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Accountability and improved local service delivery in Sub-Saharan Africa: policy orientations

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Policy Orientations



Martin van Vliet



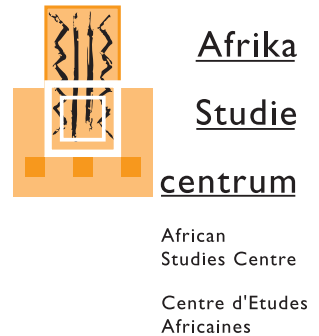
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Accountability and improved local service delivery in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

Improving service delivery and spearheading socio-economic development in Africa is not a technocratic matter nor is it primarily dependent upon the availability of resources. Strengthening state-citizen relations appears to be crucial to unlocking Africa's untapped development potential. Government institutions that regularly communicate and cooperate with (institutions representing) ordinary citizens and are effectively held accountable achieve better results in sectors such as water management, agriculture and education.

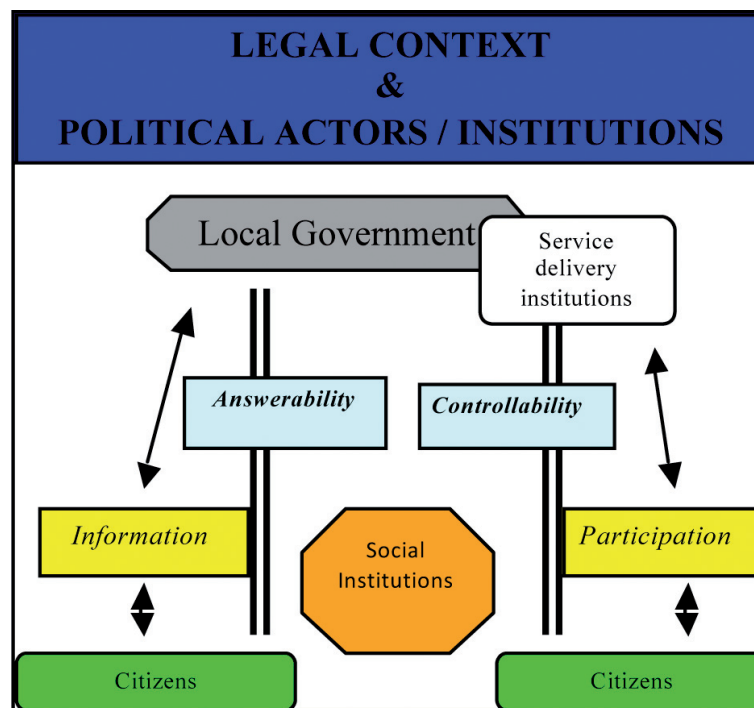
“Government institutions that are effectively held accountable provide better services.”

As recent events to the north of the Sahara have shown, engaging citizens in governance processes and establishing institutions that are accountable to ordinary people are essential building blocks for sustainable development. Thus although the international development community has primarily perceived accountability as a tool to increase the effectiveness of aid (Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness [2005] and the Accra Agenda for Action [2008]), its potential goes well beyond aid-related issues.

This brochure presents policy orientations for improving the service-delivery performance of local governments by integrating accountability mechanisms in existing (sector) support programmes. It primarily draws on a cross-country inventory study conducted by the Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG) International in partnership with the African Studies Centre (ASC). It also takes into account lessons emerging from seven accountability pilots championed by the SNV/Netherlands Development Organisation in partnership with the Embassies of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN) and VNG International. Recent publications by international think tanks and policy institutions have also been consulted (see reading list pag. 12).

Accountability
Local accountability refers to the capacity of ordinary citizens to demand explanations and justifications from their local government and service delivery institutions ('answerability') as well as the possibility to sanction local officials once they underperform ('controllability'). Accountability relations lie thus at the very heart of state – citizen relations. The quality, availability and accessibility of information as well as genuine participatory mechanisms are considered two important building blocks upon which these two pillars of accountability stand. Accountability is also shaped within a particular legal and political context.

