WaterAid

Social accountability

Tools and mechanisms for improved urban water services

Front cover image: **A water point in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.**

Inside front cover image: **People queuing to collect water from a communal water point in the Urbanizasão district of Maputo in Mozambique.**

Contents

Acronymns

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CRC	Citizens' Report Card
CSO	Civil society organisation
CVC	Community Voice Card
GoI	Government of India
GoU	Government of Uganda
MWCI	Manila Water Company Incorporated
MWSS-RO	Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System Regulatory Office (Manila, Philippines)
NETWAS	Network for Water and Sanitation (Uganda)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NWSC	National Water and Sewerage Corporation (Uganda)
OBA	Output-based aid
OECD	Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development
PPWSA	Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (Cambodia)
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
VSC	Village score card
WB	World Bank
WBI	World Bank Institute
WBWSB	World Bank Water Sector Board
WSP	World Bank Water and Sanitation Programme

Introduction

The WaterAid paper *Water utilities that work for poor people – increasing viability through pro-poor service delivery*[1] discussed the need for specific pro-poor measures to ensure water service provision to poor urban populations. This paper follows from that discussion to outline the principles behind, and the application of, social accountability mechanisms as a means to increase the downward accountability and responsiveness of water utilities to poor people. An examination of the provision of sanitation services is beyond the scope of this paper.

Given the proven importance of pro-poor measures for urban water service delivery and viability, the question arises as to why such measures are not undertaken by utilities as normal practice. Although financial constraints matter, they do not constitute the only barrier. WaterAid's report *Bridging the gap – Citizens' Action for accountability in water and sanitation*[2] argues that the missing ingredient needed in order to reach poor people is *accountability to the people*, which necessitates the meaningful involvement of users in the planning, delivery and monitoring of water services. This increases the chances of delivering reliable, sustainable and affordable water services to more urban inhabitants.[3]

The engagement of users in utility reforms and ongoing service improvement processes is crucial, since reforms to improve efficiency (inevitably the main driver for reforms) do not "necessarily translate into geographical equity or a commitment to serve the poor… without incentives, a clear mandate to serve the poor or a 'champion', companies chase markets that are 'easy', offer the highest returns and do not require subsidies".[4] However, user engagement is far from simple and its outcomes far from predictable.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the conceptual framework around accountability; Section 3 discusses the concept of social accountability, followed by an examination of the principles that underlie social accountability mechanisms and tools used by service providers and users to improve the efficiency and pro-poor targeting of reforms. Section 4 provides conclusions. The paper is the

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1   WaterAid 2010
2   WaterAid 2006
3   WB 2009
4   Castro and Morel 2008 p291

third of a set of three WaterAid discussion papers on how to improve urban water and sanitation services for poor people. It was written as part of the preparation for a workshop for training of trainers on civil society participation in urban water reform, organised by WaterAid in Nepal in July 2009. The paper draws on a variety of literature, as well as a series of key-informant interviews.

Definitions

Utility/
Service
Provider: these terms are used in this paper interchangeably, to denote "an organisation, whether public or private, that provides water services of a public service nature",[5] taking into consideration that while in some contexts urban water provision is delivered by water companies, in others provision is undertaken by local governments.

User: any person utilising urban water services: service users are referred to in the reviewed literature and interviews in various ways, including *consumers*, *customers* and *citizens*. These distinctions are "reflected in the [social accountability] tools themselves, with some of the tools (such as legal redress) viewing the user as a *citizen*, others (such as consumer services) viewing the user as a *consumer*, and a third group (such as complaints mechanisms) identifying the user as a formal, contractual *customer*".[6] The term 'users' is used throughout this paper, excluding quotes or case studies, to avoid making such distinctions within the general arguments presented.

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5   WB 2008a p1
6   WB 2008a p2

Routes to accountability

The failure of urban water utilities or providers to respond to the needs of poor people has resulted in a focus on ways to improve their accountability, and subsequently their responsiveness to user demands.

Accountability is defined by the World Bank[7] as "a set of relationships among service delivery actors with five features:

- *Delegating:* Explicit or implicit understanding that a service (or goods embodying the service) will be supplied.

- *Financing:* Providing the resources to enable the service to be provided or paying for it.

- *Performing:* Supplying the actual service.

- *Having information about performance:* Obtaining relevant information and evaluating performance against expectations and formal or informal norms.

- *Enforcing:* Being able to impose sanctions for inappropriate performance or provide rewards when performance is appropriate".


Ensuring water users have access to relevant information is key to providers' accountability.

7   2003 p48

An important model for analysis of service provision, using the terms 'long' and 'short' routes to accountability, was developed by the World Bank, and established as a framework for analysis in its 2004 annual report, *Making Services Work for Poor People*[8] (see Figure 1). Under the 'long' route, citizens use their 'voice' to exert pressure on policy makers to ensure service providers deliver affordable access to services for poor people. However, this traditional approach to service provision often fails due to the generally weak voice of poor citizens and the vulnerability of services to patronage politics (ibid), as well as the weakness or absence of democratic institutions through which citizens' voices can be channelled.[9] The lack of a clear institutional separation between policy making and service provision may also affect the ability of policy makers to hold providers accountable, and strong independent regulatory institutions are often absent. Franceys and Gerlach[10] go so far as to argue that "…the long route has tended to become so distorted that an adequate voice has never reached the service providers".

