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Context Matters: A Causal Chain Approach to Unpacking Social Accountability Interventions

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Context Matters: A Causal Chain Approach to Unpacking Social Accountability Interventions^{*}

Anuradha Joshi

Summary

A common premise of development interventions is that context matters for development outcomes, yet there is little understanding of how exactly 'context' affects outcomes and which contextual factors matter most.

The paper focuses on social accountability interventions, to explore macro and micro contextual factors. On the macro side, accountability processes need to take into account larger histories of citizen state engagement and related political processes. At the micro level, local factors can clearly drive the way certain social accountability interventions unfold and the extent to which they are successful, even within otherwise broadly similar contexts.

The research builds on the individual components of accountability and proposes a 'theory of change/causal chain' strategy to better understand the micro-context.

A number of key points emerge from the paper:

- the existing evidence could potentially be recombined to assess the promise of existing and new interventions by deconstructing the various mini-causal pathways (i.e. in the micro-context) and understanding the contextual conditions that make them work
- existing interventions could be assessed for the extent to which they travelled along the causal chain while identifying the main roadblocks to impact.

Keywords: social accountability, casual chain approach

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Contents

Summary, keywords, author notes	3
Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	6
1 The Macro Context: Broad Political Economy Features	7
2 The Micro-Context: Assumptions and Causal Chains	8
3 Unpacking the Accountability Black Box: Information, Citizen Action, and Official Response	10
4 Tracing Causal Chains	15
5 Conclusions	18
References	20
Annexes	
Annex 1 Major Contextual Factors that Mediate the Effectiveness of Social Accountability Activities	23
Annex 2 The Information Accountability Causal Chain	24
Annex 3 An Illustrative Theory of Change for Community Scorecards	25
Tables	
Table 3.1 A Broad Categorization of Components	14
Figures	
Figure 3.1 Assumed Link between Information, Participation and Accountability	11
Figure 3.2 Potential Dynamic Links between Information, Citizen Action and Official Response	11
Figure 4.1 A Preliminary Causal Chain: From Information to Official Response	16

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Introduction

A common refrain in eliciting lessons from experiences with development interventions is that the outcomes depend critically on ‘context’ (Booth 2011). This is also true of the range of recent social accountability (SA) interventions that are increasingly popular among donors and civil society organizations (Ringold et al. 2012; McGee and Gaventa 2011; Foresti et al. 2007; Joshi forthcoming). Despite this general consensus, there is limited progress on understanding exactly how ‘context’ affects outcomes; and the related question of exactly which contextual factors matter. Some dictionary definitions of context help illustrate the problem: ‘the *conditions and circumstances* that are *relevant* to the event or fact’ (Free Dictionary); ‘the *general situation* within which something happens that helps to explain it’ (Macmillan); ‘the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood’ (Oxford English Dictionary). The ambiguity in these definitions lies in the fact that which ‘circumstances’, ‘conditions’ and ‘general situation’ are *relevant* to the event is subjective. So how can we get a handle on which elements of context are relevant to understanding success and failure?

In this paper, I suggest that there are two broad parts to the issue—the macro and the micro. On the *macro* side, there is now growing acknowledgement that accountability processes are better viewed as located within larger histories of citizen state engagement and related political processes (Fox 2007; Joshi and Houtzager 2012). This recognition has led scholars to identify broad features of the context that seem to matter for outcomes. The *macro* approach, which has dominated the limited existing literature, largely focuses on the level of particular socio-economic and political realities at the country level. What we have learned to date from this approach is elaborated in Section 1.

At the *micro* level, local factors can clearly drive the way certain SA interventions unfold and the extent to which they are successful even within otherwise broadly similar contexts. For example, very similar interventions intended to provide information to communities in order to support accountability demands and improve educational outcomes could have different impacts despite being in similar country contexts (Pandey, Goyal and Sundararaman. 2009). Yet, few have explored why this might be the case and how one might approach issues of context at the local level. The main contribution of this paper is an elaboration of the individual components of accountability and a ‘theory of change/causal chain’ strategy to gain traction on the thorny issue of micro-context elaborated in Section 2. Two broad aspects are important in understanding the micro context: a) the features of the broad individual components of accountability processes and b) the causal chains through which social accountability processes are expected to work. The disaggregation of components of information, citizen action and official response is carried out in section 3. A preliminary causal chain is mapped in Section 4, which could be used as a basic frame on which complex chains could be developed. The conclusions, presented in Section 5, map out the implications of this approach to context.

1 The Macro Context: Broad Political Economy Features

Over the years, there have been several attempts to systematically understand contextual factors that influence the outcomes of development interventions under various frameworks such as the 'drivers of change' approach, or more recently political economy analysis (PEA). The idea is to identify factors that are enabling or constraining with respect to change given the particularities socio-economic and political conditions in a country. Driven by the unpredictability of outcomes of similar developmental interventions in different contexts, the drivers of change/political economy approach attempts to expose the underlying power relationships, incentives and interests among broad groups that might affect whether specific reforms will have traction. A recent definition of PEA crystallizes the thinking behind these approaches:

'political economy analysis investigates how political and economic processes interact in a given society, and support or impede the ability to solve development problems that require collective action. It takes particular account of the interests and incentives driving the behaviour of different groups and individuals, the distribution of power and wealth between them, and how these relationships are created, sustained and transformed over time' (Unsworth and Williams 2011).

Practical tool kits have been developed by several organisations as a guide for undertaking political economy analysis (Fritz, Kaiser and Levy 2009; DFID 2009). These toolkits contain several guiding questions about contextual features in different aspects of analysis (e.g. the business state relationship, state dependence on earned revenues) etc. Some thinking has also gone into developing guides to political economy analysis in particular sectors (Moncrieffe and Luttrell 2005; EC/Europeaid 2008).

