Arab Reform Initiative

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Powerful tool or passing trend? Meanings and practices of social accountability in the Arab world, and why they matter

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Hundreds of civil servants gathered at Babul Ahad square hold placards as they march towards the parliament building during a protest against the new retirement law, Rabat, Morocco, 14 December, 2016. ©AA/Jalal Morchidi

The Need for Social Accountability Initiatives

In the three countries we studied, social accountability is a scarce but very much needed public good. In **Lebanon**, state capture by incumbent elites has triggered multiple crises that led to an ongoing socio-economic collapse. Despite dramatic failures in public service delivery - from public health issues during the COVID-pandemic or the Beirut Blast of 4 August 2020 to the devaluation of the national currency or paralyzed decision-making-, a sclerotic class of politicians keeps on fending off structural reform. Since change is unlikely to arrive through the ballot box, social accountability mechanisms represent important opportunities for social movements and opposition groups to devise new strategies and hold incumbent elites to account.

In **Tunisia**, since the first democratic elections in 2011, political forces have struggled to reform a socioeconomic system and state institutions characterized by decades of misgovernance and corruption. In July 2021, President Kais Saied suspended parliament, dismissed the prime minister, shut down the anti-corruption body and has since been ruling by decree. The country has also been suffering from economic difficulties, deepened further by the COVID-19 pandemic, and continued resistance to the democratization process among political, bureaucratic and economic elites. Despite such resistance, numerous Tunisian individuals and associations have continued to demonstrate their ability to launch innovative civic projects that make a difference on the local and national levels.

Morocco too has seen major setbacks in freedom of speech and civil liberties in recent years. Both the limited influx of tourists due to travel restrictions and one of the severest droughts in Morocco's history are taking a serious toll on citizens' livelihoods. The lack of material improvement in their situation and declining trust in (elected) official institutions has pushed citizens to circumvent traditional mechanisms of representation.

The many meanings of social accountability

So, what do local actors in the region understand by the term "social accountability"? Scholarly literature views social accountability initiatives as anything from citizen monitoring and oversight of public or private sector performance, to user-centered public information access systems, public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms, or even citizen participation in actual resource allocation, such as participatory budgeting.

When we asked citizens and civil society activists in Lebanon, Tunisia and Morocco what they understand by social accountability, we found that the term encompasses a broad range of different understandings relating to the relationship between state and citizens, including:

- **Transparency** with regards to the work of public institutions (e.g. Al Bawsala in Tunisia; Kulluna Irada in Lebanon; Tafra's publication of disaggregated electoral data in Morocco)
- **Access to information** (Open Budget Survey for Morocco, iWatch's work in Tunisia and Gherbal Initiative in Lebanon)
- **Participation** (Jasmine Foundation's participatory urban planning and Action Associative's participatory budgeting initiatives in Tunisia; protecting public space in Lebanon)
- **Answerability** meaning public institutions and officials explaining and answering for their decisions and conduct (the Nouabook platform in Morocco; Badna Nhasib in Lebanon; Min Haqi Nsaalek's public meetings with parliamentarians in Tunisia)
- **Rule of law** meaning access to justice and equality before the law (the Legal Agenda in Lebanon; Tunisian associations' litigation against government in administrative courts)
- **Performance monitoring and evaluation** in public service delivery (International Alert's community score cards initiative in Tunisia; analyzing public procurement or exposing environmental damage in Lebanon; "SMIIG Data" monitoring in Morocco);

The term 'accountability' does not have a clear single equivalent in Arabic. Across all initiatives and in civil society discussions in all three countries, two terms emerged time and again when discussing social accountability: *musa'ala* and *muhasaba*. Activists often used the term *musa'ala*, linked to notion of questioning (*sa'ala*), to indicate the answerability of public officials and their obligation to disclose information and explain their actions (or inaction) and decisions. Meanwhile, the term *muhasaba*, derived from settling accounts (*hasaba*), has a more threatening connotation of enforcing accountability, i.e. sanctioning officials, and is mostly used in initiatives focusing on the rule of law and access to justice.