Figure 1: The long and short routes to accountability
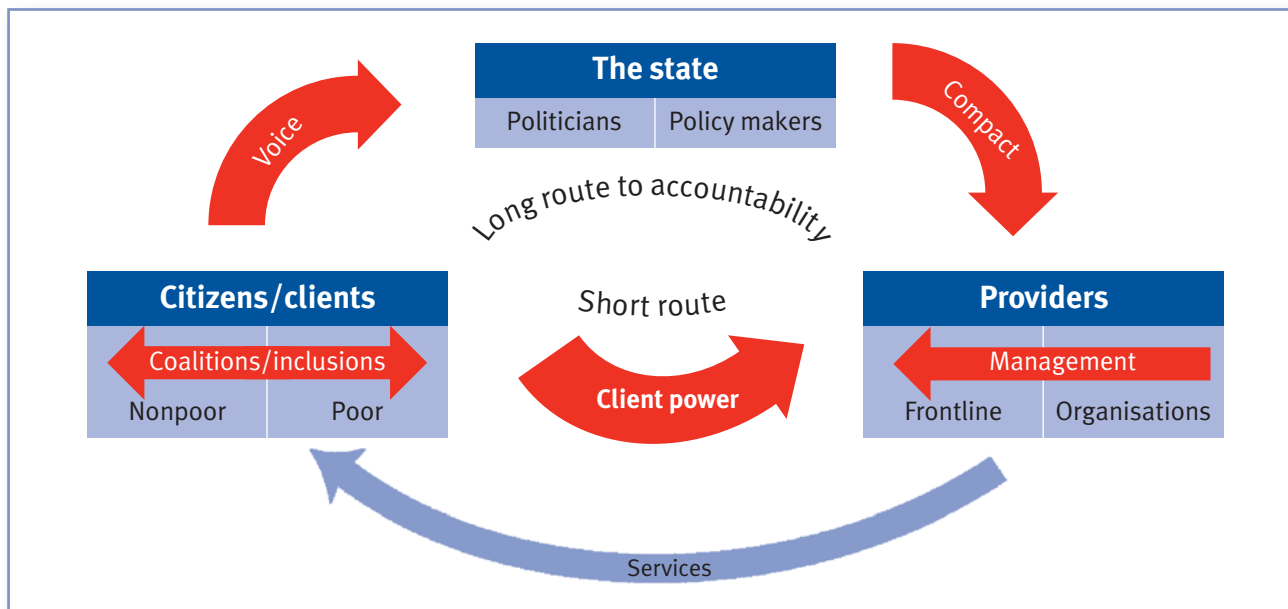
Source: WB 2008 p8

The difficulties of citizen engagement with the long route have led to greater reliance on direct user influence – the short route – implying direct application of voice to hold providers accountable. This route is enhanced when citizens' voices are accompanied by payment for services. McIntosh[11] refers to the example of water utilities in Bangkok and Singapore to argue that paying the full cost of water services (through a viable tariff structure) may in some cases put users in control

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8   WB 2003
9   WaterAid 2006
10   2008 p16
11   2003

and apply pressure for service improvement (although naturally the extent to which this is possible is context-specific). The underlying assumption is that when the money trail runs directly from user to provider, corruption opportunities are reduced and accountability, transparency and information flows are enhanced. This is particularly apparent where a change in the set of relationships allows the delegation of the direct service provision to some other entity other than the policy maker.

However, despite potentially allowing a more direct and immediate influence on providers, the advantages of using the short route should not be exaggerated. The World Bank, for example, warns against a focus on this route which neglects the political context in which service providers operate and abandons other important ways in which citizens can influence accountability, such as through political representation of citizens' interests. In addition, it argues that the long route is essential to give voice to the unserved, who do not (yet) have a direct relationship with providers[12] – certainly the case for many poor people in urban areas, particularly those residing in informal settlements. Even when they are served, poor individuals face substantial barriers to using their voice to exert demands on service providers, such as lack of collective organisation, lack of information and education, social exclusion (on account of social class, poverty, place of residence, ethnicity, disability or gender) and financial and time constraints. It is therefore important that the use of the short route does not result in abandonment of the long route to accountability. Section 3 attempts to address these issues by examining the role of social accountability mechanisms in enhancing both routes to accountability.

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12 WB 2008a

Section 3

Social accountability

a Background

The issue of social accountability is of crucial importance to water provision for poor people living in urban settings. Urban water services are often delivered at a decentralised level, where capacities may be weak and resources limited, and central or local governments may delegate service provision to other providers (such as private companies, under privatisation or service-delivery contracts). Under such circumstances, a change is created in the set of relationships governing the 'social contract' between the state and its citizens. In some cases, users may find themselves unable to hold the delegated providers to account[13] as a result, while in others service delegation may allow more direct provider-user links than previously, and thus perhaps greater accountability.

Truck drivers fill water tankers at a pumping station in Orangi Town in Karachi, Pakistan.

13   WaterAid 2006

Over the past few years there has been growing interest among various civil society actors and development agencies in social accountability mechanisms. The concept of social accountability "affirms direct accountability relationships between citizens and the state and puts them into operation… [it] refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms…that citizens can use to hold the state to account, as well as the actions on the part of government, civil society, media, and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts".[14]

Social accountability mechanisms aim to enable civil society actors to engage with processes such as policy making, service delivery, budget preparation and analysis, expenditure tracking, and performance monitoring of service provision,[15] in a way that expresses demand towards and exacts accountability from government and providers to improve service quality.[16] Social accountability mechanisms can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both, but very often are demand-driven and operated from 'the bottom up'. At the same time, they allow providers to improve the efficiency and quality of services and organisational structures, while improving their relationship with users and increasing revenue by growing their customer base.[17]

Social accountability mechanisms, created through the use of a variety of tools on both the supply and demand side, and applied in a context-specific manner, play a role in improving both short and long routes to accountability. This paper focuses to a greater extent on the short route, namely the use of mechanisms that enhance the interaction between service providers and users. A list of tools available to providers and users for enhancing social accountability is provided in Appendices one and two respectively, describing each tool and providing references for further reading. The principles underlying these tools are discussed next.

b Principles of social accountability tools[18]

While the principles of user- and provider-side mechanisms are discussed separately below, an overarching guiding principle underlying these mechanisms is **equity and inclusion**. Due consideration should be given to issues that tend to form the basis for exclusion of some people from services, such as gender, social class, age, ethnic minorities, disability, seasonal migration etc. An exhaustive list cannot be provided here as these issues are specific to each context. Further constraints to inclusion, such as transport, communication (including language), time, cost, education and confidence, should be considered and addressed.[19] As shown in Appendices one and two, consultative and participatory tools play a significant role in increasing accountability, but without due consideration of equity and inclusion, such tools will fail to ensure access to services to the most vulnerable and excluded populations, who are often also the poorest. A discussion of barriers to participation is provided in Box 1.

