

# **Social accountability: What does the evidence really say?**

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# What exactly *is* social accountability?

Social accountability strategies try to improve institutional performance by bolstering both citizen engagement and government responsiveness

- ▶ In the development field, the focus has been on improving public service delivery, including health, education, water and local public works
- ▶ Key assumptions include:
  - Trying to hold politicians accountable isn't enough
  - Spending more money isn't enough
- ▶ **Direct citizen “voice” is also needed** – both to identify problems and to promote solutions (oversight & advocacy)

## How does SAcc relate to a rights-based approach?

- ▶ **Ambiguity:** Does SAcc promote citizen voice as a *means* (efficiency, good public sector mgt) – or as an *end* in itself (the right to be heard)?
- ▶ **Limitations:** Some SAcc initiatives are limited to soliciting citizen feedback, leaving out deliberation, agenda-setting and not obliging power-holders to respond
- ▶ **Possibilities:** Rights are “enforceable claims” (Tilly). SAcc processes, by projecting citizen voice upwards – can promote the *enforcement* of rights by making them “demandable”

# “What counts” as social accountability?

- ▶ The definitional boundaries of SAcc are not yet settled (< 10 years)
- ▶ In practice, SAcc is an evolving **umbrella category** that includes:

- Citizen monitoring/oversight/feedback on public sector performance
- User-centered public information access/dissemination
- Public complaint & grievance redress mechanisms
- Citizen participation in resource allocation decisions (e.g., participatory budgeting)

# What does the evaluation evidence tell us about evidence of tangible development impacts?

- ▶ Many excellent literature reviews already exist...
- ▶ Results are mixed, so the evidence seems inconclusive - now what?
- ▶ Context matters, but are there any broad trends?
- ▶ Expectations vary widely - from it's a “magic bullet” to “just hype”

So let's reframe the question:

**How can *rethinking* the evidence help to address the “what next?” question?**

## Summary of the argument:

- ▶ If one unpacks the impact evaluation evidence, it tests two very different approaches under the broad SAcc umbrella: *tactical* and *strategic*

### ▶ **Tactical SAcc approaches:**

- Are bounded interventions (also known as tools)
- Are limited to localized, society-side efforts (voice-only)
- Assume that information provision alone will (a) inspire collective action with sufficient power to influence public sector performance

### ▶ **Strategic SAcc approaches:**

- Deploy multiple tactics (mutually reinforcing tools)
- Encourage enabling environments for collective action (reduce perceived obstacles/threats)
- Coordinate citizen voice initiatives with governmental reforms that bolster public sector responsiveness

### ▶ **Rereading evaluations through this new lens:**

- Evidence of results of *tactical* approaches is mixed
- Evidence of results of *strategic* approaches is much more promising

## What do the studies of SAcc interventions that find low impact suggest?

- ▶ **Information is not enough.** Impact evaluations have tested the proposition that local dissemination of service delivery outcome data will activate collective action, which will in turn improve service provider responsiveness.
  - Several influential studies find no impacts (Banerjee et al 2010, Lieberman, Posner and Tsai 2013, Keefer and Khemani 2012)
- ▶ **Bottom-up community monitoring often lacks bite.** Impact evaluations have tested the proposition that local oversight of public works, by itself, can limit corruption
  - Community monitoring may have no impact (Olken 2007)
- ▶ **Induced participation in local development is often captured by elites.** Many studies have documented development outcomes of both community-driven and decentralized social investments, which are widely seen as SAcc-related
  - A major meta-analysis of top-down local development found very mixed results (Mansuri and Rao 2013) [approx. 500 studies]

## Key SAcc studies are sometimes misinterpreted...

Iconic study	“Pop” version of message	Behind that message – <i>what do the findings actually show?</i>	Reframed takeaway
Olken (2007) Village public works in Indonesia (roads)	Top down and bottom up approaches are dichotomous. Top down central audits work, community monitoring can’t reduce corruption	Community-based monitoring lacked access to the key info about projects (Olken 2009). Plus, central audits don’t sanction, only the threat of cty responses gives them the clout to reduce corruption	The central audit works through cty response (social sanctions and village elections). So central audits actually work <i>because of SAcc</i> . <b>Top down and bottom up accountability are synergistic</b>
Banerjee, Banerji, Duflo, Glenester, Khemani (2010) Village education committees in India	Community oversight doesn’t help to improve public service delivery	The village education oversight committees rarely function in practice. Plus, parent reps are chosen by local authorities	Enabling environment was lacking. Actual participation & oversight were minimal. This looks like a <b>“false negative”</b>
Mansuri and Rao (2013) Meta-analysis of local development research	Participatory local development often doesn’t work - it’s oversold	<i>Top-down</i> local development projects are vulnerable to elite capture. Few included SAcc measures.	Local development initiatives likely to work better if they <b>combine central oversight with SAcc measures</b>



