CITIZEN-CENTRED ACCOUNTABILITY: HOW CAN WE MAKE IT LAST?

Bringing together perspectives on the sustainability of citizen-centred accountability mechanisms[1]

From social audits to community score cards, from mobile apps to citizen monitoring, there are now numerous mechanisms, established in a range of contexts, with the goal of giving citizens a way to feedback on or scrutinise services they are entitled to, and hold service providers or government to account.[1]

Such mechanisms have attracted significant attention in fields like open government and international development due to their potential to build trust, empower citizens, and address poor governance and service delivery failures. Yet while there has been much debate about the impacts of these mechanisms – which we shall term citizen-centred accountability (CCA) mechanisms – the question of whether and how such processes can be effectively sustained has received less attention.

With this in mind, Integrity Action has been exploring this question through conversations with civil society representatives, government, researchers, and citizens. During 2020 we interviewed 25 figures from sectors including social accountability, open government, and civic tech, and combined this with feedback from CSOs, government officials and citizens taking part in some of our projects. The majority of the contributors were from the Global South. We combined this with a literature review covering around 200 shortlisted research, policy and evaluation reports from a variety of fields.

We were not only asking how CCA mechanisms can be made to last, but also asking more broadly whether and when sustainability should be pursued, and what sustainability looks like in social accountability. In addition, we explored particular issues of relevance to sustained impact, including incentives for key stakeholders, the importance (or otherwise) of independence from the service provider, the use of technology, and inclusion.

The purpose of this note is to begin to break down and make sense of some of the different perspectives on sustainability we have encountered though these discussions, as the first of a number of contributions on the topic over the coming months. Together, these contributions aim to offer a range of insights for different stakeholders: for donors thinking about long term funding horizons and different models they might want to support; for practitioners thinking about the kinds of questions to consider when designing CCA programmes and mechanisms; and for academics and experts, as a modest contribution to our collective understanding of the value of CCA more generally.

1. A sustainability blind spot in the literature

In broaching the question of sustainability, we have adopted a deliberately broad and inclusive definition of a CCA mechanism, one which encompasses civic tech initiatives which promote

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action for the common good by enabling citizens to engage with the state online through to more formalised social accountability mechanisms often targeted at very specific problems and which may or may not involve the use of technology. While such mechanisms may be administered by state actors and service providers, most of our focus has been on those established by civil society or other non-state actors.

A scan of the policy literature from the past 10 years reveals limited explicit discussion of sustainability as the focus of inquiry with regards to CCA mechanisms (a rough estimate would be less than 5 percent). A lot of conceptual and policy-oriented work highlights the importance of sustainability issues for example when promoting strategic vs. tactical social accountability[1], thin vs. thick citizen engagement[2] or when framing effective accountability as a process, rather than a project.[3] Yet this policy and impact relevance of sustainability does not receive a corresponding level of attention in empirical studies.

Instead the focus tends to be on a range of drivers or components of sustainability, such as responsiveness and uptake, motivation and incentives to engage, the importance of an enabling environment for accountability and questions around ownership, institutionalisation, capacity, and funding of CCA mechanisms. Likewise, meta-reviews tend not focus on sustainability *per se* but rather on issues related to impact, effectiveness, context, and pre-conditions for success. One influential USAID evaluation of governance programming in Indonesia noted that, in project documents, "sustainability concepts and plans are being addressed indirectly, or through proxy measures that do not always explicitly target sustainability". It added that "the most frequently used terms used … to address sustainability concepts were 'replication' and 'adoption' of project approaches or impacts", while other terms included "buy-in," "government ownership," "scaling up," "modification," and "exit strategy". While these concepts are important and sometimes desirable, they tend to focus on "the continuation of outputs and institutional processes rather than on outcomes."[4]

This tacit approach to sustainability is to some degree echoed among practitioners and experts, with no clear consensus on what constitutes sustainability, nor on how it might best be achieved. While some definitions of impact incorporate the concept of sustainability – in the sense that impact is the highest form of change that can be achieved, and is therefore both profound and sustained – this does little to help us understand how sustainability is perceived or pursued in more practical terms. From the interviews we conducted, multiple perspectives on the question of sustainability emerged, from a narrow project-centric conceptualisation through to one which sees as its ultimate end longer-term transformations of state-citizen relations.

