

Using accountability relationships to support capacity

Strategies for strengthening societies

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This article argues that improving accountability relationships is an effective strategy for developing capacity. Effective accountability mechanisms induce public sector organisations to remain relevant and responsive to the needs and demands of the groups they serve.

Why is accountability critical for capacity development?

When people think about capacity development, they usually have in mind training or some kind of activity aimed at organisational strengthening. The assumption is that better trained personnel and more technologically-advanced operating systems will automatically result in better service delivery. Experience suggests otherwise.

While investments in staff, procedures and systems in the public sector (the 'supply side') are important, organisations tend to perform better when they are held to account by their owners, shareholders or clients (the 'demand side'). It is the pressure exerted by these groups that creates the incentive to perform. This is most obvious in the private sector where companies have to be responsive to the needs of their customers in order to survive. Conversely, in the absence of competition, the quality of public service delivery often remains well below expectations despite heavy investments in staff development and equipment provision.

The notion of "rights holders" and "duty bearers" can be useful in illustrating the relationship between, for instance, service providers (supply) and users of services (demand), and the importance of accountability mechanisms in linking the two together.

Duty bearers, such as government departments, provide public services.

Rights holders are the legitimate beneficiaries of the actions of the duty bearers. As such, citizens are rights holders with regard to the public services provided by their government.

Accountability

mechanisms bind both sides with defined rules, rights and responsibilities. They help rights holders to voice their needs and demands and establish a responsibility of duty bearers to be responsive.

Responsiveness refers to the way in which duty bearers perceive the needs of, and respond to, the demands of particular groups such as the poor sectors of society or the recipients of a particular service. The diagram depicts this basic relationship. Further working definitions of accountability are provided in the box below.

Accountability mechanisms help to monitor, steer, and adjust behaviour in all kinds of social systems: families, groups of people, organisations, and societies at large. In democratic societies governments are held to account at the very minimum because they have been elected and can be replaced through the ballot box. As this simply is not enough, a host of mechanisms are deployed to keep a check on public administration from local to national levels. In the private sector, chief executives are accountable to the company shareholders. International organisations are held accountable through their governing boards. Local associations and NGOs have their boards or general assemblies to ensure that they serve the objectives they are mandated for.

Focusing on accountability can therefore be a strategic entry point or driver for promoting capacity development and performance. There are at least five reasons why such a focus should be part and parcel of any capacity development strategy:

- **Incentives** - Accountability mechanisms allow demand side pressures to be exercised on those in power, and can have a bearing on the motivation of people and organisations to learn, to perform and to make use of their existing capacities.
- **Legitimacy** - Accountability builds legitimacy in decision making, implementation and monitoring processes, and can thus boost the ability of individuals and groups to act on behalf of the groups they serve.
- **Empowerment** - Accountability mechanisms can be used to empower people to claim their rights from the 'bottom-up', to forge a stronger democratic culture of participation and engagement, and to serve as the ultimate safeguard against the abuse of power.
- **Politics** - Accountability loops provide checks and balances in a society's decision-making processes which increase transparency and limit the influence of vested interests on public policy.
- **Concrete action** - Accountability mechanisms can be defined, communicated, implemented and measured in tangible ways.

It can be seen from the above that having effective mechanisms of accountability is an important part of any well-functioning system. Akin to living organisms and eco-systems that function with feedback loops, social systems also have their regulatory functions. Accountability mechanisms are part of these and enable social systems to learn, self-regulate, remain relevant to their constituencies, and to achieve their respective purposes. The ability of a country to manage its own affairs then depends not only on 'duty bearers' that in principle could deliver relevant services. It also depends on the mechanisms in place that enable 'rights holders' to make sure services remain relevant to their needs and are actually delivered.

Accountability entry points as a capacity development strategy

The following discussion considers eight practical ways of using accountability entry points as a capacity development strategy. Necessarily the discussion will touch on ways to strengthen accountability and voice. But the primary focus of this discussion is not on providing capacity development to strengthen accountability. The focus is on using specific accountability approaches to induce dynamics that are conducive to the development of a system's capacity.

In the following, much reference will be made to public service accountability. The article however tries to encourage the reader to think creatively and to consider opportunities in any context: national, sub-national, local, public sector, private sector, NGO, and others.

1. Reliable and legitimate ?ground rules?

Accountability in its most basic form is exercised when people agree to engage with one another with a certain binding moral force. Such agreement can either be made on the basis of informal rules or through a formal contract. If rules are not explicit enough there can be misunderstandings about respective roles and responsibilities that weaken the collective effort. Most have seen caricatures of people in one boat rowing in opposite directions and giving competing orders. Making the ground rules explicit can clarify the common purpose, focus energies, attribute authority and legitimise questioning if things are not going according to the rules. Such ground rules may take the form of editorial statutes for a journal, regulations for team work, a business plan, a national constitution or a negotiated agreement such as the Paris Declaration.

