
POLICY BRIEF 2 – OPERATIONAL LEVEL

Based on case study assessments and discussions among DLGN members on Civil Society Participation and Accountability Approaches in Local Governance Processes

Background & Objective

The learning project civil society participation and accountability approaches in local governance processes collected a series of experiences brought forward by DLGN members. As part of the learning project, eight case studies and four mirror case studies¹ were developed to assess approaches and extract key learnings based on the experience of SDC and selected other local governance programmes in a variety of contexts, including fragile ones. Case studies² were developed based on a desk review and interviews with programme partners. A special focus included the role of civil society in its relation to the state as well as specific aspects of power relations and how they influence local governance and decision-making. An additional focus was placed on the specific challenges of accountability and civil society participation in fragile or conflict-affected contexts and its potential for transformation towards increased stability and democracy. In addition, an e-discussion was held to explore more in-depth questions arising on engaging with political actors and experiences around power analysis³. In the face to face workshop held in Egypt in May 2013, further inputs were provided.

The objective of this brief is to provide development practitioners with recommendations to strengthen programming interventions in civil society participation and accountability based on key learnings from the case studies. The recommendations provide guidance on more systematically integrating approaches related to civil society accountability and participation into the project cycle with a main emphasis on the planning and implementation stages while recognizing the particularities of fragile situations.



¹ The following SDC and other local governance programmes were assessed for the case studies: Afghanistan: Improved Livelihood of Rural Communities (ILRC) Project; Bhutan: Participatory Forest Management Project (PFMP); Bolivia: Towards a Culture of Non-violence Project; Bosnia & Herzegovina: Municipal Development Project (MDP); Laos: Learning House for Development; Macedonia: Community Forum Programme; Peru: Support of Decentralisation in Rural Areas (APODER in Spanish); and Tanzania: Social Accountability Monitoring (SAM) as part of Tanzania Policy Forum. Four additional projects were included into the case studies as “mirror” cases: Bolivia: Lupita; Kosovo: Local Governance and Decentralisation Support (LOGOS); Macedonia: Civica Mobilitas; Nepal: Public Audit Practice.

² They were selected along the following criteria: 1) Different mechanisms and tools for the promotion of civil society initiatives and/or accountability mechanisms in relation to the state; 2) Innovative approaches are applied; 3) Questions related to power relations are addressed; 4) Different contexts (fragile/post-conflict situations, functioning state institutions, weak state institutions); 5) Different continents; 6) potential for impact and up-scaling.

³ The online DLGN e-discussion took place from April 9-19, 2013 and aimed to collect additional experiences among participants.

Recommendations

The list of recommendations is not exhaustive and is primarily based on key lessons from the reviewed case studies. Practitioners are advised to seek out additional ways to adapt approaches to their specific programme context.

1. Project/Programme Planning

- ❖ **Formulate a clear Theory of Change to unveil the projects' own basic ideas how change will happen.**
 - ❖ **Since local governance processes are complex and highly context-specific, conduct a comprehensive context analysis to assess the extent of open/closed/fragile spaces and favourable political, social and legal conditions for engagement.**
 - A systematic context analysis should look at the political economy, assess the spaces where local governance is happening, the factors which lead to tensions in the local governance processes as well where mitigation and genuine problem solving is taking place, what really leads to legitimacy and the locally existing self-organizing capacities.
- For example:*

 - Assess power relations (stakeholder analysis of decision-makers) and spaces (invited, closed, claimed) or using a Power Index⁴
 - Identify Sources of Tension (SOT) or elements in societies, which divide women and men from each other and Local Capacities for positive Change (LCC) elements in societies, which facilitate non-violent dispute resolution and transformative processes. In Afghanistan this step was particularly important and helpful to move beyond the political rhetoric and get a real assessment of major concerns, which, coupled with a flexible approach, is crucial to be able to stay engaged.
 - Scrutinize sources of legitimacy
 - Analyse local self-organizing capacities
- A comprehensive analysis of policies and the legal background is essential **to assess strategic entry points that provide legitimacy for the interventions.** In almost all case studies, recent decentralisation reforms or new legislation related to local self-governance (e.g. Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) citizen participation (e.g. Peru, Tanzania) or a decree on CSOs (e.g. Laos) not only served as relevant entry points for interventions, but also provided legitimacy to promote participation and collaboration between reluctant state and civil society actors, especially in less favourable or 'closed' contexts.
 - ❖ **Conduct a systematic stakeholder analysis to identify relevant implementing partners by assessing formal/informal alliances, (power) relationships, capacities, motivations, incentives, roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and broken communication and conflict among stakeholders.**
 - Most case studies highlight the **importance of understanding and changing visible, hidden and invisible power⁵ and power relationships.** Participants of the DLGN confirmed in the e-discussion that **power and politics are intrinsic elements of governance: any intervention in local governance is a political process that implies action on power relations.** Since

