CITIZEN - LED ACCOUNTABILITY: Demystifying the concept of social accountability

By Etienne Kablan Berabely

AUTHOR

Etienne, Kablan Berabely, is passionate about in-
volving local people into affairs that will lead to
the rapid development of their communities. He
is an expert on intercultural business manage-
ment and public relations. Etienne holds a MA
(Psychology of Intercultural Communications)
from I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical
University, and a BA (Translation), University of
Ghana Legon, Ghana Institute of Languages.

Editorial Team
Jimm Chick Fomunjong - Head, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI
Charles Kojo Vandyck - Head, Capacity Development Unit, WACSI

About WACSI
The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West
Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region.
WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience shar-
ing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

About WACSERIES
WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa.
These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit
views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.
The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide
critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

Objectives of WACSERIES
• To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
• To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
• To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
• To provide recommendations to policy makers.

Citizen-Led Accountability:
Demystifying the concept of social accountability

Copyright WACSI 2019

For more information, write to:
West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) No. 9 Bamboo Street (Formerly Bingo Street), East Legon P.O. Box AT 1956, Achimota Accra, Ghana
Email: research@wacsi.org Tel: +233 (0) 302 550 224

Cite as:
Berabely, E. K. (2019). Citizen-Led Accountability: Demystifying the concept of social accountability WACSERIES, Op-Ed, No. 2 March 2019

To contribute to this publication,
contact : research@wacsi.org
+233(0)501440545

Introduction

Citizen's voices are increasingly being shut down. Their rights are equally being violated and worst so, by representatives of institutions created by the state to protect the rights of citizens. However, the presence of social media and its increased use by citizens as a tool to demand social justice is helping citizens gain grounds in making their voices heard and demand accountability.

On 19 July 2018, the Ghanaian population and the international community witnessed the case of a woman who was assaulted by a police agent whose responsibility was to provide security for a bank. A concerned person who witnessed the unfortunate violent scene recorded and made it public through social media which led to the condemnation of the behaviour of the police officer. Authorities of the Ghana Police service took the necessary measures and arrested the police officer, while the microfinance institution rendered an apology to the victim[1] .

The witness[2] who recorded and disseminated the scene demonstrated bravery. Similar brave actions of 'citizen journalists' do emerge in countries across the sub region. Such occurrences provide evidence to the fact that citizens can play pivotal roles to hold government officials and governments accountable. If this trend continues exponentially, it can make significant contributions to the development of West African countries. This article examines social accountability by honing on practices civil society

organisations (CSOs) can use to engage members of their constituencies in these initiatives.

Social accountability is a set of activities citizens of a state undertake to monitor government activities and push for transparency and effectiveness in the delivery of their service. The World Bank defines social accountability as "an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability", (World Bank, 2004f: 1). Social accountability aims at increasing transparency in the work of governments— including public officials. It is a widely proven method to curb corruption and ensure that public officials deliver their duty effectively according to their work purview and ethics. It helps keep government officials in check.

The success of any social accountability initiative requires the involvement of citizens to perform activities, such as quality assessment and monitoring, in order to generate actionable inputs for deterring corruption and improving development outcomes (Camargo & Stahl, 2016).

CSOs in West Africa have been mobilising citizens to take on actions to promote social accountability in West African countries. In 2017, the West Africa Civil Society Institute organised a social accountability workshop for CSOs and civil society actors in the region. A key lesson drawn from the workshop

---

1 As reported on Ghanaweb general news of Monday, 23 July 2018
2 The name of the person who took a video shot of the scene was not disclosed.

was that active citizen participation [in social accountability initiatives] ensures the inclusion of marginalised and less privilege groups in decisions that affect their lives.

Social accountability is therefore based largely on the role any citizen of a society plays to ensure that duty bearers of the state deliver effectively and efficiently. This can include any person working as minister, a teacher in a public school, a medical practitioner in a local government hospital or polyclinic in the community, a police agent, among others.

Social accountability is about citizens contributing to discussions on issues that directly affect them and

giving critical feedback during decision making. This can ensure that decisions taken and implemented reflect and respond to the aspirations of beneficiaries.

