

## **COVID-19 and digital Social Accountability Monitoring Advocacy: Lessons and promising practices**

### **Introduction**

While the current COVID-19 crisis poses direct threats to public health systems and institutions globally, it has had far-reaching impacts on governance systems and how these have affected the daily lives of citizens globally. The crisis has presented a window of opportunity for rogue states to entrench authoritarian tendencies and heightened the disregard for due processes such as citizen and parliamentary consultation, for example. Consequently, the lack of citizen and parliamentary oversight has facilitated significant risks characterized by corruption, nepotism, patronage, and embezzlement of public resources. As the pandemic tightens its grip around the globe, multi-lateral organizations, governments, and philanthropists have mobilized and committed large amounts of funds to tackle the crisis. The arising concern, however, is the use of these funds and the extent to which corruption, in countries where oversight institutions and mechanisms are comparatively weak, will impact health outcomes. In responding to the challenge of state/institutional corruption some of the funding for the COVID-19 response has been channelled through CSOs as a mainstream practice by donors to mitigate against corruption. There are numerous strategies through which civil society can be engaged in anti-corruption programs, acting as a watchdog, and ensuring funds to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic reach their destination. Social accountability relies on four factors to thrive. These factors include engaged citizens, a responsive government, an enabling environment/context, and access to information. Each of these factors plays an essential role in promoting social accountability monitoring advocacy, and all of these have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Civil society currently faces several constraints on its ability to carry out its work, because of lockdown, social-distancing, and quarantine measures employed by governments to lower COVID-19 infection rates. Despite these challenges, social accountability approaches remain critical to ensuring that funds for the pandemic reach their intended destination. This article focuses on the importance of digital accountability platforms in enhancing social accountability in countries where citizen agency can be spurred using online platforms. In so doing, the paper explores challenges currently being faced by CSOs and proposes alternatives to support existing and emerging social accountability advocacy strategies, methods, and tools.

### **Existing challenges for CSOs**

There are wider risks related to the accountability of governments and private companies especially in political contexts where democratic institutions and practices are weak, and the state plays a paternal and patrimonial role in governance and other processes. Normally, CSOs would be better positioned to monitor and report on governments and private companies, as well as compel them to justify and explain actions. Challenges presented by the COVID-19 crisis poses several obstacles to CSOs' ability to promote citizen participation for social accountability advocacy. Coupled with already existing deficiencies in state oversight institutions, processes, and actors the case for digital-based social accountability monitoring and advocacy has become more relevant. These are some of the institutional and structural barriers impeding CSO social accountability monitoring advocacy presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **On an enabling environment/context**

#### *a) The un-even power balance between the Executive and accountability mechanisms*

In some cases and contexts, the validity of executive powers may increase and be accepted with questions due to prevailing circumstances. It is the responsibility of the Executive to set policies and agenda for action to deal with the crisis. In some cases, executive rhetoric that emphasizes a call to action may resonate with the public. This could make it more difficult for both vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms to carry out their functioning and gain momentum based on the temporary need to act than to consult and account.

*b) The inability for citizens to meet physically*

This is particularly the case for civil society's social accountability role, as most social accountability approaches and tools require engagement with local communities, at multiple levels, to collectively participate in interventions. This is not possible when lockdowns or social distancing measures are in place. Community meetings, citizen report cards, and social audits, the mainstays of most social accountability initiatives, are difficult to achieve under strict quarantine measures. Similarly, demonstrations or protests are limited as well.

**Regarding access to information**

*c) Accessing information*

In some communities, lockdowns also prevent access to information especially in contexts where citizen groups have to physically go to local authority and government offices to access hard copies of documents essential for accountability like strategic plans, budget statements, and full council meeting minutes for example. If at all this access was previously available before, then the ability to engage digitally is reduced to access via mobile phones where possible.

*d) The prohibitive cost of data*

In response to challenges associated with restrictions on meetings, faith-based gatherings, and social interaction have moved online due to lockdowns. With economic challenges associated with COVID-19, communities in developing countries are faced with challenges in connectivity and the relatively high cost of data. High data costs have disproportionately alienated low-income communities and rural citizens from participating in social accountability discussions.

**Engaged Citizens**

*e) Limited appetite and traction for non-health issues*

Because of the prominence of public health issues during the crisis, it can be challenging to build momentum and participation for a cause remotely connected to COVID-19, as media and public orientation are focused on the emergency. In addition, methods for reaching out have also moved online, which may reduce the potential for broader stakeholder engagement.

*f) Limited space for civil society*

Globally, several governments, have instituted social distancing and quarantine measures, and civil society networks warn of the consequential restrictions on fundamental rights and civic engagement. For example, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and South Africa have introduced emergency legislation that is being reported as an excuse to restrict human rights and further reduce the space for civil society. Similarly, CIVICUS Global Alliance reports that internet restrictions have been enacted in Tanzania, Myanmar, and Rwanda. Limitations placed on civic space have served to weaken democratic structures and provided autocratic governments with an opportunity to entrench authoritarianism.

