RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

PSAM
Public Service
Accountability
Monitor

11th-12th Sept
SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY CONFERENCE 2018

Exploring what it takes to enhance
social accountability practice

Conference Report

@PSAM_AFRICA   www.psam.org.za

CONTENTS

EXPLORING WHAT IT TAKES TO ENHANCE SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICE

The conference was themed to interrogate the challenges of working in the social accountability field and to explore the elements which allow for successful social accountability practice, where practitioners are able to enhance the interaction between the state and the public. The 2018 conference thus aimed to explore the manner in which social accountability practice is impacted by context, by power, by the ecosystem of actors within the sector and by actors we may consider outside of the ecosystem.

In order to achieve the aforementioned, the conference brought together a diverse range of stakeholders and practitioners to discuss, share and debate current issues within the social accountability sector. The event focused on a number of central themes, which were used to highlight key debates within the sector and ensure that discussions were relevant to participants and allowed for earnest debate, drawing on participants' experiences. The conference included a keynote address by Prof Thuli Madonsela (former Public Protector of South Africa), as well as panel discussions, small group breakaway sessions aimed at answering specific questions within each theme and a gallery exhibition, which allowed participants the opportunity to share their work and network with each other.

CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of the conference was to provide a platform for strengthening social accountability practice within Sub-Saharan Africa by:

• Providing a space for in-depth debate amongst practitioners, academics, researchers, government officials, donors and other stakeholders involved in social accountability initiatives across Southern and Eastern Africa;

• Support debate amongst participants to better enable a culture of learning and reflection that improves work within the social accountability field;

• Facilitate the presentation of research which highlights the challenges and successes of social accountability practitioners, programmes, conceptual frameworks and projects, in order to contribute towards a pool of knowledge from which participants can learn and which can be used to assist participants to stay relevant and informed;

• Encourage interaction amongst participants from across Southern and Eastern Africa in order to strengthen their partnerships across the region and support the growth of networks amongst social accountability stakeholders.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

Approximately 70 participants attended the PSAM Social Accountability Conference and included the following stakeholders:

• Social accountability practitioners from Southern and Eastern Africa

• Researchers and academics in the field of accountability, transparency and governance (and related issues)

• International NGOs

• Government officials

• Oversight actors

• Media practitioners with a key interest in social accountability issues

• Donor organisations

REPORT STRUCTURE

This report highlights the four key themes of the conference and resultant sub-themes that emerged from the panel discussions and smaller breakaway discussions for each theme. The purpose is not to provide a verbatim account of the 2018 PSAM conference, but instead, to track some of the recurring trends and key issues which emerged over the course of the conference. Each theme also includes a list of questions that were raised in plenary or breakaway sessions, as well as 'lessons learnt' which were provided by participants in their conference evaluations.

The views in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the PSAM, but reflect the views of the conference participants.

Recordings of the panel and plenary discussions, and the keynote address are available at:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWn5NXkCV63xcj2nMBy64IA/videos

THEME 1:
SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEM

This theme aimed to examine the way in which practitioners negotiate their relationships with other stakeholders and ensure that engagement leads to better social accountability practice, in a reflective and deliberate way. The theme also examined the way in which practitioners, CSOs and stakeholders assess their contribution to the greater ecosystem and how they situate themselves within that ecosystem.

At the centre of this theme was the importance of understanding what incentive structures are in place which allow for successful relationships, collective action and responsibility, and the implementation of enhanced social accountability strategies?

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Prof Thuli Madonsela

*Social Justice Chair,
University of Stellenbosch,
South Africa*

*(Pictured with Jay Kruuse,
PSAM Director)*

The PSAM is grateful to Prof Madonsela for being part of our conference and for the insights shared in her keynote address. Prof Madonsela noted that the struggle for democracy is a current issue because the question is not just whether democracy is working, but whether it is working for everyone. Social injustice, public service delivery, corruption, democracy literacy and participation are all inhibiting the effective functioning of democracy "and social accountability can correct that". "Social accountability does not have to be punitive or adversarial", sometimes it is just about creating awareness around an issue where there might not have been any before.