14 Sirker and Cosic 2007 p3
15 Arroyo and Sirker 2005
16 Cavill and Sohail 2004; Thindwa et al 2007
17 WaterAid 2006
18 Readers may find it useful to examine the tools by way of progression – it could be said that the categories listed on the left side of the table move from a relatively low level of complexity (providing information), to a higher level of action and institutional complexity as one moves downwards towards regulation.
19 Gerlach, in Franceys and Gerlach 2008

Box 1: Participation

'Participation' has become somewhat of a panacea in development practice, so much so that the inclusion of participative aspects in development projects is often a requirement. Subsequently, there is a danger that the inclusion of participatory mechanisms in projects and initiatives is viewed as an end, rather than as a means to an end, and that the challenges to stakeholder inclusion (in this case, current and potential water service users) are not given due consideration. Whilst no participatory process could be expected to include *all* people, the vulnerability of participative processes to cooptation "by favoured groups or individuals" and to "exclusion of the poorest residents from participatory process, resulting in resources being allocated unequally or to the wrong target group"[20] should be acknowledged by process facilitators and stakeholders. The danger is that such processes end up as "tokenistic or ineffective".[21]

Cleaver and Franks[22] warn against a simplistic application of participatory mechanisms, arguing that "…a focus on mechanisms for increased participation and representation, without interrogating the conditions [political processes, local priorities, institutional structures and constraints] which shape them might well further marginalise than empower the poor". Further, it is important to acknowledge that even if the mechanisms are in place, people may not wish to participate, naturally undertaking a process of 'cost benefit analysis' based on "resources, benefits, sense of responsibility for services, trust, predicted outcomes, relative bargaining power and fall-back position".[23]

Various mechanisms are suggested, including external oversight/evaluation and initiatives to empower user groups, but generally, providers and CSOs must be aware that true participation requires pro-active measures that "reach out to people who have no voice in collective mechanisms or who lack access to information or redress tools".[24] Biraj Swain[25] asserts that "if people do not come to the debate, you must bring the debate to them", by holding meetings in various settings, publicising the debate and encouraging users to participate. She notes, however, that while utilities may have sufficient funds for such pro-active measures, CSOs may not and thus may end up relying on proxy representatives, with the drawbacks outlined above.

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20 UN-HABITAT 2008 p186
21 Ibid.
22 2008 p161
23 Cavill and Sohail 2004 p168
24 WBWSB 2008b
25 Biraj Swain, Equity & Governance Advisor, Health Sector Reforms Programme, DFID-TAST (Technical Advisory Support Team). In interview, April 2009

i   The principles of **provider-side** social accountability tools

Three mutually-reinforcing principles have been identified as underlying provider-side social accountability tools: **sustainability and efficiency, transparency** and **partnership**.

Sustainability and efficiency: The three utility case studies and subsequent discussion in the WaterAid paper, *Water utilities that work for poor people*,[26] demonstrate the mutually reinforcing relationship between social accountability, sustainability and efficiency, which forms a 'virtuous cycle' in which the extension of services to poor areas and users increases the provider's revenue base, and thus its ability to further extend service coverage and quality. Providers' commitment to accountability to users enhances their ability to obtain user buy-in on tariff and service provision changes (as noted by Silver Mugisha[27] in reference to NWSC), identify preferences of potential customers, and consequently increase revenue due to a reduction in illegal water connections and increased willingness and ability to pay for water services. Emphasising the *partnership* aspects of service delivery to poor neighbourhoods (as in the case of delegated management in Manila) also reduces costs to the provider (eg of administration and revenue collection).

Transparency: Information asymmetries represent a continuous challenge to the effective functioning of markets. Without full information (eg on costs such as connection charges, tariffs and construction permits), the ability of users to make decisions about water services and demand a quality service is greatly restricted. The availability and accessibility[28] of information and the transparency of practices play a crucial role in increasing downward accountability, as well as forming the basis for user-side social accountability tools (eg comparing utility-provided data with user-generated data on service level and quality). Such transparency also facilitates the identification of low-performance areas, further enhancing the equitable distribution, *sustainability and efficiency* of water services. Importantly, transparency increases users' trust in the provider, creates a foundation for *partnership*, and helps transform negative perceptions held by providers of poor individuals and neighbourhoods.

Partnership: The WaterAid[29] case studies show that successful initiatives to extend water services to poor neighbourhoods, particularly informal slums and settlements, have involved a partnership in which users and potential users act not only as advisors and monitors of services and extension / reform plans, but also as partners in service delivery. Establishing and maintaining these partnerships necessitates financial and decision-making autonomy of the provider, sustainability and reliability

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26   WaterAid 2010

27   Silver Mugisha, Chief Manager, Institutional Development and External Services NWSC-Uganda. In interview, 1 May 2009

28   Accessibility in terms of 1. dissemination (meetings and outreach, media, internet etc); 2. language (both in terms of actual local languages as well as the simplification of complex technical language); 3. the challenges of education and communication in target areas; and 4. timeliness of information publications (particularly if ahead of deadlines, e.g. local budget processes).

29   WaterAid 2010

of performance monitoring data gathering, provider responsiveness (applying user views in process and content of policymaking),[30] and subsidiarity (taking decisions at the lowest appropriate level closest to the user).

Provider-side social accountability tools: A non-exhaustive list of tools available to service providers to increase downward accountability and improve performance is provided in Appendix one. Readers should be reminded that the context in which services are delivered must be taken into consideration when selecting, applying and evaluating the tools used. While many of the tools mentioned (eg surveys, user meetings and internal complaints mechanisms) relate to the short route to accountability, others (eg contracts between government and provider and user membership on decision-making bodies) relate to the long route to accountability, or to both.

ii   The principles of **user-side** social accountability tools

Three mutually-reinforcing principles have been identified as underlying user-side social accountability tools: **users as agents of change, ownership** and **partnership.**

Users as agents of change: The effective use of social accountability tools requires a 'bottom-up' process, in which users collectively "assert their right to receive what has been promised" and express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with services.[31] If a credible process of user-driven change is to take place, tools used by user representatives or CSOs should aim to *facilitate user engagement* rather than to *speak on users' behalf*. Consequently, those wishing to act as facilitators of social accountability mechanisms must tread a fine balance between establishing a healthy relationship of trust with users, and retaining a non-partisan position in their communication with service providers. For example, the use of user-generated information as credible and rigorous evidence serves to increase civil society legitimacy and its subsequent influence on service provision and policy making. The empowerment, confidence and social cohesion that such processes help to generate serve to further enhance users' ability to influence reforms and service provision.

