SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

AN APPROACH TO GOOD GOVERNANCE

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THIS ARTICLE INTRODUCES the reader to the various concepts, principles, approaches, and tools of good governance and social accountability. It aims to provide an overview of and a framework for constructive engagement and citizen monitoring. Specifically, this article offers the reader a framework for good governance, an appreciation of the competencies required of social accountability, and the governance arena where social accountability is practiced. Finally, it discusses the conditions and parameters under which social accountability can be effective.

UNDERSTANDING GOOD GOVERNANCE

The term "good governance" has become a mantra for many political leaders. This term is often used to curry electoral favors or put a stamp to one's project. There are politicians who use this term as a smokescreen to hide wrongdoing.

What is "good governance"?

The word "good" means "something that is desirable and beneficial", while "governance" points to a "decision-making process that produces results". Therefore, "good governance" may be defined as "a way of decision-making and implementation that aims to achieve desirable and beneficial results for both those who govern and are being governed".

Nearly all descriptions of "good governance" seem to agree on some common or crosscutting characteristics. The table summarizes the three (3) basic principles of good governance, with each having a set of characteristics.

Transparency

At its most basic, *transparency* refers to *public information* that is Accessible, Available, and Accurate; it also refers to information that is Understandable, Usable, and Updated.

Common term	Characteristic
TRANSPARENCY	Transparent
ACCOUNTABILITY	Accountable Follows the rule of law Effective & efficient Responsive
PARTICIPATORY	Participatory Consensus-oriented Responsive

- *Accessibility* is the degree to which public information is made available to all citizens. Accessibility can be viewed as the ability to access and benefit from the information provided

- *Availability* refers to public information that is present and ready for use

- *Accurate*, or accuracy, refers to the extent by which public information is correct or precise, and reflects reality

- *Understandable* refers to public information that is clear and comprehensible especially to the ordinary citizen

- *Usable* refers to the extent to which public information can be used by users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness , efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use

- *Updated* refers to the inclusion of the most recent and most relevant public information

Why is transparency important to good governance? Mainly because good governance makes for an informed citizenry, and an informed citizenry has the ability to participate in governance decision-making, which makes for good governance.

Given the importance of transparency as a prerequisite to citizen participation, the challenges at present in the Philippines are the following: (a) to pass the Freedom of Information Act, and (b) to make public information more understandable and usable to ordinary citizens.

Accountability

Accountability refers to the notion that powerholders and authority answer for their decisions and actions towards those affected by their (former's) decisions and actions. This means government officials are responsive to the needs of the citizens from whom their power is derived, and they subject themselves to monitoring. It also means that the following systems and mechanisms are in place and functioning: performance measurement, feedback, grievance and redress.

A key concept of accountability in a democratic setup is *answerability*, in which a superior, who provides AUTHORITY to subordinates, demands accountability from the latter for tasks and duties performed for the benefit of the superior (see Figure 1). In a democracy, public servants are answerable (and thus *accountable*) to citizens because it is citizens who gave them *authority* in the first place so that they can perform their tasks and duties.

Why is accountability important? Evaluating the on-going effectiveness of public officials or public bodies ensures that they are performing to their full potential, providing value for money in the provision of public
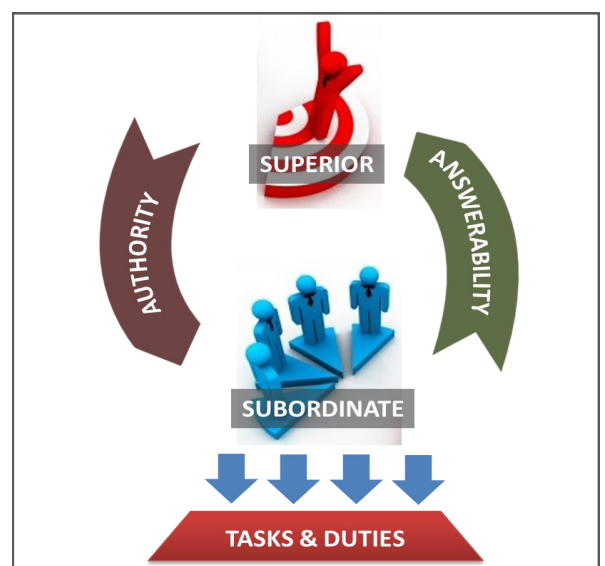
Figure 1. Accountability means "answerability" to a superior who provides authority to subordinates so that the latter can perform tasks and duties.

