

# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 49 | Number 2 | March 2018

## ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HEALTH EQUITY: GALVANISING A MOVEMENT FOR UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE

Editors Erica Nelson,  
Gerald Bloom and Alex Shankland



<b>Notes on Article Contributors</b>	v
<b>Notes on Multimedia Contributors</b>	xi
<b>Foreword</b>	
The International Health Partnership for UHC 2030 (UHC2030) Core Team	xiii
<b>Introduction: Accountability for Health Equity: Galvanising a Movement for Universal Health Coverage</b>	
Erica Nelson, Gerald Bloom and Alex Shankland	1
<b>Introduction to Multimedia</b>	
Sophie Marsden, Karine Gatellier and Sarah King Vaishali Zararia, Renu Khanna and Sophie Marsden Denise Namburete and Erica Nelson	17
<b>Health Accountability for Indigenous Populations: Confronting Power through Adaptive Action Cycles</b>	
Walter Flores and Alison Hernández	19
<b>Inverted State and Citizens' Roles in the Mozambican Health Sector</b>	
Jose Dias and Tassiana Tomé	35
<b>Accountability and Generating Evidence for Global Health: Misoprostol in Nepal</b>	
Jeevan Raj Sharma, Rekha Khatri and Ian Harper	49
<b><u>The Political Construction of Accountability Keywords</u></b>	
Jonathan Fox	65
<b>Key Considerations for Accountability and Gender in Health Systems in Low- and Middle-Income Countries</b>	
Linda Waldman, Sally Theobald and Rosemary Morgan	81
<b>Gendered Dimensions of Accountability to Address Health Workforce Shortages in Northern Nigeria</b>	
Fatima Lamishi Adamu, Zainab Abdul Moukarim and Nasiru Sa'adu Fakai	95
<b>Reducing Health Inequalities in Brazil's Universal Health-Care System: Accountability Politics in São Paulo</b>	
Vera Schattan Coelho	109
<b>Making Private Health Care Accountable: Mobilising Civil Society and Ethical Doctors in India</b>	
Abhay Shukla, Abhijit More and Shweta Marathe	129
<b>Neglected Tropical Diseases and Equity in the Post-2015 Health Agenda</b>	
Emma Michelle Taylor and James Smith	147
<b>Glossary</b>	159

# The Political Construction of Accountability Keywords\*

Jonathan Fox<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** Terminology in the accountability field is ambiguous, encompassing both top-down, technocratic control initiatives and bottom-up efforts to challenge the abuse of power and promote equity. The main proposition is that communicating accountability strategies should rely on conceptual and cross-cultural translation rather than awkward attempts at direct linguistic translation. To illustrate how accountability keywords are both politically constructed and contested, this article briefly reflects on the origins, circulation, and transformation of six relevant terms: transparency, the right to know, whistle-blower, advocacy, openwashing, and social accountability – including reflections from accountability advocates from Pakistan, Guatemala, and the Philippines. The conclusion calls for a two-track approach to communicate public accountability strategies, which involves (1) searching within popular cultures to find existing terms or phrases that can be repurposed, and (2) inventing new discourses that communicate ideas about public accountability that resonate with culturally grounded common-sense understandings.

**Keywords:** accountability, transparency, right to know, whistle-blower, advocacy, openwashing, *contraloría social*, *incidencia*.

## 1 Introduction

The issue of terminology is not ‘merely academic’. Key terms in the field of accountability practice are both politically constructed – and contested. Accountability keywords have different meanings, to different actors, in different contexts – and in different languages. The resulting ambiguity can either constrain or enable diverse strategies for promoting public accountability. Discourse analysis has long emphasised the power over naming the issues that are considered to be problems and its association with control over how agendas are set for addressing them.<sup>2</sup> This article addresses these agenda-setting issues by bringing together discussion of the political origins and implications of six relevant terms in the accountability field with examples of their translation and circulation in diverse contexts, including Mexico, the United States, the Philippines, Guatemala, Pakistan, and India.

© 2018 The Author. *IDS Bulletin* © Institute of Development Studies | DOI: 10.19088/1968-2018.136



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 49 No. 2 March 2018: ‘Accountability for Health Equity: Galvanising a Movement for Universal Health Coverage’; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

One of the key issues is whether accountability refers to an externally imposed tool of top-down control – or to bottom-up initiatives to address impunity and the abuse of power. Put another way: is accountability discourse inherently technocratic and foreign, associated with financial reporting, induced bureaucratisation, and neoliberal governance, alienated from most cultures and locally grounded pro-people social and civic actors (e.g. Martinez and Cooper 2017)? Or is the notion of accountability a fundamentally trans-ideological idea, so malleable that it can be appropriated by a diverse array of actors, basically contested and up for grabs?<sup>3</sup>

