

Fragile and conflict-affected education systems

Working for integrity and social accountability¹

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Donor support to social accountability in fragile and conflict-affected states is a relatively new phenomenon. It has emerged with the lessons that top-down anti-corruption approaches have often failed and different approaches are needed to improve a state's accountability to its people. Enforcement-based interventions, such as the establishment of an anti-corruption commission, often fall short because they lack independence from the executive and long-term support from donors. Legal approaches may become highly politicised, with unintended consequences that can even undermine the rule of law and fuel conflict². Tiri is an independent non-governmental organisation that works with governments, business, academia and civil society to find practical solutions to making integrity work. It was

founded on the conviction that integrity offers the single largest opportunity for improvements in sustainable and equitable development worldwide³.

Accountability challenges in fragile and conflict-affected states

Fragile states are home to 14 per cent of the world's population but up to 33 per cent of the world's poorest people, according to the World Bank⁴. A third of all aid to developing countries goes to fragile and conflict-affected states. While there is no clear agreement on the concept of fragile states, they are generally



Photo: Commonwealth Secretariat/Rebecca Nduku

A school-based free meal scheme

noted for their limited ability to govern a population and territory and build mutually constructive and reinforcing relations with society (OECD, 2010). The consequent developmental and security risks present some of the most complex challenges faced by education policy-makers, teachers and learners.

High levels of aid often create opportunities for the misuse of resources, conditions of high inflation and unrealistic conditions that breed resentment and reduce state actors' interest and incentive to deliver education and other public goods. Trust and legitimacy are lacking as social cohesion has broken down, while citizens' expectations are high in the context of abundant resources. The failure to fulfil state functions and build accountability in the immediate years after war creates high risks for corruption and renewed violence. In this period of high hopes and expectations, there is nevertheless often little emphasis from donors and partner governments on public education, access to information and strengthening local accountability mechanisms (Galtung and Tisné, 2009).

What is 'social accountability' in education?

Social accountability relies on civic engagement, whereby ordinary citizens participate directly or indirectly in holding education providers to account (Malena et al., 2004). Identifying who are appropriate facilitators of social accountability depends on the context. Channels such as civil society organisations often link citizens and the state, building accountability through community mobilisation, training, dialogue and collective action.

Much of the learning and knowledge of social accountability derives from groundbreaking initiatives in Brazil, India, Malawi, the Philippines, South Africa and Uganda. In India, the organisation Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) was successful at combining community budget monitoring with freedom of information through social audits of the rural employment guarantee programme in poor communities. This blazed the trail for a national mass movement that culminated in the India Right to Information Act in 2005. The social movements that have overthrown corrupt regimes in a range of countries from Asia to the Americas since the mid-1980s were a combination of direct action and heightened awareness-raising. They set the stage for greater demands for accountability to the people, including poor and marginalised communities.

Current social accountability initiatives include a range of activities to strengthen transparency, accountability and citizen engagement. They include participatory budgeting and budget monitoring and analysis, such as public expenditure tracking surveys and social audits. Some examples are citizen report cards, community scorecards and citizens' charters; public hearings and citizens' juries; community development plans and integrity pacts; and e-governance and interactive community radio.

Studies of social accountability initiatives point to several 'success factors' in building accountable, transparent and responsive states. Stocktaking of such initiatives in the Asia and Pacific Region, carried out by the World Bank, showed those that used advocacy and communication strategies saw greater social accountability gains than those that did not. Effective advocacy chains that link

together different actors for greater social accountability involve the gathering of robust and systematic data and reflecting the communities' pressing needs (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006).

Lack of social accountability in education and health systems can relate to how information is managed by service providers. Across various countries, different departments of the same government have generated and recorded inconsistent data, leading to frustration when trying to accurately assess the effectiveness of government services (McNeil and Mumvuma, 2006). Discrepancies across political/administrative districts and sectors have created challenges in consolidating and verifying information on these key services.

Through the Network for Integrity in Reconstruction, civil society organisations in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Nepal, Palestine, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste have received organisational support and built their capacities using peer learning and South-South co-operation. Through collaborative engagement, they help institutionalise social accountability from the ground up to empower people through access to information, community engagement in monitoring and decision-making, and improved infrastructure and service delivery.

Sierra Leone: supporting integrity in data management⁵

The deterioration of records systems in Sierra Leone during the 1980s and early 1990s was accelerated by a long internal war at the end of the century. The government was left without the documentary evidence needed to manage the public service and in particular to maintain employment and payroll controls. After the war, efforts to verify the payroll and re-establish control failed repeatedly due to the lack of reliable records.

The teachers' records in the Department of Education were in a very poor state. Record cards were kept but no personnel files, so it was extremely difficult to get complete information about a teacher. The cards – which contained the date of birth, the date of first appointment and, usually, the signature of the teacher – were arranged by school. This made retrieval difficult, especially as teachers frequently moved from one school to another. Decisions affecting teachers were supposed to be noted on the record cards, but this tended not to happen, partly because the volume of information was greater than the staff could handle and partly because there were no standards or procedures to ensure that information was kept up to date. There were many stories of teachers having to pay bribes to get information from the cards or waiting for weeks before their cards were found, if they could be found at all.

The teachers' payroll was another concern. The Accountant General's Office was paying approximately 19,000 teachers, while the Department of Education estimated the number of teachers at 17,000. Various initiatives, including two World Bank studies and one funded by the African Development Bank with support from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), had searched for a means of gaining control of information about teachers with limited success. The African Development Bank study had also investigated the number of school children and the architecture of school buildings.