## Many other studies find that SAcc strategies can help to deliver tangible impacts

Sector	Country	Tool	Impact	Key sources
Education	Uganda	Dissem of \$ info	Larger % of funds reach schools	Rienikka & Svennson (2004, 2009)
Education	Uganda	Participatory monitoring	Ed outcomes	Barr et al (2012)
Education	Kenya	Ctty hiring of teachers	Teacher effort & ed outcomes	Duflo et al (2012)
Education	India	Dissem of \$ info & parent roles	Teacher effort & ed outcomes	Pandey et al (2011)
Education	Indonesia	School co-governance	Ed outcomes	Pardhan et al (2011)
Local govt	Brazil	Participatory budgeting	Lower infant mortality	Gonçalves (2013) Touchton & Wampler (2013)
Local govt	Mexico	Participatory budgeting	Increased basic service coverage	Díaz-Cayeros et al (2013)
Local govt	India	Participatory budgeting	Improved targeting	Besley, Rao, Pandey (2005), Chaudhuri, Harilal, & Heller (2007)
Health	Uganda	Participatory monitoring	Improved health outcomes	Bjorkman & Svennson, (2009), Bjorkman, de Walque, Svennson (2013)
Local elections	Brazil	Dissem of audit info	Electoral accountability	Ferraz and Finan (2008)
Public works	India	Social audits	Less wage theft	Shankar (2010)
Public works	Indonesia	Local dissem of audits	Less leakage of road funds	Olken (2007)
Water	Int'l	Co-governance	Econ, social & sustainability impacts	Narayan (1995)
Water	India, Sri Lanka	Co-governance	Econ, social, & sustainability impacts	Krishna & Uphoff (2002), Uphoff & Wijayaratra (2000), Isham & Kähkönen (2002)
Targeted food subsidy	India	Access to info	Access to ration cards w/o bribes	Peisakhin & Pinto (2010)

## When SAcc works, how does it work? Three examples...

Study	Findings	Causal explanation
<p><b>Community monitoring of health services in Uganda.</b> Björkman and Svensson (2009) test a report card process designed to encourage voice, avoid elite capture and facilitate periodic dialogue with health workers</p>	<p>Reduction in infant mortality in treatment communities (33%), increased use of outpatient services (20%) and overall improvement of health treatment practices (immunization rates, waiting time, absenteeism)</p>	<p>Community discussion &amp; assessment of service performance, plus facilitated direct negotiation of expected actions with service providers encouraged them to improve performance</p>
<p><b>Participatory budgeting in Brazil.</b> Both Gonçalves (2013) and Touchton and Wampler (2013) document long-term Brazilian municipal spending priorities, comparing those with and without participatory budgeting (PB)</p>	<p>PB municipalities = 169 of 5,561 (in 2000), with 27% of nat'l pop. They allocated a larger share of funding to sanitation and health services (avg &gt; 3% higher), reducing infant mortality rates (holding per capita budgets constant)</p>	<p>PB encourages authorities to provide services that meet needs of otherwise underrepresented citizens &amp; creates frequent citizen checks on promised actions</p>
<p><b>Targeted access to information in India.</b> Peisakhin and Pinto (2010) test the Right to Information Act with a field experiment that compared different application strategies for food ration cards.</p>	<p>Bureaucrats ignored most applicants, but those who also filed information requests about the status of their application &amp; district level processing times were consistently successful. Only bribery produced comparable results.</p>	<p>Since India's RTI very rarely sanctions non-compliance, the proposed explanation is that mid-level administrators fear that RTI non-compliance may slow their professional advancement</p>

## “Mixed results” suggest the tactical and strategic distinction

Tactical approach to SAcc	Yet evaluations show....	(Revised) Strategic approach to SAcc
Information is power	For poor people – don’t count on it	Information that is perceived as <i>actionable</i> , in an enabling environment, can motivate collective action – especially if voice can trigger “teeth” (state responsiveness)
Decentralization brings government closer to the people	Not so much	Only democratic decentralization brings government closer to the people
Community participation is democratic	Social bias and elite capture are common. Allocating public funds to local elites strengthens them	Community participation processes with enabling environments, involving specific measures to include underrepresented members can be more democratic
Community oversight can reduce “government failure” by itself	Not much, without accountability measures from above	Centralized accountability measures can reduce “government failure” – especially if bolstered by community oversight & sanctions

## This brings us to a set of “next generation” challenges, including:

### ▶ *Individual tools or multi-pronged strategies?*

- Experience with individual SAcc tools (e.g., community report cards) is ahead of broader strategies that involve multiple, mutually-reinforcing tools

### ▶ *Can citizen oversight efforts scale up/vertically integrate to monitor the service delivery “supply chain?”*

- There are often missing links between local community voice and national citizen policy/oversight
- Citizen oversight efforts need to address the problem of “squeezing the balloon,” when anti-accountability forces redeploy or deflect challenges to their impunity

### ▶ *How can citizen voice gain clout by increasing governmental capacity to respond?*

- Few voice-led initiatives are coordinated with relevant governance reforms to encourage government responsiveness (i.e., audit/anti-corruption investigative bodies, public information access reforms, ombudsman, access to courts, etc.)

