The political economy of social accountability in rural Uganda

[1] **Institute for Development Policy and Management ,The University of Manchester, UK**
sophie.king@manchester.ac.uk

Sophie King [1]

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Abstract

Social accountability has become an important new buzzword among development actors seeking to understand the forms of state-society synergy that may be supportive of better public services. Advocates suggest demand-side initiatives are key to increasing the power of the poor in service provision but sceptics are concerned such mechanisms may generate mistrust of existing democratic processes while failing to challenge structural inequalities between disadvantaged citizens and political elites. This paper advances these debates by presenting qualitative research findings about political capabilities outcomes for different stakeholders within rural health and education services resulting from the social accountability interventions of a research and development NGO in Western Uganda. The paper supports arguments in the literature for NGOs to engage in more politicized strategies aimed at tackling structural inequality when seeking to advance the political capabilities of disadvantaged groups. The findings also suggest however, that within the restricted political space of rural Uganda at the current juncture, NGOs can generate limited improvements to service provision by bringing local state and civil society elites together for deliberative problem-solving.

Keywords

Author

Sophie King is a researcher at the Institute for Development Policy and Management, The University of Manchester, UK.

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

The latest 'inclusive' phase of the neo-liberal paradigm frames NGOs as both representatives of poor and marginalised groups within formal policy-making spaces, and mobilizers of these actors within decentralised participatory governance spaces and what have come to be known as 'social accountability' processes. Within the good governance agenda, the participation of the poor in holding state service providers accountable is critical to increasing 'the power of poor clients in service provision' (World Bank, 2004: 64), and following an initial focus on supply-side drives for more transparent and accountable local governance, demand-side initiatives have increasingly become the order of the day (Bukenya et al., 2012). Concerns have been raised about the de-politicising effects of constructing citizens as beneficiaries of services and NGOs as representatives of their individualized concerns rather than as facilitators of popular participation and mobilization (Bebbington et al., 2008). Critics of the 'new accountability agenda' (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005) suggest that these initiatives may be thwarting the development of existing democratic institutions and processes (Jenkins & Tsoka, 2003), and failing to challenge structural inequalities between citizens and political elites (Harriss, 2001; Chandhoke, 2003). Increasingly, development agencies seek to better understand how greater social accountability can be achieved under particular political-economic conditions (DFID, 2011; Bukenya et al., 2012), while scholars interested in 'putting the politics back in' to development have sought out more politicised frameworks for the study of outcomes for disadvantaged groups (Hickey, 2009).

This paper advances these debates by applying a political capabilities analysis to qualitative data about a series of strategies for enhanced social accountability employed by a research and development NGO – henceforth 'RD' - within the political-economic context of Western Uganda. The findings raise a series of questions about whether elite representation is an acceptable substitute for direct popular participation (Törnquist, 2009); what can be said to distinguish a local elite from an ordinary service user in the context of rural Uganda; and how these issues affect the ability of poorer members of a rural community to influence and hold state actors accountable for service delivery. The paper concludes that elite-led representation without direct popular participation has not increased the political capabilities of the poor or adequately represented their interests but that, within the restricted political space of a semi-authoritarian regime and an agrarian economy, local elites may be suitable negotiators of improvements to service provision that can benefit the poor.

The discussion begins with a review of recent debates about appropriate roles for NGOs within social accountability dynamics in developing contexts and introduces Williams (2004) political capabilities framework as a tool for the evaluation of such interventions. Section 3 examines the political space for social accountability in contemporary Uganda and section 4 provides a brief overview of the methodology underpinning the research findings to be presented. Background information is then presented about RD and the interventions to be considered. An analysis of the political capabilities outcomes achieved leads into an examination of the political economy and strategic drivers and constraints that have shaped them. The paper makes two conclusions in response to the two main debates framing the discussion. Firstly, NGOs can pursue strategies for social accountability that strengthen rather than erode existing democratic institutions and processes. Secondly, such strategies are unlikely to do more than ameliorate the status quo in short-term and limited ways if they fail to engage with the power relations and the character of politics that shape levels of political agency and political will for citizen participation in (and ultimately more effective) public service delivery in contexts like Uganda at the current juncture.

2.   The politics of social accountability

Social accountability has multiple definitions but can be understood in general terms and most relevantly to the present discussion, as 'citizen-led action for demanding accountability from providers' (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012). Related literature distinguishes between two different aspects of accountability: 'answerability' (the provision of information and justifications) and 'enforcement' (suffering penalties) (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005). The range of initiatives encompassed by the term can broadly be categorised into either transparency initiatives (such as budget and expenditure monitoring); contentious actions (such as protests and advocacy campaigns); or participation in formal governance spaces (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012; Bukenya et al., 2012). NGOs are considered legitimate actors in the social accountability arena because of their staff's dual positioning as highly educated elites able to mobilize resources to support their activities, and as grass roots participatory facilitators and civic educators able to mediate state/citizen relations at the local level, translate grass roots claims-making into formal discourse, and explain complex policy discourse in everyday language (Corbridge et al., 2005; Bázan et al., 2008).

Responses to the social accountability agenda and perspectives on the role of NGOs in promoting it have been, as ever, mixed. The ability of elite, professionalized NGOs to understand and effectively channel the interests of marginalised groups continues to be called into question (Chatterjee, 2004, Mamdani, 1996). Civil society scholars have revealed both the presence of 'briefcase' NGOs whose workers have built a comfortable living out of donor-funded 'development' without investing real commitment in social change (Dicklitch and Lwanga, 2003, Hearn, 2007), and the political potential offered by more committed civil society actors' membership of a small educated elite that moves with fluidity between state, market and civil society spheres (Uvin and Miller, 1996; Lavalle et al., 2005).

