The Significance of Civic Engagement in Fostering Social Accountability

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Abstract
Governance triggers lots of arguments in many academic writings around its consequences, pertaining the relation between the government in one side and other societal actors. Civic engagement pops up as one of the major mechanisms towards legitimizing democratization process through enhancing decision making and accountability; enhancing consequently the acceptance and consent of outputs. In other words, civic engagement presumably fosters the recipient's acceptance and responsiveness towards governance outputs; providing thus legitimacy to prevailing system. Moreover, civic engagement plays a crucial role in promoting social accountability; compensating thus the limitations of formal mechanisms of accountability.
The aim of this paper is to analyze the role of the civil society in the promotion of social accountability, as a result of adopting "participatory governance" as a way of governance. This analysis investigates the prerequisites and evaluation criteria for assessing effective social accountability. Also the study explores the arguments arise around the risks associated with depending on societal actors in fostering accountability rather than depending on formal institutional mechanisms; represented mainly in sacrificing expertise for the sake of probable armature endeavors from the society side. Accordingly, the study ends up with some helpful recommendations if civic engagement is the choice adopted to foster accountability.
Keywords: governance, civic engagement, public policy, decision making

1. Governance and Civic Engagement and Social Accountability – A Theoretical Frame.

Governance is identified as the process in which different actors, public and private, purposively participate in organizing societal relations and conflicts, necessitating thus re-considering the roles of non-governmental actors in decision-making (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006: 28). Also, governance is identified in the World Bank literature as: the way of exercising power in managing social and economic resources and ensuring accountability (World Bank, 1994). Another perception identifies governance within the change in the role of governments and their relation with other societal actors; specifying thus four pillars of governance which are: networking, emphasis on influence rather than manipulation, partnership between public and private resources, and multiple tools in implementing and managing public policies (Peters and Pierre, 1998: 224- 225). The main facet; thus, in identifying governance is the participatory approach which moves the emphasis from governmental actors and hierarchy in decision making towards the interaction between public and private actors and flatter hierarchy in making decisions (Kooiman, 1993:7). The following figure represents governance pillars among which accountability and participation, the main variables of the current study.
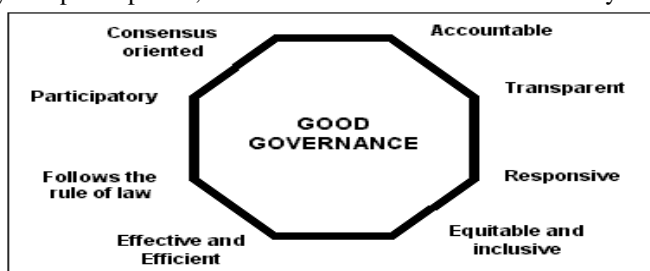
Source: United Nations ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific), What is Good Governance? http://www.unescap.org/pdd/prs/ProjectActivities/Ongoing/gg/governance.asp

Regarding the civil society, the arguments seeking to identify the concept were affected by the peaceful uprisings took place in Eastern Europe before the collapse of the Eastern bond in 1989. Civil movements opposing communist regimes, composed of commercial unions, churches, citizens and scholars, supported such uprisings (Finke, 2007). Worth notion that identifying what is meant by civil society was affected by scholars' perceptions to the nature of relation between the government and the society; i.e., whether this relation reflects a competitive atmosphere or a collaborative one (Heidbreder, 2012). Apart from the relation type, another third perception identifies the civil society as the availability of the infrastructure that enables the society to have an impact within a democratic system through the availability of communication channels and tools between both parties; the government and the society (Taylor 1985; Barber 1984).

Civic engagement, the third variable of the study, was identified differently among scholars. From a

political perspective, it was identified loosely to describe a society in which its members have a collective directive power enabling them to organize themselves in formal groups and to adopt shared or common objectives (Wnuk-Lipinski and Bukowska, 2011). Other definitions identified the concept pertaining the government - society relations. Accordingly, many definitions emerged reflecting a wide spectrum of democracy practiced by the civil society (Smismans 2006; Fung 2003; Klein 2001). However, there is a consensus upon emphasizing the key role the civil society with all its institutions plays, providing that it possesses the ability to direct recruit and organize its efforts towards agreed upon objectives.

