

Social Accountability

Country Level Consultations 2012

Colombo- Sri Lanka

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Background

Two consultative meetings on Community of Practice on Social Accountability (CoPSA) – Accountability Solutions, were conducted on February 10 and 13, 2012 in Colombo and Kandy, Sri Lanka. 30 organisations representing national and regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), private sector business chambers, local government authorities, provincial councils, Central government ministries universities and the academic community were invited to participate in consultations to share their knowledge and experience on the SAc approaches, tools and lessons learned. Participants were given a brief introduction on the purpose and the participatory consultative methodology which facilitated opening discussions with preliminary remarks followed by self-reflections and interpretations feeding decisive thoughts and wisdom into a collection of individual and institutional experience and learning on the subject under discussion.

Preliminary Responses

At the outset, participants attempted to clear their minds on some grey areas: Why should we talk about SAc? In which context do we look at SAc experience and learning – as a distinct individual functionality or as one of our organisational objectives? In which context do we want to capture the results of SAc interventions? What approaches and tools are working on the ground? What are the patterns of incentives that lead key actors to support or resist SAc interventions?

Participants felt that they represent neither the government nor the citizenry: “When we look at SAc we are coming in-between as interface. We have not been able to exercise direct influence on the service deliveries, the budgetary process or the resource allocations of the Government. Yet we have been able to use SAc measures to bring about some form of changes in the decision making that fundamentally affect the social wellbeing of the citizens. What are those effective SAc measures or tools and what are those changes and impacts. It may be appropriate for a group like us to look at the SAc issues both from the point of intellectuals and practitioners because the actual stakeholders are elsewhere. SAc concepts and tools have been useful to bring about the desired change

particularly in the arena of transparency and accountability of those agencies which are responsible for disbursement of public funds and service deliveries. We need to facilitate putting SAc measures in the public domain. Let us look at basic issues at different levels before we talk about our individual or organisational experiences on SAc approaches, tools and their appropriateness in the Sri Lankan context”.

Reflections on Social Accountability Issues

- In Sri Lanka, the government agencies, NGOs and private sector institutions have evolved and developed as separate and distinct entities. The opportunities for developing the relations and become integrated were rare in the past. NGOs are inclined more towards social welfare and humanitarian aspects and project-oriented; businesses toward results and profits; government towards politics; and public towards getting benefits. The formal **government institutions and CSOs often do not work together**. Resultantly, there is a big gap and **vacuum in terms of awareness and knowledge sharing relating to SAc**.
- **Information sharing is a fundamental issue**. In the absence of Right to Information (RTI) in Sri Lanka information sharing culture is lacking. Public servants of many governments’ institutions are wedded to circular instructions and are not guided by them and use the flexibility and discretion to do good for the public. The members of public are given forms and formats without a word by way of guidance and guidelines.
- **Awareness among public servants** and the civil society groups on the principle of SAc is poor. Therefore, this aspect needs to be strengthened.
- The **capacities of CSOs to promote SAc are either limited, or at times, practically lacking** creating conditions for them to be silent and quiescent. There is a need to play a key role in building their capacities. For example, universities of this country play a big role in building capacities of CSOs in order to promote SAc measures. Therefore, there is a need to understand the specific roles to be played in individual organisations.
- There is a question whether Sri Lankan media is independent? Do they cover issues related to public services? Will they cover SAc issues and present them in an unbiased manner? Even if the media is given a reasonable freedom will they provide a balance overview of citizen/user feedback?
- In many government, non-governmental and private sector agencies SAc is not embedded as a part of their lives or organisational behaviour. There is no mechanism or organisational form to bring these key stakeholders together. There is a compartmentalisation/polarisation among NGOs, CBOs and the business community.
- There are organisations in the government mandated to promote Democratic Governance and SAc. The Sri Lanka Institute of Local Governance (SLILG) is one such organisation. However, some of these organisations have failed to fulfill their mandatory functions to the satisfactions of civil society movements.

