//MOBILIZING ACCOUNTABILITY: CITIZENS, MOVEMENTS AND THE STATE

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- **Citizen engagement is ubiquitous in externally supported efforts to improve government accountability, however lessons about the need to encourage and strengthen existing forms of citizen collective action are not being fully put into practice**

- **Citizens can successfully pressure and support government accountability through collective mobilization strategies that require capable, autonomous and representative grassroots organizations and movements**

- **External funders and professional NGOs can play a role in engaging with and supporting popular organizations and movements to strengthen the 'accountability ecosystem', but care must be taken in building and maintaining such relationships**

External actors, including funders and international NGOs, have been working to support efforts to make governments more responsive and accountable to their citizens for many years, with important lessons learned along the way (see also here, here and here). External support for more accountable governance has taken many forms. Technical assistance to improve laws, institutions and mechanisms for accountability have been a strong element of such initiatives, as well as support for pro-reform actors (or 'champions') in government. But do these approaches reflect the realities of many challenging national and local contexts? In diverse countries, from Mexico to Tanzania to Indonesia, state accountability is fundamentally a question of power. Individuals and groups use the state apparatus to control wealth and other privileges that would be eroded with more transparent and accountable systems. Thus, what are their incentives for reforms? Even where progressive decision makers seek to make positive changes, they will likely face obstacles from those whose interests are being challenged, and thus need support from other pro-reform actors. Even where institutional reforms are put in place, these

What we still don't know – Unpacking the state

In a recent workshop on social accountability research hosted by T/AI, GPSA and MAVC, one of the key lessons is that we still need to know more about what drives state responsiveness and accountability.

may look like laws and mechanisms that function elsewhere, but don't function properly due to political, resource and other constraints.

Lant Pritchett and others have called this 'isomorphic mimicry'

To complement capacity building, technical assistance and other efforts, external actors have also renewed their focus on the role of citizens. However, many early 'social accountability' (i.e. citizen and civil society driven) approaches were narrow and isolated, and too frequently focused on specific tools like citizen scorecards to get citizen feedback to authorities ('feedback loops'). Jonathan Fox

has demonstrated the failure of such 'tactical approaches' to social accountability that pursue change through short-term, isolated 'projects', advocating instead for longer term, vertically integrated campaigns based on multiple tactics and entry points. Innovative social accountability efforts have sought to take on board some of these lessons, and some have even turned conventional thinking on its head by embracing complexity and pursuing more politically-informed and relational approaches.

Yet many lessons about the role of citizens acting collectively for state accountability don't seem to be making their way into practice. For example, the evidence that individual and group participation tends to replicate local power inequalities and need to be connected to broader movements for democratic change. Or that citizen participation through organizations and associations leads to greater gains in government responsiveness and accountability than individual or community participation – especially for the most marginalized citizens and in the most challenging contexts. In other words, "it is when participatory mechanisms in formal governance coincide with citizen mobilization - whether in the form of associations or social movements - that the effectiveness of these pathways is ensured" (Coelho and von Lieres). The question is where are the associations and movements?

Perspectives from Pakistan –
Gulbaz Khan

Transparency and accountability goals are deeply enmeshed in issues of state power. Too many initiatives seek to leverage what are perhaps well-meaning 'champions' among elected officials or bureaucrats to advance these aims. In these cases, citizens may be involved through participatory mechanisms. Yet even when these exercises begin promisingly, too many fall victim to capture, manipulation or corruption.

In Pakistan, there is a need to more seriously consider the role of membership-based citizen organizations and movements. There are numerous examples of where citizen organization and leadership has built up over time to challenge abuses of power by state authorities. Yet often these movements are small and local, and frequently the response of the state is one of violence. In other cases, political parties seek to manipulate these mobilizations, often leading to rifts and deeper distrust.

Promising examples emerge when national movements or civil society coalitions are able to link to local grassroots mobilizations. Such relationships amplify the voice of local actors while connecting national organizations directly to citizen actions and needs. The T/A community needs to consider how to support these cases of citizen organization and mobilization, which are leading the struggle for state accountability around concrete issues affecting their lives.

HOW CAN CITIZENS HOLD THE STATE ACCOUNTABLE?

