



This project is co-funded by the
Seventh Framework Programme for
Research and Technological
Development of the European Union



EU Grant Agreement number: 290529

Project acronym: ANTICORRP

Project title: Anti-Corruption Policies Revisited

**Work Package: WP7: Individual values and motivations to engage
against corruption**

Title of deliverable:

D7.4 Synthesis report on social accountability tools

Due date of deliverable: November 30, 2016

Actual submission date: November 29, 2016

Authors: WP7

Organisation name of lead beneficiary for this deliverable: Transparency International

Project co-funded by the European Commission within the Seventh Framework Programme		
Dissemination Level		
PU	Public	X
PP	Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission Services)	
RE	Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services)	
Co	Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)	

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Taking Stock and Looking Forward: Social Accountability Research and Practice

Dieter Zinnbauer, August 2016

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Abstract

Given the proliferation of empirical syntheses on social accountability that have been produced over the last few years, this stock-take seeks to add value by taking a meta approach. It distils the main insights from the evidence reviews already in existence, maps areas of agreement, identifies promising opportunities for further practical experiments and offers a commentary on how the social accountability funding, design and research landscape is evolving.

The term 'social accountability' has a long and distinguished history and has been deployed in many different contexts, though its current rise to popularity was ushered in most prominently by the 2004 *World Development Report* (published in 2003). Since then a vast number of definitions, typologies and conceptual frameworks have been proposed, and this stock-take embraces a pragmatic, flexible working definition that understands social accountability as all those things other than voting that people can do to hold their leaders and service providers to account and make their work more responsive to an inclusive set of stakeholders.

Most overviews coalesce around a set of central insights, including the following five key messages, which this meta-stock-take subjects to a critical appraisal.

A mixed evidence base and difficulty in attributing definitive impact, yet a solid proof of concept to encourage further activity in this space

Many studies initially focused on some direct outcomes, such as reductions in leakage rates, bribery or staff absenteeism, but there is also a lively, largely unresolved debate about what should count as impact, or as 'It works', with more recent studies suggesting the need to take a broader view on possible impacts. Overall, the empirical evidence is extremely mixed. Some overviews strike an optimistic tone and highlight social accountability cases with demonstrable impact, but they are counterbalanced by others that paint a rather negative picture of high failure rates, while yet others come down squarely in the middle. Given this equivocal evidence landscape, pursuing the quest for a definitive verdict on what works and what does not may seem quixotic, but there is a critical mass of sufficiently solid indications of a significant positive impact for, essentially, all types of social accountability mechanisms, which can be interpreted as a solid proof of concept warranting further embracing and refining of social accountability efforts.

Context matters – yet when, how and what is difficult to generalise

Context is found to have a crucial bearing on the chances of success of every social accountability intervention, and extensive lists of contextual factors have been drawn up showing the great diversity and sheer number of intervening variables that make up context.

One important conclusion drawn by some of the earlier reviews and framed primarily as a message to international donors is to *think and work politically* and base social accountability interventions on a sound analysis of the political interests and dynamics attaching to a particular situation. At the same time, however, this 'context matters' catalogue of factors that the literature yields cannot serve as a checklist, filter criteria or be a straightforward formula for funding better social accountability. What it *can* do is provide researchers and activists alike with a broader, inspirational view on potential levers and dynamics that might perhaps help – or get in the way when embracing social accountability mechanisms for effecting change.

Information is not (sufficient) for shifting power and generating accountability – but it opens a promising design space

Many social accountability interventions are built around information as a stimulus for change, yet a consistent insight from almost all studies suggests that information alone is not enough. It is also noteworthy that small tweaks in informational presentation can make a big difference in terms of impact, and there is a growing cross-fertilisation with insights and experimental practice from social-psychology (the so-called ‘nudge’ school of thought) that paves the way for further initiatives that enhance the efficacy of information-centric social accountability efforts.

Technology is not a magic bullet for social accountability, yet giving up on it prematurely is not in order

The evidence suggests that technology has not turned out to be great game-changer in social accountability. It is more a tool of the already empowered and less a weapon of the weak. The associated conclusion, that technology will simply follow and amplify existing power asymmetries, is problematic, however. There are a number of reasons for not taking the interpretation of the current evidence base too far and throttling the zeal of those imagining new technologies for accountability.

Operating with a richer, more embedded concept of ‘the citizen’ points to new pathways for impact

Many review studies contribute very interesting snippets to a better understanding of the notion of citizenship that underpins social accountability interventions. All these findings add up to the overall exhortation to put a stronger focus on the ‘social’ in social accountability, and to weave social accountability dimensions more strategically and more pragmatically into everyday life and its social organisation and to wrap them around the existing scaffolds and mobilisation structures of identities, solidarities and civic life. This might also entail moving away from short-term support for specific time-bound projects set on quick deliverables to cultivating longer-term relationships with patient institutional support.

Based on a review of these and several other key insights, the meta-stock-take offers a number of ideas for future initiatives in social accountability practice, design and research.

With regard to the current practice of social accountability initiatives, there are three areas that suggest themselves for more exploration. First, so far very limited attention has been given to finding ways to productively involve local business as an important stakeholder in the local political and social economy, and thus as a potentially highly promising ally for change. Local business may be able to provide some critical expertise in bookkeeping and surveying, significant clout and inside access as employer and taxpayer and some organisational and financial muscle, making social accountability mechanisms more effective. Second, close examination of funding models is peculiarly absent from much of the discussion of social accountability interventions, perhaps because most assessments are carried out on donor-funded projects. A good starting point would be to take a step back and recognise that social accountability creates concrete material benefits that, when they are realised, can provide a positive return on investment for different types of stakeholders and open up opportunities for experimenting with different pooling and funding models, from impact bonds to micro-insurance and pay-upon-success schemes. Third, thinking more

boldly about integration may be in order. The message for the better integration of social accountability initiatives is emerging loudly and clearly from most of the recent stock-takes and reviews, yet what is envisaged is still primarily imagined with a strong focus on a narrow set of governance advocates and how they could better interlink with governments and institutional mechanisms for accountability, or how they could more productively align social accountability with a broader set of governance advocacy and action efforts. Taking the enriched concept of citizenship as a point of departure suggests a broader array of connections and integration efforts, however, with, for example, community organisers in the urban development or environmental justice sphere, or faith-based organisations that are already in place and perhaps resonate with people's identities, interests and aspirations more than involvement in governance-focused initiatives per se.

With regard to the good design of practices for social accountability, a central and common lament by most, if not all, recent reviews of social accountability is the lack of explicit and robust theories of change in most projects. The risk, however, is that the quest for more precise theories of change in situations of high complexity will turn out to be futile from a research perspective and unhelpful from a practical point of view, since it might straightjacket projects into rigid plans when nimble reactions to unintended consequences and unforeseen opportunities along the way offer the best chances for success. Likewise, expectations of how innovation can be incubated and scaled into transformational change might have to be adjusted downwards somewhat, as social accountability is typically about challenging power, and impact is thus shaped by different dynamics from innovative progress in other development areas that implicitly serve as benchmarks. More unconventional risk-taking and more patience in incubating new ideas in this area might both be helpful.

Finally, with regard to research strategies that might further advance our understanding of social accountability and help maximise their efficacy, three ideas are proposed. First, a stronger focus not on the initiatives and users themselves but on the surroundings – the people who potentially could but do not engage, the exploration of ripple effects on peers and other institutions not directly involved – might yield interesting insights about longer-term effects and future strategies for mobilisation. Second, the current focus on randomised control trials and the limitations that come with this particular methodology suggest that more complementary research adopting ethnographic or mixed-method approaches would be welcome. Third, and most importantly, the inherent complexity and unforeseeable dynamics of unfolding social accountability in practice call for a significant re-centring of research around an adaptive learning approach, whereby research follows and folds around practice, evidence is fed back through rapid feedback loops and informs iterative design adjustments, and research methods can adjust along the way so as to help explore unforeseen dynamics and opportunities.

Overall, this critical appraisal of the vast landscape of social accountability evidence and research investigation argues for a re-diversification of the conversation. It cautions against a common tenor of reacting to perceived high rates of failure by trying harder, anticipating more and pre-planning all and, instead, argues for a more patient, risk-taking and flexible approach, in social accountability funding, design and research alike.

A Introduction

[The Risen Lord] he knows our care: the burden of the interests of others; the training, guiding, helping work that must be done and done again; the responsibility of station and office, of parental headship, of social accountability.

Charles Cuthbert Hall, minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn, NY, 1893¹

Social accountability burst fully onto the public policy scene in 2004 with the publication of the seminal *World Development Report (WDR)*, with its focus on service delivery and the poor.² In its most simple conceptualisation as, essentially, anything that people can do other than voting to hold governments to account³ it has many famous ancestors – as well as close and estranged siblings and diverse relatives in various fields of academic enquiry and social action, from participatory development and civic engagement to social movements for human rights, democratisation, social justice and many more.

The WDR 2004 popularised and firmly anchored the idea in the epistemic and practice community related to issues of good governance. Since then social accountability has gained enormous popularity. It typically connotes a hopeful paradigm to spark a new generation of engagement opportunities, collective action mechanisms, tools, levers, interfaces to deepen or revive democracy and empower people vis-à-vis the institutions that govern them. It describes a repertoire of at times subversive tactics to route around, patch up or bridge governance failures. It serves as a programmatic and pragmatic launch pad for designing development interventions and galvanising social action for better water, pro-poor budgets, inclusive growth, more open government and more efficient services. Moreover, with its fluid framing and adaptable purpose, it can be embraced by and serve almost the entire gamut of political leanings or ideological predispositions. It feels truly ecumenical in nature and can appeal in different guises to libertarians and liberals, communitarians and communists, conservatives and reactionaries alike.

Against this backdrop the rise to fame of what at the outset comes across as something of an awkward technocratic term is not surprising. Indeed, it might not be an exaggeration to observe that social accountability has also taken the (anti-)corruption world by storm, a natural and crucial addition to the weaponry of the corruption fighter, whose struggle and purpose are defined by the very lack of accountability and failing governance that underpin the abuse of entrusted power for private gain – as corruption is commonly conceptualised.

As a result, social accountability initiatives in many forms and shapes have proliferated as part of anti-corruption efforts. They are designed to help monitor, audit and track, provide input to, or feedback on, open government and service provision, to detect and sanction or deter and prevent

¹ C. Hall, *Into His Marvellous Light. Studies in Life and Belief* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1893).

² World Bank, *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People* (Washington: World Bank, 2003).

³ A review of definitions will follow later.

corrupt actions. Social accountability in anti-corruption circles is thus a transmission mechanism for people engagement and people empowerment. It is underpinned by the ambition to harness the growing public frustration and anger about corruption and channel its energy and power into targeted, transformational anti-corruption reforms, thus swelling the ranks of supporters in a struggle that may at times have been carried forward primarily by a smaller band of dedicated activists, policy aficionados and technocrats. Establishing social checks and balances and alternative mechanisms for holding to account also comes with the intuitive appeal that it may offer alternative pathways to change in contexts and countries stuck in situations of a high-corruption equilibrium. In such contexts, when corruption is systemic and permeates the entire formal institutional apparatus, when formal accountability mechanisms, checks and balances are debilitated or collusive and when meaningful institutional reforms from within are a distant possibility, social accountability mechanisms are the people's instrument, organised as islands of accountability – lighthouse projects that seed further reforms, independently from and in spite of the formal institutional dysfunctionality that surrounds them. This also points to the psychological dimension of impactful social accountability – the desire to break the paralysing notion that nothing can be done, that I and others and people in general cannot make a difference – and they therefore offer concrete templates to spring into action.

These great hopes for social accountability and the proliferation of related initiatives were a motivating force in 2011, when the ANTICORRP research consortium was put together, to include a stock-take of the emerging research and evidence on social accountability as an important task in our work package on citizen action against corruption.

Back then this looked like a very timely and topical research endeavour. And it still looks like a very pertinent question now, almost five years later, when wrapping up and writing up this stock-take exercise, which has been running in parallel with Transparency International's other work streams as a continuous scanning exercise all this time. The last five years have witnessed a continuing proliferation of social accountability formats, projects and ideas – further fuelled by a new wave of technological innovation and the rise of the open government movement. What we know about social accountability, what the evidence tells us, what we have learnt and where this learning might take us next are still all highly relevant questions, therefore.

