Social accountability for rural water services

Summary of RWSN e-discussion

Credit: Simone D. McCourtie / World Bank

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RWSN Leave no one behind Theme

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Introduction

The aim of this e-discussion hosted by the RWSN Leave No One Behind Theme in partnership with the RWSN Sustainable services Theme was to understand how the different kinds of accountability mechanisms present in countries can help protect the rights of the water users. Interestingly a spontaneous e-discussion re-started at the same time in the RWSN sustainable services online community, about the ability of communities to manage their own water supplies, and accountability and governance came up as one of the major challenges in that discussion.

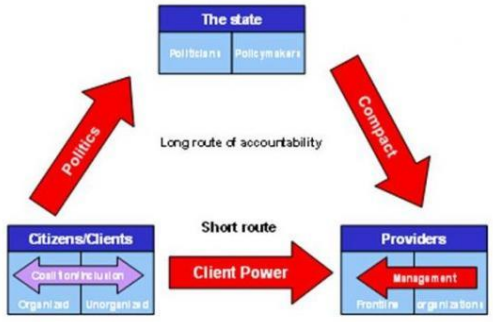
Will governments make sure everyone has access to water if nobody holds them accountable? How can citizens hold their governments to account? This RWSN e-discussion took place from 19 February to 9 March, 2018 and focused on the following topics:

- Week 1: Social accountability in different contexts;
- Week 2: Sharing tools, methods and strategies for social accountability;
- Week 3: Strengthening and scaling up social accountability.

17 people contributed experiences from 14 countries. A summary of all the contributions is available here. You can view all original contributions here by joining the RWSN Leave no one behind online community.

Conceptualising social accountability

Social accountability is an approach that refers to the extent and capacity of citizens to hold the state and service providers accountable and make them responsive to needs of citizens and beneficiaries. It encompasses initiatives that focus on ordinary citizens as the ultimate stakeholders and is based on the human rights principles of transparency, accountability, and participation. Social accountability mechanisms can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens, or both, but very often they are demand-driven and operate from below.



Source: World Bank, 2014

The framework of the "short and long route of social accountability", conceptualised by the 2004 World Development Report, was shared by one participant and may help clarify the different pathways of accountability, between the citizens and providers (short route) and via the state (long route).

Different mechanisms for accountability...

- Through feedback mechanisms between the customer and the service provider and/or the duty-bearer. This can be provided by the utility's customer services (which in the United Kingdom (UK) are mandated by law, and exist also in Kenya), or in the form of a citizen report card which feeds into local and national reporting systems (Mozambique). In Mexico, all social development programs funded by the federal government are mandated to implement a social accountability mechanism and report on it. It was noted that feedback mechanisms for people affected by humanitarian emergencies are much more common than in the development field (example of an NGO in Lebanon, which had a dedicated phone number for feedback in an emergency context). However, if organisations do not ensure their feedback systems are sustainable and lead to follow-up of issues, then this can leave people without appropriate support. Managing such a feedback system requires logistics and resources, which has led to the idea of cross-organisation feedback mechanisms in large scale humanitarian situations.
- By giving citizens a stronger voice through unions, civil society organisations (CSOs), Non-Government Organisations... (UK, Honduras, Kenya). This may enable citizens to report corruption, facilitate participatory budgeting, contribute to audits, and provide feedback on service performance to the service provider or the duty-bearer. In Bangladesh, it was found that budget tracking was one of the most efficient processes to set accountability mechanism between right holders and duty bearers. This approach applies not only to water services, but also to water resources management: In Tanzania, Zambia and Malawi, an organisation has been working with CSOs and communities to develop and test approaches to social accountability monitoring for water security - focusing on water resource management, pollution control, water rights,

conflict, drought and flood response as well as adequacy of WASH – through a model which supports community 'water witnesses' to activate law, policy and duty bearer responses on these issues within case studies of water 'hotspots'.

- Through a third party independent of political interference, e.g. a regulator (UK, Kenya), Supreme Audit Institutions or Ombudsman Offices (examples of Mexico, Argentina, and Tajikistan).

