//STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEMS: A DISCUSSION PAPER

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Introduction

Improving government transparency, responsiveness and accountability in countries in both the global north and south is a significant priority for citizens, government reformers and external donors and supporters. 'Open Government' and 'social accountability' are currently two of the most popular frameworks for understanding and pursuing such aims. Both the concept of open government and much current thinking about social accountability are underpinned by a strong emphasis on government transparency and mechanisms of citizen consultation and participation, which combine to improve accountable governance.

The now standard 'transparency + participation = accountability' formulation often fails to grapple with the complexities of each of these elements and their interaction, instead relying on simplifying assumptions that often do not reflect contextual realities. More broadly, there is a growing body of evidence about the failures of many governance reform efforts, often due to inaccurate and simplistic assumptions about the nature of change (Carothers & de Gramont, 2011; De Gramont, 2014; Fox, 2014a; Gaventa & McGee, 2013). New insights suggest the importance of understanding and working 'with the grain' of important contextual features and their complex interfaces, addressing the political and power dimensions of accountable governance, and the need for holistic and integrated strategies to activate and strengthen accountability systems.

This paper is an attempt to draw on current literature, both academic and practice-oriented, to bring together several strands of current thinking towards a framework of an 'accountability ecosystems' approach. Given that this is new territory, this paper is meant to be a springboard for discussion, rather than the final word or a polished model.[1] I hope that the propositions put forward in this paper will have relevance to both funders and practitioners in the transparency and accountability space.

In this paper I will outline two current approaches to government accountability and their limitations. I will then discuss how emerging insights point to more systematic and politically-informed approaches. Drawing on lessons from research and practice, I propose an 'accountability ecosystems' approach to strengthening accountability, outlining five important and complementary principles and features, and pointing to how this strategy addresses the limitations of many current efforts. Finally, I offer a range of illustrative recommendations for funders seeking to support 'accountability ecosystems' approaches.

Understanding accountability

Government accountability is a challenging concept, with numerous definitions, frameworks and (seemingly philosophical) debates. Yet enough of a working consensus exists to allow us to move forward. Accountability can be broadly defined as the obligation of those in power to take responsibility for their actions. Accountability is a relational process through which individuals and institutions interact, formally and informally, with those for whom they perform tasks or who are affected by their decisions. It requires that those held accountable must explain their decisions and actions to others and the external stakeholders' right and ability to inquire about those actions. 'Harder' forms of accountability, however, entail mechanisms of answerability, but also sanction and enforcement of penalty and/or redress (Fox, 2007a).

State accountability is multi-directional. Vertical accountability relationships can be found from appointed officials upward to elected representatives, and from those representatives downward to voting public through elections (often called 'political accountability'). Horizontal accountability structures can be found in the checks and balances of executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, and through specific government oversight bodies, such as anti-corruption agencies and supreme audit commissions. These mechanisms rely on functioning state institutions and processes, and a general balance of powers and autonomy between the branches of government.

Less formal, but potentially equally important, accountability relationships and processes lie outside the state. Citizen-led or social accountability entails various tools, tactics and approaches by which citizens seek to ensure accountability from governing authorities, ranging from media investigations and coverage to mass protests to leveraging traditional decision-making processes. Jonathan Fox sets out a broad umbrella term, accountability politics, for accountability processes driven by citizens that:

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[1] There have been previous efforts to inform external funders based on more systematic thinking about accountability (for example, see OECD, 2014), but this remains relatively new terrain.

...encompasses both political and social accountability, including the full range of relevant accountability 'holdees' and the public spheres in which they try to hold those in power responsible for their actions...driven by voice and power, mediated rather than determined by formal institutions (2007, p. 33).

What is clear is that accountability is realized, or not, through diverse pathways and forces embedded in a system. This accountability system can be understood as the interlinked and dynamic governance landscape of state and social actors, institutions, processes, mechanisms and influences, both formal and informal, related to government accountability in a defined context. In other words, an accountability system is composed of the actors, processes and contextual factors, and the relationships between these elements that constitute and influence government accountability, both positively and negatively. This understanding of accountability as, to use an increasingly common term, an ecosystem, allows us to draw on emerging thinking about complex, adaptive systems to understand the functioning, and the possibilities for influencing, accountability (see for example, Barder, 2014).