As for accountability, it could be identified as the process by which the public official is obligated to provide full information pertaining his performance and the results achieved (Ackerman, 2005: 6). It could be identified also as the obligation to show and justify public official's performance to others, either a person, institution, or citizens (Bovens, 2007). Thus accountability may have an upward direction, when the official has to answer to higher authority; i.e., internal accountability, or it takes a downward direction when he reports to the citizens or more precisely to the civil society (Aaref, 2015), the later form expresses what referred to as social accountability. The World Bank perceives social accountability as an approach fostering getting citizens or the civil society engaged directly or indirectly in holding the public authority accountable (World Bank, 2004f: 1). The concept of social accountability; accordingly, underlies the right and responsibility of citizens to ensure that government acts in the best interest of people, and the obligation of government officials to be accountable to the citizens (World Bank, 2006).

II. Social Accountability- Importance

Historically, accountability has been considered part and particle of applying participatory governance. Many tools have been emerged supporting such trend. Holding authorities accountable can be achieved through different means; formal, market based, and community based accountability. The importance of the formal one cannot be denied; nonetheless, the other two forms of accountability are currently receiving increasing emphasis. It worth notion that social accountability plays a supplementary role, to the formal form, in holding authorities accountable, if the later is effective and activated. But when formal accountability is blurred or not strengthened enough, social accountability then plays a compensatory role. However, this relation is not that straight, as many political, social and economic variables interfere to shape, reshape and activate social accountability (Sarker and Kamal Hassan, 2008).

Vertical formal accountability mechanism, i.e., elections, alongside with horizontal mechanisms; i.e., other political financial and legal mechanisms, play important roles in ensuring accountability of public officials. The limitations surrounding these formal mechanisms; nonetheless, gives rise to the social form of accountability. Many reasons behind the limitation of the traditional formal mechanisms, represented as follows:

1- The evolution in the governing systems toward more governance; implying thus that the state is not the only actor in the political scene. Pluralistic institutions instead are presumably cooperating and coordinating in making decisions and managing resources. Non-government actors have emerged in the scene (Chandhoke, 2003).

2- The wide intervals between electoral cycles enforce the citizen to wait for a long time to state his dissatisfaction concerning mismanagement and services delivered. Consequently, elections are far from being considered as simultaneous and effective accountability tool. Not to mention the malpractices associated with these elections in developing countries such as the wide spread use of black money, manipulation, fraud and violence (Zafarullah and Akhter, 2001).

3- The difficulty accompanied with monitoring the huge and complicated government processes. Parliamentary tools have limited effect in following the illegalities and breaches of executive institutions. Not to mention, the difficulty of tracing unethical or illegal practices associated with wasting public properties or blackmailing citizens for personal gains. The interference between the judiciary and executive bodies of the government, and the high judicial costs impede citizens from prosecute public officials (Sarker, 2009).

4- The market tool in ensuring accountability has in turn its limitation. Obligating officials to be responsive to the market mechanisms to increase the flexibility of their institutions proved its effectiveness in some cases. However, this tool has its limitation pertaining the difficulty of applying the market tools in a complicated social and political environment (Haque, 2000).

Accordingly, by involving citizens in monitoring government performance, enhancing transparency and exposing government failures and misleads, social accountability is a powerful tool in eliminating public sector corruption, and improving governance and citizens' empowerment (World Bank, 2006:7). However, social accountability should emphasize citizens' understanding of the challenges and constraints faced by government through information sharing and dialogue (World Bank, 2006: 16).

In a nutshell, the previously mentioned reasons triggered the emphasis on social accountability as a compensatory or supplementary tool alongside with the formal one to ensure public officials accountability.

III. Social Accountability- Prerequisites

The diversity and complexity of public activities necessitates another form of public accountability. In addition to the down–up accountability, it is necessary to have up-down form of accountability (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984). Social accountability provides, in contrary to the formal one, a continuous tool for monitoring officials' performance. Public accountability exists as far as the community exists (Smulovitz, 2003). Nonetheless, the main in this case, if the people falsely blow the whistle to manipulate public officials, also it may be weakened if the community shows passive attitude towards public behavior.

Consequently, in order for public accountability to play a crucial role in detecting public performance, some important prerequisites should be provided. Worth notion that these conditions are not a ready to use formula; but they are tied in author's opinion to political and social circumstances; i.e., the maturity of the political system and its governing rules and regulation, specifically with regard to the power the formal initiations have to maintain public accountability. Moreover, the demographic characteristics of the society represented mainly in its homogeneity and the awareness levels of its members pertaining their rights as citizens.

The first prerequisite is represented in the existence of what is called "social bond"- which reflects the adherence among the members of a society. Societies were exposed to diverse factors weakened their bonds; i.e., the increasing sizes and degree of societies' diversification and their institutions. Other factors represented in the widening gap between political representatives and the public, and the doubtful legitimacy of many administrative practices and procedures. Such weakened bonds deprived societies from possessing enough power and continuity in order to be able to induce satisfactory practices within the administrative systems; seeking consequently for other factors retaining communities' solidarity (Hummel, 2008).