This political debate is complicated by terminology, insofar as the cross-cultural translation, importation and circulation of the word 'accountability' can get mixed up with analysis of the actually-existing ways in which diverse actors understand and discuss the various *ideas* behind it. This is not exclusively a North–South issue. Indeed, the first problem is with the discourse *in English*: accountability clearly refers to the exercise of power, but its *directionality* remains profoundly ambiguous. Who is supposed to be accountable to whom, and who decides?<sup>4</sup>

## **2 Disentangle upward vs downward accountability**

The first issue that needs to be clarified when discussing accountability in health systems is the distinction between *upward* vs *downward* accountability (Fox 2016). Development studies applies this distinction to the relationship between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and their local counterparts (e.g. Kilby 2006), while political science frames 'vertical accountability' in terms of states responding to their citizens (O'Donnell 1998). In the context of health equity and accountability, *upward* accountability involves service providers reporting to their managers, who in turn report to policymakers, who may in turn report to international donors. In contrast, *downward* accountability refers to health service providers being responsible to their national and local publics. This raises the question: when the arrow is supposed to go both ways, what happens when these pressures push in opposite directions?<sup>5</sup>

This question of the *directionality* of accountability relationships is especially relevant in the field of global health, where an upward notion of accountability often predominates because of its association with donor compliance in terms of financial inputs and output metrics.<sup>6</sup> This approach pulls accountability upwards and inwards, towards funders, rather than downwards and outwards, towards the public. For example, while donor reporting requirements for public health delivery systems have led to the creation of elaborate monitoring systems, the resulting institutional performance data are rarely proactively disclosed to the public. There is a major missed opportunity if the data are not made available to enable citizen action to help to both identify and address bottlenecks, plus donor-driven data agendas may not measure actual access or quality of care (e.g. Boydell, Fox and Shaw 2017).

---

**Box 1 The language of accountability in Pakistan**

By Fayyaz Yaseen, Accountability Lab – Pakistan  
@fayyaz\_yaseen<sup>7</sup>

Almost all the words referring to accountability one way or the other – for example, responsiveness, transparency, participation, inclusion, accountability, rule of law – are used as they are (as English words), despite the fact that there are stronger Urdu corresponding words that can spell out an even stronger meaning that also relates to local context. For example, the Urdu word for ‘responsiveness’ is ‘*jawabdari*’, which means that one is not only expected to respond in a timely manner, but is also accountable for doing/not doing so. Similarly, the term ‘rule of law’ is understood as ‘*qanoon ki hukmarani*’, which explicitly distinguishes between rule of law and rule of lawmaker/implementer (which is often the case). ‘Transparency’ means ‘*shafaf*’ or ‘*shafafat*’ – meaning transparency in entirety and not in parts, which happens when a government, in the name of transparency, just displays its decisions on the internet/websites once they are made, and does not open up about how the respective policy issues were identified.

In 2010, a few civil society organisations (CSOs) started using the term ‘social accountability’, and it has taken seven years to introduce and infuse a relatively more neutral, bottom-up meaning of accountability in the society. People in media who want to speak about accountability usually refer to the broader term of ‘good governance’.

To promote improvements in health service delivery, state actors have been promoting upward accountability measures, while CSOs (and their international allies) are promoting downward accountability initiatives. For example, the government appointed district monitoring officers (mostly retired army officials) to monitor and report on the presence of doctors in the village-level public health facilities. The government also used electronic attendance machines (which are easily dodged both by the doctors and the monitoring officers, so the government has been only adding to monitoring layers). Lately, the government opted for direct citizens’ feedback in Punjab through mobile phone messages – called the *citizen feedback model* – again an English language terminology. Had the programme used the local term ‘*Awami Jawabdehi ka Nizam*’, the directionality of the accountability would have been clearer by referring to the accountability of the health service providers to citizens.

---

The upward vs downward distinction is also especially relevant in the global health field because of the influential United Nations metrics intended to incentivise national improvements. This approach prioritises framing accountability in terms of annual national performance averages, which are relevant both to inform donor resource allocation priorities, and the implicit prospect of international naming and shaming when outcome metrics fall short. Yet national averages are rarely tools that national and local civic groups or social constituencies can use to address specific health service issues – they need metrics that disclose health service performance indicators in their community, district, city, or province, in as close to real time as possible. In other words, the implicit theory of change behind relying on metrics based on national averages for measuring accountability relies more on upward than downward accountability.<sup>8</sup> To address the ambiguity caused by the directionality dilemma, those concerned with bolstering and communicating the democratic dimensions of accountability may want to add an adjective, as in: *public* accountability.<sup>9</sup>

The different ways in which diverse actors frame accountability poses a challenge: how can our languages communicate accountability's democratic potential more effectively to diverse publics? For those operating in global English language arenas, the first step is to resist the risk of 'linguistic determinism', which can easily slide into the problematic assumptions associated with cultural determinism. In other words, some Anglophones assume that if a direct translation of an English language term is not readily available in another language, then the concept itself must therefore be unfamiliar to that culture (Stephenson 2017). For example, those engaged in accountability work in Latin America will recall frequent comments that a direct translation for the term is lacking in Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>10</sup> This approach has two major problems. First, it assumes that alternative terms that clearly convey the *idea* of accountability do not exist (see evidence in Box 1 and Figure 1). Second, when direct translations do not exist, the 'linguistic determinist' view curiously assumes that new terms could not quickly emerge and circulate where the ideas behind them resonate (Stephenson 2017).