2. Perspectives on sustainability

A useful framework for thinking about the multiplicity of perspectives on sustainability of CCA mechanisms is to follow the arc of thinking about how monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) theory and practice has evolved over the past 30 or so years, from project outputs through to outcomes and wider impact.

Project sustainability

At its most fundamental, the project-centric view sees sustainability in terms of the survival of a stand-alone CCA project or mechanism (a specific tool, platform or initiative), sometimes over multiple project cycles or beyond those cycles. Because this perspective is often bound within a pre-determined project logic, sustainability is conceived of in terms of prospects for renewal, replication and/or expansion, with financial sustainability and retention of talent as central concerns.

This perspective has traditionally been associated with technical development interventions such as infrastructure or public works projects. It therefore follows that CCA mechanisms designed to track the implementation of specific time-bound projects such as building a road or a hospital would have as their natural end point the completion of the project in question.

But project-centric sustainability can also serve as an important foundational building block for most CCA initiatives and can provide the seed for other types of sustainability. It can foster learning and innovation insofar as it provides space for trial and error, with each subsequent iteration of an initiative building on the previous one. From a managerial perspective, the branding opportunities and full control that are offered by bounded approaches (a defined tool, defined template or "signature" process and a defined owner/operator with name recognition) make replication and scaling up easier and quicker.

Process sustainability

The process-oriented view places the emphasis on sustaining or replicating a model or approach, rather than a specific mechanism. The principles of one or more mechanisms would be internalised, adapted and re-applied, preserving at least some of the benefits of such mechanisms while improving prospects for sustainability. Thus, the focus is on solving the problem that needs solving, rather than maintaining a given product. The tool or medium adopted and the technicalities of implementation are therefore less of a concern[5].

Sustainability under this paradigm is about identifying the systems and functions which need to be in place in order to support an ongoing process of state-citizen interaction around a particular problem or problem area. A critical element of sustaining these systems is support for active citizen participation anchored in real challenges and forms of interactions with the state[6]. The process-oriented view also places a good deal of value on knowing how to constantly manoeuvre and adapt as technologies and circumstances change and acknowledges the importance of sustaining the motivation of citizens and duty bearers to engage in accountability processes[7].

Compared to the project-centric view, it constitutes a more flexible approach in terms of the variety of institutional formats which can support it, from civil-society led, to co-created, through to transfer into government ownership. While the approach offers more pathways to scaling up and financial support, it also comes with less direct control to a single project owner, and potentially less independence from the service provider.

Outcome sustainability

The outcome-oriented view of sustainability is primarily concerned with the lasting impacts of a CCA mechanism on policies, institutions, and skills and capacities of partners and citizens[8]. The focus here is on achieving and maintaining specific developmental results or specific accountability relations.

Sustainability in this view is about the preservation of the benefits of whatever system has been set up, often beyond the life of a funded initiative. In the context of CCA initiatives where gains are often hard fought and difficult to quantify, sustainability is often as much about avoiding institutional and policy backsliding as making significant forward progress, especially when marginalized populations are involved. Maintaining an independent mechanism for engagement that is not co-opted and building the capacity for collecting and presenting alternative evidence are important ingredients for sustaining CCA initiatives from this perspective[9].