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30 Budds and McGranahan 2003
31 Balakrishnan and Sekhar 2004 p18

CSOs should aim to facilitate user engagement rather than to speak on users' behalf.

Ownership: A sense of joint ownership of the change process by providers, users and government authorities enhances accountability while improving services, thus benefiting users and providers alike. This is strengthened when those facilitating this process – be they providers, CSOs or user associations – are seen as credible and representative by all involved. The process should not be restricted to poor or unconnected users. WSP's J Murty[32] asserts that in India the wealthy face many of the poor quality service issues that affect poor people. As discussed later in this paper, the voice of other users, for example the middle classes, plays an important role in shaping the pro-poor behaviour of providers. Ownership is diminished if users feel that they are the subjects of processes rather than active participants. The tools used in the process should be implemented in a way that reinforces the relevance of the process to all users.

Partnership: Ownership of water services will also be enhanced when users are seen as customers (with related rights) and partners (with related responsibilities), rather than simply the passive recipients of services. The use of user-generated information in service-monitoring strengthens the view of people as *customers*, thus achieving service improvements not by strengthening agencies but by making them more responsive to users (the short route to accountability).[33] User participation in service delivery which facilitates face-to-face contact with service providers can further contribute to accountability and increase users' trust and willingness to engage with and pay for water services, feeding once more into service sustainability and efficiency.

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32 J V R Murty, Water Institutions Development Specialist WSP-SA, The World Bank New Delhi.
    In interview 1 May 2009
33 Cavill and Sohail 2004

User-side social accountability tools: a non-exhaustive list of user-side social accountability tools is provided in Appendix two. Once more, the choice of tools applied should reflect the specific context within which users and providers live and operate. As in the case of provider-side social accountability tools, different tools relate to the short route to accountability, the long route or both.

When referring to services in general, it can be argued that users faced with unsatisfactory services have two options at their disposal: *exit*, ie the abandonment of the service provider in favour of another or abandonment of the service completely; and *voice* – making their grievances known with the purpose of engendering a response from the provider that will result in service improvement. It is difficult, however, if the choice is between *a poor service* and *no service at all*. While in many poor urban settings providers other than the utility exist and may even be preferred by very poor people, informal or small-scale services are often more costly, and are not subject to regulation or quality monitoring. There is an obvious need therefore to emphasise measures to increase voice as a catalyst for service improvement. The World Bank, however, warns that "...*voice* is not sufficient for accountability" (WB 2003 p79).

Responsiveness to voice also depends on who shouts louder, particularly if competing demands arise from more powerful groups. Thus, for users to effectively participate in service provision, they need not only tools but the knowledge and skills to use them effectively (WBWSB 2009). Cleaver and Franks (2008 p162) further argue that "disconnected collections of 'best practice' are likely to be insufficient to generate transformations in the gross inequities shaping water access".

As noted in Box 1, it is essential to avoid viewing participatory tools as an end, rather than as a means to an end. While "many mistake the process of conducting CRCs [Citizens' Report Cards] [for] improvement in service delivery" (Balakrishnan and Sekhar 2004 p26) the key aim should be not only to *raise voice,* but to *turn voice into influence*, aspiring to formation of institutionalised processes that lead to long-standing change and avoid the need for endless user mobilisation.

c Linking user- and provider-side tools to create social accountability mechanisms

Social accountability tools have value in their own right, and can contribute to accountability when used individually. However, the route to substantial improvements in accountability and meaningful engagement in and influencing of urban water services lies in the linkages between user- and provider-side mechanisms, which allow the formation of a service-delivery *compact* between users and providers. This is demonstrated in the case study of the WBI Social Accountability project in Uganda (Appendix three), which shows how tools (Citizens' Report Cards and Community Score Cards) were used to create dialogue between users, providers and government. Figure 2 attempts to illustrate this process visually by highlighting the underlying elements of tools/activities and the links between them. This is a simplistic representation and cannot capture the dynamic nature of processes in reality. Readers should thus allow for overlap and commonalities between the various components.

Figure 2: Mechanisms for linking user- and provider-side social accountability tools
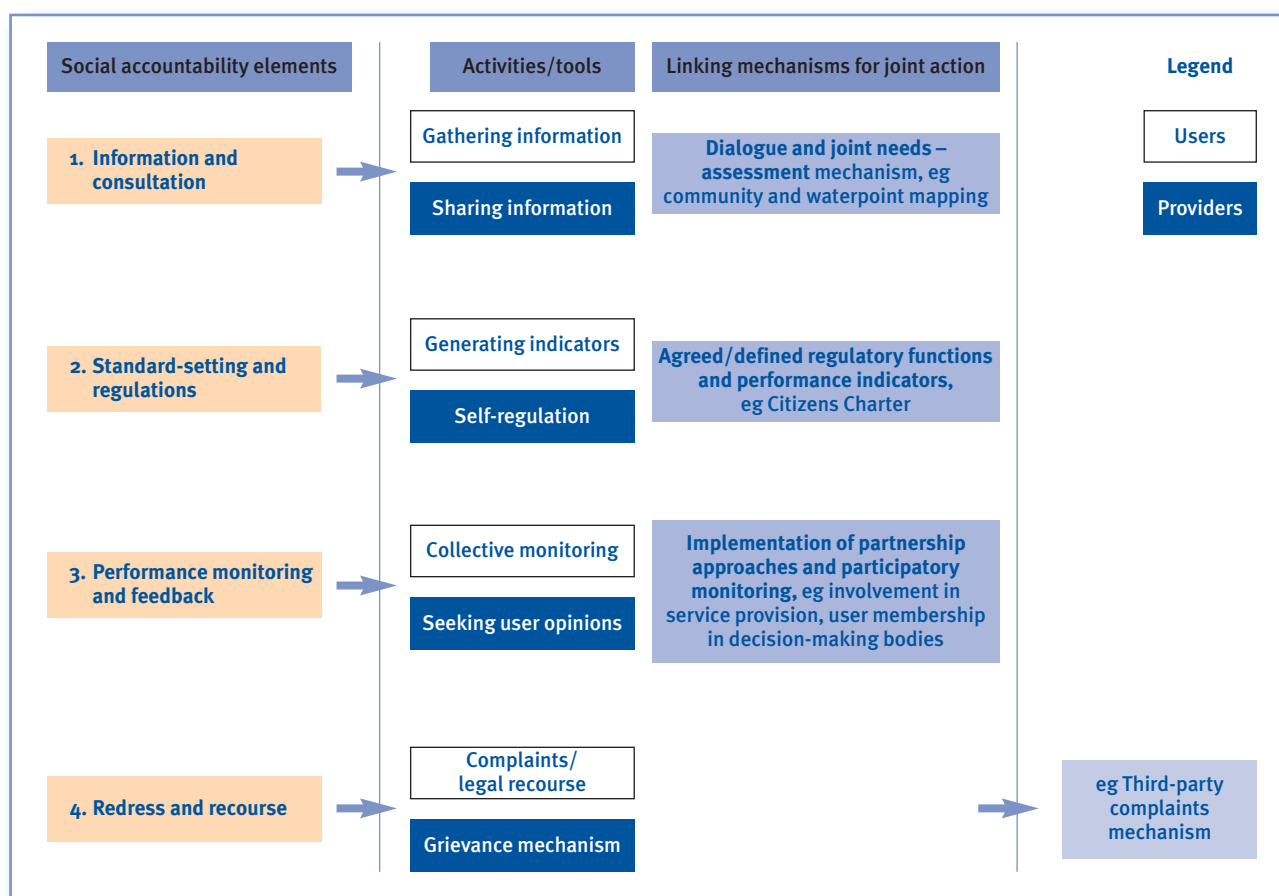
The social accountability elements listed on the left-hand side of the figure represent the overall objective of the tools, and correspond to the lists in Appendices one and two. For each element, activities and tools are used on the user (white) and provider (dark blue) side. These in turn lead to mechanisms for joint action (pale blue) to enhance accountability and improve services.