The basic proposition in this article is that accountability strategies face the challenge of communicating to publics more effectively by using engaging, accessible terms that are grounded in national and popular cultures. This involves either repurposing existing terms to harness them to accountability initiatives, or inventing new terms that have the potential to resonate and go viral. To make this point, here follow six examples of the political construction of keywords related to accountability, as well as three related boxes with relevant propositions from multilingual accountability strategists in the global South.

### **3 Six illustrations of the political construction of accountability keywords**

#### **3.1 Transparency**

This term's scope is constrained by its implied focus on access to information that is already in the hands of the state. This is a problem, especially in health, because much important information is not actually

collected by the state. For example, governments rarely document the degree to which medicines are actually available to the entire population, patterns of disrespect and abuse, or measure the toxicity of numerous chemical substances in everyday use in homes, factories, and fields, such as pesticides.

In Latin America, the term ‘transparency’ is now commonly used by diverse actors across the political spectrum, though perhaps widely seen as fairly technocratic. The term ‘open government’ appears to resonate more in the region, though it still refers primarily to information that the state chooses to collect. Yet popular culture is filled with long-standing expressions that resonate widely, such as the call for ‘*cuentas claras*’ (a clear accounting) or ‘*quien paga manda*’ (s/he who ‘pays the piper, calls the tune’).

Consider an example of an effort to reframe the term ‘*transparencia*’ to make it resonate more with popular discourse. Twenty years ago, before the term took off, CSO colleagues in Mexico deliberately tweaked it to make it more amenable to grass-roots organising. They chose a little-used but still legitimate alternative spelling of the Spanish word for transparency – *trasparencia* – which omits the first ‘n’ present in the more commonly used spelling, *transparencia*.<sup>11</sup> One reason was that organisers were concerned that the more commonly used term sounded too close to a popular, grass-roots expression for fraud: *transa*. A second reason was that it allowed the organisers to unpack the words into two parts – ‘*tras las apariencias*’ – which meant they could talk about the need to go ‘behind appearances’, an idea that could engage grass-roots movements for fairer governance (their logo even separated the word into two parts – *Tras – parencia*). A third reason was that the main independent Mexican internet provider at the time, La Neta, could not handle that many characters – but ‘*trasparencia*’ just fit...<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2 Right to know

In contrast, the concept of the ‘right to know’ is broader than transparency, since it includes a broader notion of the types of information citizens actually need to address accountability failures. For example, the literal translation into Spanish is widely used and understood: ‘*derecho a saber*’, and gets more than 11 million Google hits (in quote marks). In India, the national right to information campaign launched the slogan ‘right to know, right to live’ in 1996 (*‘Jaan-ne ka Adhikar, Jeene ka Adhikar’*). This call was inspired by grass-roots organisers in the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) movement, who strategically linked their social justice and anti-corruption struggles with demands for the right to information about government anti-poverty programmes (Pande 2014).<sup>13</sup>

The term had also been widely used by environmental health campaigners in the US, and reached a milestone when the Congress passed the 1986 Emergency and Community Right-to-Know Act. The law responded to a convergence of a grass-roots anti-toxics movement and the 1984 Bhopal disaster in India (a horrific industrial disaster involving an American company). The law mandated

industrial corporations to report their volumes of toxic emissions to the government. Public interest group Environmental Defense then invested in a pioneering online platform to make those data user-friendly and readily accessible at the level of postal codes.<sup>14</sup> The theory of change behind this effort was that if citizens had access to this granular data, they would be motivated to contribute to public oversight of the dangers located in their own backyard, while being empowered by the identification of the specific company behind the threat – a paradigm case of ‘targeted transparency’ (Fung, Graham and Weil 2007). While the 1986 law did not raise the legal standards for toxic exposure, it provided tools to promote the enforcement of existing laws. The volume of reported emissions of listed toxics dropped dramatically during the first decade of the law’s implementation.

### 3.3 Whistle-blower

One example of an accountability keyword that is difficult to translate into other languages is ‘whistle-blower’. In Spanish, translations have a negative implication – *informante*, *denunciante* – i.e. squealer, informer. This legacy is deep in many societies that either recall or still experience authoritarian regimes that widely deployed informers.