⁴ For example, in Mongolia, the SDC Governance and Decentralisation Programme (GDP) used the stakeholder analysis tool in which the characteristics of each stakeholder was analysed along eight criteria: Role & functions, Administrative position, Stakes & interests, Reform perception, Influence on decentralisation issues, Interest in decentralisation issues, Strengths, Weaknesses. Moreover, to each actor a power index was attributed, composed of five different types of power: *financial, position, expert, networking and information* power. The analysis' results were summarized in a matrix, which GDP aims to update every six months.

⁵ For example, "visible" power refers official laws, rules, decision-makers and procedures. "Hidden" power refers to local elite, strong executive branches, parties' interests, etc. that influence decision-making. "Invisible" power refers to cultural norms and values that challenge pro-poor and inclusive project interventions, such as reluctance to question authorities and include women in decision-making processes.

influencing accountability structures is about shaping and transforming formal and informal power relationships, it is critical to understand and assess⁶ which and how hidden and invisible power actors influence customary, traditional and visible accountability structures and thereby positively or negatively affect intervention outcomes. For example, although municipalities in Macedonia have some autonomy, the most powerful 'hidden' decision-makers are the political parties who appoint candidates to become mayors.



- In Afghanistan and all contexts where there is a risk of tensions and violence, it was proven crucial to understand the nature of the relationships different societal groups (social, political, ethnic, religious, tribal, etc.). **Local governance projects can only be successful if they take full notice of existing frictions and alliances between groups**, which need to participate in a joint system of local governance. In Afghanistan local power holders were opposed to increased transparency and only by intensive communication and collaboration with their own allies, it was possible to implement the envisaged activities. A conflict actor-map can facilitate a deeper understanding of stakeholders.
- As case studies indicate, most practitioners may be reluctant to work with particular political actors (e.g. political parties, parliamentarians) as this could compromise their 'neutrality' or is too sensitive. However, **if political actors are assessed as part of the governance problem (by acting as hidden powers, for example), then they are likely important to positively shaping accountability outcomes and should be included in interventions.**
- Additionally, **other hidden powers such as informal actors and private sector groups may have substantial influence and show some resistance for fear of losing power** such as the shura and mullahs in Afghanistan or the economically and politically powerful groups in Peru which are used to dominating community meetings. Practitioners should consider incorporating them into the intervention by assessing their motivations and incentives and how these can be influenced through the intervention, through for example, multi-stakeholder consultations/meetings.
- **Select main implementing actors that are seen as legitimate, credible, and trustworthy as this is critical to positively influencing and shaping local governance processes.** Some practitioners may have the tendency to select known CSOs based on technical expertise, past relationships or convenience and may neglect to assess their overall suitability from time to time. But it is critical to the success of the intervention to ensure, whenever possible, that CSOs represent the interests of citizens in a pro-poor and inclusive manner, are legitimate and trustworthy, act independently (i.e. in a non-partisan way) and are transparent and accountable to the citizens and the project they serve. For example, in Bolivia the growing credibility and legitimacy of the network of civil society actors led them to participate in formal spaces of municipal planning and decision-making and also influence policy-making at the national level.
- From the face to face workshop participants pointed out the importance of looking at informal or traditional structures, as possible actors to work with, although inclusion and democratic values, often a weakness in such structures, would have to be ensured. The Bosnia and Herzegovina case also points to this.

⁶ This can be done through a variety of assessment tools that analyze power relationships. Participants of the e-discussion, for example used a SWOT Analysis or a comprehensive Stakeholder Assessment to assess power relations.

