Accountability Ecosystems in Practice

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A. What Is the Accountability Ecosystems (AES) Approach?

Improving government accountability has long been a priority of democracy programming, and increasingly, of sectoral approaches, in the development world. Accountability is far from straightforward, with formal mechanisms (elections and courts) often failing to perform their full functions, and informal mechanisms (media attention and citizen-led social audits) often achieving limited or localized gains.

These challenges, plus emerging evidence and lessons, have pushed the field toward new thinking. Brendan Halloran of the International Budget Partnership provided a holistic framework for understanding accountability in his paper "Strengthening Accountability Ecosystems: A Discussion Paper."[1] The paper defines accountability ecosystems as:

The relationship between multiple levels of government, citizen collective action, civil society advocacy, and institutions, wrapped together by a web of social, political, and cultural factors in a given country context.

Narrow and isolated approaches to transparency, participation, and accountability too often make unrealistic assumptions that ignore the myriad systemic factors and obstacles to accountable governance. Taking a politically aware, systems-based approach can help successfully navigate within and strengthen the complex and ever-changing accountability ecosystem.

B. AES Approach in Practice

B1. Mapping and Analysis of Accountability Ecosystems

Description. Mapping and analysis allow us to understand the dynamics among actors in a political, institutional, and contextual landscape that generate or constrain accountability. Researchers have developed numerous tools and methodologies to help understand formal and informal accountability, but these are less important than the practice of "scanning" the accountability ecosystem and performing "deep dives" to understand less-visible power relations and dynamics.

Practical "How." A project, campaign, or other effort by external or internal reform actors should begin with a "deep dive." This analysis does not fully map every actor and contextual factor but illustrates basic system characteristics to inform strategic directions.

Probing root causes of accountability gaps helps direct efforts toward the right causes, rather than addressing just the symptoms of weak accountability. Tools for political and power analysis are useful, but asking the right questions is more important: What problem or gap are we trying to address? What drives these weaknesses, particularly political and power relationships? Who benefits from the current accountability weaknesses?

Analytical processes need to balance rigor and practicality, so leveraging existing analysis can be useful. When exploring root causes of accountability gaps using political economy analysis (PEA) or other tools, it is necessary to balance the structural factors

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[1] Halloran, B. (2015) "Strengthening Accountability Ecosystems: A Discussion Paper." *Transparency and Accountability Initiative Think Piece*, pp. 1-22. Retrieved from http://www.transparency-initiative.org/archive/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Strengthening-Accountability-Ecosystems.pdf. (Accessed October 30, 2019)

they raise (which often do not present clear entry points for change) with realistic starting points around a service-delivery issue, specific accountability mechanism, or dynamic.

As noted, mapping and analysis must be iterative, so building these into the monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) approach so that data is collected and analyzed along with activities, outcomes, and reflections ensures regularity and integration.

Illustrative Case. Strengthening Accountability and Citizen Engagement (SACE) program in Nigeria: https://chemonics.com/projects/advocating-vocal-civil-society-nigeria/

B2. Vertical and Horizontal Integration Strategies

Description. Given the systemic nature of accountability (or lack of accountability), approaches to strengthening accountability must go beyond isolated interventions. One well-documented approach to accountability is that of "vertical integration," in which pro-accountability efforts are linked across levels of governance to minimize accountability gaps, particularly between the national and local levels.[2] This often combines monitoring undertaken by civic actors in localities with engagement at higher levels of decision-making.

Horizontal integration refers to linking to other accountability actors and mechanisms such as supreme audit institutions and judiciary oversight. Efforts can link to, bolster, and/or leverage the accountability functions of these institutions to address accountability gaps or weaknesses. Vertical and horizontal integration can complement each other and offer a more strategic approach to accountability.

Practical "How." Vertical and horizontal integration can comprise the core of a project or be incorporated into another overall approach.

Intensity	Vertical Integration	Horizontal Integration
Low	Map links between proposed project approach and higher and/or lower levels of governance/service delivery to determine if connections are missing that would undermine project results.	Map links to relevant oversight actors to understand what — if any — oversight is being provided by these mechanisms.
Medium	Coordinate with higher and/or lower levels of governance/service delivery in project approach. For example, a project that focuses on community scorecards should also bring results to municipal or district officials so they are aware of community perceptions of government performance.	Coordinate with relevant oversight actors to enable more meaningful accountability to bolster the project's core approach. For example, a project that supports generating more accurate and public information about local health service delivery could facilitate auditor and media access to this information.
High	Orient approach to enabling vertical accountability across multiple levels of government/service delivery. For example, include monitoring of resources from national to subnational levels, with local monitoring organizations also supported to coordinate and convene at state and/or national levels, to engage decision-makers directly.	Orient approach toward enabling horizontal accountability by both leveraging and strengthening relevant oversight mechanisms. This could include building capacity of those accountability mechanisms that are autonomous and engaged, as well as addressing the incentives of oversight bodies to perform their roles.