In the field of social accountability, such macro contextual analysis is relatively new. Although country level contextual analysis for social accountability, not surprisingly, shares many features with general PEA, it also tends to focus on particular features, for example freedom of media, more as they are directly related to social accountability interventions. Further, studies have sought to identify factors that run across instances of success (Bukenya, Hickey, and King 2012; Bukenya and King 2012; McGee and Gaventa 2011; Joshi forthcoming). For example, Joshi (forthcoming) highlights five themes that were common across the cases she examined: 1) that information and transparency is necessary but not sufficient for accountability actions to be undertaken; 2) that accountability action without a corresponding capacity for state response can be counterproductive; 3) that effective sanctions play an important role in sustaining accountability demands; 4) that collective action is important for accountability to the poor and 5) that existing cases of successful social accountability are underpinned by cross boundary alliances between social actors and state reformists that create accountability coalitions.

O'Meally (2013) offers a recent, and relatively comprehensive review of the literature on contextual factors that matter for social accountability. Because this is one of the most recent attempts to provide a framework for analysing context, I go into some detail into it here. His take on contextual factors is explicitly political. The underlying meta theory of change that underpins successful social accountability and drives the contextual analysis is that:

if pro-accountability and pro-poor networks in society are adequately resourced and build coalitions with pro-accountability networks and actors in political society through rounds of state-society bargaining and interaction; and,

if these coalitions are able to : a) negotiate changes with anti-change actors; b) generate sufficient counter-veiling power to change governing elite incentives and challenge the primary/secondary political settlement; and/or c) active contextually legitimate accountability mechanisms...

...then, this might result in a) coercion - a backlash from existing power-holders; b) co-optation and collaboration - incremental improvements in accountability relations and developmental gains within the existing political settlement; and/or c) change - more fundamental change, to differing degrees, leading to the formation of a 'new' political settlement/social contract'. (O'Meally 2013:29-30).

It is clear from this very broad theory of change, that the contextual conditions that matter range from the deep rooted structures in society, e.g. political settlements, to more tractable features, e.g. nature of civil society. Capturing the range of factors that might be included in such analysis is vast - and O'Meally identifies six 'contextual domains': a) civil society, political society, c) inter-elite relations and the political settlement; d) state-society relations and the social contract e) intra society relations and issues of social inclusion; f) global factors (see Annex 1). These are then further deconstructed into various aspects that have a bearing on their enabling or constraining potential.

The characteristics of these domains in particular contexts can point to the feasibility of social accountability as a specific strategy for improving services, empowering citizen and strengthening governance. The main messages from O'Meally's (2013) review of context suggests that practitioners should think politically when considering social accountability, connect social accountability with political accountability, work on both the supply and demand side of accountability, support pro-accountability coalitions that cut the state-society divide, learn by doing and use longer time horizons, take account of global influences on accountability, build on existing processes and make issues of inclusion and exclusion more central to accountability processes. But these are very broad messages.

2 The Micro Context: Assumptions and Causal Chains

While the contextual factors identified in the studies discussed above, (particularly O'Meally 2013), are useful in providing key questions that practitioners should be asking about in various domains, they do not help in suggesting which particular strategies are likely to work; rather they help identify whether SA as a general approach should be considered or not.

Yet, developmental actors require signposts of a more detailed kind. Are community scorecards more appropriate or are social audits better in specific contexts? Should collective action focus on pursuing rights claims through existing complaint mechanisms or should one organise street protests? Are information provision strategies likely to be successful, or is the creation of strong channels of grievance redress? What combinations of approaches work in specific settings? What potential bottlenecks are likely to emerge? What essential factors need to be in place before attempting particular strategies? While practitioners regularly take decisions on these

kinds of questions, based on a range of factors, including their own capacity, past experience with approaches etc.; they could be better informed by a clearer understanding of the lessons from what interventions of worked in the past, and in what contexts.

And how are we to make judgements of this kind from the evidence (limited as it is) that exists? We know from the literature that even lessons from the most highly regarded evaluation studies - randomised controlled trials (RCTs) - of social accountability interventions have problems with generalisability of the results (external validity). In a recent paper Cartwright and Munro (2010), elaborate on the problem of external validity and outline two conditions that are important in extrapolating the *causal* inferences made in a particular study context to another: a) the study and the target population are the same with respect to the probability of their relevant compositions; and b) the study and target population are the same with respect to the causal laws for the outcomes. Yet, randomisation does not deal with the latter issue. As they point out,

'how T (treatment) operates to promote O (outcomes); what must be in place for T to operate to promote O; what can destroy or overwhelm T's operation; what other factors promote or retard O; and what happens when many factors are at work simultaneously. Ultimately, we need theory to judge which factors have stable capacities and to hypothesize when they are worth implementing.' (Cartwright and Munro 2010: 265).

Further, as they highlight,

'Most causal and probabilistic relations relied on in health care and social practice are not fundamental: They do not just hold, they hold on account of some underlying structure that gives rise to them. When the structures are different, so too are the causal and probabilistic relations they create.' (Cartwright and Munro 2010: 261)

Thus, they point to the need for unpacking the interventions in terms of a theory of change or causal chain, in order to understand how desired outcomes might work.

Increasingly, this approach to social accountability interventions is being seen as a promising one (Vogel 2012; Tembo 2012; Lieberman et al. 2012; Holland and Thirkell 2009). A theory of change/causal chain approach allows one to understand implicit assumptions underlying particular activities, the conditions that are enabling or constraining as well the extent to which interventions travel through the causal chain and reach intermediate objectives even if the final outcomes are not those expected. This approach can, in particular, identify bottlenecks in the causal chain that can be responsible for some observed adverse outcomes.

