

Original Article

Increasing the Power of the Poor? NGO-led Social Accountability Initiatives and Political Capabilities in Rural Uganda

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Abstract Social accountability has become an important new buzzword among development actors seeking to understand the forms of state-society synergy that may be supportive of better public services. Advocates suggest demand-side initiatives are key to increasing the power of the poor in service provision, while sceptics question the application of technical fixes to complex political challenges. This article reports findings from qualitative research into the political capabilities outcomes achieved among local health and education stakeholders through the social accountability interventions of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Western Uganda. It argues that NGOs are unlikely to generate substantive advances for social accountability in agrarian contexts characterised by patronage politics without organising marginalised groups themselves to tackle the causes of their disadvantage.

La redevabilité sociale est devenue un nouveau mot clé à la mode au sein des acteurs du développement qui cherchent à comprendre les différentes formes de synergie entre état et société qui pourraient favoriser de meilleurs services publics. Les partisans de la redevabilité sociale suggèrent que les initiatives du côté de la demande sont clés pour augmenter le pouvoir des pauvres dans la prestation de services, alors les sceptiques remettent en question l'application de solutions techniques pour régler des problèmes politiques complexes. Cet article relate les conclusions d'une étude qualitative relative à la capacité politique au sein d'acteurs sanitaires et éducatifs locaux, qui a été rendue possible grâce à une intervention sur la redevabilité sociale, mise en œuvre par une organisation non-gouvernementale (ONG) dans l'Ouest de l'Ouganda. L'étude démontre que les ONG sont peu susceptibles de provoquer des avancées importantes en redevabilité sociale dans les contextes agraires, qui sont caractérisés par un patronage politique, sans appuyer l'organisation des groupes marginalisés eux-mêmes afin qu'ils s'attaquent aux causes de leur désavantage.

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Introduction

Under the current inclusive liberal development paradigm, the active involvement of citizens in holding public service providers accountable is considered critical to increasing 'the power of poor clients in service provision' (World Bank, 2004, p. 64). Recent assessments find that a complex web of incentives, interests and political-economic power relations frequently undermine institutional and technical mechanisms for monitoring and claims-making by citizens and their representatives (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012; Gaventa and McGee, 2013). Increasingly, development agencies seek to better understand how greater social accountability can be achieved under particular political-economic conditions (DFID, 2011; Bukenya *et al*, 2012), while scholars interested in 'putting the politics back in' to development have sought out more politicised frameworks for the study of outcomes for disadvantaged groups (Hickey, 2009).

Researchers are divided about the contribution non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can make to greater social accountability, which in itself is a contested concept, but is understood here as ‘citizen-led action for demanding accountability from providers’ (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012, p. 146). NGOs are credited with representing marginalised groups within formal policy-making spaces (Driscoll and Evans, 2005), facilitating citizen participation within decentralised governance spaces (Corbridge *et al*, 2005), and convening new created spaces for claims-making and deliberation (Mitlin and Bebbington, 2006). Questions continue to be raised, however, as to whether such donor-funded initiatives enhance or undermine state legitimacy and performance (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005; Stel and Abate, 2014). In addition, recent studies of effective participatory rural development suggest that co-governance mechanisms are more likely to have substantive outcomes for political equality when underpinned by pro-poor agrarian reform (Bhattacharya and Bhattacharyya, 2013).

This article responds to calls for more politicised assessments of demand-side initiatives, in particular political economies, by applying a political capabilities analysis to qualitative data about a series of strategies for enhanced social accountability employed by a research and development NGO (henceforth ‘RD’) in Western Uganda. The discussion begins with a review of recent debates concerning the appropriate roles for NGOs within social accountability dynamics in developing contexts, and then introduces Williams’ (2004) political capabilities analysis as a suitable evaluative framework for such initiatives. The political space for social accountability in contemporary Uganda is then considered, and a brief overview of the research methodology provided. RD’s social accountability interventions are then introduced and analysed in terms of the political capabilities outcomes achieved, and the political-economic and strategic drivers and constraints that have shaped them. The article draws two conclusions in response to the two main debates framing the discussion. First, NGOs can pursue strategies for social accountability that strengthen rather than erode existing democratic institutions and processes in weak or fragile states. Second, such strategies are unlikely to do more than ameliorate the *status quo* in short-term and limited ways, if they fail to organise low-income groups in ways that challenge the social norms and power relations that obstruct effective popular pressure for better public goods outcomes in agrarian contexts, characterised by semi-authoritarian political regimes.

NGOs and Social Accountability

Social accountability initiatives can broadly be grouped into either transparency initiatives (such as budget and expenditure monitoring); contentious actions (such as protests and advocacy campaigns); or participation in formal governance spaces (Bukenya *et al*, 2012; Joshi and Houtzager, 2012). Another important distinction made in studies of such initiatives is between outcomes of ‘answerability’ (the provision of information and justifications) and of ‘enforcement’ (the suffering of penalties) (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005). NGOs are considered legitimate actors in the social accountability arena because of their staff’s frequent dual positioning as highly educated elites, able to mobilise resources to support their activities, and as grassroots participatory facilitators, able to mediate state/citizen relations at the local level, translate popular claims-making into formal discourse, and explain complex policies in everyday language (Corbridge *et al*, 2005; Bázan *et al*, 2008).