It is clear that citizens expressing their voice and taking action is fundamental to ensuring government accountability. Citizens attempt to – with varying degrees of success – hold authorities to account through many means and mechanisms, such as:*

- Political organizing and elections
- Formal institutional legal mechanisms of redress
- Media or other advocacy campaigns to 'name and shame' or otherwise influence the behavior of power holders
- Individual or community-based participatory mechanisms, from citizen scorecards to participatory budgeting
- Nonviolent social movements, campaigns and other forms of collective citizen organizing and action outside formal political processes, including confrontational tactics

Thus, citizens can and must be involved in expecting, demanding and pressuring government decision makers to be more responsive to public needs and more accountable for their actions. Yet for citizens to engage the state on these issues is to enter into political terrain of extreme power imbalance. How do citizens build and wield the kind of

Citizen relationships with state actors cannot be defined by a simple collaborative or antagonistic dichotomy. Citizens would generally prefer to collaborate with authorities so collectively solve problems. But under real world conditions of increasing inequality and closing civic space, popular organizations and movements must be more savvy and flexible, to engage with the state where possible and to contest unaccountable actions where necessary!

'countervailing power' (or 'people power') that will bridge this gap? Individual (or even 'community') engagement through formal participation or ICT-enabled complaints or demands is unlikely to be sufficient in most contexts. Even more ambitious efforts, such as building formal mechanisms for citizen participation in government decision making, can exclude marginalized groups, be captured by local elites, or limited to addressing specific issues (budgeting, service quality, etc.) while ignoring deeper and more systemic power inequalities. Yet advocacy by professional NGOs, with little accountability to citizens and their priorities – and thus real legitimacy deficits – has its own limits.*

A healthy civil society ecosystem, and more effective social accountability approaches, depends on the efforts of people's organizations and movements seeking more accountable governance. We argue that external funders and NGOs can and should support and complement these existing efforts, as well as promoting an enabling environment for grassroots organizations and movements to emerge.

Visible examples of collective citizen action can be seen splashed across news headlines on an increasingly regular basis. According to a recent ODI report on 'political voice', 37 protests between 2006 and 2013 involved over 1 million people. Protest or other 'unruly politics' is often a way for marginalized citizens to challenge state power on their own terms, rather than through formal institutional channels (elections, legal processes, formal participation) that too often maintain the status quo. Indeed, massive street protests have brought down corrupt and unaccountable leaders in countries as diverse as Egypt, Ukraine and Burkina Faso in recent years. Removing these autocrats from power has been a strong act of accountability. But we shouldn't think that protest is the only form of collective action, as people's organizations and movements deploy many diverse tactics depending on the context and their aims. We need to look beyond specific *collective action tactics* to the kinds of organizations** and coalitions that can sustain and deploy diverse approaches over the long term.

According to a comprehensive study of over 100 cases of citizen engagement by John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett, "while people may engage with the state in a variety of ways, associations and social movements are far more important

The UK's DFID is sponsoring new research to understand how collective citizen action can contribute to more inclusive and responsive institutions, and how external actors can support such processes.

Technology, digital activism and movements

Technology and digital activism is becoming more visibly associated with popular collective action, as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and many other tools and spaces are increasingly common in the repertoire of grassroots activists (see here and here). Yet technology is no panacea for social change, and to the extent that the T/A community should be supporting the tools for citizens to organize and act collectively to demand state accountability, we also need to be realistic about the limits of social media and other technologies for movement building. Communications technologies can reduce the time and costs of collective action, sometimes facilitating mass collective action under challenging conditions, as we have seen in the news headlines in recent years, from Cairo to Hong Kong. Yet mobilization is not the same as organization. Strong citizen organizations and movements are based on shared identity, collective experiences, and a strong organizing framework.

vehicles for gaining development and democratic outcomes than perhaps has been previously understood." Numerous studies point to the need to look at how citizens are organizing themselves and mobilizing to create forms of engagement with the state, rather than for external actors to be creating new spaces and mechanisms that ignore these existing efforts. Examples of popular organizations and movements and their efforts to promote state accountability are numerous. MKSS, a grassroots movement in India, campaigned for right to information legislation in order to use this as a tool to demand minimum wages for participants in public works projects and to audit public projects in local communities. In Cape Town, the Social Justice Coalition, a social organization mixes community organizing, leadership development and citizen protests with research, advocacy and collaborative policy design with local authorities to address public services in marginalized urban communities. Women's savings cooperative associations in places as diverse as urban Mumbai and rural Uganda, have strengthened members' economic and political agency, and allowed new forms of engagement with state actors.