In taking up the task of unpacking causal chains, we propose that two aspects are important to understand the potential of particular approaches in specific settings: the *components* of the pathway (and related micro-contextual factors) and the *mechanisms* through which each of the components could lead to the other. An analogy from the physical world might be useful here. Suppose we want to push an object from location A to B. We can use different mechanisms to do this - we could place wheels under the object and roll it to B; we could push it to location B, we could lift the object and put in B. The *mechanism* in this example is the means we use to relocate the object. However each of these mechanisms will operate dependent upon the specificities of the *component* (object) itself - the object may be lifted because it is light, or because it may be dismantled and carried piece by piece. It is also important to note that the actual enabling conditions might look different in different cases due and some *micro*

*contextual*¹ conditions we can use wheels if the path to B is relatively smooth. Often we assume these conditions are in place because they seem ubiquitous in the cases where the intervention works. However, they may not be present in particular instances. However, the role the enabling micro-context plays is the same - in terms of enabling the mechanism to work. We need to understand both how the *mechanism* works and *micro-context/component* in order to see whether particular strategies will help us reach the outcome we desire.

One additional consideration is necessary before beginning to unpack SA. One can take two different approaches to what one means by an SA 'intervention'. On the one hand one can differentiate by common SA interventions - e.g. community scorecards, social audits etc. - and elaborate an evaluation framework and a theory of change for each.² This has been the prevailing tactic for several studies (Foresti et al 2007, Barr et al forthcoming). On the other hand, one might start from a more general broad theory of change that underpins ideas about demand for good governance and citizen-led accountability. This might comprise a series of steps that combine in different ways in common SA interventions - e.g., awareness raising, information demands, protests, etc. (Joshi and Houtzager 2012). Although less prevalent in the literature, we take this approach in the paper for reasons in the next section.

3 Unpacking the Accountability Black Box: Information, Citizen Action, and Official Response

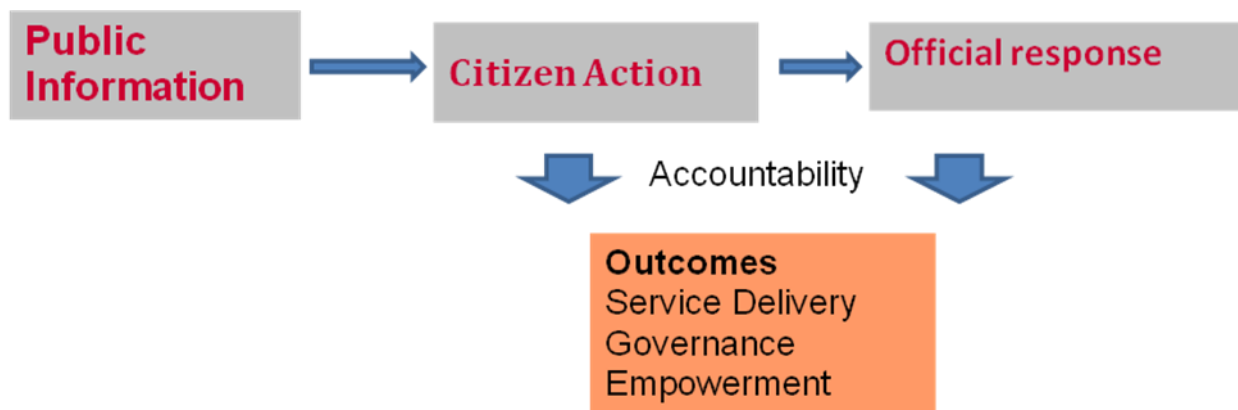
If one starts from the point of disaggregating social accountability into its component parts (rather than look at 'labelled' interventions such as social audits, community monitoring etc.) then as a first step, one will have to separate its broad components. While this might be done in different ways, and will vary depending upon the nature of the citizen groups and the target of accountability actions among other things, we know that social accountability has something to do with three broad things: information, citizen action and state response.

The conventional assumptions have been that the provision of some kind of information/transparency will lead to citizen action, which will then lead to official response (Figure 3.1). This unidirectional causal chain often implicitly underpins social accountability interventions.

¹ By micro-context, we mean the factors often identified in the macro strategy for their operation at the micro level. This is important because even if the overall climate in country is favourable for SA type action, at the local level it might not be. For example, while a country might have a free and fair media, at the local level, the newspapers might be controlled by particular groups opposed to greater accountability. Or particular groups/communities may not have access to newspapers, or might be illiterate.

² See Annex 3 for an example of this for community scorecards.

Figure 3.1: Assumed Link between Information, Participation and Accountability



However, the relationship between these three components is not so straightforward—each of the arrows, from information, to citizen action to official response, could work in the other direction (Figure 3.2). For example, citizen action through mobilisation could lead to the generation or exposure of relevant information. Official responses can encourage or restrain citizen action. Official responses can also take the form of making previously opaque information public. And sometimes, the revelation of information can directly spur official responses without being mediated through citizen action. It seems clear that the linkages between these three components are not as straightforward as assumed in the unidirectional causal chain that is often assumed.

Figure 3.2: Potential Dynamic Links between Information, Citizen Action and Official Response



In addition to the complexity of the multiple pathways of interaction between these three components, the nature of the component itself matters. All information is not equal; all citizen action is not the same and all official responses cannot be seen as accountability enhancing. Although most scholars and practitioners, if questioned, would acknowledge the differences in different types of information, citizen action and official response; curiously the literature treats them all alike, especially when attempting to aggregate lessons on social accountability. This ambiguity calls for a closer conceptual look at the nature of each component of social accountability.