Teachers' verification was considered crucial and was managed by a committee within the Department of Education. The exercise, with a 98 per cent completion rate country-wide, emphasised designations, grades/scale-points and staff ceilings for schools. All data from the schools was to be verified by the committee before payment could be authorised. However, the Department of Education was unable to produce appointment documents, staff lists, records on teachers or comprehensive registration papers for schools. Authorisation went ahead without verification against personnel records.

Box 1

Ghost-busting: some lessons learned

1. Technology is only part of the solution to establishing control of employment and payroll information; developing and managing complete and reliable personnel records is essential.
2. Personnel records must be managed effectively if they are to provide a reliable data source for computerised pay and personnel systems; inputs from records professionals are vital if the evidence in computerised systems is to be reliable.
3. Without routine records management controls, ghost workers will find their way back on the payroll no matter how good the verification methodology.
4. Records management controls should be introduced before systems are computerised. Ignoring this will waste time and money as efforts to establish control produce less than optimum results or have to be repeated.
5. The requirements for managing electronic records generated by or associated with computerised systems must be defined as part of the systems development planning process and should take account of international records management standards.
6. Records procedures must be designed and integrated with business processes connected with pay and personnel management to ensure that the evidence of employment is up to date.
7. The design of verification methodologies and IT systems must include an analysis of data sources, business processes and the viability of records management systems.
8. It is essential that there should be ownership of the goal on the part of high-level decision-makers, local records staff, local managers and employees.
9. Donor benchmarks in relation to pay and personnel information must be realistic in relation to records management realities, past and present; donors need to take action if it is discovered that a benchmark is not achievable.
10. Allowing non-records professionals to make 'improvements' to records systems creates more problems than it solves.

The Payroll Verification Project ran between 1999 and 2002. As a result of the exercise, over 6,000 people were removed from the payroll, nearly all of them teachers or people beyond retirement age. The teachers' payroll had climbed close to 23,000 in early 1999 during a period of great insecurity when payment audits were impossible. Despite these impressive achievements, controls still were not in place to regulate the employment of teachers, and between 2002 and 2008 the teachers' payroll nearly doubled.

From 2005 onwards, there was a positive effort to rebuild the structures required to manage records, with a particular focus on pay and personnel records. In the initial stages, this involved reorganising personnel records in payroll number order and systematically developing personnel files for all civil servants. Subsequently, it involved developing a new methodology for recording and capturing anomalies discovered on personnel files, verifying them through face-to-face interviews, and linking the findings systematically to the Human Capital Accountability (HCA) Module of the Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS), i.e. the payroll. This methodology was then used to verify each individual in an initial subset of 2,000 civil servants. As an immediate result of the exercise, 16 per cent of the sub-set employees were suspended from the payroll, with a potential for the number to increase through a process of further investigation.

Box 2

Standing up to gender-based violence

In early 2010, Sidi, a 13-year-old Kenyan girl, was being raped and constantly pursued against her will by a 32-year-old man. Her parents pleaded with the local chiefs to rescue their daughter, but in vain. They felt voiceless, like most of the poor families in the area. Cases of early pregnancy and school drop-out among girls in the district are rampant. Then Sidi's mother met Christine, a community monitor and resource person trained by the Coastal Rural Support Programme (CRSP) through Tiri's Pro-Poor-Integrity (PPI) project.

According to the skills gained through training in integrity and access to justice for the poor, Christine was supposed to look for local solutions to this challenge. She started by counselling Sidi, who had dropped out of school owing to stigma from her fellow pupils, and succeeded in talking her into going back. She then reported the matter to the area chief in March 2010. After the perpetrator failed to turn up despite three summonses from the chief's office, she took the matter to the District Officer. The perpetrator was summoned twice by the District Officer but again did not comply. Christine also took the matter to the police station but again no action was taken.

Then young Sidi became pregnant. This made Christine even more determined to bring the perpetrator to justice. She went to see the District Commissioner, and within two weeks the perpetrator – who had seemed to be untouchable – was arrested. His case was heard in December 2010 and he was given a 35-year jail sentence.

With the right approach, local integrity challenges can be solved with local solutions. Christine is not only a community monitor, she is becoming a voice for the voiceless.

Conclusion

Sierra Leone's sound and innovative approach to tackling records management problems as part of the process of conducting payroll verification exercises and of introducing controls can provide valuable lessons for other countries facing the same generic issues (see Box 1).

To strengthen social accountability, donors can conduct or commission a mapping of stakeholder capacities and local accountability mechanisms. In the above case study of Sierra Leone and that of Kenya (see Box 2), the work of local actors was supported by the UK Department for International Development (DfID). Knowing who are social accountability facilitators and how to support them will depend on the context. In postwar societies, non-governmental organisations or community-based groups who served the public good before and throughout the war may be well placed to build and train networks of change agents, with careful consideration of politico-economic incentives.

With an increasing number of groups pioneering social accountability initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected states, cross-sectoral partnerships can strengthen understanding of contextual dynamics and possibilities for scale. It is frequently necessary to bridge the capital and periphery, the urban and rural divide, to enable intermediaries – including parliamentarians, civil society organisations and sub-national officials – to convey and act on citizens' concerns.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Adapted from Schouten, 2011.
- ² The literature points to examples where there may be unintended negative consequences of anti-corruption programming. Among other effects, it is recognized that this has the potential to undermine state legitimacy. See, for example, Putzel and van der Zwan, 2006; Galtung and Tisné, 2010; UNDP, 2010.
- ³ More information about Tiri can be found at <http://www.tiri.org/>
- ⁴ Living on less than US\$1 per day. The figures are based on the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) (see <http://go.worldbank.org/EEAIU81ZG0>).
- ⁵ Adapted from IRMT, 2008. International Records Management Trust is a TIRI partner.

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