

“The Social Underpinnings of Decentralized Governance: Networks, Technology and the Future of Social Accountability”<sup>1</sup>

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***Decentralized Governance and Accountability:  
Academic Research and the Future of Donor Programming***

Accountable governance is defined by four elements: First, the definition of interests on the part of citizens and groups of citizens; second, the aggregation or accumulation of those interests via some “technology”, whether it be by an election, lobby, or social media; third, the translation of those preferences into government behavior; and fourth, a means whereby citizens can evaluate the quality of government behavior. Decentralization has the potential to impact each of these links. Most of the rigorous thinking on how it does so has been institutional in nature. In other words, it has focused on how formal rules governing elections, leadership selection, fiscal federalism, etc. impact political accountability. Donor programming and accompanying impact evaluations, on the other hand, have focused less on institutions and more on mobilizing civil society and “social accountability”, i.e. on approaches to informing and mobilizing citizens such that they might become better participants in politics. These programming efforts have progressed with considerable normative enthusiasm but without, for the most part, reference to recent academic breakthroughs on the social conditions for cooperative behavior and collective action. The goal of this chapter is to consider how recent innovations in the study of information flows and cooperation in social networks might inform donor programming on social accountability. Research on social networks provides insights into the relational characteristics of communities that are certain to impact the prospects for accountability, and gives rigorous underpinnings into the frequent, if underspecified, claim that “context matters”.

The arguments in favor of decentralization are now abundantly familiar: it protects citizens against encroachment by the state, limits ethnic conflict, safeguards individual and communal liberty, allows for a tailoring of taxing and spending to local preferences, and offers citizens the opportunity to more closely monitor the behavior of public officials (see Rodden 2006; Beramendi 2007). In poor countries where the central state has limited capacity to implement, regulate, build, etc. across considerable territory, these arguments take on added salience because decentralized governments are often the *only* governments that materially impact the lives of citizens. In such settings, deconcentrating responsibilities is perhaps the only means of improving services for many citizens, but it

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also raises the stakes of understanding the conditions under which local social orders (as defined by social, political and economic networks) are consistent with good governance.

While traditional arguments continue to fuel hundreds of millions of dollars of development aid aimed at decentralization, it has become clear that decentralization unto itself is no panacea. It can promote elite capture (Véron et al. 2006; Mansuri and Rao 2013), obfuscate lines of government responsibility, and unnecessarily expand the size of the public administration. Thus while decentralization *can* help promote accountability when the proper mechanisms are in place (World Bank 2004), in many cases they are not. In the absence of mechanisms of accountability, citizens cannot discipline decentralized officials. In the absence of such discipline, decentralization neither solves agency problems nor ensures that local public goods bundles reflect local preferences. Indeed, for many analysts the inability to hold local officials accountable and the tendency for it to produce local “elite capture” is at the very heart of decentralization’s failures.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, the term “accountability” appears 105 times in USAID’s 2009 “Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook”. It follows that identifying the key mechanisms of accountability and understanding how they work are key to promoting better donor programming on decentralized governance.

In this chapter I review some of the key mechanisms of social accountability that underpin the capacity of decentralization to fulfill its promise. In doing so, I rely on traditional notions of governance as characterized by a series of principal-agent problems, albeit with a recognition that in many settings there is no single principal, since citizens, public officials and administrators have competing notions as to what constitutes the public good. I also emphasize that these principal-agents can often be better understood as relational networks and that the characteristics of those networks are crucial to understanding the conditions under which social accountability is likely to exist or emerge as a result of donor efforts.

Improving the multiple accountability relations that define government has two goals: first, tightening the link between citizen preferences and government behavior; and second, improving the quality of public sector outputs. It is worth underscoring that these two goals are not always coincident and care should be taken not to conflate citizen satisfaction and high quality, low cost service provision. In fact, there may be a wide range of settings in which interventions foster participation or increase citizen satisfaction while having no impact on (or perhaps even decreasing the quality or efficiency of) service provision, as in Olken (2010).

There are, of course, a plethora of potential mechanisms that might promote political accountability. Several important formal institutions of accountability are dealt with in later chapters of this volume, including the role of elections (Wantchekon and Leon) and rules governing the choice of decentralized leaders (Grossman). Other key institutions through which citizens might hold officials accountable, such as the police and courts, have received too little comparative academic and policy research to produce a coherent body of

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<sup>2</sup> On elite capture, see Bardhan and Mookherjee 2005; Olken 2007; Banerjee and Duflo 2006.

knowledge and thus are left to the side. Likewise, the physical mobility that underpins classic Tieboutian notions of efficiency and that can promote accountability by inducing competition among decentralized governments is largely absent in the developing world. There migration is largely driven by perceptions of improved job opportunities in cities rather than inter-jurisdictional shopping for public goods; to the extent rapid urbanization bears on decentralized governance, it is discussed in the chapter by Post and Carter.

In lieu of formal institutions, I focus on the social underpinnings of accountability. By “social underpinnings” I refer not just to traditional notions of civil society, but more broadly to the interpersonal, social and political networks in which citizens are embedded. My overarching claim is that current research and programming on social accountability would benefit from more systematic engagement with the evidence and analytical tools that have emerged from research on social networks. Experiences with SA theory and programming to date suggests several recurring weaknesses – such as overreliance on transparency, poorly specified theories of change, and lack of attention to local context – weaknesses that could be at least partially addressed by paying more attention to social networks. Such research provides a rigorous means of thinking about and measuring social capital, the density of civil society, social trust and the conditions under which social accountability initiatives are likely to work. To support this claim, the chapter discusses: a) the ongoing push to encourage “social accountability” by promoting citizen information on, engagement with and oversight of local government; b) the emergent work on social networks qua civil society in shaping the prospects for collective action and social accountability; and c) the role of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in promoting citizen information, broadening social networks and allowing for networked monitoring of government behavior and outputs. I also underscore how the tools of network analysis are particularly well suited for the kind of data that the promotion of ICT generates. These discussions follow on a set of introductory issues, namely a discussion of what is meant by the term “accountability” and what citizens are meant to hold their decentralized governments accountable for.