3.1 Information

There are several issues related to the nature of information in social accountability processes. First and foremost is the issue of usefulness: as Fox (2007) puts it, is the information opaque or clear? If the information is provided in a form that is not understandable or actionable - in other words, is opaque - then it is unlikely to trigger collective action. Usually, whether information is opaque or transparent depends upon the source of the information, and the incentives people have for full and clear disclosure.

Second, is the credibility of the information source - it is likely to be accurate and reliable? Does the information provider have incentives to distort or obfuscate information? If the information is produced through a process in which citizens have participated then it is more likely to be credible and legitimate. On the other hand, information provided by governments, will be considered more authoritative when considering official responses. When the information used in accountability demands is generated through a process involving both providers and users, then it has more legitimacy on for all stakeholders.

Third, there is the issue of whether the information provided is about official standards, (of either/both processes and outputs) or whether the information is about performance in relation to other similarly placed comparators. On the one hand, when the information relates to established standards, then citizens are expected to mobilize and demand performance up to the official standards. On the other hand, when information is about performance and is comparative (e.g. lead tables in the UK), citizen action can be catalyzed by realising that similarly placed groups are receiving better services than them for no rational reason. Here the trigger for collective action is competition among localities (or groups) to receive services at least up to the best available among locations.

Fourth, information can have an inspirational effect.³ Stories of successful citizen action leading to greater official responsiveness and improved services in other parts, can catalyse a 'we can do it too' spirit, in communities that might otherwise not consider accountability demands. The lessons from success here are not so much the actual citizen action or pathways through which accountability gains were made, as much as the fact that it is possible to make successful accountability demands, despite difficult circumstances.

These four aspects of information (and there might be others) imply different causal paths for usage as a part of the accountability process. Each potential pathway has a set of assumptions that underlie it. For example, there is no reason to believe that clear information from a non-credible source will trigger citizen demands for accountability. Or when information is about standards that are unrealistically high, there may be little faith in official responsiveness due to

³ Credit for this point and the earlier point about comparative information, goes to Twaweza, whose thinking in this area was elaborated for me by Varja Lipovsek (personal communication, 2013).

the difficult nature of the task. Starting with categorising the nature of information on the four aspects can throw light about the possible paths that link information with both citizen action and official responses.

3.2 Citizen Action

Similar to the discussion on information, the substance of citizen action can be broken down into several elements (Joshi and Houtzager 2012). First, citizens can demand information from governments related to budgets and spending, processes, standards and performance. Often budgets and expenditures can be skewed towards the better off, processes are not well understood, entitlements are not explicit or widely known and the actual performance of government remains unclear. This is the reason why information campaigns often accompany social accountability interventions.

Second, citizen action can generate relevant information - for example through perception surveys, expenditure tracking or budget analysis. Such information, as discussed above, is likely to be viewed more credibly by communities due to the legitimacy of its collation. However, as many observers have pointed out, the availability of information by itself is not enough to spur action (Fox 2007). The process of demanding or gathering information however, might itself spark off greater mobilisation for accountability.

Third, societal actors can keep a watch on services through on going monitoring of the actual quality of public goods being delivered. Are teachers absent from classes? Are medical supplies in stock? Are officials demanding bribes for services? Are contractors using appropriate materials as per specifications? These issues are best scrutinized by those who are close to the services in question and are able to monitor performance on a regular basis. Such on-going monitoring forms part of citizen action, but need not require official response if nothing is found to be amiss.

Fourth, if monitoring and information gathering shows that there are gaps between expected and delivered levels of service, then further citizen action is required in terms of seeking accountability. Such action can involve making demands to enforce legal standards that are not currently being met. For example, communities may demand more teachers in a school if the teacher pupil ratio is higher than established norms. This is an important element of social accountability: to give governments opportunities to remedy the situation when suitably informed or provide credible explanations of why the standards cannot be met.

Finally, if dissatisfied with the explanations provided, or if corruption is exposed, social groups can seek grievance redress. This could be done either through existing administrative complaint mechanisms, political protests or litigation. If grievance redress channels do not exist, citizen action may take the form of demands for them to be established.

Which of the above actions are actually undertaken depends upon various factors. Key to this is the past history of demands and the responses they invoked. In addition, these various actions can be combined in different ways in sequence, or in parallel. As with information, underpinning each action is a set of assumptions about how these might work.

3.3 Official Response

Within the literature on social accountability, the least explored aspect is that of official response. While the key expectation is that public officials will respond to citizen action and

make improvements, the actual substance of their response can vary considerably including generating and releasing information, to reforming processes, mobilising resources, advocating for reforms at higher levels and changing their own behaviour. They could also initiate investigations of wrongdoings and sanction those responsible. On the negative side, they could instigate reprisals and ignore reputational taints. What sorts of citizen action trigger particular responses, and in what contexts? While there is consensus that social accountability advocates should focus on state capacity and inclination to respond, there is little understanding of why officials might take certain actions rather than others. Unpacking the assumptions we make in expecting official responses to citizen action will be key to understanding the micro-contextual factors that matter.