Responses to the social accountability agenda, and perspectives on the role of NGOs in promoting it, have been mixed. While post-colonial analyses question whether elite, professionalised NGO workers can genuinely understand and effectively channel the interests of low-income marginalised groups (Chatterjee, 2004), others highlight the political capital

generated by their ability to move with fluidity between state, market and civil society spheres (Uvin and Miller, 1996; Lavalle *et al*, 2005). Middle-class professionals have also been found to be critical mediators within the cross-class alliances that have contributed to the effectiveness of demand-side initiatives (Jenkins, 2006). Beyond the class composition of NGOs, assessments of social accountability initiatives increasingly cast doubt over technical approaches that fail to address politics and power relations. Recent studies critique the World Bank's emphasis on technical tools or 'widgets' (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012), such as score cards and experimental designs, which disguise the politics of accountability by constructing citizens as beneficiaries and NGOs as representatives of their individualised concerns, rather than as facilitators of popular mobilisation (Gaventa and McGee, 2013). The limited outcomes achieved by donor-funded social accountability initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa have also been linked to a failure to engage with the structure of social and political-economic power relations, and informal incentive structures (Booth, 2012). Such findings resonate with studies that suggest better governance outcomes in the Indian states of Kerala and West Bengal have been linked to pro-poor agrarian reform, which shifts the balance of political-economic power from landlords to tenants and smallholders (Sandbrook *et al*, 2007; Bhattacharya and Bhattacharyya, 2013).

Despite these increasing calls for a more politicised approach, scholars also warn of the dangers of undermining state legitimacy (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005) or provoking an uncooperative state response (Mitlin, 2013) by taking a confrontational approach to poor governance. Researchers also continue to identify opportunities within formal participatory governance spaces for citizenship building (Corbridge *et al*, 2005), particularly when these are combined with institutional reform that hence tackles 'both sides of the equation' (Gaventa, 2004). Working to democratise existing spaces, NGOs are credited with building popular capacity for participation through the provision of training and information about strategies for engagement, policies, services, and particularly budgets and expenditures (Corbridge *et al*, 2005); or acting as representatives by lobbying for redistributive reforms focused on socio-economic as well as civil and political rights (Driscoll and Evans, 2005). NGO engagement in aggregating and channelling claims-making has been framed as building state capacity for responsiveness while equipping state officials with necessary information and awareness, creating more conducive conditions for collaborative planning and implementation processes, and thereby strengthening rather than undermining existing democratic channels, as well as developing alternative routes for claims-making (Gaventa, 2004; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). Increasingly, activist scholars draw attention to the need for 'popular organisation building' among marginalised groups to enable their accumulation of the collective power, knowledge and confidence, necessary to tackle exclusionary norms, values and power relations (Törnquist, 2009; Mitlin, 2013).

Assessing Political Capabilities for Social Accountability

Concerns that participation has been reframed as technical practice (rather than political action) have catalysed theorisation of more politicised frameworks for analysing the outcomes of participatory initiatives for disadvantaged groups. One of these is Williams' (2004) political capabilities analysis, which seeks to capture the longer-term political value of participatory initiatives for marginalised people by focusing on changes along three dimensions. The first dimension is concerned with the extent to which initiatives catalyse *political learning*. This includes increased knowledge of formal rights and procedures, but importantly also the informal rules of the game, and a deeper understanding of how power operates within social and political relations. The second dimension considers whether initiatives have re-shaped the *political*

networks through which disadvantaged groups can advance their interests, and might include changes to the roles of traditional brokers or patrons, the development of relationships beyond the immediate local arena, and changes in the interests and motivations of actors within a particular network of relations. The third dimension draws attention to the ways in which *patterns of representation* have changed, which might manifest in changes to the language of political claims-making, challenges to repressive or exclusionary political norms, shifts in local cultures of governance or in the extent to which alternative ways of thinking about or doing development are emerging or being imagined (Williams, 2004, p. 568).

These themes suggest that Williams' framework is well suited to both assessing the empowerment outcomes of participatory social accountability initiatives, and to exploring the effects of power relations and informal (as well as formal) incentives and processes that a series of synthesis papers have found critical to understanding social accountability dynamics (Cornwall *et al*, 2011; Bukenya *et al*, 2012; Gaventa and McGee, 2013).