As common as the notion of social accountability may seem to be, it is unfortunate to know that many West Africans are not familiar with this phenomenon and are not equipped to resort to accountability tools to hold government officials accountable and help promote good practices in public institutions.

Majority of our citizens are still falling prey to the malpractices of some duty bearers.

Case in Point: Author's personal experience:

In 2017 during the time I was processing documents for school3, I had to legalise my certificate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I paid all the administrative fees required to legalise the documents. I also waited for two-weeks for the legalisation of my certificates. Despite the long wait, I noticed a mistake in the spelling of my name. I returned the documents for correction and the agent in charge asked me to pay an amount of 20 Ghana cedis for the document to be sent back to the department that committed the error for correction—so that I can get my document in time. He emphasised that if I did not comply, I will have to wait for another two weeks for the document to go through a new legalisation process. I lived very far from the ministry. The deadline for submission of the legalised documents was also very close. Under such circumstances, many citizens in my shoes would have no choice than to pay the illegal 20 Ghana cedis.

My first attempt to evade this illegal fee failed. I pointed that it was unfair and unethical. Yet, neither the civil servant nor her colleagues paid attention to my plea. Days went by and no action was taken so I came up with another idea. I told them I will pay the requested amount on the condition that they provide me with a receipt to show to my academic sponsors. This seemed to have frightened the ministry staffer. She then ensured that the mistake was corrected, and the document was submitted to me the following day without me having to pay the amount she requested.

3   While processing my documents to pursue my master's Degree at the Sechenov University, Russia.

Many citizens are always faced with experiences in which their rights are violated and due public service is not rendered to them, and, unfortunately, they are under duress to take responsibility for the unprofessional conduct of some government officials in the delivery of their duties.

Other areas where citizens experience such injustices are on trans-national borders. Many West Africans (who are supposed to move freely across borders) are harassed to pay money unjustly before entering another country.

Also, in some schools, students are made to pay bribes to gain admission or to be given marks. And sadly, the list goes on. This situation may be deteriorating across the region. However, there is a possibility to end such social ills.

One rapid remedy to this cancer in our West African countries is to increase the knowledge of the population about social accountability and equip them with basic tools to contribute to advancing social accountability initiatives. CSOs should empower citizens to have a grounded understanding of discussions related to social accountability.

Demystifying social accountability
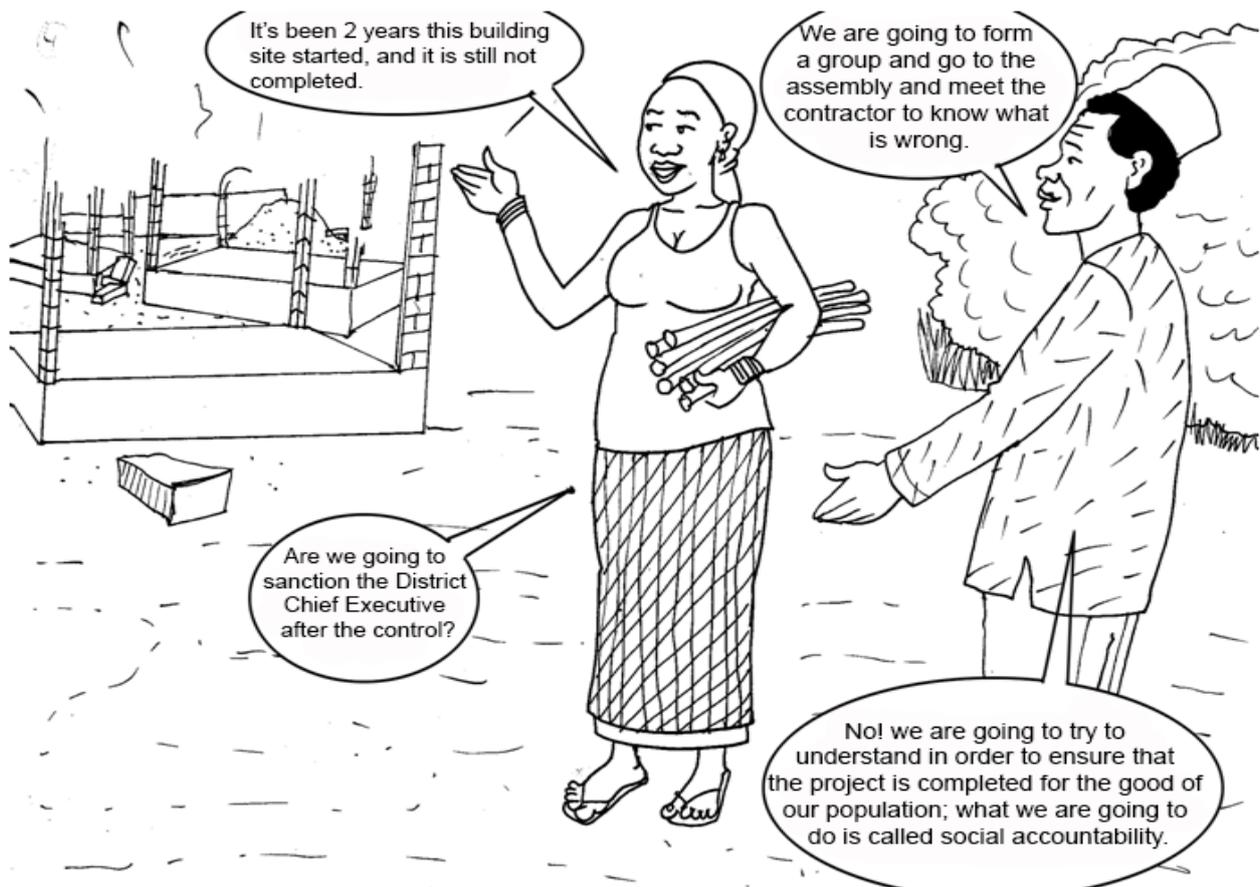
Figure 1. Source: adapted [4] from Bola Balogun, 2017