Power shapes and is shaped by relationships throughout the accountability ecosystem, both in the workings (and failings) of formal accountability institutions and mechanisms, and through the efforts of citizens to demand that power holders be accountable for their actions. Often, as Fox emphasizes, pro-accountability actors may be found inside and outside the state, as can accountability resistors. Promising results may be seen when efforts to strengthen accountability work across the state-society divide in a 'sandwich' strategy (2014a). International actors, arenas and efforts influence the accountability ecosystem in ways that still not entirely cl ear (Fox, 2014b).

Current approaches to government accountability and their limitations

Approaches by external actors, such as bilateral donors, private foundations, multilateral institutions and large NGOs, have evolved over the past decade. Earlier efforts were marked by the prevalence of, what are now understood to be false, dichotomies. One was between 'supply' and 'demand' side approaches to accountability. The former sought to strengthen state accountability institutions through technical assistance, while the latter aimed to build up social accountability efforts. This separation ignored broader thinking about the need to work on 'both sides of the equation' (Gaventa, 2002).

On the supply side, external actors sought to build accountability institutions, such as parliamentary oversight bodies and legal frameworks for accountability, often along the lines of those found in western democracies. The often-

technocratic governance models and 'solutions' implemented by many external aid donors failed to become rooted in the institutional context or function as prescribed. Many external actors have come to understand the limitations of governance reform based on international best practices, understanding that existing political dynamics will adapt to new institutional forms, undermining the possibilities for change (Carothers & de Gramont, 2011). Further analysis of these failures revealed a trend of 'isomorphic mimicry', where the form governance institutions and processes followed international standards, but the function was shaped by existing capacities, interests and power dynamics (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2012).

The limitations of governance reform efforts has led to increased calls for 'working with the grain' (Levy, 2014) and 'good enough governance' (Grindle, 2007). The underlying lessons from these growing body of experience were that politics is crucial (DFID, 2010), that local learning and adaptation is key (Barder, 2014), and that integrated, holistic strategies are needed to address the multiple drivers of governance change (De Gramont, 2014), rather than supply-side interventions in isolation.

On the demand side, efforts to support citizens as change agents in democratic and accountable governance stretch back decades. The World Bank's 2004 World Development Report (WDR) outlined two accountability pathways for citizens to demand improved service delivery. The WDR described a 'short route' of direct citizen engagement with service providers and a 'long route' through elected representatives. Since the release of the WDR there has been increasing interest in supporting social accountability, particularly around public service delivery.

Often this has taken the form of citizen monitoring of services, generally through a specific technique or methodology (e.g. citizen scorecards, social audits), which were demonstrated to be effective in some contexts (Bjorkman & Svensson, 2007). Over the last decade, these social accountability efforts have been marked by significant enthusiasm for technology and increasing importance attributed to the role of information. This has led to some approaches that focus on the 'feedback loop' of citizen input channeled to government authorities, often through technological mediums of SMS, websites, etc. (Gigler & Bailur, 2014).

In recent years, a wealth of evidence has been generated about social accountability approaches. Much of the research points to the importance of contextual factors and drivers in social accountability outcomes (Kosack & Fung, 2014; O'Meally, 2013) and the importance of understanding and working with political dynamics of service delivery (Wild & Foresti, 2013). Other studies highlight the relational nature of social accountability and the need for interlocutors with the political capacities to build coalitions in favor of accountability (Tembo & Chapman, 2014).

Social accountability interventions have often been evaluated using experimental methods, such as randomized controlled trials[2]. This has generated numerous 'impact evaluations' about the success and failures of social accountability interventions in achieving improved services, but with ambiguous and contradictory initial findings. Later syntheses of these impact studies led to clearer understanding of the contextual conditions conducive to social accountability work (Kosack & Fung, 2014), but also to a significant rethink of common approaches and a new call for longer-term, multi-pronged campaigns that go beyond encouraging citizen 'voice' (Fox, 2014a).

The emerging evidence has led to vibrant discussion about how to strengthen social accountability approaches, but often still within a narrow framework that emphasizes individual citizens or communities, as the focal point, rather than a broader set of collective actors (e.g. cooperatives, associations, federation, social movements) shown to be crucial for improved citizen engagement with authorities (Gaventa & Barrett, 2010) and improvements in accountability (Beyerle, 2014, Halloran and Flores, 2015). Important lessons about social accountability efforts have been learned (Gaventa & McGee, 2013), but have been only slowly and partially integrated into externally-funded efforts.