### *Basic Approaches to Accountable Governance*

The initial enthusiasm among academics and practitioners about decentralization was based on the notion that it would: a) enhance the match between preferences and policies; and b) reduce agency costs. This distinction delineates two basic approaches to understanding accountable governance, and hence two basic approaches to program design and evaluation. Both views build on naïve and acontextual assumptions of an idealized Tocquevilian citizenry and the ease of cultivating such a citizenry where it does not already exist. Some straightforward attention to the structure of local social and political relations, i.e. network characteristics, would provide insight into the settings where such assumptions are more or less warranted and, thus, where practitioners might contribute to accountability.

In the first view, accountability occurs when government officials successfully implement what one might consider “the will of the people”. The key challenge of governance, in this view, is to align the incentives of public officials such that they have reason and capacity to

gather information on the desires of citizens and translate them into policy outputs. We have elsewhere called this “prospective accountability” (Rodden and Wibbels 2013), although it also goes under the guise of “responsiveness”, “pre-election politics” (Persson and Tabellini 2002), etc. It is in the spirit of enhancing prospective accountability that donors have set out to encourage electoral turnout, civil society mobilization, attendance at meetings, participatory budgeting, and other forms of engagement with local government. The central notion is that poor governance thrives when the electorate is disengaged and inactive, and policies can better approximate the “collective will” when citizens take an active role in directing public officials.

An alternative view of accountability is borne of skepticism that “the public good” is plausible to uncover, since: a) citizens who vary by gender, age, income, ethnicity, religion, etc. often have competing preferences over what government should do; and b) alternative procedures for aggregating those preferences can produce different outcomes (Riker 1982). Instead, this view relies on citizens’ capacity to evaluate the past behavior of government. These retrospective evaluations can be difficult because reliable information about the choices facing public officials is hard to come by, and those officials often have incentives to hide information in order to protect their own interests. Since information is scarce, voters often use information shortcuts based upon everyday experiences with the economy or service provision to judge how their government is performing (Fiorina 1981). When these indicators fall below some threshold, citizens can remove (or otherwise sanction) officials and give someone else the opportunity to do better. As long as public officials desire to retain office, this retrospective judgment can be an effective way of keeping them in check. We refer to this accountability mechanism as *retrospective accountability*. It is in the spirit of enhancing this kind of accountability that donors have promoted various technologies for improving citizen information, including score cards, media campaigns, information sheets, comparative data on different officials or localities, and published audits.

Both the prospective and retrospective views of accountability are fundamentally rooted in a principal-agent model of governance. The key principal-agent relationships run from voters to local elected officials, from those officials to local service providers/implementers, and from service providers and implementers to the consumers of those services. Broadly speaking, the goal of donor programming aimed at promoting accountability in decentralized governance is to tighten up one or more of these agency relationships such that the agent has less scope for acting contrary to the interests of the principal.

There are two serious shortcomings with this approach to donor programming, and jointly they represent a blind spot in social accountability initiatives: First, the principal-agent approach’s emphasis on information asymmetries relies on idealized assumptions about social relations that rarely accord with reality on the ground. Just as important as information are the underlying relations of power among citizens, officials and service providers. Indeed, feeding information to citizens who are in a dependent or clientelistic relationship with local elites is unlikely to promote accountability. The basic point is that should understand these principal-agent relationships as embedded in local social

networks that condition the use of information and the prospects for social accountability. Second, the principal-agent approach assumes that citizens are a homogenous bunch that share underlying preferences over what government should do or what constitutes good performance. Of course there are many valence issues—most citizens want a stronger economy, better schools, higher quality health care, etc.—but they often have differing ideas about policy priorities, tax rates and the like. Thus, in many settings there is no single principal. These twin shortcomings raise a whole range of challenging questions: What are the key feature of local social, political and economic networks? And how do those features of local context condition the likely success of social accountability initiatives? How to promote accountability in heterogeneous local settings with diverse local network characteristics? Might promoting citizen mobilization promote conflict rather than accountability in settings where they have divergent opinions? Are there means of conflict mediation that can promote local accountability and participation at the same time? I return to these issues in the section on “Frontiers: Research and Programming” below.

### *Accountable for What?: Decentralization and the Allocation of Responsibilities*

The concept of accountability in local governance raises the question as to what it is that decentralized governments are to be held accountable for. There is a large literature on the optimal allocation of responsibilities across levels of government.<sup>3</sup> It provides a handful of guiding principles (see Rodden’s chapter in this volume for details): 1) Expenditure decentralization should follow upon heterogeneity in preferences across communities; 2) To the extent possible, revenue responsibilities should follow upon expenditure decentralization so as to minimize intergovernmental transfers, limit fiscal illusion, and promote the accountable expenditure of tax dollars; and 3) government responsibilities with considerable externalities across jurisdictions—such as defense, environmental regulation and enforcement, and interpersonal redistribution (such as through CCTs)—should be centralized to prevent a race to the bottom across subnational jurisdictions.

These principles are systematically violated in most developing countries. This results largely from the fact that major revenue sources are centralized and most localities have thin tax bases. As Gadenne and Singhal (2015) note in their recent review, this has not prevented considerable decentralization of expenditure responsibilities over the last 15 years, with the result being that fiscal gaps have grown. Thus, while regional, district and local governments are playing a larger and larger role in the provision and/or oversight of basic services like education, health and infrastructure, they are doing so with revenues raised elsewhere. The donor community might well have exaggerated these fiscal gaps courtesy of the push to decentralize functional responsibilities to lower levels of government, despite the absence of robust local tax bases and the ongoing reliance on community-driven development (CDD) programming in countries with weak state capacities.