Yet at the same time, whistle-blower is also an example of a term whose contemporary meaning – even in English – was politically constructed. The term used to refer only to sports referees or to the police on the beat (because they blew whistles in response to wrongdoing).<sup>15</sup> In 1969, the pro-war press used the term to try to stigmatise Ron Ridenhour, the US soldier who blew the whistle on the infamous My Lai massacre of Vietnamese civilians.<sup>16</sup> By the early 1970s, the growing consumer rights movement gave the term ‘whistle-blower’ its current political content (Nader, Petkas and Blackwell 1972). The term now recognises the commitment to public service by those from inside powerful institutions who take the risks inherent in revealing abuse and corruption – either internally or publicly. Another, perhaps more translatable option could be ‘truth-teller’ – a term that has recently become widely politically contested in the US.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.4 Advocacy

The current meaning of this accountability keyword was politically constructed about a half century ago.<sup>18</sup> The origins of the word ‘advocacy’ are narrowly legal, referring to lawyers’ defence of their clients. That meaning later extended to the role of other service providers, such as social workers, who were tasked with defending the interests of individual clients. In the US, however, the movements for peace, racial, and gender justice of the 1960s and 1970s broadened the use of the term to encompass the defence of interests of broader groups of the excluded.

Public interest advocacy’s challenge to the systemic production of social exclusion means that in the context of contemporary social accountability discourse (see Section 3.6), development agencies that claim to support citizen voice consider advocacy to be adversarial and therefore in tension



---

## Box 2 Inventing accessible accountability concepts in the Philippines: the ‘*bibingka* strategy’

By Francis Isaac and Joy Acheron, Government Watch  
@gwatch\_ph

The ‘*bibingka* strategy’ is one of the popular frameworks used by civil society groups in the Philippines to pursue reforms and promote accountability. This strategy proposes that reforms are likely to occur if: (1) there is sustained citizens’ pressure from below, and (2) sufficient action is taken by state reformers from above. Pressure from below is generated by CSOs clamouring for substantive policy changes or better policy implementation. Action from above, on the other hand, comes from state officials who seek to enhance service delivery or curb government inefficiency.

The term ‘*bibingka* strategy’ was coined by Filipino scholar Saturnino Borras in his study of agrarian reform implementation in the Philippines (1999). It comes from the word ‘*bibingka*’ – a type of Filipino rice cake where live charcoal is placed simultaneously on top and below the dough during the baking process.

The ‘*bibingka* strategy’ draws from Fox’s concept of sandwich strategy, which combines pressure from above and below to counteract anti-accountability forces (1992). It is obviously not a direct translation, but using the term ‘*bibingka* strategy’ has the advantage of enabling ordinary Filipinos to immediately grasp the meaning of the concept. While sandwich coalition can be easily understood, the phrase sounds too foreign and distant for local ears. But the response is almost automatic when Filipinos hear the term ‘*bibingka* strategy’, creating a mental image of ‘*apoy sa taas at apoy sa baba*’ (fire on top and fire below).

---

with their preferred ‘constructive engagement’ approach. Yet the term had different implications during its original politicisation phase in the US. In the late 1960s, an influential cadre of liberal policy professionals promoted community participation in national anti-poverty programmes under the banner of ‘advocacy planning’. Yet this professional-led approach to advocacy was not necessarily grounded in relationships of accountability with those whose interests were ostensibly being defended. Critics at the time argued that advocacy planners’ focus on participation via official ‘proper channels’ – what are now called ‘invited spaces’ – was in tension with then-widespread mass protest, which they considered to be the principal lever for pro-poor policy influence (Piven 1975).

The potential for ‘elite’ insider advocates to promote sustainable power shifts depends significantly on whether they coordinate with or

actively enable mobilised social constituencies. In other words, insider public interest advocacy initiatives and mass protest can potentially be mutually reinforcing, as in the Mexican case of 'sandwich strategy' efforts to coordinate openings from above with mobilisation from below (Fox 1992). Borrás (1999) then reframed the term 'sandwich strategy', culturally adapting it to the Philippine context, where it subsequently took off and became embedded in both national CSO and policy reformer discourse (see Box 2).

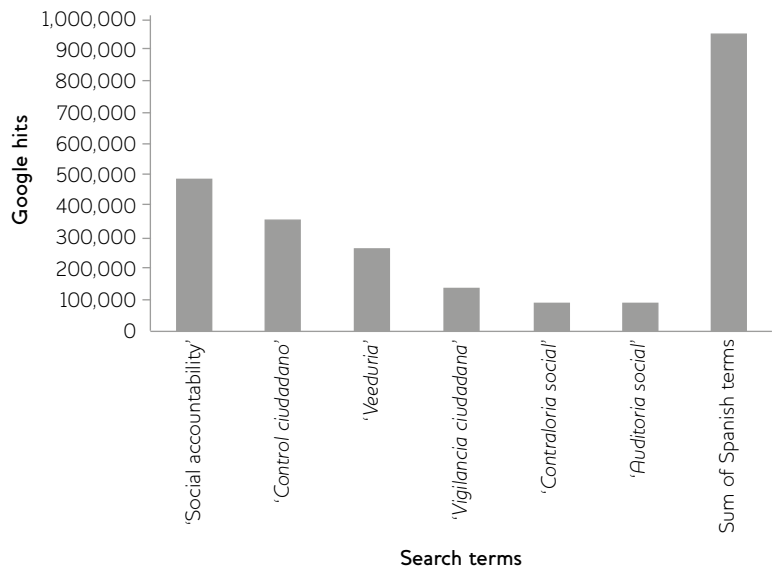
'Advocacy' turns out to be another one of those words that lacks a precise translation into Spanish (not unlike 'accountability'). The literal translation of advocacy into Spanish is '*abogacía*' which refers only to the practice of law, in contrast to the broader notion of intervention with authorities on behalf of third parties. The Spanish term '*gestoría*' could be an option, but it has the disadvantage of appearing to be restricted to seeking limited material concessions. '*Defensoría*' clearly refers to advocacy in response to specific cases of abuse, but whether it also encompasses broader public interest causes is an open question – the Colombian government's People's Defender office is a notable case (*Defensor del Pueblo*).

