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Social Accountability in Action

Illustrations of PRAN's work in Nepal

2009-2012



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The Background to “Social Accountability in Action”

The Context and the Problems

This report refers to the particular situation in Nepal in 2013 in relation to the social contract between citizens and government – particularly local government¹. The Government of Nepal (GoN) has passed, in Parliament and subsequently in the Constitutional Assembly, some very fine laws, policies, statutes and regulations to govern the social contract. Indeed if all these laws etc. were implemented, there would be little need for social accountability. The problem is that they are not implemented, and, as a result, women, poor and excluded (WPEs) do not receive the services that they should by right - and moreover, do not know what their rights or entitlements are. As a result of this is that they do not ask for them. A lot of the work of the 19 CSOs is thus concerned with making the citizens rights and entitlements known to citizens (particularly the WPEs), and then helping them to access these rights and entitlements.

This breakdown in the social contract rests on top of (and is possibly caused by) a society that is deeply riven by caste, class, and ethnicity. Those in government responsible for providing the rights and entitlements to the citizenry, are largely educated upper caste men who are not immediately motivated to help uneducated lower caste women and other marginalized people, even though the law not only says that they can, but actively encourages them to do so.

And in a layer on top of this again is the situation of local government², specifically:

- peoples representatives for local government have not been elected for 12 years,
- a hybrid formation called the All Party Mechanism was put into practice to replace this vacuum, until it was declared absolutely corrupt by the CIAA and disbanded in July 2012,
- corruption at national and local levels is endemic and supported by impunity³.

PRAN has found that it is possible, though difficult, to:

- inform WPEs of their rights and entitlements,

¹ An overall picture of how Local Government works can be found from the relevant laws, particularly the Local Good Governance Act of 2006, a book published by Action Aid called “Local Democracy Building – Civic Education Resource Book” in Nepali and English in 2009, and a book published by PRAN in 2012 called “A Sourcebook of 21 Social Accountability Tools for Nepal” in English and Nepali.

² An explanation of the situation of Local Government is best found in “Political Economy Analysis of Local Governance in Nepal”, Asia Foundation, Nepal, 2012

³ There are a number of reference books on corruption in Nepal - the aforementioned “Political Economy Analysis of Local Governance in Nepal”, the report for NORAD by Sarah Dix called “Corruption and Anti-Corruption in Nepal – lessons learnt and possible future initiatives” of 2011, and the National Planning Commission’s study on corruption in social security payments “Assessment of Social Security Allowance Program in Nepal”, May 2012.

- inform and educate government officials of what they should already know – these same rights and entitlements,
- and bring these together in a constructive engagement whereby government officials recognize the citizens right to demand their entitlements, and are prepared to accommodate these demands.

The entitlements are based on three categories:

- (a) the use of the block grants from central government to DDCs, and from DDCs to VDCs and Municipalities
- (b) the use of social security payments to individuals from the VDC and the Municipality
- (c) the involvement of the citizens, through the Ward Citizens Forums in participatory planning and budgeting, firstly in Village Development Committees (VDCs) or Municipalities, and then in District Development Committees (DDCs) .

It is important to be clear that social accountability is not a new concept to the Government of Nepal. The Government had incorporated Public Hearings and Public Audits into its procedures, and made them mandatory for infrastructure projects. The government also has extensive instructions for involving citizens in participatory planning and participatory budgeting of local government through the Good Governance Act. However, as the sub-grantees reported, these instructions are often ignored, or hijacked by political parties, something that was noted in the Asia Foundation report. This document also shows occasions when local government realizes and appreciates what it has not done, and is prepared to improve the situation.

How did this social accountability program work?

The CSOs interested in practicing social accountability made a competitive bid in response to a call for proposals from CECI, naming which of the three themes they wanted to pursue, and which social accountability tool they wanted to practice. They competed for two sizes of projects – up to \$15,000 for organizations which had recently received training in SA and wanted to practice what they had learnt, and up to \$50,000 for organisations which already had some SA experience and wanted to expand it. Each project lasted between 6-10 months – please see the table following. Please also see the list and the number of uses of the different tools.

What usually happened is that the CSO made a courtesy visit to the offices of local government, informed them what they intended to do, and got their agreement to it. In some cases the CSO was already well known to the Local Government, e.g. VDRC in Nawalparasi (page 65) which already had a long history of helping schools with libraries. In other cases the CSO had to introduce itself, as well as the planned project. In many cases the initial agreement from the Local Government was not an issue, but became an issue later when the Local Government found out that the CSO's practice of the SA tools exposed their wrongdoing and caused them embarrassment.

The next stage was usually that the CSO introduced the concept of SA to the citizenry of whatever area they were covering. This was novel inasmuch as most CSOs were known for

their service delivery – and SA did not mean delivering new services, but getting the government to deliver services which they should have already delivered. This stage involved a considerable amount of discussions, and the holding of meetings. In many cases the CSO held public meetings at which it urged the citizens to ask for accountability from the government agencies – something that not many citizens were used to doing, and were often apprehensive about.

The next stage was often the collection of data, and the production of a report to the local government agencies which showed what had not been done, which should have been done, followed by discussions to try and get commitment from the Local Government to right the wrongs of the past. In quite a few cases the Local government bodies were not aware of the laws and regulations that bound them, and were surprised about what they had to do. In other cases they denied wrongdoing until the facts were incontrovertible. In some cases both parties came to consensus about what needed to be done, in other cases it was more confrontational, as in the work of Sahara Nepal in Bahjang (Page 62) where popular pressure resulted in repayment of NRPs 240,000 which had been wrongly taken from the block grant for women’s empowerment, and according to the VDC, used to build schools, something doubted by the citizens.