Increasingly studies have found that the World Bank's emphasis on technical tools or 'widgets' (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012) such as score cards and experimental designs disguises the politics of accountability by constructing citizens as beneficiaries and NGOs as representatives of their individualized concerns rather than as facilitators of popular participation and mobilization (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005; McGee and Gaventa, 2010).   Studies of donor-funded social accountability initiatives – like those of participatory governance more broadly (Mansuri and Rao, 2012), have repeatedly linked failure to engage with the structure of social and political-economic power relations, and informal incentive structures as well as formal decision-making processes, to the limited outcomes development agents like NGOs have been able to achieve (Cornwall et al., 2011; Booth, 2012).   Goetz and Jenkins (2005) draw attention to analyses which find that social accountability initiatives can undermine the growth and consolidation of existing democratic institutions (Jenkins and Tsoka, 2003), such as by eroding trust in public officials (Jayalakshmi et al., 2003).

Within a broadly social democratic school of critique, analysts have identified opportunities within new participatory governance spaces for citizenship building and an enhancement of the state/citizen contract, particularly when these are combined with institutional reform which hence tackles 'both sides of the equation' (Corbridge et al., 2005; Gaventa, 2004). Working to democratise existing spaces, NGOs are credited with building popular capacity for participation within decentralised decision-making processes through the provision of training and information about strategies of engagement, policies, services and particularly budgets and expenditures (Corbridge et al., 2005; Pollard and Court, 2008); or acting as representatives by lobbying for redistributive reforms focused on socio-economic as well as civil

and political rights (Waddington and Mohan, 2004; Mitlin, 2004). NGO engagement in aggregating and channelling claims-making has been framed as building state capacity for responsiveness while equipping state officials with necessary information and awareness, creating more conducive conditions for collaborative planning and implementation processes, and thereby strengthening rather than undermining existing democratic channels, as well as developing alternative routes for claims-making (Gaventa, 2004; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). Törnquist (2009) links questions of representation and accountability to political equality arguing that substantive democratisation must therefore be pursued through forms of state/society synergy that tackle poor quality representation of disadvantaged actors (and associated resource-capture) by better educated and wealthier elites. He proposes increased integration of popular representation within existing representative structures will require development actors like NGOs to focus on three strategies for the promotion of popular capabilities and an expansion of political space: 'popular capacity building', 'popular organisation building' and cultivating state commitment to the 'facilitation of popular representation' (2009: 227).

3.   Political capabilities

Concerns that the good governance agenda casts participation as a technical tool for involving service users in monitoring and evaluation, rather than a political practice focused on reshaping power relations and tackling inequality have motivated the theorisation of more politicized frameworks for analysing the outcomes of participatory initiatives for disadvantaged groups. One of these is Williams (2004) political capabilities analysis which – as an attempt to re-politicise the evaluation of participatory development – is a useful framework for the application of the above theoretical debates to empirical research into the social accountability interventions of a Ugandan research and development NGO. Williams asks 'if participation has gained institutional power within development practice, what can this power be made to do?' This question requires an explicitly political response in terms of seeking to understand how participatory practices 'can be exploited to forward particular programmes, values and interests' and what longer-term political value they hold for the poor (2004: 566). More specifically, Williams' framework requires a focus on three key questions which are elaborated further in Table 1 below: to what extent do participatory development programmes: contribute to political learning among the poor, to what extent do they reshape political networks, and how do they impact upon existing patterns of political representation?

Table 1. Williams' (2004) political capabilities framework

Political learning:
• Knowledge of formal political rights (which can provide potential bases for struggle)
• Increased awareness of the *de facto* local rules of the game (which can sharpen understanding of appropriate strategies and allies).
• Deepened understanding of how power works and how things could be different
Political networks:
• How are linkages beyond the local re-shaped?
• How are existing roles of brokers and patrons (key mediators of power) challenged or reinforced?
• The complexity of motivations and interests among these actors who are not always driven by self-interest alone
Patterns of political representation:
• Changes to the language of political claims and competition
• Challenges to repressive or exclusionary political norms
• Analysis of local cultures of leadership and governance to understand the potentials and limits of change.
• Why are particular elements of political culture valued, and what alternatives are emerging or being imagined?

These themes suggest that Williams' framework is also well suited to the present attempt to capture the social and political-economic power relations and informal as well as formal incentives and processes that a series of synthesis papers have found critical to understanding social accountability dynamics (McGee and Gaventa, 2010; Cornwall et al., 2011; Bukenya et al., 2012).

4.   Political space for social accountability in Museveni's Uganda

Uganda presents a particularly interesting case for advancing understanding about how political-economy and strategic dynamics shape NGO-facilitated social accountability initiatives and outcomes. During the 1990s, Uganda was hailed as a beacon of good practice for poverty reduction through economic liberalisation and good governance including a pioneering approach to participatory poverty reduction strategy making focused on achievement of the MDGs and extensive decentralisation reforms (Craig and Porter, 2006). Since claiming power in 1986, Museveni has overseen sustained economic growth and, after 25 years of political upheaval, it is difficult to overstate the significance of the stability and rehabilitation secured by the NRM. Yet, the regime was recently characterised as semi-authoritarian (Tripp, 2010) on the basis of a gradual erosion of civil and political rights, increasingly centralised control over resources and potential opponents through a system of corruption-fuelled political patronage (Barkan, 2011), populist policy-making, and mounting military expenditure and presence (Kasfir, 2012). Concerns have been raised about rising levels of inequality and the disparity between poverty reduction statistics and the absence of substantive development among rural small holder and subsistence farmers who comprise approximately 70% of the population (ILO, 2008; Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey, 2010). GDP

growth also fell from 6.6% in 2010/11 to 3.4% in 2011/12 linked to the wider financial crisis and attempts to combat domestic inflation (IMF, 2013).