By lobbying elected politicians, and local authorities responsible for services provision. This can be done with or without formal mechanisms; in the UK for instance, this happens on an ad-hoc basis, while it is formalised in others contexts: in Nepal, public hearings are regularly organised at district level for annual reporting so communities can meet face to face with the authorities that are responsible for service provision. It is important to highlight the linkages to the human right to water, in particular towards local governments, which are often responsible for services at the local level (as was done in India). However, building the capacity of individuals and communities (rights holders) to seek accountability does not work unless local governments/providers are responsive. Otherwise, people who seek accountability may be turned away (or worse face repercussions). Often, a combination of all the above enables social accountability in practice in the water sector. For instance, in Kenya, the Human Right to water is recognized in the constitution, and the water sector institutional framework recognizes the role of informed citizens and a vibrant civil society in ensuring that water supply services fulfil consumer rights and respond to their needs. The regulator supports the realization of social accountability in water services through water service providers, research institutions, private sector actors and civil society organizations (CSOs). It has developed guidelines to institutionalise consumer participation, enabling CSOs to provide bottom-up feedback and act as watchdogs to improve governance in water supply services. Water Action Groups empower consumers and the follow up of consumer complaints. Maji Voice, an ICT platform enabling two-way communication between the citizen and water providers, enables water consumers to use their mobile phones or computers to share their concerns on service delivery with water providers, and receive feedback on how those issues are being addressed. Accountability systems are designed to be gender-sensitive, considering the needs of people with disabilities, and consumers in low-income areas. There is still work to be done on monitoring the performance of water service providers in solving consumer complaints, ensuring that they are providing the required information to consumers, and enhancing the internal accountability of the water service providers.

...but who is accountable to whom?

While the e-discussion had started by asking the question of the accountability of service providers and governments, the question of accountability of NGOs / CSOs was raised, both in terms of external accountability (to citizens and communities), but also internal (failure of organizations' reporting chains leading to covering up issues about staff misconduct or abuse and preventing appropriate action to be taken). In terms of accountability for the quality of their programmes, a number of tools were shared to enable NGOs and donors to rate, or get an independent rating, of the sustainability of their interventions, including a Donor Scorecard to promote donor accountability for lasting water services.

In contexts where services are heavily subsidized, service providers and governments may be more accountable to donors than their citizens. This is something the experience of Honduras cautioned against: internal accountability is enhanced by reducing dependence on external funds, and ensuring the meaningful participation of citizens in all processes related to WASH services. Participation of citizens was also central to the approach undertaken in Ukraine to identify vulnerable members of the community for the provision of pro-poor subsidised water services.

Social accountability issues specific to rural water services

There are issues of scale and sustainability specific to rural water services (when compared with urban): for instance, in Indonesia rural water supply services are mostly managed through community management groups. Within a single district there can be more than 100 community-based groups (CBOs), which makes it difficult to engage with one district local government. To address this challenge, one approach that is currently underway led by the Government of Indonesia and World Bank is to establish District Associations of water CBOs. These associations are made up of individuals representing a number of village water CBOs, which can form a 'bridge' between users, service providers and local governments. Their role includes monitoring services, providing technical and social support to water CBOs, and representing the voice of water CBOs to local government. In practice the District Associations are varied in their success and effectiveness in these roles, and the model has its limits. In addition, there is a risk that local government may rely on voluntary contributions of time, effort and resources (for example in monitoring services) when in fact these are mandated roles of local government according to current regulations. Still, the Associations are an interesting approach and provide a possible pathway to improve communications,

engagement, answerability and enforceability across widely dispersed and numerous rural water users, providers and local government. On a related note, a study in Uganda highlights the motivations of community members who volunteer to join water CBOs. This is often linked to social status and existing power dynamics, and underscores the potential for the lack of sustainability of CBOs.