For each of the components: of information, citizen action and official response, there are associated processes. Information can be generated through crowd sourcing, perception surveys, participatory research or monitoring and be made public through a variety of channels, including the media. Citizen action can take the form of appeals to the bureaucracy, street protests, political articulation, formal complaint channels or litigation. Official responses can be communicated through behaviour changes, formal and informal channels of reform, and sanction or through the media. Each of these processes (or transmission mechanisms) that circumscribe particular elements has an associated set of assumptions that underpin them. These process and micro-contextual assumptions are highlighted through illustrative examples in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: A Broad Categorization of Components

Component	Content	Process	Assumptions/Micro-context
Information	Performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compared to standards - Compared to others Inspirational	Transparency Generating New Information (e.g. Perception data, monitoring data) Media campaigns	Literacy/Access Legitimacy/ credibility of Information
Citizen Action	Demand Information Generate Information Monitor performance Seek accountability Seek Grievance Redress	Formal bureaucracy Protests Political articulation Formal complaint channels Litigation	Priorities Belief in efficacy of channel Sense of entitlements
Official Response	Release Information Reform Processes Increase Resources Demands at higher levels Investigation/sanctions	Transparency Reduced corruption Behaviour change Formal and informal channels of reform demands Formal and informal channels of enquiry and punishment	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 of influencing higher levels

4 Tracing Causal Chains

In the previous section, we examined each component of the black box more carefully to understand its nature and sub-parts. In this section, we focus on the relationships between the components - the pathways through which each component is expected to lead to the others. In order to do this, we start by tracing causal chains, assuming rational, self-interested individuals. Further work might expand such causal chains based on advances in behavioural economics and social psychology that elaborate more realistic patterns of human behaviour.⁴ In the following we examine an illustrative and the most common causal chain for social accountability - the pathway from information to official response.

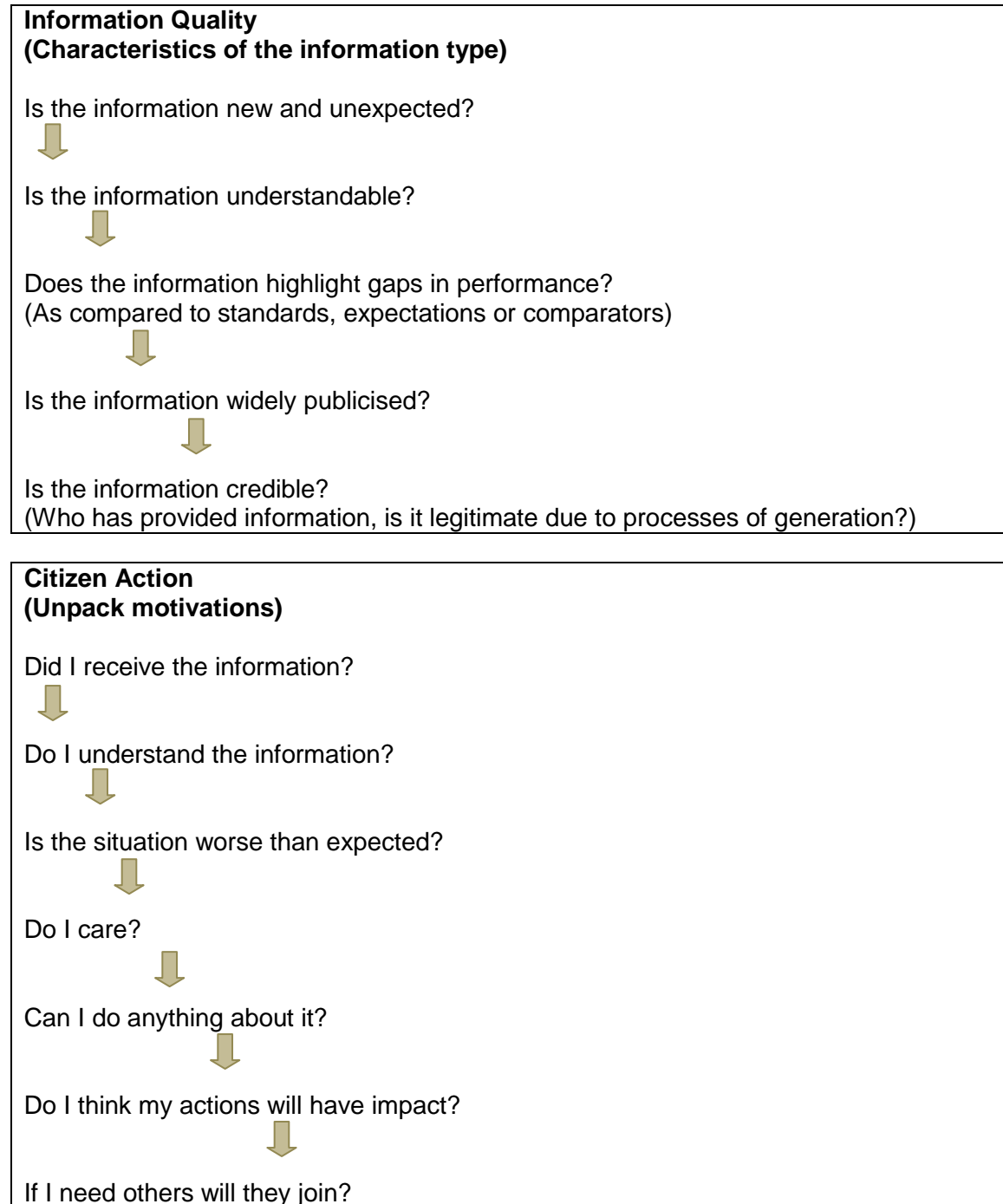
There is a widespread expectation that providing information to the poor and disadvantaged will spur them into demanding better services. In fact several interventions have been premised on such an assumption (Banerjee, Duflo, Glennerster, Banerji, and Khemani, 2010; Pandey, Goyal and Sundararaman 2009; Khemani 2008). In the field of education, most studies find information campaigns to have little or no effect (Bruns, Filmer and Patrinos 2011). Yet the findings of many studies suggest that information may not catalyse action, and information itself is not enough to lead to accountability (Fox 2007). Similarly, social accountability is based on the belief that citizen action leads to positive outcomes (service delivery, governance, empowerment). Yet we know that citizen action leads to such outcomes only in some cases; in others it leads to frustration, and occasionally reprisal (Gaventa and Barrett 2010). Finally, official responses to citizen action are necessary for the desired outcomes, yet it is not clear why officials respond positively in some cases and not others. So what are the steps in the causal chain where the information to citizen action path might break down?