- There is a lukewarm attitude within the government agencies on the maintenance, transparency and accountability and granting the citizens much spoken RTI. The dilution of national procurement institutional and legal framework is a case in point.
- There are no active initiatives to promote constructive engagement at all level. Even the “Cleaner Hands of the Bureaucrats” appears to be inactive and dormant. Therefore, there is need to ensure constructive engagement of all levels of government, seeking partners at the central, provincial and local levels.
- There is need for the government, ministries and key agencies to institutionalise SAc initiatives into new policies, policy reforms at the national, provincial and local level. One such initiative is the introduction of citizen charters to the local government and public service reform agenda.
- Sri Lanka has not been able to identify drivers of change. There is a need to assess and identify positive elements of in the political economy and institutions and use these to inform a strategic analysis to promote how best SAc is benefiting a country to establish democratic governance.
- Many local NGOs are project-oriented and accountable to their donors. Therefore, they do not have serious initiatives for public accountability. NGOs have not developed their capacities for implementing programmes to promote public accountability. On the other hand, NGOs and private sector agencies are subject to reactions of the public officials based on their negative attitudes. The key is the lack of correct positive attitudes. Partnership building with positive attitude is key to SAc.
- Local authorities and divisional secretariats do not work together. Institutional objectives and political cultures sometime do not tally together. Competing interests of local organisations (e.g. local authorities vs divisional secretariats) hinder and become counterproductive to local development.
- Local political parties lack long term vision based on democratic governance. Therefore, they do not value managers and champions with cleaner hands for opportunities in the political ladder. Only the corrupted politicians with power and connections to corrupted groups are given opportunities to fight local elections.

Sri Lankan Experience of SAc Processes & Tools

- There is a need to take into account the existing SAc measures within the government system. For example, asset verification in public institutions, internal and general audit functions have been effective in many instances. The general procurement guidelines of the government are intended to maintain transparency and accountability. Similarly, there are so many committees in the process of financial decision making without leaving possibilities. The question is whether all these measures alone would ensure SAc to a reasonably satisfactory level on the part of those who take decisions on the use of public funds and resources.

- Despite existing issues and limitations, and the negative influencing the local government set up, many **local government institutions have been able to make some form of positive changes and develop/establish the confidence with the citizen groups.** For example, public private dialogues, public private dialogues partnerships, participatory budgeting, enhancing revenue generation, improved regulatory environment and establishment of some form of institutional resilience to ensure satisfactory service deliveries. It has not been able to test the hypothesis that despite limitations and negative developments, the local authorities of the country can make a positive change at the local level.
- The positive changes are visible across the board not only in the developed areas but also in the more backward remote localities. **They might not be the best and yet the changes have happened.** For example, CBOs can play a key role without centralising and devolution of power. **There are effective SAc measures and tools** which can contribute to roll out the debate. For example, Citizen Report Card (CRC), Citizen Charters, Participatory Budgeting and Expenditure Tracking are some of the effective tools. CRC results reflect the perceptions and the satisfaction level of the actual users who utilise the services on daily basis. It also creates opportunities for bringing both service users and providers on a common platform to understand the realities and re-define their roles and responsibilities to ensure persistence of democratic governance element in their respective locations. In the real sense citizens should see the CRC results and be convinced the gravity of their services and also be able to compare the satisfaction level.
- Many CSOs use different SAc tools. However, the expected change cannot be done by the good use of SAc tools and measures need to be adapted to suit the situation and existing issues.
- CBOs in water sanitation projects, community development, livelihoods and micro-financing have been able to meet the aspirations of the poor, particularly of those marginalised women. CBOs have proved that they can influence the thinking and the practices of the government without decentralising and devolution of power.
- Citizen Charters have played a big role. Why Citizen Charters are successful in some LA locations. The secrecy for these successes needs to be explored. Why Nuwara-Eliya Municipal Council is comparatively more successful than the others.
- Many stakeholder agencies have begun to accept that the level of awareness, education, training, communication and information sharing are crucial to make positive changes. Also, the lessons learned have proved **partnerships among the government, private sector and civil society is** fundamentally important. The citizen engagement has proved to be crucial to ensure transparency and accountability over and above many factors. Therefore, other than the citizens, the government and the media have a big role to play in creating public awareness. The media has to sell and market the ideas of public accountability. They need to propagate the notion of institutionalising SAc.
- Local authorities in Sri Lanka have some form of supply side SAc mechanisms such as frequent internal audits, annual general audits, annual performance evaluations and internal committee systems and set procedures for producing results.