What *has* changed in the last five years, however, and what has come as a positive surprise, has been the really rapid development of an increasingly expansive and professionalised research and learning community around social accountability. The last five years have witnessed not only a rapidly growing number of primary research projects dedicated to examining the impacts of social accountability mechanisms but also the growth of several large learning collaboratives aimed at compiling and synthesising the rapidly growing body of primary evidence. These efforts have spawned a number of impressively comprehensive and very up-to-date synthesis reports.

Against this backdrop, the stock-take carried out here will not seek to re-invent the wheel and revisit the vast primary evidence base that has already been so expertly dissected, inspected and synthesised from a variety of perspectives. Instead, we believe that we can best add value to this thriving literature by taking

- one step back and **synthesise the syntheses**, in addition to somewhat expanding the scope of the evidence base to some related areas of social action that closely connected to but are typically not considered under the social accountability umbrella
- one step out and **provide an overview of the related learning and research landscape**, the approaches to research, learning and project design that are practised and promoted

All along, moreover, we will seek to offer some speculative ideas, and perhaps some slightly provocative observations, all in good spirit and with the intention of helping to inspire the conversation on the future research, policy and action agenda for social accountability.

B Definitions of social accountability: a rough consensus for blurry bounds

As the introductory quote indicates, the term ‘social accountability’ has a long and distinguished history, and has been deployed in many different contexts for very different purposes. As a political and social idea⁴ in the twentieth century it came to describe obligations and responsibilities that specific (non-governmental) group of actors and institutions should have vis-à-vis the social community, from business leaders to professional psychologists or medical schools.⁵

Perhaps the earliest sustained use of the term in the contemporary political arena, as part of a progressive reform agenda, can be observed with regard to the business sector. As early as the 1950s business historians in the United States were beginning to use the notion of social accountability in relation to the notable efforts that had taken place during the progressive era at the beginning of the twentieth century to make the business sector more socially responsible and accountable to a broader group of stakeholders and the broader public.⁶ Since then the notion of social accountability has evolved into an important normative and advocacy concept in the business arena, and most references in the policy literature from the 1970s to the turn of the century refer to its use in the business context. Social accountability even lends its name to an entire international certification, standard SA8000, established by the organisation Social Accountability International in 1997. SA8000 enables companies to articulate their social commitments in auditable ways, and as of 2013 it had been adopted by more than 3,000 facilities across 72 countries.⁷ A shorthand of social accountability in policy debates in the 1980s or 1990s would have most likely referred to and been associated with the social responsibilities of businesses to the social community they operate in. Since then the use of social accountability vis-à-vis the corporate sector seems to have abated somewhat, eclipsed by new anchor concepts such as corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship.

⁴ Social accountability has also been used as a technical concept in other fields, such as communication studies or social psychology: see, for example, R. Buttny, *Social Accountability in Communication* (London: Sage, 1993); and J. Shotter, ‘Social Accountability and Self-Specification’, in *The Social Construction of the Person*, 167–189 (New York: Springer, 1985). These uses tend to intersect to varying degrees with the notion of social accountability in political science and related disciplines; the focus here is firmly on the latter, however.

⁵ J. J. McMillan, ‘Agenda for the '70s in Professional Affairs: Some First Thoughts’, *Professional Psychology*, vol. 1 (1970), 181–184; R. F. Woollard, ‘Caring for a Common Future: Medical Schools' Social Accountability’, *Medical Education*, vol. 40 (2006), 301–313.

⁶ See, for example, M. Heald, ‘Management's Responsibility to Society: The Growth of an Idea’, *Business History Review*, vol. 31 (1957), 375–384.

⁷ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SA8000>.

At the same time, social accountability as an idea, even if not yet under this name, has begun to gain increasing popularity in the policy and research community in relation to governance issues.⁸ As mentioned earlier, the 2004 *World Development Report* (published in 2003) was, at that time, the most visible example planting an ideational and conceptual flag for social accountability in the policy community. Although it did not actually use the term ‘social accountability’ as such, the report promoted a *short route* to accountability for service provision via various direct mechanisms with which citizens could hold service providers to account, as an alternative or complement to the *long route* of accountability via elections and the accountability of politicians to the electorate for the public service provision that they oversee. Many of the compelling practical examples that the report mustered to illustrate the idea would today be described as social accountability practices. In the wake of the success of WDR 2004, Malena, Forster and Singh offered the first, frequently referenced definition of social accountability for the governance and development community, as *an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability.*⁹

In contrast to previous notions of the social accountability of business, which emphasised responsibilities *to* the public, this definition in the governance world, and most others that followed, shift the focus of the *social* part as referring to actions that can be taken *by* the public. Yet the less definitional but more intuitive appeal and power of the term ‘social accountability’ might eventually derive from the fact that, ultimately, it connotes both: the accountability of specific stakeholders *to* the public generated via mechanisms that *involve* the public.

Since Malena et al. put forward their definition many others have emerged that build and expand on this. In 2008, for example, Joshi and Houtzager focused on the question of *accountability for what* when conceptualising social accountability as ‘an ongoing and collective effort to hold public officials and service providers to account for the provision of public goods which are existing state obligations, such as primary healthcare, education, sanitation and security’.¹⁰

Claasen and Alpín-Lardiés take a broader sweep in their 2010 treatise on the topic when they propose to think about ‘the concept of social accountability [as] new terrain that aims to develop a framework of how citizens demand and enforce accountability from those in power’.¹¹

The most recent and pragmatic definition that has gained currency in the literature comes from Fox (2015), who invites us to see social accountability as ‘an evolving umbrella category that includes: citizen monitoring and oversight of public and/or private sector performance, user-centered public information access/dissemination systems, public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms, as

⁸ For example, ‘citizen voice and accountability’ is one of these antecedent terms that found widespread use in the 1990s: A. Rocha Menocal and B. Sharma, *Joint Evaluation of Citizens’ Voice and Accountability: Synthesis Report* (London: Department for International Development, 2008).

⁹ C. Malena, R. Forster and J. Singh, ‘Social Accountability: An Introduction to the Concept and Emerging Practice’, Social Development Paper 76 (Washington: World Bank, 2004).

¹⁰ A. Joshi and P. Houtzager, ‘Widgets or Watchdogs?’, *Public Management Review*, vol. 14 (2012), 145–162, p. 147. This is the published form of a paper they had authored in 2008.

¹¹ M. Claasen and C. Alpín-Lardiés, *Social Accountability in Africa: Practitioners’ Experiences and Lessons* (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2010), p. 3.

well as citizen participation in actual resource allocation decision-making, such as participatory budgeting'.¹²

This definition stresses the dynamic nature of the concept and gauges the field by way of a deliberately non-exhaustive enumeration of instances of social accountability that highlight the diverse and fluid array of activities that cluster around this concept. This seems to be the most productive approach. It does not artificially and contentiously discriminate between collective and individual actions, which are in practice often tightly interwoven. Neither does it try to render ineligible upstream engagement on the input side of policy-making (such as participatory budgeting), which some purists may argue does not strictly adhere to performance-oriented notions of accountability.

So, despite some observers raising concerns that ill-defined 'fuzzwords' increasingly blur the thinking in the broader open-governance community of practice,¹³ holding on to such a loose, pragmatic definition of social accountability seems useful. It does not unnecessarily expend too much precious analytical energy on forcing a definitional clarity that looks conceptually out of reach and is always open to challenge. What is more, some kind of forced clarity would strategically be counterproductive. It would ultimately have to draw sharp boundaries somewhere and end up excluding actions and ideas in the outer spheres of the social accountability cloud, when it is precisely within these very fluffy boundary zones that the most interesting ideas, interfaces and expansion points lie for the future of social accountability and the efforts to maximise its potential for impact.¹⁴

Inspired by Fox, an even more parsimonious working definition for the purpose of this stock-take is to treat social accountability as all these things other than voting that people can do to hold their leaders and service providers to account and make their work more responsive to an inclusive set of stakeholders.

C A rich tapestry of typologies

Given the definitional pluralism that surrounds the concept, it is not surprising that many different approaches have emerged to slice up the concept, situate it in broader notions of governance and accountability and develop conceptual frameworks around it.¹⁵

The WDR 2004 employed the terms **long** and **short routes of accountability**, the latter emphasising how social accountability operates more directly (people holding service providers directly to

¹² J. Fox, 'Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?', *World Development*, vol. 72 (2015), 346–361.

¹³ The criticism by Edwards and McGee is directed against conceptual confusion in the open governance field. D. Edwards and R. McGee, Introduction: 'Opening Governance: Change, Continuity and Conceptual Ambiguity', *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 47 (2016), 6.

¹⁴ See section E for more on this.

¹⁵ The following is just a set of the most-cited typologies; many more are in play, often using more complex and expansive differentiations (e.g. Ackerman's six dimensions of classifying social accountability by punishment vs. reward-based mechanisms, rule-following vs. performance-based mechanisms, level of institutionalisation, depth of involvement, inclusiveness of participation and branches of government: J. M. Ackerman, 'Social Accountability in the Public Sector: A Conceptual Discussion', Social Development Paper 82 (Washington: World Bank, 2005).

account), as compared to classic public accountability, when citizens hold elected office-holders to account via elections with regard to their performance in overseeing and ensuring the performance of public service delivery – the long route. Somewhat concurrently the World Bank also popularised the notion of **supply and demand sides of good governance**, which acknowledges that more effective accountability can be driven either from the top down or from the bottom up but that both are very much intertwined: government institutions and their capacity to provide / responsiveness to improve accountability (the supply side), on the one hand, and on the other hand the demands by citizens and the pressure for more accountability than they can generate (the demand side).¹⁶

Others have further stressed and diversified this interplay by distinguishing between **horizontal**, **vertical** and **diagonal mechanisms** for accountability. There are checks and balances that formal political institutions exercise upon each other (horizontal), the classic political accountability that citizens can exercise through voting to hold their leaders to account (vertical) and the many interesting permutations in the middle that involve interaction between both formal institutional accountability mechanisms and alternative citizen engagement instruments to generate accountability (diagonal). These latter two typologies have firmly shifted the focus onto the interrelated nature of citizen-led and government-provided accountability mechanisms. Grandvoinet, Aslam and Raha offer a stylised sketch of how they perceive this interplay and accord a central role to information and civic mobilisation as drivers/transmission mechanisms.¹⁷

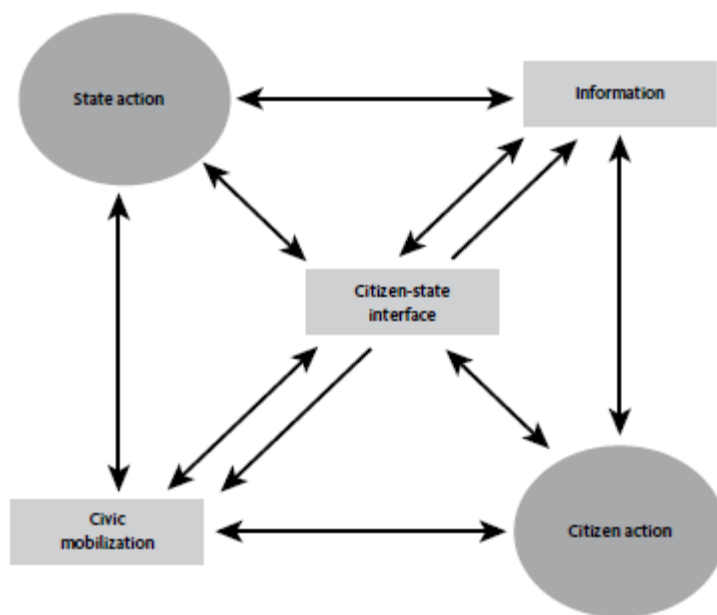


Exhibit 1: Interplay of Social Accountability Dynamics

Source: Grandvoinet et al. (2015)

¹⁶ World Bank, *Demand for Good Governance in the World Bank. Conceptual Evolution, Frameworks and Activities* (Washington: World Bank, 2010).

¹⁷ H. Grandvoinet, G. Aslam and S. Raha, *Opening the Black Box: The Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability* (Washington: World Bank, 2015).

