



## SUPPORTING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: LESSONS FROM TRANSITIONS

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**Introduction:** Social accountability is increasingly recognized as a way to make governance reforms and development efforts more effective in responding to the needs of citizens. There is a growing body of evidence, as highlighted in the 2004 *World Development Report: Making Services Work for Poor People*, that citizen participation-through consultation about needs, identification of beneficiaries, monitoring and providing feedback on performance can improve the quality of public services and of governance.

*“How can we build social accountability into better governance, how can we build it so that everybody in a country has a chance to have ownership in the development and growth of their country?”*

President Robert B. Zoellick, opening remarks of the Conference “Towards a New Social Contract in the Arab World: Global lessons in Citizen Voice and Accountability” 9/22/2011

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### What is social accountability?

Social accountability is an approach to governance that involves citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) in public decision-making and in holding governments accountable for its actions, especially with regard to the management of public resources. It is a way to make government work more effectively by enabling citizens to articulate their needs, and be more fully included in the activities of government, such as the making of policies, management of public finances, and delivering of

*“We have strong institutions...the framework is there. But something extraordinary happened over the last nine months in Tunisia, which is the emergence of civil society. And we have seen evidence of that all over the country. And this is something important, because I believe that this is something that is going to offer perhaps the strongest element of comfort to the new democracy to be consolidated”*

Tunisian Minister of Finance, H.E. Mr. Jelloul Ayad

services, while also monitoring and giving feedback on government performance. Defined in this way, social accountability is, in essence, an important feature of democratization, and is therefore particularly relevant for countries in transition in the Middle East and North Africa.

The framework for social accountability can be organized around three key principles: (i) transparency, (ii) accountability; and (iii) participation. The effectiveness of these principles depends on several enabling conditions: (i) an enabling political environment; (ii) an appropriate policy and legal framework; (iii) capable and supportive state-actors; and (iv) institutional capabilities of non-state stakeholders.

Social accountability has both instrumental and intrinsic value which contribute to improving economic growth and service delivery. Instrumentally, social accountability mechanisms can help to:

- Establish and implement policies that are responsive to broad public interest;
- Ensure that resources are allocated to areas and services that citizens need;
- Track the flow of resources, to reduce leakage and corruption; and
- Monitor the quality of outputs and services delivered.

The “intrinsic” value of social accountability is reflected in its main messages: that government is open to its citizens, that citizens have the right, and power, to hold their government to account, and that they can participate meaningfully in public affairs and contribute to the public good. This could not be more relevant in the MNA Region today. Economic research has shown that countries with higher levels of transparency are more competitive; and that higher foreign direct investment and competitiveness are associated with higher growth.

*“People, unless they see by their eyes what is going on in government, how the government is using public finance, they will not trust what is going on. And I made a promise when I took office, that day I will know my salary, I will disclose it – which I did a month later, to the surprise of everyone...when you are getting public money, everyone should know how it is used, why you get it, and how your colleagues get it.*

Egyptian deputy Minister for Economic Affairs and Finance, H.E. Mr. Hazem El-Beblawi

Experiences in countries that have gone through political and economic transitions, such as

Indonesia, Philippines, South Korea, Peru, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Turkey, Spain, and Portugal, show how political and economic crises can give way to democratic transitions that reorder the relationship between citizens and government, and in the process create new opportunities for reform and economic growth. For example:

- **In the Philippines**, after the People Power revolution which was primarily political in nature, citizens began to participate in enforcing the accountability of government institutions for public finance management, public procurement, and education.
- **In Indonesia**, following the ouster of President Suharto, new legislation on freedom of association and expression created the enabling conditions for citizen-based accountability initiatives in community-driven development, natural resource management, education, and local government and in this and other respects had an important role in the development of the economy.
- **In Turkey**, the transition to democracy was difficult, due to risks of internal instability, the geo-political environment, and a monetary crisis. Despite initial setbacks, progressive reforms, as recently as 2010, are creating an enabling environment for civil society and guarantees of civil and political rights. The media and society at large continue debating the importance of a strong and free press and diverse and vibrant public opinion

**MENA and Social Accountability Practices:** As governments in MNA start to build new democratic foundations for their countries, the message from citizens is that they want to be included in the process. Social accountability practices can facilitate such inclusion, while promoting real improvements in the way government works and delivers services. This Quick Note argues that a social accountability approach could help reinforce MNA's political transition by:

- Signaling that MNA governments intend to be more transparent and accountable, and

allow citizens to play an active role in shaping and implementing those reforms.