Peoples' organizations and movements for accountability

Engaging citizens has [become ubiquitous](#) across the transparency and accountability sector. But in this note, we are seeking to move towards thinking about how citizens act collectively through movements and organizations they have built themselves with the goal of achieving a more accountable state. In her recent book *Curtailing Corruption: People Power for Accountability,* Shaazka Beyerle, outlines several pathways by which popular organizing and collective action strengthens accountability:

- Disrupting systems of graft and abuse by interfering with their smooth functioning
- Applying nonviolent pressure through the power of numbers: people raising their collective voice over shared demands and bringing pressure on corruptors who have been unwilling, up to that point, to change the status quo
- Engaging with power holders and the public and "pulling" them towards the civic initiative and anti-corruption/accountability struggle, thereby shifting positions, loyalties to the corrupt status quo, and "defections" from it

Despite clear evidence for the efficacy of people's organizations and movements, we shouldn't totally romanticize them. Such organizations and movements are very difficult to grow and sustain, and are not the 'magic bullet' for accountable governance. Citizens, particularly from marginalized groups, face significant barriers to collective action. They often avoid conflict and sometimes participation entirely, often preferring to delegate to intermediaries – including the patrons and brokers responsible for maintaining unequal structures and relationships. Once built, organizations and movements may [lack internal mechanisms for democratic decision-making](#), and can be dominated by a few leaders, [capturing benefits and creating new inequalities](#). Finally, and to state the obvious, collective mobilization and activism does not always lead to more state accountability, in many cases state repression undermines collective action or short term victories lead to demobilization before real changes can be institutionalized.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE-CENTERED APPROACHES TO ACCOUNTABILITY: MOVEMENTS AND ECOSYSTEMS

External supporters of social accountability are paying increasing attention to the political dimensions of state responsiveness and accountability (for example, see [here](#) and [here](#)). This requires a broader understanding of the range of actors seeking to hold decision-makers to account, and the spaces and processes (formal or informal) in which they seek to engage. This means going beyond tool-based approaches to citizen demands (e.g. citizen score cards or SMS-complaint mechanisms for service delivery). [But we already knew that](#).

Where we need more thinking, and some more innovative doing, is in going beyond the current focus of external support on either individuals/communities or specialized professional NGOs. In many situations where state accountability is weak, the context is more challenging for individual citizens or communities to play a strong role in addressing this. Political patronage can coopt citizens and communities, community participation can often be dominated by local elites, state and non-state violence creates fear and limits collective direct action, and vote buying or electoral manipulation limit citizens' ability to assert control via the ballot box. Individual citizens and communities are often unwilling and unable to challenge unaccountable state power, and with good reason.

Professional NGOs, on the other hand, are often based in capital cities, and are generally far removed from the daily lives of the most marginalized citizens. Their external financing means that they are ultimately accountable upwards, towards funders, rather than to the citizens whom they often claim to represent. These challenges often lead to questioning of NGO credibility and legitimacy, often by cynical governments looking for excuses to shut down channels of dissent.

Now obviously citizens, communities and NGOs can and should be part of a holistic approach to strengthening accountability. But if we acknowledge that accountability is fundamentally about power relationships, then support for social accountability needs to be focused on strengthening the power of citizens to hold authorities to account. This means that [we need to get serious about supporting people's organizations and movements](#).

Social Movements and Accountability: A view from the Slums of Durban

In his 2008 article, "A Politics of the Poor", Richard Pithouse reports on the contradiction of post-Apartheid Durban, where despite legal measures preventing evictions and protecting slum dwellers, the municipal authorities have been engaged in forced relocations and prevention of new slum settlements. This has provoked a surge of protests. The state's response to these protests has been one of attempted cooptation and, more frequently, violent repression. According to Pithouse, social movements amongst the slum dwellers of Durban have:

> "democratized the governance of settlements, stopped evictions, won some concessions around services, illegally connected electricity, built homemade toilets, set up crèches, vegetable gardens, and various cultural, sporting and popular education projects, started a newspaper, developed a capacity to respond to shack fires with far more speed and efficacy than the State, won sustained media access, become a prophetic voice within the churches and enabled collective bargaining with the state…" p. 85

Yet, the divide between state and social forces is as wide as under Apartheid rule, and the likelihood of collaboration as bleak. The slum dweller movement in Durban has had a complete break with the ANC, but has no other viable electoral option and have thus chosen to boycott elections. Yet even party patronage has been trumped by the policies of removal, as seen by continued evictions in slum communities that have remained loyal to the ANC. The slum dweller movement has carved out a space for organizational autonomy and worked to increase community democracy and capacity, but, as highlighted by Pithouse, the commitment to autonomy and "people's politics" has further isolated them from political, state, and NGO actors with whom they might hope to build bridges or coalitions.