Social accountability and the SDGs

A study from End Water Poverty, in partnership with Coalition Eau, WSSCC, Watershed and SWA has investigated the nature of the existing accountability mechanisms at national level, the challenges and the opportunities. Social accountability mechanisms for international SDG commitments are of a voluntary nature, there are no guidelines, are viewed by many as not transparent, not fit for purpose, tick-box exercises. At national level, every country has its own set of institutional structures and mechanisms to implement and report on achievement of SDG6 targets. It has found that for accountability mechanisms to be effective, they need to be transparent, engage stakeholders, must facilitate and encourage critical reflection on progress and lesson learning and be respondent to issues addressed by stakeholders. More than just seeking to correct past wrongs, accountability is forward-looking, seeking to influence Government actions in the future, making it more responsive to the SDG6 targets and the needs of citizens.

Contributors to the e-discussion

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10. Hannah Neumeyer
11. Juliet Willetts from Institute of Sustainable Future, Sydney
12. Viacheslav Sorokovskyi from DESPRO
13. Adane Bekele from UNICEF WASH
14. Al-hassan Adam from End Water Poverty
15. Susanna Smets from World Bank
16. Euphresia Luseka from USAID
17. Zobair Hassan from DORP

Resources shared

1. Violence, Gender and WASH: Practitioner's Toolkit (co-published by 27 organisations in 2014: http://violence-WASH.lboro.ac.uk *(week 1)*
2. Frontiers of CLTS 'Making sanitation and hygiene safer: Reducing vulnerabilities to violence' (published by the IDS in 2015): http://www.communityledtotalsanitation.org/resources/frontiers *(week 1)*
3. The WASH Cluster small booklet on accountability – including a leaflet for communities on standards of staff behaviours and contact links where problems occur: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/iraq/document/wash-accountability-handbook *(week 1)*
4. UNHCR - WASH, Protection and Accountability manual (2017) : http://wash.unhcr.org/download/wash-protection-and-accountability/ *(week 1)*
5. The Common Humanitarian Standard including components related to accountability (considering accountability from a range of angles, including related to participation but also commitment to having appropriate capacity of staff, best use of resources etc.): https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard *(week 1)*
6. Water Governance Facility (UNICEF & UNDP) reference guide providing a comprehensive reference Guide for Programming detailing *existing accountability mechanisms, illustrated by examples* of how they are currently being operationalized in different contexts: http://watergovernance.org/resources/accountability-in-wash-a-reference-guide-for-programming/ *(week 1)*
7. Rochelle Holm from *Center of Excellence in Water and Sanitation, Mzuzu University, Malawi* provided more information on the use of social tools in Malawi: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352801X16300212 and http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0155043. *(week 2)*
8. Hannah Neumeyer from *WASH-United* shared information on 'Making rights real' tool kit: https://washmatters.wateraid.org/blog/making-rights-real-by-supporting-local-government-heroes and http://washunited.org/files/washunited/resources/Making_Rights_Real_WASH_United_Paper_Web.pdf. *(week 2)*
9. Susan Davis from *Improve International* shared a video on the WASH Donor Accountability Scorecard https://www.dropbox.com/s/b07ziuy2wcie5t1/Improve%20International%20Donor%20Scorecard.mp4?dl=0 *(week 2)*
10. Viacheslav Sorokovskyi *from DESPRO* shared the story of their approach that ensured access to water service for the poorest in Ukraine: https://rwsnforum7.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/full_paper_0116_submitter_0113_sorokovskyi_viacheslav.pdf *(week 3)*
11. Sean Furey from RWSN shared an experience of Adane Bekele, UNICEF WASH Manager in Sudan *(week 3)*

Sustainable Water Supply System for h

12. Al-hassan Adam from End Water Poverty shared about a study on the accountability mechanisms present globally: https://endwaterpoverty.org/latest/news/accountability-mechanism-hlpf-report *(week 3)*
13. Sara Ahrari from Simavi shared guidelines on "How to Accelerate.. By using Social accountability tools": https://wash-alliance.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2017/03/4.-How-to-accelerate%E2%80%A6-by-using-Social-Accountability-tools.pdf *(week 3)*