Political Space for Social Accountability in Museveni's Uganda

Uganda presents a particularly interesting case for an investigation into the ways in which NGOs can advance social accountability within challenging political-economic environments. During the 1990s, Uganda was hailed as a beacon of good practice for poverty reduction through economic liberalisation and good governance, including a pioneering approach to participatory poverty reduction strategy making focused on achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and extensive decentralisation reforms (Craig and Porter, 2006). Since claiming power in 1986, Museveni has overseen sustained economic growth and, after 25 years of political upheaval, it is difficult to overstate the significance of the stability and rehabilitation secured by the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Yet, the regime was recently characterised as semi-authoritarian (Tripp, 2010) on the basis of a gradual erosion of civil and political rights, increasingly centralised control over resources and potential opponents through a system of corruption-fuelled political patronage, populist policy making, and mounting military expenditure and presence (Kasfir, 2012). Concerns have been raised about rising levels of inequality and the disparity between poverty reduction statistics and the absence of substantive development among smallholders and subsistence farmers, who comprise approximately 70 per cent of the population (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey, 2010).

Recent studies of social accountability have generated diverse and sometimes contradictory findings¹ about the kinds of supply- or demand-side strategies that might generate pro-poor outcomes in Uganda at the current juncture (Robinson, 2006; Hubbard, 2007; Reinikka and Svensson, 2004). The institutional framework for social accountability in Uganda has been shaped by both decentralisation policy and sector-specific reforms. Local government is structured according to the five-tier resistance council model established during the 1981–1986 guerrilla war, when Museveni's National Resistance Army established self-management structures for local residents as it gained ground across the country. The village council is a shared deliberative, judicial and administrative space for village residents led by an executive appointed by the chair. At sub-county level, the council operates like a parliament with elected councillors representing parishes, and technical officials responsible for health, education and development implementation. The district council is the highest local government tier and the chair the most powerful local government seat, with overall control over service delivery in the district (Green, 2008). In 2005, after 10 years of a merit-based 'no-party' system, the NRM opened up Ugandan politics to multi-party electoral competition (simultaneously extending

Presidential term limits), but opposition parties have struggled to generate the necessary resources and mass popular support to compete effectively.

In theory, decentralisation has facilitated direct citizen participation in development planning and service delivery and the investment of large amounts of sector-specific finance in local government (Craig and Porter, 2006). In practice, mechanisms for citizen participation have been tokenistic, fail to tackle entrenched social hierarchies (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004) and decentralisation has created endless opportunities for patronage (Tripp, 2010). The control of staff appointments by a District Services Commission whose members are selected under the influence of the district council executive has led to posts being granted along ethnic lines and has undermined accountability, as job security depends on favour rather than performance (Tripp, 2010). Incessant district creation taking the total number from 33 in 1986 to 118 in 2010 has also enabled the widespread cooptation of local elites by the NRM, while exacerbating ethnic tensions by consolidating administrations around majority ethnic groups (Green, 2008).

The dynamics of populist policy making and patronage-politics manifest clearly within local health and education governance. The announcement of Universal Primary Education in the run up to the 1996 Presidential elections (including the abolition of Parent Teacher Association (PTA) fees), the abolition of health service user fees ahead of the 2001 elections, and the announcement of Universal Secondary Education before the 2006 contest have all met with international approval while mobilising the popular vote, but in the long run undermined the quality of service provision and social accountability (Ssewankambo *et al*, 2008; Kjær and Therkildsen, 2013). The abolition of parent and health service user fees, while in principle pro-poor, has in effect led to vast increases in demand without related increases in human resource capacity and adequate financial investment. School enrolments increased from 2.6 million in 1996 to 5.3 million the following year, without sufficient investment of resources or preparatory work to manage the transition (Tripp, 2010). The abolition of fees has also undermined incentives for downward accountability with local staff accountable to district-level patrons and district civil servants accountable to central government or international donors (Higgins and Rwanyange, 2005). Participatory governance mechanisms like user committees and parent-teacher associations have been left without a substantive role to play, as under the 'Sector Wide Approaches' introduced in part as a mechanism for achievement of the MDGs, resource allocation became highly centralised (Craig and Porter, 2006). Local government resources that might once have contributed towards local service improvements have also been depleted since the abolition of Graduated Personal Tax (a form of income tax) in 2005 ahead of the multi-party elections (Ssewankambo *et al*, 2008).

The findings to be presented below come to demonstrate how this combination of semi-authoritarian control over potential sites of opposition, patronage-politics and an agrarian culture of deference to social superiors, presents a highly constrained political space for NGOs seeking to promote greater social accountability in rural Uganda.

Methodology

The qualitative findings presented below are based on 12-months doctoral research conducted between 2009 and 2011 into RD's ability to cultivate supportive conditions for social democratic development. One strand of this research examined the extent to which RD had enhanced the political capabilities of rural communities to demand greater social accountability for the provision of primary health care and education services.