Guatemala's grass-roots, indigenous Community Defenders of health rights have also broadened the usage of the term – including using a gender-inclusive term in Spanish: *defensor(a)*.<sup>19</sup> '*Promoción*' could also work, since it can refer broadly to grass-roots organising, but that may or may not involve policy advocacy. Some use the term '*cabildeo*', to refer specifically to lobbying national policy elites, which is only one of several possible tactics for influencing public policy (not to mention the term's strong connotations of 'influence peddling').

The Spanish term of choice for advocacy in Latin America is now '*incidencia*', meaning 'to have influence on'. This term was invented through cross-border dialogue in mid-1990s partnerships between human rights and public interest groups in the US and Central America, in the context of shift in CSO focus in the region as 'from protest to proposal'.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.5 Openwashing

A more recent example of a politically constructed term is: 'openwashing' (sometimes referred to as 'window-dressing'). This refers to the actions of powerful institutions that appear to promote transparency but actually hide the persistent abuse of power and impunity – an intuitive response after more than a decade of widespread transparency initiatives have often fallen short of producing expected accountability gains. For example, when Guatemala joined the Open Government Partnership, the Vice President was in charge of the government's follow-up – but she later ended up in prison for corruption, which suggests that she had much to hide. The term is a variation on the classic term 'white-washing', which refers to efforts to gloss over or cover up misdeeds. An earlier variation was invented in 1989, when the Greenpeace anti-toxics campaign invented the term 'green-washing'

**Figure 1 Comparing usage of social accountability terms in English and Spanish**

Source Google searches were conducted on 12 October 2017 and 19 October 2017. All search terms were in quotes. The search language was Spanish for Spanish terms, and English for 'social accountability'. The Google hits for all of the Spanish terms are summed, for comparison with the English equivalent, 'social accountability'. Since multiple terms are used in Spanish, the equivalent approach in English would be to add search terms like 'citizen oversight' (121,000 hits) and 'social audits' (112,000). The Spanish total would still be higher – plus, most usage of the term 'social audit' appears not to refer to social accountability as used here (additional search conducted on 1 January 2018). Thanks to Chris Wilson for this suggestion. Notably, inclusion of the usage of another Spanish term for social accountability, 'control social' would add more than 3 million additional hits, but it is not included here because it is sometimes used to refer to concepts other than social accountability (see Box 3). Thanks to Julia Fischer-Mackey for research assistance.

to describe corporations that claimed to have good environmental credentials whilst their core business continued to be environmentally harmful.<sup>21</sup> Yet defining openwashing with precision poses a challenge: it could refer both to weak transparency initiatives that coexist with persistent accountability failures, and to more deliberate attempts to cover up abuse and impunity. Yet only the second sense of the term includes openwashing's implicit emphasis on the *intent* to deceive.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.6 Social accountability

In its origins more than a decade ago, the term 'social accountability' created a new political space by allowing mainstream development agencies such as the World Bank and larger INGOs to value and invest in the promotion of citizen voice, albeit usually bounded to local 'invited spaces.'<sup>23</sup> When one tracks its diffusion, 485,000 Google hits turn up – though this total also includes usage of the term 'social accountability' with a different meaning, to refer to corporate social responsibility.

---

**Box 3 Different understandings of 'control social' in Latin America**

By Walter Flores, Center for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health Systems (CEGSS), Guatemala @CEGSSGuatemala

The Spanish language term '*control social*' has been widely used in South America to mean 'social oversight' both by governments and in civil society. In Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Colombia the term appears often in national laws and policy regulations. Historically, the idea is linked to processes of democratisation, elected governments of the centre-left, and the view that public sector oversight should be in the hands of the citizenry. Diverse social and civic organisations use the term widely, including in many training manuals available online. More recently in South America, younger activists – perhaps with more exposure to global discourse – use the term '*rendición de cuentas*' (a more direct translation of 'accountability') more than '*control social*' – perhaps to differentiate themselves from governmental uses of the term to refer to the official channels for citizen oversight. In Central America, in contrast, the term '*control social*' was understood very differently, and did not gain the same degree of acceptance. In Guatemala and El Salvador, for example, the words are associated with governmental manipulation and repression – closer to the literal translation into English: 'social control'.