services, instilling confidence in the government and being responsive to the community they are meant to be serving.[1]

Participation

Participation is a *process*, not an event, by which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policymaking, resource allocations, and/or program implementation.[2] The participation process allows the *voices* of different stakeholders to be heard and included in decision-making. Concrete *roles* and *contributions* of the most marginalized and affected groups are integrated into initiatives to improve their conditions.

Participation may be regarded as a "continuum". The lowest form of participation is "passive", in which people are merely told what will happen. The highest form is "self-mobilization", in which initiatives are taken independently from official institutions. Between these are various degrees of participation:

a. PASSIVE – people are told what will happen
b. INFORMATION – people answer survey questions, but no follow up
c. CONSULTATION – people answer questions but outsiders define design
d. INCENTIVES – people work for cash, for food, etc.
e. FUNCTIONAL – decisions by outsiders, but local groups form to meet and word to meet objectives
f. INTERACTIVE - joint analysis and decisions for actions, monitoring, etc.
g. SELF-MOBILIZATION – initiatives taken independently from official institutions
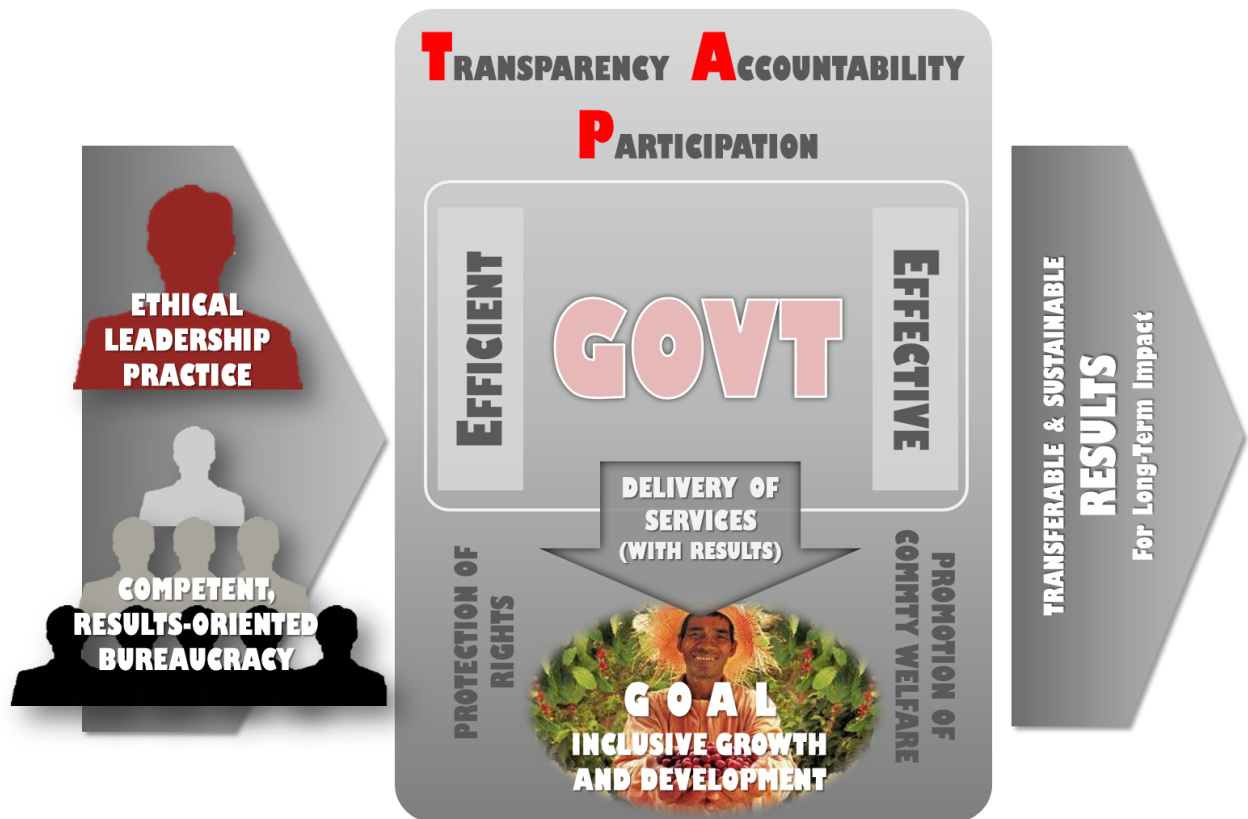
Figure 2. The Ateneo School of Government's "Good Governance Framework".