Element one: Information and consultation:

Information is demanded by **users** or their representatives about the performance of services, user entitlements and user/provider/government responsibilities, to enable them to hold providers and government to account, and to "get into direct negotiation to change policy and practice, and gain their rightful services".[34] Civil society organisations in particular play a crucial role in obtaining and disseminating information, as well as demystifying budgets, decision-making processes, policy and legislation, making these accessible and understandable to all stakeholders, particularly when long, complex and technical texts are involved.

Providers share information for public scrutiny, as well as using it internally to benchmark their own performance against that of other providers. **A joint mechanism** for dialogue and needs assessment is established when information is

34 WaterAid 2006 p7

collected by users, as in the case of community water mapping,[35] and is used to cross-check performance and coverage information released by the utility to point out discrepancies and service gaps.[36] This serves to improve the quality of data (addressing the shortcomings of standard sample surveys) and improve the management information systems of both government and provider. It potentially creates incentives for honest reporting and reducing corruption, challenges assumptions and improves mutual understanding, and forms a platform for more substantial user-provider interaction as outlined in the following categories.

WaterAid/Kate Eshelby

A map showing the location of water facilities and latrines in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

35 In urban contexts, communities are difficult to define, although the word 'community' is used in many of the names of social accountability tools. However, it has been noted in the case of the use of community mapping in Tanzania (Glöckner et al, 2004) that using such tools may actually contribute to a sense of cohesion resulting in users gaining a sense of community.

36 WSP, 2008

Element two: Standard-setting and regulation:

In this element, **users** collectively generate indicators to track inputs and expenditure, monitor service quality, evaluate performance against benchmarks across facilities and districts, and generate direct feedback mechanisms between providers and users (feeding into element three below). In cases where a user-provider dialogue process has already been established, as in the Uganda case study, **providers** may take part in this process. **Providers** can also take self-regulation and standard-setting measures such as integrity pacts and corruption-reducing initiatives (eg conducting transactions through internet portals to remove opportunities for corruption), and sign performance contracts with the government which include specific service targets, against which performance is monitored by a multi-stakeholder review body (as with NWSC in Uganda).

Joint mechanisms for this purpose, such as a citizens charter (in which users spell out provider responsibilities and service standards which the provider ratifies) allow agreement on undertaking service reforms. This is an indicator of the recognition by providers of the capacity of civil society to represent the voice of users, and of providers' need for the expertise and community connections of CSOs. Another mechanism is that of allowing users membership of and/or voting rights on decision-making and regulatory bodies such as the water company board or independent regulatory bodies.

Element three: Performance monitoring and feedback:

Users have at their disposal several tools, such as Citizens' Report Cards, to monitor the provider's performance and provide feedback against collectively-determined standards and indicators. If these are undertaken periodically in a formalised way, trends can be analysed over time. User platforms, or consumer membership bodies (which have a formal structure and legal entity), are used to reach coherence and consensus on service challenges. **Providers** can conduct their own customer satisfaction surveys to follow up on service commitments and identify inefficiencies and problem areas.

Joint mechanisms such as user platform meetings, serve to enhance the effectiveness of monitoring and formalise feedback to providers, often in the presence of government authorities. Another such mechanism is created by the involvement of users in service delivery through delegation of functions such as billing, revenue collection and minor maintenance to small-scale operators or user-appointed representatives. This approach is illustrated by the 'street leader' system used by MWCI in Manila.

Element four: Redress and recourse:

This element is somewhat of an 'outlier' here, since it represents functions put in place to address instances in which there is a breakdown in the compact between providers and users – ie when service-delivery commitments are not met. Tools which aim to serve this objective enable **users** to call providers to account (recourse) and obtain an appropriate response (redress). **Providers** put in place internal complaints mechanisms which include compensation possibilities. **No joint mechanism** for this purpose has been identified; rather, tools are backed up by third-party mechanisms (eg regulator, ombudsman or user association) as well as legal recourse and redress through the courts.

d Key challenges and enabling factors for social accountability

The mere application of social accountability tools will not automatically result in greater accountability. Rather, outcomes depend on the power relations in which the spaces for civil society participation are embedded,[37] as well as the interpretation and use of such tools by users and providers. Hence, the enabling factors described in this section relate not only to the interaction between providers and users, but also to the broader context that surrounds this interaction and the extent to which it facilitates user/civil society participation in change processes.