- **There is a common knowledge base what are the useful tools and where they could be applied.** For example, information relating to which tools is applicable at national, provincial/regional, local and village level and in what context by which etc. is not available for the possible practitioners and social activists:
 - a) **Citizen Charters:** Citizen Charter as a written voluntary declaration has been introduced to local authorities as guided by the Ministry of local government and provincial councils. It has also been introduced to divisional secretariats in a different since with guidance from the Ministry of Public Administration. The purpose is building mutual trust and sustainable partnerships between Local authorities and civil society. The Asia Foundation, Center for Policy Alternatives and UNDP have been facilitating the implementation of Charter.
 - b) **Citizen Report Card (CRC):** CRC surveys have been carried out in small scales with divisional secretariats by Transparency International, Social Indicator affiliated to Centre for Policy Alternatives and in the local government set by the Asia Foundation.
 - c) **Participatory local planning priority setting budgeting:** Local planning tool has been extensively used by different government agencies more specifically by the local government authorities. The Asia Foundation and GIZ have extensively supported the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils to institutionalise this tool within the local government institutions.
 - d) **Community Score Cards (CSCs):** Gamidiriya Foundation has used CSCs extensively for performance monitoring of village based people's companies.
 - e) **Independent Budget Analysis and Budget Summaries:** Independent Budget Analysis gives CSOs, community groups and citizens the opportunity to scrutinise, analyse and propose recommendations on the budget. The Asia Foundation has used the budget summaries of urban councils and municipal councils of Northern and Eastern provinces for making the local government budgets more transparent. Federations of local government authorities and Asia Foundation have used revenue assessment of the local government budgets for the same purpose.
 - f) **Budget Advocacy:** Advocacy is an act of well-planned and intended series of actions to influence change. In democracies, advocacy is also a formal form of resisting change and enforcing rights through legal mechanisms. In the context of unorganised, disconnected CSOs expressing their individual opinions, there are several organisations, NGOs working together to promote civic engagement in budget analysis and expenditure tracking. The organisations working in this direction include Centre for Society and Religion, Law and Society Trust, NAFSO, Uva Development Centre under the Active Civil Society Network.
 - g) SAc training manuals have been produced and pilot tested by the Asia Foundation, CPS and TI Sri Lanka with several other partners
- SAc activities by their very nature are group actions. Therefore, an organisation needs to understand how much teamwork is needed to push a SAc agenda. There are various

instances where SAc tools have been used successfully. Stakeholders can be brought together so that everyone will be in ‘win-win’ situation to benefit from joint SAc initiatives.

- There is enough opportunities for CSOs to work together with SAc tools and strategies.
- Even some of the initiatives of the government are targeted at improving SAc, and power sharing and democratic community governance. JANASABHA initiative is a case in point. JANASABHA movement promotes participation of citizens in the decision making at the village/group level. The JANASABHA movement attempts to overcome the challenges of putting the political and administrative institutions together.
- The Sri Lankan experience showed that the key to success is the availability of a strong, dynamic and vibrant civil society represented through CBOs, NGOs and other CSOs inclusive of private sector business associations. A civil society without dynamic organisations will be a one without a backbone to voice and demand accountability from the public institutions more specifically from the local government authorities. This is the case in Sri Lanka despite availability of plethora of CSOs without required impartiality and dynamism. Therefore, there is a need to take cognisance of these facts and continue to implement catalytic programmes for civil society strengthening to incubate accountability initiatives within the civil society movement and the local government system itself.
- Many CSOs are planning to try out these concepts. However, the use of serious tools is only at the superficial level. Therefore, there is a long way to go. Use of serious SAc tools such as CRC need serious interventions, hands on training and coaching and backstopping support. The initiatives need to be anchored and integrated into many other on-going activities to ensure the impact transcending to the future.
- For a long time budget has been a subject understood by few who could handle numbers. However of late, demystification of the same has been occurring with civil society groups playing a major role in advocating for disaggregation of information related to budget and making it more inclusive.

