand, and broader public interest advocacy reform initiatives on the other (e.g., [Joshi & Houtzager, 2012](#)).

Social accountability initiatives are multiplying in the broader global context of the booming transparency and accountability field, which also includes high-profile open government reforms and a proliferation of voluntary multi-stakeholder initiatives that attempt to set social and environmental standards, mainly for the private sector.³ These diverse efforts are based on the assumption that ‘information is power’ – that transparency will necessarily leverage accountability. Yet widely accepted, normatively appealing theories of change, summed up as “sunshine is the best disinfectant,” turn out to have uneven empirical foundations ([Fox, 2007a](#)). In response, both practitioners and policy analysts are increasingly posing the “what works” question – and the answer remains inconclusive.⁴ Practice in the SAcc field continues to race ahead of empirical research, and relevant theory lags even further behind.

The diverse mix of institutional change initiatives that fall under the rubric of social accountability complicates efforts

to draw broader lessons. Those who seek answers in terms of one-size-fits-all, easily replicable tools quickly confront the empirical reality that social accountability processes and outcomes are very context-dependent ([Grandvoinet, Aslam, & Raha, 2015](#); [O’Meally, 2013](#)). Calling for an evidence-based approach is not enough. *Rethinking* the growing body of evidence can advance the way we understand SAcc, which can help to inform realistic strategies.

This study reinterprets both the empirical evaluation evidence and the analytical concepts involved in SAcc, in order to help to address the “what next?” question. First, the paper identifies limits to the conceptual frameworks usually applied to SAcc. Second, a meta-analysis assesses the SAcc impact evaluation literature through new conceptual lenses. This exercise draws primarily on 25 quantitative evaluations, with an emphasis on field experiments that are widely considered to be influential in the field, based on their uptake by mainstream practitioners. Third, the study proposes a series of grounded conceptual propositions to analyze the dynamics of SAcc strategies, informed by the “state–society synergy” approach to institutional analysis ([Evans, 1996](#)). The article concludes with an emphasis on pro-accountability coalitions that bridge the state–society divide.

To preview the main argument, if one unpacks the impact evaluation evidence, it actually tests two very different approaches under the broad SAcc umbrella: *tactical* and *strategic*. Tactical SAcc approaches are bounded interventions (also known as tools) and they are limited to “society-side” efforts to project voice. Their theory of change assumes that access to information alone will motivate localized collective action, which will in turn generate sufficient power to influence public sector performance. Strategic SAcc approaches, in contrast, deploy *multiple* tactics, encourage enabling environments for collective action for accountability, and coordinate citizen voice initiatives with reforms that bolster public sector responsiveness. Reinterpreting evaluation evidence through this new lens, it turns out that the results of *tactical* approaches are indeed mixed, whereas the evidence of impacts of *strategic* approaches is much more promising. This interpretation points to the relevance of institutional change strategies that promote *both* “voice” and “teeth” (defined here as the

state's institutional capacity to *respond* to citizen voice). The concluding proposition for discussion is that 'sandwich strategies' of mutually empowering coalitions of pro-accountability actors in both state and society can trigger the virtuous circles of mutual empowerment that are needed to break out of "low-accountability traps."

2. RETHINKING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR SACC

The SAcc field has outgrown conventional conceptual frameworks, and lessons learned from practice should inform new approaches. This section reviews the limitations of four widely accepted conceptual frameworks. All four were imported from other intellectual agendas, rather than developed with the goal of understanding social accountability.

The World Bank's 2004 *World Development Report* on public service delivery set a global agenda, framing service delivery performance problems in terms of accountability gaps and pathways (2003). Conceptually, the report emphasized the principal-agent framework (P-A) as the most relevant tool for understanding the relationship between citizen voice and public sector response. The P-A approach became conventional wisdom in mainstream development thinking, assuming that citizens are ultimately the principals – regardless of whether or not they actually live under electorally competitive regimes (e.g., Griffin, Ferranti, & Tolmie, 2010). Yet when the P-A framework is applied to governance, it implicitly assumes what it needs to demonstrate – that citizens are indeed ultimately in charge – the "principals." Moreover, this approach often makes the assumption that citizens-as-principals have relatively homogenous interests and goals. The main issue here is one of "conceptual stretching" (Sartori, 1970). The P-A model originally referred to two-way market relationships, such as shareholders–managers, managers–employees, or customers–service providers. When applied to politics, it originally focused on clear-cut, formal relationships of delegated authority. Social scientists then stretched the metaphor, applying it to more amorphous power relations involving mere influence rather than authoritative power, as well as multiple "principals." This diluted its parsimony. The model also has difficulty with non-hierarchical oversight relationships, as in the cases of mutual accountability inherent in partnerships, checks and balances institutions and informal accountability relationships – all of which are especially relevant for social accountability processes.

