

Social accountability: What does the evidence really say?

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What do evaluations tell us about evidence of tangible development impacts?

- After many excellent literature reviews - what's the takeaway?
- Yes, results are mixed, the evidence seems inconclusive - & now?
- Context matters, but are there any cross-cutting insights?
- *Rethinking* the evidence can help to address “what next”
- Based on a recent meta-analysis of 25 large N studies...

Summary of the findings:

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

➤ **Tactical SAcc approaches:**

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

➤ **Strategic SAcc approaches:**

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

➤ **Rereading evaluations through this new lens:**

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

This interpretation draws from studies of SAcc interventions that find *low impact*, which find...

➤ Information is not enough

- Impact evaluations have tested the proposition that local dissemination of service delivery outcome data will activate collective action, which will in turn improve service provider responsiveness

➤ Bottom-up community monitoring often lacks bite

- Impact evaluations have tested the proposition that local oversight of public works, by itself, can limit corruption

➤ Induced participation in local development is often captured

- Many studies have documented development outcomes of both community-driven and decentralized social investments, which are widely seen as SAcc-related

“Mixed results” suggest the tactical and strategic distinction

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

What next? Nine propositions for discussion

1. Information needs to be user-centered to empower
2. To be heard, voice needs representation as well as aggregation
3. Recognize that voice can be constrained by the “fear factor”
4. Build in “teeth” > shorthand for institutional capacity to respond to voice
5. To break out of ‘low accountability traps,’ bring in vertical accountability
6. Pathways out can either be voice-led or teeth-led, but both are needed
7. SAcc strategies need to address the ‘squeezing the balloon’ problem
8. That’s why civil society oversight needs vertical integration
9. Sandwich strategies can shift power with state-society synergy

1. Information needs to be user-centered to empower

- “Targeted transparency” refers to accessible information that is *perceived* as useful and actionable by stakeholders (Fung, Graham and Weil 2007)
- Information disclosure informs action by changing actors’ perceptions, mediated by a political economy analysis of different interests involved
- To overcome obstacles to collective action, information needs to be linked to credible pathways to change
- This *user-centered* emphasis on actionable *information* contrasts sharply with widespread optimism that larger quantities of public *data* will inherently promote good governance

2. Voice needs representation as well as aggregation

- Minimalist approach: aggregation of individual responses to questions determined from above
- Deeper voice: Collective, scaled-up, autonomous agenda-setting
- Crowd-sourced voice can aggregate, but what about representation?
- Who gets a seat at the table?
- Interlocutors -- facilitators of two-way communication – are needed to bridge cultural and power gaps

3. Voice can be constrained by the “fear factor”

- Why should people perceive the benefits of participation as greater than the costs?
- How does risk factor in to action decisions, when fears of reprisals are real?
- Truly enabling environments reduce the risks of action and help to identify actionable pathways to change

4. Build in “teeth”

(shorthand for institutional capacity to *respond to voice*)

- How to find synergy between supply and demand for good governance?
- “Teeth” includes capacity for positive institutional responses as well as negative sanctions
- When governments *do* respond to voice, they create incentives for more voice – and vice versa
- Address positive incentives and negative sanctions together because they can reinforce each other (as in ‘carrots and sticks’)