On the provider side:

Contextual factors: The extent to which a specific system of government is 'open' or 'conducive' to the voice of civil society and its responsiveness to that voice affects the extent to which a participatory process can affect both the context in which providers operate (the long route) and providers themselves (the short route). There is a "strong tension between the need for tools, which is higher in less conducive environments, and the potential of tools [to achieve their purpose], which is lower in less conducive environments".[38] Since the degree of openness may impact on the extent to which providers acknowledge their responsibility to become transparent and accountable, political buy-in to the change process and the championing of the process by high-level leadership has been identified as a key enabling factor.[39]

Provider-specific factors: The likelihood of provider commitment to downward accountability and service improvement increases if this commitment is championed by utility directors themselves, as in the case of PPWSA in Cambodia and NWSC in Uganda. However, users and their representatives should be aware of how factors such as capacity, central government directives and legislation, and government restrictions to autonomous decision-making such as political interference limit providers' ability to meet such commitments and respond to user demands.

Where services are provided by local government, as in India, J Murty[40] argues that strong political incentives for provider accountability to users and service improvement exist naturally, since local authorities rely on a public vote to remain in power. Biraj Swain[41] emphasises the importance of targeting social accountability efforts at elected representatives within local authorities, rather than civil servants whose position is secure, since the former are faced with the risk of being voted out of power.

On the user-side:

Process facilitation: Those aiming to facilitate social accountability processes are faced with the challenge of establishing space and legitimacy for representatives to speak on behalf of users without having any formal mandate. Facilitators thus need to articulate user feedback in a manner that encourages providers and political

37 Gaventa 2006
38 WBWSB 2008b
39 Balakrishnan and Sekhar 2004; Court et al 2006; Sirker and Cosic 2007
40 In interview, as previously
41 In interview, as previously

leaders to see the input of users as both neutral and significant.[42] A track record of neutrality and non-partisan action contributes to the credibility of the facilitating organisation, as in the case of the Public Affairs Centre in Bangalore[43] and of NETWAS in Uganda (Appendix three).

The competencies and resources (technical and analytical) which the organisation has at its disposal also affect its ability to interact with users, providers and other stakeholders, collate, interpret and communicate information and assist the formalisation of social accountability processes. A further point made by Biraj Swain[44] is that in broader terms, when 'marketing' the concept of social accountability tools for use in new contexts and locations, CSOs should showcase examples of projects which are *replicable* and *practical*. Doing otherwise creates an image of CSOs as unprofessional and results in a dismissive attitude from authorities and providers.

Cost and sustainability: The costs (to users, providers and facilitating organisations) of social accountability processes in terms of human and financial resources should not be underestimated. Costs affect not only the likelihood of getting initiatives off the ground, but also long-term process sustainability, since "monitoring and follow through are public goods: the benefits accrue to the entire group while the [high] costs are borne by a few".[44] Short- and long-term cost consideration must therefore be factored into the process framework.[46] This includes, although is not restricted to, the costs associated with user participation as detailed in Box 1. CSOs can perform an important role in facilitating participation and in channelling user voices into social accountability processes.

Dieter Telemans /Panos

CSOs can help to channel user voices into social accountability processes.

42 Balakrishnan and Sekhar 2004
43 Ibid.
44 In interview, as previously
45 WB 2003 p72
46 Rosemary Rop – Water and Sanitation Specialist (Social Accountability) WSP-Africa Region. In interview 5 May 2009

Coalitions: Clearly, a collective voice is louder than individual voices; thus, user coalitions play a significant role in delivering demands to providers. It should be noted however that "coalitions made up by only the powerless are often powerless".[47] Forming coalitions that include users from various social classes and income levels brings the 'louder' voices of the middle and upper classes into the process and helps to brand demands as 'user-oriented' rather than 'poor-oriented', subsequently avoiding a *pro-poor service* which is, in reality, a *poor service.*[48]

Biraj Swain[49] notes the importance of making coalitions 'multi-disciplinary', encompassing not only users from all classes but also various NGOs and academic institutions. Since the discussion around water provision tends to be monopolised by technicians or NGOs with water sector experience, Swain argues that drawing on a broader scope of capacities lends the collective argument more credibility. She adds that although civil society is not homogenous, coalitions are about negotiated compromises around joint principles, and conflicts and disagreements between various stakeholders should be put aside in order to form a unified voice. Nevertheless, creating the same sense of urgency for the need for social accountability in the middle and upper classes as in the poor and unserved, as well as sufficient solidarity between users, is a significant challenge in many contexts. At the same time, participation in coalitions relies on the existence of incentives (ie clear benefits) that serve to bring diverse groups together to form a collective voice.

47 WB 2003 pp63-4
48 Biraj Swain points out that in the case of India, the fact that the wealthy pay a surcharge on public services to be used on service extension to the poor makes them stakeholders with an interest in knowing what 'their' money has been spent on
49 In interview, as previously

Conclusions

The concept of *social accountability* was introduced in this paper as a key building block for delivering change through the use of tools and mechanisms. Such tools provide a way for users to increase provider accountability in reform processes and ongoing service provision. Evidence from the literature reviewed and from the interviews undertaken for this paper shows that the prescriptive use of such tools should be avoided, and three specific points were made in this respect:

a   Tools and mechanisms should be suited to the context in which they are to be used

b   Activities focused on strengthening the 'short' route to accountability through direct relations between users and providers should be complemented with actions that aim to improve the 'long' route

c   Emphasis should be placed on the linkages between user- and provider-side tools in order to form joint mechanisms for sustainable improvement of accountability

While recognising the immense potential and importance of such tools and mechanisms, it is important not to take the mere adoption of such tools to mean that accountability has been achieved. The goal should not be simply for users to be consulted, or for mobilisation or voice-raising to occur – rather, these are means by which voice can be turned into influence that results in the creation of formal and concrete mechanisms for the improved delivery of equitable and sustainable services.

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Blanche Cotlear, Water and Rural Program, World Bank Institute (WBISD)
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Silver Mugisha, Chief Manager, Institutional Development and External Services
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J V R Murty, Water Institutions Development Specialist WSP-SA, The World Bank
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Karen Sirker, Social Development Specialist, World Bank Institute (WBISD)
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DFID-TAST (Technical Advisory Support Team). April 2009.