2. Transparency, access to information and awareness

Transparency is a pillar of trust and legitimacy in social systems. People (rights holders) are only able to claim their rights if they are aware these rights exist, if processes are sufficiently transparent to understand them, and if they have access to salient information. Access to information moreover holds the key to increasing people's participation in democratic and policy making processes. A law on access to information may be critical in the enabling environment and lead, for instance, to public disclosure of state budgetary allocations to local schools allowing parents to question where the money actually goes.

3. Facts, broadened evidence and increased objectivity

Even where there are no agreed rules, initiatives to establish evidence are potentially powerful means to focus attention and energies. Performance assessments, functional reviews, public expenditure reviews, gender budget analyses, programme evaluations and peer reviews are all means for establishing a degree of certainty around information that is of public interest. The degree of independence of the reviewing authority, as well as the degree to which the perceptions of client groups are reflected, will increase the legitimacy of any assessment or evaluation. National reports on progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as local Human Development Reports, for instance, can be a way of democratising information on actions and progress in critical social areas.

4. Regular monitoring and control

In modern democracies, a host of mechanisms institutionalise monitoring and control. For example, certain entities, such as the Auditor General or an independent electoral commission are entrusted with a constitutional mandate to hold other state agencies to account – thus indirectly acting on behalf of the people. Such mechanisms and entities can monitor accountability relations over time. In similar ways individual organisations evaluate their operations, and projects are usually monitored at regular intervals to make adjustments and improve on weaknesses.

5. Improved access to recourse and arbitration

Access to justice, in particular for poor people, is not a given in many societies. Even where these rights exist and where institutions are in place, they may be biased toward the interests of elite groups. NGOs have successfully used court action to assert their rights, and of courts consciously promoting the interests of the weakest and most vulnerable. The institution of the Ombudsman has been established in many countries as a more or less independent body that investigates grievances of citizens and seeks to broker solutions or an equitable settlement. A range of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that provide arbitration outside the formal courts of justice are other examples.

6. Accountability loops closer to the people

When users of services have a real opportunity to influence public policy and services, they are more likely to articulate their demands. Decentralisation does not necessarily ensure that the services provided by local authorities are effective, appropriate and accountable. However, strengthening the lines of communication between citizens and local government structures is often effective in improving direct accountability and the performance of local service providers.

7. Opening channels and arenas for participation

This approach focuses on the institutional channels and arenas through which citizens can shape decision-making processes. Participatory mechanisms take various forms, including public consultation mechanisms and public hearings, village assemblies, consultations on project options, or internet forums. Participatory planning, budgeting and evaluations are mechanisms that have been successfully used to increase the ‘voice’ of citizens. Social audits are also being increasingly used to ensure accountability. However, consultation fatigue has become a common phenomenon and care needs to be taken to ensure that those consulted perceive their invitation to participate as being of real benefit to them.

8. Voice and the ability to articulate

The approaches listed so far emphasise structural changes and the opening of opportunities by changing elements in the accountability relationship. This eighth approach directly aims at strengthening the ability of rights holders, and in particular poor people and their advocates, to

speak out, to organise, to know their rights and to claim them. Civil society organisations tend to work closely with local stakeholders and are more intimately aware of the constraints people face in voicing their needs and in participating in policy processes. Access to quality education, campaigns to raise awareness, support for local leadership development or other approaches to strengthen self-esteem and confidence can be part of strengthening the articulation of demand.

Thinking out of the box

The above has been an attempt to show different entry points to strengthening the capacity of a social system to function effectively by bolstering its accountability structures. An investment in accountability can maintain the 'health' of a system, reinforce ownership and legitimacy, and is a seed for the development of sustainable capacities at all levels of society. The following questions summarise dimensions that practitioners may want to consider as options in the context of the specific challenges they face:

1. Which ground rules of engagement are conducive to capacity development and are possible at a given point in time?
2. Which measures can increase transparency and access to information?
3. How can one establish facts and broaden evidence as an impartial basis for collective action?
4. Should regular monitoring and accountability mechanisms be institutionalised?
5. How can formal and informal access to recourse and arbitration be improved?
6. Which accountability loops could be moved closer to local people?
7. What communication/participation channels could be opened?
8. How can one support the capacity of people and community-based organisations to articulate their needs and claim their rights?

Accountability relationships and capacity development are about roles and responsibilities and most of the above approaches are bound to question power and vested interests. Resistance must therefore be anticipated. On the other hand, accountability, evidence, transparency and voice belong to the instruments of good governance and the argument for promoting them is in principle compelling and difficult to refute. It may take creativity to move towards concrete measures. Yet, applying accountability as a capacity development strategy can change dynamics and lead to profound changes in rules, attitudes, behaviour and a society's ability to manage its own affairs.

Further reading

This article is based on a paper prepared for the UNDP conference [*Capacity Development Strategies: Let the evidence speak*](#), 30 November - 1 December 2006, Madrid, Spain.

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