A Good Governance Framework

Figure 2 illustrates the Ateneo School of Government's (ASoG) Good Governance Framework. This framework was the result of a study conducted by ASoG in partnership with the League of Cities in the mid-2000s to determine local government officials' perception of good governance as well as the various elements and factors that make up or contribute to it.

The requirements and/or conditions to achieve the goal of the national government, expressed as "inclusive growth and development", are the *efficient and effective* delivery of services, protection of rights, and the promotion of community welfare (demand-side). The key actor is *government* at the national, district, or local levels (supply-side). The various strategies, programs, projects, and activities to achieve the goal of inclusive growth and development are anchored on the democratic and good governance ideals/ principles/values of *transparency*, *accountability*, and *participation*.

Moving the vehicle of good governance forward are the two *drivers* of (a) an *ethical leadership practice* and (b) a *competent and results-oriented bureaucracy*. There are three things to note here. First, the focus is on "leadership practice" and not "the leader", because we want to emphasize leadership as an *activity* and as an *influence relationship* between leader and

follower[3], and not as a patronage relationship. Second, *ethical* is underlined inasmuch as leadership in the public sector highlights accountability, legality, integrity, and responsiveness.[4] Third, we emphasize a bureaucracy that is knowledgeable and skilled in what they do, whose heart is in the right place, and who are able to deliver in response to their constituents' needs.

Finally, good governance is not a one-time, big-time event. This means it is not contingent on the intent and actions of a specific, but transient, political administration. It is a process that needs to be sustained so that small gains become the building blocks for growth and development for future generations. And because good governance should not be the monopoly of an expert group, it needs to be transferable from one political administration to the next, and from one level of government to the other. This means that good governance only happens if there is deliberate and facilitated institutional learning among key actors.

AN APPRECIATION OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The government has several layers that serve as accountability or internal check-and-balance mechanisms among its various units and agencies. For example, the three main branches of government, i.e. executive, legislative, and judiciary, are by their nature check-and-balance mechanisms. Other agencies that serve as internal government accountability mechanisms are the Commission on Audit, the Ombudsman, and other similar agencies.