The final element shaping many current efforts to support accountable governance is the increasing popularity of the 'open government' framework. Open government is an ambiguous term, meaning very different things to different actors, but most common conceptualizations are fundamentally based on the power of transparency. The focal point of open government is thus making government data available to and usable by citizens. However, the discourse of open government tends to conflate the technical process of opening of government data with the political process of more open and accountable government (Yu & Robinson, 2012), as enthusiasm for open data has outpaced thinking about how and under what conditions such information can contribute to accountability (Peixoto, 2013). Furthermore, it is clear that many governments are pursuing 'openness' against a backdrop of scaling back basic rights and freedoms.

The Open Government Partnership (OGP), an international initiative supporting government and civil society to pursue open government reforms in their countries, is the most public face of the movement. However, a growing number of organizations have taken up the open government framing, many with a strong data and technology orientation, overlapping significantly with the 'feedback loop' thinking prevalent in significant segments of the social accountability sector. This includes several other international initiatives, such as the Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative, Open Contracting

[2] This is far from uncontroversial. RCTs are best suited for simple and linear interventions, not complex adaptive efforts often needed to influence government accountability, not to mention failing to address why interventions lead to observed outcomes and having limited generalizability to other contexts (Leavy, 2014).

Partnership and others. Although the OGP and other initiatives advocate a vision of open government that includes citizen engagement, more responsive government services, and robust accountability mechanisms, it's fair to say that the emphasis to date has been strongly on transparency and open data (Brockmyer and Fox, 2015).

The initiatives based on an open government framing face real challenges and questions when it comes to contributing to real accountability. The open government formulation entails an often-linear logic of transparency, along with under-specified citizen engagement, directly leading to accountability. This approach does not fully incorporate the well-known complexities and obstacles in that equation (Fox, 2007b) or constitute a deep engagement with the fundamental challenges of power and political will (Gaventa & McGee, 2013; Malena, 2009). The forms of transparency, terms and representativeness of citizen and civil society engagement, and their indirect influence on accountability mechanisms and influences raises numerous questions about the underlying theories of change and on-the-ground impact of high profile open government initiatives (Halloran, 2015).

Furthermore, the reforms promoted by open government initiatives may be more technocratic and fall into the 'isomorphic mimicry' trap, as the political dynamics highlighted in other areas of accountability work are notably downplayed in this domain. Indeed, the 'openness' movement, born from open source programming and now being applied in the arena of governance, is built around a politics that is not necessarily democratic and may have more in common with neo-liberal visions of the state and society (Tkacz, 2012) with implications for the kinds of government accountability such conceptualizations might lead to (i.e. if everything is open, who is best positioned to leverage openness and who less so, and with what implications?).

To summarize, the community of organizations promoting and supporting efforts to strengthen government accountability has learned much over the past decade, due in no small part to the increasingly obvious failure to achieve real and sustainable gains through many of the interventions that have been supported. Thinking about the importance of context and the role of politics has advanced and been mainstreamed, at least rhetorically, in the sector. Yet much current social accountability practice still limits interventions to citizen monitoring at the community level, often based around specific techniques for citizen 'feedback loops', with little scope for engaging in strengthening broader coalitions and movements, nor for exploring the other accountability mechanisms that could powerfully complement their efforts, such as electoral processes (Schatz, 2013). On the other hand, open government efforts are too focused on transparency and open data, with much less understanding of the requisites for leveraging these to strengthen accountability on the ground within the context of existing constellations of power and influence.

The learning generated by the evolution of pro-accountability efforts, as well as by continued limitations of the social accountability and open government frameworks, points to the need for more holistic and systematic approaches that take power relations as the central focus of their strategy. In the following section, I will outline elements of such an approach, under the framework of 'accountability ecosystems'.

Accountability ecosystems

New insights from research and practice suggest that more strategic and system-wide thinking about accountability systems and pro-accountability efforts, grounded in an appreciation of the power dynamics involved in accountability relationships, is more promising. An 'accountability ecosystem' encompasses the diversity of formal and informal paths toward and influences on real accountability. This includes formal state processes that are vertical, for example between citizens and their representatives via periodic elections, and horizontal through state checks and balances, such as legislative oversight of executive power and official state accountability institutions. But the accountability ecosystem is also deeply influenced by 'accountability politics', in which pro- and anti-accountability forces, inside and outside the state, contest the idea of accountability and the spaces and processes through which it is pursued. In other words, an accountability ecosystem is composed of the actors, processes and contextual factors, and the relationships between these elements, that constitute and influence government responsiveness and accountability, both positively and negatively.