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[2] Fox, J. and Aceron, J. (2016). "Doing Accountability Differently." *U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre*, (Issue 2016 No. 4), pp. 1-57. Retrieved from https://accountabilityresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/U4Issue-2016-04-20160921-b.pdf. (Accessed October 30, 2019).

Illustrative Case. Vertical integration is clear in the "Textbook Count" campaign in the Philippines, in which local boy and girl scouts tracked textbooks at distribution centers and connected to national efforts to improve systems and compliance.[3]

B3. Strategic Use of Varied and Complementary Tactics

Description. Given the complexity of the accountability ecosystem as well as the power dynamics that often underpin accountability weaknesses, a single tactic is almost never sufficient. So although components such as citizen scorecards or litigation can achieve some gains, they are often limited by weaknesses elsewhere in the accountability ecosystem.

Practical "How." Diverse resources on individual tools and tactics for strengthening accountability exist, including:

1. Social audits: https://www.internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/social-audits-in-south-africa-pocket-guide-2018.pdf

2. Legal empowerment: https://namati.org/resources/good-practices-guide-for-incorporating-legal-empowerment-into-operations/

3. Access to information: https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Open-Development-Access-to-Information-and-the-SDGs-2017.pdf

Understanding when to use such tactics and how to combine them presents a greater challenge.

Illustrative Case.

Example: Social accountability and elections monitoring in East Africa and South Asia[4]		
Problem: Corruption in local service delivery	**Complementary Tactics:** Social accountability tools (public expenditure tracking surveys and citizen scorecards) linked to election monitoring to ensure free and fair elections	**Why One Tactic is Insufficient:** Social accountability tools often provide information about service delivery without directly sanctioning authorities. Elections alone are often insufficient to improve services. Leveraging the "hard accountability" of elections with the "soft accountability" of social accountability tools led to more meaningful gains.
Example: Policy reform and public monitoring in Nigeria's Enugu state[5]		
Problem: Opaque procurement procedures leading to poor infrastructure development	**Complementary Tactics:** Initiative supported passing a public procurement law, then facilitated media coverage of and civil society engagement with the new legislation	**Why One Tactic is Insufficient:** Often reforms are passed, but capacity or incentives limit their extent. In this case, the state did not have the capacity to monitor all contracts. On the other hand, citizen monitoring without an effective policy framework might not have generated government action.

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[3] Fox, J. and Aceron, J. (2016).

[4] Schatz, F. (2013). "Fighting Corruption with Social Accountability: A Comparative Analysis of Social Accountability Mechanisms' Potential to Reduce Corruption in Public Administration." *Public Administration and Development,* 33(3), pp. 161-174.

[5] SAVI program, "Public finance management: All states." http://savi-nigeria.org/casestudy/public-finance-mangement-states/. (Accessed October 30, 2019).

B4. Learning and Adaptation

Description. Accountability ecosystems are dynamic. Actors make decisions, external events shift incentives, and norms build up or erode over time. Context shifts, and what made sense at one point might not make sense at another. In this environment, individuals and groups learn from their experiences, and unless they are constrained, they will adapt. Meaningful efforts to strengthen accountability must build in learning from the start and ensure that insights and evidence can inform adapted approaches.

Practical "How." Learning and adaptation require systems, capacities, and an organizational culture. These should aim to enable "sense-making" at the intersection of strategy and implementation so that insights can be generated and incorporated into practice.

Systems include work plans that build in flexibility, making them living documents. MEL systems must also produce data — and undertake analysis — in faster feedback loops. Spaces must be created for reflection and sense-making. Documentation and reporting should seek to share insights and learning, rather than just report results.

Capacities include facilitation, critical thinking, listening, and collaborative approaches, that is, "soft skills" for engaging in learning, sense-making, and adaptive management. Crosscutting capacities include knowledge of key insights in governance, basics of theory of change and monitoring and evaluation processes, and nuanced contextual and sectoral knowledge.

Organizational culture must include values of openness, participation, mutual respect, curiosity, and innovation. Leaders must model principles with behavior and be willing to experiment, take evidence seriously, and make changes. Organizational culture must be reinforced by the right incentives, such as rewarding asking tough questions, rethinking assumptions, and exploring new approaches.

Illustrative Case.