Table 1, below, shows the CSOs, with their district of registration, the themes they decided to work on, the size of the grant they received, and the length of time they to spend it in. Table 2 shows the Tools that the CSOs used in order of frequency of use.

Table 1: Organisations, Districts, Size of Grants and Duration of Grants used

Organisation (in alphabetical order, with District)	District of Registration	Theme	Money (\$)/ Time
Abhiyan Nepal	Sunsari	MGG	43,372 /10 m
Community Communications Centre	Kaski	PFM	10,967 / 6 m
Deep Jyoti Youth Club	Baglung	PFM	33,512 / 6 m
Feminist Dalit Organisation	Lalitpur	PSD	48,487 /10 m
Himalayan Conservation and Development Association	Humla	PFM	33,682 /6 m
Human Welfare and Environment Protection Centre	Dang	MGG	10,726 /5 m
Integrated Community Development Campaign, Nepal	Dhading	PFM	9,042 /6 m
Jalsrot Vikas Sanstha	Kathmandu	PSD	48,351 /10 m
Janahit Good Governance Club	Dhankuta	PFM	10,999 / 6 m
Janaki Womens Awareness Society	Dhanusha	PFM	32,977 /6 m
Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre	Jumla	PSD	48,260 /10 m
Mahuli Community Development Centre	Saptari	PFM	10,999 / 6 m
ProCivic Society	Kathmandu	PSD	13,920 /11 m
Radio Chinnamasta	Saptari	MGG	10,760 /6 m
Rastriya Rojgar Prawardhan Kendra	Sarlahi	MGG	10,697 /6 m
Reconstruction and Research Development Centre	Mugu	PSD	10,985 /6 m
Rural Regional and Agro Forestry Development Centre	Bara	PFM	32,440 /6 m
Sahara Nepal	Bahjang	PFM	10,755 /5 m
Vijaya Development Resource Centre	Nawalparasi	PSD	44,760/ 10 m

Table 2: Tools used in order of frequency of their use.⁴

Public Expenditure Tracking Systems
 Participatory Budgeting
 Citizens Charter
 Public hearings
 Community Score Cards
 Citizens Report Card
 Participatory Planning
 Participatory Budget Analysis
 Public Grievance Redressal Mechanisms
 Social Audits
 Public Help Desk
 Public service Tracking
 Citizens Watch group
 Complaint Hearing Mechanism
 Zero Corruption Tolerance

What does this illustrate?

This illustrates that CSOs, trained by PRAN through its partners, are quite capable of learning the use of social accountability tools, of negotiating with local government for the practice of these tools in the local government units, of educating and orienting citizens about their rights and entitlements, using these tools, and of making the whole exercise positive and constructive, increasing the practice of good governance at local government level in Nepal.

It is instructive to recognize what is not illustrated:

- a. Local Government never forbade the CSOs from practicing social accountability (although there were instances where the Local government officials were less than enthusiastic)
- b. The CSOs were able to work with the citizens at their own pace and in their own language. There were no instances where the citizens rejected the approach of the CSOs
- c. There were no instances of confrontation (although sometimes the CSOs had to be skillful negotiators to avoid this)

What does this lead to?

In most cases the project led to a commitment from the local government officials to reform their ways of working so that they kept to the law and the regulations in respect of rights and entitlements: and a commitment from the citizens to regularly monitor the local

⁴ A list of Social Accountability tools and how to use them is available in PRAN's publication "Sourcebook of Social Accountability Tools in Nepal" 2011. Other lists are in the World Bank's Sourcebook of Social Accountability, and the UNDP's Handbook on Social Accountability.

government officials in the future to make sure that there was (a) no back sliding, and (b) that they would take up their opportunities for participatory planning.

In turn this will lead to citizens becoming involved in democracy and the conduct of good governance. The original hopes of those who funded PRAN (the State and Peace Building Fund) were that PRAN would lead to better State Building and better Peace Building. This is a high level desired outcome which would need a separate study, but what has been achieved by PRAN will contribute to a reduction in poverty, and a growth in participation – both of which are likely to contribute to state and peace building.

What did not happen?

Even though many of the activities of the sub-grantees involved identifying and controlling corruption, and corruption based upon individuals and political parties taking for themselves resources that rightfully belonged to poor and marginalised people, it seems that few citizens and citizen groups were interested in sanctions, punishment or prosecution of the wrong doers. Apart from Sahara Nepal in Bhajang, (Page 62) there is no evidence of citizens demanding restitution for money stolen from them, or a desire to take the cases to the courts. Citizens, instead, were enthusiastic to inform the local government officials that:

- a. They now knew what their rights and entitlements were
- b. They now knew that they had been robbed of their rights and entitlements
- c. They did not intend to let this happen again
- d. They were putting the local government officials on notice that they would be watching for future infringements

How does this illustrate PRAN's purpose?

PRANs purpose, as noted before, is to create:

A civil society sector with a considerable array of SA skills and a good knowledge of SA tools that would enable CSOs to engage actively and effectively in holding public agencies accountable. The impact would be improved public service delivery, reduced corruption, and greater transparency and responsiveness among government agencies to citizens and hence improved development outcomes.

The work done by 19 sub-grantees illustrates that this is possible: PRAN's work has been limited and of a pilot nature, but there is good reason to believe, that if it was taken to scale, it would be able to have the outcomes desired.

Lessons learnt

The following points come up regularly in the sub-grantees reports

- They needed more time to make a serious change in the status quo
- Many people, particularly the very poor, wanted allowances to take part in voluntary activities, particularly discussions which took them away from their daily income.
- Success came from reforms carefully negotiated with local government officials

- It took more time than had been envisioned to teach local people that social accountability was a useful method of work to improve their lives. Once taught, however, people were very enthusiastic and committed to continue the work, even in the absence of an overall project.