

// PUTTING THINGS INTO CONTEXT, TIME TO RETHINK SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY?

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The field of transparency and accountability (T/A) has matured in recent years. Two decades ago reformers sought ‘magic bullets’ – solutions that would work in all countries and all sectors. Today, however, we are increasingly taking account of context. When, where, and how does a T/A intervention work?

To answer questions like this, a group of funders, civil society organizations, and researchers from around the world have formed [TALEARN](#). This is a community and safe space in which members can ask tough questions and seek new ideas. One of TALEARN’s practice groups is currently focusing on precisely this question of context. Our underlying principle is that by understanding the context of T/A interventions we can learn how and why specific interventions do (or do not) work in different settings.

One of TALEARN’s first efforts towards this goal was a [webinar](#) on the subject of context. Its focus was a [World Bank report](#) on those contextual factors that help social accountability initiatives succeed¹. (The report was presented by Simon O’Meally, and he has summarized its findings in [this blogpost](#).) TALEARN’s virtual discussion space enabled members to talk about the study’s findings, and consider their practical implications for T/A interventions.

In this post we present a summary of the main questions asked, and some of the answers that were offered.

Why should we care about context?

The reasons why a social accountability intervention

succeeds or fails are complex and are usually context-specific. We therefore need to understand the context of particular interventions before we transplant them to new contexts or apply remedies.

One study in India found that community management committees were effective in districts where a particular political party – the Marxist Communist Party of India – was committed to mobilizing the poor. From this evidence it seems that community management committees may be most successful in contexts where the poor are being simultaneously mobilized by political parties or other organizations. Reformers may need to consider how the linkages between political parties and citizens might affect their likelihood of success..

A “tools-based” approach² to social accountability can miss what actually makes a tool effective.

One Central African country that wanted to implement Citizen Report Cards found that its citizens were unlikely to give honest feedback because they feared a retaliatory response from public institutions. How likely citizens are to give honest feedback is the sort of contextual factor that should be considered before we promote tools like this.

What does context look like?

We need a better understanding of what context looks like – what factors are meaningful in different circumstances.

One way this will help us is in understanding the limits of citizen engagement and the need to complement it with public institutions and state engagement.

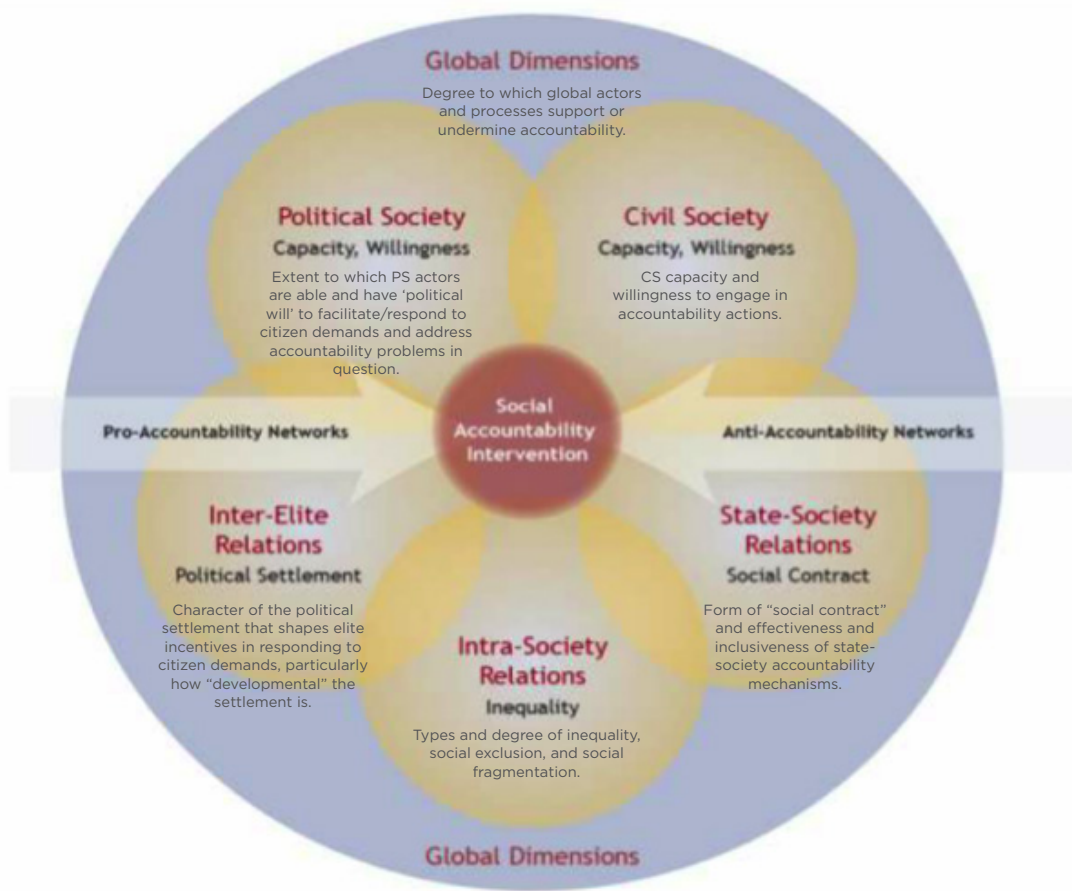
Want to learn more about dialogues around this issue? Check out the summary and resources of our roundtable on [The effect of state-society interactions on Transparency & Accountability – building bridges between research and practice](#)