This paper argues that approaches to strengthening state accountability that are grounded in an ecosystems perspective, rather than more linear understandings, will more effectively support pro-accountability efforts. Civil society efforts must address 'accountability politics' and build 'countervailing power' if they are to be successful over the long term. When organizations or coalitions work across the scales of government (local, provincial, national, international), build partnerships with key actors and institutions (legislative oversight bodies, anti-corruption commissions, grassroots organizations and movements, etc.), and leverage multiple tactics and tools (legal, media, FOI, collective action, etc.), they can better influence the power relations that make real accountability possible. In brief, this strategic approach to 'scaling up' accountability involves taking on accountability challenges and arenas across the ecosystem – in contrast to the conventional understanding of 'scaling up' as simply replication, or doing more of X. Broadly speaking, these integrated strategies to addressing the dynamics of accountability ecosystems can be thought of as an accountability ecosystems approach.

An ecosystems approach to strengthening accountability includes five fundamental elements, all of which build on emerging insights about more successful experiences. Broadly speaking, these can be described as:

1. Analysis and mapping of accountability systems, including formal and informal actors, institutions, mechanisms and processes, and their underlying power dynamics
2. Strategies that emphasize integrated approaches, both vertically across scales and horizontally across accountability mechanisms and processes
3. Strategic use of varied and complementary tactics, such as litigation, media coverage, citizen monitoring, freedom of information requests, etc.
4. Embedding learning and adaptation in organizational approaches
5. Politically-informed practice, that focuses on addressing and shifting power relations that underpin accountability

I will discuss each of these dimensions in turn.

Analysis and Mapping

The ecosystems approach begins from the premise that government accountability involves changing relationships of power between and within the state and society, taking as a starting point the diversity of actors and influences on both sides of this equation. It also involves unpacking state actors and systems, and the 'calculus' of government decision-making, to provide insights into the motivations, capacities, possibilities, and constraints inherent in challenging governance situations to inform citizen-led accountability efforts. Efforts to strengthen government accountability must take into account and address these power dynamics. Thus, pro-accountability actors must have a sophisticated understanding of power relationships and accountability politics.

Aid agencies and other external actors looking to support development efforts more broadly, including more accountable governance, have gradually but unevenly come to terms with the political dynamics underlying such political change efforts (DFID, 2010; Unsworth, 2009). Among many institutions, Political Economy Analysis (PEA) has become the tool of choice to understand the political dynamics relevant to their interventions. Yet the application of PEA is patchy and the production of these analyses has outpaced the actual integration of political thinking into practice (Routley & Hulme, 2013). Furthermore, external actors have perhaps focused too much on strengthening their own political analysis, and less on building up the capacities for political and power analysis by in-country actors.

Finally, PEA is limited in its actual engagement with the fundamental dimension of change processes: power. Whereas PEA is constructed on an understanding of human behavior as rational and interest-maximizing, more nuanced political analyses take power as the starting point:

> Power is the key 'resource' in politics and the key concept in political science. Power is embedded in structures; it shapes and is framed by institutions; and institutions can also both strengthen and 'tame' it. It constrains what agents can do, but it also can be generated, used and mobilised by them to shape

and change both institutions and the structures of power (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014, p. 106).

Putting power analysis at the heart of understanding the accountability system focuses attention on scale (local, national, international), spaces (created by formal institutional processes or by social actors) and the nature of power itself (visible, hidden and invisible) (Gaventa, 2006). Grappling with power dynamics allows for a much more effective analysis of the ecosystem of accountability actors, institutions, mechanisms and processes in place in a given context, be it a country, locality or specific sector (health, education, sanitation, etc.). Mapping the accountability system focuses attention on the interconnections between political accountability mechanisms of elections, horizontal accountability of checks and balances, and other formal accountability institutions, for example anti-corruption commissions and supreme audit institutions. The lens of power analysis improves understanding of the relationships among these formal institutions, and between them and less formal actors, processes and spaces related to accountability. These can include traditional authority structures, patronage relationships and networks, as well as more 'unruly' mechanisms through which citizens challenge state power on their own terms, rather than through formal institutional channels (Kanna, 2012).