Building Blocks & Pillars of Accountability

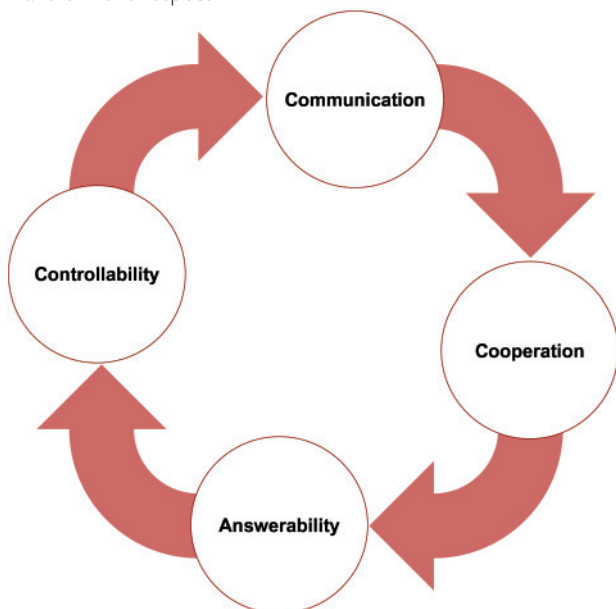


Two additional perspectives on local service delivery and accountability

There is an increasing body of empirical research illustrating that accountability mechanisms have great potential to contribute to more effective service delivery by local governments. These mechanisms gradually develop over time ('accountability cycle') and cut across multiple governance levels ('accountability web').

The Accountability Cycle

Firstly, as state-society relations are often weak or even absent at the local level, particularly in rural areas, accountability mechanisms that stimulate service-delivery performance are only developing gradually. Establishing regular communication and cooperation networks between state and non-state actors provides the building blocks for accountability relations to emerge over time. Improving local service delivery by strengthening accountability therefore tends to follow a gradual, though not linear, process characterized by phasing and sequencing different interventions. The 'accountability cycle' is a useful tool for policy makers in this respect.



Before African citizens demand and obtain explanations and justifications from their local governments ('answerability') or threaten to sanction them ('controllability'), thereby spearheading local service delivery, functioning communication and cooperation mechanisms are indispensable.

Effective local communication mechanisms

Empirical studies convincingly demonstrate that formal information channels used by local governments mostly fail to raise transparency over key local governance documents (budget; subcontracts signed with service delivery institutions; tendering procedures) and to inform local citizens adequately. This is partly caused by generic challenges (language; infrastructure; illiteracy rates; geographical scattering). The case studies also illustrate that information particularly fuels local accountability when used as input in regular platforms that bring together local governments, service delivery institutions and citizen' representatives.

Effective local cooperation mechanisms

Formal local participatory channels often lead to rituals of participation rather than meaningful participation by key stakeholders and ordinary citizens in local governance. Local governments generally control the participatory spaces by determining the agenda, invitation list and final decision making process. Effective participatory mechanisms encountered in practice with a positive spin-off on service delivery, were those whereby the local government took much more of a coordinating role and set-up regular (inclusive) platforms of dialogue. Participation of rather 'unusual suspects' such as traditional and religious leaders as well as political party representatives and councillors in these platforms proved of great significance.

From participation to cooperation: Illustrating its potential for service delivery (Benin, Ghana and Zambia)

Local government in Ouinhi (Benin) receives funding from the state on an annual basis to finance its interventions in the primary-education sector. The municipal council always used to decide what to buy or do with the money without consulting teachers' associations, local school directors or other local authorities. Teachers were frequently dissatisfied with the choices made as they believed the priorities lay elsewhere. A newly elected mayor decided to set up a dialogue platform with all the relevant stakeholders in the education sector. In close cooperation with the teachers, the school management and parents' association, a joint decision was taken on how to allocate the funds received from central government. All the teachers interviewed indicated that they were extremely satisfied with this new approach and local opinion leaders claimed that this method was much more effective and that social services in the local education sector had improved.