In Mombasa, Kenya, a proposal by the tenant movement for a tenancy purchase scheme failed, despite support from the Ministry’s Director of Housing. The problem was the city’s mayor, who opposed the plan and threatened to have the Director of Housing fired if the proposal was implemented. Citizen mobilization alone does not guarantee greater accountability – a full understanding of the particular political context, including the relative influence and power of individual politicians, is required. The [World Bank report](#) identifies six main contextual domains that

can affect social accountability initiatives. These give us six starting points for exploring the idea of context further. The six types are:

- Global dimensions;
- Political society;
- Civil society;
- State-society relations;
- Intra-society relations; and
- Inter-elite relations.

These are summarized in the figure below:



Source: extracted and modified from [World Bank report](#)

What are the advantages of thinking about context?

Taking the political and social context seriously can show T/A organizations the full range of strategies that are available, as well as ways of thinking about the assumptions and trade-offs that are associated with each. It can help CSOs decide on the best way to work with government and other civil society groups, and whether to take a confrontational or collaborative approach.

Interested in the interaction between strategy and context? Stay tuned for forthcoming blogs by [#transp4dev's](#) Archon Fung and Stephen Kosack.

Imagine a CSO observes the successful experience of participatory budgeting at the municipal level in Brazil, and uses this to develop a theory of change. If it does not consider context, it may miss the political society or state-society relations that made this particular intervention a success. If the context in which it's operating is different in important ways, the theory of change may not apply and the program may not succeed.

In particular, the World Bank report suggests that the collaboration between grassroots movements and local governments was successful in Brazil because the national ruling party supported political decentralization and was closely associated with the grassroots movements. In a political context where decentralization receives less support from the central government, it may make less sense to collaborate with local government. A smarter strategy might be to work at a higher level of government, or to take a more confrontational approach.

What are organizations already doing?

Politically capable organizations³ need to think about how context, strategy, tactics, and intervention design fit with each other. They consider the entire range of tactics that are available to them and where and when they are likely to make most sense.

Some organizations are already giving this some thought. The International Budget Partnership, for example, has proposed a context-sensitive route. In a recent [research note](#), they present five 'generic impact

pathways' (tactics) used by CSOs and survey the literature for internal and contextual variables that affect their impact.

Other stakeholders have recently begun to reward political capabilities through funding. The [grant application](#) from the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) asks what strategies and tactics applicants propose to use to advance change. It also asks what factors are relevant in the contexts in which those tactics will be applied. [A recent workshop for GPSA finalists](#), in which some TALEARNERS participated, emphasized strategies, tactics, and the political economy.



DICTIONARY:

1. *Social Accountability*: In this context, according to Simon, **accountability** is the combination of answerability and enforcement, and "**social**" accountability is action – beyond voting – by citizens or non-state actors to hold government accountable.
2. "*Tools-based*" approach in this paper means a focus on specific operational steps, inputs, and methodologies within somewhat discrete interventions – such as citizen scorecards, participatory budgeting, and so on. These are sometimes also referred to as "**widgets**".
3. Politically capable civil society organizations are those that can adapt their actions and programming, and mobilize resources to the context in which they operate. By so doing, they improve the likely effectiveness of their work. Maria Poli, Agustina Giraudy, and Florencia Guerzovich. 2010. *Societal Accountability: A tactical toolkit*. Washington DC and Buenos Aires. More on this? Check out Thomas Carothers & Diane de Gramont's new **book**.

Next steps

Clearly there are implications in the report's findings for researchers, funders and CSOs. But how can we put its insights into action? Or, to use Simon's words, 'So context matters - duh! - but what is to be done?'

Clearly, **it's time to rethink how we conduct social accountability interventions.** This means being more sensitive to context, as well as reviewing existing evidence from the field.

With this in mind, follow-up TALEARN conversations are planned on the following topics:

- Choosing frameworks for different CSO contexts;
- The research challenges of comparing the effects of interventions to understand how specific factors in the context matter.

The first webinar was organized with the help of a funding organization, the World Bank. Now CSOs, research institutions and other funders can come together to shape a joint agenda.

TALEARN means innovative work in a candid, collaborative style.

Are you interested in joining us or following what we do? [Sign up](#) to be part of the conversation!



WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

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