Nigeria SACE's Approach to Learning and Adaptation: Cluster Coaching and the Annual Learning Summit

To maintain a participatory and collaborative spirit with civil society organization (CSO) anchors and issue-cluster members, SACE implemented two primary mechanisms to foster consultation and collect feedback: cluster coaching and the annual learning summit.

Cluster coaching. Twice a year, with support from SACE, the anchor CSO leading an advocacy issue cluster organized a check-in session with members. In these sessions, cluster members reviewed progress toward the cluster's plan for collective advocacy work, identified steps needed to advance their work for the next six months, and assigned specific cluster members to undertake identified tasks. Cluster coaching sessions provided dedicated time for groups to conduct a mini-PEA to spot changes in their issue's accountability landscape, identify new opportunities or challenges, and discuss the strategies and tactics needed to advance their capacity building, engagement, and public-awareness goals.

Annual learning summit. The learning summit brought together all members of the SACE team, CSO anchors, and cluster members to review progress made toward objectives. The annual learning summit collected important feedback for helping cluster groups plan to achieve their results for the subsequent period, but also for SACE to gather feedback and adjust its implementation strategy to support its partners.

B5. Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)

Description. Successfully promoting lasting and inclusive government accountability presents daunting challenges in any context. It requires grounding interventions in the underlying political and power dynamics of the accountability ecosystem itself.

Fundamentally, this process involves understanding why accountability ecosystems are weak, which actors or dynamics can influence and are influencing ecosystem functions and dysfunctions, and the political nature of change to strengthen or reorient accountability. Efforts that aim to strengthen accountability ecosystems must then "work politically" to support actors in addressing complex political dynamics, institutional changes, and power relations.

Practical "How." Create a project design that is flexible and iterative to develop effective accountability-strengthening interventions, given the actors and power dynamics identified in the mapping and analysis process. This means:

(1) Elevating the importance of understanding formal and informal institutional contexts to create opportunities for locally defined solutions

(2) Supporting local partners to navigate — and shape where possible — the environment and political dynamics

(3) Recognizing the interests of accountability actors at play and how incentives can drive decision-making and entry points

(4) Supporting the mobilization of pro-accountability actors to shift accountability dynamics, including supporting coalitions, harnessing popular movements, and supporting strategic media engagement, as well as bolstering reformers within the state

(5) Allowing projects to concentrate on small, incremental improvements and lessons learned, but building up to more systematic shifts over time

Illustrative Case. The U.K. Department for International Development Nigeria Strengthening Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) project implemented TWP throughout its accountability programming. From 2012 to 2016, the project supported local partners by analyzing the power relations that drove state change, providing another example of engaging local partners to think and work politically within accountability ecosystems. The SAVI project conducted phased analyses throughout project implementation to identify issues that engaged a wide range of civil society actors as well as targeted government officials in specific ministries. As described in a paper on thinking and working politically, "In the later operational phase of the programme, SAVI staff drew on their partners' experience to revise/update their own PEA and S-Doc [state drivers of change] analysis, keeping abreast of significant changes and adjusting support strategies accordingly."[6]

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[6] SAVI program, "Thinking and Working Politically." http://savi-nigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/SAVI_ApproachPaper4_2015_FINAL.pdf. (Accessed October 30, 2019).

C. Putting It All Together: Working in (Eco)Systems

This guide has sought to provide a practical and conceptually sound framework for strengthening accountability ecosystems. These five dimensions by no means constitute a "cookie cutter" solution, but offer a set of principles, approaches, and tools to give practitioners the best chance to have a meaningful impact in their efforts to strengthen accountability.

Fundamentally, working in systems differs from working through projects or campaigns. When working in systems, we must focus more on indirect change that generates the right system dynamics that direct change to produce a specified outcome.

One approach to the accountability ecosystem is *navigating* the system. Mapping and analysis, learning and adaptation, and working politically can all help guide approaches that link accountability efforts, bridge small gaps, and respond to opportunities. These efforts take overall system dynamics as a given and seek to leverage whatever functioning accountability exists and nudge it toward outcomes for a service, locality, or group.

Another approach is *shifting* the accountability ecosystem. Many externally funded accountability projects seek to strengthen accountability mechanisms or institute new accountability practices. However, such inputs often fail to alter the deeper dynamics of the ecosystem and are either abandoned or adapted into the existing system. Efforts that seek to meaningfully shift systems toward greater accountability must focus on efforts that address underlying power dynamics, both through small nudges and support for accountability actors and efforts, and more significant investments in building "countervailing power" through citizen organizing, political leadership, and powerful ideas and discourse.

Few good examples exist of putting these accountability ecosystem ideas into practice. Experimentation and innovation should be encouraged, as should robust documentation and assessment. With this framework, our community can continue to build our understanding of accountability ecosystems and buttress our efforts to strengthen them.