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- ❖ ***In fragile and conflict-prone contexts, it is crucial to ensure a detailed conflict analysis and assessment of the key features of fragility including the prevalence or absence of trust and legitimacy, as well as the extent of inclusion and informal and formal power relationships.*** In addition to legal provisions, it is particularly crucial to understand customary and traditional or actual accountabilities that often correspond with hidden and invisible power structures. It is essential to incorporate conflict-sensitive approaches into project design and implementation. ***This means to anticipate potential risks, limitations and challenges and identify relevant mitigation measures.***
 - ***Interventions that aim to shape accountability structures can create tensions between citizens and state actors and if not mitigated appropriately, trigger conflict.*** A number of case studies demonstrate the political nature of accountability and how it affects power relations and relations with civil society bring about certain risks and challenges.
 - ***Cultural resistance to change can limit the success of the intervention and may also be a risk factor for conflict.*** A context assessment should also assess to what extent cultural values, norms and social institutions influence behaviours in a society and may limit inclusive citizen participation, grievance redress or open citizen-state debates and thereby present a risk or challenge to interventions. For example, in Afghan culture and society upholding dignity is crucial, therefore complaints expressed in public can have an impact on the dignity of the accused person and lead to serious problems within the community.
 - ***Depending on context, consider other risk factors that may include elite capture, lack of state or civil society capacity to respond appropriately, and time constraints for implementation.*** For example, in Macedonia one main challenge is elite capture by particular parties of CSOs in the community forum process, since CSOs depend on local authorities for space and financing. To mitigate this risk, there are on-going efforts to address this issue by supporting local CSOs through another SDC-funded civil society programme.

 - ❖ ***Select participation and accountability mechanisms based on ‘best fit’ according to the context and stakeholder analysis, rather than seeking to implement ‘best practice’.***
 - Depending on the political, legal and social context (e.g. cultural norms, values, behaviours) and the willingness and capacity of stakeholders, local governance accountability structures can vary not only among countries but also *within* countries, therefore practitioners should aim to select participation and accountability mechanisms based on ‘best fit’.

 - ❖ **Plan for the long-term: how can the intervention be aligned with national systems to ensure sustainability?**
 - How will capacity building and alliance building efforts of state and civil society actors be prioritized and sequenced to achieve sustainability?
 - Anticipate time, commitment and resources needed, based on context and stakeholders.
 - Participants from the f2f workshop added that establishing parallel systems should be avoided where possible and recommended to rather work on strengthen those state institutions that have legitimacy or, in the absence of these, work with platforms that are seen as legitimate. They also recommended to strengthen processes and structures rather than individual capacities.

 - ❖ **Remain flexible to adapt to changing situations and plan to re-assess context and stakeholders at specific intervals to adjust mechanisms when necessary.**
 - Even with thorough assessments, practitioners may miss crucial aspects or not foresee certain risks – in addition, as the intervention unfolds, it may be useful to conduct a quick re-assessment at specific points (e.g. increased citizen participation, advocacy, new grievance redress mechanism, etc.) to evaluate how stakeholders are responding.

2. Implementation

- ❖ ***Continuous capacity building efforts (of both civil society and local authorities) are crucial for success and besides technical skills, should also focus on building legitimacy, trust and influencing mindsets and behaviours.***
 - ***Capacity building of local authorities may also need to focus on meeting citizen demands and being responsive in a non-defensive manner, which in return helps to build trust and legitimacy and minimizes conflicts.*** For example, in Tanzania government officials were included in trainings to better understand social accountability monitoring mechanisms with an aim to become more open to collaborating, finding solutions and to de-escalating potential conflicts that arose because local authorities were challenged.
 - In Bhutan and Laos, civil society capacity has been weak and constrained but at nascent stages due to a gradual opening of space for citizen participation. In such ***closed contexts, capacity building initiatives tend to require more time, resources, flexibility and space to evolve and, therefore, smaller steps should be taken towards mobilizing and empowering civil society,*** in order not to risk a closure of space.
 - Supporting ***networks*** of CSOs and multi-stakeholders was proven to be effective in at least two case studies.
 - Participants from the f2f workshop added that civic education and introducing a culture of accountability is important, including the strengthening of awareness on obligations of both right-holders and duty-bearers side.

