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ACCOUNTABILITY AT WORK

Constructive engagements with citizens and states

Access to public services is key to realising basic rights, such as the right to water, health, housing and education. However, in many countries where HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation works, poor people and members of disadvantaged groups do not have equitable access to such services. Services may be of low or irregular quality, not responsive to citizens' needs or implemented in a discriminatory way. In order to improve access to and provision of public services, Helvetas, along with other development actors, focuses its interventions on strengthening the direct accountability relationship between citizens and states. It expands the opportunity and capacity of citizens and their organisations to engage directly in different decision-making processes, and simultaneously strengthens the capacities of government officials to be accountable for their actions and to provide means to address failures. This implies working on social and political power relations and issues of trust and legitimacy.

WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY?

Accountability is broadly defined as the requirement of power holders to take responsibility for meeting their obligations, and to be answerable and liable for their decisions and actions. Power holders refer to those who hold political, financial or other forms of power. Obligations refer to the duties defined according to local, national and international legal frameworks, such as national constitutions and international human rights conventions.

There are different forms of accountability, depending on the type of actors involved and the relationships between each other. However, the common element is balancing the relationship between 'duty bearers' (those with an obligation to provide a certain service, such as clean drinking water) and 'rights holders' (those with a right to access a certain service). A broad distinction can be made between a) horizontal accountability referring to internal checks and balances within a state (such as between legislative and judicial branches of government) and b) vertical accountability referring to citizen-state relations.

Many development organisations – including Helvetas – focus their work particularly on accountability relationships involving the state as power holder and 'duty bearer' and citizens as 'rights holders'. This is because access to reliable and affordable basic public services is key to the wellbeing and sustainable livelihoods of poor people and members of disadvantaged groups in many of the places where we work.

While enhanced vertical accountability can be demanded from citizens or provided by governments, development organisations are also part of accountability relationships. We are accountable to the people whose lives and livelihoods we aim to improve through our activities, and we are also accountable to the people and institutions who have entrusted us with the means to do so.



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Joint public audits provide a space to discuss practical challenges and achievements in implementation.



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Media, such as radio, is a useful means for ensuring access to information and for holding decision makers to account.

WHY DO WE WORK ON

STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY?

There is increasing evidence that strengthening accountability

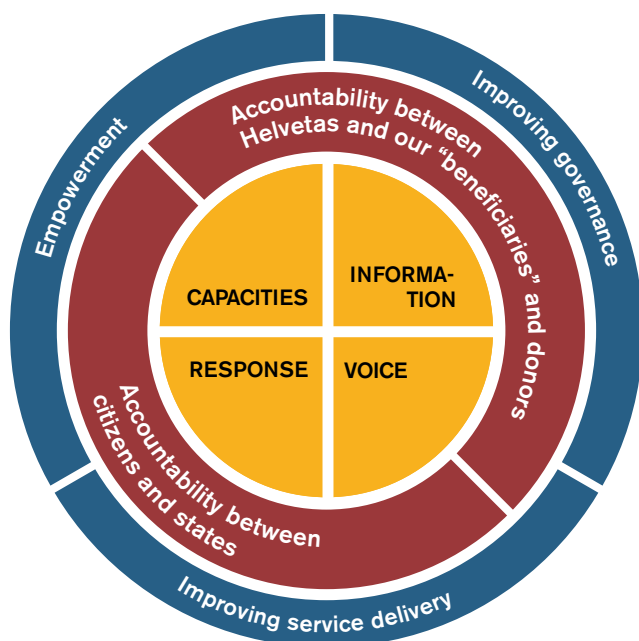
- can improve the quality of governance by building citizens' engagement with civil servants and politicians in a more systematic, constructive, informed and inclusive way
- can improve the quality of public service delivery through creating spaces in which the quality (and quantity) of service provision can be audited and measured according to defined commitments and standards
- can lead to empowerment of poor people and members of marginalised groups by providing critical information on rights and entitlements, enhancing voice and ensuring systematic feedback.

OUR APPROACH

Helvetas acknowledges the importance of engagement between the state and its citizens, focusing thus on the vertical accountability aspect. Together with local partners in the countries where we are active, we work on improving the relationship between citizens and the state, in particular the relationship between communities and their representatives in local government and local public administration. This engagement is based on a vision of a state that provides basic services and security to its citizens, according to human rights conventions, and of active citizens who are able to make claims and influence policies in their interest.