Lieberman, Posner and Tsai (2012) present a fascinating exploration of why a large scale information campaign to disseminate the results of literacy/numeracy assessments and materials to help children's learning and citizen participation in education in Tanzania had no impacts on citizen action. In their own earlier work, a randomised control trial of the initiative found no treatment effect for the intervention (i.e. none of the observed citizen participation could be attributed to the intervention). To explore the reasons for this finding, they developed an analysis based on expanding the causal chain between information and citizen action (see annex 2). When simple survey and qualitative methods were used to test whether assumptions behind each link in the causal chain held true, they found that only, 'a minority - sometimes a very small minority - of the subject population was reasonably likely to advance down any single step of the causal pathway towards increased citizen activism' (Lieberman et al. 2012: 34/35).

Extending this and other work on theories of change (Joshi 2013; Tembo 2012), we present below a series of steps that are required for information to lead to positive official responses. Following Lieberman, et. al. (2012) each step is posed as a question - for the relevant stakeholder in the process. When the answer to any of the questions is likely to be 'no' then the process of translating information into citizen action faces a roadblock. When the answer is 'yes' then there is a greater chance of the desired outcome (in this case improved service delivery) being achieved. It goes without saying that these questions will have distinct answers in diverse cases. Although the causal chain is depicted here in a linear manner, there may be various leaps in steps and some looping in the chain in particular contexts.

⁴ Even work based on such recent advances might be limiting. Some ground-breaking experimental research in diverse populations about societal interactions and rational interest suggests our knowledge of human behaviour is based on studies of cultural 'outlier' populations—W.E.I.R.D. –Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic (Henreich, et al., 2010). Most of humanity might be operating on other cultural principles.

Figure 4.1: A Preliminary Causal Chain: From Information to Official Response*



Collective Strategy
(Substantive characteristics of citizen demands)

Who is likely to be responsive?



What framing are they likely to listen to? (moral appeals, legal obligations, humanitarian grounds, political stability)



Are there official channels where I/we could target my demands and complaints?



Is going to the courts likely to have an effect?



Do I/we have time and resources?



Are there other actors I could take joint action with?

Official Response
(Substance of response types)

Do I think citizens have legitimate grievances?



Do I hold responsibility for the particular public good?



Am I likely to be officially sanctioned due to citizen action?



Do I care about my reputation?
(If not, possibility of reprisal)



Do I care about the service?



Do I think I can do something about the situation?
(if not, then could lead to helplessness)

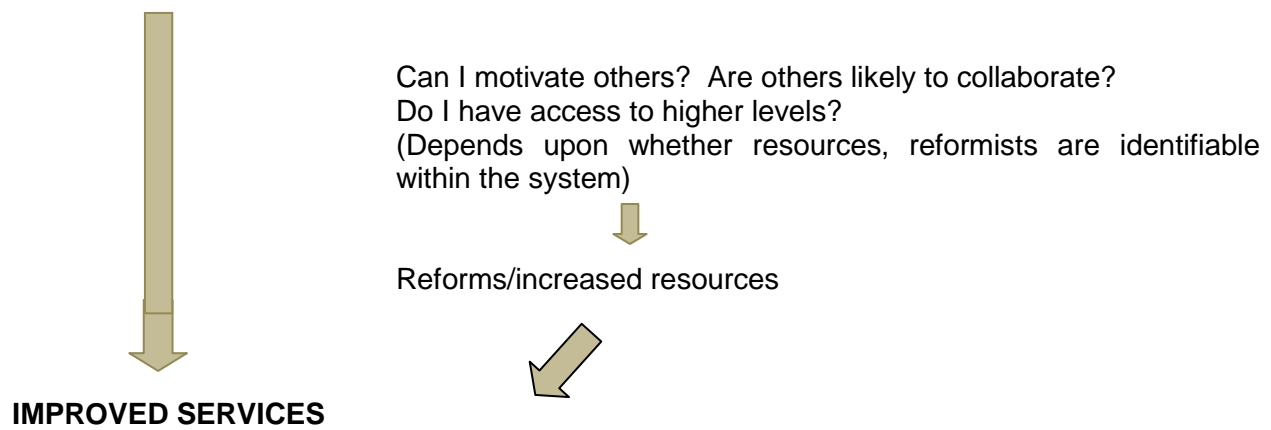


Do I have the capacity and resources to take action?
(If not, then could lead to frustration)



Do I need others to contribute in terms of resources/reforms?





Potential Outcomes

Improved reputation?
Better relationship with service users?
Increased likelihood of the SA process being re-used by communities.
Empowered Communities

Source: Adapted and expanded from Lieberman, Posner and Tsai (2012)

The kind of analysis outlined above, that draws out causal pathways relating specific components of social accountability to each other can be useful in arraying the existing evidence on the impact of social accountability as well as in providing a potential checklist of micro-factors to consider before embarking on particular social accountability interventions. The task ahead is to begin a mapping of mini-causal chains and mine existing studies (both qualitative and quantitative) to unearth the assumptions behind each step and the extent to which they seem to hold true more generally. Such work will also point to very simple test research that could be carried out prior to large scale implementation of interventions, and prevent the likelihood of low impacts.