- ❖ ***Based on experiences and insights from participants of the e-discussion, there are different strategies available for working successfully with political actors, despite some risks⁷ and the fact that consequences of engaging them may be difficult to predict.***
 - ***Working with political actors in programmes/projects requires more time and a larger investment of resources*** given the additional risks and efforts necessary for planning, analysis, research, coordination and dialogue.
 - Participants of the e-discussion highlighted that ***the most common strategy to engage with political actors is to work with all actors within a specific group***, for example with all members of a parliament or all candidates for mayors in a municipality. ***This way programmes avoid political discrimination and preserve their neutrality and impartiality.*** The e-discussion highlighted several successful examples of this strategy. For example, in Mongolia the SDC Governance and Decentralisation Programme (GDP) started a project in collaboration with UNDP and the Parliament's Standing Committee on State Structure that aims at strengthening capacities of all local parliaments. By indiscriminately engaging with all ~7000 local MPs, the project ensures a neutral approach and a non-partisan image.
 - ***Another strategy is to individually collaborate with selected political actors on the basis of their professional backgrounds, irrespective of their political background.*** When working on this approach, programmes need a careful analysis of the political landscape in order to identify so-called ***“champions of change”*** among parliamentarians or political actors in general. This approach also results in the advantage that programmes can count on inside lobbying for policy changes by the selected actors; on the other hand, however, there is a risk of being identified with partisan interests.
 - ***Diversifying the partners of a programme/project has proven to be a successful strategy to reduce risk and improve sustainability and effectiveness,*** in particular while working with political actors. However, engaging with several partners may lead to losses in ***short-term***

⁷ Depending on the context, the risks of engaging with political actors may include the following: a) ***In countries with a single-Party system, where one party controls all institutions, programmes cannot avoid engaging with it.*** However, this may threaten the neutral image of the development agency, since collaborating with the system may increase the legitimacy of that system. b) ***Also, in many countries where development agencies work, governments are very instable and volatile.*** Frequent changes in the political settings may undermine the impact and sustainability of projects and programmes. For example, frequent and unpredictable changes in the composition of parliaments would considerably reduce (if not ruin) the impact of projects that offer trainings to MPs.

efficiency of the intervention. Diversifying partners might therefore be challenging under time or money constraints and may clash with the need of quick and convincing outputs/outcomes.

- **Also, flexibility in the project/programme design and implementation was mentioned as a successful strategy to reduce risk and improve sustainability and effectiveness.** Working on more levels, with different partners and with different intervention modalities allows diversifying and thus reducing risks and at the same time being open to new opportunities.
- In the face to face workshop, the question of changing staff after every election was addressed and experiences around training of parliamentarians and councillors were shared. One way to address the sustainability of capacity building of parliamentarians is to **support the institutionalisation of the training**, by supporting a training centre or certifying courses.
- The participants of the f2f workshop also recommended to focus on issues, e.g. through parliamentary standing committees or to sensitise political parties about local issues.



Specific implementation recommendations related to participation and accountability mechanisms:

- ❖ ***In public audit meetings and forums, the selection of an independent/neutral facilitator, the quality of moderation, and providing a ‘safe’ environment to speak are key success factors for an inclusive and democratic process.*** The Bolivia case study highlights the participatory, inclusive and impartial attitude of the network coordinator as an important element of the project. In Macedonia facilitators are neutral and independent since they are not from the same municipality in which they facilitate the forums and they also obtain certificates to ensure their skills and capabilities. Bosnia also mentions neutral facilitators as a success factor.
- ❖ ***The media, especially when legitimate and independent, can be engaged and collaborated with effectively for promoting access to information, mobilizing citizens and for long-term advocacy.*** In Tanzania, experience showed that local government officials only dealt with civil society complaints when a certain public pressure emerged. However, there were also backlashes from public officials and politicians when identified weaknesses in local governance were disseminated and made public. The

situation could be de-escalated by incorporating a so-called verification stage before dissemination, where local officials are given an opportunity to comment on the findings and to make any necessary changes.