RD was selected according to a theory testing logic (Yin, 1984) in response to its reputation among donors and national civil society actors for fostering shifts in state/citizen relations within the Rwenzori region making it an anomalous case in comparison to most other literature on Ugandan civil society, which suggests NGOs are too weak to shape political space. RD was also selected because of the relevance of their 'hybrid' approach and character (Bázan *et al*, 2008) to an investigation of conflicting perspectives in the literature about the ways in which NGOs should engage with democratisation in different kinds of political-economic contexts. RD employs diverse strategies at multiple levels based on an ideological commitment to socio-economic and political empowerment, working within the existing system rather than imagining systemic change (Bázan *et al*, 2008). It attempts to support small-holder farmers to access markets for example, but does not engage in campaigns for land reform.

Fieldwork methods included review of organisational documentation, semi-structured observation of organisational practice, and a total of 123 semi-structured interviews and 20 focus group discussions with a range of state, civil society and political actors at multiple levels of organisational operation. Research examining RD's social accountability interventions focused principally on two sample sub-counties within two sample districts, selected because together they offered insight into the fullest range of the organisation's interventions and a broad contextual range.

Theoretical and context-specific literature shaped a process of qualitative analytical categorisations that focused on political capabilities analysis of outcomes, and analysis of interlinking dimensions of political economy and strategic capacity, shaping RD's behaviour and effects within the sample sub-counties. Data reliability and validity has been built upon the triangulation of data from interviews, focus groups and observations generated with the breadth of actors described above, and evaluation of weight, quality and theoretical significance (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Cultivating Social Accountability in the Rwenzori Sub-region

Rwenzori is a predominantly agrarian sub-region that has suffered from repeated ethnic conflict and experiences poverty and population growth above the national average.² RD was founded as a non-membership research institute in 1996 by a group of locally born university graduates seeking to generate knowledge about how to bring greater development to the area. As the NGO boom took effect in Uganda at the turn of the millennium, RD drifted away from research towards implementation of donor-driven development projects. By 2010, the organisation had an international donor-funded budget of approximately GBP £702 thousand, and a staff team of 28 graduates.

The social accountability interventions examined below have been significantly shaped by donor agendas, and the rise of the participation agenda within international development discourse. RD's participatory approach followed a similar trajectory to many other attempts at participation for transformation (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). Although early work with a British consultant focused on developing a participatory action learning system that could support Friarian-style conscientization for social and political change, this eventually resulted in a toolkit of participatory exercises that might assist civil society workers and rural communities to monitor local resources.

The first intervention discussed below attempts to use this participatory toolkit to increase accountability for health and education provision through training, monitoring and capacity building within local governance structures. The programme has been running in various guises in the sample sub-counties since 2005, but expanded in scope under the latest programme (2008–2011), from 9 to 23 sub-counties. Health and education have always been primary concerns, but

the latest programme has also focused down specifically on encouraging citizen monitoring of primary health centres and schools in order to report and resolve problems throughout the governance structure. Two staff members managed the initiative during the latest phase working through a team of 23 Community Process Facilitators (CPFs) who operate at sub-county level. In theory, CPFs are locally embedded activists but in practice, operate more like sub-contracted NGO trainers.

Outputs for the first year of the latest 36-months programme included training new CPFs in using the toolkit; 12 village meetings about the roles and responsibilities of service users and providers in ensuring quality health and education service provision; four training sessions each for school and health centre management committees, and four for village, parish and sub-county councillors; and a series of dialogue meetings – two at sub-county level and two at district level. Most of these activities involve working within existing participatory governance spaces, except the dialogues. Sub-county dialogues are a new space paid for and facilitated by RD, where management committees, civil servants, political leaders and community leaders come together and discuss issues raised during village, parish and parents' meetings, or gathered through the monitoring activities of management committee members and councillors. They are founded on an 'appreciative inquiry' approach through which staff and CPFs facilitate non-confrontational deliberation and solution development, which is intended to build positive relationships across state-political-civil divides and divert the emphasis of discussions away from 'finger-pointing'.

In 2006, RD was nominated to participate in a consortium initiated by a multi-lateral donor and a central government ministry for the development of a public expenditure monitoring toolkit for Civil Society Organisations, which could provide more robust and easily aggregated evidence on public service effectiveness. The consortium subsequently collapsed, but RD continued to take the piloting forward because the initiative presented an opportunity to address demands from civil servants and politicians in Rwenzori for more robust research evidence to support claims-making. RD adapted these research instruments for a mixed-methods study of value for money in the primary health and education sectors across the region, in 2008 and 2009, respectively. The research combined quantitative surveys and reviews of health centre and school records with participatory discussions with parents and service users, to generate evidence for deliberation at district dialogues in an attempt to tackle social accountability at a more senior level.³

The Political Economy of Social Accountability in Rural Uganda

Training Local Stakeholders to Monitor Services

RD's training has generated limited but positive results for the effectiveness of school and health unit management committees, by engaging members in a process of political learning about formal rights and procedures. Members had an increased understanding of their roles after RD training, resulting in increased monitoring of teacher and pupil or health worker attendance and finances. One school management committee member explained that, since RD training, the committee has begun to check the arrival of central government funds and approve quarterly budgets. Less positively, health and school management committee members engaged during the research defined accountability in terms of checking that money had come in rather than monitoring whether it had been spent according to budget, and increases in knowledge and monitoring activity were counter-acted by their lack of authority to enforce sanctions. Teacher absenteeism was a continual problem, and although management committee members could challenge teachers or attempt to negotiate for improved behaviour, actions agreed during

governance meetings, and reports submitted to RD by the CPFs, suggested that they were either unwilling or had no authority to take more punitive action. The training had therefore not been able to bring about significant changes within the underlying culture of governance.