Local government in Kaoma District (Zambia) initially operated in isolation within the education sector too. Frustrated by poor levels of service delivery, parents started to improve sanitation, security and water supplies in the schools by themselves and, in the process, became more knowledgeable about the challenges facing the local education sector and established important civic networks. Gradually, networks of cooperation between parents, teachers and local government developed, giving a different character to the state-citizen relationship. Instead of parents merely complaining without any knowledge or involvement in education delivery, they became engaged in a constructive dialogue with government institutions. Local government realized that a relationship of accountability was based on mutual support to effectively and efficiently provide service delivery and it has become much more willing to cooperate. Clearer roles and responsibilities between citizens and government are starting to take shape at school and district level and are stimulating networks of cooperation that are improving local service delivery. (Example drawn from SNV Working Paper on local accountability).

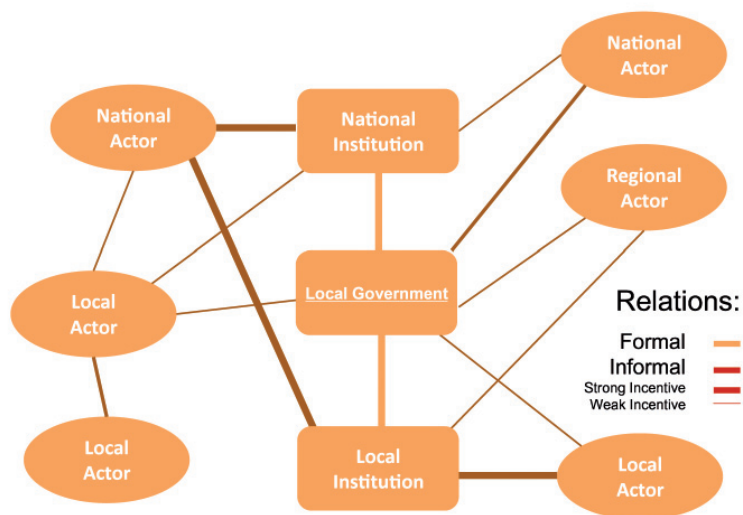
The VNG inventory study conducted in Tamale (Ghana) also demonstrated how networks of cooperation between local government and different (formal and informal) stakeholders impacted positively on local service delivery. Together with the butchers' association, the local government co-managed a cattle ranch. Sanitation was improved in close cooperation with civic communities that contributed financially. Numerous focus-group participants expressed high levels of satisfaction about cooperation with local government in these areas and highlighted positive developmental results.



Cooperation between state and non-state actors fostering accountability and improved services in rural Mali

The Accountability Web

A second common feature of effective accountability mechanisms that stimulate local service delivery is illustrated by the 'accountability web'. Local governments maintain relations with various formal and informal institutions and actors operating at different governance levels. The strength and incentives local government face from these different actors greatly influence their service-delivery performance.



Understanding these relations in which local governments are embedded is of crucial importance for providing effective support to local service delivery. Many case studies, for example, illustrate that too often donor support is limited to the local level while effective local service delivery depends on support strategies at the interface of the local and national level. Similarly, support is often focussed on formal state or non-state institutions, while informal actors (the unusual suspects) play a very influential role too.

Supporting local service delivery by integrating accountability mechanisms

An empirical knowledge base on accountability is gradually developing and increasingly enables an understanding of its functioning in different contexts. Despite the variety of experiences, a number of generic policy orientations can be formulated. Successful support of local service delivery by integrating accountability mechanisms involves:

- anchoring accountability interventions in sector policies
- moving beyond the local level and intervening at the interface of governance levels
- moving beyond the state-civil society dichotomy and strengthening interaction
- timing accountability interventions in relation to political and policy processes
- understanding and influencing popular perceptions of accountability

Anchoring accountability interventions within sector policies

Accountability is still often perceived as a relatively separate aspect of development programmes. This is not surprising considering its relatively recent arrival on the international development agenda. Many donors are still struggling to integrate the accountability concept in their regular development programmes and often develop accountability support programmes parallel to budget- and sector-support programmes. Empirical cases however clearly indicate that an integration of accountability mechanisms in sector policies has a positive impact on service-delivery performance. The example from Benin (see pag. 9) reveals how enhanced local accountability relations significantly improved people's access to water and the management of local water installations.