The growth of expenditure decentralization has two big implications for accountability relations. First, the services that citizens rely on are increasingly the responsibility of

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<sup>3</sup> See Gadenne and Singhal (2014) for a recent review.

decentralized governments. Whether that responsibility is thin—as when decentralized governments are responsible for implementing central government policies, schemes and expenditures—or thick, local and district governments have more and more impact on the government outputs that most immediately affect citizens, including health care, education, infrastructure, and public security. That the case, understanding the huge heterogeneity across localities and the manner in which context matters becomes hugely important. As discussed below, a networked approach to decentralized settings offers a distinctly rigorous means of approach this contextual variation.

Second, the large fiscal gaps produced by decentralization have exaggerated a problem inherent in overlapping jurisdictions, namely the difficulty (and at least sometimes, the unfairness) of holding decentralized governments accountable for public services and other outputs that they are only partially responsible for. Williams (2015) provides a recent example from Ghana, where ongoing decentralization has left district governments responsible for a good deal of public infrastructure. He shows that 1/3 of the capital projects (representing 1/5 of total infrastructure expenditures) begun by district governments are never completed. Given that these investments include the rural clinics, school houses and markets that citizens rely on, this looks like a striking failure of decentralized governance. But a closer look shows that no small part of the problem is that central government fiscal transfers often appear late, if at all, which results in districts being unable to pay contractors. There is no doubt that: a) citizens want the capital investments; b) some district governments are inefficient and even corrupt; and c) that the failure of the central government to deliver revenues on time makes district government planning very difficult. Who are Ghanaian citizens to hold accountable for the resulting outcomes? In cases like this, the potential increased responsiveness of district assemblies must be balanced against the agency problems generated by the process of decentralization and the corresponding misalignment between revenues and expenditures.

#### *A Decade of Social Accountability Programs*

Institutional fixes aside, the most significant push towards promoting accountability has occurred via “social accountability” programming by international donors. Although these are not always tied to formal decentralization programs, they are inherently local, and most of the programming aims to affect the local clinics, schools, administrators and elected officials who define most citizens’ day-to-day experiences with the state. The World Bank defines social accountability as “the broad range of actions and mechanisms, other than voting, that citizens can use to hold the state to account as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other actors that promote or facilitate these efforts.”<sup>4</sup> The wave of social accountability enthusiasm is built on a belief (and occasionally a well-developed theory) that the primary obstacles to accountable governance are poor citizen information (Pande 2011) and a lack of venues through which they can have input into governing processes. Much of it also builds on a well-developed body of work on “social capital” that emphasizes the key role of citizen engagement in promoting good governance (Putnam 1993; Ostrom 2001; Krishna 2007). As discussed below, the often vague concept

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<sup>4</sup> 2007: p.5.

of social capital can become more explicit, rigorous and operational when approached from a social network perspective.

Consistent with the conceptualization of retrospective accountability and prospective accountability above, social accountability initiatives can be organized into those that: 1) aim at improving the knowledge of citizens about the performance of the public sector and the behavior of government officials such that they can hold them retrospectively accountable; and 2) aim to improve the responsiveness of government officials by providing avenues for citizens to provide inputs into decision making and public sector management (i.e. prospective accountability). The former set of projects focus on publishing audit reports, scorecards, increasing transparency, etc. (Olken 2007; Andrabi et al. 2014; Peisakhin and Pinto 2010). The latter set of projects focus on promoting participatory modes of decision making (Olken 2010; Bjorkman and Svensson 2009).

There are now several extensive review papers of social accountability programming that the reader can consult for a more detailed and expansive discussion of the dozens and dozens of social accountability projects of the last decade.<sup>5</sup> In lieu of another such review, I provide several key points that are organized around key themes in research on social networks, which I explore in the next section. Some of these are addressed in the accumulated wisdom expressed in the review papers, but others are not.

*Theories of change need clear specification. Theoretical work on information flow, collective action and coordination in social networks offers an important source of insights:*

- Social accountability programs are not typically derived from clear theoretical principles. This results in a failure to specify precise mechanisms linking project activities to outcomes. A properly spelled out “theory of change” would specify who the principals and agents are, the kind of information available to them, and the nature of institutions structuring their relationship. As discussed in the following section, such theory should consider that citizens are deeply embedded in local social, political and economic networks.
- There is a common critique that rigorous impact evaluations of social accountability programs fail to specify the “mechanisms” through which they do or do not work (see, for instance, Devarajan, Khemani and Walton 2013). In some cases, this failure is held up as instructive of a weakness of RCTs or other rigorous methods of evaluation. But the failure to specify the mechanisms through which a social accountability project is expected to impact outcomes is first and foremost a failure of theory rather than evaluation. If the “theory of change” is sufficiently precise about mechanisms, there is no reason impact evaluations cannot be designed to evaluate them.
- There is a disjuncture between the scale of the most rigorous social accountability impact evaluations and our knowledge that localities within countries vary hugely in terms of their social organization, social capital and collective action capacity. To

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Fox (2015), Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2015), and Williamson (2015). On the closely related topic of community driven development and a broader look at efforts to promote participation, see Mansuri and Rao (2013).

the extent impact evaluations estimate average effects, they limit what we can learn from the heterogeneity across decentralized settings. The implication is not to do fewer rigorous impact evaluations. Instead, “theories of change” should aim to systematically theorize the relationship between community characteristics and interventions such that the heterogeneity is not swept under the rug.

*Transparency and information are not enough. The flow of information and accountability among citizens and government are deeply conditioned by local social networks:*

- Increasing citizen information is not, unto itself, enough to promote accountability. There are certainly studies showing that augmenting information on the performance of government and active citizen participation improve outcomes (Bjorkman and Svensson 2009; Andrabi et al. 2014; Ferraz and Finan 2008), but there are many rigorous evaluations that uncover no effects of increased information (Banerjee et al. 2010; Keefer and Khemani 2012; Humphreys and Weinstein 2007; Lieberman, Posner and Tsai 2014) and at least one showing that it can actually discourage participation (Chong et al. 2015). There are at least two issues: First, the information has to be salient to local citizens, and we do not have a consistent evidence base on what information they care most about or how best to deliver the information; and second, absent some clear accountability mechanism, it is not always clear how citizens can be efficacious in their use of additional information.
- Consistent with the point above, increasing the supply of information is more likely to work when it is combined with some means of impacting the incentives of government officials and government officials with the administrative capacity to respond (Fox 2015; Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg 2015). The provision of information alone runs into the fact that citizens are resource- and cognitively-constrained. Absent a clear path between the information, citizen action and a potential change in government outputs, the information will have little effect.