5. To break out of “low accountability traps,” bring vertical accountability back in

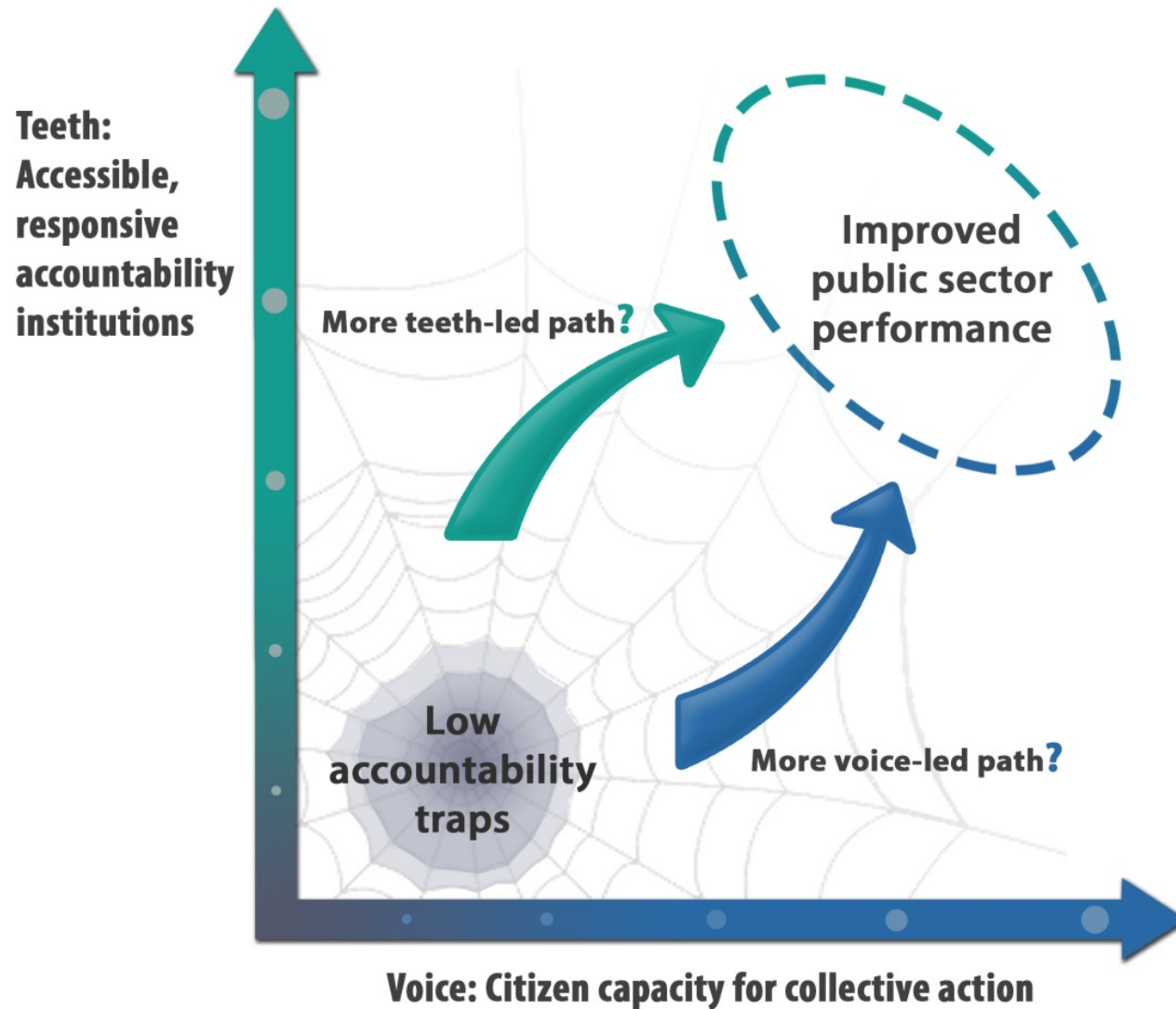
- The long and short routes to accountability are not really separate
- Public sector managers and frontline service providers are rarely insulated from electoral politics
- Political manipulation of social programs and horizontal oversight agencies can undermine fair elections
- This leads to vicious circles of self-reproducing “low-accountability traps”
- In practice, vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability relationships are interdependent

6. Pathways out can either be “voice-led” or “teeth-led”

- Accountability strategies need to address mutually-reinforcing linkages between non-accountable politicians and bureaucrats
- How to trigger virtuous circles between voice and teeth?
- Accountability pathways can be either more voice-led or more teeth-led

Diverse Pathways Out Of Low Accountability Traps

Voice And Teeth Can Combine In Different Ways



7. SAcc strategies need to address the “squeezing the balloon” problem

- The targets of citizen (or state) oversight are flexible
- They can adapt by reconfiguring corruption or diverting advocacy attention
- Focusing exclusively on local, front-line service providers leaves out the rest of the “supply chain” of governance
- Incomplete oversight may change the *shape* of the “corruption market,” but not necessarily its *size*