“Integrating accountability mechanisms into sector policies has a positive impact on service-delivery performances.”

Intervening at (the interface of) multiple governance levels

Accountability lies at the heart of state-citizen relations and is thus, by nature, highly political and influenced by society's broader political and institutional set-up. Improving the service-delivery performance of local governments through enhanced accountability mechanisms therefore also requires interventions that move beyond the local level.

The overall legal framework and political context merit particular attention here. Local governments in most Sub-Saharan African countries are facing political and institutional incentives to be 'upwardly' accountable, are financially highly dependent on central government and have virtually no discretionary authority to spend resources according to local priorities. A combination of executive dominance and political clientelism further increases the dependence of local government on the central government. In addition, the formal division of tasks between representatives of the central state, decentralized agencies and locally elected bodies is often unclear or even contradictory, thereby frustrating both accountability and service-delivery performances at the local level.

Supporting legal and political reform processes (including the quality of the decentralization process) at the national level generates an enabling environment for enhanced accountability and improved service delivery at local level. The accountability web is a useful tool for mapping and analyzing the broader context in which local government operates.

“Improving local service-delivery performances in an effective way requires support for broader institutional and political reform processes at the national level.”

Accountability at the interface of multiple governance levels (Ghana)

Two key features of Ghana's institutional anatomy particularly influence the ability of local governments to perform their service-delivery and accountability roles. The first relates to the appointment of District Chief Executives (DCE) and the second to the timing of local elections.

According to the 1992 Constitution, the District Assembly (DA) is the highest political authority at the local level. Two-thirds of its members are elected by the people and the other third are appointed by the national President. DA members elect a Presiding Member from their midst to chair DA meetings and activities are largely conducted through committees. The executive committee is the most powerful and is responsible for general policy and development planning at the local level and for the main executive and administrative functions. To maintain a strict division of powers, the constitution excludes the Presiding Member of the DA and district MPs from the executive committee. The chair of the executive committee is the DCE, who is appointed by the national President. The result of this system is that an appointed representative of the central government chairs the most powerful body at the district level, from which the Assembly's own elected leader is excluded.

Local elections for the 110 district assemblies are held every four years, halfway through the national electoral cycle. When taking power, a new President (in

the case of an alternation) nominates new DCEs affiliated to his own political party. The effect of this system in Bongo District over the last two years has been stifling. Between 2008 and 2010, the DA was made up of 27 NPP and 9 NDC members, which reflected the political colour of the former presidency. During this period, the DCE was from the NDC, the party that took over the presidency following the December 2008 elections. When the DCE proposed buying a grader and a tipper truck to improve the local roads (and thus access to markets for farmers), the NPP majority on the district assembly voted against it because it would have been perceived as an NDC initiative. This led to an impasse and no developmental decisions could be taken until after the next elections.

The Bongo case clearly demonstrates that local government performance is much more influenced by informal political networks than formal (electoral) accountability arrangements. Until the legal framework is changed to harmonize the local and national electoral cycles and/or alter the appointment structure of the DCE, the political impasse will prevail in the period between national and local elections in the case of a power alternation at national level. Legal and political reforms at the national level are thus required to stimulate local accountability and service delivery. (See the VNG Ghana Inventory research carried out by Sebastiaan Soeters.)

Strengthening interaction between state and non-state actors

Traditionally, international development policies have either focussed on strengthening civil society ('voice': the demand side of accountability) or on building the capacity of local governments ('responsiveness': the supply side of accountability). Empirical case studies suggest, however, that effective accountability mechanisms that spearhead service delivery largely result from interventions that foster connections and co-operation between local state and non-state actors.