"Social accountability is about me and you holding public representatives accountable." Prof Madonsela outlined the key requirements for accountable governance: democracy literacy and leadership; transparency; a functional accountability framework; technological advances and development; mature and purpose-driven leaders; and incentive structures for those in government, which should not just highlight the corrupt but also prioritise those that are doing good. Partnerships with government are important, but in doing so CSOs need to ensure that they are not co-opted by government and become worried about speaking truth to power; so there is a need to ensure a balance between being part of the system and keeping your independence.

"Democracy is under strain"; but social accountability is a means to strengthen democracy. We need to reflect on "how can we use social accountability to deepen democracy, to re-anchor democracy, to strengthen democracy – even if it means re-imagining democracy for its own sake". There are many opportunities for strengthening democracy through social accountability. "One candle is powerful against the dark because light is stronger than the dark, but many candles together are formidable against the dark."

PANEL DISCUSSION
THE SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEM

Moderator: **Mr Jay Kruuse**
Director of PSAM, South Africa

Panellists: **Adv. Mohamed Ameermia** (Commissioner at the South African Human Rights Commission, South Africa), **Mr Ludovich Utouh** (Director of the Wajibu Institute of Public Accountability, Tanzania), **Ms Gertrude Mugizi** (Head of Programme, PSAM, South Africa), **Mr Dalitso Kubalasa** (Executive Director of the Malawi Economic Justice Network, Malawi).

Panellists: Adv. Mohamed Ameermia, Mr Ludovich Utouh, Ms Gertrude Mugizi & Mr Dalitso Kubalasa.

CONVERSATIONS & BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: CREATING THE ECOSYSTEM

• If CSOs want things to change, they need to learn to have conversations with people that they don't necessarily agree with and who don't agree with them, but still work with them to achieve a common goal. This requires compromise and the willingness to continue to have difficult conversations. Things that help the conversations to be productive are if parties agree on the results, the willingness to listen and civil society taking responsibility for their part in failing governance.

• CSOs have a responsibility of building trust between themselves and government. CSOs need to demonstrate what they are advocating, they need to be transparent and accountable. If they do that, it will bring about the trust between stakeholders because without trust there can never be meaningful development. This mistrust is unfortunately the situation most CSOs are facing in many African countries.

• Elected representatives have to justify the decisions they make to the voters (vertical accountability) and are bound by structures fostering checks and balances (horizontal accountability). Too much power vested in the executive is dangerous and that is why the constitution is key to holding the executive to account.

• The challenge facing civil society who work in accountability is how to minimise things that are not working well in government while still being bold enough to call them out for failure? However, this has to be done constructively so that collaboration is still possible and not confrontational? Many in government have their own frustrations at not being able to do more. Some of these frustrations are as a result of capacity gaps.

INCENTIVES: WHY SHOULD I BE PART OF THE ECOSYSTEM?

• For accountability to be realised, those involved in the system have to be convinced that there is something to gain. The role that civil society can play is to facilitate the promotion of change agents within the public sector.

• All governments aim to make provisions available to their people and governments know that if they are not delivering, their chances of remaining in power are limited, so there is an incentive to be seen to be performing, but on their own they cannot reach all citizens and so they know they will need the media and CSOs to disseminate information.

• Being part of the ecosystem means understanding incentives from different vantage points and making sure there is a collective responsibility. 'What's in it for us' is a very real issue and there is a need to understand this from each stakeholder's perspective.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

• Without sensitisation and awareness in citizens, their appreciation of the efforts being made by civil society will be minimal. There is a need to sensitise citizens so that they can be involved in the process of doing social accountability.

• Citizens cannot demand the rights that they do not know, so it is the duty of CSOs and the media to create awareness.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

•   Social accountability can be defined as citizens holding the government to account. This can be done by ensuring that there is transparency, responsiveness from the government and that public resources are channelled to initiatives that are people-centred. There is a need to emphasise the realisation of human rights, the provision of quality services and the distribution of power.

•   Social accountability is about citizens being at the centre, regardless of the tools being used. Defining social accountability too narrowly runs the risk of being exclusive, so context matters when designing strategies and tools.

•   It's important to differentiate between the best approaches vs the best fitting approaches. It's important to cross check sectoral expectations with the needs and standards of the people.

•   Social accountability is not a new concept; it is important to explore pre-existing social accountability mechanisms and to realise that indigenous norms and systems can be leveraged to ensure more meaningful accountability.