8. Civil society oversight needs vertical integration

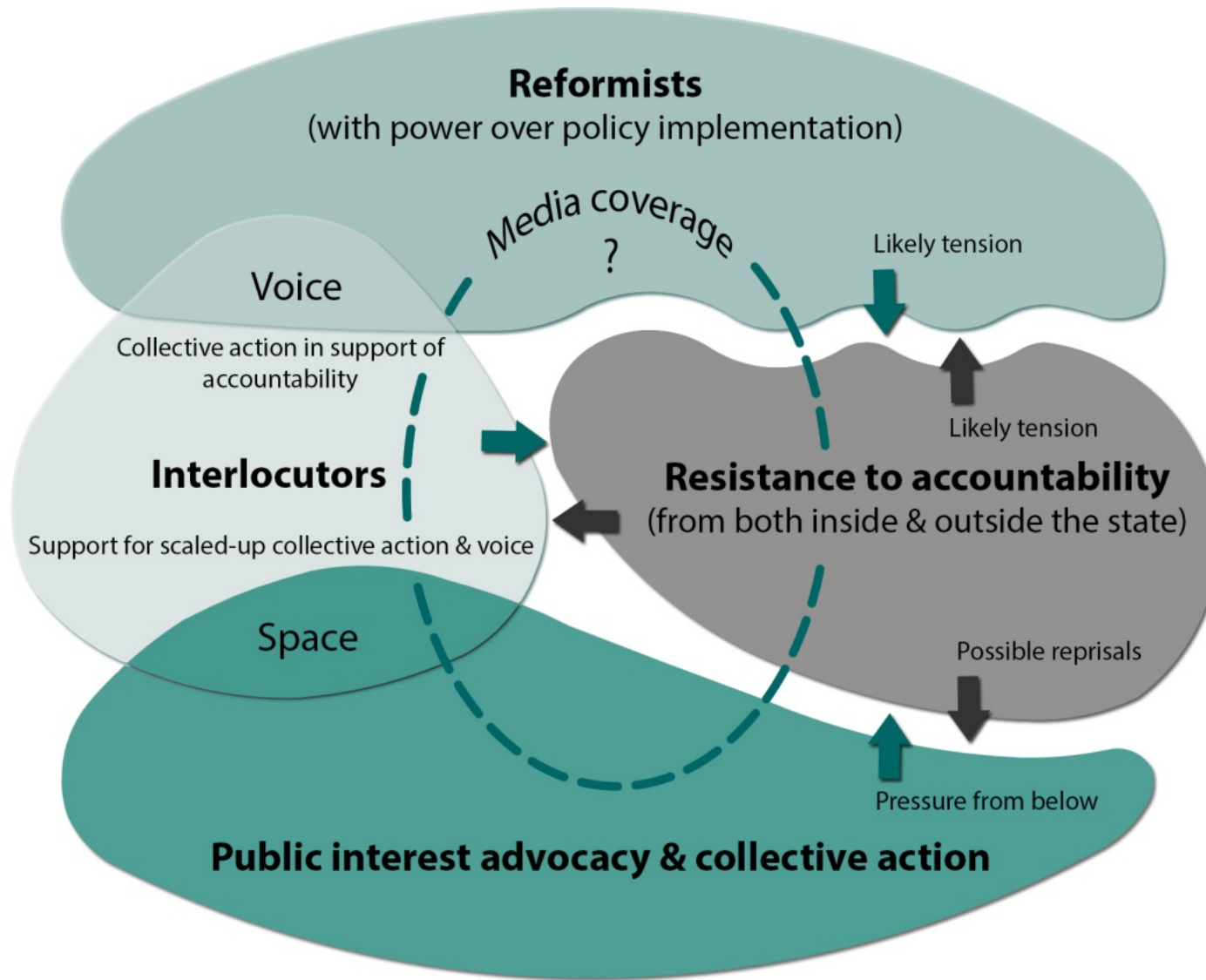
- Corruption and social exclusion are produced by vertically integrated power structures
- Effective responses require parallel processes that are also vertically integrated
- Vertical integration of local, regional and national civil society oversight can begin to mitigate the “squeezing the balloon” problem
- Yet this will only be as strong as the weakest link in the chain

9. “Sandwich strategies” can shift power with state-society synergy

- “State-society synergy:” mutual empowerment across the state-society divide
- Anti-accountability forces are also linked across the state-society divide
- The construction of accountability is driven by coalitions of pro-accountability forces in both state and society
- “Sandwich strategy” is shorthand for coordinated coalitions among pro-accountability actors embedded in both state and society (Fox 1992)
- Resistance is likely and conflict should be both expected and necessary

The Sandwich Strategy

Opening From Above Meets Mobilization from Below



Source: Revised version of diagrams in Fox (1992: 220).

To sum up re “what works?” in the SAcc field ...

Voice needs teeth to have bite...

... but teeth may not bite without voice