*Complex demands limit the usefulness of social accountability. The capacity of social networks to solve problems declines in the complexity of the problems they have to solve:*

- The value of citizen input and participation is declining in the complexity of the tasks assigned to them. The more complicated the administrative, oversight or implementation task, the harder it is for time- and attention-challenged individual citizens and collections thereof to efficiently and effectively complete them. Whether one considers citizen input into establishing priorities for the government (Khwaja 2004; 2008) or their capacity to actively and productively monitor development projects (Olken 2007), it is best to keep things simple.
- Even if optimally designed, the need for simplicity points to inherent limits in the capacity of social accountability to promote democracy. Simple, highly involved modes of participation impose limits of scale and attention. To the extent some (perhaps many) failures of governance do not have local or decentralized roots, sustainable solutions almost certainly require mass democratic organizations, such as parties and interest groups, that can scale up and contribute to deliberative procedures beyond decentralized levels.



*Context matters. Awareness of local context, as indicated by social network characteristics, are crucial to successful SA initiatives:*

- Social accountability initiatives work best when they are designed in a context-relevant way that takes account of the concerns of local communities. The easiest way to know what information, service needs, and priorities are relevant to local citizens and social groups is to ask them before programming begins and to design projects appropriately. This is a difficult task given how donor contracts are awarded and run, but as I describe in the *Conclusion* the challenges are surmountable.
- Power relations among citizens condition the success of participatory procedures and the manner to which citizens use new information provided via social accountability initiatives. High levels of social hierarchy or inequality contribute to the elite capture of participatory processes; they also militate against a sense of political efficacy which would encourage citizens to act upon information initiatives. As discussed in the following section, research on political networks provides a systematic way to design social accountability programming that is reflective of local power relations.

#### *Social Networks, Civil Society and Accountability*

In recent decades, donors have laid a great deal of faith in the capacity of NGOs and civil society more generally to redress local governance failures and promote accountability. The motivating impulse has been that a robust civil society offers the capacity to gather information on government behavior, provide inputs into citizen needs, and hold public officials accountable (Putnam 1993; Devarajan et al. 2014). Civic engagement is costly, of course, and individual self-interest can militate against it. As Ostrom notes, “Somehow [citizens] must find ways of creating mutually reinforcing expectations and trust to overcome the perverse short-run temptations they face.”<sup>6</sup> Social capital provides the means and the motivation for individual citizens to contribute to accountable government, and Ostrom notes that it is more likely to occur via mutual learning and norm development in tight social networks.

To the extent decentralization brings government “closer to the people”, there has been an obvious affinity between efforts to promote civil society and decentralization. To the extent social accountability initiatives rely on the mobilization of civil society, they implicitly rely on the capacity of local social networks to deliver collective action. Early, naïve assumptions about the capacity of local civil societies and civic associations to provide robust checks and balances on decentralized governments have given way to a recognition that communities are highly varied in their social organization and capacity for collective action. To date, programming on social accountability, civil society and decentralization have proceeded without careful attention to that variation. A growing body of research on social networks—the persistent informational, social and economic links between individuals—provides a rigorous basis for assessing the conditions under which

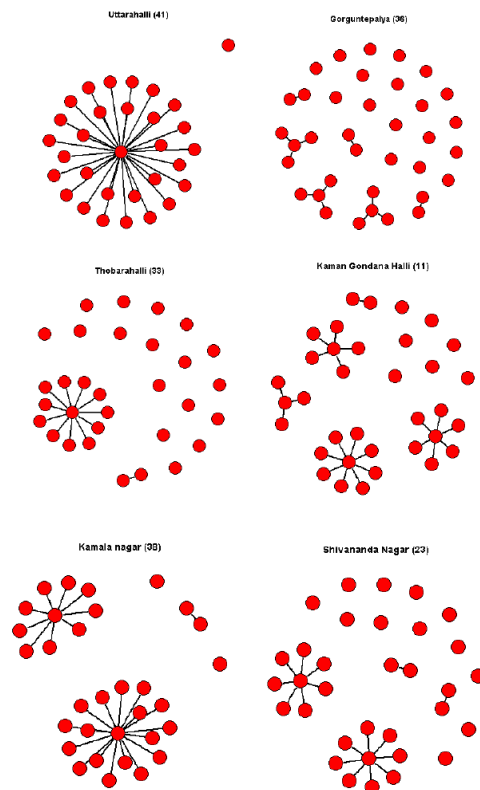
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<sup>6</sup> 2001: p.176.

communities of different types and at different scales might work to promote accountability.

Figure 1 gives some sense of the huge variation in the structure of local social networks even within a single city. The figure presents graphs of leadership networks across six slums in Bangalore, where colleagues and I have asked household respondents who the most important local leader is. Central nodes reflect leader names, and outer nodes the respondents that name them. If social accountability requires a recognized leader and/or a locus for collective action, these network graphs indicate substantial variation in the capacity of these six slums to promote it. The slums range from environments of almost complete social anomie in which there is no recognized leader, to an almost fully centralized network where everyone recognizes a single leader, to bipolar networks, to everything in between. In a broader set of 72 slums we have found evidence that centralized leadership networks facilitate the capacity of communities to coordinate votes and extract better public services in slums (Rojo and Wibbels 2014; Wibbels, Krishna and Sriram 2015). The main point, however, is that a one-size-fits all social accountability program that pursues a standardized approach to information delivery, community meetings and decision-making procedures with the aim of promoting collective decision making or oversight of local government is unlikely to work in the same way across these slums. Indeed, it seems clear that taking account of these differences could really help tailor social accountability programming to local contexts.