Appendix one

Provider-side social accountability tools

Element	Tool	Description	Examples
	User outreach/ad hoc user meetings	Proactive dissemination of information on routine service provision or planned changes, in order to demystify technical reform processes, providing details on costs, connection options, tariffs etc.	Franceys and Gerlach 2008 *MWCI, Maynilad*
	Publication of performance data	Performance data publicised regularly in the form of performance/service-level benchmarking, or on-demand in response to external requests. Can be used for target-setting, dovetailed to reform processes and their appraisal; indirectly reflect on institutional capacity and financial performance. The main objective is to identify best practice to improve performance.	WB 2009 *IBNET* GoI 2009 *India* MajiData, Kenya
Information and consultation	**Forecast surveys/baseline demand surveys**	Surveys to plan service extension, including willingness and ability to pay and user preferences, and to form baseline for future evaluation.	
	Structured consultation processes	Periodic mechanism to ensure continued engagement, such as regular user forums and focus group discussion.	Franceys and Gerlach *Manila MWSS-RO* Rosemary Rop *Kenya*
	Allowing user membership on advisory boards		WB 2008a *Venezuela, Kerala* Franceys & Gerlach 2008 *Buenos Aires*
Standard setting and regulation	**User membership/voting rights on decision-making and regulatory bodies**	Such as the water company board or independent regulator.	Franceys & Gerlach 2008 *Senegal*

Standard setting and regulation *(continued)*	Self regulation	Ratification of customer charter, integrity pacts, corruption reducing initiatives (eg conducting transactions through internet portals).	WDM 2007/ Franceys & Gerlach 2008 *NWSC-Uganda* NESC Kenya
	Contract terms	– Performance contracts between utility and government which includes specific service targets, against which utility performance can be monitored by government and users. – Provision contracts between utility and small-scale provider.	Franceys and Gerlach 2008/ Silver Mugisha *NWSC-Uganda* Rosemary Rop *Kenya*
	Ownership of utility/ service provider	Utilities fully/partially owned by users and government	WB 2008a *Bolivia Honduras*
Performance monitoring and feedback	Retrospective performance/ perception surveys	Utility conducts customer satisfaction surveys to follow up on service commitments and identify inefficiencies and problem areas.	Rosemary Rop *Kenya* WDM 2007 *NWSC-Uganda*
	Involvement in service provision	Through delegation of functions such as billing, revenue collection and minor maintenance to small-scale operators or user-appointed representatives.	Castro & Morel 2008 *Tanzania, Kenya* Rosemary Rop *Kenya* Howell-Alipalo 2007 *MWCI*
Redress and recourse	Internal complaint/ grievance mechanisms	Enabling users to call providers to account (recourse) and obtain an appropriate response (redress); backed up by third-party mechanisms (eg ombudsman or user association) as well as legal recourse and redress through the courts. Internal complaints mechanisms should include: clear point of contact (hotlines, complaint forms, web complaint tools), feedback on progress, compensation for service interruptions, time-limit for complaint processing.	WB 2008b WB 2008a *Singapore* Silver Mugisha *Uganda* Rosemary Rop *Kenya* WB, 2008a *Peru, El Salvador (third party)*

Appendix two

User-side social accountability tools

Element	Tool	Description	Examples
	Demystification	CSOs act to gain access to and 'interpret' technical information on budget/policy/legislation processes, structures and cycles, institutional roles and responsibilities, and effects of services and reform. They disseminate this information to service users as a tool to inform user demands and apply pressure on authorities to release information broadly and on time.	Arroyo & Sirker, 2005 *Bangalore, Maharashtra*
	Community and water-point mapping/ data gathering	Mapping processes performed as a tool for knowledge generation and as a basis for service demands; they involve participatory activities to number dwellings and position them in relation to one another on paper, as well as profiling each dwelling (age, sex, occupation, services, education level, health status, land tenure, water points and sanitation). The breadth of information collected can help to highlight water/sanitation links to public health, gender and land tenure issues that affect access to services.	Glöckner et al, 2004 *Tanzania* WaterAid, 2006 *Uganda, Ghana*
Information and consultation	**Community score card (CSC)/ community voice card**	Rely on group-generated indicators, rather than standard questionnaire, to track inputs/expenditures, monitor service quality, evaluate performance against benchmarks across facilities and districts, and generate direct feedback mechanism between providers and users. Uses participatory M&E principles: • Communities generate, understand, review/use, and own data; • community-level service as unit of analysis; • generates information through focus group interactions; • citizens as evaluators; • conducted at micro/local level; • results in agreement to undertake service reforms to improve development outcomes.	Thindwa et al, 2007 *Malawi* WaterAid, 2006 *Ghana* Mukherjee, 2008 *West Bengal, South China* Sirker and Cotlear interview *Uganda* Thindwa et al, 2007 *Gambia*

Category	Tool	Description	References
Information and consultation	**Community based performance management**	**Community based performance management:** form of CSC with features from Strategic Planning and Action Process (elaborate focus group scoring methodologies, standard indicators).	
	Citizens' Charter	Citizens spell out provider responsibilities and service standards for ratification by provider, with regular monitoring meetings to evaluate progress	Balakrishnan & Sekhar, 2004 *Bangalore* Cavill & Sohail, 2004
	Citizens' Report Card	Survey of services performed at the household or the individual level and using standardised sampling methods, grading service providers on themes of *access, quality, affordability, willingness to pay, staff behaviour, efficiency, reliability, adequacy of supplies,* and *overall user satisfaction.* Periodic report cards may be compiled to allow for trend-analysis, and may include several service providers at a time to allow comparison	Balakrishnan & Sekhar, 2004 *Bangalore* Arroyo & Sirker, 2005 *Bangalore, Maharashtra* WaterAid, 2006 *India, Nepal*
Performance monitoring and feedback	**Citizens' Jury/user platforms**	**Citizens' Jury:** demographically representative citizens' panel examines and deliberates issue of public significance, advised by expert witnesses. The members present their recommendations to decision-makers and the public. Can be enhanced through public communication through internet and media. **User platforms:** users meet to reach coherence and consensus as to service challenges, with authority and utility representatives present to allow interface with local government and utility.	Jefferson Centre (Undated) Smith 2007 *Cape Town*
	Water users' associations/water action groups	Consumer membership body (at time registered as legal entity) which meets regularly to strengthen consumer voice and provide dialogue forum for residents and provider. Has constitution, chair and executive committee.	WSP & DAWASA, 2009 *Dar es Salaam* Rosemary Rop *Kenya*
Redress and recourse	**Legal recourse**	Using available frameworks individually or collectively to voice grievances to improve services and receive compensation.	
	Use of complaint mechanisms		