The core elements of Helvetas' accountability approach are

- starting with strengthening our own accountability to the people whose lives and livelihoods we aim to improve through our activities, and the people and institutions who have entrusted us with the means to do so.
- focusing on the local and building upwards
- addressing ordinary citizens and governments both as rights-holders and duty-bearers within a human rights-based approach (HRBA)
- building the capacities of these two main types of stakeholders to be both aware and capable of realising these rights and duties.



Helvetas' approach to accountability

« When we started with participatory budgeting we saw a lot of extra work and costs for the local government. But now we observe that people have more confidence in the local government and our tax revenues have increased! With the money we were able to rehabilitate a road. »

Local government staff implementing participatory budgeting with the support of the SAHA programme, Madagascar

ENTRY POINTS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

INTERVENTIONS

Working on accountability implies investing in a long-term change process. Helvetas aims to influence existing relationships and ways of doing things through working with both power holders and disadvantaged groups to generate commitment to change from all sides through

- 1) Ensuring that citizens are informed about their entitlements to services, access to resources and the distribution of budgets. With this information, they are enabled to monitor the allocation and implementation of budgets, use of public resources (such as forests), as well as the quality of services provided.
- 2) Ensuring that citizens, particularly members of disadvantaged groups, are capable of and empowered to voice their concerns (and be heard), make demands to the government, and participate in decisions about the distribution of local public resources.
- 3) Ensuring that effective means of response exist, for example to sanction power holders not complying with the agreed standards or engaging in corruption or other illegal activities.
- 4) Capacity building of both citizens and state actors – so that they are aware about their roles, rights and responsibilities and are capable of realising them – is a transversal element implemented alongside and throughout each of the three above measures.

There are a wide array of tools and methods for strengthening accountability through these four entry points, including both tried-and-true approaches we have been working with for years as well as more innovative approaches we are currently developing.



Accountability builds upon a clear agreement of standards, roles and responsibilities among the various stakeholders.

LESSONS LEARNED

Helvetas has gained experience in integrating a broad accountability perspective in a number of different contexts. Several lessons learned and findings have emerged out of this practice, which guide our current and future interventions in the area of accountability.

- **Access to information:** Ensuring access to information is crucial for any accountability initiative. However, citizens and civil society actors frequently encounter difficulties in obtaining relevant documentation in an accessible form from local governments. Furthermore, understanding the complex policy processes and budget cycles often requires capacity-building of citizens, civil servants and even newly elected local government representatives.
- **Participation spaces:** When participation spaces provide the opportunity for a structured and transparent way of communication, they can serve as a learning ground for citizenship and a culture of dialogue and deliberation. Through developing the communication skills of both government officials and citizens, more open and responsive relationships can be fostered.

- **Inclusion of members of disadvantaged groups:** Ensuring the meaningful participation of members of disadvantaged groups often poses a challenge. Special measures to empower and facilitate the effective participation of members of disadvantaged groups should be implemented.
- **Follow-up through media:** Only a few accountability interventions have so far addressed the enforceability aspect, such as imposing sanctions when accountability fails. Using the power of local media can address this challenge.
- **Addressing aspects of power and conflict:** Accountability initiatives always address power relations and can provoke conflicts. Capacity-building should thus ideally focus on both sides – citizens and government officials – so that the latter feel able to adequately handle citizens' demand.
- **Long-term vision:** By addressing power relations and creating participatory spaces, accountability interventions need time to build awareness on accountability roles, responsibilities and processes. Therefore, a long-term vision and engagement is crucial.
- **Multi-level approach:** Even though our focus lies on the local, regional and national aspects should be addressed in a complementary manner for enhancing the policy and legal environment, such as unclear provisions in decentralisation laws.

FURTHER READINGS

For further information please contact the «Governance and Peace» team at gop@helvetas.org

Helvetas Issue Sheets: Public Audit Practice (Nepal), Public Service Provision Improvement Program (Vietnam), Human Rights Based Approach: Orienting development efforts towards human rights.

Helvetas (2014) Guidance on putting into practice our commitment to downward accountability. Bern, Zürich: Helvetas

McGee R. & Krösschell C. (2013). Local accountabilities in fragile contexts: experiences from Nepal, Bangladesh and Mozambique. IDS Working Paper No. 422. Brighton: IDS

Rosenberg K., Marthaler E. & Krösschell C. (2013) Civil society participation and accountability in local governance processes. Part I – Raising voices and keeping promises. An analysis of selected SDC case studies. Bern, Zürich: SDC & Helvetas

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