Figure 1: Leadership Networks in 6 Slums in Bangalore



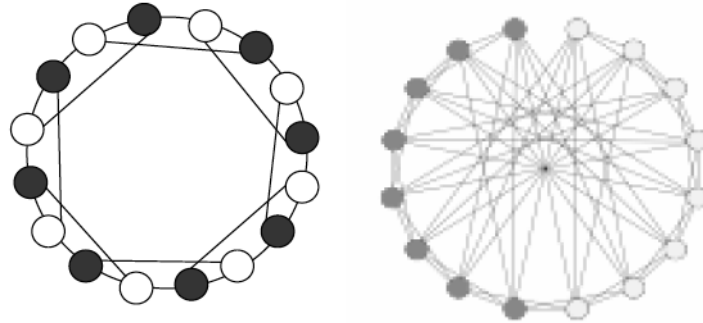
Much of the work on social networks begins with the recognition that cooperative behavior and collective action, both crucial ingredients of a robust civil society, require some sort of deviation from narrow short-term self-interest (Henrich et al. 2001). Iterated interactions between individuals are a well-known mechanism for overcoming collective action problems (Kranton 1996), but other characteristics of social networks are also important. Most importantly, dense networks offer a host of advantages with regard to collective action (Greif 1993). First, they are associated with a high degree of preference homogeneity and shared expectations about what constitutes acceptable behavior. Second, they provide a monitoring technology that provides information on how members of the network behave. While it is very difficult for outsiders to know whether individuals are shirking or doing their share, it is much easier for tightly knit neighbors and local leaders who live in those communities to know these things about each other. Third and finally, dense social networks provide a mechanism for sanctioning community members who deviate from socially expected behavior. As discussed below, dense networks can also suffer from serious problems, and there are conditions under which weak ties among citizens can facilitate information flow and accountability (Larson and Lewis 2016), but in many settings the information and sanctioning characterized by dense networks provide the tools for overcoming collective action problems that are the heart of civil society activism.

Above and beyond these general features of social networks, we have also learned some of the factors that condition their capacity to generate consensus and collective action. Success tends to increase in the simplicity of the task (Khwaja 2008) and decline in the cost of communication within the network. As noted by Khwaja (2004) many important local decisions about service provision are technical in nature, and substantial participation by non-experts can introduce inefficiencies. This insight is reflected in laboratory work, where task complexity and the number of potential solutions slow the capacity of networks to solve collective problems (McCubbins et al. 2013). Some straightforward implications for the design of social accountability initiatives follow: First, *what* civil society will oversee and provide input into should be relatively straightforward; complex tasks of public administration (such as, for instance, social audits) seem like poor candidates compared to more simple tasks. Second, while social accountability initiatives have focused a lot of effort on getting information into the hands of citizens as individuals, they would benefit from more effort at lowering the cost of communication among citizens. I discuss this in greater detail in the next section.

A substantial body of work also shows that the structure of communication across members of a network can ease or complicate problem solving, knowledge acquisition, consensus and collective action (Golub and Jackson 2010; Banerjee et al. 2013; McCubbins et al 2013). And here popular conceptions of a robust civil society at least potentially conflict with available research. Standard thinking would probably suggest that Figure 2a represents an ideal decentralized citizenry—citizens (represented here as nodes) are connected to many other citizens (the ties might reflect weekly conversations), and there is no hierarchy since no individual is more central to the network than any other. Given the large number of connections (or edges), such networks can be slow and inefficient, however, and collective action can be difficult to mobilize (a single uncooperative defection

reverberates throughout the network). Figure 2b shows an alternative network structure that solves these problems via some sort of leader, i.e. an actor who is central to the network structure. This focal point can coordinate others, facilitate problem solving and encourage collective effort. Relying on a huge study of social networks in dozens of Indian villages, Banerjee et al. (2013, 2014) have shown that such individuals diffuse information further and help social networks learn; Breza et al. (2015) show that such actors can also help promote cooperative behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2a and 2b: Two Alternative Social Networks<sup>8</sup>



These two networks present SA and civil society programmers with a choice: They can *either* aim to promote one of these network structures, which in some localities will involve attempts to disrupt and reconstruct existing networks, *or* it can take these network characteristics as given and promote SA initiatives that “fit” particular local contexts. In its current state, programming is not analytically clear which is intended or why. Given that a lot of time and money is, in fact, being spent on these programs, it is worth being intentional about them.<sup>9</sup>

Research also provides insight into some of the key obstacles to dense networks and the reasons that local communities might have trouble mobilizing collective responses to failures of accountability. Ethnic and religious heterogeneity are well known characteristics that makes coordinated social pressure more difficult, and there is recent, micro evidence that information flows more broadly in homogenous social networks (Larson and Lewis 2016).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that local heterogeneity does not preclude collective action or a robust civil society.<sup>11</sup> Beyond social identities, high levels of inequality

<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the emphasis on central actors to networks, there is at least some evidence that peripheral members of social networks play a key role in mobilizing collective action (Centola and Macy 2007; Steinert-Threlkeld 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Figures courtesy of McCubbins et al. (2013).

<sup>9</sup> As McCubbins et al (2013: 514) write: “...legal and political environments are often intentionally designed, which means that it may be possible to build a structure of communication that encourages agreement.”

<sup>10</sup> Though note that Larson and Lewis find that this information transmission occurs despite the fact that homogenous networks are *not* more dense.