**Emerging and promising practices for CSOs**

While the current situation may seem catastrophic and paralyzing, it provides an opportunity for actors to be creative and to explore new opportunities to promote citizen engagement for social accountability monitoring advocacy.

*i) Potential to increase the legitimacy of civil society*

In recent years, questions have been raised regarding the impartiality, partisanship, and legitimacy of CSOs in representing citizen's views. African authoritarian regimes have accused CSOs of being extensions of western governments' foreign policies questioning the neutrality of CSOs. Further, opposition parties have tended to co-opt civic actors into politics, for example in Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The current crisis offers opportunities for CSOs to respond to some of these criticisms by building broader participation through a network of online

reporters and activists with strong links to the communities in which they live. This may counter the tendency of NGOs to be driven by donor demands and the need to secure funding.

*ii) Potential for broad-based engagement*

The obtaining situation has reinvigorated the desire to participate in public processes, demonstrated by the hundreds of Facebook groups or crowdsourced mapping projects sharing information or organizing assistance. Some of this engagement could be channeled into constructive support and alternative forms of civic engagement to combat corruption if the framework to do so is created and made known to the right audience.

*iii) Collaboration and coordination of efforts*

While the hunger to participate in social accountability activities has been demonstrated by the increase in citizen response through platforms like Facebook, several initiatives implemented by CSOs are either national in scope, or are at the local level with limited scope for vertical and horizontal linkages for improved collaboration and coordination. Each organization has been focused on micro-level issues with limited attempts to connect local voices with national processes resulting in duplication and fragmentation of citizen voices. As such, there is a need for CSOs to establish convergence platforms where local and national level discussions can be coalesced into one voice to amplify citizen voices in promoting accountability and transparency.

*iv) Using incentives to build new alliances*

CSO work has largely been limited to non-state actors collaborating vertically and horizontally. The current situation provides opportunities for CSOs to engage with other types of civil society organizations beyond NGOs, such as churches, professional associations (e.g. nurses unions), and other membership-based organizations. For example, organizations such as Habakkuk Trust in Bulawayo partnered local citizen social formations such as ward development committees to monitor the distribution of PPEs and food handouts, to ensure that aid reached beneficiaries. This demonstrates that membership groups may be more willing to support COVID-19 social accountability initiatives because they relate to a health emergency rather than 'corruption' – an issue which is often highly politicized in many contexts. These different types of CSOs often have good communication structures and can engage different people in the monitoring and oversight of COVID-19 responses. Building new alliances and networks can help civil society organizations to break down silos and create new synergies between organizations, which can prove useful in emergencies such as the current pandemic.

*v) Exploring platforms for digital civic engagement*

Civic engagement and social accountability have transitioned to online platforms. There are many resources that development practitioners can draw upon to mobilize digital participation and engage civil society as a watchdog. There are several examples of how civic engagement and accountability have moved online, with many untapped resources to draw upon to mobilize digital participation. These provide different ways in which development practitioners could engage and support the watchdog function of civil society. For instance, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have seen an increase of 50% in messaging and a doubling of video calls in certain markets during the coronavirus crisis. Hundreds of social media groups have been created. Many of them monitor the local spread of the virus; others organize neighborhood assistance. Most of them will probably communicate with their group of supporters. But some platforms are dedicated to and have a history of crowdsourced monitoring and could be tapped into for accountability purposes.

**Platforms and approaches to consider in digitizing social accountability monitoring advocacy**

Networks and platforms for information sharing and collaboration are already in place in most regions. This situation creates a need to highlight the risk of corruption and utilize these existing

structures to engage civil society in monitoring funds allocated for the pandemic response. As such, social accountability monitoring advocacy can foster digital civic participation using multi-media platforms including SMS and web-based mapping and monitoring. Inclusion in such platforms will, in some countries, only be possible for the urban and connected parts of the population. But deploying a combination of, for example, radio broadcasts and SMS responses could reach a far wider audience.

***Citizen journalists and working groups:*** Citizen journalists and community working groups are found in several countries across Africa. Some of these structures are already deeply involved in local coverage of local issues for collaboration and participation. However, during a lockdown, such community groups may be inaccessible due to lockdown restrictions, but they play a critical role in collecting hyperlocal perspectives in ensuring sustained citizen dialogue and engagement.

***Community and mainstream radio stations:*** Such platforms are frequently used in projects where community awareness is important. Community and local radio programs are broadcast in local languages, which helps to ensure the wider spread of information. For example, Farm Radio broadcasts in several countries and is distributing information to local radio stations to share on how to tackle the spread of COVID-19.

***Coordination of grassroots efforts:*** This typically happens via low-bandwidth apps, such as WhatsApp or Telegram, which have options for sophisticated group structures. For example, organizations such as CITE, ZCA, WILD, and EWF use social media and radio broadcasts to call for citizen reports on accountability issues related to combatting the spread of the virus. Similarly, reaching out to local and national television channels and print media can be considered for spreading information more widely. For example, the “*Gara Mumba Iwe*” show on ZTV has been a key platform in spreading news and sharing information on COVID-19 using music.

***Telecom providers:*** These providers are normally very willing to be approached for support. Their ability to provide bandwidth, connectivity, or toll-free numbers can be of significant value.