5 Conclusions

Current social accountability practice has been racing ahead of clear evidence of impact. The paucity of studies of impact (although increasing rapidly), the fragmentation of the data points, the lack of comparative evidence, the need for studies using mixed methods all have contributed to a situation where there is a strong normative belief in citizen-led accountability without a clear understanding of the conditions under which it can have impact.

Central to the debate is the issue of context. As we saw in this paper, there are particular challenges to any attempts to identify contextual factors. Foremost, 'context' is a loose term and can relate to any relevant condition. The critical task of course is how to identify which are the 'critical' contextual factors.

A two-pronged approach to the study of context seems to be emerging. On the macro side, and closely aligned to political economy analysis is an approach that examines the existing literature to identify patterns of enabling and constraining contextual factors in broad domains (O'Meally 2013). On the other hand is an approach that attempts to unpack particular causal chains and the micro-contextual conditions that seem to make them work. As work on the former is relatively well developed, this paper attempted to develop the latter and start to flesh out some of the issues and challenges that lie ahead.

The approach to context outlined here is distinct from attempting to understand the contextual conditions under which 'labelled' interventions such as community score cards or social audits work. Focussing on 'labelled' interventions is problematic because most often such interventions are not actually alike in their individual components: rather they share only a broad approach. Instead, by deconstructing the various mini-causal pathways (akin to strands in DNA) and understanding the contextual conditions that make them work, we could potentially recombine the existing evidence to assess the promise of specific existing and new interventions. In addition, existing interventions could be assessed for the extent to which they travelled along the causal chain - and where the roadblocks to impact lay. Such an approach also ties in more closely with the more explicitly political and organic analysis suggested in the discussion of macro factors, and is rooted in specificities of the histories and norms of particular contexts.

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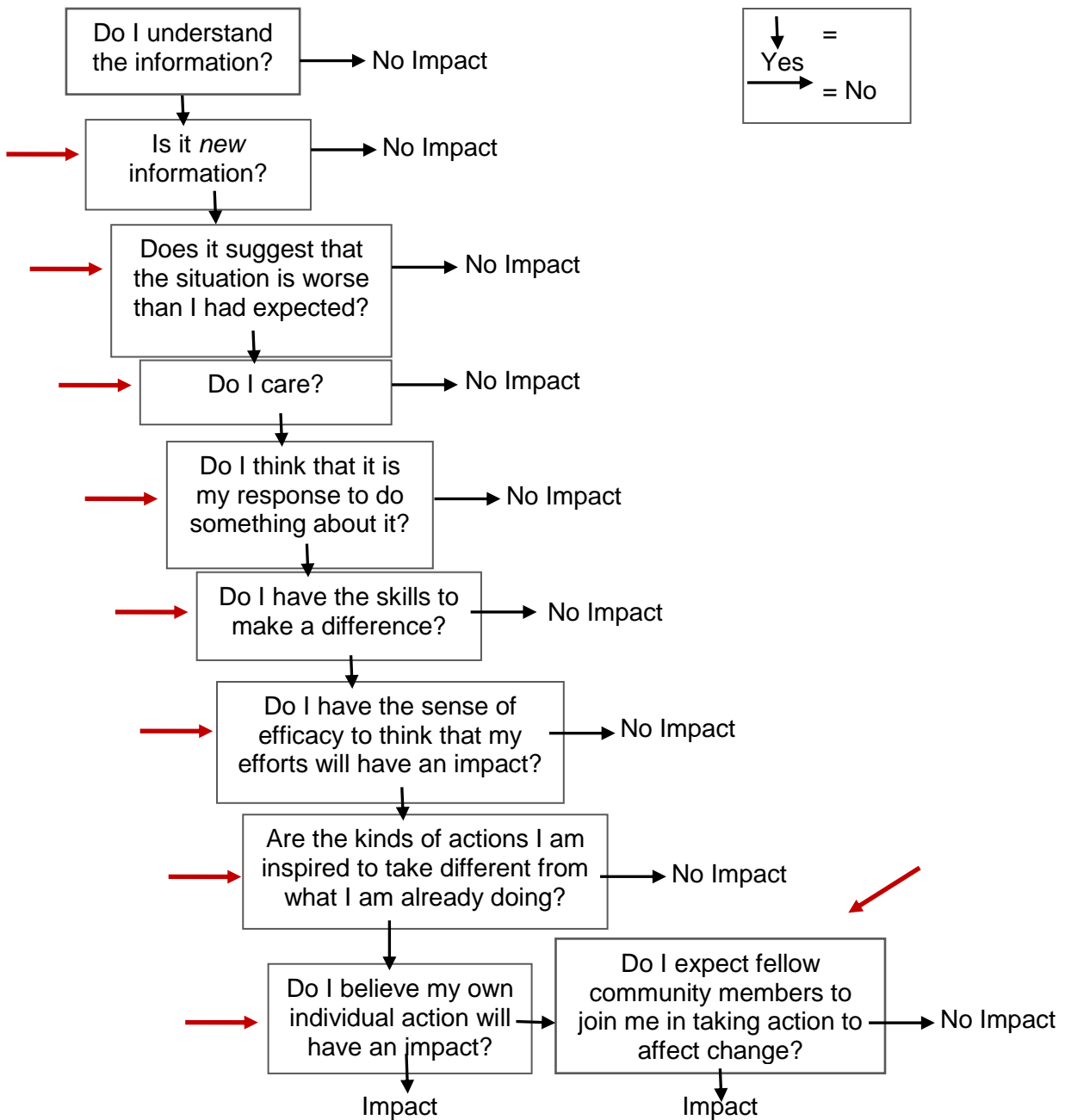
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Annex 1: Major Contextual Factors that Mediate the Effectiveness of Social Accountability Activities

