

Accountability, Transparency and Corruption in Decentralized Governance

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Abstract

Accountability and transparency are key principles to fight corruption and achieve good governance in any country, especially in a democratic setting. Accountability and Transparency are the criteria for good governance which brings about legitimacy and popular support from the people. The economy of the country cannot develop when its members lack the sense of duty and accountably. In creating an administration that will be responsive to the yearnings and aspiration of the people by the government, the role of accountability and the transparency cannot be over stressed. This paper examines the concept of accountability, transparency and corruption in decentralized governance. It highlights the types of accountability and identify that the process of accountability should increase the pressure for more transparent local governance.

Keywords: *Accountability, Transparency, Corruption, Decentralized Governance*

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Background to the Study

In its democratic political aspect, decentralization as currently conceived and increasingly practiced in the international development community has two principal components: participation and accountability. Participation is chiefly concerned with increasing the role of citizens in choosing their local leaders and in telling those leaders what to do—in other words, providing inputs into local governance. Accountability constitutes the other side of the process; it is the degree to which local governments have to explain or justify what they have done or failed to do. Improved information about local needs and preferences is one of the theoretical advantages of decentralization, but there is no guarantee that leaders will actually act on these preferences unless they feel some sort of accountability to citizens. Local elections are the most common and powerful form of accountability, but other mechanisms such as citizen councils can have limited influence.

Accountability can be seen as the validation of participation, in that the test of whether attempts to increase participation prove successful is the extent to which people can use participation to hold a local government responsible for its actions.

Dimensions of Accountability

Accountability comes in two dimensions: that of government workers to elected officials; and that of the latter to the citizens who elect them.

1. Government Workers to Local Officials

The first type can prove difficult to achieve, for civil servants, particularly professionals in such fields as health, education, agriculture --the very sectors that are most often decentralized-- often have considerable incentive to evade control by locally elected officials. Such people generally have university training and sophisticated life-style practices hard to maintain in small towns and villages, career ambitions that transcend the local level and goals for their children's education that local schools cannot meet.

They may well also fear that quality standards for service delivery will suffer if provision is localized. Finally, they often find opportunities for corruption greater if they are supervised by distant managers through long chains of command than if they must report to superiors close at hand. For all these reasons, they tend to have strong urges to maintain ties with their parent ministries in the central government and to resist decentralization initiatives. And understandably, their colleagues at the center have a parallel interest in maintaining these ties, for they are much concerned about preserving national standards in service delivery and often about opportunities for venality as well (many corruption schemes provide for sharing ill-gotten gains upward through bureaucratic channels to the top).

Given all these reasons both good and bad for opposition, it is scarcely surprising that decentralization initiatives so often run into heavy bureaucratic resistance, and designers find themselves pressured to keep significant linkages between the field and the central ministries, especially concerning such issues as postings, promotions, and salaries. Needless to say, such ties tend to undercut the capacity of elected officials to supervise government servants

supposedly working for them. Some decentralized governance systems (e.g., Karnataka State in India) appear to have worked through these problems to establish popular control over the bureaucracy, but it has taken many years to do so.

2. Elected Leaders to the Citizenry

The second type of accountability is that of elected officials to the citizenry. Elections (provided they are free and fair) provide the most obvious accountability, but this is a rather blunt tool, exercised only at widespread intervals and offering only the broadest citizen control over government. Voters can retain or reject their governors, a decision that can certainly have salutary effects on governance, but these acts are summary judgments, generally not reactions to particular acts or omissions. And when local elections do revolve around a given issue, such as schools, they necessarily leave everything else out of the picture. Citizens need more discriminating instruments to enforce accountability. Fortunately, a number of these are available.

i. Political parties can be a powerful tool for accountability when they are established and vigorous at the local level, as in many Latin American countries. They have a built-in incentive to uncover and publicize wrongdoing by the party in power and to present continuously an alternative set of public policies to the voters.

ii. Civil society and its precursor social capital enable citizens to articulate their reaction to local government and to lobby officials to be responsive. These representations generally come through NGOs (though spontaneous protests can also be considered civil society), which, like political parties, often have parent organizations at the provincial or national level.

iii. If citizens are to hold their government accountable, they must be able to find out what it is doing. At the immediate neighborhood level, word of mouth is perhaps sufficient to transmit such information, but at any higher level some form of media becomes essential. In some countries, print media can perform this function, but generally their coverage is minimal outside larger population centers. A feasible substitute in many settings is low-wattage AM radio, which is highly local, cheap to operate, and can offer news and talk shows addressing local issues.

iv. Public meetings can be an effective mechanism for encouraging citizens to express their views and obliging public officials to answer them. The *cabildosabiertos* held in many Latin American countries are a good example. In some settings, such meetings may be little more than briefing sessions, but in others they can be effective in getting public officials to defend their actions.

v. Formal redress procedures have been included as an accountability mechanism in some decentralization initiatives. Bolivia probably has the most elaborate instrument along these lines with its municipal Vigilance Committees that are based on traditional local social structures and are charged with monitoring elected councils, encouraged to file actionable complaints with higher levels if needed.

In other systems, formal recall procedures are available to citizens dissatisfied with their officials. Opinion surveys have generally been considered too complex and sophisticated to use at the local level, but usable and affordable technologies are being developed in the Philippines enabling local-level NGOs to employ such polls to assess public opinion about service provision.

A recent USAID assessment of democratic local governance in six countries found that each country employed a different mix of these mechanisms, while no country had employed them all. No one instrument proved effective in all six settings, but various combinations offered considerable promise. Some may be able to substitute at least in part for others when weak or absent. Civil society and the media, for example, might together be able to make up for a feeble party system at the local level.

Transparency and Corruption

In theory these two phenomena should be inversely related, such that more transparency in local governance should mean less scope for corruption, in that dishonest behavior would become more easily detectable, punished and discouraged in future. The history of the industrialized countries indicates that this tend to be true in the longer term, but recent experience shows that this relationship is not necessarily true at all in the short run. In the former Soviet countries, for example, local governance institutions have become much more open to public scrutiny in the 1990s, but at the same

time there can be little doubt that corruption at all levels has greatly increased. It is to be hoped that the local mechanisms of accountability discussed above will in tandem with greater probity at the national level improve the degree of honesty at all levels, but at best this will take time. The message for the international development community is to press forward with as many of these accountability mechanisms as is feasible.

A second type of linkage between transparency and corruption has been noted by Manor when he notes that in India, while greater transparency in local governance was not accompanied by increased corruption, it did lead to popular perceptions of greater public malfeasance, simply because citizens became more aware of what was going on. This pattern has surely repeated itself in many other locales. Over time, to the extent that accountability mechanisms begin to become effective and corruption begins to decline, the citizenry should appreciate the improvement.

Conclusion

The democratic local governance initiatives currently under way in many countries hold much promise for developing effective systems of public accountability that will ensure that government servants are responsible to elected officials, and that the latter are in turn responsible to the public that elected them in the first place. In the process these systems of accountability should increase the pressure for more transparent local governance, in which corruption will be easier to bring to light and thus to curtail, But just as it took many decades for such efforts to make much headway in the industrial countries, so too quick results cannot be expected elsewhere.

Reference

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