Finally, Fox offers another interesting way to think about and categorise social accountability interventions. Revisiting a number of seminal research exercises and widely quoted empirical studies he proposes distinguishing between initiatives that are more **tactical** in approach versus others that take a more **strategic** orientation. In this account, tactical social accountability is typically a one-tool intervention focused on citizen voice, more narrowly focused on a particular problem /accountability breakdown and often episodic in nature, while strategic social accountability is about longer-term, more comprehensive change initiatives. These strategic efforts bundle a set of interventions that seek to systematically change the enabling environment for accountability and harness the interplay of openings from above and mobilisation from below.¹⁸

D Social accountability: what does the evidence say? Five key messages

The synthesis literature on social accountability is sprawling, yet there is a rather striking degree of agreement. Most overviews coalesce around a set of central insights and findings that are quickly gaining the status of basic truths in social accountability. The following sections present five of the most salient findings, and in the spirit of a critical-constructive approach seek to present some qualifying thoughts and ideas in order to follow some commentators, such as Fox, to shake up the settled consensus somewhat in the hope of enriching the debate.

1. Does social accountability work? Or, what works and what does not in social accountability?

When this stock-take was planned, in 2010/11, it was motivated by the hope of putting the focus firmly on these very questions. The idea was to meticulously identify, catalogue and score evidence to arrive at some kind of answer to these questions, ideally in the style of a systematic review. As mentioned at the beginning, however, many authoritative reviews have since been carried out, and the ‘what works?’/‘what does not?’ issue is one of the main questions that they have sought to address in meticulous fashion. They have compiled and summarised the insights from numerous academic research projects, synthesised the assessments of related interventions, gleaned relevant insights from reviewing evidence in neighbouring fields and even revisited seminal studies in the area for further insights. Some of the major reviews with a distinctive focus on social accountability are as follows.

- 2008: Rocha Menocal/Sharma: synthesise evaluations of donor projects in the field of citizen voice and accountability
- 2010/11: McGee/Gaventa: review of the published empirical literature as well as an assessment report of development projects annexed by abstracts of 67 specific initiatives¹⁹

¹⁸ Fox (2015).

¹⁹ R. McGee and J. Gaventa, *Review of Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives: Synthesis Report* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2010); R. McGee and J. Gaventa, ‘Shifting Power? Assessing the Impact of Voice and Transparency Programmes’, Working Paper 383 (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2011).

- 2013: O’Meally: based on a global overview of evidence mapping the macro-structural conditions for success²⁰
- 2014: Joshi: a trawl through the evidence with a view to developing plausible causal chains for social accountability impact²¹
- 2015: Fox: revisiting 25 seminal, widely cited empirical studies on social accountability and re-examining their messages
- 2015: Grandvoinet et al.: a vast undertaking with several literature reviews and expert consultations and a focus on contextual factors for social accountability success²²
- 2015/16: Peixoto/Fox: reviewing the (non-)impact of 23 information and communication technology (ICT) platforms for citizen voice²³
- 2016: Edwards/McGee: considering new developments/new evidence reviews five years after their first overview report and summarising the current state of the debate, evidence and persistent shortcomings
- 2016: Fox/Aceron: revisiting evidence summaries and adding more in-depth case studies to propose a strategy for vertically integrating social accountability into larger advocacy initiatives²⁴
- 2016: Carothers: a sampling of leading experts in the field of transparency and accountability and their views on where future work in this area should focus²⁵

In addition, there are a considerable number of synthesis studies that do not focus explicitly on social accountability but cover important aspects of it from relevant other perspectives.

- 2012: Johnson et al.: mapping overall evidence base for anti-corruption efforts with social accountability as one category of interventions²⁶
- 2012: Mansuri/Rao: reviewing almost 500 studies on participatory development to better understand when participation can work²⁷
- 2013: Olken/Pande: reviewing randomised control trials in the area of governance interventions, including community participation and monitoring²⁸
- 2014: Kosack/Fung: probing 16 high-profile transparency interventions to examine the conditions under which transparency can improve governance²⁹

²⁰ S. C. O’Meally, ‘Mapping Context for Social Accountability’, resource paper (Washington: World Bank, 2013).

²¹ A. Joshi, ‘Reading the Local Context: A Causal Chain Approach to Social Accountability’, *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 45 (2014), 23–35.

²² Grandvoinet et al. (2015).

²³ T. Peixoto and J. Fox, ‘When Does ICT-Enabled Citizen Voice Lead to Government Responsiveness?’, *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 47 (2016), 23–40 (published also in 2015 as a background paper to the WDR).

²⁴ J. Fox and J. Aceron, ‘Doing Accountability Differently: A Proposal for the Vertical Integration of Civil Society Monitoring and Advocacy’, U4 Issue 2016:4 (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2016).

²⁵ T. Carothers (ed.), *Ideas for Future Work on Transparency and Accountability* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016).

²⁶ J. Johnsen, N. Taxell and D. Zaum, ‘Mapping Evidence Gaps in Anti-Corruption: Assessing the State of the Operationally Relevant Evidence on Donors’ Actions and Approaches to Reducing Corruption’, U4 Issue 2012:7 (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2012).

²⁷ G. Mansuri and V. Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?* (Washington: World Bank, 2012).

²⁸ B. A. Olken and R. Pande, *Governance Review Paper* (Cambridge, MA: Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, 2011).

²⁹ S. Kosack and A. Fung, ‘Does Transparency Improve Governance?’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 17 (2014), 65–87.

- 2011: Hanna et al.: a systematic review of evidence in the area of anti-corruption policies, including community monitoring³⁰
- 2015: Marquette/Peiffer: summarizing the literature on collective action in view of factors that are relevant for collective action against corruption initiatives³¹
- 2015: Lieberman: a systematic review of the politics of service delivery and accountability in developing countries³²

As with almost every development issue, the backdrop to this evidence trawl on what works in social accountability is a lively, largely unresolved debate about what should count as impact (or as ‘it works’), what should count as evidence and what should count as a viable research strategy to unearth it in the first place. A classic systematic review that often leaves out grey literature and policy assessments and restricts evidence to peer-reviewed journals, a narrow set of research strategies and a clearly defined set of often exclusively quantified impact indicators is thus not a very useful instrument in this respect.

With regard to the range of possible impact, many studies initially focused on some direct outcomes such as a reduction in leakage rates, bribery or staff absenteeism. This might have been partly related to methodological limitations, yet it has become clearer over time that this cannot do justice to the range of outcomes that social accountability mechanisms can yield over a longer time frame. Grandvoinnet et al., for example, give a good sense of the diversity of potential impacts.

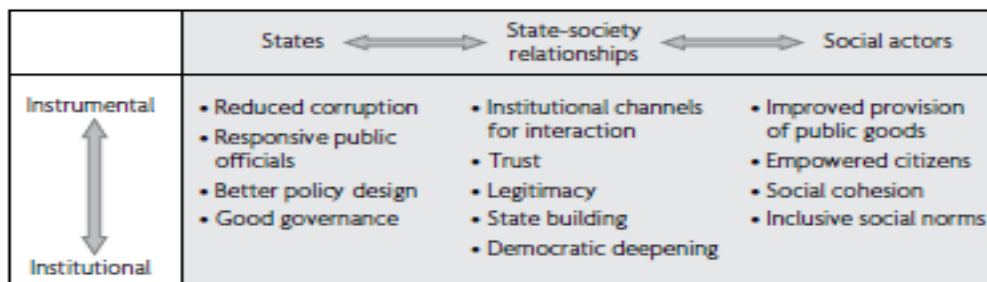


Exhibit 2: Expanded Impact of Social Accountability

Source: Grandvoinnet et al. (2015)

In beginning to summarise the findings from all these summaries, the idea was still to devote considerable space to presenting a rather detailed account of the clustered evidence. This no longer seems very useful, however, for two main reasons.

First, there is a serious problem of ‘label fit’, or, more technically, ‘construct validity’, which makes it extremely difficult to subsume evidence for specific *types* of social accountability and then compare

³⁰ R. Hanna, S. Bishop, S. Nadel, G. Scheffler and K. Durlacher, *The Effectiveness of Anti-Corruption Policy: What Has Worked, What Hasn’t, and What We Don’t Know* (London: EPPI-Centre, 2011).

³¹ H. Marquette and C. Peiffer, ‘Corruption and Collective Action’, Research Paper 32 (Birmingham: International Development Department, 2015).

³² E. S. Lieberman, ‘The Comparative Politics of Service Delivery in Developing Countries’, in C. Lancaster and N. van de Walle (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Politics of Development*, 240–263 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

which of these classes of intervention strategy seems to work better. As Joshi puts it: '[F]ocusing on "labelled" interventions is problematic because most often such interventions are not actually alike in their individual components.' Or, in the more technical language of Pritchett and Sandefur: 'We doubt the construct validity of classes like...pay-for-performance, information campaigns...to compare program or policy interventions. In the course of implementation any specific intervention has to make choices within a high-dimensional design space of attributes. [...] What one can infer about a class from an instance depends on dimensionality of the design space...'³³

Reviewing in detail relevant evidence in areas such as social audits, tech-centred interventions or complaints mechanisms might be a useful learning exercise for the particular specialist community when done at a very detailed narrative level, but attempting to figure out an overall/average impact degree for each label and rank them according to what works better or best is not helpful. It ignores the underlying diversity of interventions and does not offer any real guidance for the practitioner in search of the most preferred intervention.³⁴ Or, as Fox has put it: 'Even potentially high impact solutions to problems are likely to have only partial impacts, only under certain conditions, only for certain problems.'³⁵

Second, despite all the diversity in approach, focus and interpretation of all the evidence reviews, the overall, overarching message of all the synthesis is quite clear: the evidence is extremely mixed, no matter how it is sliced up. Some overview reports strike a more optimistic tone and highlight social accountability cases with demonstrable impact, but they are somewhat balanced out by others that paint a rather negative picture of high failure rates, while yet again others come down squarely in the middle, presenting evidence on both sides in the 'glass half empty' and 'glass half full' manner. With a bit of squinting one could perhaps read some kind of hype curve into these synthesis endeavours, with early overviews coming down more on the exuberant side, followed by a certain empirical disenchantment and yet another more optimistic push when new tech and open governance provided additional impetus to the field; now one could feel as if some kind of balanced pragmatism (exhaustion?) has set in, but this is really a very subjective impression.

So, rather than passing a verdict on what works and what does not, it might be more helpful to draw the following conclusion: get on with it! There is a critical mass of solid evidence, soundly produced and showing significant positive impact for individual manifestations for essentially all types of social accountability mechanisms. The proof of concept that most kinds of social accountability interventions can work is certainly there³⁶ and that the incremental value for yet another big-picture summing up of the evidence in the hope of deriving some actionable prioritising of impactful interventions is rather limited.³⁷

³³ L. Pritchett and J. Sandefur, 'Learning from Experiments when Context Matters', *American Economic Review*, vol. 105 (2015), 471–475.

³⁴ This is a common problem in synthesis reports on what works and what does not in anti-corruption studies, where the categories are even broader and might be labelled 'civil service reform' or 'social accountability'.

³⁵ Fox (2015), p. 348.

³⁶ Fox (2015).

³⁷ To just quote one exemplary conclusion of a recent evidence paper: 'There is a large body of evidence on social accountability making use of a good mix of methodologies. The focus on the impact of social accountability on corruption is, however, typically not the main focus of the studies reviewed. Nevertheless, the evidence does indicate overall that social accountability mechanisms can have an impact on levels of corruption, although the effect varies depending on the mechanism used.' (Department for International

As a result, a more productive endeavour for this stock-take in 2016 is to reframe the question and think about extracting some cross-cutting key messages, common attributes, perhaps counter-intuitive insights and micro-mechanisms at work.

The aim for the following sections is thus to flag and critically discuss some of these common insights (this section) and to derive from them ideas for what could be promising to try out next in social accountability (section E.1), what principles could guide the design of such social accountability actions (section E.2) and what kind of research endeavours could be the best companion for this journey (E.3).

2. Context matters tremendously – but does it matter?

The common ‘It depends’ reply that, basically, all these reviews give to the ‘Does it work?’ question is typically expanded into an equally consensual ‘It depends on context’.

Context is found to crucially shape the chances of success of every social accountability intervention, and extensive lists of contextual factors are being drawn up that impressively show the immense diversity and sheer number of intervening variable that make up context.

Joshi, for example, compiles a list of the micro-characteristics, contextual factors that shape specific engagement situations for individual citizens.