The understanding of important contextual dimensions of accountability has advanced and have focused on important political factors that underpin accountability relationships (Grandvoinet, Joshi, & Raha, 2015; Joshi, 2014; O'Meally, 2013). The evolving understanding of context is pointing to key accountability institutions and processes, and seeking to understand how they function together. Contextual analysis also must look at the nature and health of civil society and social networks (Edwards, 2014; Fox, 2010; Reich & Guyet, 2007), with a critical eye on the spaces and mechanisms through which citizens are engaging the state (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007b) as well as linking up and mobilizing independently to press for government accountability (Beyerle, 2014; Coelho & Von Lieres, 2010; Gaventa & Barrett, 2010; Shefner, 2008). Combining the mapping of accountability systems and citizen organizing and engagement, with an analysis of power and political dynamics suggests the elements and pathways of a more holistic and system-wide approach to strengthening accountability.

Finally, it is important to underscore that political analysis is not a one-off activity to be done before undertaking a project. Political analysis does entail 'deep dives' into power relations, institutional dynamics, and social networks, but it also requires more continuous 'scanning' of the shifting political landscape, as it relates to a particular priority area or challenge (Halloran, 2014). Indeed, more sophisticated tools and maps for understanding accountability pathways and contexts should not be seen as a substitute for local capacity for political analysis. Rather, the growing understanding of the

accountability ecosystem and its complex political dimensions points to the need for strengthening the analytical capacities of pro-accountability actors to understand the power dimensions of the work they are engaged in, and to use this evolving knowledge to shape and reshape their tactics and approaches (rather than replicating tools or best practices, as a substitute for analysis).

Strategies of Vertical and Horizontal Integration

Analysts of civil society strategies to strengthen government accountability have emphasized integrated monitoring and advocacy strategies, particularly vertical coordination across levels of governance and horizontal engagement with accountability actors and mechanisms. Integrated strategies respond to the understanding that 'supply and demand' and 'short and long-routes' for accountability are inadequate (Gaventa & McGee, 2013). The mapping and analysis proposed above suggests multiple potential arenas of engagement, monitoring, advocacy, and potentially contestation, as social actors seek to ensure the accountability of government decisions and actions. This includes the kinds of data and information could be most usefully leveraged to contribute to accountability efforts by specific actors using specific strategies. Integrated approaches build on existing understanding about how institutional strengthening and reform can best be achieved in more challenging contexts (De Gramont, 2014).

Horizontal accountability mechanisms, state checks and balances, exist in many contexts, but often fail to enforce real accountability measures. State accountability institutions – such as supreme auditors and anti-corruption commissions – have proliferated, but that numerous factors (design, capacity, leadership, political context, history, cultural influences) influence the extent to which they can effectively promote accountability. Paradoxically, the 'importation' of institutional forms and standards (as well as engagement with international networks of peers) has both improved the functioning and professionalism of these institutions while also ensuring that they are not adapted to the political realities of their contexts. These dynamics reflect the concept of 'isomorphic mimicry', where government institutions and processes adopt the form of functioning accountability mechanisms from other (typically Western) contexts while failing to perform their actual functions (Andrews et al., 2012) , i.e. having real 'teeth'. In other cases, checks and balances may have a higher degree of functionality, but still be undermined by the prevailing power dynamics involved. External actors are increasingly aware of these nuances, and even measurement tools, such as the Global Integrity Report, take account of the presence of formal accountability institutions versus the actual functionality of those mechanisms.

Civil society organizations are increasingly seeking to engage directly with horizontal accountability institutions, both in monitoring (Peruzzotti, 2012)

and supporting (Beyerle, 2014, Ch. 5) these mechanisms. The nature of this engagement varies from context to context according to the nature of the challenge faced by the horizontal accountability institutions and the capacities and strategies of the civil society actors involved. Ideally, civil society organizations are able to collaborate with pro-reform individuals in government in an inside-outside 'sandwich strategy' against actors resisting increased accountability, both within the state and without (Fox, 2014a). Even in cases where democracy is fragile, civic space is limited, and state accountability institutions are weak, the existence of mechanisms such as ombudsman and audit commissions can provide some leverage to citizens that did not previously exist. For example, even in contexts with an unfavorable enabling environment, accountability institutions can provide channels for citizens to access government or play some mediating role between citizens and state actors.

Vertical integration responds to the realities of decentralized and multi-level government structures. Budgets may be made at the national level but executed by lower levels of government or policy may be set by the federal government but implementation rules decided on by state authorities. Similarly, local service providers may not have real authority over how much resources they receive, limiting the effectiveness of accountability efforts that are exclusively local. Thus, innovative civil society campaigns and coalitions have sought to build links across levels of government to enable their monitoring and advocacy efforts.