Real citizen 'countervailing power' means a vibrant and diverse set of peoples' organizations working at multiple scales

to make government more responsive and accountable, across the spaces, processes and mechanisms – formal and informal – that exist for this purpose, or can be created or strengthened by collective citizen action. Just to repeat, we don't want to suggest that people's organizations and movements are a 'silver bullet' for accountability, but we think they are a very important – and under-emphasized – element of an 'ecosystem' of complementary pro-accountability actors and efforts.

Unfortunately, despite repeated calls to go 'beyond the usual suspects', disproportionate support has gone to professional NGOs that often exist solely due to external funding, and not enough to the kinds of organizations, associations and movements that citizens themselves autonomously create and sustain. This situation can lead to an unbalanced and unrepresentative civil society 'monoculture'. Now this is not to say that external supporters should abandon funding NGOs. But it does suggest thinking about the role of NGOs vis-à-vis citizens' organizations and movements. First, professional NGO's can play a key role in supporting membership-based organizations and movements. An example of this is an alliance in Mumbai between SPARC, a professional NGO, and a women's savings cooperative and the federation of slum dwellers. SPARC supports the more representative groups to pursue their aims and effectively engage the government (see here and here).

Secondly, NGOs should consider how their strategies can better integrate with those of citizen organizations and movements. Professional advocacy and grassroots mobilization and pressure has been shown to be complementary in strengthening state accountability in challenging contexts such as Mexico and Colombia, leading to real reductions in impunity. There are many other examples – like the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa – where professional NGO strategies reflect and seek synergies with popular movements, often due to good political analysis and flexible, adaptive approaches.

This case is part of a dialogue about mass-mobilization versus elite-based strategies for achieving rights and justice on the website Open Democracy.

Finally, we should be explicit: supporting popular organizations and movements does not necessarily mean funding

them. This could lead to the 'NGO-ization' of such groups and the 'project-ization' of their activities, and there are plenty of NGOs implementing projects out there already! We need to think about other kinds of support and collaboration, including support for networking, learning, capacity development, legal assistance, etc.

CIVIL SOCIETY, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE STATE IN THE PHILIPPINES – JOY ACERON

The Philippines has gone through many stages of state-society relationships, where social movements and other coalitions engaged policy makers from the bottom up to the top, through either informal/society-led or formal and institutionalized mechanisms. Today the major challenges are around governance and institutional strengthening, which are not necessarily traditional areas of social movement involvement.

Social movement actors still engage around critical policy junctures, such as putting pressure to pass certain legislation. But after legislation is approved, the movement or coalition dissolves, in the sense that the constituent organizations go back to addressing their local or specialized concerns, which often can include supporting and monitoring implementation. Some movement leaders call this 'post-modern social movements'.

Sustaining longer-term and broad mobilization is costly, and few examples of this exist. Likewise, institutionalizing nationwide formal civil society engagement, also has its limits, such as a more constrained space for social engagement. Thus, I think the fruitful area for exploration is how scatters social actors in civil society, government, or elsewhere, who share similar aims and ideals, but may not self-identify as a 'social movement', are able to link up and pursue their goals. So rather than talking about narrow labels, we should be looking for frameworks that broaden the inclusion of pro-reform and pro-accountability forces, and only define a specific identity if it helps advance that aims of such a coalition. This could be a new model for supporting change through a more systemic, holistic ecosystems model.

LEARNING FROM MOVEMENTS, AND MOVING FORWARD ON WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

In our last global workshop for the TALEARN community of practice – bringing together funders, researchers and practitioners – some participants asked: where are the movements? This led to a plan to bring grassroots organizations and movements into the TALEARN conversation, with this piece as a modest starting point.

To move this agenda forward, we are collaborating with the Engine Room to explore the perspectives of activists associated with grassroots organizations and movements, as well as funders and practitioners who seek to promote and strengthen the work of such groups. These initial conversations, as well as a look at the literature, will inform further Think Pieces on this theme, unpacking the opportunities, challenges and knowledge gaps related to citizen organizations and social movements addressing government accountability – and efforts to support these. There is a lot of knowledge about the role of popular organizations and movements, but less about how funders and NGOs can best support and enable these efforts, and complement them with other pro-accountability programs.

Finally, T/AI will bring this work on social movements together with other themes we are exploring, such as thinking and working politically and ecosystems approaches to strengthening accountability. We also expect to bring insights from engagement with citizens' movements to our broader learning efforts. We look forward to sharing emerging insights more broadly and also thinking through implications and strategies for specific organizations.

Transparency & ACCOUNTABILITY Initiative

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