•   As civil society, it important to know what to ask for when engaging duty bearers, be in tune with incremental changes, rising expectations and the demands from both demand and supply sides.

LESSONS LEARNT

•   One important lesson which emerged during the discussion is the need to question norms and probe existing assumptions that inform the social accountability approach;

•   There is a need to map out who is in the ecosystem and identify how best to engage and build partnerships;

•   There is a need for strategic partnerships and to equip citizens with more information.

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS THEME

•   How do youth participate in social accountability? How to influence young people to have a culture and spirit of accountability from a young age?

•   What is meant by people-centred accountability?

•   Do systematic approaches adopted by CSOs in accountability suppress organic activism?

•   What is the role of civil society, given their access to different spaces and privileges?

NAVIGATING POWER

This theme examined the wider political space in which social accountability practice takes place and the factors which enable enhanced practice within those spaces. It also delved into the politics of undertaking social accountability work in context. This meant trying to understand: 1) when it is necessary to deliberately work politically and when it is not; 2) when to use formal processes and when to work informally; 3) when are practitioners over-politicising the work of social accountability to the detriment of stakeholders.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Moderator: **Ms Thokozile Madonko,**
Project manager, *Heinrich Boll Stiftung, South Africa*

Panellists: **Ms Juliet Ilunga** (Programme Manager, Civil Society for Poverty Reduction, Zambia), **Mr Pepukai Chivore** (Senior Analyst, Parliamentary Budget Office, Zimbabwe), **Mr Imbwanga Mapoko** (MuniSAM Programme Director, United Purpose, Mozambique), **Mr Zitto Kabwe** (Activist and politician, Tanzania).

Panellists: Ms Juliet Ilunga & Mr Pepukai Chivore.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

•   For citizens to navigate power they need to have access to the right information, but governments and the private sector sometimes package information in a way that is not accessible to citizens because there are high levels of illiteracy. A key factor is political will for social accountability. There is a need for accessible governments with mechanisms that ensure accountability.

•   Civil society interact with government, but at the same time need to build the capacity of citizens to know their rights and raise issues because government needs to hear voices from everywhere.

•   It is important to strengthen grassroots organisations through capacitation and a better understanding of how to communicate information so that grassroots people own the narrative. CSOs need to tap into local structures that exist within communities and empower people through tools which ensure access to information and agency over government processes.

•   Having access to information is an important tool to gain power. As it is, governments are not obligated to implement recommendations from oversight bodies, therefore it is important to be knowledgeable about how to get oversight recommendations to be implemented by the executive. It is also important to promote the role of citizens in oversight.

•   Poor access to information makes it difficult for CSOs to engage in policy spaces and to promote social accountability to inform decision making.

REGULATORY STRUCTURES

•   Beyond corruption, there is a need to seriously discuss incompetency within the public sector. CSOs should consider existing enforcement mechanisms and look for opportunities to shape them through the use of oversight institutions. Where there are no legal frameworks, CSOs should advocate for these legislative provisions.

•   Tapping into electoral processes or systems could strengthen the voice of CSOs, especially if they use their platforms to inform the public about election processes.

TRUST

•   One major challenges within the sector is the diversity of views. Finding common ground for all parties involved can be difficult. It is easy to move from agreeing to disagreeing within a given situation. As such, it's important to know how other stakeholders operate and not be judgmental without understanding their context. Stakeholders should learn to appreciate positives in each other, have respect and work with the right people in initiatives. Other avenues to build trust include: be evidence-based and restrict emotional outbursts; conduct joint initiatives; and provide capacity building where necessary.

•   Collaboration, teamwork, fairness and lack of bias are all essential for progress and achieving better results in social accountability.

POWER AND POLITICS

• Power is the ability to influence and the ability to make decisions that are binding to citizens. Sources of power include: information, legislation, expertise, legitimacy.

• The incentives to working politically include using both formal and informal connections to achieve goals. Building relationships and connections assist in garnering power.

• The quickest way to get results might depend on getting rid of bureaucracies as they create inequality, especially for those without access to gatekeepers.

• Power affects accountability as one is limited in who they have access to, which might result in interactions with particular individuals rather than institutions. It might be useful to document informal connections, as well to make them formal and in that way widen the areas of influence.

MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

• There are situations where the government restricts public participation in both formal and informal spaces. For example, in Zimbabwe the government often uses formal spaces to restrict citizen's engagement. In such cases CSOs are required to secure police clearance before convening public dialogues. The use of the media has proven to be an effective platform for social accountability and civil engagement. Likewise, in Tanzania, CSOs have used social media to promote social accountability due to government attempts to shut down civic spaces.

• Technology is a useful tool for accountability, but this means taking the capacity of people to use the applications into consideration, especially in rural areas where accessibility is a major factor.

LESSONS LEARNT

• The importance of understanding sources of power and the importance of empowering citizens with information and creating spaces to share both good and bad practice;

• Some situations require being political and realising that informal mechanisms should complement formal systems;

• The importance of striking the delicate balance between confrontational advocacy and collaborative approaches.

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS THEME

• How can civil society think about power in the work they do when trying to navigate accountability cycles to get services delivered?

• How is power organised within a given space?

• How can government forge a collective agenda with civic organisations despite different levels of power?

THE MEDIA AND SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The theme on the media looked at different aspects of media's engagement in accountability within society. Issues around media capture and independence were debated and the importance of balancing the need to ensure that media are part of accountability strategies without being co-opted by accountability practitioners in order to ensure the independence of both stakeholders. The impact of social media, fake news and the continued influence of powerful elements in society were all debated and discussed with the aim of getting a better understanding of the challenges and potential opportunities for engaging the media in social accountability.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Moderator: **Dr Vanessa Malila,**
                 Head of Programme, PSAM, South Africa

Panellists: **Ms Faiza Abrahams-Smith** (Executive Director, Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, South Africa), **Mr Jimmy Maliseni** (Information & Advocacy Officer, Alliance for Community Action, Zambia), **Ms Karabo Rajuili** (Advocacy Coordinator, AmaBhungane, South Africa).

Panellists: Dr. Vanessa Malila (moderator) and Faiza Abrahams-Smith, Jimmy Maliseni & Karabo Rajuili (panellists)

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

•   There is a lot of information available, but is it relevant and does it make an impact on the lives of ordinary citizens? By promoting access to information, citizens can be more involved in accountability rather than being mere observers.

•   Citizens need to ask more questions because if citizens don't ask those questions, then who is holding the media accountable?

•   When budgets or audit reports are released, civil society can assist the public and journalists in understanding the content by developing user-friendly documents online and contacting the media to offer analysis and expertise.

•   Sometimes the release of social accountability findings in mainstream media can result in threats against journalists. But social media can also be used to counter such threats and offer protection by making the threats themselves public.

•   Government should be encouraged to be more open and release as much data as possible to mitigate the possibility of threats against those who might release it in civil society and the media.

•   CSOs also have to ensure they have robust media and communications strategies, knowing how and when to share findings. For example, is it worth sharing a small corruption case on social media if it's going to undermine efforts to create more sustainable, systemic changes in the same government department.

•   MobiSAM and Ushahidi can be invaluable platforms for collecting and collating data. Although these kinds of technology are useful, there has to be a link to the responsible government department to ensure reports can be followed up and action taken. Without this, reports are not used and the users of the applications can become disenchanted.

•   It is important to have a clear yardstick for access to information, taking into consideration the kind of information, the target of the information, the method of delivery or circulating the information, the usability and timing of the information, and to be constantly aware of windows of opportunity where it can be freely accessed or circulated.

•   The role of the media is to make information accessible for citizen consumption. However, in order to do this, journalists must understand the social accountability cycle & their role as social accountability actors.

REALITIES OF JOURNALISM IN CONTEXT

•   More journalism students are graduating but very few know what journalism is about. They know the theory but they don't know the practice of journalism. In South Africa, the education system needs to change because it is outdated and doesn't equip citizens for life.

•   Senior journalists are being retrenched and newsrooms are hiring junior reporters. The reality of most journalists is that they have unrealistic deadlines, almost no budgets, have to be specialists in all subjects, while access to data is a challenge, and so it becomes difficult to produce good quality journalism.

•   In Africa, even in countries that had previously been free, one sees shrinking spaces for media practice. In order for media to continue to play the role of the fourth estate there is a need to understand how they can be relevant to the everyday lives of people, but also make credible media more prominent over 'fake news'.