---

In spite of the widespread reference to the lack of a direct translation of accountability in non-English languages, when one adds the adjective 'social' it turns out that there are several different Spanish terms for social accountability. Widely used terms for social (or citizen) oversight of the public sector include: '*contraloría social*', '*control ciudadano*', '*veeduría*', '*auditoría social*' and '*control social*', with usage varying by sub-region and over time within Latin America (see Box 3).

The use of these terms in Spanish took off more than a decade before Anglophone development agencies began using the term 'social accountability', driven both by governments and public interest groups. For example, the term '*contraloría social*' was first widely deployed by the Mexican government in the early 1990s to refer to official channels for citizen oversight (Hevia de la Jara 2009). Remarkably, if one adds up the Google hits for these various synonyms, one ends up with what may be a counterintuitive finding: they are significantly *more* widely used than their English language term 'social accountability' – which itself includes an overstated number of hits because of its other meanings, such as corporate responsibility (see Figure 1).

#### 4 Conclusions

Stepping back to the original dilemma about how to communicate strategies for public accountability more effectively with terms that resonate more widely across cultures and languages, this article's reflections suggest a two-track approach:

- 1 Search within popular cultures to re-appropriate existing terms or phrases, possibly even from the private sphere, that can make sense in the public sphere.
- 2 Unleash our creativity to invent new discourses that both communicate ideas about public accountability, and have the potential to go viral because they crystallise and resonate with common-sense understandings.

In conclusion, the emerging field of transparency, participation, and accountability needs to do a better job of communicating the key steps on the path to accountability-building. This involves conceptual and cross-cultural translation, rather than awkward attempts at direct linguistic translation.

#### Notes

- \* This article expands on Fox (2017). Thanks to participants in the July 2017 IDS conference on accountability for health equity for the discussions that informed this think piece. Thanks also to feedback on earlier versions from Joy Aceron, Chris Wilson and two reviewers.
- 1 Jonathan Fox is Professor of Development Studies at the School of International Service at American University in Washington DC, where he directs the new Accountability Research Center ([www.accountabilityresearch.org](http://www.accountabilityresearch.org); @AcctResearchCtr), an action-research incubator. @jonathanfox707.
  - 2 See Cornwall and Eade's landmark collection on the construction and contestation of development discourse (2010), originally published in 2007 as a thematic issue of *Development in Practice*, including this author's attempt to disentangle transparency from accountability (Fox 2007a). On accountability as a keyword, see Dubnick (2014). The seminal discussion of definitions is by Schedler (1999), who stressed the twin dimensions of 'answerability' and sanctions. See also McGee and Kroesschell (2013), among others. Pettit and Wheeler's earlier discussion of the discourse of rights-based development is relevant to accountability discourse today: they emphasised that the possible tension between its strategic value or risks of co-optation would depend on how the discourse was 'understood and challenged, in context' (2005: 3).
  - 3 For one recent example of the malleability and contestation of accountability-related terms, consider the trajectory of the term 'fake news' in the US. The term was actively deployed during the 2016 US election campaign by opponents of right-wing disinformation, but those efforts were thwarted by the effective co-optation of the term by the proponents of disinformation themselves, who continue

- to use it to refer to the mainstream news media's investigative reporting.
- 4 For a discussion from the point of view of international relations, see Grant and Keohane (2005). Accountability is also conceptually associated with the idea of responsibility – a much more widely-used term (Abadzi 2017).
  - 5 In health systems, some potentially pro-accountability actors find themselves in contradictory locations. For example, are community health workers supposed to represent citizens to the state, or are they supposed to represent the state to citizens? The first role involves projecting citizen voice upwards, towards authorities, to improve performance and address abuse, while the second role involves focusing on authorities holding patients accountable for adherence to prescribed behaviours. For the results of a researcher–practitioner discussion of this dilemma, see Schaaf *et al.* (2018).
  - 6 See, for example, the recent CIVICUS critique of INGO-driven 'accounts-ability' by Sriskandarajah (2017).
  - 7 For additional discussion of usage of accountability terms in Pakistan, see Fancy and Razzaq (2017).
  - 8 For an effort to address this upward tilt in the contexts of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), see <http://participatesdgs.org/prg/>. For a recent analysis of SDGs and accountability that stresses diverse monitoring and accountability strategies from governments to their peoples, see UNESCO GEM (2017).
  - 9 The question of who the relevant publics for accountability are is also politically constructed, ranging from media elites to urban middle classes to socially excluded populations. Everyday discourse would suggest focusing on public accountability to citizens, but that frame would exclude many immigrants and displaced people.
  - 10 For a detailed discussion of translation issues involving accountability in the case of Portuguese, see Gomes de Pinho and Silva Sacramento (2009). The term '*responsabilização social*' is also used in Mozambique.
  - 11 For more on *Trasparencia*, which spent a decade engaging in grass-roots organising, CSO coalition-building, and advocacy to encourage informed citizen action involving World Bank-funded rural development projects, see Fox (2007b).
  - 12 For another example of politically invented Mexican accountability discourse, consider the phrase first proposed by the Zapatista movement in Chiapas in 1994, '*mandar obedeciendo*' (to lead by obeying), which draws on indigenous community governance traditions to refer to grass-roots leadership that remains accountable to movements of the excluded. See [https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Discurso\\_del\\_Subcomandante\\_Marcos\\_%22Mandar\\_obedeciendo%22](https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Discurso_del_Subcomandante_Marcos_%22Mandar_obedeciendo%22).
  - 13 Suchi Pande reports that the original phrase was '*hum janenge, hum jiyenge*' in a Hindi newspaper editorial, which literally translates into 'we will know, we will live' (email communication, 29 December 2017). See also Khaitan (2009) and Roy and Dey (2015).
  - 14 See <http://scorecard.goodguide.com/>.