But there are situations when internal government accountability mechanisms are not enough, or fail to function as they should. Situations like this call for an *external accountability mechanism* to make government answerable for its decisions and actions. This is the role of social accountability. This is illustrated in Figure 3.
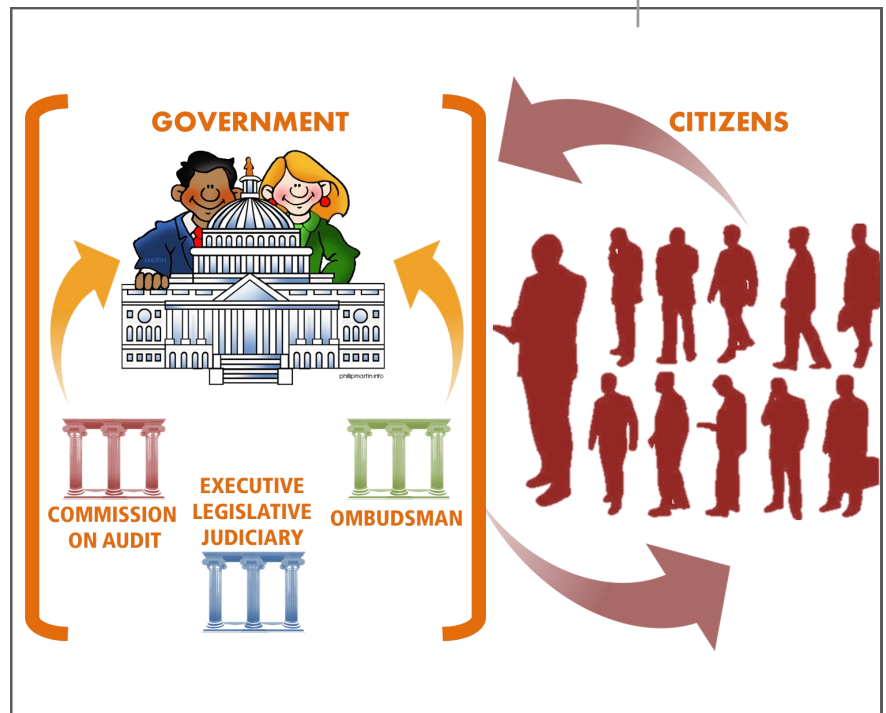

Figure 3. Internal accountability and external accountability.

A Definition of Social Accountability

ANSA-EAP defines SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY as the "constructive engagement between citizens and government in monitoring government's use of public resources to improve service delivery, protect rights, and promote community welfare". This definition also identifies the goals of social

accountability: (a) improvement of service delivery, (b) protection of rights, and (c) promotion of community welfare.

Given its two key actors—government and citizens/citizen groups--how does one practice social accountability? What are the required competencies—the sets of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values—to practice social accountability? To answer these questions, ANSA-EAP came up with the Social Accountability Competency Framework to provide a deeper appreciation of the role of and dynamics between the two key actors of social accountability.

Constructive Engagement

The first social accountability competency is CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT, which is the building of a mature relationship between two naturally opposable parties—i.e. citizens or citizen groups, on the one hand, and government on the other—bound together by a common reality. This process of building a mature relationship is characterized by the following:

a. It involves *trust-building* between the two parties, i.e. builds up incentives towards strengthening the partnership
b. It is *evidence-based*, i.e. involves collection and use of data and information

c. It is results- or solution-oriented, i.e. with concrete outcomes benefiting the people especially the poor and marginalized

d. It is a *sustained and sustainable* kind of engagement, i.e. towards developing mature partnerships

As the term indicates, citizen groups and governments veer away from an adversarial or confrontational stance in social accountability work.[5] Both deliberately focus on *continuing dialogue* and *collaborative problem-solving*.

Continuing dialogue means they engage in actions that involve creative inquiry, negotiation, and systematic deliberation. Collaborative problem-solving leads both parties to shared exploration of greater understanding, connection, or possibility. Factors that contribute to the success or failure of such actions include communication (listening, feedback-giving and –receiving, information sharing); involving people (in planning, in doing, and in checking and monitoring); and building relationships (improving, correcting, making amends, recognizing and rewarding, and celebrating). Underlying these factors is *trust* (and the action of *trust-building*), which is the foundation of continuing dialogue and problem-solving between the parties.

While social accountability prefers constructive engagement as the default mode, it does not preclude being adversarial or confrontational, such as when fighting corruption.

Citizen Monitoring

Citizen monitoring involves a range of actions in which citizens keep track of and, where appropriate, actively participate in decision-making processes

leading to good governance outcomes. Social accountability identifies these governance processes as the generation, allocation, and use of public resources. Collectively, these actions are within the Public Finance Management (PFM) cycle, which includes development planning, budgeting, expenditure management (including public procurement), and performance evaluation.

