



FAQs on the Social Accountability Approach

What is social accountability?

“Social accountability” refers to particular actions taken by groups of ordinary citizens to hold public officials, politicians, and service providers to account for their conduct and performance in terms of delivering services, improving people’s welfare and protecting peoples’ rights.

Do you mean participating in elections or taking to the streets for popular revolt (“people power”)?

Elections and “people power” are traditional types of citizen action. But the social accountability approach represents a different – and, some say, higher – level of citizen engagement. It involves citizens (especially poor citizens):

- empowering themselves with information about government programs so that they have solid evidence,
- analyzing this information,
- and then interacting directly with public officials, politicians, and service providers to demand that they serve the public interest efficiently, effectively, and fairly.

What kind of actions would fall under the social accountability approach?

These include, for example, participatory public policy-making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, citizen monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery (preparing ‘report cards’). They also include efforts to enhance citizen knowledge and use of conventional mechanisms of accountability (for example, through public education about legal rights and available services) or efforts to improve the effectiveness of “internal” accountability mechanisms — for example, through citizen involvement in public commissions and hearings, citizen advisory boards and oversight committees.

When did the concept of social accountability start?

It evolved from the concept of citizens participating in governance. When government mechanisms and market forces failed to promote the public good, especially in eliminating corruption and reducing poverty, a movement began toward making direct citizen involvement a prominent aspect of governance. International donors who want to secure the proper use of loans and grants to developing governments also contributed significantly in support of the social accountability approach.

Does this have anything to do with Social Accountability 8000?

No. SA8000 is a standard and verification system to assure humane workplaces. A nonprofit called Social Accountability International developed it in 1997. The SA8000 Standard is an auditable certification standard based on international workplace norms of International Labour Organisation conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

When should citizen groups practice social accountability?

Social accountability happens in the entire cycle of democratic governance. The idea is that citizenship should not only be exercised during elections when citizens cast their votes. The social accountability approach calls for citizens to remain constantly vigilant and watchful over the performance of elected leaders, bureaucrats, and service providers.

So citizens are the most important players here?

Not just citizens but government as well. Citizens and the government are the most important players of social accountability. The government has the duty to facilitate access to all information while the citizens must assert their right to participate in governance. This means citizens must organize themselves to be able to engage in this kind of participation.

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How does the government-citizen partnership play out?

The social accountability approach presumes, first, that government keeps the door open for people's participation and, second, that citizens are willing to engage the government. The dynamics of the relationship is constructive government-citizen partnership. Citizen groups and nongovernment organizations are willing to expand the range of actions for engaging – or working together – with government in order to assure that government lives up to its duty of delivering services, improving people's welfare, and protecting people's rights.

How is a constructive partnership possible?

This partnership is possible if there is mutual trust and openness. The crucial factor would be if there are trusted and credible "champions" in government who appreciate the value of citizen participation. These champions should be complemented with equally credible citizen organizations that can dialogue in an organized and competent manner. The effectiveness of the partnership highly depends on free access to information. Information substantiates the decision and action of social accountability players. The ethical, responsible, appropriate use of available information, on the other hand, makes social accountability advocacy work credible.

Does this mean citizen groups should no longer disagree with government?

Of course not. Non-violent but assertive methods, such as protest, remain legitimate actions and should be used, depending on the needs of the situation.

But isn't there a risk of citizen groups becoming co-opted by government?

Not if you set concrete measures of either success or failure of engagement. Significant failure to live up to these measures should be a basis for withdrawing support while success should encourage continuation of support. The public should know about the success and failure of the engagement.

How can ordinary citizens battle big problems in government through social accountability?

Ordinary citizens are actually the primary contributors to the advancement of social accountability, but it is necessary to pull together and consolidate their actions to match big, complicated issues. By connecting citizens, the power of collective and organized advocacy work can make them a potent force for social transformation.

Should the social accountability approach be made more culturally appropriate?

Yes, definitely. Social accountability requires cultural relevance. It must be understood and framed according to the unique values, language, and practice of the people of the East Asia-Pacific region. Only in this way can the social accountability approach be popularized, mainstreamed, and accepted.

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