The relation between civic engagement and social bond is debatable. Some argue that the solidarity of the social bond will positively affect civic engagement. While others argue the solidity of social bonds is the result of high levels of civic participation in public administration practices. Thus, many endeavors, in the late sixties of the previous century, emerged purposing enhancing the citizens' participation opportunities in the public affairs, which was evidenced specially in the environment field (Newman and Demone, 1969). The more the citizens become accustomed to participate in public affairs, the more mature solution they provide, and the more consensuses they gain (King, Feltey and Susel, 1998: 320). In other words, the ongoing interaction among citizens will eventually lead to consolidate their bonds (Stivers, 1990: 86).

On the other hand, the solidarity of social bond should be perceived as a prerequisite for any involvement. Such bonds are crucial in shaping the involvement procedures. Involvement without the existence of concrete social bonds will result in scattered and immature participation. This perception matches what Rousseau mentioned in his social contract theory (1978), as he proposed the social block as a result of common interests among people, without which no community can exist and persist (Austin, 2010).

Other important considerations in this regard are: First, social accountability initiatives should not work in isolation of other mechanisms. They are expected to complement state horizontal accountability mechanisms. Second, the issue of institutionalization is of paramount importance. Five key institutional requirements of social accountability have been emphasized (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001):

o Legal basis of civic groups" participation within institutions of public sector oversight;
o Civic groups" continuous presence throughout the process of the agency's work;
o Well-defined procedures for the conduct of encounters between citizens and public sector actors in the meeting;
o Civic groups" access to public information; and
o Civic groups" right to dissent and report directly to legislative bodies.

Accordingly, we find that the constrains required for civic engagement are represented in the existence of social bonds and ongoing channels for participation able to form and foster such bonds.

IV. Mechanisms of Social Accountability

Different kinds of mechanisms are being used for civic engagement-based social accountability. Broadly, the mechanisms are (Malena et al, 2004):

- Participatory Public policy making
- Participatory budgeting
- Participatory monitoring of public expenditures
- Monitoring and evaluating public services delivery
- Raising awareness of citizens' legal rights
- Participation as a consultant and proctoring agents in public committees and hearings.

There is a diversity of ways in which civic engagement can have a positive impact on government accountability. Six different distinctions capture the variety of practices that make up the broad category of "social accountability". Worth notion that many of these distinctions can also be used to evaluate any type of

pro-accountability reform. These criteria are (Ackerman, 2005: 20):
1- Reward vs. Punishment criterion,
2- Rule Following vs. Performance Based Mechanisms,
3- Level of Institutionalization or Formality criterion,
4- Depth of involvement,
5- Inclusiveness of participation,
6- Branches of government
The explanation of each criterion will be discussed respectively.

1- Reward vs. Punishment criterion
Punishment is considered a crucial tool to ensure accountability. The problem of course is that excessive punishment tends to corner public officials into a state of fear and paralysis. Rewards also have their difficulties. Although they stimulate already relatively honest and pro-active officials to perform, they do not do a very good job at correcting the behavior. Social accountability is often seen to be closer to the punishment than to the reward side of the spectrum. This is because we tend to associate social mobilization with anger and protest, with social movements that challenge the state and try to punish government officials for malfeasance or for taking particular policy directions. One example of a social accountability mechanism which is grounded in a positive-sum, rewards based
view of accountability is the Citizen Report Card .
In general, the best "accountability system" is one that includes both punishments and rewards so that public officials have strong incentives both not to break the rules and to perform at their maximum capacity. When designing their initiatives government pro-accountability reformers should think about combining "nice" strategies like scorecards and surveys with "tougher" strategies like the reation of an independent anti-corruption ombudsman that is both in close touch with civil society and has the power to directly sanction or prosecute government officials (Sadek & Cavalcanti, 2003).

2- Rule Following vs. Performance Based Mechanisms
A focus on rule-following is linked to the so-called "Old Public Management" and its emphasis on the construction of a Weberian bureaucracy. On the other side of the coin there are mechanisms that look to stimulate effective performance. This is the core of the so-called "New Public Management" (NPM) which argues that governments need to liberate themselves from strictly process based evaluation, which slows down government action and stifles creativity, and turn to results based evaluation (Barzelay, 1997) . The best pro-accountability strategies are ones that simultaneously focus citizen participation on enforcing the rules and on improving performance.