Assumptions/micro-context	
Information	Literacy/access Legitimacy/credibility of information
Citizen action	Priorities Belief in efficacy of channel Sense of entitlements
Official response	Public officials think citizens have legitimate grievances Public officials have capacity Public officials are motivated by public service Public officials care about their reputation Public officials have channels by which to influence higher levels

Exhibit 3: Micro-context; Source: adapted from Joshi (2013).

O’Meally adds to this a set of macro-structural factors that his review identified as important in influencing social accountability.

Development, *Why Corruption Matters. Understanding Causes, Effects and How to Address Them* (London Department for International Development, 2015), p. 70.

Civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical and organisational capacity • Capacity to build alliances across society • Capacity to build alliances/networks with the state • Authority, legitimacy and credibility of civil society with citizens and state actors • Willingness of civil society to challenge accountability status quo • Capacity of citizens to engage in social accountability (SAcc) • Willingness of citizens to engage in SAcc
Political society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness of political/elected elites to respond to and foster SAcc • Willingness of state bureaucrats to respond to and foster SAcc • State and political elite capacity to respond to SAcc • Democratisation and the civil society enabling environment • The nature of the rule of law • The capacity and willingness of political parties to support SAcc
Inter-elite relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The developmental nature of the political settlement • The inclusiveness of the political settlement • The organisational and political capabilities of the political settlement • Elite ideas/norms of accountability underpinning the political settlement
State–society relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The character and form of the social contract • History of state–citizen bargaining (long- and short-term) • State–society accountability and bridging mechanisms (formal and informal) • The nature and depth of state–society pro-accountability networks
Intra-society relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social exclusion and fragmentation
Global dimensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donor–state relations • International power-holder accountability • International political and economic drivers

Exhibit 4: Macro-context

Source: adapted from O’Meally (2013).

Taken together, these two enumerations of micro and macro factors offer the most comprehensive set of contextual variables that are found to influence the impact of social accountability mechanisms.

What lessons can be drawn from these context matter insights for the practice of social accountability and guidance for future project design? One important, though not very surprising, conclusion drawn already by some of the earlier reviews and primarily framed as a message to

international donors is to *think and work politically* and base social accountability interventions on a sound analysis of the political interests and dynamics that attach to the particular situation.³⁸

Unfortunately, beyond such rather common-sense exhortations that political context matters, the extremely long list of contextual factors that have been found relevant does not make life much easier. There are two ways of spinning the message from that laundry list of contexts that matter, and neither of these approaches offers much guidance.

The first approach is to venture into an identification of a list of positive contextual success factors, which often sounds like this:

*Critical conditions include a focus on issues relevant to the targeted population; targeting of relatively homogenous populations; populations that are empowered and have the capacity to hold institutions accountable and withstand elite capture; synergies and coalitions between different actors; alignment between social accountability and other reforms and monitoring mechanisms; credible sanctions; and functional and responsive state institutions.*³⁹

While this and similar conclusions in other reviews somehow bravely make choices and reduce the ocean of contextual permutations to a smaller set of key variables, such conclusions are still of limited insight and guidance because:

- they often face, again, the label of 'misfit', or the simplification challenge, since distilling down the laundry list is often done by actually drawing up and subsuming various factors into broader categories that would still need unpacking and differentiation
- they rather quickly border on the tautological when identifying empowered, uncaptured populations and responsive, functional institutions and others as key drivers

The enumeration of positive context at times sounds a bit like the literal free lunch: too good to be true. Or, in other words, the message when following this route sounds then a bit like: social accountability can help tackle accountability problems when the accountability problem is almost not there in the first place and all hard-to-change structural background conditions are favourable. Applied as screening criteria to donor funding opportunities, this might then lead to situations in which only the lowest-hanging fruit, the accountability problems most easy but perhaps not the most pressing to fix, will qualify for support for social accountability interventions.

The other, perhaps epistemologically more appropriate, approach is to implicitly capitulate and accept the impossibility of arriving at a sharper prioritisation on what matters most from this inductive endeavour. As Pritchett and Sandefur, for example, observe with regard to experimental evidence for social development interventions more broadly: 'We actually don't know what context means... Social programs are embedded in contexts which encompass a long list of unknown factors which interact in often un-known ways.'⁴⁰

³⁸ See, for example, Rocha Menocal and Sharma (2008). This reasoning is firmly anchored in a broader stream of work that emphasises the importance of thinking politically in development. See, for example, A. Leftwich, 'Thinking and Working Politically: What Does It Mean? Why Is It Important? And How Do You Do It?', discussion paper (Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham, 2011).

³⁹ Department for International Development (2015).

⁴⁰ Pritchett and Sandefur (2015).

The answer that comes with this recognition in a way replicates and returns the ball to the ‘What works?’ dilemma outlined earlier: which specifics on context matter when and how? Well, it depends! And it depends on context, the configurations of other contextual factors, and also on the overall interplay with specific attributes of specific social accountability interventions.

This criticism on the ‘context matters’ interpretations is not meant to be harsh. It does not point at any inherent flaws in how the reviews are done and the empirics are summarised. In fact, the review papers do a tremendous job in cataloguing and reviewing the contextual evidence. Yet the point here is that the rather open and not very informative conclusion that stands at the end, when evaluating what matters in context, speaks again to the tremendous diversity and complexity of dynamics at play, which simply do not allow us to draw stronger generalised inferences of real policy value. And, again, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that more research will not really help to solve this issue but simply reconfirm that things are intertwined in complex ways. Against this backdrop, the ‘context matters’ catalogue of factors cannot serve as a check-list, filter criteria or straight-out recipe for baking and funding better social accountability, but *can* still serve as a colourful bazaar that can provide activists with a broader, inspirational view on potential levers and dynamics that might perhaps help – or get in the way. And, for researchers and practitioners alike, it might suggest giving up on a hunt for sweeping general principles and focusing on elaborating possible chains of micro-dynamic transmission mechanisms instead, such as the ones that are being developed with regard to how information can lead to action – described in the following section.

3. Information is not (sufficient) for power and accountability, yet opens a huge design space

Many social accountability interventions are being built around information to foment change. The mantra is to strengthen accountability by providing citizens with information on anything from budget plans and budget expenditures, service entitlements and service performances, prices of medicines and hospital satisfaction rates, learning outcomes and teacher absenteeism to water tariffs, social benefit transfers, voting records, etc. New technologies that promise a new era of information and communication and the closely related open-governance, open-data movement have further fuelled this focus on information as the currency of power.

It is therefore not surprising that many reviews have sought to directly address whether this transmission mechanism from information to accountability holds. The answer is consistent across all studies: information alone is not enough. This is, of course, closely related to the ‘context matters’ finding. The very factors that have been found to shape the efficacy of social accountability interventions more broadly also apply to the efficacy of the subset of information-centric actions. Yet a closer look at the information–action link helps to unpack some of these contextual issues in insightful ways. For a start, Kosack and Fung, based on their review of the evidence, propose a transparency action cycle with specific conditions and actions required both on the information user (citizen) side and on the information target (service provider) side.

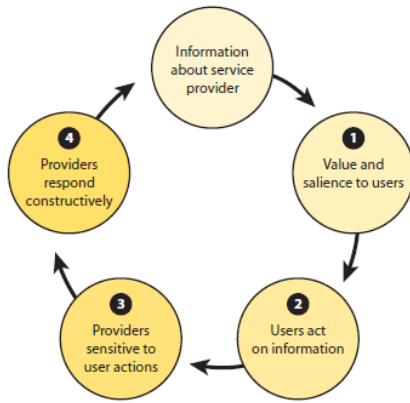


Exhibit 5: Transparency Action Cycle; Source: adapted from Kosack and Fung (2014).

Lieberman, Posner and Tsai further elaborate the more detailed conditions that need to be met on the user side to translate information into citizen action.



Figure 3. *When Might Information Generate Citizen Action?*

Exhibit 6: From Information to Action; Source: Lieberman et al. (2014).⁴¹

While this framework stems from their empirical work on education interventions in Kenya it has evolved into a widely used reference point for a lot of other studies that examine information-based social accountability interventions. Joshi further unpacks and clusters some of these factors and arrives at a very comprehensive stylised causal chain of what conditions need to be met to turn information into action.

⁴¹ E. S. Lieberman, D. N., Posner and L. L. Tsai, 'Does Information Lead to More Active Citizenship? Evidence from an Education Intervention in Rural Kenya', *World Development*, vol. 60 (2014), 69–83.

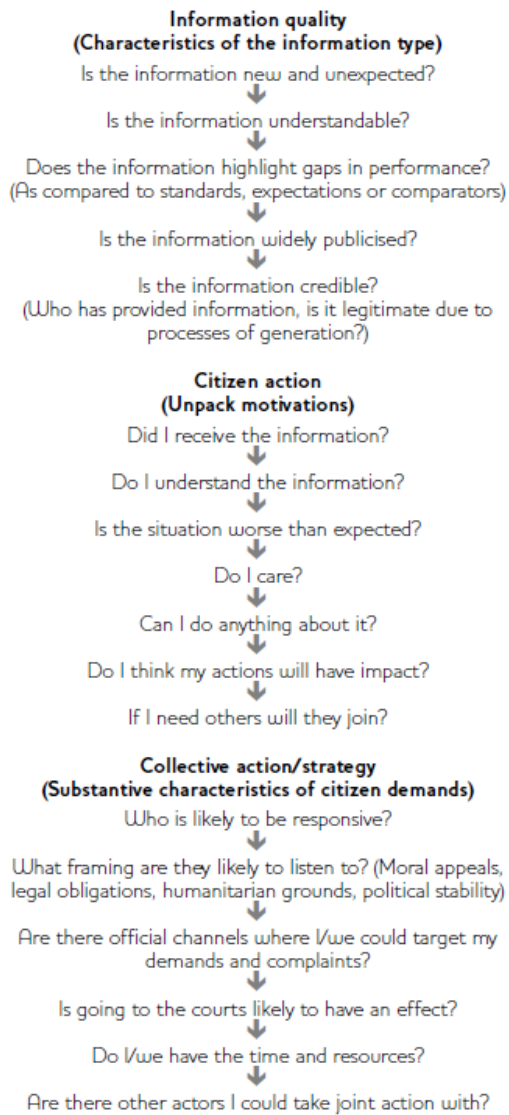


Exhibit 7: From Information to Action II; Source: adapted from Joshi (2013).⁴²

Although this framework somewhat overlaps with the laundry list of contextual factors discussed earlier, these micro-level causal chains provide more guidance for social activists, since they focus on factors that are less structural and in principle open to be influenced and quite often lie within the design space for an envisaged intervention.

The key message from this long list of conditions is clear. Information alone does not do the job; it must be the right kind of information in the right situation, and a lot of other enabling conditions need to be in place. Many other studies and synthesis reports have further elaborated on specific parts of this chain. Batley and Wales, for example, explore which types of information and communication modes work better for what types of public services for which more accountability should be generated. They find that personal one-to-one communication is a better fit for individual, sensitive services, such as healthcare, while community communication is better suited for the more

⁴² A. Joshi, 'Context Matters: A Causal Chain Approach to Unpacking Social Accountability Interventions', work in progress paper (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2013).

communal affair of a water services.⁴³ Kosack and Fung distinguish between transparency interventions that rely on **exit (choice), collaboration or confrontation** depending on the degree of competition in the service environment and degree of responsiveness by service providers/politicians.⁴⁴ Zinnbauer emphasises the concept of ambient accountability and the timing and spatial targeting of information.⁴⁵

Most importantly, such a focus on the micro-causal chain of information transmission provides a bridge into a vast literature in social psychology that comes with many extremely useful insights on how to design disclosure and information interventions that respect cognitive load, help harness peer effects and shift attitudes and norms, and encourage and incentivise particular conduct. Weil, Graham and Fung's work on *targeted transparency* is an early example of such a bridging literature.⁴⁶ Thaler and Sunstein, with their nudge concept, have been perhaps the most visible proponents of harnessing social psychology in this way and have spawned an entire community of practice and policy design rife with empirical experiments.⁴⁷ Two central insights from this rapidly growing literature are particularly relevant for social accountability interventions: a) small tweaks in informational presentation can make a big difference in terms of impact; and b) the highly variable evidence once more does not suggest that there is a particular secret sauce that can be readily applied but simply that there is perhaps a larger set of plausible ingredients in the kitchen cabinet that can possibly add flavour and thus merit consideration.⁴⁸

4. The cooling love affair with all things tech: a premature disenchantment?

The meteoric rise of technology, particularly information and communication technologies, for empowerment and accountability has been closely related to, and perhaps inseparable from, the euphoria with *transparency as disinfectant*. The accountability promise of tech did not only include a new era of radical transparency, however. It went far beyond, by offering the prospect of overcoming some of the very structural obstacles that stood in the way of unleashing the emancipatory power of information. New ICTs in the hands of citizens were hoped to also offer new modes of mobilising and organising, of routing around accountability failures and of outwitting repressive controls on conventional media and public expression. It is worthwhile noting that such hopes are not new and germane to the internet and all things 2.0. The empowerment through ICT debate has a very long history, and the very same hopes and questions have long featured in scholarly debates on earlier waves of new information and communication technologies, from

⁴³ R. Batley and J. Wales, 'Service Characteristics and Engagement with Citizens', (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2015).