Local government and interest groups discuss cooperation modalities in service delivery programme, Tanzania

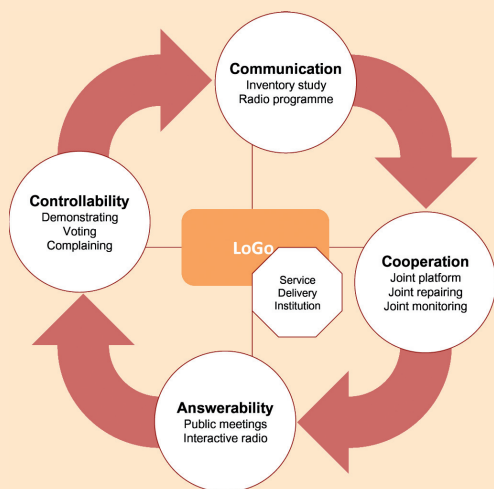
The accountability cycle and service delivery in the local water sector (Benin)

Access to drinking water in Benin's rural areas increased from 35% in 2002 to 55.3% in 2009 and is likely to reach the 70% threshold by 2015. This progress partly stems from strategic policies developed at the national level and financial commitments made by donors and central government (accountability web). At the local level, interventions in the accountability cycle have contributed to improved service-delivery performances.

In Ouinhi, for example, an external expert first examined the state of affairs at all local water installations. His report highlighted the specific deficiencies of each water point and was distributed to various local actors, notably the water monitoring committees at village level. The results were also presented on two local radio stations and citizens could phone in to ask questions. Subsequently, an NGO facilitated a number of meetings between local government officials, local

water-management institutions, traditional village leaders and other stakeholders to discuss and plan repairs. An influential local opinion leader indicated that local government officials now regularly visit the water points to see whether improvements are being made and it is now easier to keep track of the changes. Various respondents confirmed that officials in the water sector are conducting more field visits than before and are addressing problems more rapidly. The assessment report and dialogue platforms have thus provided a useful monitoring tool and stimulated the performance of local government officials in the water sector. Communication and cooperation mechanisms have spearheaded answerability relations between local government officials and ordinary citizens, which has impacted positively on local services. Local citizens have also held demonstrations and threatened to vote for other politicians if certain measures are not addressed by local government.

Accountability cycle & the local water sector (Benin)



A new water installation in Northern Benin funded by The Netherlands

Supporting local accountability thus requires focusing on state-society connections rather than on providing support for either civil society or local governments in an isolated manner. By setting up or strengthening communication and cooperation channels between local governments and (formal and informal) non-state actors, the conditions under which accountability and improved service delivery can take root are improved (see example from Uganda).

Timing accountability in relation to broader political and policy processes

The effectiveness of accountability and its impact on service delivery benefit from the close alignment of different phases of electoral, policy-planning and budgetary cycles. Strategically timing accountability interventions have a considerable impact on service-delivery performance.

Releasing information on the poor quality of services provided by local government during an election campaign, for example, can generate a more rapid response than doing so halfway through an electoral cycle. The period after an election often proves to be more conducive to fostering a multi-actor dialogue on political and institutional reforms or preparing input in budgetary and planning processes.

“Effective local accountability support requires the mapping of the different time phases of relevant processes, such as the electoral cycle and budgetary process, and the identification of windows of opportunity.”

Illustrating state-society answerability mechanisms that stimulate local service delivery (Uganda)

In Uganda, the Community Development and Child Welfare Initiatives (CODI), a local community based organisation based in Luwero, is facilitating a social audit project, which brings together political leaders, technical staff, opinion leaders and citizens to interface with each other and hold local leaders answerable through public dialogues.

In each of the four sub-counties in Luwero, community meetings, usually attended by over 1000 local people, are organized on a quarterly basis and district and sub-county political leaders are invited to discuss the progress of government projects and plans. Community members are able to hold their leaders to account through direct questions and the sharing of experiences, which may or may not be in line with what the political leaders report. At the end of every session, community members agree on issues to be raised and discussed at the next meeting, thus setting the agenda themselves. The CODI ensures that the relevant technical and political leaders are present at the subsequent social audit meeting to answer to

the queries raised by community members. The issues raised at the meetings in a given sub-county are put forward to the sub-county council meetings for redress. The CODI works to bring issues beyond their mandate to the attention of LCV council meetings through the district speaker and the clerk to the council.