The outcome-oriented view of sustainability suggests a pragmatic approach to CCA initiatives which adopt flexible or even multiple time horizons according to desired achievements. It also sees CCA mechanisms operating within a broader context as one element of a larger integrity

toolbox that includes more formal or horizontal accountability processes such as auditing or judicial reviews.
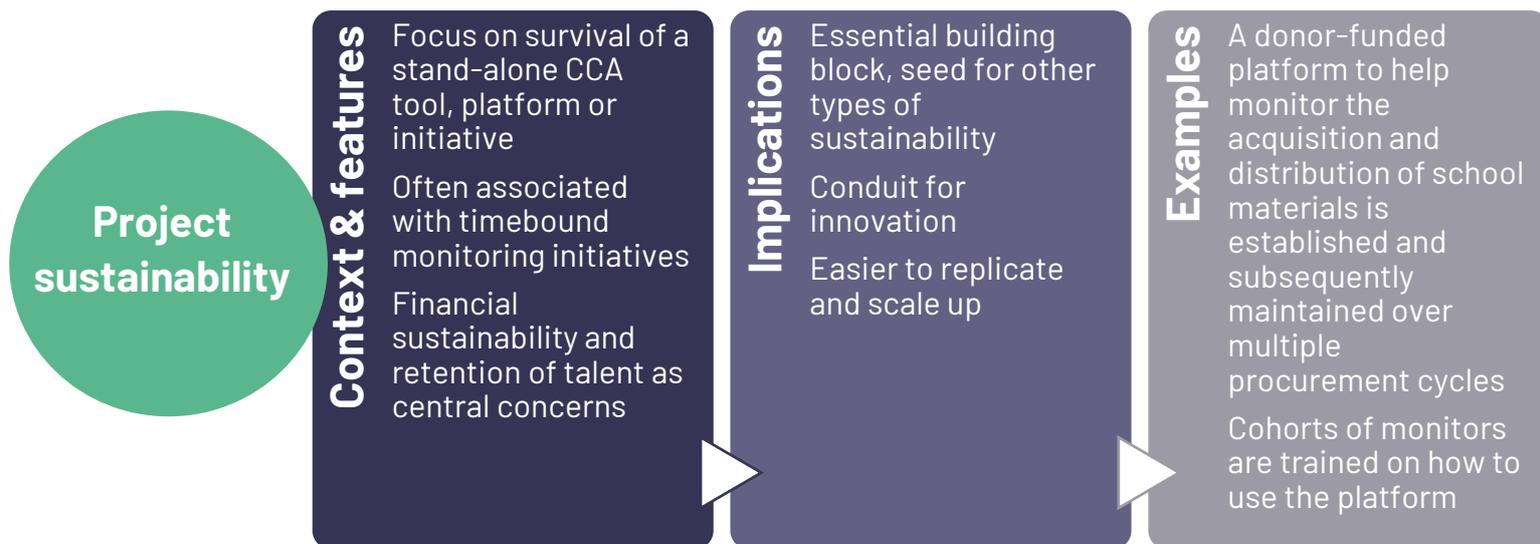
Impact sustainability

A logical progression from outcome sustainability, impact sustainability sees any given CCA initiative as both being conditional on, and (ideally) contributing to, a broader set of institutional and social conditions (norms, attitudes, values, practices) on both the citizen and state side of the bargain. We might consider this level simply as "impact", with sustainability implicit in that term.

On the citizen side, these conditions might include a sense of entitlement, agency and shared community power to demand accountability, and the accompanying capabilities to mobilize and collectively engage in CCA initiatives. On the duty bearer side, such conditions and values might include a supportive legal and institutional environment that respects and promotes citizen participation, a commitment to act accountably and an openness to challenges to structural power asymmetries. Between the two lie a set of motivations and incentives which can drive action on both sides, and which are critical to building trust, establishing joint responsibilities and ultimately changing norms[10]. (These will be explored further in future contributions.)

This is not to say that all these conditions need necessarily be in place before a CCA initiative can have any traction. Rather it directs attention to how specific interventions can most effectively build on layers of previous - and link up with concurrent - accountability initiatives. It calls for long term investment in capacities (e.g. training, fundraising) and institutions (establishing shared roles and responsibilities) which might integrate strategically with other ongoing initiatives[11]. It implies perhaps a more relaxed approach with regard to project sustainability than might be considered under the project-centric or process-oriented view, while at the same time aiming for a higher strategic ambition for long-term change.