The popularization of the term "social accountability" (*musa'ala ijtima'iya*) in recent years has been driven by both local demands for accountability and by international donor programs. In Tunisia, for example, the spread of the term among civil society was boosted by the UNDP's Tamkeen programme on "reinforcing the capacity of civil society…as a key development and social accountability actor". However, social accountability has been picked up and reappropriated by local actors in their own array of initiatives, which go beyond interventions promoted by international donors. Thus, there is no straightforward process of "transfer" of ideas or models. While donors play a key role in circulating concepts, these concepts are often adapted by local actors to fit a wide diversity of endogenous demands for accountability.

The reaction by public officials and counter-strategies by civil society organizations

Both the terms *musa'ala* and *muhasaba* meet with resistance from officials on the ground, who are threatened by the connotations of punishment and settling of accounts these terms carry. In all three countries, politicians and bureaucrats use various strategies for resisting or sabotaging social accountability initiatives. They recycle the terminology of accountability while engaging in window-dressing or tokenism, or they ensure that such initiatives do not lead to real accountability. These strategies are often unnoticed by the very donors who pay for social

accountability projects.

However, civil society actors in all three countries have developed counter-strategies to minimize the threat of social accountability initiatives being co-opted, obstructed or sabotaged by officials and state institutions. One such pattern is to build relations with officials that are co-operative, framing their engagement as a process of '*accompagnement*' based on support for state institutions, rather than pure confrontation. Thus, civil society organizations use cooperative language with officials, presenting accountability as a process of building trust between state and citizens. Such "cooperative" methods include signing partnerships with ministries or municipalities, providing expertise and technical support to public officials (offering trainings or supporting municipalities to create websites and information campaigns), or helping state institutions gain credibility with the public (and donors) by launching joint steering committees or by monitoring public procurement. Civil society actors found that offering resources officials need is an effective means of persuading the latter to engage in social accountability initiatives.

In addition to cooperative approaches, civil society also developed tools to pressure governments, via social mobilization or litigation, but also through sophisticated uses of social or mainstream media, and reputational pressure using relations with international donors.

Thus, local activists in the region deploy strategies to tread a fine line between cooperation and co-optation, and between conflict and confrontation. As one activist in Tunisia explained, "We used to use very confrontational methods [when dealing with officials] which we as an organization are famous for... But then we found that is not a solution. You can't get into a fight with [them] because [they] did something wrong. We should show them how to do it right, how to write their internal rules of procedure, how to conduct a public tender, how to respect access to information laws. So, we have a new approach… which is to build partnerships with institutions… and move from confrontation to support".

Do social accountability initiatives work?

Social accountability initiatives by civil society in Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia

have led to institutional changes at local and national levels. In Tunisia, experimentation with accountability initiatives at municipal level include examples such as participatory budgeting in a number of municipalities and the pioneering open-gov initiative by Sayada Municipality, which became the first Tunisian municipality to put all its official documents online, as well as setting up an open-access intranet network accessible throughout the town that residents could use to access the documents and give their views on local projects and issues. These examples generated public enthusiasm for participatory governance and produced civil society organizations and public officials with experience in driving forward open governance. This helped ensure the adoption of constitutional provisions on transparency, good governance, access to information and participatory democracy at all stages of the decision-making process (articles 15, 32, 137, 139), which were then implemented via the introduction of new laws.

Overall, however, endemic corruption, institutional resistance, and lack of political will have tamed the potential of social accountability initiatives to trigger systemic change. The main limitation of social accountability initiatives for local activists is a lack of 'teeth', i.e. that initiatives may focus attention on key issues and even secure commitments towards accountability, but that such promises are rarely fulfilled. In Tunisia, civil society struggled to get ministries to respond to access to information requests, even when they are required to do so by law. In Morocco, officials hijacked accountability by reframing their answers to bottom-up demands as a top-down concession, rather than as a right. In Lebanon, public office holders routinely depict calls for accountability as partisan attacks on the integrity of the national fabric.

