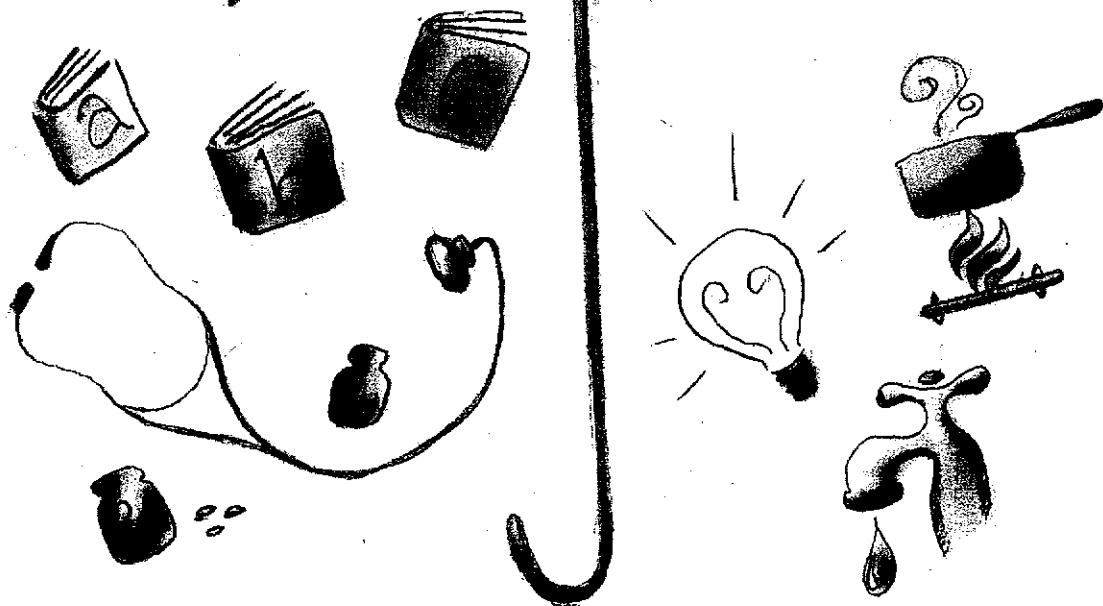


# DEVELOPMENT Outreach

PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK FOR THE POOR

## CLIENT POWER

Making Services Work  
**FOR THE POOR**



WORLD BANK INSTITUTE

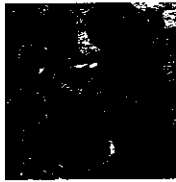
*Promoting knowledge and learning for a better world*

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# Voice and Accountability in Service Delivery

BY ANNE MARIE GOETZ AND ROB JENKINS

ACCOUNTABILITY, BY DEFINITION, implies voice—the accountable agency is answering a question articulated through a voice. Agencies must also face the other aspect of accountability, being vulnerable to sanction—another place at which a different type of voice is exercised.

The idea of a relationship between voice and accountability, however distant, is central to everyday understandings of democratic systems. *World Development Report 2004* mentions a "long route" to accountability: citizens provide mandates to policy-makers to design services to respond to citizens' needs. If these needs are not met, this could result in electoral or other forms of political backlash, including demonstrations and legal proceedings.

A huge range of citizen-led efforts around the world has been experimenting with various means of engaging directly with accountability institutions that were once closed to non-state entities. Many civic groups are participating in new, hybrid forms of accountability, either in partnership with state organizations or, more frequently, through protest action, which increasingly takes the form of civil society-initiated public hearings, people's courts, and commissioned reports that mimic official state proceedings. Through these and other means, ordinary people and their associations are getting intimately involved, demanding the impartial enforcement of punishments for corruption, criminal negligence, and ineffective performance.

As with market-based reforms to public services, voice-based initiatives stress disintermediation—people are pursuing individual cases without the aid of auditors and inspectors-general. Those involved in pursuing what we have called a "new accountability agenda" seem disproportionately to find themselves working within shorter accountability time-horizons, the cycle from mandate to sanction radically compressed. This article outlines some of the salient features of these trends in accountability relationships while also highlighting limitations of voice-based approaches.

## Conceptual innovations and practical experiments

ORDINARY PEOPLE COMPLAINING about abuses of power, or participating in service delivery in order to better monitor providers, are hardly new occurrences. Parent-teachers' asso-

ciations around the world have long enabled clients of public schooling to contribute to performance improvements. What is new is a considerable amount of conceptual innovation and practical experiment in citizen-led accountability struggles.

Beginning with electoral institutions, there are numerous examples of citizens engaging directly in the vertical accountability relationship between voters and representatives. Improving electoral accountability was the objective of the Election Watch project in the north Indian state of Rajasthan, where during state elections in December 2003 a coalition of civic groups sought to improve public awareness of candidates' backgrounds. The Supreme Court had, earlier in 2003, ruled that candidates could be required to disclose information about their personal assets and histories. Volunteers crosschecked information supplied by candidates about their assets, their outstanding debts, their criminal records, and their educational attainments. This is similar to a project run by the *Poder Ciudadano* (PC), or Citizens' Power, a civic organization seeking cleaner political competition in Argentina. The PC monitors campaign finance norms, broadcasts information about the assets of politicians, and accumulates evidence that can be used to expose political corruption. Both cases reveal ordinary people, almost by default, performing a function they might justly have expected the state's electoral commission to discharge, to say nothing of another great institution of intermediation, the media. Both organizations represent the vertical (citizen-state) dimension of accountability intruding upon the horizontal (or state-to-state) dimension of accountability—in the process, creating a set of locally adapted hybrid forms.