If art is the word to describe constructive engagement, to citizen monitoring belongs the science. Citizen monitoring includes actions that focus on government activity or government performance, and hence it involves data and information about those activities or performance. Monitoring thus refers to *systematic collection and gathering of data* (including determining levels of data accessibility, availability, and integrity).

But data in and of itself is not at all useful because it is "raw... It simply exists and has no significance beyond its existence. It can exist in any form, usable or not. It does not have meaning of itself".[6]To be useful, data (for monitoring purposes, for example) has to be raised to a higher level— processed, analysed, and understood—so that it becomes meaningful. Ackoff (1989) suggests that data should transition to information to knowledge and finally to wisdom, with understanding supporting the process from each stage to the next.[7] Only when data becomes useful that it becomes a platform for communication, dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation. Thus competencies in basic data appreciation and data management are important and necessary in any citizen monitoring work.

Assertiveness: An Underlying Attribute

Assertiveness is the third driver of social accountability, linking constructive engagement and citizen monitoring together and helping clarify the behavioral parameters of stakeholders.

This attribute is especially relevant in the Southeast Asian context where cultural norms and practices shape people's behavior of being not assertive for fear of displeasing others and of not being liked. However, although one may avoid some immediate unpleasantness by not being assertive, one could also jeopardize the relationship in the long run if he or she refuses to assert him/herself and then feel taken advantage of over and over again.

To assert is to state an opinion, claim a right, or establish authority. If one asserts one's self, one behaves in a way that expresses one's confidence, importance or power and earns that person respect from others. Assertiveness is standing up for one's right to be treated fairly. It is expressing one's opinions, needs, and feelings, without ignoring or hurting the opinions, needs, and feelings of others.[8]

Being assertive is different from being aggressive. Being aggressive is standing up for one's self in ways that violate the rights of others. Aggressive behavior is typically punishing, hostile, blaming, and demanding. It can involve threats, name-calling, and even actual physical contact. It can also involve sarcasm, catty comments, gossip and "slips of the tongue". Social accountability purposely and deliberately refrains from any aggressive behavior; it strictly follows ethical standards and does not compromise governance principles.

Public Finance Management: The Arena of Social Accountability

Where does social accountability happen? Which governance activities should citizens engage government in the process of decision-making?
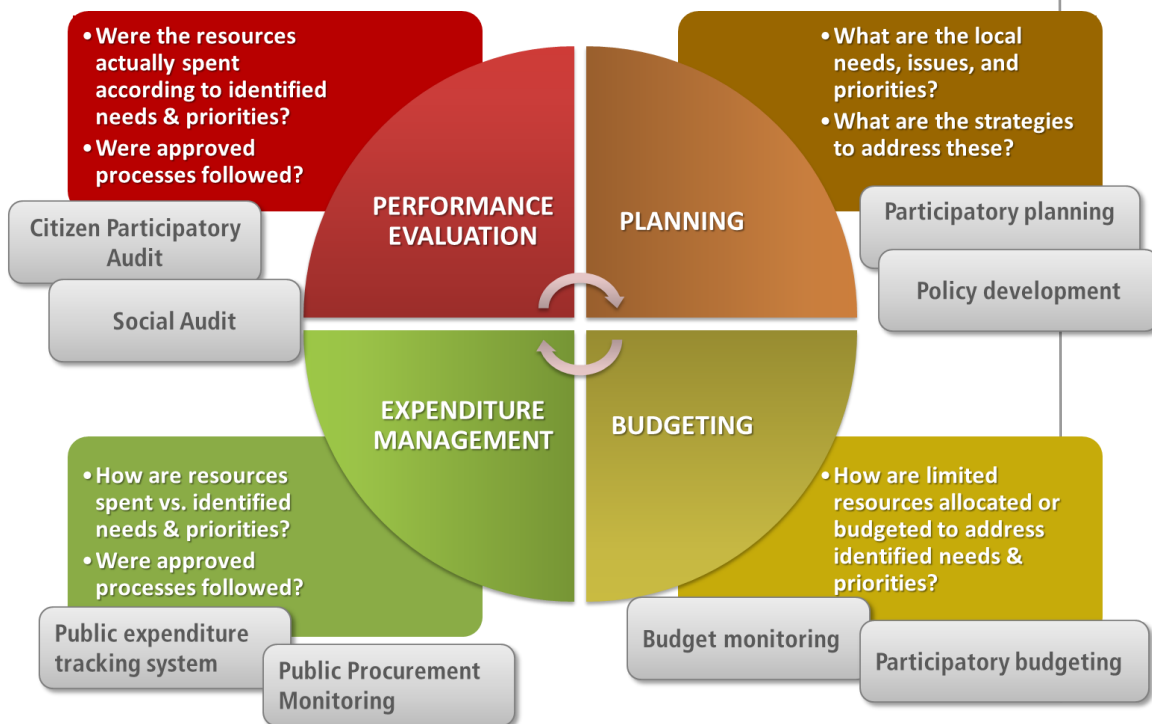