While social accountability initiatives rarely bring about spectacular shifts, we found instances of local, piecemeal change. Most commonly, social accountability initiatives reshape the behavior and attitudes of public officials, who become more used to questioning and more responsive to critique through their engagement in social accountability initiatives. They also appear to be successful in informing citizens and engaging them in monitoring and questioning their public officials at local and national levels.

Implications for citizens and civil society

Citizen-led initiatives to foster accountable and inclusive governance is seen as a way forward by many civil society activists we spoke to in Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. However, to make such initiatives more effective, local actors raised specific challenges.

- **Avoiding co-optation** – civil society actors are keen to prevent their participation or initiatives from being exploited by governments as "window-dressing" or legitimate "reforms" while being emptied of meaning, particularly with regards to international donors. This is particularly delicate at local levels, where CSOs and activists often have personal social ties with municipal officials and are at a greater risk of pressure or retaliation. Thus, CSOs are faced with having to build close relations with state institutions to make their work more effective, while retaining autonomy from the state in order to remain a countervailing power to challenge the state when needed.
- **Coalition-building within civil society** - activists expressed concerns that civil society in their country is organizationally weak, internally divided, and afflicted by polarization and competitive behavior, partly driven by international funding. This leads to a lack of cooperation between CSOs and a fragmentation of collective action, which weakens civil society vis-à-vis public institutions.
- **Evaluating to develop better strategies** – many organizations are concerned by their lack of resources to evaluate their own initiatives. Associations had few methods to gauge why the same social accountability mechanism produces contrasting results in different localities, and how context shapes social accountability dynamics. The focus of donors on short-term projects and tangible outputs undermines the ability of CSOs to experiment with multiple approaches and analyze longer-term outcomes, such as changes in attitudes. Activists also emphasize the need for self-evaluation in order to analyze and compare domestic experiences and develop new, locally generated rather than (imposed) models or 'templates' for action from other contexts.

Implications for donors

Civil society actors in Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia see social accountability initiatives as a way forward but are constrained by current donor approaches. Donors' emphasis on introducing participatory mechanisms into their projects has positive but also negative effects on accountability. For instance, donor-funded, government-led participation programs are sometimes used by authorities to impose forms of citizen participation designed to shield governments from full accountability and exclude CSOs. This risk has been highlighted before in studies describing how Arab governments have usurped processes funded by international donors to strengthen their own networks or hollow out reforms. Sponsoring initiatives that allow governments to define the participation mechanisms opens the door to exploitation of social accountability.

Furthermore, modalities of international donor funding often create limitations for CSOs that undermine the quest for accountability. First, the project-based approach of many donors is limiting CSOs in their long-term attempts to build movements for change that require continued financial support or independence from outside actors. Secondly, donor funding often discourages "political" activities involving confrontational strategies towards the state. For CSOs to be eligible for international funding, they have to be politically "neutral", which has a chilling effect on civil society. Finally, in a context of limited financial autonomy, donor funding encourages competition between CSOs, which further undermines efforts on issues that affect them all. International donors could play a role in facilitating shared spaces to encourage CSOs to cooperate while allowing them to set their own priorities for action.

In short, the design of donor-funded programs can have a deeply depoliticizing effect on Social Accountability Initiatives, and they must be aware of and mitigate this. As shown by the research programme 'Action for Empowerment and Accountability' (A4EA) led by the Institute of Development Studies, donors should be attentive to the rich repertoire of citizen-led social and political action which exists despite authoritarian governance styles, including actions that are 'under the radar'. Most importantly, international donors should focus on understanding the local meanings and practices of social accountability, and be open to local

innovation and long-term processes of learning. This will allow for context-sensitive programming which can help local civil society organisations address pressing challenges in Lebanon, Tunisia, and Morocco.

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About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

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