Recent studies of social accountability have generated diverse and sometimes contradictory findings (see Reinikka and Svensson, 2004; and Hubbard, 2007 for example) about the kinds of supply- or demand-side strategies that might generate pro-poor outcomes in different areas of the country at the current juncture (Robinson, 2006; Bjorkman and Sverrisson, 2009; Anand, 2011). The institutional framework for social accountability in Uganda has been shaped by both decentralisation policy and sector-specific reforms. Local government is structured according to the five-tier resistance council model that was established during the guerrilla war as a means of distributing rations and consolidating NRM control over local areas. The village council (LC1) is a shared deliberative, judicial and administrative space for village residents led by an executive appointed by the chair. At sub-county (LC3) level, the council operates like a parliament with elected councillors representing parishes, and technical officials responsible for health, education and development implementation. The district council (LC5) is the highest local government tier and the chair the most powerful local government seat, with overall control over service delivery in the district (Green, 2008). In 2005, after ten years of a merit-based 'no-party' system, the NRM opened up Ugandan politics to multi-party electoral competition (simultaneously extending Presidential term limits), but there have been no elections at a village level since the 'no-party' 2001 elections making it difficult for opposition parties to develop mass popular support.

In theory, decentralisation has facilitated direct citizen participation in development planning and service delivery and the investment of large amounts of sector-specific finance in local government (Craig and Porter, 2006). In practice, mechanisms for citizen participation have been tokenistic and researchers have repeatedly suggested that amidst a context of rural poverty, decades of political upheaval, and a sense of disillusionment with the NRM's original moves towards popular democracy, most Ugandans are more interested in survival than participating in decision-making (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004). Decentralisation has also created endless opportunities for patronage. The control of staff appointments by a District Services Commission whose members are selected under the influence of the district council executive has led to posts being granted along ethnic lines and has undermined accountability as job security depends on favour not performance (Tripp, 2010). Incessant district creation taking the total number from 33 in 1986 to 118 in 2010 has also enabled the widespread co-optation of local elites by the NRM while exacerbating ethnic tensions by consolidating administrations around majority ethnic groups (Green, 2008).

The dynamics of populist policy-making and patronage-politics manifest clearly within local health and education governance. The announcement of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in the run up to the 1996 Presidential elections (including the abolition of PTA fees), the abolition of health service user fees ahead of the 2001 elections, and the announcement of Universal Secondary Education before the 2006 contest have all met with international approval while mobilizing the popular vote, but in the long run undermined the quality of service provision and social accountability (Kjær and Therkildsen, 2012, Ssewankambo et al., 2008). The abolition of parent and health service user fees, while in principle pro-poor, has in effect led to vast increases in demand without related increases in human resource capacity and adequate financial investment. Under UPE for example, school enrolments increased from 2.6 million in 1996 to 5.3 million the following year, without sufficient investment of resources or preparatory work to manage the transition (Tripp, 2010). The abolition of fees has also undermined incentives for

downward accountability with local staff accountable to district level patrons and district civil servants accountable to central government or international donors (Higgins and Rwanyange, 2005). Participatory governance mechanisms like user committees and parent teacher associations have been left without a substantive role to play, as under the 'Sector Wide Approaches' introduced in part as a mechanism for achievement of the MDGs, resource allocation became highly centralised. Local government resources that might once have contributed towards local service improvements have also been depleted since the abolition of Graduated Personal Tax (a form of income tax) in 2005 ahead of the multi-party elections (Ssewankambo et al., 2008).

The findings to be presented below come to demonstrate how this combination of semi-authoritarian control over potential sites of opposition, patronage-politics and an agrarian culture of deference to leaders or social superiors presents a highly constrained political space for NGOs seeking to promote greater social accountability in rural Uganda. The analysis raises questions as to whether such actors should therefore focus on working within the boundaries of this limited space or refocus their attention on reshaping these boundaries in pursuit of more transformational outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

5.   Methodology

The qualitative findings presented below are based on 12 months doctoral research conducted between 2009 and 2011 into RD's ability to cultivate supportive conditions for social democratic development (King, 2013). One strand of the research examined the extent to which RD had enhanced the political capabilities of rural communities and associated civil society advocates to demand greater social accountability for the provision of primary health care and education services.

RD was selected according to a theory testing logic (Yin, 1984) and because of the relevance of their 'hybrid' approach (Bázan et al., 2008) to an investigation of conflicting perspectives in the literature about the role of NGOs within processes of democratisation. Initial enquiries suggested that in contrast to the Uganda literature, which claims that NGOs are too weak to shape the behaviour of state actors in this restrictive political-economic landscape, RD had facilitated incremental shifts in state/citizen relations including in one instance, exposing corruption that contributed to the resignation of a former district chairperson. In terms of speaking back to debates in critical development studies, RD appeared to be pursuing a social democratic vision focused on the redistribution of both socio-economic and political power but by working within the existing neo-liberal development paradigm (partly through a focus on social accountability).

Fieldwork methods included review of organisational documentation, semi-structured observation of organisational practice, and a total of 123 semi-structured interviews and 20 focus group discussions with a range of state, civil society and political actors at multiple levels of organisational operation. Research examining RD's social accountability interventions focused principally on two sample sub-counties within two sample districts selected because together they offered insight into the fullest range of the organisation's interventions and a broad contextual range.