⁴⁴ Kosack and Fung (2014).

⁴⁵ D. Zinnbauer, D. (2012). "'Ambient Accountability": Fighting Corruption When and Where It Happens', available at SSRN 2168063.

⁴⁶ D. Weil, M. Graham and A. Fung, 'Targeting Transparency', *Science*, vol. 340 (2013), 1410–1411.

⁴⁷ See R. H. Thaler and C. R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); and, for a succinct overview, see G. Loewenstein, C. R. Sunstein and R. Golman, 'Disclosure: Psychology Changes Everything', *Annual Review of Economics*, vol. 6 (2014), 391–419. And, for a seminal overview of broader applications to development, see World Bank, *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* (Washington: World Bank, 2014).

⁴⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the implications for research approaches, see section E.3.

printing press and radio to the fax machine or the arrival of satellite TV.⁴⁹ Given the intensity of the early hype, fuelled undoubtedly also by the promotional zeal of an entire new crop of new economy companies, it is easy to diagnose failure, and there is certainly a large graveyard of failed tech-centred social accountability projects to point to even in the most promising areas, such as crowd-sourcing corruption reporting.⁵⁰ The review literature very much concurs on clipping the wings of the tech hype. Technology has not turned out to be a magic bullet. Technology is more or less just a tool that will exert its influence within but shows very little transformative impact to overcome the power structures and other structural contextual obstacles to empowerment and accountability. It is more a tool of the already empowered and less a weapon of the weak. It succeeds where political will is already in place and only capability limitations need to be solved.⁵¹ Such widely shared findings provide a worthwhile corrective to naïve technology fantasies, and the reviews also point out that the blending of online and offline practices offers the best chances of impact. Yet one might wonder if the pendulum has not swung too far to the opposite side and helps promote a sense of inevitability that becomes self-fulfilling and narrows the scope for a productive and imaginative engagement with technologies for accountability. Consider, for example, the following conclusion in a recent overview paper: ‘Political will is generally a necessary but insufficient condition for governance processes and relationships to become more open... In short, where there is a will, tech-for-T&A may be able to provide a way; where there isn’t a will, it won’t.’⁵²

No doubt the views that ‘If we built it they will come’, or that technology will cut through entrenched power like a knife through butter, are banal and naive. But potentially problematic is also the notion towards the other end of the spectrum: that technology will simply follow and amplify such power asymmetries. There are a number of reasons to not take the interpretation of the current evidence base too far and throttle the zeal to imagine new technologies for accountability.

From a very macro-structural perspective, analyses of how countries manage to improve their overall governance systems identify the diffusion of social media as one of the few factors with explanatory power.⁵³ At the other end of the spectrum, the history of technology and the most detailed and insightful analyses of how technologies work their way into societies as produced in the field of science and technology studies recommend a much more granular view on the relation between technology and power. According to this large established body of knowledge, which is rarely explicitly considered in accountability technology reviews, technology is not fully determined and not fully deterministic. It indeed mixes things up but it does so in often very unexpected, non-linear ways. At a very conceptual level: it rewires incentives, trade-offs and practices, brings new stakeholders into the game and offers new risks, uncertainties, new opportunities to reframe perspectives, new beliefs and attitudes and expectations to be filled with meaning, to be shaped. And all this interacts with the use and further development of such technologies in highly dynamic

⁴⁹ For an emblematic pre-internet articulation of such hopes, see I. de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁵⁰ For a review of the evidence on the latter, see D. Zinnbauer, ‘Crowdsourced Corruption Reporting: What Petrified Forests, Street Music, Bath Towels, and the Taxman Can Tell Us about the Prospects for Its Future’, *Policy and Internet*, vol. 7 (2015), 1–24.

⁵¹ Peixoto and Fox (2016).

⁵² D. Edwards and R. McGee, Introduction: ‘Opening Governance: Change, Continuity and Conceptual Ambiguity’, *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 47 (2016), 1–22.

⁵³ A. Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Quest for Good Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

and discontinuous ways. Or, to bring these rather abstract insights down one level to the conceptual framework of social movement analysis: new ICTs do shake up the interpretative domains and the framing and sense-making around social claims and political ideologies, do reshuffle opportunity structures with potential new entry points, allies and arenas for engagement and do expand the repertoire and resources of movement organisation. In this context, the much-cited *political will* as necessary condition for the success of tech-centred accountability initiatives also looks more of an interesting concept in flux and under construction, influenced by new technology practice as much as influencing it.⁵⁴

It is beyond the scope of this stock-take to elaborate on this in detail, and section will draw out some implications in terms of research design and possible future experiments, but here is just one particularly salient example: that a number of forces conspire to align civic engagement via technology with established asymmetries and power structures in political engagement.

At the macro level it may be at times tempting to jump from the low participation of the poor and uneducated in many industrialised countries to the conclusion that this might be similar or even worse in lower-income countries. There is significant, though not unambiguous, evidence that this is not necessarily the case in developing countries, where poor and uneducated do make use of engagement opportunities.⁵⁵ At the meso level there is solid evidence that participatory mechanisms at community level can be less elitist, more open to poorer segments and more resilient to capture and co-optation than expected.⁵⁶

A similar premature inference might perhaps be too quickly at hand when thinking through the appropriation of technology. There is considerable evidence that technology use for political activism and civic engagement is a domain of the more educated and already engaged in industrialised countries.⁵⁷ And it might be suggestive to assume that this might be even more so the case in developing country contexts where starker manifestations of digital divide issue around digital access and literacy loom even larger. Yet there is interesting evidence that suggest that this may not be always the case, particularly when it comes to digitally mediated action against corruption. Survey evidence points to the fact that poorer people do carry a higher corruption burden, might be more prone to corrupt transactions which are more extortionary than collusive in

⁵⁴ As one concrete example, consider that the government of Malaysia in the late 1990s had no political will whatsoever to grant online activists reprieve from restrictive media censorship, yet locked itself at least for a few years into an involuntary hands-off approach, since it had on the other hand promised a no-censorship policy to international investors in order to lure in venture capital and tech entrepreneurs to kick-start its own version of Silicon Valley. D. Zinnbauer, *Power and Activism in the Context of a Maturing Internet: The Case of Malaysia*, PhD thesis (London: Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, 2003).

⁵⁵ R. Pande, 'Understanding Political Corruption in Low-Income Countries', in T. P. Schultz and J. Strauss (eds.), *Handbook of Development Economics*, vol. 4, 3155–3184 (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 2007).

⁵⁶ A. Díaz-Cayeros, B. Magaloni and A. Ruiz-Euler, 'Traditional Governance, Citizen Engagement, and Local Public Goods: Evidence from Mexico', *World Development*, vol. 53 (2014), 80–93; A. Barr, M. Dekker and M. Fafchamps, 'The Formation of Community-Based Organizations: An Analysis of a Quasi-Experiment in Zimbabwe', *World Development*, vol. 66 (2015), 131–153.

⁵⁷ For related findings from an exploration of the most successful set of crowd engagement platforms in the United Kingdom, see M. Cantijoch, S. Galandini and R. K. Gibson, 'Civic Websites and Community Engagement: A Mixed Methods Study of Citizen Empowerment Initiatives', in *APSA 2014 Annual Meeting Paper*; for similar conclusions from an analysis of US online helpline data, see J. J. Feigenbaum and A. B. Hall, 'How High-Income Neighborhoods Receive More Service from Municipal Government: Evidence from City Administrative Data' (2015), available at SSRN.

nature and thus exhibit a higher willingness to take action against corruption.⁵⁸ And such predispositions seem to translate into disproportionate action by the poorer segments of society when the conditions are right, e.g. when complaints hotlines are accessible via text message and campaigns encourage reporting.⁵⁹ One reason for such a disproportionately stronger embrace of new technologies for complaints by the more marginalised may also have to do with the fact that such technologies offer alternative ways of engagement that are not fully aligned with and somewhat more uninhibited by status inequalities, social and physical distance, role expectations that can all conspire to erect high social thresholds for voice and particularly in-person complaints by the poor.⁶⁰

Again, this is just one example that would in itself require more in-depth analysis and many more aspects of how technologies rework social accountability activities and their impacts would merit more elaboration, which is beyond the scope of this stock-take. The point to note for now is that the pendulum may have swung too far towards techno pessimism and that the bulk of the scholarly review literature and assessment of technology for accountability (as well as the broader governance community of practice that engages in this area) could benefit from a deeper, more imaginative engagement with technology studies and the differentiated view on how technology interacts with power that this body of literature affords.

5. Exploring the humans behind the citizens; or, where is the social in the social?

Many review studies contribute very interesting bits and pieces to a better understanding of the notion of citizens that underpins social accountability interventions. I will subsume some of these insights in the following under this unpacking citizenship umbrella, though this is usually not how reviewers label and categorise these rather fragmented findings. By bundling them together these insights add up to providing much-needed commentary on a problem with social accountability conceptions that is rarely explicitly spelled out as such: we design social accountability for citizens, but should actually target people; we forget the social in social accountability – and thus leave a lot of money on the table.

At first sight, many social accountability interventions seem to directly conceive of *the individual citizen* as the source and agent for this new type of accountability that they seek to generate. The

⁵⁸ On the higher corruption burden for the poor, see, for example, M. K. Justesen and C. Bjørnskov, 'Exploiting the Poor: Bureaucratic Corruption and Poverty in Africa', *World Development*, vol. 58 (2014), 106–115. On less acceptance of corruption by groups with lower socio-economic status in Brazil and a review of literature in other countries, see M. S. Winters and R. Weitz-Shapiro, 'Lacking Information or Condoning Corruption: When Do Voters Support Corrupt Politicians?', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 45 (2013), 418–436. On how need corruption is associated with a higher readiness to take action against corruption, see M. Bauhr, 'Need or Greed? Conditions for Collective Action against Corruption', *Governance* (2016), DOI: 10.1111/gove.12232.

⁵⁹ G. Grossman, K. Michelitch and M. Santamaria, 'Can SMS-Mobilization Increase Citizen Reporting of Public Service Deficiencies to Politicians?', working paper (2015). It should be noted that a more recent and larger experiment by the same authors was not able to replicate these findings, though. G. Grossman, M. Humphreys and G. Sacramone-Lutz, 'Information Technology and Political Engagement: Mixed Evidence from Uganda', working paper (2016)

⁶⁰ Data from the *Global Corruption Barometer 2013* points in a similar direction: respondents in rural areas with less internet connectivity are nevertheless more likely to indicate that they would use social media to spread the word about corruption than their peers in urban settings. Transparency International, *Global Corruption Barometer 2013* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2013), own analysis.

rather abstract notion of a citizen is very often not unpacked any further and is meant to sufficiently describe the political and civic persona that inhabits all of us and that resonates with and is meant to be activated by social accountability initiatives. While this label of ‘citizen’ might be very important and productive from a legal/rights perspective it presents a bit of an unhelpful short cut, or perhaps something of a veil, when it comes to elaborating on the conditions for meaningful engagement with and impact of social accountability initiatives.

To put it bluntly: very few real people would assign all but a tiny sliver of their identity to being a citizen, but would rather describe themselves, their identities and the sources of their interests and passions as men or women, old or young, doctors or miners, parents, immigrants, Catholics, Portuguese or soccer fans.

Identity politics might be a problematic marker of dysfunctional particularistic systems, yet identity-conscious social action, mobilisation and solidarity are the practical way of organising civic engagement.