The Case of a Private Sector Business Man: I was encountered by tax offices. I was convinced that I have many achievements – free education, public health benefits – at the expense of tax payers. The moment I changed my attitudes it triggered in a long term process for changing my businesses for success

Marginalised Business Women and Accountability: The business chambers work with their member business people and their associations. Women’s Chamber Kandy is more open and transparent towards economically marginalised women. Women three wheeler association within the Women’s Chamber is a case in point

Case of Nuwara-Eliya Women’s Bank: Nuwara-Eliya Women’s Bank has been able to empower marginalised women. The organisation has a fund of Rs. 135, 00000. As against many commercially-driven initiatives WB has achieved success in empowering marginalised women

Case of Passara Pradeshiya Sabha: People forum Badulla is another success story. Opening of public gallery or the members of the public and changing the attitudes of the councilors. Opportunities created to work together with the Public

Case of Community Policing- KDF_Kandy: Structured mechanism can trigger in collaborations. Public forums have been set up to implement Police functions. Petty conflicts such as incidence of domestic violence are resolved at the Public forums. This is a novel experience for the police. There is a misnomer that NGOs/CBOs and the government organisations cannot work together

Recommendations

- Civil Society should fulfill their accountability obligations. For example, members of the public should be able to get together and engage services of a private audit firm to scrutinise the management of funds/finance with a view to prevent abuse of public funds by government organisations (for example abuse of social security benefits, financial allocations for floods and disaster relief, rural roads, shanty upgrading, welfare funds for maternal and child health care or prevention of health related epidemics) because abuse of such funds bring about direct negative impacts on the social security of the poor and the marginalised groups of the society.
- The role of the responsible government organisations needs to be strengthened.
- RTI needs to be established through introduction of legal instruments. This will facilitate community/citizen monitoring of overall performance of public agencies, through public disclosure initiatives and use of RTI by CSOs and citizens.
- The government agencies and citizen groups need to be convinced on the importance of sustaining the citizen satisfaction. For this purpose, changes towards positive directions need to be tracked continuously on periodic basis. This needs a research process and generating data, careful analysis and converting information generated into a new knowledge base. Use of CRC survey is encouraged in collaboration with universities and research agencies.
- There is a need to create Forums of Service Recipients (*Seva Labhinge Sansadaya*) through the Citizen Charter. Currently, there is no forum in place which includes CBOs, GOs and private sector business people – can we create such a forum.
- The engagement with key stakeholders needs to be formalised through memorandum of understanding.
- There is a need to be observant on how the political game is being played and analyse institutional arenas, interests and resource mobilisations.
- Partnership building is key to SAc. NGOs and private sector agencies are subject to aggression and reactions of public officials based on their negative attitude. Therefore, a programme for attitudinal changes with a long term vision is *sine-qua-non*.
- Awareness among public servants and civil society groups on the principle of SAc is poor. Therefore, this aspect needs to be strengthened.
- There is a need to take into account the existing SAc measures within the government system.
- Do local governments have reasonably high degrees of financial & policymaking power and whether they have ability to seek feedback? Whether survey organisations feel safe in conducting research on social accountability interventions. Do citizens feel free to give honest feedback about government services? Are there active NGOs/CBOs in the country independent & non-partisan? Do they demonstrate local skills for analysis of survey/research findings?
- Monitoring government revenue and expenditures help civil society groups answer the question of whether or not government revenues are actually being spent according to the

budget. By monitoring budget spending, citizens and civil society groups have the potential to affect several different aspects of fiscal expenditures. Tracking expenditures encourages government transparency, allowing the public the right to hold public officials and the government accountable for the actual results of expenditures. Successful monitoring affords the opportunity for civil society to effectively advocate allocations of public revenues.

- SAc tools such as CRCs need to be promoted in collaboration with universities and research agencies
- There are many opportunities for meeting practitioners and activists, sharing their experience, exchange of resources and creating a feeling of pride of being in a part of a professional network. It will also create the required mental shift that would challenge the existing deeply rooted undemocratic systems leading to democratic political transformations in the end.