Theoretical and context-specific literature shaped a process of qualitative analytical categorisation which focused on political capabilities analysis of outcomes and analysis of interlinking dimensions of political economy and strategic capacity shaping RD's behaviour and effects within the sample sub-counties.

Data reliability and validity has been built upon the triangulation of data from interviews, focus groups and observations generated with the breadth of actors described above, and evaluation of weight, quality, theoretical significance, and the presence or absence of conflicting cases (Dey, 1993, Miles and Huberman, 1994).

6.   A research and development NGO in the Rwenzori sub-region

RD was founded as a non-membership research institute in 1996 by a group of locally born Makerere graduates seeking to generate knowledge about how to bring greater development to marginalised rural communities in Rwenzori, a sub-region that reflects the picture of rural political economy described above. RD is a 'hybrid' NGO in terms of the diversity of strategies it engages in at multiple levels and its ideological commitment to socio-economic and political empowerment through working within the existing system rather than imagining systemic change (Bázan et al., 2008). It attempts to support small-holder farmers to access markets for example, but doesn't engage in campaigns for land reform. As the NGO boom took effect in Uganda at the turn of the millennium, RD drifted away from research towards implementation of donor-driven development projects. By 2010 the organisation had an international donor-funded budget of GBP £750 thousand and a staff team of twenty eight graduates.

The social accountability interventions to be examined here have been developed in tandem with the participatory tools staff and volunteers use in their implementation. In 2002, a British consultant supported RD staff to develop a participatory action learning (PAL) handbook for facilitating social change with savings groups and producer cooperatives in rural communities. RD either did not prioritise, or did not have the experimental space for, the development of PAL according to the leadership's own ideological vision or in response to staff experiences on the ground. RD's early adaptation of PALS into a Poverty Resource Monitoring Tool (PRMT) was instead highly donor-driven with two European agencies commissioning the development and piloting of these tools for civil society capacity building programmes at different times. PRMT has therefore effectively become a series of participatory exercises for thinking about and monitoring poverty and local resources, using diagrammatic tools like problem trees and poverty diamonds, rather than a systematic process for the pursuit of social change (see also Hickey and Mohan, 2004).

The first social accountability intervention discussed below attempts to use PRMT to increase social accountability for the provision of better quality health and education services through civic education, participatory monitoring, and capacity building within local governance structures. Under the latest programme (running from 2008-2011), the initiative has expanded in geographical coverage from the 9 sub-counties they began with in 2005, to 23, and has focused principally on the primary health and education sectors, attempting to foster ownership among service users and parents to encourage their participation in monitoring the effective running of these services and reporting problems to participatory governance bodies, or relevant local leaders and officials. At the time of fieldwork, the initiative was managed by two staff members and delivered through a team of 23 Community Process Facilitators (CPFs) who operate at sub-county level. In theory, CPFs are locally-embedded PAL practitioners but in practice, operate more like sub-contracted NGO trainers.

Outputs for the first year of the latest 36 month programme included training new CPFs in using PRMT; 12 village-level awareness-raising sessions about the roles and responsibilities of service users and

providers in ensuring quality health and education service provision; 4 training sessions for primary school management committee members (an estimated 612 individuals) and 4 for management committee members of health centres (an estimated 183 individuals); 4 training sessions for local councillors from village through to sub-county level on their roles and responsibilities in relation to monitoring local services; and a series of dialogue meetings – two at sub-county level and two at district level. Most of these activities involve working within existing and invited participatory governance spaces, except the dialogues. Sub-county dialogues are a new space paid for and facilitated by RD, where management committees, civil servants, political leaders and community leaders come together and discuss issues raised during village, parish and parents' meetings, or gathered through the monitoring activities of management committee members and local councillors. Feedback is then supposed to be given to service users through village, parish or parents meetings. The dialogues are founded on an 'appreciative inquiry' approach to problem-identification, with staff and CPFs facilitating a process of non-confrontational deliberation and solution development, which is intended to build positive relationships across state-political-civil divides and divert the emphasis of accountability and planning discussions away from 'finger-pointing'.

In 2006, RD was nominated to participate in a consortium initiated by the World Bank and the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED) for the development of a Public and Private Expenditure Monitoring (PPEM) toolkit for CSOs that could provide more robust and easily aggregated evidence on public service effectiveness. The consortium subsequently collapsed but RD continued to take the piloting forward because the PPEM initiative presented an opportunity to address demands from civil servants and politicians in Rwenzori for more robust research evidence to support claims-making. RD adapted the tool for mixed methods research into value for money in the primary health and education sectors across the region in 2008 and 2009 respectively which combined quantitative surveys and reviews of health centre and school records with participatory discussions with parents and service users using PRMT to generate evidence for presentation at district dialogues in an attempt to tackle social accountability at a more senior level. The health research incorporated 24 health facilities in four out of the then five districts in the region including Bukuuku HCIV and Mahyoro HCIII[1], interviews with 295 'health service consumers', and 36 community meetings. The education research included 181 school visits in both easy and hard to reach areas in each of the then five districts of the region. 34 community meetings were also held, one in each of the sample sub counties with over 500 participants in total including members of management committees and PTAs, local councillors, parents, religious leaders, teachers and centre-coordinating tutors. District dialogues were organised in each of the sample districts for presentation and discussion of the research findings.