Table 1 below summarises the key features of these four typologies of sustainability as well as some implications for the overall design of CCA mechanisms.

Figure 1: Typologies of CCA sustainability – some features and implications (continues overleaf)

Project sustainability		
Context & features	**Implications**	**Examples**
Focus on survival of a stand-alone CCA tool, platform or initiative	Essential building block, seed for other types of sustainability	A donor-funded platform to help monitor the acquisition and distribution of school materials is established and subsequently maintained over multiple procurement cycles
Often associated with timebound monitoring initiatives	Conduit for innovation	
Financial sustainability and retention of talent as central concerns	Easier to replicate and scale up	Cohorts of monitors are trained on how to use the platform

Process sustainability

Context & features
- Focus on sustaining/replicating a model and internalising a set of principles
- Enabled through support for active participation and sustained motivation of citizens and duty bearers

Implications
- More flexible approach, accepts and actively supports adaptation as technologies, context changes
- Open to a variety of institutional formats
- More pathways to scaling up and financial support but less direct control

Examples
- The citizen monitoring model is taken up and adapted by other communities
- Additional focus on establishing a dialogue mechanism with education authorities
- Strong focus on learning and iterative adaptation
- Renewable and more flexible funding commitment secured beyond a trial, or short-term project phase

Outcome sustainability

Context & features
- Focus on achieving and maintaining developmental results or accountability relations (policies, institutions, and skills/capacities of partners and citizens)
- Achieving incremental change and avoiding backsliding as key concerns

Implications
- Pragmatic approach, flexible tailoring of time horizon according to desired achievements
- CCA as one element of a broader integrity toolbox

Examples
- Relations with education authorities around the monitoring process are formalized, with commitments to meet certain targets.
- Funding sources are diversified (incl. government and private sector)
- Over time, the volume of waste and mismanagement of education resources diminishes

Impact sustainability

Context & features
- Focus on a broader set of institutional and social conditions which are critical for ensuring sustainability (norms, attitudes, values, practices)
- On the citizen side: a sense of entitlement, agency and shared power and the capacity to mobilize and collectively engage
- On the duty-bearer side: supportive legal and institutional environment, commitment to accountability and an openness to scrutiny
- Bonds between citizens and duty bearers cemented through trust-building and joint responsibilities

Implications
- Building on previous CCA initiatives and linking up/integrating with existing ones
- Calls for long term strategic investment in shared capacities and institutions
- Implies a more relaxed approach to project sustainability, but a higher strategic ambition for CCA overall

Examples
- Citizens' expectations of the quality of education resources have risen, and when problems arise, it is the norm to raise this and expect a solution
- Duty bearers expect and even welcome feedback from citizens, and when concerns are raised it is the norm to respond promptly
- Monitoring groups have linked up with parents' associations, and are actively involved in overseeing school budgets and advocating for changes to education policy

It is important to recognise that these perspectives on sustainability are not mutually exclusive but rather they interact in different ways. For example, project sustainability need not necessarily take a short-term perspective nor be conceived in terms of a fixed end point. A long-running mechanism which has demonstrated value and garnered the trust of stakeholders, beyond the immediate results which it itself is able to deliver, might also be an important catalyst for replication or wider adoption of certain accountability principles and practices. It might also contribute, however modestly, to more fundamental shifts in state-citizen relationships. At the same time, it would be futile to focus on outcome or impact sustainability in isolation, without considering the project and process-related infrastructure required to support it. Indeed, explicitly highlighting project or process sustainability from the outset of an intervention may help convince reluctant stakeholders and duty bearers that the mechanism in question is not one that can simply be ignored or "waited out", and that a different kind of engagement is required.

This implies thinking about sustainability of CCA across multiple levels, in terms of both the mechanism/process itself as well as outcomes and broader impacts, regardless of the nature of the mechanism in question. From a practical perspective, a multi-faceted, adaptive approach to sustainability may serve as a useful insurance policy, given that the course of CCA interventions is often contingent on a host of dynamic external factors and hence difficult to predict.