3- Level of Institutionalization or Formality criterion
Most efforts at involving society to strengthen government accountability tend to be ad-hoc initiatives
Initiated by civil society activists. There are three different levels at which participatory mechanisms can be institutionalized in the state. First, participatory mechanisms can be built into the strategic plans of government agencies and rules and procedures can be mandated that require "street-level bureaucrats" to consult or otherwise engage with societal actors. Second, specific government agencies can be created that have the goal of assuring societal participation in government activities or act as a liaison in charge of building links with societal actors- a good example of which is the ombudsman system. Third, participatory mechanisms can be inscribed in law, requiring individual agencies or the government as a whole to involve societal actors at specific moments of the public policy process. Although the first level of institutionalization is more or less widespread and the second level is relatively common, the third level is extremely rare.

In addition to the institutionalization of social accountability, equally important is their institutionalization in society. Civil society organizations and groups need to build their capacity to dialogue with government and hold it to account- the issue that has been discussed formerly and referred to it as the solidarity of the social bond. This involves including the education and training of civil society as a central element of any social accountability initiative (Akerman, 2005: 18-20).

4- Depth of involvement
Most pro-accountability initiatives grounded in civic engagement tend to be "under-involved" or too "externalist". But it is very difficult to find cases in which societal actors are "invited to observe step-by-step the process of government planning for two main reasons. Firstly, governments usually claim the need to protect personal privacy and national security, and secondly How can we expect someone who participated in making decisions to have an objective perspective on whether the formulated policy is good or not? According to this point of view, pro-accountability initiatives based in civic engagement need to defend the autonomy of society.

5- Inclusiveness of participation

There is a tendency for pro-accountability mechanisms to only involve a small educated group who has the same values and orientation and speaks the same language.   The argument, or simply the fear, is usually that the participation of broad based grassroots movements, uneducated citizens will only make things more difficult. However, civic engagement for accountability is usually more effective when government officials don't know what to expect from civil society. When public officials and society actors form part of the same "epistemic community" officials can anticipate exactly when, where and how they will be observed, judged and held accountable. Some level of predictability is positive in so far as it allows for coherent long term planning. But too much predictability is dangerous because it may tend towards complicity (Eberlei, 2001: 15). Although some level of social trust in government is necessary for national cohesion, too much trust can be counterproductive.

6- Branches of government

Social accountability initiatives tend to be directed towards the executive branch. Reforming the executive branch is indeed an important challenge. But, equally important tasks are reforming the legislative and the judicial branches. Since judges deal with highly sensitive material and information it is quite easy for them to hide from the public eye simply by claiming that their work is "confidential" and that they need to protect the right to privacy of the parties involved. Nevertheless, civil society does have an important role to play in holding the judiciary accountable. Indeed, given its constant interaction with the public the legislature is one of the more productive locations for citizen participation, as it constantly hold public hearings, conduct consultations, speak with lobbyists, inform the public as to the status of bills, etc. In addition to holding legislators accountable through their vote, citizens can also work side by side with legislators to hold the executive and judicial branches accountable (Ackerman, 2005: 32).

Conclusion

The study aimed to provide a theoretical frame to some concepts related to enacting social accountability; such as; governance, civic society, and accountability in general. The study investigated the reasons triggering the concern of social accountability, especially those related to the limitations proved in the traditional accountability mechanisms, leading consequently to searching for new and ongoing tools ensuring accountability in which the ordinary citizen plays a crucial role.

Worth notion that reaching an active participation from the citizens' side should have definitely passed through prior steps called "social accountability spectrum". Participation in its initial phase takes the form of just "informing" the citizens of problems faced and available alternatives. Then participation takes the form of "consulting" to assure the importance of articulation opinions regarding proposed policies and their alternatives. The third step is to "involve" the citizens through direct and continuous interaction. "Collaboration" is the higher next step which ensures coordination with the formal civic representatives. The last and higher step is to "empower" citizens to take decisions and get commitments concerning implementation (international association for public participation).

The study revealed some prerequisites in order to move on in that spectrum, and some basic criteria that might be used to evaluate social accountability- or any other accountability. The challenge is to reinvent the relation between citizens and decision-makers in the administrative system, and to activate citizenship as one of the public responsibilities. Instead of perceiving citizens as clients and public officials as experts and the ones tackling citizens' problems, rather active citizenship enables citizens to think by themselves and for themselves, such that they are empowered to take the initiatives suiting their preferences, and allocating resources to get them implemented.

This new perception does not imply underestimating experience and specialization; rather it emphasizes a dynamic process in which citizens' initiatives get the priority as new resources for problem solving (Boyte and Kari, 1996, p. 24).

Further, the study highlighted the importance of bearing into account situational factors that may foster or hinder the adoption on social accountability. The factors highlighted were mainly the political and social surroundings. These factors tend to shape the weight and scope of civic engagement as a tool fostering social accountability.

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