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[1] Health centres are organised according to the five tier local government structure described above so that an HCIV is a county-level health centre with drug distributional and supervisory responsibilities, and HCIII and HCIIs are sub-county and parish level health centres respectively. The HCI is not a centre but a Village Health Team (VHT) and is in theory a group of volunteers at village level who are supposed to distribute health information and mobilise the community to identify their health needs.

7. Intervention outcomes

7.1 Training local stakeholders to monitor services

It was difficult to identify concrete cases of local councillors and residents carrying out systematic monitoring of schools, health centres or public works in either sub-county. Councillors were able to explain the step-by-step process for monitoring that they had learned from RD and stressed that before this training they didn't know that this was part of their role as leaders. Yet, when asked to provide examples of their monitoring activity and of holding public servants accountable, leaders struggled to offer any detail beyond their own individual and occasional visits to the local primary school, or ad hoc monitoring of construction works which were usually done at face value rather than against a bill of quantities which were difficult to access[2]. None of these councillors were working in tandem with local residents to carry out coordinated monitoring work to inform advocacy for social accountability. A parish councillor for example, described going individually to check progress with the construction of a latrine in his area. He could see that sub-standard work was being carried out and called the sub-county-chief to suggest he refuse to pay the contractor. The chief ignored this request and the toilet collapsed a few months later, but the councillor felt that there was nothing further he could do in this case because the chief was beyond his field of influence, and though speaking in general terms, also suggested that the chief had probably benefited from the poor quality work: 'When the construction of the latrine takes 5 million, they have to take those [materials] that cost less so they put it in their pockets'.

This was typical of other instances in the data which suggested that despite RD's training, councillors were either unable to strategise about who had the power to resolve a problem and how they might be influenced to take action, or unwilling to rock the boat by challenging their superiors. These outcomes suggest that while local councillors had experienced a degree of political learning in terms of having an increased understanding about their formal duties, this learning has not translated into significant increases in their ability to demand accountability because entrenched cultures of patronage and social hierarchy remain unchanged.

RD's training has generated some limited but positive results for the effectiveness of school and health unit management committees. Members of school management committees (SMCs) had an increased understanding of their roles after RD training which had resulted in increased monitoring of teacher and pupil or health worker attendance and to some degree school finances. One SMC member explained that since RD training the committee has begun to check the arrival of UPE funds and approve quarterly budgets for example. SMC monitoring was not linked to any direct outcomes in terms of enforcement. Teacher absenteeism for example was a continual problem and although SMC members could challenge teachers or attempt to negotiate for improved behaviour, actions agreed during SMC or PTA meetings and reports submitted to RD by the CPFs suggested that they were either unwilling or had no authority to take more punitive action. Both the health and school management committee members engaged during the research also defined accountability in terms of checking that money had come in rather than monitoring whether it had been spent according to budget.

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[2] Bills of Quantities describe the type and quantity of materials that are supposed to be used for public works sub-contracted from local government.

Outcomes from RD sensitisation among parents and health service users have been extremely limited. At one case study health centre, service user engagement was almost non-existent. Village health teams existed on paper but health centre staff felt they didn't have the resources to support their information function and the management committee couldn't even think of a role for them to play stating: 'there would be no need, most of the things government has decided to do by itself'. Although five out of nine schools engaged during the research had experienced increased attendance at parents meetings between 2008 and 2011[3], RD training was only one of many contributory factors stated by research participants. Parents adopted a passive role during meetings and it was the SMCs not the PTAs who mobilised parents for these meetings. Most schools did not display detailed budget and expenditure information outside where parents could see it and although this information was given verbally during general meetings each term, there were few mechanisms in place to ensure its accuracy. PTAs have poor levels of oversight over the amount of financial contributions parents are making to the head teacher or over how this money is spent. The PTA treasurer in one school was simply signing multiple blank pages of a receipt book to fulfil their co-signing responsibilities in advance.

7.2 Sub-county dialogues

RD has been able to build on the political learning they have fostered through training local leaders by convening sub-county dialogues which have opened up a new pattern of representation that has contributed in limited ways to improved service delivery. During interviews, education dialogue participants reported having an increased understanding about their respective responsibilities for ensuring quality health and education, and that stronger relationships had been built between stakeholders at different levels. One civil servant described how, following a dialogue, one SMC member felt confident enough to travel to the sub-county offices and report a case of defilement at their school to the chief. The same person explained how the dialogues were beginning to overcome the culture of blame that can mean problems are simply passed from one person to another without responsibility being taken or a resolution being developed. Councillors and SMC participants highlighted how the dialogues were also an opportunity to learn about the approaches of other schools in resolving problems like child drop outs or poor academic performance and introduce similar strategies in their own schools.

In one sample sub-county, the dialogues have also created a drive to move beyond requests for answerability or learning exchange towards enforcement. After successive dialogues in 2007 and 2008, RD agreed to fund and facilitate a series of meetings with a smaller group of education stakeholders to draft a sub-county education bill, which was enacted in December 2008. The issues targeted by the bill and the solutions developed are telling of the elitist character of participation within the dialogues however. It is designed to tackle pupil absenteeism, school drop outs and child labour rather than teacher absenteeism or poor staff performance, and focuses on sanctions against parents and children, rather than the ability of parents or civil society actors to hold schools or local government accountable for their use of education resources. On the other hand, both CPFs and village councillors had been able to collect the experiences and views of the parents and service users they had engaged with during village meetings or parents meetings around the sub-county, as had some PTA and SMC chairs, and these dialogue participants felt that they had been able to represent these views within the discussions. Absenteeism and poor staff behaviour towards clients were topics of debate in education and health

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[3] the sample time period for the research

dialogues, generating, in the case of one HCIV for example, apologies from staff for poor behaviour and a related increase in service uptake by the surrounding community[4]. Representatives of schools also attributed improved academic performance to learning they had gained from these fora and trainings.