Integrated civil society strategies seek to achieve systemic impacts by operating at scale. Just as the systems of governance that produce social exclusion integrate local, regional, national and global power-holders, civil society accountability chains face the challenge of stretching from the local up to the regional, national and global levels of governance, with different entry points, potential allies, and relevant tactics at each scale. According to Jonathan Fox:

> the vertical integration of pro-accountability actors can bolster civil
> society influence...The problems that civil society monitoring is supposed
> to address are produced by vertically integrated authority structures, and
> therefore effective monitoring processes require parallel processes of
> vertical integration...In those issue areas where autonomous poor people's
> organizations can guide the investments of their limited political capital,
> helping them to targeted their limited leverage to those pressure points where
> they are most likely to break bottlenecks (2007a, pp. 343-344).

Some vertically integrated strategies have also sought to broaden their coverage at the local level, achieving a monitoring and influencing presence in numerous communities or municipalities as part of an integrated strategy. This points to the need for partnerships between professional NGOs and grassroots citizen's groups or movements (Halloran & Flores, 2015). One example is the Textbook

Count initiative by Government Watch in the Philippines, which involved the collaboration between a professional NGO and grassroots networks for election monitoring and the Boy and Girl Scouts (for more see Guerzovich and Rosenzweig, 2013). Integrated strategies and linkages are difficult to construct and maintain, but offer strategic advantages versus isolated strategies, and can be linked to integrated data sets to more effectively leverage information about money flows or decision-making. In particular vertical and horizontal integration can mitigate the 'squeezing the balloon' effect, where monitoring and advocacy shifts but does not eliminate corrupt activities or where authorities blame other government actors for decisions or actions and thus avoid responsibility.

Varied and Complementary Tactics

Civil society organizations and other actors seeking to strengthen accountability make use of multiple tools and tactics. These include media exposure, litigation, citizen monitoring, freedom of information requests, and non-violent collective action, just to name several of the dozens of approaches deployed by pro-accountability actors. Accountability strategies that are based on a single specific tool and isolated from other efforts, within short timelines, are fundamentally flawed and inadequate (Fox, 2014a; Gaventa & McGee, 2013). Rather, it is a strategic combination of multiple tactics, informed by political analysis and experience and oriented towards vertical and horizontal integration, that is most likely to be effective.

Similarly, many organizations promoting citizen-led accountability are putting an increasing stress on constructive engagement with government actors, as opposed to contestation. However, such dichotomies are no more helpful than artificial divisions between 'supply' and 'demand' side approaches. Citizen organizations and movements need the flexibility to adapt their approaches to the opportunities and constraints they face in achieving their goals (Tarrow, 1998), using combinations of collaboration and contestation as appropriate (Bebbington, Mitlin, Mogaladi, Scurrah, & Bielich, 2010). More broadly, evidence suggests that citizens and civil society must develop strong political and organizational capacities, or 'countervailing power', even when they engage constructively with government actors, who hold a power advantage over citizens (Coelho, Rerraz, Fanti, & Ribeiro, 2010; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007a; Etemadi, 2004; Fung & Wright, 2003; Mitlin, 2014)

With the need for flexibility in mind, evidence suggests that social accountability approaches can contribute more to government responsiveness and accountability when combined with other approaches and tactics. For example, citizen monitoring has been found to be bolstered by electoral mechanisms (Schatz, 2013), meaning that monitoring of elections and political finance should be part of a more holistic strategy. Similarly, social accountability tactics can be strengthened when combined with legal aid and empowerment

(Ezer, McKenna, and Schaaf, 2015; Maru, 2010). Finally, social accountability processes that include formal opportunities for citizen engagement can best be leveraged by building broader citizen organization and capacities outside these mechanisms (Coelho et al., 2010; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007a; Etemadi, 2004; Fung & Wright, 2003).

Combining other tools and tactics can be similarly effective. In particular, leveraging technology and open data through a holistic strategy that that builds on complementary capacities, tactics and relationships, is a more promising approach than building a tech solution (or releasing a data set) without careful thought to how it will be made use of. Yet finding these synergies is not always straightforward. Even among coalitions of likeminded actors, varying experiences and capacities may suggest distinct tactics for addressing accountability deficits, but not the manner in which to best combine these. More challenging still may be finding synergies between professional NGOs and popular organizations and movements, whose approaches tend to be significantly different. Nonetheless, there are promising experiences where NGO advocacy and grassroots pressure have combined to effectively address accountability challenges in daunting contexts (Gallagher, 2013), suggesting that strengthening accountability requires a broader set of actors than traditional donor-funded NGOs (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015).

