Democratic Accountability in Service Delivery

Democratic accountability pertains to the mechanisms by which citizens, political parties, parliaments and other democratic actors can provide feedback to, reward, or penalize officials in charge of setting and enacting public policy. Well-functioning accountability mechanisms are believed to provide incentives for governments to work in the best interests of citizens. When it comes to the more concrete dimension of service delivery, however, the critical role of accountability is still a matter for debate.

The impact of transparency and accountability on service delivery has always been a salient issue, especially pertaining to Latin America. Accountability as a central theme of the debates on service delivery however, only became centerstage after the World Development Report of 2004 which identified failures in service delivery squarely as failures in accountability relationships (World Bank 2004). By showing how the 'long route' of accountability (via elected politicians and public officials through to providers) was failing the poor, the WDR argued in favor of strengthening the 'short route' – direct accountability between users and providers. The WDR triggered the effort to strengthen the short route: from amplifying voice, increasing transparency and enhancing accountability (Sirker and Cosic 2007; McNeil and Mumvuma 2006).

By now, accountability is widely accepted as key to service delivery improvements. The importance of accountability (and related transparency) comes from two quite different ideological streams. On the one hand, New Public Management (NPM), which emerged in the 1990s, emphasized the use of market mechanisms within the public sector to make managers and providers more responsive and accountable (Batley 1999). While many of the NPM reforms for accountability were focused on vertical accountability within organizations, such as

performance based pay, a subset related to downward accountability to citizens, e.g., citizen charters and complaint hotlines. In keeping with the intellectual traditions from which the NPM approach emerged, most of these downward accountability mechanisms were oriented to users as individual consumers who could choose to use these mechanisms or, alternatively, exit in favor of other providers.

On the other hand, and at the same time, the failure of democratic institutions to deliver for the poor also resulted in calls for deepening democracy through the direct participation of citizens in governance (Fox 2007). Innovative institutions such as governance councils in Brazil or village assemblies in indigenous Latin American villages were viewed as embodying this spirit (Cornwall and Coelho 2006, Manor 2004). In parallel, social movements were arguing that governments had an obligation to protect and provide basic services as 'rights' that were protected under constitutions rather than 'needs' which were at the discretion of officials to interpret and fulfill. Advocates of rights-based approaches to basic services identified ways in which rights could be legislated and progressively achieved, for example, in the right to education or the right to health. The rights based, direct democracy approaches were distinct from NPM in that they emphasized the collective and public good dimensions of accountability.

While this double-branched provenance was timely in uniting practitioners and scholars in the importance of understanding and enhancing of transparency and accountability, it has simultaneously led to some looseness in what different people mean by the core concepts.

Transparency initiatives in service delivery are relatively easy to define: any attempts (by states or citizens) to place information or processes that were previously opaque in the public domain, accessible for use by citizen groups, providers or policy makers can be defined as transparency initiatives. Initiatives for transparency can be pro-active or reactive disclosure by government.

Moreover, accountability for service delivery can be demanded from a range of stakeholders: of politicians (e.g. not adopting appropriate policies); or of public officials (not delivering according to rules or entitlements, not monitoring providers for appropriate service levels); or of providers (not maintaining service levels in terms of access and quality). Further, initiatives to hold these multiple actors to account can be state-led or citizen-led. Recent literature on service delivery has highlighted the failures of traditional accountability mechanisms and placed greater faith in demand-led accountability initiatives.

Existing literature on the issue of democratic accountability in service delivery in Latin America demonstrate that several lessons can be learned. Specifically, existing formal accountability systems are dysfunctional in many countries due to weak formal mandates, the capacity constraints of parties and parliaments or underlying political practices such as

clientelism or corruption. Furthermore, few efforts exist to strengthen political accountability. Efforts to strengthen social accountability are much more common and some of them have had positive effects, leading to concrete improvements in service delivery. A number of lessons can be drawn from these experiences.

One lesson is that direct contacts with government officials seem to be important for getting recommendations adopted successfully. By contacting civil servants or politicians at an early stage, before starting accountability demands (e.g. an advocacy campaign or investigation), civil society organizations can earn the trust of officials, get hold of information that otherwise would be difficult to access, and frame their demands to make them fit the priorities of the government.

Furthermore, the timing of advocacy campaigns in the electoral cycle is important because politicians may be more open to demands in the months leading up to or following an election. Social actors can for example use political campaigns to shed light on their own demands. There are also examples of organizations making use of promises made by newly established governments to advocate for specific concerns.

The general consensus is that more effort is needed to balance political and social accountability efforts. Social actors are not suitable as the sole form of accountability, since they often engage in short term advocacy at a specific point in time. There also need to be formal arrangements in place to ensure enforcement and continuity. An exclusive focus on social actors is also problematic from a democratic point of view, since the core democratic functions in representing citizens cannot be expected to be taken over. Civil society organizations have severe limitations of their own when it comes to interest representation as they themselves are not accountable to those they claim to represent.

It is hoped that this conference at Florida International University will re-open the discussion on this salient issue in Latin America and allow us to develop innovative means of ensuring democratic accountability in service delivery in Latin America.