Through the facilitation of negotiation and collaboration rather than confrontation and demands-making, RD has therefore been able to foster receptivity to collective problem-solving among state and civil society actors in ways that have begun to increase answerability within local health and education services. RD is also building the capacity of governance actors within existing democratic structures like local government councils and management committees rather than undermining trust in state institutions (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005), but has achieved this through the creation of an alternative deliberative space that allows new approaches, new relationships and new ideas to emerge. From a grass roots perspective however, the dialogues are an elite-led space which is not directly increasing the power of the poor within service provision or engaging them directly in challenging the power of political elites.

7.3 PPEM research and district dialogues

The PPEM research and associated deliberations during district dialogues did achieve improvements to local services but as elite-led initiatives have achieved little if anything for the long-term political capabilities of lower-income rural actors. This was not the express intention of this initiative however, and lasting gains have been achieved in terms of political learning by civil society activists. The creation of a new representative space – even if not directly mandated by the groups it sought to represent – has fostered receptivity to NGO research and more inclusive deliberations about local government service provision.

Two of the most critical issues to be raised about local health services during one district dialogue were shortages of staff and medicine. During fieldwork, a district civil servant explained that the local government had struggled to either identify Ugandan staff with sufficient qualifications for senior posts[5] or, where the qualifications exist, find staff who are prepared to work in the remote rural areas that characterise much of the area. Both the chair of the district council and a district health team official expressed a sense in which, although the staffing shortage was already well known among district political leaders and civil servants, the PPEM research combined with lobbying from local councillors, sub-county chiefs and religious leaders, added to a sense of urgency in getting the gaps addressed. In January 2010, the District Services Commission gained authorisation from the Ministry of Health for money that had been budgeted for senior salaries to be spent on employing a higher number of more junior staff to fill the gaps at health centres across the district. Although still only at 79% capacity, after the increase in staffing, this district stood above the national average for health service staff.

Other action has been taken by district level actors in response to RD's initiative including using the research evidence for staff training and to encourage improved performance during supervisory meetings. A former district chair formed a 'district council committee for education' in response to the

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[4] according to qualitative accounts of dialogue participants, statistics about service uptake were not obtained.
[5] the Ministry had a policy in place that ring-fenced health appointments for Ugandan nationals.

PPEM research. The committee visited high performing schools in Bushenyi district and used the research to develop 'an enabling law - the District Education and Sports Ordinance - to address problems we were finding with parent/child relations, children working in markets instead of in schools, early marriage, not taking lunch'. The law had not been implemented by the time the chair lost his seat in the 2011 elections however, and at least one RD staff member felt it was unlikely to survive the leadership transition.

By taking on the roles of researcher and facilitator, CPFs and staff have effectively positioned themselves as mediators between the state and parents or service users which falls foul of the de-politicization critique explored above (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005). There is certainly a sense in which CPFs and staff are experiencing political learning by gathering evidence and presenting and negotiating around that evidence, while the rural residents who they are seeking to 'empower' remain passive sources of data. On the other hand, there were aspects to the research process which educated participants on their rights within health and education services and encouraged reflection, which may have contributed, along with other PRMT exercises, to an incrementally increasing sense of citizenship (Corbridge, 2007). The use of a survey also ensured that service users could share their experiences without fear of recriminations from local elites (Goetz and Jenkins, 2006: 89), although in doing so they have circumvented rather than reshaped local power dynamics which would be a more transformational objective in the longer-term (Williams, 2004).

As one off exercises the PPEM research and associated dialogues were inherently constrained in what they could achieve for the political capabilities of service users and providers in social accountability terms. The District Sports and Education Ordinance may have offered potential for longer-term capabilities-enhancement but this has been stalled by political transition. The findings nonetheless provide support for Robinson's conclusions that firstly, budget and expenditure monitoring interventions can 'improve the utilisation of development resources' for the poor at a local level' and secondly that the presentation of budget monitoring work at forums 'attended by politicians, government officials and civil society organisations... leads to a wider and more inclusive debate on the use of government funds for development purposes' (2006: 21).

8.   Discussion: strategic capacity within a constricted political space

The findings suggest that RD has not catalysed greater demand-side pressure for social accountability but has contributed to processes of political learning among local elite representatives, such as councillors and management committee members. By creating an alternative space for local-problem solving, RD has also shifted the deliberative focus of relevant local elites from questions of answerability to an engagement with the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005), and has fostered greater reflection and more inclusive (if not particularly cross-class) debate (Mitlin and Bebbington, 2006). At a district level, the PPEM research and dialogues have facilitated political learning among elites by providing space for evidence-based reflection and debate and have at least provided supporting evidence for action to be taken that may benefit poorer service users (Robinson, 2006). Ultimately however, these strategies have not re-shaped entrenched power relations between elite and poorer citizens or between parents/service users and the state (Hickey, 2010; Mosse, 2010) and multiple interlinking structural and strategic dynamics have shaped the social accountability outcomes RD has managed to achieve.