---

[4]   Translation into English done by Etienne Berabely.

Challenges in achieving social accountability

The term social accountability is a "paper tiger"[5] to most of our government officials. Many factors account for this. Prominent among them are; the knowledge gap on the side of the population and the ineffectiveness in pushing for citizens participation in social accountability initiatives.

Knowledge gap: The population's weak appreciation of their ability to seek accountability presents a major barrier to achieving the benefits of social accountability. CSOs working to promote social accountability efforts should strategically position themselves to fill this knowledge

gap. In Ghana, for instance, the awareness would increase if discussions related to social accountability are opened up through the promotion and use of local languages—at least in Twi and other major Ghanaian languages—rather than in the English language only.

Verbose language: The language used when deliberating on issues related to social accountability is a barrier on its own. Using English —as well as development jargons— as the main language in discussions about social accountability excludes a vast majority of the population mostly affected by the adverse actions of state institutions and officials. (Omondi, 2017)

---

5   Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term as, "[a thing] that is outwardly powerful or dangerous but inwardly weak or ineffectual." West African governments officials are less frightened concern about accountability in which citizens are not involved much.

Case in point: Author's experience

During my days as a translator in the development sector, I faced the dilemma of choosing between translating our texts into simple terms or targeting donors. Where targeting donors means using the terminology that will convey our messages properly to our donors, which I was very much aware that majority of the population we were serving may not understand. Even our reports were written with terminology targeted at donors rather than the populations we serve.

Often, the language used within the development sector limits the opportunity for many citizens to understand and participate in various actions to hold state officials accountable in the delivery of their services. It is necessary to discuss matters related to our population's wellbeing in languages they understand better.

Way Forward: Improving social accountability in West Africa

Citizen education

Citizens need to be equipped with knowledge on what social accountability prior to empowering them with skills to demand accountability. To succeed in doing this, there is need to erase the impression that the problem stems from the illiteracy of our population. Many of our citizens are "official-language illiterates", meaning they do not understand the English or French or Portuguese language. That does not imply they are illiterates. Making a

deliberate effort to sensitise our population on questions related to social accountability using the language they understand better will help raise their consciousness on social accountability initiatives. This requires that funding related to social accountability questions should include fees for expert translation into local languages. Education in the local language will boost citizens participation in holding state officials accountable in the exercise of their duties.

