Tools for more accountable governance and better public services

Social accountability hinges on the principle that the state is accountable to its people; it implies that the state is obligated to inform its people about what it is doing. While people, equally, have the right to know what is going on. Central to the concept are a responsive government and active networks.

This is the first in a series of three briefing papers on Social Accountability. Turn to the back page for details of the other briefing papers and how to get them.

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Why a SACC project?

SACC is a four-year project to:

- Improve transparency, accountability and people’s participation in management of public finances
- Contribute to better development outcomes for vulnerable people through improved government planning
- Improve Social Accountability through constructive engagement between CSOs and local administrations for transparent, people-centred policies, programmes and budgets, including in delivery of core public services and natural resource management.

We’ll be working directly with:

- 25 CSOs
- 100 local/township authorities
- 90 village administrators
- 20 parliamentarians
- 01 national network
- 04 state/region networks

Myanmar people lived under a powerful and largely unaccountable government for nearly 60 years. The country continues to be severely limited by weak public financial management and a lack of transparency and accountability to its people. In 2011, the Myanmar government began a range of political and economic reforms for good governance. It is expected that following the November 2015 general election, people can hope for a continued trend of increased transparency and accountability of government plans and budgets, and more say in how public money is spent on local services. Social accountability provides a framework for supporting both communities and local administrations to constructively work together towards increased accountability and transparency of local service planning and delivery to communities.

Who we are:

Oxfam, Spectrum SDKN and Scholar Institute aim to enhance constructive engagement between people, government and other duty bearers across Myanmar. We aim to help improve transparency, accountability and public participation in planning, budgeting processes and delivery of core services and development programmes.

Budget Literacy


Why? It is very important for people to understand budgets because these provide resources for all the services that governments offer to their people. Budgets are complicated and specialist help is needed order to make them understood before a CSO can negotiate changes in budgets.

Participatory Budgeting

What? People are usually not part of the budgeting and planning process in Myanmar. Participatory Budgeting means people give their opinion to government about what should included in budgets (e.g. more spent on clean water, more spent on access to midwives and post natal nursing).

Why? If people have not been involved in planning they are passive recipients of what others have planned. Involving people in participatory planning allows government officials and people to become more acquainted with each other, and results in better planning.

Local government budgets

What? Each year local government bodies have a budget for their expenditures on services to people – much of it coming from tax collection. The budget is used for local construction projects and the operations of roads, schools, health services and social welfare.

Why? People need to know how much is in a budget; if it is for things they consider important; and if the money has been spent on the things intended. If they disagree with a budget or the ways it has been used, they should be involved in planning of the budget.

Public Expenditure Tracking

What? This is a method through which people try to find out how much budget is allocated to the activities implemented by local authorities, and how much has been spent. It tries to find out whether plans, programmes and resources have been used correctly and have reached the intended targets.

Why? Helps people identify weakness, irregularity and leakage in management of public funds and ask for it to be corrected. If resources are misused, poor people are likely to be worst affected. Government is made aware of things like corrupt practices between officials and contractors.
How? Learning about budgets can be done through books, teaching in classes and videos. It requires an overall understanding of what a budget is and attention to identifying the particular parts of the budget that are relevant to particular people (by sector or by region).

In Action In Myanmar, Spectrum has taken the training materials from the International Budget Program and taught Myanmar CSOs how to understand national and state budgets. It has negotiated with the government’s Ministry of Finance for a Citizen’s Budget – a more simple and understandable version of the budget that people can understand.

How? CSOs, working with local people who are aware of the limitations of existing budgets, can encourage and facilitate their meeting with the Ministry of Finance or sectoral ministries. They can seek to persuade them that it is in both their interests for people to be involved in suggesting elements of the budgets.

In Action In Nepal, while there was official blessing to improve attention to gender problems, there was little evidence that the budget supported initiatives to do so. Local government officials often diverted budgeted funding for gender to other areas. CSOs worked with women’s groups to point out that, for instance, official statements were not reflected in budget allocations and this needed to be addressed.

How? In 2015, Myanmar’s government will publish the first citizen’s budget in decades. This is a very positive step, but it does not yet include a breakdown of the local government spending plans. CSOs can ask for more detail in future Citizens Budgets. The ministry of Finance supplies budget information through line ministries, through state and regional governments and through Township authorities.

In Action South Africa’s budget system is rated the most transparent in the world. (International budget survey).

How? People can apply this method to projects in their area. Does a new school, for instance, have the right number of windows as planned? Does it have the toilets intended? Was the concrete used of the right quality? Government can support this by making budgets, plans bills of quantities and cost specifications available to people.

In Action CSOs in Northern Philippines were suspicious of the poor quality of the roads being laid in their area and organised investigations into the quality of the aggregate used. They found discrepancies between what was used and the plans/specifications so they complained to the Audit office. The Audit office agreed with them and asked them to do more work of the same kind.
How social accountability works

Social Accountability, as defined by the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (www.ansa-eap.net) is: “Constructive engagement between citizen’s groups and the government for the purpose of checking and monitoring the conduct and performance of public officials and service providers in their use or allocation of public resources.”

The definition roughly describes the type of relationship between state and stakeholders that Open Government Partnership seeks in its programmes and projects.

For social accountability to work there must be at least four enabling conditions:

1. Organised and capable citizen groups that can gather and analyse information about government programs; then use this information judiciously to directly engage public officials, politicians, and service providers; and request that they serve the public interest justly, efficiently and effectively

2. A responsive government that provides spaces, structures and processes for constructive civic engagement. A social accountability approach is particularly useful in the context of decentralisation which provide opportunities for civil society to interact with government officials and public servants

3. Access to and effective use of adequate and essential information. People request information from government and, in turn, provide evidence they have collected, which is helpful to government.

4. Sensitivity and relevance to culture and context. This requires understanding of contextual factors that can help both government and people to appreciate difficulties and challenges in the topics identified.

This is Spectrum’s first briefing note for civil society and government on Social Accountability tools and reforms.

Our second briefing note covers five further tools
- Independent citizen oversight committees
- Citizens Report Cards
- Participatory budgeting
- Community scorecards
- Budget literacy.

Our third briefing note covers three key aspects of Social Accountability:
- Right to information
- Checklist of entitlement
- Civic education.

Please contact us to download or request leaflets, and find out more about how you can get involved in Social Accountability work in Myanmar.

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The SAcc partners are:

[Logos of Scholar Institute, OXFAM, and Spectrum SDKN]

SACC partners can help you find other people who share concerns about the same issues, for example the safety of a new public building. You can use SACC to call for change together.

SACC can help local authorities, government and people understand when a service isn’t working properly and together discuss how improvements can be made.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can use SACC to push for progress on issues they focus on. SACC will be working directly with 25 CSOs.

The SACC project will create 4 state/region networks and strengthen 1 national network. This means that thousands of people can come together to work for stronger social accountability in Myanmar.

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