•   The challenge in making the media an effective watchdog of society is to first identify credible and

legitimate media from ones that hinder accountability. If we want the media to be effective in upholding democracy, we must begin by defining which media we are talking about.

CAPACITY BUILDING

•   There is a need to build the capacity of the media to understand what social accountability is in order for them to be part of the ecosystem.

•   When big stories on corruption break in the news this should be an opportunity to provide context and direct audiences to reflect on bigger systemic issues. As a source for a 'big story', CSOs should ensure that they demonstrate larger systemic issues that must be addressed to prevent future cases.

•   CSOs should work to strengthen systems that protect media freedom, which may mean having to promote the establishment or amendment of laws, foster a culture of information seeking and develop an appetite for information demand.

•   Community media need to be strengthened, as well as utilised, as they tend to be independent and community-oriented. Community radio are more difficult to co-opt politically because they are owned by the community, they have a board that oversees the management team and there is a higher level of independence amongst community radio than commercial media.

•   It's important to also be aware of the incentive structure involving the media and social accountability, as it has potential to counter political narratives which can limit social development. The outcome and value of social accountability should be communicated properly to citizens. CSOs have a responsibility to empower journalists so that they are clear about various social accountability mechanisms.

•   As civil society, we need to begin to extend the understanding of what good media are to other sectors that we can influence in our formal and informal settings. It is important to rally around good media because good media do still exist.

MEDIA INDEPENDENCE

•   What is important is a media that understands social accountability objectives but works independently from the social accountability work. If the media are co-opted, they will lose the same independence that CSOs desire in them. Media should not be part of the social accountability community – rather they should reflect from the middle what the supply side is saying and what the demand side is saying. The media should also be critical of CSOs.

•   Sources are willing to give information but civil society have to behave ethically when dealing with anonymous sources. The media must also be able to verify and corroborate information with other sources and with official documentation.

•   The role of a journalist is to confirm events and to look at different narratives and investigate whether what is being presented is truthful. Transparency about their practice is important and they should show what went into putting a story together. That kind of transparency is not only useful for other journalists but also citizens using the documents made available to hold public officials to account.

•   Media can sometimes be a threat to social accountability when it chooses to support a certain agenda or tow a certain like. There appears to be ignorance within the media regarding social accountability values. Media houses funded by businesses tend to be biased and they distort the issues they report on, as they

lack independence. There are risks that emanate from this bias, such as intentional risks which include deliberate misinformation to cause derision; unintentional risks revolve around incompetence, such as the lack of information provided, lack of access to accurate information, and unverifiable information. Sometimes reporters have good intentions but bad reporting distorts the story.

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

• Media and civil society have to be both critical and responsible users and consumers of social media and information technology. As consumers, when you receive a story on social media, you should be critical of the information it contains and check the source and actually read the story (not just the headline) before sharing. This is especially true for those stories you might agree with or support, as that is often how fake news spreads – if you agree with it you are less likely to be sceptical, and just share without questioning it.

• Social media users should ensure they utilise multiple platforms (mainstream media, social media, websites, blogs, meetings) to communicate information and messages to various audiences, as well as counter fake news.

• Social media is a good way of reaching youth in particular.

• Information technology and social media are a double edged sword. It is important to understand how to use them to advance social accountability work, but also how to moderate and mitigate against the risks.

LESSONS LEARNT

• It is important to maximise the role of media (different forms) in social accountability. But, there is a need to ensure that they are trustworthy and to have legislation that ensures access to information.

• The fact that the media can be captured too and that the media should be allowed to do accountability reporting independently.

• The need to focus on community media as they have better governance structures and therefore are able to resist or withstand capture.

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS THEME

• In a situation where journalism has become commercialised and there has been a level of media capture - how can CSOs deal with that so that citizens are still informed in a way that allows them to make informed decisions?

• Where do media and social accountability intersect?

• What is the role of CSOs and the media in promoting a culture of transparency and accountability?

• How is accessed information used?

LEARNING, ADAPTING AND REFLECTING

This theme aimed at allowing practitioners and stakeholders to interrogate their own learning processes within their practice and asked how they use those lessons to adapt and enhance their practice. The theme looked beyond monitoring & evaluation systems that civil society organisations implement and asked what does learning and reflection look like for social accountability practitioners on a daily basis, how do they make it part of their daily practice and how do they use it to inform improvement in practice?

