

The Four Pillars of Social Accountability

<http://www.ansa-eap.net/about-us/who-we-are/the-four-pillars-of-social-accountability/>

Social Accountability or SAc is a process of constructive engagement between citizens and government to check the conduct and performance of public officials, politicians, and service providers as they use public resources to deliver services, improve community welfare, and protect people's rights.

Through SAc action, citizens are connected to government. The action sustains their meaningful participation in decision-making that affects their most immediate needs, especially in health, education and community infrastructure. Social accountability contributes to advancing people's welfare—that is, the improvement of more than just the lives of individuals and families but that of the entire community, and ultimately, the nation. In the same way, SAc reinforces basic human rights: the right to be heard (voice); the right to expression (information); the right to association (organization); and, the right to negotiate for change (participation).

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 SAc 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 SAc 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.

RESPONSIVE GOVERNMENT

Government's receptivity to citizens' participation is embodied 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 SAc initiatives is finding and nurturing those champions from the ranks of bureaucrats, government officials, and public servants.

CONTEXT & 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 SAc 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 SAc 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 SAc action. SAc 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 SAc 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. SAc fails when data and information is either absent or willfully 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.