Political capabilities outcomes among councillors were much the same. Councillors had experienced political learning about the *de jure* rules of the game, but learning had not significantly impacted on their political networks or patterns of representation in their local arena. Interviewees could explain how to go about monitoring public services, and stressed that before RD training they did not know that this was part of their role, but were unable to provide examples of systematic monitoring with constituents to hold public servants accountable for their duties. Three councillors described either visiting their local primary school, or carrying out *ad hoc* monitoring of construction works following RD training, but this was done individually, and at face value, rather than against a bill of quantities that were difficult to access.⁴ One parish councillor reported sub-standard work being carried out during construction of a local latrine. The sub-county chief ignored his request to withhold payment to the contractor and the toilet collapsed a few months later, but the councillor felt that there was nothing further he could do in this case because the chief was beyond his field of influence. He also suggested that the chief had probably benefited from the poor quality work: 'When the construction of the latrine takes five million, they have to take those [materials] that cost less so they put it in their pockets'. This was typical of other instances in the data that suggested that despite RD's training, councillors were either unable to strategise about who had the power to resolve a problem and how to influence them, or unwilling to rock the boat by challenging their superiors.

Neither had RD training contributed significantly to increased consciousness about social norms and power relations, meaning parents and service users remained reluctant to monitor or challenge local teachers and health workers as their social superiors. One health worker explained how his predecessor was a 'small king' within the community whom local residents lacked the confidence to challenge, and who was protected from being held to account for poor performance by friendships with local political leaders. Poorer members of a community may also be more concerned about the economic costs of participation (Hickey and Mohan, 2004) than accountable service provision. A district councillor suggested that some parents look unfavourably on enforced school attendance and may depend upon the income their children generate; and in response to a discussion about mobilising other parents, a PTA member asked: 'What if the parents I have to mobilise live far from me? Am I expected to give up my time to travel to see them?' At the other end of the social spectrum, richer parents have the exit option of sending their children to private schools or buying drugs from private clinics, which reduces demand-side accountability pressures (Di John, 2007).

RD staff and CPFs also struggled to catalyse agency for collective action because of both a deficit in community ownership over public resources, and a sense of futility in attempting to gain more information about public works or address existing problems. The district local government awards contracts for construction works within the sub-counties to private companies, and the bills of quantities for these works are held by heads of departments (usually the district engineer) and the private contractor. The sub-county government is responsible for holding briefing sessions with communities about public works including the provision of bills of quantities, aimed at fostering a sense of ownership and a collective drive to monitor and maintain the resources in question. During interviews, village and parish councillors claimed that in practice they do not receive information from the sub-county; sub-county representatives insisted that neither the district officials nor the private contractors provide them with this information; and two district councillors from different areas refuted any suggestion of corruption at the district level. None of the research participants communicated a sense of responsibility to chase up this

kind of information, to maintain pressure on those above them in the system until such information is provided, or to work with others to create pressure for the information to be released and organise people in response to it.

A complex network of interests and incentive structures and an absence of effective enforcement mechanisms (within local government, and rural communities more widely) was perpetuating this absence of demand-side pressure for better governance in the region. A former sub-county councillor described how parish chiefs are failing to carry out basic duties like mobilising communities for collective maintenance or monitoring of resources, and investigating cases of school drop-outs. He claimed that the sub-county chief was failing to hold parish chiefs to account for these duties, but that he himself had also been unable to do so when in post. Civil servants interviewed suggested that the lack of opportunities for professional development and inadequate remuneration drains them of motivation. Civil society and government actors described how civil servants are protected from sanctions for poor performance by their more senior patrons in local government, usually by being transferred to another sub-county or district. In one example of conflict between staff and parents, a whole school was closed down for a week, all the teachers transferred to other areas and new teachers brought in, rather than engage in the conflict resolution process advocated by RD. Horizontal accountability mechanisms are also weak because as one sub-county councillor explained, 'you have to be polite and humble to get votes'. Frequent rotations of government staff mean that civil servants are often not embedded within their communities of operation, and hence not subject to demand-side accountability pressures through social ties, as Hossain (2010) and Tsai (2007) highlight elsewhere. Neither does their job security rest upon the quality of service delivery because of the lack of alternative services and the lack of local autonomy over resources and policy making (Brett, 2003; Francis and James, 2003).

