

Synthesis Report:

Options for Cross-Country/Regional Learning Themes (OGB-ANSA EAP)

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ANSA EAP facilitated regional and country-level chats that intended to deepen OGB staff's understanding about the uses, and context-specific adaptations that need to be made for the effective use of Social Accountability Tools. The chats were a combination of conceptual discussions about Social Accountability tools such as participatory planning, and budgeting and participation in the cycle of public finance management (PFM). The ANSA-EAP staff and the mentor worked with the OGB country teams in an attempt to produce Social Accountability action plans. A regional chat took place on April 16 and subsequent country level chats with OGB-Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Philippines were also held.

This synthesis report will neither repeat nor summarize the chats that took place. Documentation of the individual chats are available at the ANSA-EAP portals. In lieu of a final region-level chat, this report will assemble a number of cross country and possibly regional thematic threads that the ANSA-EAP OGB initiative may opt to pursue.

- 1. Mapping of the spaces where accountability relationships can be established i) between higher and lower-level policy makers located at different government tiers. ii) between policy makers and service providers iii) between service providers and citizens and iv) between policy making tiers and citizens.**

In Vietnam the map of such prospective accountability relationships, say in the provision of irrigation, could vary from one province to the next. The decentralization rules were broadly worded and permitted a pluralism of formalized hierarchical arrangements across provinces. In Cambodia decentralization was for many years done only at the commune level. The mandates of the districts and provinces, as well as the relationships among these tiers were unspecified until recently.

In other words, the nexus where social accountability mechanisms can arise is also determined by the design of decentralization – the contrast in the formal institutional relationships will also lead to strong contrasts in entry points for social accountability mechanisms.

The recent promulgation of mandates for the district and province in Cambodia necessarily reconfigures, and maybe broadens, the options of where to locate social accountability practices in that country. Conceivably, the disincentives to participation due to the very limited resources, powers and personnel of communes will disappear as district and province-level spaces open up for civil society engagement. Something similar might already be happening in Vietnam, with the possible contrast that there appears to be more scope for localized rule-making in Vietnam.

- 2. From the chats, with the possible exception of OGB-Philippines, there would appear to be a high level of distrust of ministry officials, and of commune and people's councils because of upward links to the party or because these continue to be associated with discredited or dictatorial regimes.**

Cambodia (and Myanmar) would probably embody highly limited opportunities for real

reform and for forging community-level and national-level links among reformers and civil society groups. On the other hand, the decentralization in Indonesia, even Vietnam, could feature real reform trajectories and sustained opportunities for social accountability practices that have some measure of support from reformers in the central government or in the ministries.

In the case of Vietnam, the decentralization was a direct response to the acknowledged failure of top-down rule in some provinces where riots took place due to the abuse and corruption of party bureaucrats. In the case of Indonesia post-Suharto electoral competition at the national level and in parliament has been creating incentives for office holders to start being responsive to community-level and street-level constituencies. The upshot of this is that in the case of OGB Vietnam and OGB Indonesia, the exploration of possible community-national reformer link-ups may generate huge returns in the near future.

In settings like the Philippines, national-level reformers have, from time to time, provided support (in the form of laws, and seemingly insignificant administrative innovations) that increased the bargaining power of communities and marginalized sectors versus local elite office holders. Reformers in ministries are usually well placed to provide information that would not otherwise be made available locally. National or even provincial level reformers could also endorse the idea of score-card-based competitions among sub-districts in Indonesia where OGB Indonesia is working with women's groups.

3. **“Accountability without democracy”**. In Cambodia (and Myanmar) and in Vietnam to some extent there may be lessons that can be gleaned from the experience of social networks in China that are described in “Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China” by Lily Tsai. The key idea might be summed up as “party members and government bureaucrats are people too,” they are embedded in religious, ethnic and professional associations. And it is thru connections in such associations that informal forms of accountability and popular influence can be put to bear on office holders.

This concept may be one of a number of necessary modifications to the idea of Social Accountability – which to a significant degree was conceptualized with open societies in mind, where obligations and accountabilities of office holders are at least as well defined as their powers and prerogatives.

A related conceptual innovation that might be apt for societies governed by authoritarian cliques and parties would be the idea of the power “everyday politics,” as elaborated by Ben Kerkvliet in his narrative of how the constant derailment of top-down official plans through the uncoordinated decentralized but persistent action of ordinary people led to the retrenchment of collective farms in Vietnam.

From the chats and from one's knowledge of the creativity of urban poor communities, it is possible that documentation of the uncoordinated but synchronized response, say, to state housing policy could strengthen the hand of reformers who are predisposed to align government housing plans and procedures to the preferences of ordinary people. At some point, the realization by (paternalistic) party officials and bureaucrats that reforms and service delivery improvements can arise from the emergence of a civil society or media feedback loop might lead them to formalize and even support such feedback mechanisms – this might be seen as constituting one kind of prehistory of social accountability in authoritarian settings.

4. Accountability for Policy Implementation. The country and regional chats reveal that, as everywhere else, there are many rules on decentralization, gender budgets, popular participation, grievance mechanisms in case of land disputes and other nice things that have no teeth and reality except on paper.

A key idea that was discussed during the mentoring sessions, and to which, there was near unanimous agreement is that the promulgation of policy is sometimes seen as the culmination of an advocacy process. In fact the formulation of policy should also be seen as the beginning of the processes of negotiation, bargaining and erosion of the efficacy of well-conceived policies. The anemic implementation or non-implementation of potentially progressive social accountability practices is very often interpreted as a lack of knowledge of policies that are in the rule books. But just as often, the non-implementation of progressive policies is nothing else but the lack of local demand for such policies coming from local office holders.

New rules are resisted because local office holders “don't want to fix what's not broken”. If local office holders have risen up the political ladder without the aid of social accountability instruments, there would be very little motivation for experimenting on novel procedures of planning and budgeting that could potentially disrupt the well practiced craft of political survival and patronage politics.

There were suggestions on how to make progress in such kinds of settings. What was clear from the discussions, however, is that civil society groups will be unable to effectively use social accountability mechanisms if they don't have policy champions and constituencies to back them up. There will surely be exceptional local officials who would subsequently welcome the practice of social accountability. The experience and context of such local officials will be a gold mine of insights on the process of local political change that would create pathways for the practice of social accountability. Exemplars encountered in the literature or in the course of doing OGB work can be discussed by the different country teams with a view to learning about the process of creating the political space for social accountability.

5. Mutual Monitoring for collective action. Social accountability is critical in multi-stakeholder consensus building and policy formulation and in the achievement of the desired multi-stakeholder collective action. This probably describes the key challenge in the domain of climate change mitigation and adaptation. The collective action failures at the international level are well known. But analogous collective action failures at the national and local levels are also among the most important reasons for the weakness of adaptation responses. Who will bear the costs of adaptation, is that a fair allocation of burdens? Will those who violate covenants be penalized? Will those who fail to penalize violators themselves be penalized? This is quite different from a setting where public deliberation formalizes a tasks that the government has to prioritize, fund and faithfully execute. This is because climate change adaptation, as we know, requires changes in behaviors, voluntary resettlement of people etc and not just the allocation of budgets. It is a case of governing a complex system with multiple stakeholders interacting; and in governing such systems mutual monitoring, consensus building negotiations and the setting up of feedback loops for constant readjustment of agreements are needed. Are there social accountability tools that will measure up to such new complex challenges?