

DFGG Learning Note

Holding government to account or helping government out?

Obstacles for service delivery organizations as implementers of social accountability activities

Although social accountability has been a part of the development agenda in Cambodia for a few years, only a limited number of non-state actors are currently engaged in these governance-related initiatives. Developing this platform of actors is not straightforward as it can require non-government organizations to fundamentally change their missions, roles and relationships and take on board new ways of working. This is particularly challenging for NGOs that have become known as, and adept at, service providers in lieu of government. Some NGOs are moving on from the service provider role and reorienting activities to help improve the accountability of state service providers, whereas others attempt to perform both service provider and social accountability roles simultaneously. This short note reflects on the challenges service delivery NGOs face in their efforts to undertake social accountability activities in Cambodia.

Many of the grantees of the Demand for Good Governance (DFGG) non-state actors component have decades of experience working in and around government agencies at the local level in Cambodia. These NGOs have traditionally provided independent or semi-independent health, education, water, agriculture services that complemented and enhanced government service provision, and in many cases play a very important function in enhancing the quality of lives of their target communities. With DFGG and other donor funding however, a number of these service delivery NGOs have started to develop mechanisms for monitoring government performance and the services they provide, rather than helping provide them.

Service delivery NGOs have various organizational features that are important for effective implementation of social accountability initiatives. Many have well developed organizational structures at the local level (in communes or districts), well established and functioning relations with local authorities and communities, sound experience as project implementers and a comprehensive understanding of the sector(s) they monitor. However when these organizations shift their focus from providing services to enhancing accountability for services, they face a number of challenges before they can function effectively in their new role.

The first challenge they face is to shift their approach from “helping government out” to “holding government to account” and this is not an easy process for organizations that have been focused on delivering services for decades. It not only requires that an organization redefine its role vis-a-vis government and citizens, it also means recasting its mission.

In the course of making a shift to a new approach, they need to develop the staff, skills and experience for social accountability activities and to deal with the fundamental blockages (e.g. the hierarchal culture, limited tradition of citizen/user participation, lack of familiarity with the concept of accountability) that make this role so challenging. Moreover, in a context where services are inadequate, NGOs with a track record in providing services – that bring significant benefit to target communities – are under pressure from both beneficiaries and government to continue their service delivery role.



Evidence from the DFGG project suggests that social accountability approaches are most successfully adopted by NGOs that have played advocacy roles (e.g. for women or youth) before they engaged more specifically with social accountability. NGOs such as Amara and Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP) in Cambodia successfully implement social accountability activities through a mission and strategic approach which has, for some time, focused on social inclusion, equity and cohesion. This strategic understanding of the empowerment and rights agenda has helped both these organizations to undertake activities focused on stimulating greater accountability of government service providers.

In a community scorecard sub-project in Battambang, Amara worked constructively, but nevertheless independently, to stimulate demand for improvements in the performance of teachers in local primary schools. A key dimension of this process was the very effective collaboration of the commune council, the community and NGO to demand better services in schools. While there are many complex reasons why this collaboration worked (that require evaluation over time), key factors appear to be related to the trust they have built through existing



Holding government to account or helping out?

relationships, the ‘constructive engagement’ approach in working with the Commune Council and the staff skills and experience in undertaking advocacy and mobilization work in the local context.

There is a delicate balance in the way these relationships are managed however, and in some situations where NGOs operate in both service delivery and social accountability roles, things can go wrong. Typically, social accountability activities proceed more smoothly at the local level if they are carried out by local NGOs. Government clearly prefers to engage in social accountability initiatives with NGOs that are known. While this familiarity provides a basis for dialogue, it can also lead to cooptation and/or a dilution of the overall process and a weakening of potential results. A good indicator of this dilution is when NGOs and government agencies agree to undertake a vast set of activities (incommensurate with the budget) compromising the accountability elements in the process.

In a small grant provided to an NGO in the province of Kampong Speu, the implementation of a citizen report card proved difficult for an NGO to complete. The lack of accountability-focused skills and experience and their need to maintain a role as a service provider (to ensure continued funding) meant that the tough messages in the feedback process were not delivered. In the feedback stage, they were not willing to disturb relationships with relevant government agencies. In this situation, with little incentive to ensure the accountability loop was working, they removed/downplayed the follow-up and feedback aspects of the tool. This transformed the report card into a beneficiary satisfaction survey rather than a tool for exacting accountability. Although the grant was small, the lessons learnt through this grant were significant and provide a sharp reminder how difficult this role and approach is for weak local NGOs.

Another experience from the field shows how a dual approach can be managed, in what might be called a hybrid model of both helping government out and holding them to account. With a partnership grant, the OWSO team in the Ministry of Interior and the NGO, Democracy Resource Center for National Development (DND), partnered with One Window Service Offices (OWSO) in Kampong Cham, Kratie and Prey Veng to improve the performance of district OWSOs. The objective of the grant was complex: to assist in building awareness of the services offered by the OWSO, how they would benefit citizens and what could be expected of the services, *and* to monitor the OWSOs (using citizen report cards and exit surveys). This was an extremely effective mechanism to feedback to OWSO national management on the performance of the OWSOs. It revealed practices by OWSO staff that were non-compliant with procedures and not consistent with accountability and transparency objectives.

The actions which followed this feedback resulted in strong messages and sanctions that have been evaluated to have improved the accountability of this decentralized service delivery agency. Although this clearly created a tension in the relationship with the government agency, it is an example of how the DFGG non-state actors are executing the “constructive engagement” principle, but still effectively testing methods of holding government to account.

Despite successes, it is unsurprising that some NGOs struggle with and/or are hesitant to make the transformation needed. Without a sound understanding and commitment to social accountability and a conscious strategy to implement, service delivery organizations may opt to play traditional NGO roles of helping the government out, rather than assisting in the development of the social accountability approach. The capacity and incentive structures of many organizations are such that they will continue to remain involved in projects that, explicitly or implicitly, focus on delivering services rather than improving services by enhancing accountability.



As the shift from service delivery to accountability for service delivery unfolds, many NGOs will face similar dilemmas. At the outset, there needs to be an awareness by all stakeholders that the skills and incentives for effective implementation of social accountability activities are different. NGOs embarking on social accountability also need to establish a genuine organizational commitment. Project proposals, designs as well as implementation processes provide indicators of the confusion and contradiction. Enhanced monitoring can be vital to ensure goals are achieved and to assist service delivery NGOs in the transition.

The DFGG Learning Note Series provides quick summaries of the lessons learned in the field. The information is obtained from progress reports, meetings, workshops and World Bank Implementation Support. It is anticipated that the end evaluations of each component will provide further reflection on these issues.

DFGG Learning Note 1 reflects on lessons learned by non-state actor's activities. Written by Andreas Dolk and Janelle Plummer