- 15 In late eighteenth-century Mexico City, a similar term was used to refer to night watchmen: *guardas de pito* – ‘whistle guards’ (Puck 2017).
- 16 [www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/whistle-blower.html](http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/whistle-blower.html).
- 17 Recalling the exposé of the My Lai massacre, the Ridenhour Awards now publicly honour the courage of truth-tellers each year: [www.ridenhour.org/](http://www.ridenhour.org/).
- 18 This paragraph draws from Fox (2001).
- 19 See the work of the Center for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health Systems (CEGSS), <http://cegss.org.gt/>.
- 20 Email communications, former Washington Office on Latin America Directors George Vickers (4 October 2017) and Joy Olson (2 October 2017). See for example: Mckinley (2002).
- 21 Email communication, Kay Treakle (22 August 2017).
- 22 For further analysis of the challenges involved in defining the term, see Brockmyer and Fox (forthcoming, 2018).
- 23 Key early formulations were broader (e.g. Malena, Forster and Singh 2004). The World Bank’s more bounded 2004 *World Development Report* approach was much more influential, but it did not explicitly use the term.

## References

- Abadzi, H. (2017) *Accountability and its Educational Implications: Culture, Linguistics and Psychological Research*, Background Paper prepared for the 2017/2018 Global Education Monitor Report, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002595/259573e.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Borras, S. Jr. (1999) *The Biringka Strategy in Land Reform Implementation: Autonomous Peasant Movements and State Reformists in the Philippines*, Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy
- Boydell, V.; Fox, J. and Shaw, S. (2017) *Transparency and Accountability Strategies & Reproductive Health Delivery Systems*, Learning Exchange Report 1, Washington DC: Accountability Research Center, School of International Service, American University, [http://accountabilityresearch.org/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Learning\\_Exchange\\_Report1\\_Sept17\\_11-14-17.pdf](http://accountabilityresearch.org/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Learning_Exchange_Report1_Sept17_11-14-17.pdf) (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Brockmyer, B. and Fox, J. (forthcoming, 2018) ‘What is Open-Washing?’, Washington DC: Accountability Research Center, School of International Service, American University
- Cornwall, A. and Eade, D. (eds) (2010) *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*, Bourton on Dunsmore: Practical Action/Oxfam GB, <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/deconstructing-development-discourse-buzzwords-and-fuzzwords-118173> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Dubnick, M. (2014) ‘Accountability as a Cultural Keyword’, in M. Bovens, R.E. Goodin and T. Schillemans (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

- Fancy, H. and Razzaq, J. (2017) *Accountability in Education in Pakistan*, Background Paper prepared for the 2017/2018 Global Education Monitor Report, UNESCO, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002595/259549e.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Fox, J. (2017) *History and Language: Keywords for Health and Accountability*, IDS blog, 4 August, [www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/history-and-language-keywords-for-health-and-accountability](http://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/history-and-language-keywords-for-health-and-accountability) (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Fox, J. (2016) 'Transparency and Accountability: Unpacking Keywords', presented to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, 14 June, <https://jonathan-fox.org/lectures/> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Fox, J. (2007a) 'The Uncertain Relationship Between Transparency and Accountability', *Development in Practice* 17.4–5: 663–71
- Fox, J. (2007b) 'Contrasting Theory and Practice: The World Bank and Social Capital in Rural Mexico', in J. Fox, *Accountability Politics: Power and Voice in Rural Mexico*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, [https://jonathanfoxucsc.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/fox\\_contrasting\\_theory\\_and\\_practice\\_wb\\_and\\_sc\\_ch\\_6\\_in\\_accountability\\_politics.pdf](https://jonathanfoxucsc.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/fox_contrasting_theory_and_practice_wb_and_sc_ch_6_in_accountability_politics.pdf) (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Fox, J. (2001) 'Vertically Integrated Policy Monitoring: A Tool for Civil Society Policy Advocacy', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 30.3: 616–27, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/07s6x64j> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Fox, J. (1992) *The Politics of Food in Mexico: State Power and Social Mobilization*, Ithaca NY: Cornell, [https://books.google.com/books?id=QKZSyZdXU3sC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Politics+of+Food+in+Mexico&hl=en&ei=MLbRTvCTBejmiAKmidm7Dw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDYQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=The%20Politics%20of%20Food%20in%20Mexico&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=QKZSyZdXU3sC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Politics+of+Food+in+Mexico&hl=en&ei=MLbRTvCTBejmiAKmidm7Dw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDYQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=The%20Politics%20of%20Food%20in%20Mexico&f=false) (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Fung, A.; Graham, M. and Weil, D. (2007) *Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Gomes de Pinho, J.A. and Silva Sacramento, A.R. (2009) 'Accountability: Já Podemos Traduzi-la para o Português?', *Revista de Administração Pública* 43.6: 1343–68
- Grant, R. and Keohane, R. (2005) 'Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics', *American Political Science Review* 99.1: 29–43
- Hevia de la Jara, F. (2009) 'Contraloría Social y Control Ciudadano en los Programas Sociales', in D. Gómez Álvarez (ed.), *Candados y Contrapesos: La Protección de Programas Sociales, Políticas, y Derechos Sociales en México y América Latina*, Guadalajara: Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores do Occidente ITESO/United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), <https://rei.iteso.mx/bitstream/handle/11117/224/Candado%20y%20contrapeso.pdf?sequence=2> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Khaitan, T. (2009) 'Dismantling the Walls of Secrecy', *Frontline* 26.4
- Kilby, P. (2006) 'Accountability for Empowerment: Dilemmas Facing Non-Governmental Organizations', *World Development* 34.6: 951–63
- Malena, C. with Forster, R. and Singh, R. (2004) *Social Accountability: An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice*, Social Development