RD staff and CPFs struggled to foster agency for collective action among councillors and communities partly because of a deficit in community ownership over public resources and partly a sense of futility in attempting to gain more information about public works or address existing problems. The district local government awards contracts for construction works within the sub-counties to private companies and the bills of quantities (BoQ) for these works are held by heads of departments, usually the district engineer, and the private contractor. The sub-county government is responsible for holding briefing sessions with communities about public works including the provision of BoQs, aimed at fostering a sense of ownership and a collective drive to monitor and maintain the resources in question. During interviews, village and parish councillors claimed that in practice they do not receive information from the sub-county; sub-county representatives insisted that neither the district officials nor the private contractors provide them with this information; and two district councillors from different areas refuted any suggestion of corruption at the district level. Yet none of the actors engaged for interview demonstrated a sense of responsibility to chase up this kind of information, to maintain pressure on those above them in the system until they provide the information, or to work with the community if necessary to create the necessary pressure to get the information released and organise others to act upon it - including RD staff and CPFs. Even though other rights and governance focused NGOs were finding access to information to be a stumbling block, RD had not sought to ally with others to try and ameliorate the problem (as might be expected of the lead rights and governance agency in the sub-region).

This underdeveloped drive for claims-making among councillors and lower level civil servants is linked to a complex network of interests and incentive structures and an absence of effective enforcement mechanisms within local government and rural communities more widely that was perpetuating ineffective governance in the sample sub-counties. A former sub-county councillor described how parish chiefs are failing to carry out basic duties like mobilising communities for collective maintenance of resources and monitoring such resources, investigating cases of school drop outs, or collecting annual license fees for rice huller machines and a local maize mill. He also suggested that the sub-county chief is failing to hold parish chiefs to account for these duties and that he himself had been unable to do so when in post. Civil servants interviewed suggested that the lack of opportunities for professional development and inadequate remuneration drains them of motivation. Civil society actors and civil servants also described how civil servants are protected from the enforcement of sanctions for poor performance by their more senior patrons in local government, usually by being transferred to another sub-county or district. In one example of conflict between staff and parents, a whole school was closed down for a week, all the teachers transferred to other areas, and new teachers brought in, rather than engage in a conflict resolution process. Horizontal accountability mechanisms are also weak because, either, as one sub-county councillor explained, 'you have to be polite and humble to get votes'; or as a health management committee member attested: 'we don't have the authority to punish the staff'. One district and one sub-county councillor also suggested that local demand-side drives for social accountability are weak because few village residents will pursue claims-making that might result in financial costs to their household such as the collection of fees or enforcement of their child's attendance at school. Frequent rotations of government staff mean that civil servants are often not embedded within their communities of operation and hence not subject to demand-side accountability pressures through social ties to fellow clan or church members as in certain other developing contexts (Hossain, 2010; Tsai, 2007). Neither does their job security rest upon the quality of service delivery because of the lack of alternative services and the lack of local autonomy over resources and policy-making (Brett, 2003; Francis and James, 2003). For NGOs like RD, the absence of more confrontational mobilisation through

alliance-building was linked to the semi-authoritarian character of national politics. RD leaders and other activists are 'treading on egg shells' as one civil society actor put it, for fear of recriminations from central government. At least one other NGO in the region had been dissolved by central government after becoming too vocal in its criticism of the NRM regime. In view of this constrained political space, RD's research and dialogue approach perhaps presents a sensible balance between collaboration and critique (Patel and Mitlin, 2004).

The challenges of populist health and education policy-making (Booth, 2012) linked to the central prerogative of regime survival (Tripp, 2010) were also shaping what RD was able to achieve in the sample sub-counties. A health worker explained how the promise of an HCII for every parish is resulting in even greater staff shortages as the same human resource base is expected to cover a wider number of facilities. A parish councillor explained how the local CPF has tried to 'sensitise people', 'but parents have turned a deaf ear' because of widespread political campaigning about the abolition of PTA fees under UPE. The CPF and another local councillor described how parents see UPE as a gift from government rather than as an initiative funded out of the public purse that they should hold their school or local government accountable for. While some studies link financial contribution (through user fees or direct taxation) to political agency for demand-side accountability (Di John, 2007; DFID, 2011), the findings here suggest that this is also linked to governance arrangements that give people a meaningful role to play. At the state-run schools encountered during the research, parents are passive recipients of information during meetings and PTA committees defunct or ineffective. Yet, historically, PTA committees in two of the same schools, were extremely active when they had an influential role to play before the schools were taken over by government.

Beyond these political-economic constraints, there were also questions of strategic capacity and donor dynamics shaping what RD had been able to achieve. RD's strategy for enhanced social accountability through the provision of training and information does not adequately account for the effects of power relations on citizen agency or political will for more effective service delivery. Like the parish councillor in the case of the collapsed latrine above, most rural parents and service users will not engage in monitoring or even asking questions of teachers or health workers because they are seen as their social superiors, better educated and with higher incomes. One health worker explained how his predecessor was a 'small king' within the community whom local residents lacked the confidence to challenge, and who was in any case protected from being held to account for his poor performance by his friendships with the local political leaders in the sub-county. Poorer members of a community may also be more concerned about the economic costs of participation (Hickey and Mohan, 2004) in social accountability processes than accountable service provision – as a PTA member of the above case study school asked: 'What if the parents I have to mobilise live far from me? Am I expected to give up my time to travel to see them?'. At the other end of the social spectrum, richer parents have the exit option of sending their children to private schools or buying drugs from private clinics which reduces demand-side accountability pressures (Brett, 2003; Di John, 2007). In relation to health, they may also be less prone to illness – as a member of a VHT suggested: 'Those are the rich... they rarely get sick.'