Public audit functions are notoriously closed to citizen engagement, but citizens have in some instances assumed the responsibility of verifying whether local government spending claims are accurate. The citizen-managed public audits of local government spending conducted by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Workers and Peasants Power Association) in Rajasthan have led to positive knock on effects: legislative change obliging local government officials to supply, on demand by any citizen, photocopies of all local public-spending records, including supporting documentation. These official accounts are assessed by villagers who can verify whether or not, for instance, minimum wages were paid on a road-building employment-generation scheme, or whether the stipulated quality of materials was used to construct a village school, or whether a community centre is being used for its official purpose. Citizen engagement in public-expenditure

management is to be found in participatory municipal budgeting in some cities in Brazil. This offers an opportunity for citizens to express their needs and begin the accountability-seeking process *ex ante*—demanding explanations and justifications from policy-makers regarding their plans and proposals, even before decisions are taken.

In countries like India and the USA, long-established democracies where rights are constitutionally guaranteed, citizens and their associations have used litigation as a way of bringing themselves directly into judicial accountability processes. Using the tools available through litigation, individual citizens and activist groups become part of an official fact-finding process. Discovery motions can lead to the availability of government-held information that can incriminate officials, who may never have expected such detailed scrutiny of their decisions. Courts in many countries are being reformed to increase the direct participation of poor people. The most important innovation from this point of view has been an expanded jurisdiction for Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in some countries, enabling people's organizations to prosecute abuses of the rights of socially excluded groups and to hold power-holders more directly accountable to the poor.

## Citizen-led initiatives

CITIZENS' GROUPS HAVE BEEN INSTRUMENTAL in creating new jurisdictions and institutions for accountability-seeking. This process is assisted by the growing legitimacy of a global human rights regime. The non-governmental Coalition for an International Criminal Court (CICC) played an important role in establishing the International Criminal Court (ICC). The CICC mobilized global public opinion, influenced the diplomatic procedure that led to the 1999-2000 Rome treaty, and contributed important amendments to address rights abuses against vulnerable groups, particularly women. The International Campaign to Ban Land Mines (ICBL), a diverse NGO coalition that was critical in creating the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty of December 1997, is another high-profile example.

This experimentation is altering popular understandings of accountability and how it should be achieved. It is expanding the range of accredited accountability-seekers. It is exposing dissatisfaction with weak or consultative versions of accountability, those that de-emphasize the enforcement element of accountability relationships. It is drawing attention to the need for *de facto* accountability in the actions of non-state power-holders who substitute voluntary self-regulation for enforceable adherence to norms of social justice. And it is promoting broad-based deliberation on changing standards of probity and justice in the actions of power-holders. The results are new standards of what officials ought to be accountable for. Increasingly the standard is no longer adherence to procedure, but the achievement of outcomes, assessed in terms of their value for poor and vulnerable groups.

## Pitfalls

THE PREOCCUPATION WITH "reinventing accountability" has come, in no small measure, from dissatisfaction with

state-led voice experiments, which often seem driven by public-relations concerns. At times they manage to inform officials about public perceptions of government behavior. But they rarely include formal obligations on officials to supply answers, accounts, or other information—nor, for that matter, provisions for investigations to be automatically triggered by *prima facie* indications of corruption or poor performance. In short, voice is being over-sold, particularly as a means of securing accountability to the poor. Formal institutions are profoundly biased against socially excluded groups, denying them access and meaningful participation. This diminishes not only their prospects for collective action, but even their ability to formulate common policy positions.

But expecting citizen-initiated voice initiatives to fill the gap left by distorted or underdeveloped expressions of voice is similarly problematic. For a start, the suggestion that those worst afflicted by abuses of power ought to be directly involved in checking those abuses is hugely unfair. Why should those most likely to suffer adverse consequences from a challenge to elite privilege be forced to lead the charge? It is, moreover, unrealistic to expect relentlessly valiant behavior of ordinary people, who often lack the voice resources of other social groups—elite connections, education, media savvy. In many cases, voice initiatives—for instance, certain democratic decentralization programs and right to information laws—have resulted neither from pressure by the poor, nor from pure altruism. Yet in the long run they can end up making public institutions more accountable to the poor.

Citizen's accountability initiatives, particularly those that end up establishing scrutiny processes parallel to, rather than in partnership with, official horizontal accountability institutions, have their own problems. The substitution of citizens' informal institutions for state accountability institutions inevitably runs into problems of legitimate authority, controls on power, and at the same time, limited impact.

State-society accountability partnerships also must avoid pitfalls. These should be designed explicitly to increase the capacity of public oversight institutions to answer to the poor. Such partnerships must provide rock-solid assurances to citizen participants with recognized roles in public oversight institutions, that they will possess certain rights—most notably, to access the same documentary information as their state counterparts, to have procedural complaints independently assessed, to be able to cross-examine witnesses, and to issue dissenting reports to a higher body (such as the legislature). Voice without these basic tools of answerability and enforceability is a recipe for disenchantment and disengagement.

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The ideas expressed in this article are drawn from Goetz and Jenkins, *Reinventing Accountability: Making Democracy Work for the Poor*. Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.