Though initially perceived by the local leadership as a witch-hunt, these community platforms are increasingly gaining prominence and support. They function as informal information-sharing and dialogue platforms and enable local actors to demand justification from their local government. The Bamunanika sub-county case in particular demonstrates the (potential) impact of these forums on answerability mechanisms. In the Bamunanika case, the LC III treasurer was forced to resign after his failure to explain the alleged mismanagement of resources during the construction of the main village road. (See the VNG Uganda Inventory research carried out by Lillian Tamale and Karijn de Jong.)

Popular perceptions and demand for accountability

Surveys have indicated that traditional and religious leaders play a crucial role in local governance processes. Working to involve these actors in participatory processes is likely to make accountability for service-delivery performance more effective. However, faith-based organizations and local elders are not often involved in support programmes funded by external donors, who tend to focus much more on formal NGOs.

Popular perceptions in Sub-Saharan Africa tend to respect rather than question leaders. According to Afrobarometer surveys, a majority of particularly rural citizens hold a 'parental' view of governance whereby local leaders are expected to take care of their constituents like a father figure. In the absence of a popular basis critically scrutinising local leaders, accountability incentives stimulating overall service delivery risk to remain weak.

Opinion surveys also show that local government responsiveness is closely linked to corruption. Bribing local government officials has become a successful strategy for securing personal assistance. But empirical examples also illustrate how taxation instead of corruption (particularly in urban areas) has provided the financial incentives to hold local government accountable for its service-delivery performance.

Supporting local accountability thus not only requires building on (informal) local institutions that are considered effective by local citizens but also entails transforming the perverse link between corruption and local government responsiveness in taxation and representation. A more substantive popular basis that demands improved service delivery at the local level is required.



Anti-corruption paintings in Kampala, Uganda



Billboard highlighting the link between taxes and public services, Benin

Conclusion

Ameliorating service delivery performances of local governments in Sub Saharan Africa is much more than a financial or technical matter. It is highly political and particularly requires constructive state – citizen relations. This brochure has shown the potential of accountability mechanisms to contribute to improved service delivery performances and highlighted common features of effective accountability mechanisms.

Suggestions for further reading

- ASC, ECDPM & SNV, 'The Accountability web: illustrating effective local accountability mechanisms.' Policy Brief developed for OECD. (June 2011)
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- The Overseas Development Institute (ODI), 'Towards a theory of local governance and public goods' provision in Sub-Sahara Africa. (2010)
- World Development Report, 'Making services work for the poor', Oxford University Press. (2004)

About the African Studies Centre

The African Studies Centre in Leiden is the only multidisciplinary academic research institute in the Netherlands devoted entirely to the study of Africa. It welcomes African scholars through its visiting fellowship programme, has a monthly seminar programme and an extensive library that is open to the general public (www.ascleiden.nl).

About the Author

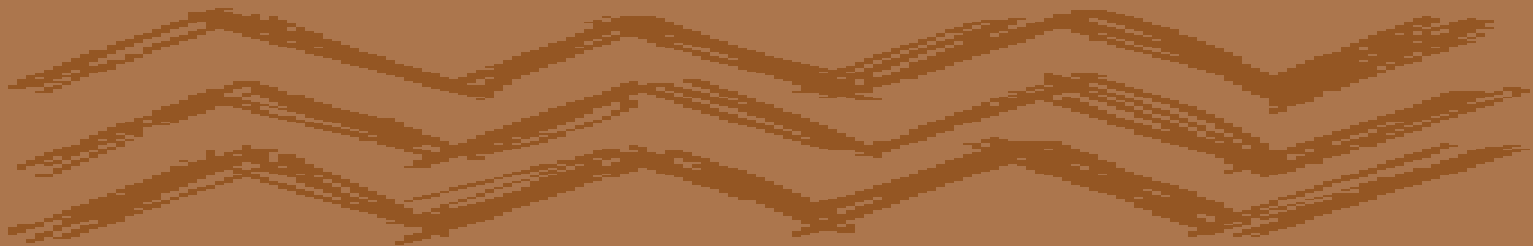
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