- Making policies more relevant to the needs of citizens. Providing mechanisms for participation in policy dialogue could also reduce the risk of political instability. Exclusion from government has been cited as an important factor in the Arab uprising.
- Empowering citizens to demand better services and to monitor the use of public resources, thereby positioning them as key agents in the fight against corruption in government, clientelism, and elite capture—all important factors in the Arab uprising.

Preliminary lessons are emerging from the social accountability practices being implemented in the MENA region. Understanding the socioeconomic, institutional, and political context - including attendant power dynamics - are necessary in order to determine the correct entry point for social accountability mechanisms.

The experience of implementing social accountability in the Arab World to date points to its value in improving transparency and service delivery across sectors, and in giving voice to citizens as users. The heightened interest in democratic governance shown in the Arab Spring are important entry points for citizen participation to improve delivery of services, and other key areas of governance such as policymaking and management of public finance. Citizen feedback mechanisms, as in the case of the Tunisia health sector; disseminating information about services, as in the Yemen water sector; or engaging citizens in prioritizing their needs, as in West Bank and Gaza; show that social accountability has real potential to transform the way government services are provided in MNA.

**Key Lessons from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Turkey:** Some of the key lessons learned from political and economic transitions in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Turkey, which would be of interest to transitioning MENA countries include:

- *Active citizen participation in public affairs requires an enabling environment.* Appropriate legislation to promote freedom

of expression, free and independent elections, and freedom of association provides important guarantees to citizens, and needs to be prioritized as part of the process of transition.

- *Government outreach to civil society is critical to building confidence and trust.* In post-revolutionary environments of raised expectations, new governments have opportunities to engage citizens and stakeholders from all segments of society at every level of decision-making: civil society organizations, local communities, representatives of the poor and vulnerable, religious groups, and women's groups. Such engagement should be supported by mechanisms for genuine dialogue.
- *Proactive disclosure of information by the government about its plans during transitions helps manage citizen expectations.* During transitions, governments are challenged to respond to multiple demands at the same time. Part of Turkey's success in managing transitions was to publicly disseminate realistic plans and expected time tables for achieving milestones, an approach that resulted in broad based support for the ruling party from informed citizens.
- *Reform is a long-term process, based on the credibility of effectiveness of formal and informal institutions.* The strong vested interests that thrived under an autocratic regime do not simply disappear with the change in politics and can entrench themselves in a new democratic structure. Supporting a strong civil society and an independent press, building better institutions, from government bureaucracies to judiciary to the political system itself can take many years to bear fruit. Institutional strengthening and capacity development thus need to part of the reform effort from the outset.
- *Investment in improving service delivery through partnership with civil society and users is important.* Public participation spearheaded by CSOs can lead to concrete

shifts in the way services are provided. Check My School<sup>2</sup> and other examples from the Philippines show, CSOs can be powerful allies to government in bringing about positive change. This is most commonly done in the area of service delivery.

- *Engaging with a broader range of stakeholders during transitions increases the legitimacy of the new government and increases sustainability of reforms.* Indonesia's new government, like other countries that experienced transitions, lacked legitimacy to implement long-term reforms. The government reached out to CSOs, academics, think tanks, religious groups and student groups. A key lesson was that an open, participatory, inclusive and accountable political system can generate needed national consensus and enable broad-based public ownership and support of national reform priorities and development goals.

***Bottom-up processes through decentralization reforms and community-driven development enable citizen participation and improvement of services.***

As transitions take time, the new governments can focus on implementing programs that yield quick results, such as community-driven development programs, as was effectively done in Indonesia. Moreover, bottom-up approaches in Indonesia's transition helped citizens to articulate their needs, local institutions to be strengthened, and citizens' trust in government to be established. The Kecamatan Development Program was designed with strong participation of local citizens, and incorporated several anti-corruption elements from the outset, including independent monitoring by journalists and CSOs, and grievance redress mechanisms.

**Conclusion:** Supporting initiatives that strengthen social accountability at the regional and national levels is consistent with the priority the Bank places on social and economic inclusion, citizen participation, and the quality of governance. The longer paper<sup>3</sup> provides a brief overview of some

experiences in the MNA Region and international experiences from Indonesia, Turkey and the Philippines supporting social accountability during political and economic transitions. The full paper was prepared for a conference around the 2011 Annual Meetings in Washington, DC and included high-level policy makers from Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Indonesia and the Philippines. A panel of civil society organizations from the MNA Region exchanged perspectives about social accountability in the region, emerging opportunities and remaining challenges in making government more effective through an informed and engaged citizenry.

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<sup>2</sup> See Checkmyschool.org

<sup>3</sup> The full paper can be downloaded in English, French and Arabic from web site at [Worldbank.org/MNA](http://Worldbank.org/MNA).