The 2004 WDR built on the P-A approach to propose another very influential metaphor for understanding different sets of power relations between citizens and public service providers. The "long route" has citizens exercising their "principal-ness" by delegating authority to political representatives, who then govern bureaucracies by choosing policymakers who in turn form compacts to manage front-line service providers. The "short route," in contrast, links citizens directly to service providers, through various oversight and voice mechanisms (as well as exit options, if available). The long-short route metaphor did not address the potential contributions of other public "checks and balances" institutions, such as legislatures, the judicial system, audit institutions, ombudsman agencies, or public information access reforms. In addition, the 2004 WDR's proposed short-route approach to addressing frontline service providers is also exclusively local, reflecting an assumption that institutional failures are primarily local, rather than distributed all the way up the governance "supply chain." A decade later, mixed results suggest

that the "short route" may not be so short after all. Indeed, influential World Bank researchers recently concluded that there is no "short route" when the problem is what they call "government failure" – akin to market failure (Devarajan, Khemani, & Walton, 2014). They recognize that there is no way around the central issue of political accountability and the incentive structures that influence the degree to which elected officials are responsive to citizens.

By the latter part of the decade of the 2000s, official World Bank documents began to promote a third discursive frame for accountability issues, deploying the market metaphors that contrast the "supply" and "demand" for good governance. This reflected the World Bank's own internal organizational divisions, which separated staff dealing with inward-looking public sector reforms (the supply side) from those who promoted public interfaces and civil society engagement (the demand side). In contrast to the 2004 WDR, this approach does emphasize the potential contribution of checks and balances-type institutions, which fit under the "supply side" (anti-corruption bureaus, open budgeting, legislative oversight capacity-building, grievance redress mechanisms, etc.). Yet the market metaphor suggests that somehow demand will create its own supply, or vice versa. The implicit assumption that an invisible hand would bring them together is unrealistic.

A fourth conceptual framework for understanding accountability draws on spatial metaphors. *Horizontal* accountability refers to the mutual oversight embedded in the state's institutions of checks and balances – relatively co-equal relationships that do not fit easily into principal-agent models (O'Donnell, 1998). *Vertical* accountability refers to political accountability relations between citizens and their elected representatives (Mainwaring & Welna, 2003). This is a crucial concept for understanding where pro-accountability reformers come from, as well as whether their power base can help them to pursue institutional change. *Diagonal* accountability refers to hybrid combinations of vertical and horizontal oversight, involving direct citizen engagement within state institutions (e.g., Ackerman, 2004; Goetz & Jenkins, 2001; Isunza Vera, 2006; Paul, 1992). This can involve either participation in or direct management of official oversight bodies. Some of these official state–society power-sharing bodies are created from above, as in the case of "invited spaces" (Cornwall & Schattan Coelho, 2007). They can become remarkably participatory, like Brazil's national policy conferences (Pogrebinschi & Samuels, 2014). Other power-sharing institutions are created in response to broad-based citizen protest and advocacy, as in the case of the early days of Mexico's independent election administration (Avritzer, 2002; Isunza Vera & Olvera, 2006).

In the context of these spatial metaphors, social accountability efforts can be either vertical or diagonal. They are vertical when citizens make demands on the state directly, whether inside or outside of electoral channels (Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006). These vertical and diagonal dimensions interact with each other, since the space for citizen power within official oversight bodies may be created in response to vertical pressures from below. Conversely, some argue that where horizontal accountability is weak, the underlying cause is flaws in the vertical accountability process (Moreno, Crisp, & Shugart, 2003). Where weak horizontal and vertical accountability systems reinforce each other, one can speak of "low accountability traps" (Fox, 2007b). Analysis of these accountability bottlenecks involves unpacking the state in terms of its often spatially uneven degree of institutionalization and efficacy (O'Donnell, 1993). Moreover, under some conditions, elected national authorities may have incentives to allow undemocratic subnational regimes to persist – or they

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