Six Contextual Domains	Key domain sub dimensions
Civil Society	• Technical and organizational capacity
	• Capacity to build alliances across society
	• Capacity to build alliances/networks with the state
	• Authority, legitimacy and credibility of CS
	• Willingness of CS to challenge accountability status quo
	• Capacity and capability of citizens
	• Willingness of citizens
Political Society	• Willingness of political/elected elites to respond to/foster SAcc
	• Willingness of state bureaucrats to respond to/foster SAcc
	• State (and political elite) capacity
	• Democratization and the CS enabling environment
	• The nature of the rule of law
	• The capacity and willingness of political parties to support SAcc
Inter-Elite Relations	• Broad elite incentives to act in certain ways around SAcc claims
	• The extent to which the settlement is developmental
	• The extent to which the settlement is capable (organizationally and politically)
	• The extent to which the settlement is inclusive
	• Elite ideas and narratives of accountability underpinning the settlement
State-Society Relations	• 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)
Intra-Society Relations	• Inequality
	• Social Exclusion
	• Social Fragmentation
Global Dimensions	• Donor-state relations
	• International power-holder accountability
	• International political and economic processes and drivers

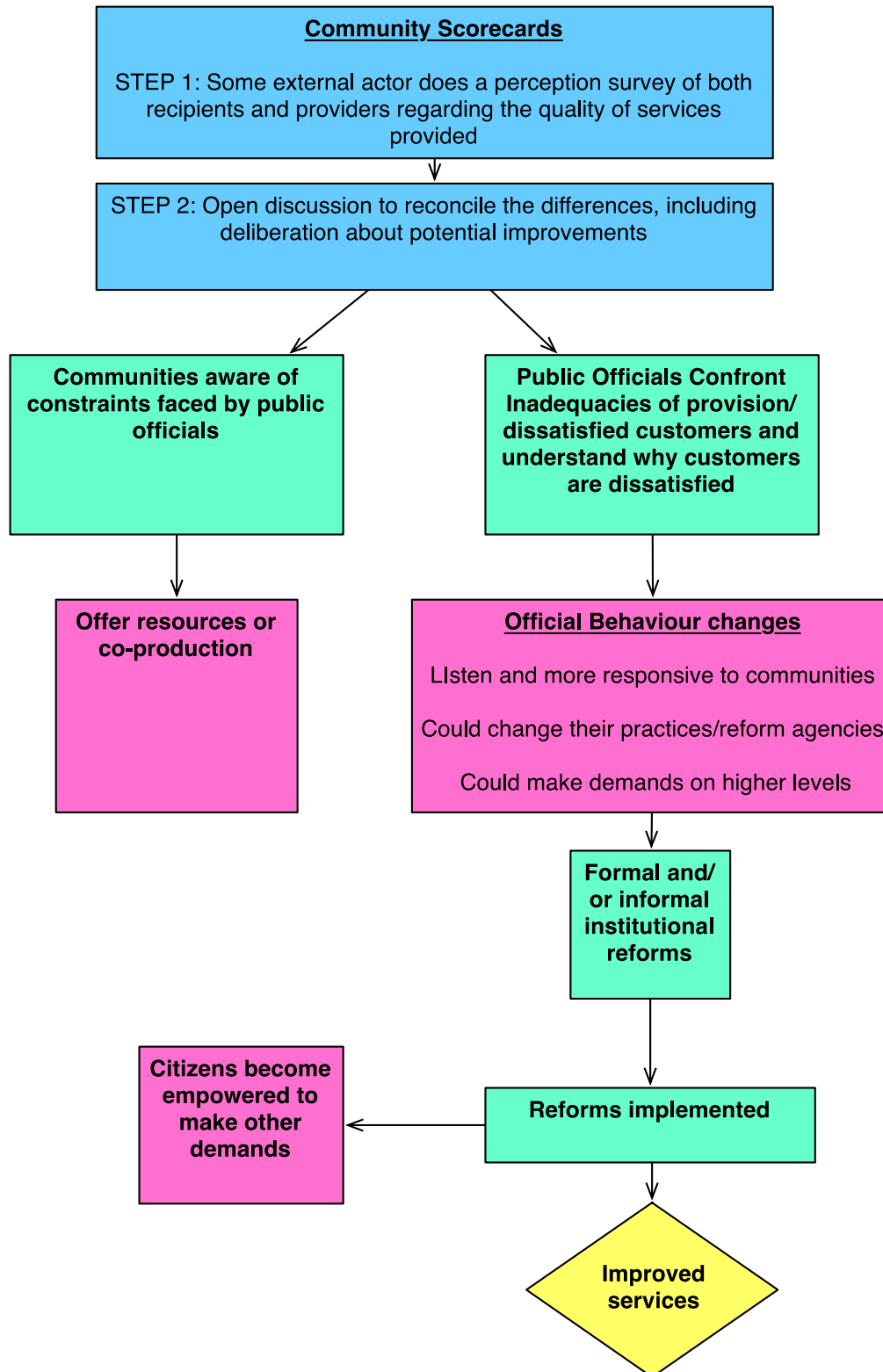
Source: O'Meally 2013

Annex 2: The Information Accountability Causal Chain



Source: Lieberman, Posner and Tsai 2013

Annex 3. An Illustrative Theory of Change for Community Scorecards



Source: Joshi et al. 2013