The challenges of populist health and education policy making (Booth, 2012) linked to an executive focus on regime survival (Tripp, 2010) were also shaping what RD was able to achieve. A health worker explained how the promise of a health centre for every parish is resulting in even greater staff shortages, as the same human resource base is expected to cover a wider number of facilities. A parish councillor explained how the local CPF has tried to 'sensitise people', 'but parents have turned a deaf ear' because of widespread political campaigning about the abolition of PTA fees under Universal Primary Education. The CPF and a local councillor described how parents see universal education as a 'gift from government', rather than as an initiative funded out of the public purse that they should hold their school or local government accountable for. While some studies link financial contribution (through user fees or direct taxation) to political agency for demand-side accountability (Di John, 2007; DFID, 2011), the findings here suggest that this is also linked to governance arrangements that give people a meaningful role to play. At the state-run schools encountered during the research, parents are passive recipients of information during meetings, and PTA committees defunct or ineffective. Yet, historically, PTA committees in two of the same schools were extremely active when they had an influential role to play, before the schools were taken over by government. Similarly, at one case study health centre, village health teams (VHT)⁵ existed on paper but there were no resources to support their function and the management committee could not even think of a role for them to play.

The political capabilities outcomes achieved were also shaped by strategic and organisational constraints. RD staff had not engaged in detailed political economy analysis of the local contexts they were intervening in, but neither had successive donors prioritised this within their funding requirements. Underestimations by staff and donors about the complexity and level of skill required for the effective facilitation of transformational participatory methodologies, aimed at accumulating more power and influence for disadvantaged groups, were also indicative of low levels of deep-felt commitment to social change. The geographical scope of the intervention is

too broad for staff and CPFs to offer sustained inputs of facilitative support and advice, and CPFs operate at sub-county level without a 'train-the-trainer' strategy, leading to an absence of locally embedded activists able to implement or follow up on RD's inputs. This perpetuates dependency on the CPFs' information, skills and links to the political networks Williams (2004) refers to within and beyond the sub-county.

Sub-county Dialogues

Despite achieving fairly limited outcomes for the political capabilities of service users and parents, RD has built upon the political learning they have fostered among local leaders by convening sub-county dialogues, which have opened up a new pattern of representation that has contributed in limited ways to improved service delivery. During interviews, dialogue participants reported having an increased understanding about their responsibilities for ensuring quality health and education, and that stronger relationships had been built between stakeholders at different levels. A civil servant described how, following a dialogue, one management committee member felt confident enough to travel to the sub-county offices and report a case of defilement at their school, and how the dialogues were beginning to overcome a culture of blame that leads to problems being passed from one person to another without resolution.

In one sample sub-county, the dialogues have also created a drive to move beyond requests for answerability or learning exchange towards enforcement. After successive dialogues between 2007 and 2008, RD agreed to fund and facilitate a series of meetings with a smaller group of education stakeholders to draft a sub-county education bill, which was enacted in December 2008. Although CPFs, councillors and management committee chairs felt that they had been able to collect and represent the views of parents and service users during the planning process, the issues targeted by the bill and the solutions developed are telling of the elitist character of participation within the dialogues. It is designed to tackle pupil absenteeism, school drop-outs and child labour, rather than teacher absenteeism or poor staff performance, and focuses on sanctions against parents and children, rather than the ability of local stakeholders to hold schools or local government accountable for their use of resources. However, absenteeism and poor staff behaviour towards clients were topics of debate in education and health dialogues, generating – in the case of one county health centre, for example – apologies from staff for poor behaviour, and a related increase in service uptake by the surrounding community.

Through the facilitation of negotiation and collaboration, rather than confrontation and demands-making, RD has therefore been able to foster receptivity to collective problem-solving among state and civil society actors in ways that have begun to increase answerability within local health and education services. RD is also building the capacity of governance actors within existing democratic structures like local government councils and management committees, rather than undermining trust in state institutions (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005), but has achieved this through the creation of an alternative deliberative space – a new pattern of representation – that allows new approaches, relationships and ideas to emerge. From a grassroots perspective, however, the dialogues are an elite-led space that is not directly 'increasing the power of the poor' (World Bank, 2004) within service provision or engaging them directly in challenging the power of political elites.

By focusing on management committees and councillors, RD has clearly targeted local educated elites rather than the most marginalised. Yet, against the context of Ugandan social hierarchy and the absence of effective incentive and enforcement mechanisms within local government, this strategy is perhaps attuned to the political opportunities available to Rwenzori civil society actors at the current juncture, and has produced some positive outcomes for answerability. By bringing local-level actors like management committee members, teachers and

village councillors into contact with sub-county leaders and officials through the dialogue process, RD are facilitating local deliberation and problem-solving in ways that have led to the development of locally relevant solutions of benefit to a range of households. 'Elite' is also a relational category. The community leaders RD has trained comprise a heterogeneous group in terms of social status – one of the management committee chairs engaged during the research was a clan leader for example, while others were literate but had not finished primary school; and many are also parents and service users. In this way, although RD is perhaps achieving little for the political capabilities of the poorest, they are contributing to incremental empowerment and shifting citizen/state relations among different social strata within the spectrum of socio-economic status that makes up rural society in Rwenzori.

