Producing Social Accountability? The Impact of Service Delivery Reforms

Description

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Summary (from GSDRC website)

Which types of state reform improve public services and citizen engagement? How can accountability mechanisms improve service delivery? This Institute of Development Studies (IDS) paper draws on the polity approach, which suggests that the organisation of state institutions influences who engages in collective action and around what issues. Collective action is essential for the poor if direct accountability is to work. Successful cases of social accountability are often the result of alliances that cut across class and public-private divides.

New public management (NPM) reforms aimed to improve public services by changing the incentives faced by providers. Pluralisation of services in order to create competition and enable user â??choiceâ?? was a key NPM reform. Decentralisation and privatisation often accompany pluralisation. There is little evidence that NPM reforms have worked in developing countries. Reforms are increasingly focusing on accountability. Accountability relationships between stakeholders â?? citizens, policymakers and service providers â?? are not transparent, formalised or effective.

Horizontal channels of accountability (legislatures and institutional checks and balances) have largely failed to oversee the work of service providers. Greater emphasis is being placed on direct accountability between citizens and providers:

* Institutionalising direct user participation through â??individual consumersâ?? is problematic. it excludes those who are not served by providers, and there is no mandate for providers to respond. Individual citizens in poor communities have not been effective in holding providers to account.
* Social accountability refers to social movements that demand accountability through channels other than traditional vertical mechanisms (elections) and horizontal mechanisms. They often frame their claims in terms of legality and rights.
* Social accountability seeks to institutionalise durable societal control over policies by enabling collective actors to exercise voice in deliberative processes that monitor public decisions. It operates through three main strategies â?? social mobilisation, the judiciary, and the media.
* Some participatory institutions are stronger at creating spaces for citizen involvement in decision-making; others do better at monitoring government action. Social accountability by itself does not presuppose participation in decision-making.

The polity approach focuses on long-term iterative processes of state-society interaction. Polity-centred analyses suggest that the way state institutions are organised will influence who engages in collective action and around what types of issues:

* When collective actors participate in service delivery reforms, they are more likely to engage in social accountability actions that monitor implementation and increase the uptake of reforms.
* The move from monolithic state provision to decentralised, pluralised provision can constrain opportunities for alliances between citizen groups and reformist professionals. Choice reforms may fragment political actors.
* Institutionalised involvement of collective actors in new spaces for participation can create real incentives for beneficiaries to engage collectively with public officials and policy.
* Engagement with the state is necessary to engineer an â??institutional fitâ?? between reforms and the capacities of collective actors. Tracing who participates at foundational moments of policy change reveals how the reform process enables some actors to do this, while constraining others.
* Research needs to pay particular attention to alliances that cut across class lines and the public-private divide. These are more likely to underpin successful cases of social accountability leading to improved services.

Tags

1. accountability

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