<sup>11</sup> I, for instance, am unable to uncover any relationship between slum-level caste- or religious-based heterogeneity and either the centralization of local leadership networks or indicators of local collective action in 72 slums in Bangalore and Udaipur, India.

and/or social hierarchy in local networks are associated with less cooperative behavior (Chandrasekhar et al. 2015). Macro-level evidence indicates a negative relationship between heterogeneity and public goods provision (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005), even if the precise mechanisms aren't clear. At a more micro-level, Bhavnani (2013) provides natural and survey experimental evidence of caste-based discrimination against candidates in India, and Grossman et al. (2015) exploit the random allocation of defendants to Israeli judicial panels to show that ethnicity has an important impact on outcomes. These individual-level results are echoed in Duflo et al.'s (2005) evidence on caste-based targeting of local public goods by local village councils and Burgess et al.'s (2015) research on co-ethnic targeting of road projects in Kenya. Several possible mechanisms likely underpin these findings, including that identity provides an information shortcut and that it is difficult to sanction social cheaters across ethnic boundaries (Miguel and Gugerty 2005).

Any effort to build donor programming upon the growing evidence on social networks should recognize that network density comes with four potential problems. First, dense social networks and a mobilized civil society need not work in ways that are democratic or otherwise normatively appealing. Dense social networks, for instance, have helped spread everything from Nazism (Berman 1997) to infectious diseases (Luke and Stamatakis 2012), and a whole host of negative behaviors are socially contagious. Second, dense networks can be quite closed, resistant to learning from the outside and resilient to efforts to promote accountability. Brinkerhoff and Keener (2003: p.26), for instance, describe a situation in Madagascar where a small group of professional, tightly knit decentralized administrators prove closed to outside information and pressure. They write that:

“Many of the SSDs [district health offices] are composed of a small group of professionals who often have close family ties or multiple affiliations, thus providing room for degrading the effectiveness of internal oversight and auditing mechanisms or for benefits such as less formal sharing of resources. In terms of the kinds of checks and balances that support formal accountability, these informal interrelationships risk compromising the necessary separation, and open the door to collusion and mutual “back-scratching.”

These underlying features seem quite prevalent in many bureaucracies across the developing world. Third, while centralized networks can promote collective action, they also may lend themselves to capture by elites. Fourth and finally, dense networks in heterogeneous settings can impede information flows to the extent many social interactions occur with “other” types with whom one is less likely to share important information (Larson and Lewis 2016).

To summarize, dense social networks can facilitate accountability by promoting information flow, building a shared sense of what a community needs, and facilitating collective action. Thereby can communities successfully generate prospective accountability even as they ease the sanctioning of corrupt or exploitative behavior. These benefits have to be weighed against the potential costs discussed above. An important implication of these findings is that we already know a good deal about which communities are likely to be responsive to donor programming aimed at promoting accountability. This,

however, leaves two challenges. First, donors need to develop the capacity to assess key characteristics of local social networks, including those individuals who are most central to them. As Banerjee et al. (2014) note, this is not as hard as it sounds, since members of a network can identify central individuals without knowing anything about the broader network structure. Second, we know very little about how dense (or otherwise) social networks emerge endogenously, and this places a sharp constraint on the capacity of outsiders to alter the civil underpinnings of accountable governance where it does not already exist. Nevertheless, even we are not in a position to promote the emergence of local, participatory democratic orders where they do not exist, social accountability programming would benefit a great deal from recognizing in advance where it is unlikely to work, where tweaks of local programming are in order and how local social “context” is likely to condition the impact of projects.

### *Information Technology, Social Networks and Accountability*

A key element of the push toward social accountability has been a growing effort to use information communications technology (ICT) as a means to promote citizen information, government transparency, and an avenue for citizen input into government processes (Peixoto and Fox 2016). Given the difficulty for citizens of getting good, timely information on everything from the behavior of their politicians to the hours and drug stocks at local health clinics, cell-phone based ICT offers huge potential. Potential efficiency gains aside (imagine the time saved by each person *not* walking to a closed clinic or one without drugs!), such information is obviously crucial for the capacity of local citizens to hold local officials accountable for their performance. It can also provide less time-consuming and more direct means for citizens to provide input into government decision making. Participation, particularly in its traditional and more active forms—be it via school committees, participatory budget meetings or whatever—is demanding and can produce an elite bias (Alatas et al. 2013; Dasgupta and Beard 2007). ICT-based inputs, on the other hand, are less costly and have the benefit of anonymity. As a result (and as the boom in social networking applications makes clear) ICT has the potential to broaden networks among citizens and create new networks of accountability between citizens-as-service-consumers and governments-as-service-providers. In short, innovations in ICT offer the potential to keep citizens informed and provide venues for feedback that require less effort. Indeed, the potential for ICT to improve accountability might be greatest in very poor countries, since: a) cell phone ownership and useage is ubiquitous, even in many rural settings; and b) civil society is often weak; and c) traditional forms of political accountability, such as courts, lobbying, elections, a free press, are weak or missing. Indeed, inspired in no small part by the reported role of social media in the Arab Spring, the U.S. government has funded similar efforts elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> and there is a great deal of optimism that ICT can address many of the challenges of governance in the developing world by developing networks of engaged citizens.

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<sup>12</sup> Ron Nixon, “U.S. Says it Built Digital Programs Abroad With an Eye to Politics.” *New York Times* April 25, 2014: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/26/world/us-ran-social-media-programs-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan.html? r=4>

One growing branch of work on the relationship between ICT and politics explicitly focuses on the network characteristics inherent to cell phones, SMS and social media (Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013; Shapiro and Wedmann 2011; King et al. 2013; Lawrence forthcoming; Steinert-Threlkeld 2015; Berger et al. 2015). Focused largely on the incidence of violence and repression, it provides insight not just into the correlation between cell phone coverage and violence but also into the manner in which useage changes before and during protest events.<sup>13</sup> At this point, the findings are inconclusive, with some results suggesting a positive association between protest activity and cell coverage (Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013) and others not (Shapiro and Wedmann 2011). It is clear, however, that authoritarian regimes are well capable of using ICT to further their repressive aims (King et al. 2013; Rod and Weidmann 2015). To the extent protests and civil violence represent mechanisms of accountability, this work provides an entry into broader questions about the link between ICT and citizenship.