Source: Arroyo and Sirker, 2005; Balakrishnan and Sekhar, 2004; Cavill and Sohail, 2004; Court et al, 2006; Glöckner et al, 2004; Mukherjee, 2008; Sirker and Cosic, 2007; Smith, 2007; Thindwa et al, 2007; UN-HABITAT, 2006; WaterAid, 2006; WB, 2006b; WB, 2009; WSP, 2008

Appendix three

Case study: Improving governance in water supply through social accountability in Uganda

In Uganda the delivery of urban water services is delegated to two groups of service providers. In large towns, water services are the responsibility of the government's parastatal National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC). In small towns, water is provided by private operators contracted by the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE).

Good practices checklist

- Securing a commitment by all stakeholders to promote good governance in the water sector

- Institutionalising feedback mechanisms to allow water users to voice their complaints and concerns to water service providers

- Launching regular, structured dialogues among the stakeholders to foster a sense of mutual trust and encourage collaboration to solve problems

- Implementing participatory monitoring to gather data about the quality of water and water services before and after the implementation of social accountability tools, all designed to enable practitioners to measure progress achieved

- Ensuring that externally supported (World Bank) and domestic Ugandan water projects are complementary.

According to MWE's 2006 Water Sector Performance Report, there is a disconnect between the price of water and quality of water partly due to a lack of feedback mechanisms through which the public can voice complaints, and a lack of government accountability and transparency.

A programme to improve governance in water supply through social accountability, communication and transparency was launched to address this issue by the World Bank Institute (WBI), in partnership with MWE and the water sector's Good Governance Sub-Sector Working Group (GGWG). The programme was designed "to promote the use of transparency and social accountability tools", encourage effective communication, and "institutionalise the use of these tools" in the sector by central government, communities, local authorities and providers.[1]

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1   WBI 2010, p1-2

The programme was piloted in the town of Wobulenzi, Luwero District[2] between May 2008 and December 2009 through the local water and sanitation NGO NETWAS in partnership with Wobulenzi Town Council and Luwero District Local Government. Wobulenzi is served by two providers: The Bukalasa Agricultural College and a private operator hired by the government under an Output Based Aid (OBA)[3] arrangement – adding a comparative element to the project.

The pilot programme contained the following components:

- Comprehensive multi-stakeholder assessment of the local context;

- Capacity building of NETWAS and community stakeholders;

- Implementation of two social accountability tools, Citizen Report Cards (CRCs) and Community Score Cards (CSCs), to monitor water provision and to generate dialogue among stakeholders and other technical tools such as scientific tests to monitor changes in water quality;

- Improved communication to encourage good governance and cooperation among stakeholders;[4] and

- Monitoring and evaluation to measure progress, results, and outputs, and to track outcomes, difficulties, and lessons learnt.

Measures were taken to ensure user participation and the inclusion of vulnerable groups by conducting a baseline representative census and working with female leaders to identify others in a cascade-like process. Local facilitators also contributed to ensuring the process was representative, and some CRC questions were designed specifically for women, poor individuals and children. Communication played an important role in participation, keeping everyone informed of the process.

Two CRC surveys were conducted to track changes in public opinion about the performance of water service providers in the town. A baseline survey was done in August 2008, and a follow-up survey in December 2009, surveying users on the quality and availability of water services and monitoring changes in water quality. The results of the CRC surveys were used to monitor progress, to put pressure on water providers and to demonstrate that social accountability can have a positive impact in improving water quality. In addition, NETWAS implemented Community Score Cards (CSCs) to facilitate dialogue among the various stakeholders. CSCs encourage service providers to meet with members of the community to facilitate immediate feedback and foster grassroots empowerment. The project effectively used communication tools to facilitate dialogue among stakeholders about water use and services.

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2   A scaling up process is under way in Rukungiri and Busia districts.
3   The OBA approach is a strategy that contracts providers to extend services to poor areas but only pays for the infrastructure once service has been delivered, as a way to incentivise and benchmark providers.
4   This involved the development of a **communication strategy,** context-specific **information tools** and evidence through **chemical quality tests**.

Outcomes: According to the evaluation conducted by NETWAS and WBI, based on the 2008 and 2009 surveys, water provision in Wobulenzi has improved following the implementation of social accountability tools. Stakeholder satisfaction has improved significantly, water use has increased, and the number of users with difficulties in accessing water as a result of competition for access at water points has decreased. The original expectation was that the OBA provider would receive better customer satisfaction levels than Bukalasa as a result of the programme. However, satisfaction with both providers improved almost identically. Further, users reported that "improved communication with service providers had increased the transparency of the costs of certain water services, such as connections to the piped system", and "service providers began to adjust their practices to improve services in response to public feedback".[5] Tests also suggest an improvement in water quality.

The Wobulenzi pilot demonstrates the ability of social accountability mechanisms to produce significant **operational results** (improved performance, the introduction of corrective measures) as well as **process outcomes** (institutional, behavioural and relational changes). It suggests that impact is enhanced and synergies are created when a **systems approach** is adopted and social accountability initiatives are supported and institutionalised at multiple stages of the public policy and expenditure cycle.

Sources:
NETWAS, 2008;
WBI, 2008;
WBI, 2010
Interview with Karen Sirker, Social Development Specialist, World Bank Institute (WBISD); and Blanche Cotlear, Water and Rural Program, World Bank Institute (WBISD) 30 April 2009.

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5   WBI 2010, p11-12

Notes

Social accountability: Tools and mechanisms for improved urban water services

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Notes

Social accountability: Tools and mechanisms for improved urban water services

This publication is the third of a set of three WaterAid discussion papers on how to improve water and sanitation services to poor people. The set includes:

- *Access for the poor and excluded: tariffs and subsidies for urban water supply*

- *Water utilities that work for poor people: Increasing viability through pro-poor service delivery*

- *Social accountability: tools and mechanisms for improved urban water services*

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