The danger, as these social accountability initiatives seem to suggest, is that working with elites becomes the only strategy, to the detriment of other potential popular sites of agency like local associations. RD's strategy might be more effective in enhancing the political capabilities of lower-income households by building awareness and capacity within PTAs and VHTs or other local associational forms, and fostering stronger links between these popular actors and more elite representative structures.⁶ Without effective mechanisms for incentives and sanctions within service providing institutions, however (Brett, 2003, Booth, 2012), and a shift in the values of those with vested interests in the *status quo* (Francis and James, 2003), the literature suggests that gains here too would be limited.

Expenditure Monitoring Research and District Dialogues

The public expenditure monitoring research and associated deliberations during district dialogues did achieve improvements to local services, but – like the sub-county dialogues – they have achieved little if anything for the long-term political capabilities of lower-income rural actors, as elite-led initiatives. This was not the express intention of this initiative however, and lasting gains have been achieved in terms of political learning by civil society activists. The creation of a new representative space – even if not directly mandated by the social groups it sought to represent – has fostered receptivity to NGO research, and more inclusive deliberations about local government service provision.

During one district dialogue, two of the most critical issues to be raised about local health services were shortages of staff and medicine. A district civil servant explained that the local government had struggled to either identify Ugandan staff with sufficient qualifications for senior posts⁷ or, where the qualifications existed, find staff who were prepared to work in the remote rural areas that characterise much of the district. Both the district council chair and a district health team official expressed a sense in which, although the staffing shortage was already well-known among district political leaders and civil servants, this research combined with lobbying from local councillors, sub-county chiefs and religious leaders, added to a sense of urgency in getting the gaps addressed. In January 2010, the District Services Commission gained authorisation from the Ministry of Health for money that had been budgeted for senior salaries to be spent on employing a higher number of more junior staff to fill the gaps at health centres across the district. Although still only at 79 per cent capacity after the increase in health service staffing, this district stood above the national average.

District-level actors have also used the research evidence for staff training and to encourage improved performance during supervisory meetings. One former district chair formed a 'district council committee for education' in response to the research, that drafted a by-law focused on tackling high numbers of school drop-outs and poor academic performance. The law had not been

implemented by the time the chair lost his seat in the 2011 elections, however, and it has not survived the leadership transition.

By taking on the roles of researcher and facilitator, there is a sense in which CPFs and staff are experiencing political learning by gathering evidence and presenting and negotiating around that evidence, while the rural residents who they are seeking to ‘empower’ remain passive sources of data. Yet, there were aspects to the research process that educated participants on their rights within health and education services and encouraged reflection, which may have contributed, along with RD’s training interventions, to Corbridge’s (2007) notion of an incrementally increasing sense of citizenship. The use of a survey also ensured that service users could share their experiences without fear of recriminations from local elites (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005).

As one-off exercises, the expenditure monitoring research and associated dialogues were inherently constrained in what they could achieve for the political capabilities of service users and providers in social accountability terms. The findings nonetheless provide support for Robinson’s conclusions that expenditure monitoring interventions can improve the use of development resources for the poor, and promote ‘a wider and more inclusive debate on the use of government funds’ (2006, p. 21). Certain local civil society actors questioned why RD had not taken a more confrontational stance towards local government in response to their research findings, and sought out a stronger civil society anti-corruption coalition. For RD, this was a matter of finding a balanced position. Leaders are ‘treading on egg shells’, as one civil society actor put it, for fear of recriminations from central government. At least one other NGO in the region had been dissolved by central government after becoming too vocal in its criticism of the NRM regime. In view of this constrained political space, RD’s research and dialogue approach perhaps represents a sensible compromise between collaboration and critique. In contrast to Chatterjee’s (2004) critique of elitist civil society, RD staff have been able to cultivate effective relationships with district-level civil servants and politicians because of their own often highly elite status and by exploiting their ‘mutual needs’ (Patel and Mitlin, 2009). RD has supplied useful evidence, information and a communicative platform for leaders to demonstrate responsiveness (ahead of the 2011 local government elections for example), while politicians or civil servants have given their time, and in some cases their commitment, to engagement with civil society advocates and citizen representatives within participatory governance structures.

Reviewing the outcomes RD has achieved through training, research and dialogue, it is fair to say that these interventions have not catalysed greater demand-side pressure for social accountability, but have nonetheless contributed to processes of political learning about formal rights, rules and procedures among local elite representatives, such as councillors and management committee members. Existing knowledge about the *de facto* rules of the game has in some cases worked against a drive for collective action and claims-making, out of a sense of resignation and futility however. By creating alternative spaces for local problem-solving, RD has at least generated a new pattern of representation that has begun to shift the deliberative focus of relevant local elites from questions of answerability and finger-pointing towards an engagement with the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms, and has fostered greater reflection and more inclusive (if not particularly cross-class) debate (Mitlin and Bebbington, 2006). Ultimately, however, these strategies have not re-shaped entrenched power relations between elite and poorer citizens, or between parents/service users and the state, and this may be linked to an absence of strategic action to tackle not just knowledge gaps but norms and values – both internalised by low-income groups and held by governance actors in relation to their own roles and their attitudes to low-income service users. Mitlin (2013), for example, suggests that for capabilities to become functionalities, that is, for increased knowledge and skills to translate into actual practice, popular actors need to become organised and interact directly at multiple levels of the state. It is through

this strategic action and interaction that people's own sense of self is transformed and the social norms held by power-holders towards the less powerful also begin to shift.