Learning and Adaptation

The complexity and political nature of efforts to strengthen accountability suggests that more successful approaches will feature contextualized strategies, analytical capacities, organizational learning, and flexibility and adaptation (Halloran, 2014). Change is constant in efforts to strengthen accountability, whether the opening of new windows of opportunity, the imposition of new constraints, or other shifts in the context. Pro-accountability actors must be ready to seize opportunities or adapt to new constraints, rather than following pre-defined, linear prescriptions. This does not mean the absence of strategy or bouncing from one perceived opportunity to the next, but rather careful scanning and analysis of political dynamics that suggest when a strategic shift could be most successful.

Pro-accountability actors also learn through their successes and setbacks. But learning goes beyond the question 'did this work or did it fail?', and suggests ongoing questioning and reflection about incremental successes and opportunities for improvement. Combined with periodic contextual analysis and gathering relevant data, this learning can inform organizational strategy and specific tactics and techniques. However, it's important to note that learning organizations are not just the sum of various unrelated learning activities, but embed learning in the fabric of organizational culture and make it a core part of how their organization seeks to contribute to positive change in complex environments. Thus, learning should not be conflated with doing

research (or being researched) or impact evaluations. Rather, learning and adaptation should be woven into how an organization pursues objectives on a daily, weekly and yearly basis. This requires both leadership and an enabling environment, particularly with respect to external funding (Allana & Sparkman, 2014; Ross, 2015).

The emphasis on learning and adapation is consistent with the recommendations from the work of Matt Andrews and others around 'problem – driven iterative adaptation' (PDIA). To combat the weaknesses of approaches driven by linear prescriptions and best practices, PDIA emphasizes several core principles, including:

- Address locally chosen and defined problems

- Promote an authorizing environment for decision-making that encourages positive deviance and experimentation

- Embed 'real time' learning

- Engage broad sets of actors to ensure that reforms are viable, legitimate, relevant, and supportable

Similar ideas have emerged with other labels, such as 'Doing Development Differently', also focusing on learning, experimentation and iteration as keys to more successful support for social change by external actors (Wild, Booth, Cummings, Foresti, & Wales, 2015).

Politically-Informed Practice

In theory, the above practices, or even combinations of these, could still lead to technocratic, apolitical interventions. The key to an accountability ecosystems approach is to ground the above dimensions in a sensitivity and orientation towards the power and politics of accountability. Strengthening accountability often involves challenging (directly or indirectly) powerful interests and structures, inside and outside the state. To do so successfully and sustainably requires significant political will from decision makers, yet many accountability efforts fail to unpack and address the complex and interrelated factors that influence decision making processes and outcomes (see Malena, 2009), relying instead on weak or untested assumptions (Gaventa & McGee, 2013).

For example, much accountability work is undertaken by professional NGOs that exist due to external funding, with less thought to the role of popular organizations and movements more often responsible for driving social change (Ackerman, 2014; De Gramont, 2014) or representing a 'countervailing power' necessary for inclusive and accountable decision-making (Fung & Wright, 2003). Indeed, external actors need to think much more strategically about how to support the work of membership-based organizations and popular movements to drive greater accountability under challenging conditions (Beyerle, 2014; King, 2015). Within the open government arena, these questions about who

represents society at the bargaining table with government and how they can really influence decision-making are at the core of the theory of change of numerous high-profile international initiatives, notably OGP (Halloran, 2015).

Similarly, social accountability interventions are often narrow and circumscribed exercises of citizen engagement, that often fail to strengthen the autonomous and inclusive citizen organization and 'political capacities' that drive more accountable citizen-state relationships (Cornwall, 2008; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007b; Gaventa & Barrett, 2010; Williams, 2004). Accountability efforts that include significant citizen participation components need to address the lessons about how citizen involvement can be most meaningful, especially in the context of engagement with government actors and processes:

- Catalysing and supporting processes of social mobilization through which marginalized groups can nurture new leaders, enhance their political agency and seek representation in these arenas as well as efficacy outside them;

- Instituting measures to address exclusionary elements within the institutional structure of the participatory sphere, from rules of representation to strategies that foster more inclusive deliberation, such as the use of facilitation;

- Articulating participatory sphere institutions more effectively with other governance institutions, providing them with resources as well as with political 'teeth' (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007a, pp. 24-25).

