State of Social Accountability in South Asia

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What is Social Accountability?

Social Accountability is an approach:
- that relies on civic engagement
- where ordinary citizens and/or their organizations participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability

Social Accountability mechanisms can be initiated and supported by the:

- state
- citizens or both,

but very often they are demand-driven and operate from the bottom up.
Why Social Accountability is Important

Social Accountability

- Good Governance
- Development Effectiveness
- Empowerment
Elements of Social Accountability

- Engaging and preparing community and civil society
- Collecting, analyzing and using information
- Undertaking accountability engagements with governments
- Using information to enhance accountability
- Engagements with governments
Evolution in Pakistan

In Pakistan:

“Social accountability is a new jargon but it has roots back 1995 when evidence based monitoring with the help of communities was initiated first by the civil society organizations”

(World Bank, 2007).

Following the Asian Slump in 1997, these were the economists who demanded good governance through public participation and monitoring for efficient utilization of public resources
Civil Society and Social Accountability

- Hissar Foundation (Karachi) on water
- Shehri (Karachi) on land grabbing
- CPDI (Islamabad) on right to information
- Omer Asghar Khan Foundation (Islamabad) on participatory budgeting
- Action Aid on gender based budgeting and social accountability
- IRSP (Mardan) on water and sanitation
- SDPI on CRC and budgeting processes
Challenges to Promote Social Accountability in Pakistan

- Government/ State’s resistance to reform
- A difficult, confusing accountability landscape
- Disruption by powerful vested interests
- Weak/ no Implementation of Right to Information Act
- Centralization
- CSOs’ weak governance and accountability mechanisms
Continued…..

- Absence of an enabling Environment
- Political and institutional capacity of the government and the civil society
- Absence of Performance Benchmarks
- Lack of social Mobilization and effective media exposure.
Opportunities of Promoting Social Accountability Pakistan

- Revival of a responsible judiciary
- Vibrant Media
- Politically aware and charged masses
- Strengthened civil society
- Receptive political parties
Social Accountability and the marginalized in India

- Some observations
The Social Contract

- According to one interpretation of the Social Contract Theory, individuals agreed to voluntarily part with some freedoms and accede to the rule of an authority to ensure greater bodily and material safety.
- This voluntary subordination does not, however, amount to renunciation of all powers by the citizens.
- The state depends for its legitimacy, upon the support of its citizens.
- To ensure that it continues to enjoy the support of its citizens, the state ought to acknowledge that it is accountable to them.
Social Accountability

- The concept may, therefore, be defined as the obligation of those who hold power to take responsibility—moral and practical—for their actions vis-à-vis those who, as per the original social contract, had yielded their power to the authority figure.

- Social Accountability of the state towards its citizens gets manifested in primarily two ways:
  1. Through transparency of actions initiated by the state.
  2. Through acknowledgement by the state of the right of the citizens to participate in public sphere. This right includes the right to freedom of speech and the right to freedom of association.
Continued…. 

- This right enables the citizens to express their grievances against the government and their suggestions aimed at contributing towards the improvement of governance.
- Hence, any state that considers its citizens to be equal stakeholders in the process of development and nation-building, would consider itself to be accountable to the people and pay serious heed to their concerns as expressed in the form of public opinion.
Exit or Voice?

- In dictatorial-and sometimes, monarchical-regimes, this right to freedom of expression is often curtailed as the state cannot brook any opposition but in democracies, people create the space to constantly engage and negotiate with the state so that the latter never forgets that it is accountable to the people and that they have the right to question and critique it.

- According to Albert O. Hirschman, when the members of any organization including a nation-state perceive that there has been a decline in the efficiency of the functioning of the organization, they exercise one of two options-exit or voice

- Exit refers to withdrawal from the organization and indicates only that there are problems in it. The option of ‘voice’ on the other hand, facilitates the articulation of the perceived problems
Voice is, therefore, critical as it enables the citizens to express their grievances in a sustained manner and to demand accountability of the state.

People are not, to use Christian parlance, ‘flocks of sheep to be flocked by the shepherd’ or the state but equal stakeholders in the system of governance.
The Right to Information Act

- The Supreme Court of India once observed, “Where a society has chosen to accept democracy as its creedal faith, it is elementary that their citizens ought to know what their government is doing…no democratic government can survive without accountability.”

- As discussed earlier, accountability includes the right of citizens to express/air their concerns. It also includes the freedom to demand explanations and information from the state.

- The Right to Information Act which was passed in India in 2005, is an important step towards ensuring social accountability of the state.
The Act explained…

- The Act made it mandatory for every government and government-aided agency in India to appoint a public information officer (PIO) who has the responsibility to reply on behalf of the state, in most cases, within 30 days to request by citizens for information on any area of governance, save some specific ones.

- Under this Act, the government departments were expected to computerize their records and then make them available in the public domain to make it easier for the people to access information.

- The aim of Act, therefore, is enable citizens in demand information so that they may effectively pressurize the state to enhance its transparency.
The Act explained…

- The Act, therefore, is a tool of assertion of the ‘voice’
- It would be interesting to study the rationale put forth for keeping certain areas such as national security out of the ambit of the Act. Why should the state not be accountable for its actions in certain spheres?
The Political Society

- A second and equally interesting question arises at this juncture—does the state consider itself to be equally accountable to all its citizens?
- According to the Indian social scientist Partha Chatterjee, “although India has never had a classical bourgeois revolution, its political system is nonetheless a bourgeois democracy that enjoyed considerable legitimacy not only with the dominant classes but also with the masses.”
- Thus, the Indian state sought to seek support of both the masses and the dominant elites.
- But the difference is that while the state aligns its interests with the interests of the dominant classes, it attempts to meet the claims of the masses to ensure, in the opinions of both Chatterjee and David Harvey, the ‘long term and relatively peaceful wellbeing of the civil society’ by ensuring that the political society does not emerge as a dangerous class.