A staff member also explained that the move away from facilitation of open-ended community-led priority setting and action planning using the PALS methodology towards training health and education stakeholders was driven forward by a lack of staff capacity to meet the information needs generated by an open-ended process and the need to demonstrate impact: 'now we should be able to see the impact

because we are working with committees. We train a committee, they take some action, we see the impact'. Underestimations by staff and the donor in question about the complexity and level of skill required for the effective facilitation of transformational participatory methodologies aimed at accumulating more power and influence for disadvantaged groups is also indicative of low levels of deep felt commitment to social change. The geographical scope of the intervention is too broad for staff and CPFs to offer sustained inputs of facilitative support and advice, and staff and CPFs have been inadequately trained in providing this kind of support. CPFs also operate at sub-county level without a 'train-the-trainer' strategy leading to an absence of locally embedded activists able to implement or follow up on RD's inputs. This perpetuates dependency on their information, skills, and links to the political networks Williams refers to (2004) within and beyond the sub-county for the expression of community views and interests.

By focusing on management committees and councillors, RD has clearly targeted local educated elites rather than the most marginalised members of their communities of operation. Yet, against the context of Ugandan social hierarchy and the absence of effective incentive and enforcement mechanisms within local government, this strategy is perhaps attuned to the political opportunities available to Rwenzori civil society actors at the current juncture and has produced some positive outcomes for answerability. By bringing local level actors like management committee members, head teachers, and parents (in the guise of village councillors) into contact with sub-county leaders and officials through the dialogue process, RD are facilitating local deliberation and problem solving in ways that have led to the development of locally-relevant solutions of benefit to a range of households. 'Elite' is also a shifting and relational category. The community leaders RD has trained comprise a heterogeneous group in terms of social status - one of the SMCs engaged during the research was a clan leader for example, while others were literate but had not finished primary school. Some of these actors also have a dual positioning as both community members/users and governance actors/providers which can only serve to enhance the depth of the political learning generated. In this way, although RD is perhaps achieving little for the political capabilities of the poorest, they are contributing to incremental empowerment and shifting citizen/state relations among different social strata within the spectrum of socio-economic status that makes up rural society in Uganda. RD staff have also been able to cultivate effective relationships with district level civil servants and politicians because of their own often highly elite status and by exploiting their 'mutual needs' (Patel and Mitlin, 2009). RD has supplied useful evidence and information and a communicative platform for leaders to demonstrate responsiveness (ahead of the 2011 local government elections for example), while politicians or civil servants have given their time and in some cases their commitment to engagement with civil society advocates and citizen representatives within participatory governance structures.

The danger, as these social accountability initiatives seem to suggest, is that working with elites becomes the only strategy to the detriment of other potential popular sites of agency like local associations. RD's strategy might be more effective in enhancing the political capabilities of lower income households by engaging in popular organisation building (Törnquist, 2009) with PTAs and VHTs or other local associational forms and fostering stronger links between these popular actors and more elite representative structures. Without effective incentives and sanction mechanisms within service providing institutions however (Brett, 2003, Booth, 2012), and a shift in the values of those with vested interests in the status quo (Francis and James, 2003), the literature suggests that gains here too would be limited.

9.   Conclusions: elite and popular capabilities for social accountability

The political-economy of agrarian society does not, then, provide fertile ground for social accountability initiatives focused on 'increasing the power of the poor in service provision' (World Bank, 2004), particularly when these initiatives are designed and driven forward by a partnership between elite, urban based Ugandan professionals reluctant to invest time and energy at very local levels (subject to Chatterjee's 2004 critique) and European donors with little depth of understanding or commitment to transforming the character of politics and governance incentive structures or the structure of societal power relations (Booth, 2012). Neither RD's training nor research-based advocacy strategies have encompassed approaches which might begin to reshape the 'networks of power' or 'patterns of political representation' (Williams, 2004) which undermine processes for social accountability at local or district level in the region. If anything, these have been reinforced by investing the majority of programme resources into working with local elites. As analyses from across the liberal/social democratic divide suggest however, elites play an important role in expanding space for alliances and participation by formerly excluded groups (North et al., 2009; Sandbrook et al., 2007). In a political-economic context where citizen agency and citizen-led action are hard to find or catalyse, and contradictory to accepted social mores and behaviours, enhancing the advocacy capabilities of rural elites is at least a start on the road to building 'a sense of being a citizen' as Corbridge observes in relation to village education committees in Bihar (2007: 197).

The increased effectiveness of management committees and emergent attempts at elite but local cross-sector problem solving strategies that focus on political learning and convening deliberation between local leaders of different kinds has the effect of enhancing rather than eroding 'existing democratic institutions and processes' (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005) by contributing to political learning and to some extent, creating new patterns of representation (Williams, 2004). While perhaps guilty to some degree of de-politicising citizen/state interactions, the dialogue approach appears to be a positive coalitional pathway to bringing state, political and civil actors together to bring changes to services that will benefit poor service users – particularly when reinforced by robust mixed methods research evidence (Bázan et al., 2008).

Those cautious optimists who celebrate the expansion of the public sphere that has resulted from the good governance agenda might therefore consider RD's interventions to be important contributions towards a wider process of citizenship-building (Corbridge, 2007). The findings also demonstrate however, that demand-side social accountability initiatives in contexts like Uganda's which assume governance can be improved through information-based strategies are unlikely to go beyond minor and sporadic achievements of answerability or enforcement because of an absence of political will linked to vast power inequalities between a poor rural majority and a minority political-economic elite which operates increasingly centralised control over resources. Overall therefore, the discussion here provides support for a growing body of critique that suggests such initiatives are but sticking plasters over the much deeper and more daunting challenge of securing better health and education for a greater number by redistributing socio-economic power (and the political power that accompanies it in such contexts) in ways that include those currently on the margins of the global capitalist system (Mosse, 2010).

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