- ❖ ***In some cases, citizen participation and ensuring inclusiveness might be harder to achieve and therefore requires more time, efforts and patience.***
 - ***In certain cultural or closed contexts***, (e.g. Laos) ***especially in the absence of a strong civil society, citizens may be more reluctant to participate***. They may not be comfortable to question the government, express their grievances or to demand accountability and participation. In such cases, special and consistent efforts need to be made to change mindsets by continuously raising awareness and educating citizens about the process, their rights and what they can gain from it.
 - Also, ***citizens might lack the education or technical skills to participate effectively***. In the Afghan villages and districts where the projects were working, the concept of Good Governance is completely unknown to most people, although governance issues represent one of the driving factors of conflict and are a root cause of insurgency. To address this issue, a long-term and strategic approach to prepare citizens for democratic governance was necessary, in addition to specific conflict prevention and mitigation measures.
- ❖ ***Depending on context, inclusive participation faces various barriers that will require special efforts to address.***
 - In Peru, Bosnia and Macedonia ***participation has been costly for the poor due to time and transportation costs***. In all cases, the project facilitated and encouraged local government officials to meet close to the communities, in order to allow for meaningful consultation and participation.
- ❖ ***Depending on the extent of cultural norms and beliefs, women may be excluded or underrepresented in certain local governance processes.*** In Afghanistan, strong cultural and religious beliefs prevent the participation of women who are not able to raise their voices in public. To avoid putting women in dangerous positions, the project stays away from trying to strengthen public voices of women, but instead provides support in the form of Women Resource Centres, where women can discuss different issues and subsequently communicate their opinions and ideas. To increase women's participation and ensure inclusiveness, the projects in Peru, Bosnia and Macedonia established successful women quotas for participation in community/forum meetings and for trainings.
- ❖ ***Include conflict prevention and mitigation measures to limit or address certain risks and challenges.*** In Macedonia, forum meeting group tables were organized by interests to discourage ethnic group table formations and potential conflicts. In Tanzania, local authorities became defensive after broad dissemination of social monitoring activities and also initially did not respect the CSOs that were involved in the process. This shows the ***importance and need of the state in also developing trust and legitimacy in civil society***. Through capacity building, which led to evidence-based advocacy, the CSOs gained more credibility and legitimacy with local authorities. Also, conflicts were prevented and trust was built over time through more frequent communications and by including local authorities in capacity-building and awareness raising efforts and giving them space to address monitoring outcomes.

Additional implementation recommendations for fragile contexts:

- Using non-threatening terminology and good communication through roundtables, forums and regular multi-stakeholder meetings are important.
- Transparency measures and processes are pivotal for restoring trust.
- In Bolivia, Afghanistan and Laos the invitation of not-likeminded and hard to reach actors was a critical element of effective stakeholder engagement.
- Sound organisational processes guaranteeing inclusion and impartiality (organisation, invitation, facilitation, voting, recording, documentation) related to forums for accountability and participation, are particularly important although at the same time challenging in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

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- ❖ **Scaling up and alignment with national systems (sustainability) takes time and careful planning.** As the case studies demonstrate, sustainability is a complex process and difficult to achieve. It requires time to change mindsets, behaviours, beliefs and norms. **National state actors or other political actors should engage early in the implementation process to ensure support for scaling up and institutionalizing processes.** In Bhutan and Bolivia, projects aligned with national and/or international frameworks to gain legitimacy and entry points for interventions. While scaling up is one step towards sustainability, it may not in itself lead to sustainability (as in the case of Macedonia) due to a number of other challenges such as the risk of elite capture of CSOs.
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3. Monitoring

- ❖ **Since local governance interventions require context-specific mechanisms and initiatives, practitioners should adapt a flexible 'learning-by-doing' approach and focus on careful and consistent monitoring throughout the implementation phase, including a re-assessment of context and stakeholders.**
 - Mechanisms may need to be adapted at certain points of the intervention (e.g. increase in citizen participation/mobilization, advocacy stages, etc.) or as certain contextual factors or stakeholders change. For example, new local government authorities may get re-elected or re-appointed which may affect power relations. Or new rules and legislation may shift incentives and motivations of stakeholders and/or provide new entry points for practitioners.
 - ❖ **Based on a sound baseline, select output and outcome indicators to also measure mindset and behaviour changes such as government responsiveness, level of trust and legitimacy, citizen participation and motivation, etc.**
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4. Evaluation

To evaluate the success of the interventions, practitioners should determine the following:

- To what extent have impact and results been achieved?
- How have visible, hidden and invisible power relations changed?
- What are the implications for the next phase?
- How can the project/programme be sustained?

The dlgn Learning Project “Outcome Measurement in Local Governance Programmes” developed two additional briefs on outcome monitoring, which provide more specific recommendations for the monitoring and evaluation stages of the project cycle.