Figure 4. The Public Finance Management (PFM) cycle and examples of social accountability tools.

Recall that governance is defined as "a way of decision-making and implementation that aims to achieve desirable and beneficial results for both those who govern and are being governed". In government, this is done through the Public Finance Management, defined as the administration of funds used to deliver public services as effectively and efficiently as possible to maximize benefits to citizens.

The PFM is at the very heart of how governments translate public resources into development results.[9] In the Philippines, the PFM Reform Program aims to improve efficiency, accountability and transparency in public fund use in order to ensure the direct, immediate, substantial and economical delivery of public services especially to the poor.[10] Social accountability ensures that citizens and citizen groups are able to participate in the PFM where governance decision-making activities and processes occur.

In each stage of the PFM cycle, all stakeholders ask similar questions. While those in government are presumed to have the competence (technical skills and procedural know-how) to answer the questions, citizens and citizen groups are able to participate using tools and approaches appropriate to their level. This is illustrated in Figure 4.

Enabling Conditions: The Pillars of Social Accountability

Two forces drive social accountability: citizen groups, who are direct beneficiaries of public services, and government, which provides the space for citizen participation in governance such as the monitoring public programs.

Citizens have a direct stake in the allocation and use of public resources, and thus are inherently motivated to participate in the government's decision-making. By "citizens", ANSA-EAP does not simply mean political advocates,

development groups, and intermediary organizations. Citizen groups are diverse—Scouts, mothers' clubs, citizens' road watch efforts, and the like—and are from various sectors, such as the academe and the youth.

The social accountability approach presumes, first, that government keeps the door open for people's participation and, second, that citizens are willing to engage with government. Constructive engagement goes beyond superficial ways of interacting. It irrevocably requires mutual trust and openness between citizen groups and government. The goal of constructive engagement is honest, involved, and sustained partnerships that create space for continuing dialogue and negotiation.

An enabling environment must be in place for social accountability to happen. "Enabling environment" refers to inter-connected social, economic, and political factors that define the space for constructive engagement and, eventually, good governance. There are four conditions to create this enabling environment, known as the Four Pillars of Social Accountability: (1) organized and capable citizen groups; (2) government champions who are willing to engage; (3) context and cultural appropriateness; and, (4) access to information.

Organized and capable citizen groups

The capacity of civil society actors is a key factor of successful social accountability. The level of organization of citizen groups, the breadth and scope of their membership, their technical and advocacy skills, their capacity to mobilize resources, effectively use media, to strengthen their legitimacy and quality of their conduct and actions including their internal accountability practices are all central to the success of social accountability action. In many contexts, efforts to promote an enabling environment for civil society and to

build the capacity (both organizational and technical) of citizen groups are required. After all, citizen groups, who drive the demand for good governance, need to powerfully give voice to their concerns in order to assert their rights to participate in governance. The power of citizen groups and civil society organizations must stand on the quality of their capacity to organize themselves, their partners who are from the sectors and communities they serve and other development stakeholders. This capacity also has technical and substantive as well as procedural requirements so that the efficient and effective initiatives in the form of agenda, platforms, projects and programs bring for the outcomes and changes aspired for.