What’s more, this notion of citizenship is, particularly in some tech projects, even further flattened to a notion of individualistic or atomistic citizenship. Early technology projects in social accountability are construed to offer individual channels for engagement that are implicitly built on individualistic notions of the voice and agency of the citizen as individual users of new reporting channels etc.⁶¹

This is admittedly a somewhat stylised depiction of the situation, yet it applies to a significant degree to a large number of social accountability initiatives and is problematic for at least three reasons.

1. It makes it easy to ignore how all this social accountability plays out in the day-to-day lives of real people. Consider the quote of a villager that Grandvoinnet et al. highlight in their review: ‘Today you ask us why we don’t get teachers to come. The NGO [non-governmental organisation] says that we should file an RTI [right to information], meet the district officer, hold up traffic, and force the teachers to come. We have to do this for the schools, for the electricity, for the doctors, for the roads, for the garbage, and for anything at all. You tell me—when should I work in my fields?’⁶² The authors use this quote to highlight that the trade-offs that potential social accountability participants face, the time and resource constraints, the competing priorities, etc. are not sufficiently factored into the design of related initiatives.
2. It fails (paraphrasing a German bon mot in politics) to meet people and engage with them where they are rather than where they should be. Early reviewers, such as Rocha Menocal and Sharma, have already propagated this as an overlooked *core principle* for social accountability:

Work with the institutions you have, and not the ones you wish you had:

- *Learn to live with the informal institutions and practices that continue to predominate, and*

⁶¹ Most crowd-reporting platforms, for example, only offer one-way reporting channels, though they have a great potential to serve as social discovery mechanisms that help people find others with similar grievances and catalyse the formation of self-help groups or collective action initiatives among the reporting public. For more on this, see D. Zinnbauer, ‘Crowd-Sourcing Corruption: Some Challenges, Some Possible Futures’, in *The Internet, Policy and Politics Conferences*, 1–20 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶² Grandvoinnet et al. (2015), p. 71.

often override, the formal ones in the country settings they work in.

- Engage with these informal systems more thoroughly and explicitly rather than ignore them or, worse, dismiss them as irrelevant or backward.
- Focus on how to best work ‘with the grain’ (i.e. what is already in-country) rather than to transplant formal institutional frameworks from the outside.⁶³

Grandvoinet et al. home in on a similar finding:

*Civil society organizations and nongovernmental organizations often have low capacity and legitimacy, but indigenous local associations and, in some cases, traditional or customary institutions play an especially important role in [fragile and conflict-affected] contexts as channels for information and civic mobilization. [...] SA is more likely to be effective where it builds on existing ‘organic’ pressures for change and accountability, even where this represents only a ‘second-best’ approach.*⁶⁴

Lieberman, in her summary of the politics of service delivery, highlights a number of in-depth case studies that trace how citizen action succeeded in improving the accountability of service delivery and how the practical organisation of state–society relations at local level can be harnessed. In some Indian states, for example, Naya Netas (new leaders, middle-school-educated and aged 25 to 40) act as essential bridge-builders between communities and service providers, while in China informal solidarity groups that include both local residents and local officials provide important interfaces for generating social accountability.

3. It makes it easy to skip over the tremendous opportunities to leverage the role of existing and new intermediaries. The short route to accountability is rarely really a disintermediated route to accountability. Many studies and reviews arrive at this conclusion from different perspectives. Intermediaries are found to generate peer pressure or solidaristic ties that help address free-riding in collective action that is often considered to afflict social accountability initiatives. From an organisational perspective, intermediaries have been found to help pool resources and compensate for shortcomings in skills and expertise, such as low literacy rates or limited experience in civic engagement. From a social movement vantage point, they expand – particularly when working in coalitions – the entry points and pressure points in the political opportunity structure, as well as the movement repertoire of complementary actions.

Fox, for example calls for a new paradigm of vertically integrating social accountability mechanisms into broader more strategic reform initiatives:

*Vertical integration puts coalition-building between social and civic actors with complementary strengths at the center of the strategy—for example, intermediaries plus membership-based civic organizations, plus independent media, plus insider allies (if available).*⁶⁵

⁶³ Rocha Menocal and Sharma (2008), p. xiii.

⁶⁴ Grandvoinet et al. (2015), p. 72.

⁶⁵ J. Fox, ‘The Need for Vertical Integration’, in Carothers (2016) (17–18).

Glencorse in his account about the future of social accountability research and practice makes a very similar point and invites us to expand our horizons re potential intermediaries to enrol:

*We need to work with organizations that build trust in meaningful ways (let's think religious organizations or labor groups, not just NGOs).*⁶⁶

All these findings add up to the overall exhortation to put a stronger focus on the social in social accountability and to weave social accountability dimensions more strategically and more pragmatically into everyday life and its social organisation. Or, to put it even more succinctly: it is not only necessary to think more politically, but also to think socially when doing social accountability. To make this approach reality might not be easy, since it is likely to run into similar difficulties as a more politically informed approach to social accountability: it takes the project out of a more managerial/technocratic fixing service delivery comfort zone into the more unsettling territories of engaging with and to some extent siding with certain social structures, values, associations – a path that many donors and practitioners are likely to feel uncomfortable with. And it might also mean moving away from short-term support for specific time-bound projects set on quick deliverables to cultivating longer-term relationships with patient institutional support, again an approach that is not easy to realise for many donors that are themselves locked into their own accountability and return-on-investment reporting schemes.

⁶⁶ B. Glencorse, 'Getting Closer to the Ground', in Carothers (2016) (23–24).

E Implications for designing future social accountability action and research

Having extracted and discussed some of the key messages from the many stock-takings on social accountability, the remainder of this report is dedicated to looking forward. The following sections seek to spin further some of the implications of these various stock-taking exercises and, informed by these insights, offer various ideas, and the odd provocation on.

- Content: what more could be tried out in social accountability?
- Approach: could the design logic of social accountability initiatives do with some tweaking?
- Research: would some rejigging of related research strategies be helpful?

It is beyond the scope of this meta-stock-take to discuss each specific idea in full detail, so the following is intended to quickly flag some potentially promising new avenues and open them to further conversation.

E.1 Content: interesting things to try out

Social accountability mechanisms proliferate and are becoming ever more diverse yet some things appear to be somewhat under-explored, including the following.

The role of business

Businesses might be considered as direct or indirect targets of social accountability interventions when they are contractors for public services and public works projects.

Yet there is very little attention to local business as an important stakeholder in the local political and social economy and thus as a potentially highly promising ally for change. Perhaps the social in social accountability connotes some implicit demarcation from anything business-related, yet this is neither fully articulated, nor would it be a conceptually very defensible or practically very productive artificial separation.

The neglect of business in social accountability interventions seems particularly ironic given that the contemporary use of social accountability is firmly anchored in the world of business ethics, as noted in the introductory section. Local business interests do not fully align with other stakeholders, as when it comes to prioritising public spending, but heavily overlap with citizen interests in a wide array of policy and service issues. Local companies critically depend on functioning local public services and infrastructures and thus have a strong interest in ensuring that accountability is effective for failing services or disappearing public budgets. Local business may be able to provide some of the critical expertise in bookkeeping, surveying, significant clout and inside access as employer and taxpayer and some organisational and financial muscle to make social accountability mechanisms more effective.

It is, of course, also likely that some elements of the local business community are part of the problem rather than solution, co-opting and colluding with local leaders to stymie rather than support accountability, yet it would be over-reaching to assume that this applies to the entire, or even large parts of, local business. It is thus important to open this black box of business and parse out the interests of specific actors in specific local contexts and explore how to enrol the sympathetic ones in social accountability efforts. A similar approach applies to thinking about the role and engagement of international business that may have some presence or supply chain links in

the local community and could also be a potential elite ally for better social accountability initiatives.⁶⁷ A stronger effort to enrol business also dovetails with the key messages to think politically, in this case about the local political economy, in which business is likely to play a large role and the finding that intermediaries and elite allies matter. In addition, it resonates with the paradigm shift in social accountability advocated by Fox et al. towards more integrative approaches that combine traditional social accountability efforts with upstream policy advocacy. And it ties in with a growing notion in the anti-corruption community of research and practice that escaping from a high-corruption equilibrium and putting governance systems onto a sustainable path towards more accountability and integrity requires something akin to a big-bang approach that involves a very broad coalition of stakeholders. Drapalova provides a fascinating piece of local evidence on this. She compares a set of cities in Italy and Spain that, despite very similar contexts and starting points, exhibit a remarkably different local governance performance, and finds that the involvement of local business associations in a push towards more accountability and integrity was a key determinant for success.⁶⁸

New funding models for social accountability

A closer examination of funding models is peculiarly absent from much of the discussion of social accountability interventions. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that most assessments are done on donor-funded projects and thus lock in a particular funding mechanism in those early-stage projects. The closest approximation to thematising funding issues comes when assessments find a lack of sustainability of projects when donor funding dries up but there is very little deeper discussion about alternative funding options other than stating that assumptions about self-sustained projects via a critical mass of voluntary engagement or state funding did not hold.

What other funding options could be considered and tried out more systematically in the area of social accountability? A starting point would be to take a step back, look at social accountability from a social entrepreneurial perspective and recognise that social accountability creates concrete material benefits that, when realised, can provide a positive return on investment for different types of stakeholders. A willingness to pay a premium for corruption-free goods,⁶⁹ a shared sense that corruption is one of the most pressing issues that many countries face, significant leakage rates that can add up to more than 20 per cent of public budgets, a heavy, typically regressive corruption burden, the adverse knock-on effects from corruption-affected services – all this culminates in what can only be described as, in principle, a strong public demand for effective anti-corruption work and thus also successful social accountability initiatives.

Against this backdrop of very concrete material and immaterial gains, a number of innovative funding models for social accountability initiatives could be considered, including the following.

Fee-based professional services, where specific communities pool small contributions to afford specific professional service providers that assist with particular social accountability effort, such as by helping audit or monitor projects, running legal helplines, etc.

⁶⁷ There are some initiatives under way that seek to activate international business in this context of local social accountability mechanisms as part of their corporate citizenship and human rights responsibilities and as participants in related collective action initiatives.

⁶⁸ E. Drapalova, *Good Apples on Bad Trees. Explaining Variation in Levels of Corruption in South-European Local Government*, PhD thesis (Florence: European University Institute, 2016).

⁶⁹ Transparency International, *Global Corruption Barometer 2009* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2009).

Claw-back and recouped resources fund-sharing schemes could be instituted to incentivise forensic accountants, lawyers, investigative journalists or hobby auditors to help detect and recover stolen money and keep a share of the recouped resources as reward.

Social impact bonds or pay-upon-performance schemes could be more open-ended instruments for donors or local governments to invite private sector professionals or citizen initiatives to come up with and run monitoring and social accountability mechanisms. These mechanisms would take on a specific measurable responsibility for ensuring a specific level of integrity and quality in service delivery and would qualify for a specific amount of compensation if targets are achieved.

Micro-insurance systems that would grant specific communities, associations or individuals access to legal assistance and support for lawsuits in specific situations when accountability failures translate into litigatable rights violations.

A common feature of all these funding mechanisms is not only that they seek out ways to supplant donor funding in favour of sustainable community-generated funding sources but also that they invite in professional service providers to support social accountability efforts, and thus address some of the expertise and time constraints that have been found to hamper a reliance on citizens as the main actors in social accountability. Such hybrid accountability approaches that augment citizen initiatives through professional experts are in themselves an interesting area of experimentation.⁷⁰

Many of these proposals may sound futuristic or naïve, and many such initiatives will inevitably fail, yet none of them are entirely implausible, particularly given that newer technologies, such as highly popular mobile payment systems, afford unprecedented opportunities for soliciting, pooling and managing micro-payments, even for disadvantaged communities.

Taking integration one level up and out

The message for better integration of social accountability initiatives is emerging clearly and loudly from most of the recent stock-takes and reviews. There are calls for integrating bottom-up social accountability with top-down institutional accountability mechanisms; there are demands to integrate online and offline social accountability initiatives; and there is a push towards integrating social accountability with a particular local-level focus into broader advocacy programmes that blend multiple interventions at international, national and local level to address accountability failures in a systems-wide scope.