For example, civil society actors working in the area of education should ensure that students and parents are empowered to hold educators accountable in the delivery of their duties. An effective way of doing this is to empower student leaders to educate their mates on their rights. By doing this, students can hold educators accountable for the quality of services they deliver. Civil society can also equip students with the requisite tools to monitor, evaluate and report on an educator's performance. These tools should be designed

using communication means that every student and parent is able to understand and therefore get involved in the process (see figure 1). This will strengthen accountability in the education sector, which will contribute to quality education and rapid development of our countries.

Citizens should be well informed about their rights and several abnormalities in their context which they have the right to question. Citizens should be empowered to demand accountability on abandoned as well as on-going projects in their communities. This will curb the tendency of leaving projects incomplete and embarking on a new one due to a change in government.

CSOs should elaborate a communication plan to help members of the community ensure the that the right actions are taken into consideration for the development of their community. The development of West Africa will be fast tracked if every citizen is empowered to counter malpractices in their communities.

Decentralisation of social accountability discussions

CSOs' discussions on social accountability are often confined to the conference rooms. The discussions need to be held in communities (in the form of community talks or town hall meetings) to boost their desire to take actions for the development of their communities. Organising regular inclusive dialogues within grassroot communities will help our citizens be aware of many issues that are crucial to social accountability; pertaining to their health, education, protection of the environment as well as the protection of their rights. These issues are crucial matters that play an important role in the development of any country. They are not to be left under the stewardship of policy makers only.

Leveraging on the media

Another way to facilitate the process of social accountability in the sub region is to create a

partnership between traditional media channels, CSOs and citizens to deliberately amplify the population's grievances, and help them to express their dissatisfactions, and expose malpractices.

To do so, civil society must cooperate with like-minded media bodies. Several initiatives are underway from the local media to fill the knowledge gap in the population in terms of language. For example, in Ghana, Kedjetia vs. Mokola is a satire that tries to teach citizens their rights and encourages them to seek justice in the court of law whenever they are treated unfairly. The Prison TV series, ''Time with the Prisoner'', produced by the Crime Check Foundation, publishes reportage and interviews with prisoners from various Ghanaian prisons on , [Facebook](#) and website. The aim of the documentaries is to advocate for crime prevention in the society and to denounce the unprofessionalism of some individuals in the judiciary branch of the governments, including police officers delivering their duties in various communities in Ghana. Similar TV programs are being broadcast in other countries across the sub-region.

CSOs should examine the link between these private entities' area of work and social accountability, and endeavour to work in synergy with them and provide them with the necessary tools and support to increase their viewers' awareness on social accountability practices. Partnering and involving such private institutions will increase the potential for success of any social accountability initiatives.

Leveraging on technology

Technology experts should educate the population on how to use their smart devices to expose malpractices in their communities. CSOs can take it from the point where the population's voices have been amplified by the media and make sure consequences follow. Empowering citizens in the use of their smart devices to generate precise and timely information on issues they are faced with can be an effective tool against corruption. It can also promote efficiency of public officials in the delivery of their duties.

Conclusion

To achieve social accountability, in which all our citizens in the sub-region will fully be engaged, accountability patterns need to be constantly reviewed. Social accountability discussions should include, primarily, those directly affect by corruption in key areas such as education, ministries, and security. These populations should be provided with the necessary tools to evaluate service providers' actions and generate pertinent information about those actions and recommendations for improvements.