PANEL DISCUSSION

Moderator: **Ms Rachel Gondo**,
Senior Programme Officer, PSAM, South Africa

Panellists: **Mr Francisco Tabua** (Monitoring & Evaluation Officer, United Purpose, Mozambique), **Dr Baruani Mshale** (Learning Programme Lead, Twaweza, Tanzania), **Ms Angela Bailey** (Associate Director, Accountability Research Centre, USA), **Dr Fletcher Tembo** (Director, Mwananchi Accountability Research & Learning, Malawi).

Panellists: Rachel Gondo (moderator) and Francisco Tabua, Baruani Mshale, Angela Bailey & Fletcher Tembo (panellists).

BUILDING LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

• Learning culture is a question of asking ourselves whether we are a learning organisation or not and how to accommodate new ideas, and how to accommodate critiques. It's about reviewing and reflecting on practice to see how much practices have adapted. The component of adaptation is very important because it can only come in an environment of objective learning.

• One of the challenges for CSOs in accountability is qualitative indicators, which do not adequately show impact, particularly where government is concerned and because governments don't attribute change to others. As such, how can one claim results to be their own and how can CSOs use qualitative indicators more effectively?

• Positionality makes a difference – where one sits in a process or a hierarchy really impacts on what you get out of the monitoring data. CSOs have to reflect on their positions in these hierarchies. It is important to talk about advancing learning and using positions in our institutional environment to create spaces to share the good and bad of activities undertaken. Often there is a tendency to report problems that we really had no control over or only report on positive results. But to learn from these processes CSOs have to be open and create space for all kinds of feedback.

• Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) is a necessary organisational development tool, it should be looked at from both an organisational and wider perspective. MEL at the moment is a compliance tool, because practitioners don't get to deal with the learning aspect of it.

DONORS

• CSOs end up losing their identity and are forced to adapt to strategies provided by donors which might not be appropriate for their context.

• There are two types of donors, ones that gives grantees funds and allows them to draw indicators based on the reality on the ground and implement their programme. The other says 'here are the rules' and only by following these rules will grantees get funding, and those are dictating the rules. The second scenario can be frustrating because a grantee will realise at the far end of their implementation that all the results are responding to the donors needs and not to the beneficiaries needs.

• Some donors are open to communicating about the rules of the funding attached whilst others are not. CSOs should evaluate whether they are reacting to expected goals of those they serve or being influenced by other factors. If done right, MEL can assist CSOs to account internally and externally and should be used as an accountability tool.

• It might be a good idea to look at current MEL systems and as a collective propose that donors revise and customise systems that will better serve project outcomes in context. Proposing these changes to donors as a collective could assist in ensuring they are heard.

EVIDENCE AND LEARNING

• There are challenges of working with research institutions to build evidence: most of the policy work done by CSOs is opportunistic, ad hoc and reactionary whereas researchers need time to review literature and understand the context and only then do the research. CSOs work at different paces and have different expectations. Sometimes project staff will be more emotional and help in solving a problem but the research

unit will be more detached and objective and not study what is being introduced on the ground.

•   The benefits of working with research institutions: it helps uplift the credibility of the evidence produced, the evidence becomes strong and can be defended because there is scientific rigour, particularly in causality. CSOs get the benefit of applying the latest and most innovative methodologies because of developments in the research field.

•   As practitioners, we are constantly thinking and strategising, adapting as we go, but we do most of this without being conscious of it, which results in a cycle of experimentation. This generates rich information and when reflected on strategically, it can generate valuable knowledge.

•   Academic research is very important but it can also be extractive, and the questions and methods are often determined by academics. Society often puts academic research above practical knowledge, but practice is ahead of formal academic research. The purpose of learning is to inform action and the purpose of action is to inform positive change.

•   It's important to learn how to share lessons within organisations and with community members. Often practitioners collect information from communities but fail to give feedback. Most organisations would publish their findings or share it at AGMs, but those are often exclusive, whereas feedback should be accessible.

•   It might be necessary to custom design MEL systems and move away from traditional M&E that limits the learning and engagement with various stakeholders.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS:

•   When civil society partner with government, they work with them on some aspects but this should be done in such a way that civil society don't become an appendage of the state, and it is important to make sure CSOs can maintain their independence.