It is early to assess the impact of ICT on development programming, but some results are in from efforts to promote “digital democracy”. In lieu of elections and polls, which provide some imperfect means of identifying a “public will”, there have been several attempts to encourage citizens to communicate directly with public officials and administrators. One can think of these as attempts to create low-cost network ties between citizens and government officials. There is some evidence from a pilot project in Uganda that an SMS-based system can serve to promote participation, particularly by typically marginalized citizens (Grossman et al. 2014), but a large follow-up study has found no such effect (Grossman, Humphrey and Sacramone-Lutz 2016). The authors summarize that “uptake in treatment constituencies was low, marginalized populations largely refrained from using the ICT platform, and there was no price effect.”<sup>14</sup> Obviously, approaches such as this one are much more promising in more democratic settings where the social network enhancing features of ICT would find a more fertile context.

Short of feedback to politicians, there are several efforts to promote the use of ICT by citizens to monitor government outputs and provide feedback on services. Examples abound: The *ichangemycity.com* platform in Bangalore is an SMS-based means for citizens to identify local service needs and vote them up (or not) in terms of importance; online platforms for commenting on proposed legislation in China; web-based platforms for reporting corruption in Uganda and Kenya.<sup>15</sup> Many of these have not yet been subject to rigorous evaluation, but Grossman et al. (2015) provide evidence from an RCT suggesting that a low-cost SMS-based attempt to elicit service feedback from citizens in Uganda doubled participation (albeit off a fairly low baseline). It is early in the lives of these efforts, but they offer the potential to promote networks of linked citizen-consumers who serve to provide government highly local information on how it is performing.

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<sup>13</sup> See Dafoe and Lyall (2015) and accompanying pieces for a review.

<sup>14</sup> 2016: p.3.

<sup>15</sup> See [makingallvoicescount.org](http://makingallvoicescount.org), a donor funded grand challenge to develop e-platforms to improve governance.

There are some reasons to doubt the capacity of ICT to fundamentally alter accountability relations. SMS systems, open budget initiatives or other forms of direct digital democracy can be powerful tools for uncovering corruption and diffusing information about poor performance. But all the openness has costs too: It can serve to make bargaining more difficult, since side payments become public and bargaining gives way to posturing; likewise, all of the scrutiny associated with politics can dissuade entry by good and qualified potential leaders. It is also the case, that most of the ICT initiatives currently provide venues for *individual* action—the technology typically facilitates the reporting, overseeing, etc. by individuals who experience a failed irrigation pump or an act of corruption. To the extent that is the case, technology does not solve the underlying social choice problems that plague any effort to divine the public good or citizen intent vis-à-vis the public sector. More promising might be to link citizens together into a network of government oversight. Such efforts might displace government from the central node of these ICT-based solutions in favor of promoting ties of oversight among citizens.

Yet if there are good reasons to doubt the capacity of ICT to fundamentally improve the nature of social choices, it does show remarkable promise for wringing efficiencies from systems of public administration. As technology and learning spread through the public sector, the costs of many important public goods are likely to go down. Government will know more and better about which roads needs fixing, when and where drug stock outs are occurring, which of its citizens need to visit a health care provider to prevent an emergency room visit, etc. Many of these benefits result from the capacity of ICT to tighten the network ties between higher and lower-level administrators, where principal-agent problems are endemic and absenteeism of front-line providers is endemic. Other benefits emerge from the building on many weak network ties among citizens and public officials, where the former can become important sources of information on the performance of very local public sectors. Where it wants to, government is likely to find big bills on the sidewalk courtesy of extending technology into public administration and building stronger information networks between and among citizens, public officials and service providers.

#### *Frontiers for Policy and Learning on Accountability*

The most daunting challenges in the study of social networks are to understand: a) why they have the structure that they do? and b) Can they be altered predictably from the outside? This has obvious implications for SA programming. Even if practitioners can already leverage research on social networks to understand the key features of local social contexts, it would be helpful to know when and if local networks are malleable such that one can promote social accountability. Here academic researchers and practitioners have very significant shared interests in working together. Researchers could embed research on the adaptability of social networks into programming, and the learning could fuel better, more context-sensitive programming.

Above and beyond learning about social networks and their role in conditioning the prospects for social accountability, it is worth emphasizing that some of the key actors in decentralized settings across much of the developing world are left outside of traditional notions of accountability. Three actors are particularly important: 1) Central governments; 2) Private sector service providers; and 3) international NGOs and donors who play a



prominent role in financing or delivering local services and infrastructure in many localities. Central governments finance a large share of decentralized expenditures in many countries, and local governments serve largely to implement programs and priorities established by central governments. In these settings, local officials face incentives established by their national sponsors. Although bottom-up accountability of local officials is desirable, it is difficult to achieve if they are not elected or face few incentives to worry about the concerns of local citizens. In these situations, the best way to improve performance might be to strengthen mechanisms of hierarchical oversight rather than through programming aimed at enhancing local accountability. Likewise, where the private sector is an important service provider—as it is with water in a great many settings and increasingly in both education and health—promoting decentralized *political* accountability is unlikely to improve key services. Particularly where private providers are the only game in town, a robust system of government oversight is the first step in improving the services that local citizens hold dear. Finally, international NGOs and donors play a very large role in the local provision of infrastructure and citizens in many localities; in some cases, this provision is direct while in others it operates through direct budgetary support of decentralized governments. Though a nascent body of research indicates the citizens might have greater faith in the transparency and capacity of these outside providers (Findley et al. 2015; Wibbels et al. 2015), there are typically no means through which citizens might hold these outsiders accountable. And there is at least some possibility that by providing services directly, international actors erode accountability by eroding the link between governments and the governed. Echoing Gadenne and Singhal, how should we think about accountability if “a good local government is not one that builds schools but rather is successful at competing with other jurisdictions to attract an internationally funded NGO to build schools”?<sup>16</sup> Each of these accountability relations—between central governments and local administrations, citizen-consumers and private sector service providers, and citizens and international actors—deserve additional academic and policy attention.

