

Prepublication version of a paper subsequently abridged and published as a chapter in Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper (eds), *The Social Science Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

‘Accountability’

Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins

Accountability describes a relationship between power-holders and those affected by their actions, and consists of two key elements: ‘answerability’ (making power-holders explain their actions) and ‘enforceability’ (punishing poor or criminal performance) (Schedler, 1999). Accountability is often conceived as operating along two dimensions, the vertical and the horizontal. The ‘vertical’ relationship between citizens and the state can be either formal (through electoral systems) or informal (through lobbying and public advocacy by associations). The ‘horizontal’ relationship involves one public authority scrutinizing the activities of another – for instance, legislative oversight of executive agencies, or the capacity of specialized authorities (ombudsmen, anti-corruption agencies) to investigate charges of malfeasance (O’Donnell, 1999).

Qualifying adjectives are often placed in front of the term accountability to specify the *domain of activity* within which scrutiny is to take place, the *type of actors* being held to account, or a *common standard* against which performance is to be assessed. Thus ‘Fiscal accountability’ refers to a domain of activity: the use of public resources and the formal systems of financial reporting and auditing through which spending authorities are monitored. ‘Administrative accountability’ refers to a specific variety of actor: bureaucrats, who are obliged to answer to elected officials and to adhere to the rules that define their reporting relationships with superiors and subordinates. ‘Legal (or ‘constitutional’) accountability’ refers to an external *standard*: it is enforced by the judiciary, which ensures that state agents neither exceed their legal authority nor derogate from their obligations towards citizens.

The creation of democratic institutions requires the establishment of rules governing relations of accountability. Which individuals, groups, or institutions are entitled to demand answers, and from whom? Which mechanisms are to be used in effecting this right? To what standards shall power holders be held? Which agencies shall be charged with enforcing sanctions? Because societies change over time – as new actors emerge, new techniques for exercising power are deployed, and new standards for assessing performance become accepted – democratic systems must also specify the means by which the rules governing accountability relationships are to be continuously reinvented. This is perhaps the most difficult challenge facing those seeking to design systems of democratic accountability.

Indeed, the need to adapt to change has been a central feature of the recent history of accountability. Democracy's 'third wave' during the final quarter of the 20th Century (Huntington, 1991) led many newly enfranchised groups to hope for a more active role in holding politicians and bureaucrats accountable – in two senses. First, in obliging public authorities to engage in frequent, non-arbitrary, transparent and interactive processes of reason-giving, in which their actions are explained and justified against commonly agreed standards of morality and effectiveness. And, second, in exercising the right to have sanctions imposed on public authorities found to have behaved immorally or performed ineffectively. These aspirations however, have largely been unfulfilled. Developing world democracies, and indeed the more established democracies in industrialized countries, have experienced what might be called a crisis of accountability – a perception created by pervasive corruption, poor decision-making, and a feeling that public actors are unresponsive to ordinary citizens. Elections, the primary means for holding politicians accountable, are widely considered inadequate, whether because of procedural defects in voting systems or an absence of programmatic alternatives between political parties. Moreover, structural transformations in the nature of governance – which include, but is not limited to, the privatization of some state functions – have blurred lines of accountability, making it difficult to establish which actors hold ultimate responsibility for certain types of policies or services. The on-going process of globalization has introduced a range of new power-holders – such as multinational corporations and transnational social movements – which slip through the jurisdictional cracks separating national authorities, yet whose actions have a profound impact on people's lives. The influence exercised over economic policy in poor countries by such multilateral institutions as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization has also reduced the regulatory autonomy of many governments. This has made lines of accountability even harder to trace.

The challenges posed by imperfect democratization and unbalanced globalization have produced a contemporary interest around the world in strengthening accountability institutions, such as electoral systems, courts, human rights commissions and auditing agencies. This is the core of the 'good governance' agenda promoted by many aid agencies. But these efforts are increasingly viewed as insufficient for the scale of accountability-related deprivations faced by the world's poor. In response, the 1990s witnessed a proliferation of accountability-seeking. Despite the undeniable diversity among governance experiments that have sought to improve accountability, and the widely differing contexts in which they have been undertaken, it is possible to discern the defining characteristics of a new accountability agenda in the making (Goetz and Jenkins, 2004). Existing mainly in fragments of conceptual innovation and practical experiment, the four basic elements of this agenda are nevertheless increasingly visible: (1) a *more direct role for ordinary people and their associations* in demanding accountability across (2) a *more diverse set of jurisdictions*, using (3) an *expanded repertoire of methods*, and on the basis of (4) a *more exacting standard* of social justice.

Examples of citizens engaging more directly in accountability efforts are citizen-managed public audits of local government spending (Jenkins and Goetz, 1999), participatory budgeting and spending reviews (Abers, 1998), or Public Interest Litigation to prosecute,

often on behalf of socially excluded groups, public and private actors for abuses of power (Dembowski, 2001). Jurisdictional shifts have spurred the development of new techniques. At a global level the International Criminal Court provides a new (though as yet not universal) arena in which abusers of power can be made to answer to their far-flung victims. At a local level, democratic decentralization makes viable new, more direct, methods for ensuring accountability. Cyberspace even offers a deterritorialized terrain for the advancement of complaints against power-holders, and a means for the pursuit of concerted mass action to demand answers and even impose sanctions such as consumer boycotts.

But it is the question of what power-holders are being held accountable *for* that is the dimension along which accountability is being most dramatically reinvented. New popular understandings of accountability are emerging that go beyond the conventional use of the term. Accountability systems are increasingly expected to not just satisfy concerns with process integrity, but also respond to norms of social justice.

Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins

Abers, Rebecca, 1998, 'From Clientalism to Cooperation: Local Government, Participatory Policy, and Civic Organizing in Porto Alegre, Brazil', *Politics and Society*, 26 (4): 511-538.

Dembowski, Hans, 2001, *Taking the State to Court: Public Interest Litigation and the Public Sphere in Metropolitan India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Goetz, Anne Marie and Jenkins, Rob, 2004, *Reinventing Accountability: Making Democracy Work for the Poor*, London: Macmillan/Palgrave.

Huntington, Samuel, 1991, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

Jenkins, Rob, and Anne Marie Goetz, 1999, 'Accounts and Accountability: Theoretical Implications of the Right to Information Movement in India', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp 603-22.

O'Donnell, G., 1999, 'Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies', in Schedler, A. et al, *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies*, Lynne Rienner, London.

Schedler, Andreas, 1999, 'Conceptualizing Accountability', in A. Schedler, Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds), *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, pp. 14-17.