Open and responsive government

Government's receptivity to citizens' participation is embodies in the combination of the set of laws, rules, practices and cultural mores in any given political and economic situation. All these circumscribe the actual space for citizen's to hold government officials accountable for their conduct and performance in terms of delivering better services, improving people's welfare, and protecting people's rights. Space for citizen participation is opened in government institutions that have reform champions. Therefore, an important part of social accountability initiatives is finding and nurturing those champions from the ranks of bureaucrats, government officials, and public servants.

Context and cultural appropriateness

The parameters for social accountability are largely determined by existing contextual and cultural conditions. To a large extent, social accountability

action must respond to and operate within the larger context and framework of a sector, nation, or region. The appropriateness of the social accountability approach—including tools, techniques and other mechanisms—are determined against political, socio-cultural, legal and institutional factors.

The likelihood of social accountability action succeeding depends on eco-political realities. Is there protection of basic civil rights (including access to information and freedoms of expression, association, and assembly)? Is there a culture of political transparency and honesty? Legal, institutional, and socio-cultural factors also need to be considered because they can influence the success of social accountability activities. In East Asia-Pacific, for instance, so-called "backdoor channels" are important to policy-making. To ignore context and culture is to risk alienating local stakeholders.

To be sure, context and culture sometimes will be unfriendly to social accountability action. Social accountability action should still be pursued if the need for it is urgent. It should be done strategically, however, with foreknowledge of the environment, the barriers, and the risks. Appropriate what-if scenarios and courses of action should be worked out, based on an analysis of political, socio-cultural, legal, and institutional conditions.

Access to information

Information is power. Essential to social accountability practice is the availability and reliability of public data. Such data, analyzed and correctly interpreted by competent citizen groups, lies at the core of constructive engagement. Social accountability fails when data and information is either absent or wilfully denied. This underscores the need for an unambiguous law guaranteeing freedom of information.

Access to information can mean two things: physical access to source documents; and their availability in a format that is understandable to users. Because not all information comes from documents, "access" also means access to people who have the information (such as officials) and know where the information is lodged. One other aspect of access to information is easy retrieval and proper processing. This makes possible timely and appropriate use of the information.

ENDNOTES

[1] A good description of "accountability" is available online: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/PUBLICSECTORANDGOVERNANCE/Resources/AccountabilityGovernance.pdf

[2] Ondrik, R.S. (1999). *Participatory approaches to national development planning.* Technical Assistance for Facilitating Capacity-Building and Participatory Activities II. Manila: Asian Development Bank. Available online: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEASTASIAPACIFIC/Resources/226262-1143156545724/Brief_ADB.pdf

[3] This perspective is based on Rost's definition of leadership, viz., "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (p. 124). From Rost, J.C. (1993). *Leadership for the twenty-first century.* NY: Greenwood Publishing Group.

[4] Makrydemetres, A. (2002). *Dealing with ethical dilemmas in public administration: The ALIR imperatives of ethical reasoning.* Available online: http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAFRAD/UNPAN009319.pdf

[5] The social accountability mode of constructive engagement differs from anti-corruption. Anti-corruption is more confrontational and adversarial, often manifested through finger-pointing and blaming.

[6] Bellinger, G., Castro, D., and Mills, A. (2004). *Data, information, knowledge, and wisdom.* Available online: http://www.systems-thinking.org/dikw/dikw.htm

[7] Ackoff, R.L. (1989). From data to wisdom. *Journal of Applied Systems Analysis, 15,* 3-9.

[8] Mountain State Centers for Independent Living. (N.d.). *Assertiveness.* Available online: http://www.mtstcil.org/skills/assert-2.html

[9] The Overseas Development Institute. (N.d.). *Reforming public finance management.* Available online: http://www.odi.org.uk/programmes/aid-public-expenditure/reforming-public-finance-management

[10] Public Financial Management. (N.d.). *What is PFM?* Available online: http://pfm.gov.ph/about/what-is-pfm/