- CSOs want strong citizens who can hold governments accountable but to get there they need to unlearn some of their own patterns of working with communities. In some respects, CSOs can impose limits on citizens or diminish what they can do. CSOs often underestimate what citizens can do if they are given the space and opportunity. While people are constrained by systems of power, CSOs need to do more to break those invisible power boundaries and norms that inhibit how communities can engage in social accountability processes.

- Social accountability practitioners need to start thinking about collaborative MEL which involves the representation of all stakeholders, including government officials, CSOs, citizens, members of parliament, etc. Good stakeholder analysis is a requirement for that to happen.

- Collaboration doesn't necessarily mean working with people who have similar ideas, although all parties need to share the same goal. There is a need to learn to engage with different stakeholders, in order to improve interventions. Transparency can assist, but it's important to have clear indicators and align CSO indicators with those in the national development plan. Collaborative work and MEL should be beneficial for all those involved.

- Having strategic partners who add value to the strategy could also assist in conceptualising relevant MEL systems. This means providing the right platform for their participation, engaging with them on how they want to participate, appreciating what they can do. It's important to agree on the change they want to achieve from the very beginning. The information gathered is dependent on how information is collected and who needs it, but it also depends on the kinds of approaches used for MEL implementation.

ACCOUNTABILITY TRAPS

- As accountability work leads to more democratic change, it is important to think about systems change, attitudes, building trust and understanding what is happening in context.

- Not everyone is online so CSOs shouldn't assume everyone will use online platforms. It is important to understand who has which technology around which motivations. How to mix traditional media forms of representation with new technology is important to consider. Technology plays a minor role in changing deep-seated systemic weaknesses and governance challenges, more work on power analysis and incremental learning and adapting is required.

- There seems to be a disconnect between structure, and desired outcomes and achievements by practitioners. The problems with social accountability MEL is the lack of feedback strategies and mechanisms, either internally within organisations or externally in the ecosystem.

- In order to drive for more systemic change, it is important to understand what the incentives are for government officials to get involved, for champions to promote the cause, and to understand their pressure points and their challenges in getting involved.

- The problem with a lot of technology is that it tends to be a one-way street, which may be good for immediate problem solving but not necessarily building relationships or systemic change.

ADAPTABILITY

- Adaptation can be viewed as both progressive or a distraction. The challenge is adapting without losing focus. At the same time, adaptation can be viewed as a tool to maintain focus, especially when the change

is based on an awareness of the environment one is operating in. It's important to design strategies that will allow for flexibility and adaptability, which will allow practitioners to take advantage of the opportunities and being deliberate about MEL.

• In order for MEL to work, resources ought to be allocated for opportunities leading to adaptability; including budgeting for reflection activities. It's necessary to create space for accountability while being open and flexible to different approaches, being mindful of shared purposes and shared learning with relevant stakeholders in the eco-system.

LESSONS LEARNT

• CSOs should strive to be learning and adaptive organisations that are able to adapt effectively without moving away from their main goals.

• The importance of reflection, the need to evaluate honestly and to move forward strategically.

• The need to be deliberate in setting up a learning agenda and embedding that in hypotheses in order to test certain assumptions about social accountability work.

• The question is: "Do we need to unlearn some patterns", as CSOs engage with communities in undertaking social accountability?

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS THEME

• How do you learn when you are experiencing conflict within your organisation?

• In what situations and to what extent do CSOs need to reject donor funds?

• What does 'feedback' in MEL mean? Is it feedback externally or also internally within our own structures?

• What does collaborative M&E look like?

• How do you incentivise different actors to participate in your MEL?

• Wicked problems are problems with deep underlying complexities that are resistant to resolution. To what extent can our knowledge and experiences unpack these wicked problems?

CONTACT US

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE WORK THAT PSAM DOES, PLEASE CONTACT US AT ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:

Physical Address: 16B Prince Alfred Street, Rhodes University, Grahamstown

Postal Address: PO Box 94, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 6140

✉   psam-admin@ru.ac.za

📞   046 603 8358

📠   046 603 7578

🌐   www.psam.org.za

f   www.facebook.com/publicserviceaccountabilitymonitor

🐦   @PSAM_Africa