Yet, despite all the integration spirit, one cannot help the feeling that social accountability is still a somewhat insular affair mainly driven by and involving actors from what could be called the governance communities: the donors, professionals, experts and volunteer ‘wonks’ that do care about accountability, governance and perhaps, at its broadest, service quality as patients, clients, parents or citizens. Yet, other than in the area of participatory budgeting, which tends to attract a broad band of social justice players, there still seems to be a peculiar disconnect from a lot of much larger, resourceful social justice or other social movement initiatives. One example: the connections between social accountability experts and activists to their peers in the urban development or

⁷⁰ This hybrid accountability would go beyond existing collaboration schemes whereby activists work closely with public auditing institutions because the professionals would be paid for and report directly to citizen groups rather than being part of the conventional tax-funded institutional system, which is more prone to co-optation or engineered inefficacy than such citizen-appointed, -funded and -controlled professionals.

environmental justice community are surprisingly limited. Some of the most intense struggles for accountability and social justice are being fought in the urban arena by highly organised urban activists and related movements with a long tradition of participatory engagement, self-help and solidaristic activities that might not be practised or discussed under the label 'social accountability' but intersect heavily in mobilisation mechanisms, resources and – partly – objectives.⁷¹ Likewise, struggles for environmental sustainability and justice succeed in mobilising large numbers of volunteers and considerable resources. The environmental governance frameworks in the making stand and fall with the enforcement and funding integrity that they manage to maintain. Bottom-up monitoring of these mechanisms is imperative, and the environmental movement has been a trailblazer in improving rights to information regimes. Yet neither the urban nor the environmental movements for justice seem to be fully aware of the full social accountability repertoire that could be useful. And at the same time very few social accountability activists have reached out and sought to foster mutual learning, shared agendas and joint initiatives with these communities. There are tremendous opportunities for greening and urbanising social accountability – bringing these movements into existing social accountability schemes and supporting them into appropriating social accountability tools for their own purposes. And this type of broader thematic integration of social accountability might be also worthwhile exploring with regard to other social justice issues and movements.⁷²

E.2 Approach: some notes on social accountability design principles

As mentioned earlier, most of the review literature focuses on donor (often development donor) - supported social accountability initiatives. As a result, many reviews also seek to infer insights about the proper design principles for social accountability interventions that could guide donors and their partners towards more impactful initiatives.

Use more sophisticated theories of change?

A central, common lament by most, if not all, recent reviews of social accountability is the lack of explicit and robust theories of change on which most projects are built. In fact, the call for mandating more, more explicit and better theories of change to guide project design and strategic implementation (not to mention funding applications) is perhaps the most consensual key message.

There are reasons to doubt that this is going to lead to significant improvements, however.

First, the dynamic change processes or pathways to reform that are proposed by some of the major social accountability review studies do not offer much concrete guidance. They are very schematic, express some interesting ideas about dynamic relations but are otherwise too schematic (and most likely not intended) to serve as guideposts for related theories of change.

⁷¹ For an interesting review of initiatives that straddle the line, see D. Burns, P. Ikita, E. Lopez Franco and T. Shahrokh, *Citizen Participation and Accountability for Sustainable Development* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2015).

⁷² On the disconnect between urban and governance practitioners, see D. Zinnbauer, 'Cities of Integrity: An Overlooked Challenge for Both Urbanists and Anti-Corruption Practitioners – and a Great Opportunity for Fresh Ideas and Alliances' (2013), *available at SSRN 2288558*. The observations about the environmental movement are based on participant observations while I was involved in developing programming and analysis around climate governance integrity for Transparency International.

Fox has sketched out the interplay between what he labels ‘teeth’ (accessible, responsible accountability institutions) and ‘voice’ (citizen capacity for collective action) to illustrate possible dynamic pathways from low-accountability traps (where low voice and insufficient teeth coexist) to improved performance (when both reinforce and help empower each other).

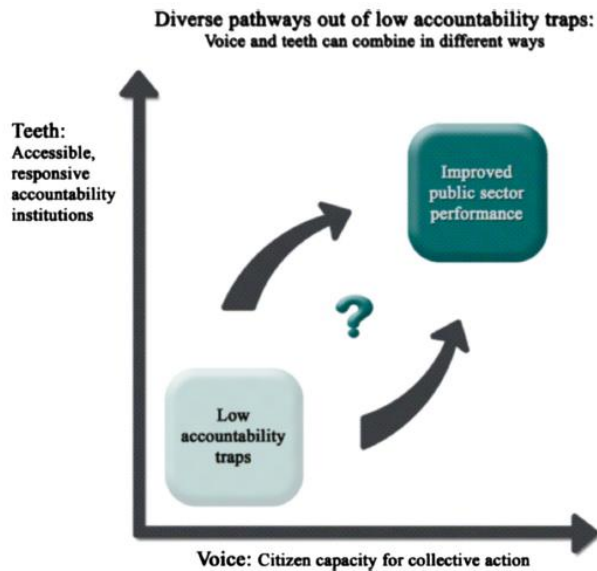


Exhibit 8: Moving out of Low Accountability Traps; Source: Fox (2015), p. 354.

Similarly, Grandvoinet et al. offer the idea of an iterative nature of social accountability and a ‘spiral of change’⁷³

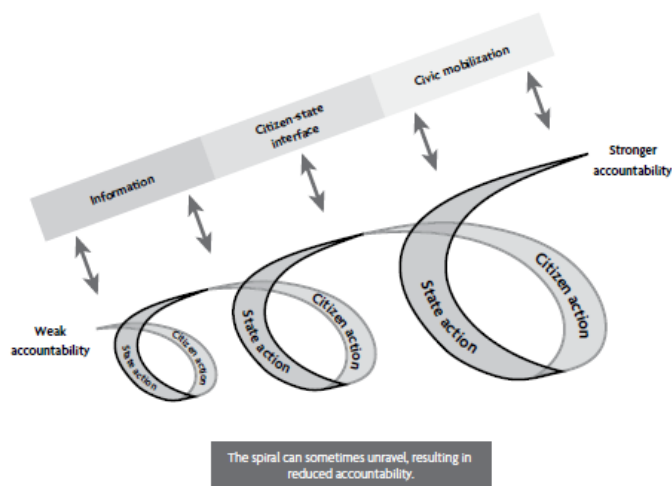


Exhibit 9: Spiral of Change; Source: Grandvoinet et al. (2015).

Both of these are very accessible in how they schematically plot ideas about change processes. Yet, for presentation reasons, they have to rely on what inevitably looks like a rather stylised, sequential

⁷³ Grandvoinet et al. (2015).

and mechanistic depiction of what, as such, cannot provide direct guidance on how to productively initiate or plug into such change dynamics.

A realistic theory of change would either have to be much more nuanced or grounded in larger evidence-based theories of social change, an endeavour that is typically beyond the reach of the resources and expertise of the activist project designer. Even when at hand such a full theory would probably be not very useful, since articulating multiple interdependencies and ‘It depends’ contingencies are hard to milk for straightforward tactical guidance.

Alternatively, a useful theory of change might just be built on the opposite, more agile side around a specific rather simple idea, small mechanism or important aspect of the problem, as suggested by sound and strong empirical evidence. The parsimonious beauty in this case is that such a nimble evidence anchor for change opens up a vast design space rather than locking the project into a relatively rigid framework.

In reality, though, it looks as if project applicants and donors alike shy away from this simplicity, which might feel somewhat loose and under-theorised. And they opt for middle-of-the-road log-frames that ingest some empirical insights and draw out some logical change processes. While this can be helpful it also runs the risk, particularly when linked to detailed monitoring, reporting and evaluation frameworks, of locking in a very detailed design and delivery plan. All the related milestones, deliverables, Gantt charts and tracking indicators threaten to ultimately straightjacket and over-design the project at the outset, depriving it of the very agility and openness to watch out for and respond opportunistically to unforeseen dynamics and surprising opportunities that no theory of change can foresee and that will become apparent only when the project is rolling out.

The clear and loud call for better theories of change is understandable, as it is unlikely to deliver given the highly contingent, complex nature of the type of political and social change that social accountability aims at, in which unforeseeable dynamics and unintended consequences abound.⁷⁴ A strong push towards more detailed theories of change might even backfire and augment the risks of over-specification.

So, as mentioned earlier, perhaps a better steer would be to call for more nimble theories of change that open interesting design spaces, rather than a particular execution corridor.⁷⁵ And, first and foremost, it might be useful to deprioritise theories of change in favour of finding, trusting and putting local partners in the driver’s seat who are deeply knowledgeable about the local context, politically astute and tactically shrewd – skill profiles that no stakeholder mapping matrix or log-frame can supplant or even adequately signal. Thinking and acting politically and socially are based on tacit knowledge and soft skills defying codification in theories of change.

A more relaxed approach to innovation

The growing disenchantment with technology and inadequate theories of change are closely related to a frustration with high failure rates and the inability of the various innovation challenges in the

⁷⁴ See the sections on context matters and what works.

⁷⁵ For example, Fung simply states that designers of transparency initiatives should keep in mind who is supposed to use their information (A. Fung, ‘Four Frontier Issues for Further Investigation’, in Carothers (2016) (20).

social accountability space to produce a significant number of scalable, sustainable, transformational, blockbuster innovations. Indeed, patience appears to be wearing thin in this area.

One of the most recent reviews by two long-time observers of the field diagnoses ‘the persistence of poorly articulated theories of change that fail to specify realistic causal pathways at the outset’ despite the availability of ‘clear pointers as to how to design theories of change and action to have a chance of achieving high government responsiveness’, and then goes on to summarise that, ‘if the designers and implementers of future tech-for-T&A initiatives do not utilise them, it will not be because the evidence is not there’.⁷⁶

As much of the previous sections suggest, one could and probably should reasonably disagree with the rather optimistic conclusion about clear design guidance. The point here is more that such observations articulated by observers who are very aware of related funding and innovation processes point to an imminent narrowing of the appetite for blue-sky innovations and thus the fundable innovation space, rather than its widening.

This is somewhat troublesome for a number of reasons that would actually augur well for going in the opposite direction and widening the innovation funnel, rather than narrowing or entirely abandoning it.

First, some of the social accountability innovation design thinking might be based too much on templates drawn from and expectations derived from innovation in the natural sciences, tech world or even other development innovations that do not have power and power relations so much as a constitutive part of the problem to resolve. We are not in search of a vaccine against corruption, to be deployed in fail-safe ways around the world to eradicate the disease of irresponsible government conduct. Social accountability is not a hand-washing intervention or literacy push that seeks to shift behaviours that rarely rub against vested interests and powers. Social accountability is about supporting an age-old and continuing struggle at small inflection points. This struggle is essentially political and essentially about social justice. Some privileged players will almost inevitably lose. Outright push-back, inventive resistance and shrewd sabotage are to be expected as the norm, rather than as an outlier side effect. Yet the forms and efficacy of such a push-back cannot be anticipated and thus require adaptive responses and redesigns of social accountability, leading to a performance footprint that is very often annulled and at best a jumpy rollercoaster with an upward tendency rather than a straight ladder towards more accountability. Bearing this essentially political nature of social accountability in mind, high failure rates of social accountability projects and the innovation processes that helped incubate may look more understandable and also caution against narrowing or abandoning the innovation efforts in this area.

Furthermore, even if one were to abstract from the power dimension and accept innovation in the ICT sector as an (unfair) benchmark, it is not clear even then if the social accountability innovation funnel is failing. At the surface, the perceived failure to hatch a sufficient number of high-impact blockbuster innovations contrasts painfully with the dynamism, innovation engine and huge transformational changes brought about by the ICT sector via Silicon Valley etc. Yet a quick reality check might be in order. R&D spending in Germany and France alone is bigger than the entire global overseas development assistance budget. And the topmost risky effort, venture capital in the United

⁷⁶ Edwards and McGee (2016).

States, is by itself about as big as all the aid flowing into the developing countries (only a tiny of fraction of which is likely to be devoted to innovation).⁷⁷ So, if the United States produces an Apple, Google or Facebook once in a decade, the social accountability and tech community, which operates with a tiny sliver of the resources and start-up energy in a much more difficult, high-resistance environment, might be lucky to produce a killer application once in 50 years. It would be not too far-fetched to guess that the number and volume of innovation projects ever having received innovation funding in the TAI world over the last decade is dwarfed by the failure and burn rate of Silicon Valley in a couple of weeks. Against this backdrop, the Mysocietys, Ushahidis or Wikileaks of the world that have scaled somewhat and achieved episodes of impact do not look so bad any more, and suggest an imminent failure of the innovation engine in this area.