Conclusions: Social Accountability or Social Transformation?

The discussion above makes a number of important contributions to current debates concerning the ways in which NGOs can or should promote greater social accountability in particular political-economic contexts. First, the findings support Booth (2012) in demonstrating that demand-side strategies for enhanced accountability through more effective citizen participation within existing governance spaces can only bring limited outcomes for the political capabilities of disadvantaged groups in contexts characterised by patronage politics, where the institutional channels for accountability are weak, and populist policies undermine community ownership of services. The evidence presented here suggests that in agrarian contexts characterised by semi-authoritarian regimes like Uganda's, it is both the character of politics and the structure of societal power relations that most prominently shape the kinds of social accountability outcomes that NGOs are able to achieve, and particularly the nexus between these fields. These fields overlap in terms of the ways in which socio-economic power relations have become intertwined with a history of political repression and deference to authority, and the ways in which this shapes state/society relations and grassroots political agency. These findings reinforce the case in the literature for studies of, and approaches to, citizen empowerment to focus more clearly on politics and power relations rather than technical 'widgets' or formal institutional mechanisms (Hickey, 2009; Joshi and Houtzager, 2012).

This raises questions as to what NGOs should most usefully be aiming to achieve both for the political capabilities of disadvantaged groups in such contexts, and for state/citizen relations more broadly. RD's training, research and dialogue approaches have not managed to reshape the political networks or patterns of political representation that undermine downwards accountability at local or district level in the region. If anything, these have been reinforced by investing the majority of programme resources into working with local elites. As analyses from across the liberal/social democratic divide suggest, however, elites do play an important role in expanding space for alliances and participation by formerly excluded groups (Sandbrook *et al*, 2007; North *et al*, 2009). In a political-economic context where citizen agency and citizen-led action are hard to find or catalyse, and are contradictory to accepted social mores and behaviours, enhancing the advocacy capabilities of rural elites is at least a start on the road to building 'a sense of being a citizen' as Corbridge observes (2007, p. 197).

As isolated and donor-dependent strategies, however, such initiatives are unlikely to go beyond minor and sporadic achievements of answerability or enforcement in contexts with an absence of political will, linked to vast power inequalities between a poor rural majority and a minority political-economic elite that operates increasingly centralised control over resources. Overall therefore, the discussion here provides support for a growing body of critique that suggests such initiatives are but sticking plasters over the much deeper and more daunting challenge of securing better health and education for a greater number by redistributing socio-economic power (and the political power that accompanies it in such contexts) in ways that include those currently on the margins of the global capitalist system (Mosse, 2010; Bhattacharya and Bhattacharyya, 2013). Beyond advocating for substantive agrarian reform, the discussion here suggests that NGOs interested in more transformative social change need to find ways to support disadvantaged groups, like subsistence and smallholder farmers, to organise for the accumulation of these kinds of power, in order to more effectively represent their interests, and

make meaningful claims of the state. Such a conclusion requires civil society donors to focus attention on initiatives that build the collective capabilities of farmer organisations over the long term. For governance reformers – whether internal or external to the state – it requires the development of institutional mechanisms that give citizen’s organisations a meaningful role to play within local service provision, one that, in other words, provides for enforcement as well as answerability. Finally, the analysis here suggests that Williams’ political capabilities framework offers a revelatory lens into the politics and power relations shaping civil society strategies for enhancing social accountability in agrarian and patronage-based sub-Saharan African contexts. Future research could fruitfully investigate the extent to which this relevance holds across different political-economic environments.

Notes

1. Hubbard (2007) questions Reinikka and Svensson (2011).
2. Estimates based on census projections cited within internal documentation. There are no official aggregate figures at sub-regional level.
3. The research incorporated 24 health facilities and 181 schools across four districts. District dialogues were organised in each area for presentation and discussion of the research findings.
4. Bills of quantities describe the type and quantity of materials to be used for public works sub-contracted from local government.
5. Villages in Uganda are supposed to have VHT – a group of volunteers who in theory distribute health information and mobilise the community to identify their health needs.
6. A related paper (King, 2014) explores the potentially deeper political capabilities outcomes achieved when NGOs support smallholder farmers to form livelihood-based associations through which farmers accumulate socio-economic power while learning to represent their interests.
7. The Ministry had a policy in place that ring-fenced health appointments for Ugandan nationals.

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