Most of the accountability mechanisms discussed above and in the broader body of work on political accountability emphasize the link between voters and elected officials. Yet it seems unlikely that citizens care much about the behavior of elected officials above and beyond the quality of the frontline services they get from government. That the case, one of the most important accountability relations bears on the capacity of local politicians to induce good behavior on the part of unelected bureaucrats and service providers. Absenteeism and weak effort in the public sector are huge problems in many countries (Rogers and Vegas 2009, Banerjee and Duflo 2005), and a small but important body of research and programming aims to understand the incentives of bureaucrats and frontline service providers (Leonard 2010; Hasnain et al. 2014; Gingerich 2012; Muralidharan and Sundaraman 2009; Duflo et al. 2012; Khan et al. 2014). The evidence points to considerable variation in administrative responsiveness across agencies within countries; it also suggests that high-powered incentives can promote better performance, although this may come with some social cost (Khan et al. 2014) and frontline bureaucrats are creative in finding ways around incentive schemes (Banerjee et al. 2008). One place for research and

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<sup>16</sup> 2014: p. 597.

donor programming to explore is in the use of alternative and less expensive means of promoting better employee performance. Work on corporate culture and workplace networks provide some foundation for thinking about how frontline agents might be motivated without relying on high powered incentives.

Experimenting on administrative rules aside, accountability is particularly difficult to generate in decentralized settings where local administrators—be they teachers, health workers, or police—are agents of the central government rather than local voters. In these settings, the best way to combat absenteeism, corruption and rent seeking might involve oversight and incentives from the central government rather than fostering distinctly local accountability (see the Grossman chapter in this volume). For many citizens, one of the more important avenues for improvement would be in the practices of local police and courts. For many citizens, the very first (and perhaps only) experience with the state comes in the form of the local police officer and judges who are oft to be avoided at all cost. Unfortunately, these fundamental agents of the rule of law have largely operated outside of academic research on accountability even as donor programming has recognized their importance for quite a while (USAID 2002). The recent boom in donor programming on these areas is conceptualized largely in terms of crime prevention rather than as a means of promoting accountable governance, but it is important that we learn how to promote professional and responsive frontline agents of the rule of law.

Finally, political accountability—be it decentralized or otherwise—is notoriously difficult to measure. There are several large cross-national efforts to measure the quality of governance, including elements of accountability (Agrast et al. 2009; Kaufmann and Kray 2008). There are also related efforts to harmonize measurements of the quality of local governance, again with important elements of accountability thrown in (Bloom, Sunseri and Leonard 2007), albeit with limited uptake in the field. All such efforts are plagued with serious problems (Kaufman and Kray 2008), none more serious than the atheoretical construction of indices from potentially unrelated underlying dimensions of governance. Academics and donors are collecting a huge amount of data relevant to decentralized political accountability, but these efforts are uncoordinated and reflect the idiosyncratic needs of particular projects. As such, it is difficult to accumulate wisdom across research projects even as they aim to understand fairly similar accountability mechanisms. To the extent donor programming aiming to improve accountability is to take part in the ongoing evaluation revolution, it is important that researchers and donors begin to coordinate their efforts the measure accountability. The challenge is conceptual (what are the key dimensions of accountability?), empirical (how to measure the key concepts appropriately across diverse settings?) and administrative (who will do the coordinating?). Addressing these challenges is even more pressing in light of the high profile that the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals place on “accountable institutions”.<sup>17</sup> USAID could play an important role in promoting a harmonized effort to measure decentralized accountability through its research support and programming on decentralization.

### *Conclusions*

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<sup>17</sup> See SDG #16: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>

“Context matters”. Everyone has heard this, and everyone believes it. Alas, it is a slippery slope indeed from “context matters” to the notion that everything matters. And if everything matters, what is a governance officer (or a social scientist) to do? An awful lot of academic research on social capital, civil society and community-driven development has assumed a common endpoint for a local, democratic order. Perhaps even more donor programming on social accountability has ignored local context in the expectation that a robust, participatory social order was an intervention away. In the face of mounting academic and policy frustration with these naïve and decontextualized notions of local political economies, it is important that researchers and the development community alike take a rigorous approach to learning and programming on local social contexts and alternative means of promoting better local governance.

Luckily, while many of us interested in development were not paying attention, a host of formal theorists, sociologists, statisticians and social networking analysts have been developing a body of knowledge on what features of networks, i.e. of social context, matter for outcomes that we care about. As Siegel notes “Networks may vary in importance by substantive topic and spatiotemporal setting, but their conceptualization is clear and constant....”<sup>18</sup> This chapter has provided a summary of some of the key insights of work on social networks and how they might instruct donor programming on social accountability, civil society promotion and community-driven development.

Programming in a way that is consistent with what we know about social networks does require some practical change. At the point of project design it requires a capacity to tailor interventions to local conditions so as to maximize the prospects for accountability. As noted above, this requires implementers to make a choice: Do they want to engineer local social networks that promote accountability or do they want to take existing networks as given and design projects that reflect them. In either case, existing academic work provides some guidance. A networked approach to SA also requires some changes to monitoring and evaluation practices. Baseline, midline and endline data (where they exist) are typically not relational and thus provide limited insight into network properties. If programming is to be responsive to local contexts, relational data has to be collected at baseline so as to inform that programming. Such data collection can be expensive, but technology is driving costs down, and innovations in sampling on networks offer savings. When it comes to M&E, there are tremendous gains to be had from cooperation between the development industry and academics—the former wants to know what works, and the latter specializes in figuring that out and can help build a rigorous learning agenda into social accountability programming.

The challenges of implementing this kind of programming are not trivial, but many of them have already been solved. Taking those solutions onboard is crucial, because a relational, networked approach to decentralized social orders offers the potential to move beyond the oft-vapid notion that “context matters” to a rigorous understanding of when, where and why social accountability exists. We are at an advantageous moment: donor desire for

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<sup>18</sup> Siegel 2011: p. 51.

systematic programming and evaluation, academic research interests, and the technology of data collection and citizen mobilization are all converging in such a way that we can make great progress in learning on these crucial issues.

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