3. Thinking big picture: brownfield vs greenfield accountability

Taken together, this amalgam of perspectives on sustainability suggests considering CCA mechanisms as part of a larger "accountability ecosystem" with new initiatives building on existing territory and involving established as well as emerging relationships and power dynamics: In other words, a "brownfield" rather than "greenfield" view of CCA. Efforts in sustainable urban development are increasingly focused on getting brownfield developments right. Efforts in sustainable CCA development might embrace a similar perspective on how to work towards meaningful sustainability, by revitalizing, enriching and/or transforming the existing CCA landscape. While the importance of taking the broader context into account when designing CCA interventions is well established, the brownfield view prompts us to think about the sustainability of CCA neither as the persistence of a specific, stand-alone project or mechanism nor the longevity of some institutional or behavioural outcomes but in a more messy and pragmatic "additive" way: many communities have over time been exposed not just to one but various initiatives that contain aspects of CCA. Some might only be designed for shorter durations (e.g. ensuring a road is built properly) while others may have a longer time horizon where the aim is to build more enduring accountability relationships and cultures. But they do have some overlapping or cumulative effects in the form of somewhat unplanned, messy, but nevertheless tangible patchwork continuity in capacity building, institution building, funding, advocating etc.

This view of CCA may be especially pertinent for initiatives that rely on well-known CSO brokers and their networks as facilitators and project partners. These groups are likely to work with communities and individual facilitators that have already experienced and perhaps taken active part in other citizen-led accountability initiatives. Resourceful CSOs can thus turn individual project funding into more sustainable funding.

Thus, a key question for CCA sustainability might not only be: *"How can I achieve sustainability for my efforts?"* but, also: *"How can I contribute to the sustainability of the CCA ecosystem of the communities I operate in?"* and *"How might others also build on my efforts?"* At a practical level, this calls for designing projects and support strategies that are not only tailored to the nature of the individual service or government function being held to account, but that also integrate effectively into the existing web of accountability relations and mechanisms in place for other

sectors and functions (e.g. linkages to strategic litigation initiatives or to infrastructures for legal empowerment)[12]. Such an approach also requires us to carefully consider the real risk of crowding out or diminishing the efficacy of extant accountability arrangements.[13]

4. Further questions

Our research started out with some specific questions on sustainability of CCA and the subsequent interviews and literature review have helped us to reflect on and refine them. We intend to explore such questions in future outputs, including:

- How important is the independence of CCA initiatives vis-à-vis the service providers that they intend to monitor? What are the trade-offs with sustainability and resilience under what circumstances? How can this interplay be shaped for the better?

- If we are in it for the long game, what strategies have proven most successful in sustaining motivations to engage – for citizens, for civil society, and for government?

- How do time horizons influence design choices and vice-versa? How consciously are these choices made?

- What is – beyond hype or doom scenarios - the role of technology in helping or hindering sustainability?

There are also two questions that have emerged as central during our inquiry and that we are making the subject of a collective online brainstorm, aiming to tap into the experience and creativity of practitioners and other experts alike:

- Money: to keep CCA mechanisms going, are we stuck with donor vs. government funding? What other innovative funding models are out there or could be envisioned to engineer financial sustainability?

- "Ownership", governance and administration of CCA mechanisms: are we stuck with civil society- vs. government-run mechanisms? What hybrid ownership or partnership models are being successfully done where, and what others can be envisioned?

Details on how to participate in the brainstorm – and later, to see the results – are available here:

https://integrityaction.org/what-we-do/initiatives/sustainability-research/

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[6] Interview with Maria Poli, GPSA, World Bank

[7] Interview with Walter Flores, Center for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health, Guatemala

[8] Interview with Sue Cant, WorldVision and interview with Florencia Guerzovich, GPSA, World Bank, referring to: USAID (2018). Sustainability Assessment: Donor Projects on Decentralization and Governance Reform in Indonesia, prepared by Management Systems International, Arlington, Virginia

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