Again, this is not to suggest that everything is all right and there are not too many ill-suited 'me too' projects submitted for support. The point is, rather, that all-too high expectations and impatience might lead down the wrong way, to demand proposals that are ever more prone to ticking all the boxes of conformity with what is perceived to be the right path to change, ever more pre-planned and pre-specified, ever heavier on reporting, and thus ever less agile and diverse and ever less able to hit upon unintended, unforeseen dynamics and levers for change.⁷⁸

We may have to adjust our baseline for success, throw the door even wider open, to invite in some unusual sources and forces for change (see previous sections) and let the literal thousand flowers bloom once more rather than trying to prescribe their growth.

E.3 A fresh look at research strategies

During the last five years a thriving knowledge and learning community has developed around social accountability issues. Related organisations and initiatives include the following.

- Global Partnership for Social Accountability: established in 2012 by the World Bank to provide learning exchanges and support to civil society and governments
- Transparency & Accountability Initiative: a donor collaborative to enhance the impact of accountability initiatives
- The Governance Section of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (J-PAL/GOV): a network of researchers using randomised controlled trials to gauge the impact of governance interventions
- Making All Voices Count: a research and innovation incubator for technology-related projects that improve governance
- Evidence in Governance and Politics: a global research network focused on experimental approaches to generating evidence for governance and institutional reforms

⁷⁷ All 2014 numbers come from OECD science and tech and ODA stats: see www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data and www.oecd.org/innovation/inno/researchanddevelopmentstatisticsrds.htm.

⁷⁸ Looking into successful innovations in the ICT space also supports the latter point, with most blockbuster applications, from Google to Twitter to Airbnb or Facebook, having been turned down at some point for funding due to implausible business models, and often thriving after agile adjustments to unforeseen impacts and responses.

- Open Government Partnership: a multi-stakeholder initiative to commit governments to specific actions in order to achieve more transparency and better governance
- International Initiative for Impact Evaluations: a learning initiative to support and summarise systematic reviews and impact evaluations including on governance and social accountability

This rich landscape of research and learning initiatives, which includes many different approaches and disciplines, has significantly expanded the knowledge base and research activities on social accountability. The following provides a quick discussion of some ideas and promising directions in terms of future research approaches and research focus that would fit well into this growing ecology of knowledge.

Negative space and peer effects

“When a fight breaks out, watch the crowd”

This perennial adage attributed to the late Elmer Schattschneider, eminent student of social movements, sounds like a great fit for future social accountability research. Initiatives tend to often suffer from low use, low participation, large drop-offs, etc. Yet most studies focus on looking at what happens, examining, for example, the characteristics and actions of participants in a social accountability initiatives rather than looking at the by-standers, non-participants. Exploring more this surrounding space – that is, what potential target user or participants of a social accountability initiative know about and think about the initiative itself – as well as about the broader issues that are at stake would help gain a better understanding of how to engage and mobilise. Very few studies so far have taken such an approach and done in-depth interviews or focus groups with non-users. Such an approach would also shed some light on the existence or potential for peer effects. There is an influential insight in collective action, social psychology and conceptual anti-corruption research that perceptions of what other people think can be very influential in shaping individual behaviour. This may take the form of free-riding, when a critical mass of other citizens is already believed to be involved in anti-corruption activities.⁷⁹ Or it can lead to resignation and complicity when all others are believed to accept corruption and play along with it.⁸⁰ Beyond initial survey-based correlation work there is very limited more in-depth empirical work yet on these effects, which can be particularly important in social accountability contexts. And the enquiry gets even more interesting when taking into account the importance of higher-order information asymmetries: beliefs about what other people believe about other people’s thinking can provide very interesting inhibiting or activating dynamics for taking action.⁸¹ Situations of pluralistic ignorance, for example, occur when the majority of people harbour the false belief that they are severely troubled by corruption while

⁷⁹ Bauhr (2016).

⁸⁰ A. Persson, B. Rothstein and J. Teorell, ‘Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail: Systemic Corruption as a Collective Action Problem’, *Governance*, vol. 26 (2013), 449–471.

⁸¹ On higher-order beliefs and the related, often called sunspot, literature, see, for example, S. Morris and H. S. Shin, ‘Social Value of Public Information’, *American Economic Review*, vol. 92 (2002), 1521–1534.

their peers seem to be tolerant of such practices.⁸² Such false beliefs about others can quickly lead to resignation, a falling in line with practices that are despised but look too difficult to change single-handedly. Simply unearthing such widely held beliefs as false and creating a deliberately public visibility of specific information so that everyone know that everyone now knows could be a powerful propellant for activating a dormant commitment for engagement and action. Such peer-effect strategies might be particularly interesting in the context of many social accountability interventions in which high-corruption equilibria and collective action challenges are particularly pertinent. Peixoto and Fox have hinted at this issue without fully elaborating on it when they highlight the importance of public display of citizen feedback,⁸³ and Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP), for example is beginning to build interesting related designs into its research approaches.⁸⁴ But it is very early days for considering negative space and peer effects, and many more ideas could be tried out and accompanied by related research.⁸⁵

Beyond RCTs

Randomised-controlled trials (RCTs), as the gold standard for evidence generation in many humanities, have also emerged as one of the most popular approaches to studying social accountability interventions. RCTs have yielded some of the most compelling and most quoted evidence on the impacts and non-impacts of social accountability interventions. Lately, though, some legitimate questions have arisen as to whether it might be worthwhile to complement RCTs more strongly with investment in other research strategies, for several reasons. First, RCTs with a focus on measurable outcomes and a short- to medium-term time horizon provide only a narrow view of impact and possible outcomes, particularly when considering a broader concept of outcomes as discussed earlier.⁸⁶ Second, the stringent methodological requirements for intervention design and execution might be ill-suited to real-world social accountability projects.⁸⁷ Third, while RCTs might be able to capture some outcomes and attribution, they do not provide any further explanations on why things have turned out that way, thus doing little in themselves to advance our understanding of underlying causal dynamics.⁸⁸

Fourth, they might be strong on internal validity, but they face serious limitations in terms of external validity, and even construct validity and might be inferior to other research strategies when it comes to policy guidance on the same interventions in other contexts.⁸⁹ Fifth, in their quest to establish statistical significance they are rather resource-intensive, yet can assess only a small set of treatment variations and might thus not be the most efficient strategy in a world with a large set of

⁸² J. Darley, 'The Cognitive and Social Psychology of Contagious Organizational Corruption', *Brooklyn Law Review*, vol. 70 (2004), 189–202; C. Bicchieri and Y. Fukui, 'The Great Illusion: Ignorance, Informational Cascades, and the Persistence of Unpopular Norms', *Business Ethics Quarterly*, vol. 9 (1999), 127–155.

⁸³ Peixoto and Fox (2016).

⁸⁴ T. Dunning, 'Transparency, Replication, and Cumulative Learning: What Experiments Alone Cannot Achieve', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 19 (2016), 541–563.

⁸⁵ See, for example, the *Feedfeedbackback* idea discussed here: <http://ambient-accountability.org/post/130738095776/feedfeed-backback>.

⁸⁶ See exhibit 2, page 8.

⁸⁷ Grandvoinnet et al. (2015).

⁸⁸ Dunning (2016).

⁸⁹ Pritchett and Sandefur (2015).

design variability that might matter strongly for outcomes.⁹⁰ Sixth, deployed in an area that is about power and resistance, they might be subject to a particularly strong Hawthorne effect, which might not be fully controllable, as when tactical responses relate to suspending corrupt activities until after endline analysis.⁹¹ Seventh, given scale and complexity, they take some time from idea to completed implementation and might be ill-suited to deliver policy-relevant results in rapidly changing technology environments.

All this means that there are strong methodological reasons to be more cautious with the inferences drawn from RCTs and that there are strong practical and methodological reasons for deploying more mixed-method research strategies to advance our understanding of social accountability interventions.⁹² Grandvoininnet et al. provide some examples of early new research initiatives in this area.

Adaptive learning

Moving towards mixed methods for a fuller understanding of social accountability interventions and its impact might be a first move towards more policy guidance, yet a conceptually and instrumentally very different research strategy might be in order to make research on social accountability as relevant to the social accountability designer and activist as possible. The social accountability interventions most likely to achieve impact and most likely to advance learning are the ones that a) can offer quasi-real-time feedback on the evolution and ripple effects of the intervention, b) not simply do so by tracking a set of specific, predefined indicators but by casting a wide net to capture potential unforeseen dynamics and unintended reactions, c) have the agility to respond with instant design variations and d) sustain this ping-pong between rapid feedback and design changes over a considerable period of time.⁹³ This is admittedly wishful thinking, and no research approach will ever be able to fully live up to this ideal, yet a number of changes in how research is done can help to at least move a bit closer into that direction: first, put the local activist and social accountability entrepreneur firmly at the centre. They are not execution agents for a predetermined research question and project but principals that commission the best research and feedback that fits and adapts to the very interventions that their excellent local embedding and expertise tell them are the best ones to carry out. Second, as a donor, be uncompromising in identifying the best local talent, but tolerant of a relative black box for intervention design and research strategy, since both will evolve significantly along the way. And be patient and invested for the long haul. Third, as a researcher, privilege flexible adaptation, opportunistic learning and inconclusive 'thick' description over methodological precision, epistemological rigour and a focus on a narrow set of research objectives/questions.

⁹⁰ Dunning (2016); R. Hausmann, 'The Problem with Evidence-Based Policies', Project Syndicate, 25 February 2016.

⁹¹ On the Hawthorne effect more generally, see K. L. Leonard and M. C. Masatu, 'Using the Hawthorne Effect to Examine the Gap between a Doctor's Best Possible Practice and Actual Performance', *Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 93 (2010), 226–234.

⁹² Grandvoininnet et al. (2015).

⁹³ Most of these suggestions are very much in line with and inspired by the growing movement for Doing Development Differently (<http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com>), an initiative by a loose network of development practitioners and scholars to, among other things, foster adaptive learning methods for development interventions.

Endnote

This discussion of recent stock-takes in social has deliberately shied away from adding to a ‘what works’ discussion that on closer inspection appears of limited use at best and counter-productive at worst. There is a solid proof of concept that social accountability interventions can work. And there are a plethora of conceptual work, insights and evidence that all help widen the imaginative horizon about the available design space, the immensely varied repertoire of available interventions, the many levers, buttons and interfaces that can be considered to work towards impactful change and the various different perspectives that can be applied and juxtaposed to think and do social accountability productively. But it does not find persuasive evidence or arguments for more tangible prescriptive policy guidance.

It has subjected some of the widely shared conclusion to a somewhat provocative, critical review in the spirit of re-diversifying the conversation a bit. Essentially, it seeks to caution against a common tenor to react to perceived high rates of failure with trying harder, anticipating more, pre-planning all, requiring sharper definitional concepts and more sophisticated theories of change for funding eligibility. Instead, this discussion of reviews has argued for a more hands-off, flexible approach, a more open-ended research agenda aimed at racing along on the roller-coaster of iterative project adaptations with infinite curiosity, intent on raising new questions and uncovering strange surprises rather than expending more efforts on the futile quests of more generalisable truths and once-and-for-all impact recipes.

Acknowledgements: I thank Jonathan Fox for invaluable comments on the topic and Finn Heinrich, Jose Marin and Santhosh Srinivasan for invaluable comments on the draft text. All errors remain mine however.



This project is co-funded by the
Seventh Framework Programme for
Research and Technological
Development of the European Union



Project profile

ANTICORRP is a large-scale research project funded by the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme. The full name of the project is "Anti-corruption Policies Revisited: Global Trends and European Responses to the Challenge of Corruption". The project started in March 2012 and will last for five years. The research is conducted by 20 research groups in fifteen countries.

The fundamental purpose of ANTICORRP is to investigate and explain the factors that promote or hinder the development of effective anti-corruption policies and impartial government institutions. A central issue is how policy responses can be tailored to deal effectively with various forms of corruption. Through this approach ANTICORRP seeks to advance the knowledge on how corruption can be curbed in Europe and elsewhere. Special emphasis is laid on the agency of different state and non-state actors to contribute to building good governance.

Project acronym: ANTICORRP

Project full title: Anti-corruption Policies Revisited: Global Trends and European Responses to the Challenge of Corruption

Project duration: March 2012 – February 2017

Theme: FP7-SSH.2011.5.1-1

Grant agreement number: 290529

Project website: <http://anticorpp.eu/>