Figure 2 below gives an overview of the cycle of social accountability initiative that effectively integrate citizens. As a first step, CSOs together with the media should work on building citizen's capacity (i.e. teaching them their right, equipping them with monitoring tools and the skills to using those tools effectively). Then the citizens, in turn, will monitor service providers (2), and report back to CSOs and the Media through their opinions (3). Upon receiving citizen's feedbacks, CSOs and the Media must transfer them to both the Government and the service providers (4) and ensure enforceability from the side of the government towards the service providers (5). And the service providers must be answerable to the citizens (6). Development professionals should consider adopting the model in the diagram for effective social accountability initiatives in the sub region.
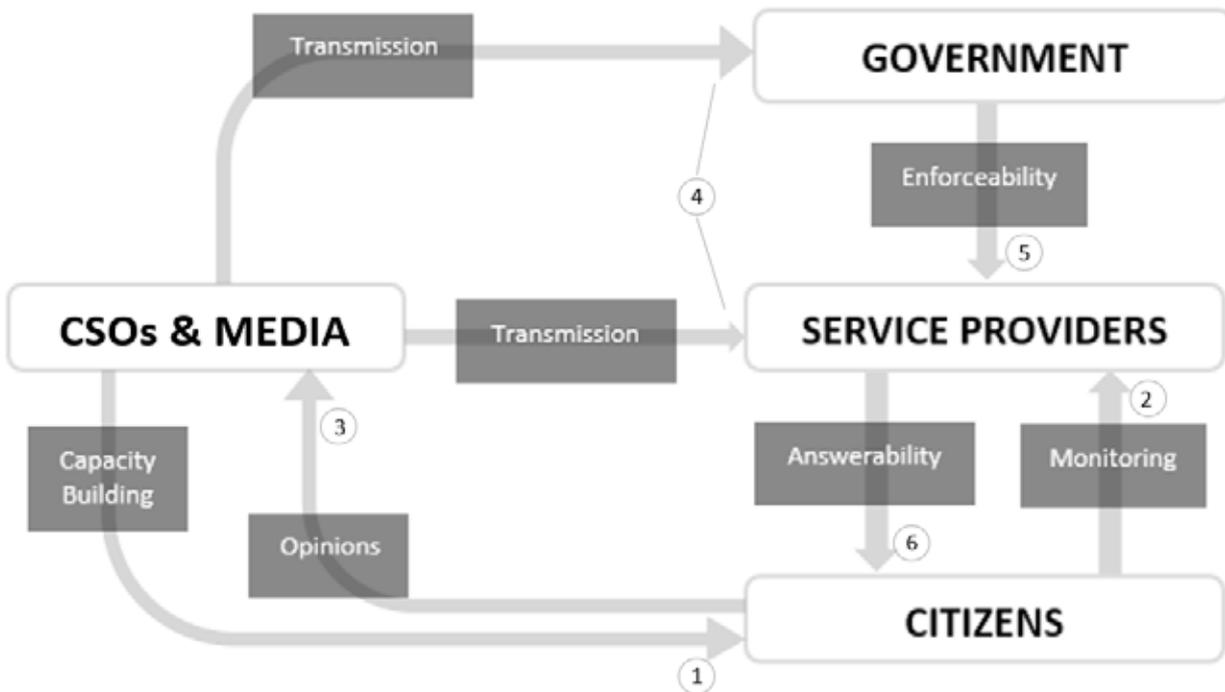

Figure 2: Social accountability process (By Berabely, K. A. 2019)

References:

Bola BALOGOUN, 2017. Le contrôle citoyen de l'action publique, un outil d'aide à la gouvernance (n°5). https://medium.com/@iambalogoun/le-contr%C3%B4le-citoyen-de-laction-publique-un-outil-d-aide-%C3%A0-la-gouvernance-n-5-cdf24aad87f8 (accessed on 16/09/18)

Camargo C. B. & Stahl F. 2016, Social accountability a practitioner handbook anti-corruption. Available at: https://transparency.am/files/publications/1457166569-0-814669.pdf

Crime check Foundation. Time with the prisoner. episodes available on YouTube/ http://crimecheckfoundation.org/

Ghana Web. I got there at 7:30am; waited till 4pm - Woman assaulted by police at Midland speaks, https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/I-got-there-at-7-30am-waited-till-4pm-Woman-assaulted-by-police-at-Midland-speaks-670638 (accessed on 16/09/18)

Ghanaweb general news of Monday, 23 July 2018, Police officer faces court today after assaulting woman, https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Police-officer-faces-court-today-after-assaulting-woman-671024 (27/11/18)

Liezer-Legacy Productions. Kedjetia Vrs Makola, episodes available on YouTube.

Sharon Omondi, 2017. What Languages Are Spoken In Ghana? Article published on World Atlas, https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-languages-are-spoken-in-ghana.html (27/11/18)

WACSI, 2017. Report of the Social accountability regional learning workshop, report. Available at: http://www.wacsi.org/en/site/publications/?tpl=11&tpid=21;

World Bank. 2004. "Social Accountability: An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice." Participation and Civic Engagement Group, World Bank, Washington, DC.

WACSI

Strengthening Civil Society

@wacsiorg WACSIBA WACSI @WACSI