## Unpacking the shorthand: What are “voice” and “teeth?”

- ▶ **“Voice”** refers here to *both* the aggregation and representation of the views of under-represented citizens

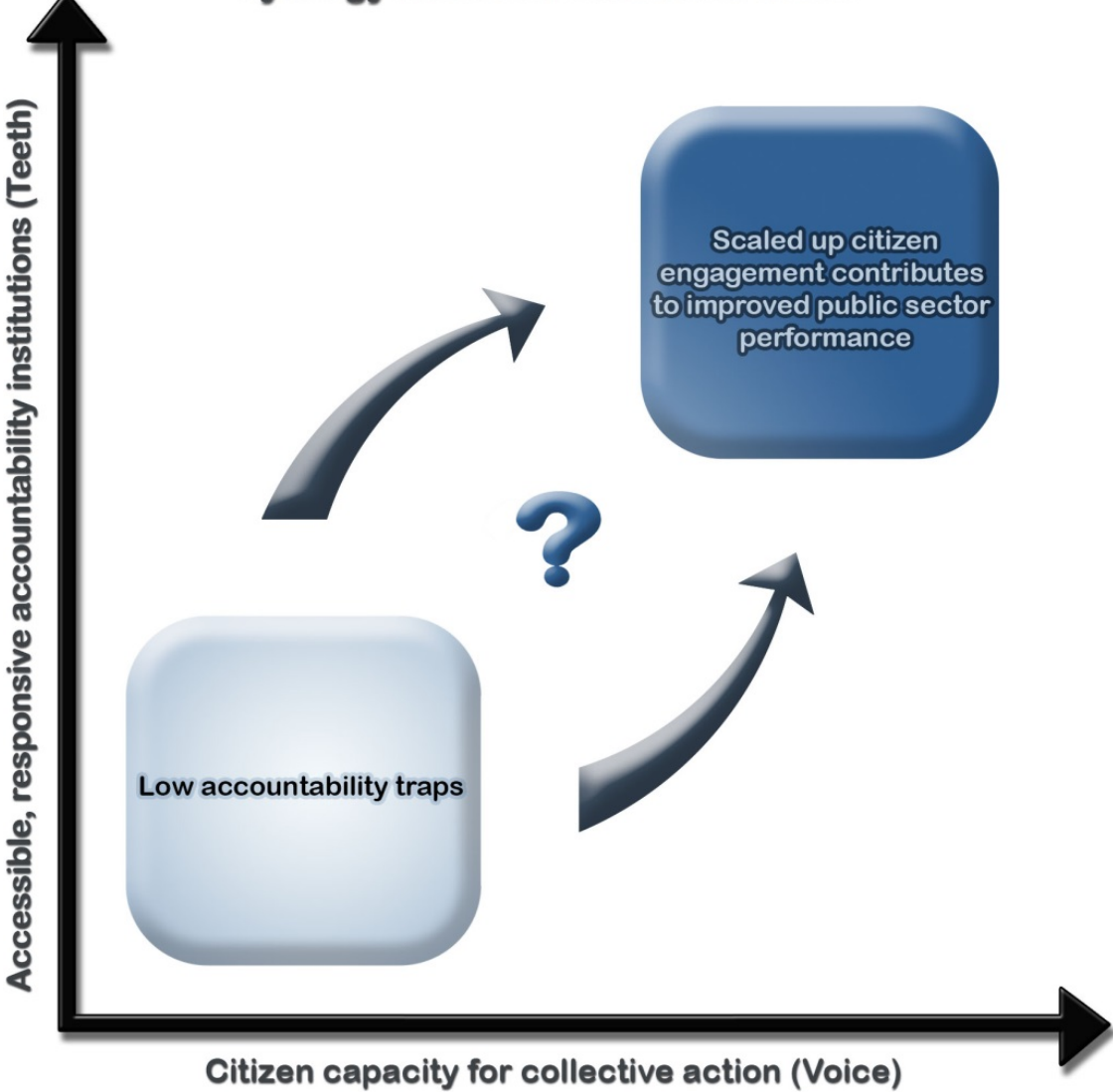
Many need to exercise voice (aggregation) and they also need to have the capacity to dialogue & negotiate with authorities (representation).

- ▶ **“Teeth”** refers to government capacity to *respond* to voice - which includes both positive incentives and negative sanctions to reform the public sector.

That is: Can authorities deliver?

- ▶ **Challenge:** How to trigger *virtuous circles*, in which enabling environments embolden citizens to exercise voice, which in turn can trigger and empower reforms, which can then encourage more voice?

**Pathways out of low accountability traps:  
Synergy between voice and teeth**



Returning to “what works?” in the SAcc field:

Voice needs teeth to have bite...

.... but teeth may not bite without voice