- Papers: Participation and Civic Engagement Paper 76, Washington DC: World Bank, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/327691468779445304/pdf/310420PAPER0Society0SDP0Civic0no1076.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Martinez, D.E. and Cooper, D.J. (2017) 'Assembling International Development: Accountability and the Disarticulation of a Social Movement', *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 57: 18–32
- McGee, R. and Kroeschell, C. (2013) *Local Accountabilities in Fragile Contexts: Experiences from Nepal, Bangladesh and Mozambique*, IDS Working Paper 422, Brighton: IDS, [www.ids.ac.uk/publication/local-accountabilities-in-fragile-contexts-experiences-from-nepal-bangladesh-and-mozambique](http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/local-accountabilities-in-fragile-contexts-experiences-from-nepal-bangladesh-and-mozambique) (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Mckinley, A. (2002) *Manual Básico para la Incidencia Política*, Washington DC: Washington Office on Latin America
- Nader, R.; Petkas, P. and Blackwell, K. (1972) *Whistle Blowing: The Report of the Conference on Professional Responsibility*, New York NY: Grossman Publishing
- O'Donnell, G. (1998) 'Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies', *Journal of Democracy* 9.3: 112–26
- Pande, S. (2014) 'The Right to Know, the Right to Live: Grassroots Struggle for Information and Work in India', doctoral thesis (PhD), University of Sussex
- Pettit, J. and Wheeler, J. (2005) 'Development Rights? Relating Discourse to Context and Practice', *IDS Bulletin* 36.1, <http://bulletin.ids.ac.uk/idsbo/article/view/1038> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- Piven, F.F. (1975) 'Whom Does the Advocate Planner Serve?', in R. Cloward (ed.), *The Politics of Turmoil: Essays on Poverty, Race and the Urban Crisis*, New York NY: Vintage Books
- Puck, L. (2017) 'Mexico's Private Security Dilemma: Understanding the Relationship Between the Mexican State and the Private Security Industry', PhD dissertation, Politics Department, University of California
- Roy, A. and Dey, N. (2015) 'RTI On My Side', *The Indian Express*, 12 October
- Schaaf, M.; Warthin, C.; Manning, A. and Topp, S. (2018) 'Report on the Think-In on Community Health Worker Voice, Power, and Citizens' Right to Health', *Learning Exchange Report* 3, Washington DC: Accountability Research Center, School of International Service, American University, <http://accountabilityresearch.org/publication/report-on-the-think-in-on-community-health-worker-voice-power-and-citizens-right-to-health/> (accessed 5 February 2018)
- Schedler, A. (1999) 'Conceptualizing Accountability', in A. Schedler, L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner
- Sriskandarajah, D. (2017) 'Can INGOs Push Back against Closing Civic Space? Only if they Change their Approach', *From Poverty to Power*, Oxfam blog, 13 October, <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/can-ingos-push-back-against-closing-civic-space-only-if-they-change-their-approach> (accessed 26 January 2018)

- Stephenson, M. (2017) 'The Swahili Word for Transparency, and the Fallacies of Linguistic Determinism', *GAB: The Global Anti-Corruption Blog*, 1 August, <https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2017/08/01/the-swahili-word-for-transparency-and-the-fallacies-of-linguistic-determinism/> (accessed 26 January 2018)
- UNESCO GEM (2017) *Global Accountability Monitoring Report 2017/2018. Accountability in Education: Meeting Our Commitments*, Paris: UNESCO (accessed 26 January 2018)