In sum, accountability efforts need to 'work politically', supporting and strengthening the capacity of pro-accountability actors to navigate complex and challenging political dynamics and power relationships.

Conclusion: Towards an accountability ecosystems approach

In this paper I have argued that significant learning is emerging about more effective strategies for strengthening government accountability that are not fully captured by popular current approaches. Efforts to promote open government and social accountability are often based on a linear formulation of transparency + participation = accountability. All three elements of this equation are challenging and complicated, and their interaction more so. Furthermore, open government and social accountability approaches often fail to sufficiently grapple with the fundamental power dynamics that underpin accountability relationships. Thus, there is a need for more nuanced, holistic and politically-informed approaches that recognize and tackle these complexities.

I've argued that an accountability ecosystem approach addresses the complex and political nature of strengthening accountability. The ecosystem approach responds to analysis of the limitations of current approaches and calls to:

> …move beyond simple dichotomies – such as supply and demand, voice and response – and learn how to build cross-cutting conceptualizations that link

civil-society organizations, the media, champions inside government, private-sector actors, researchers and others across these boundaries (Gaventa & McGee, 2013, p. S22).

An accountability ecosystems approach seeks to challenge the assumptions underpinning ideas about impact and scale, reframing these as strengthening the capacities of pro-accountability actors and efforts across the system to enable short, medium and longer-term gains, rather than seeking linear cause-effect outcomes and replicating these.

The ecosystems approach incorporates these insights and moves beyond current practice by combining five key elements:

- Mapping and analysis

- Vertical and horizontal integration

- Complementary tactics

- Learning and adaptation

- Politically-informed practices

Thus, accountability ecosystems approaches should by contextually grounded, analytically rigorous, integrated across geographies, political scales and accountability systems, tactically pluralist and synergistic, adaptive, and fundamentally oriented towards the political and power dimensions of accountability relationships. I argue that such an approach would be a significant step forward for efforts to strengthen government accountability.

So what now? Recommendations for advancing accountability ecosystems approach

The above discussion suggests a number of broad and specific recommendations for funders supporting accountability strengthening efforts.   Illustrative recommendations from the five 'ecosystems' dimensions are as follows:

1 | *Analysis and Mapping*

- Invest in analytical capacities of individual activists, local organizations and broader movements, specifically around political analysis (not just PEA)

- Shape ToCs around accountability systems related to specific problem, challenge or right

- Embed complexity and non-linearity into ToCs

- Base funding strategies on understanding of accountability ecosystem, and thus coordinate support from external actors to pro-accountability efforts in ways that encourage and facilitate ecosystems approaches

2 | *Vertical and Horizontal Integration*

- Support and encourage linkages between actors across scales in coordinated

campaigns or coalitions

- Support and encourage linkages between donor-supported organizations and existing citizen's organizations and movements

- Support and encourage linkages between pro-accountability actors inside and outside the state

3 | *Multiple, flexible and complementary tactics*

- Inform tactics based on analysis of accountability system and build off of existing capacities and relationships first

- Focus on building capacities for flexible and strategic deployment of tactics, rather than approaches built around specific tools or techniques

- Combine funding to formal NGOs with support for membership-based organizations, broader movements and more spontaneous citizen mobilizations

4 | *Learning and adaptation*

- Implement funding and reporting systems and practices that encourage and support grantee flexibility and adaptation based on ongoing learning and analysis

- Prioritize longer-term, core funding for organizations

- Support building learning capacities and practices in grantee organizations

- Emphasize real-time, actionable learning and reflection over end of project evaluation

- Focus reporting on reflection and learning, rather than just measurable outputs

- Focus less on generalizable lessons about 'what works' (or 'what failed') and more on building organizational learning capacities to navigate and adapt in own context

5 | *Politically-informed practice*

- Emphasize longer-term, flexible organizational support over narrow, predetermined projects

- Support organizational capacities to work politically (analysis, relationship building, strategic communication, negotiation, etc.)

- Support diverse, locally embedded pro-accountability actors and efforts, particularly existing membership-based organizations and movements

- Focus support for citizen engagement on strengthening environment and organizational capacities for autonomous collective action

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