

Social Accountability during Covid-19

By Lindelwa Nxele: PSAM Advocacy and Impact Program Officer

March 2021

Introduction

Corona viruses are a family of hundreds of viruses that was first discovered in chickens in the 1930's. It wasn't until the 1960's that the first human coronaviruses were identified (Kahn et al 2005). The latest addition to the corona virus group, namely COVID-19 was first identified late 2019 in the Wuhan district of China (Kumar et al, 2020). It has since spread to become a pandemic threatening the lives of people worldwide (WHO 2020, Guo et al 2020). As means to manage the pandemic, governments worldwide have been implementing measures to limit human interaction, such as lockdowns and social distancing (World Economic Forum 2020). Whilst these initiatives have been effective in slowing the spread of the virus, their impacts have been less than desirable, especially within the economies of the world. Workplace systems and structures have been disrupted, therefore in addition to people's concerns about their health and wellbeing, various work activities have been delayed or required significant adjustment to ensure work productivity and progress.

The social accountability sector involves stakeholder interaction that engages diverse players, from government officials, donors, civil society organizations (CSOs), media practitioners, researchers to independent activists, and local community members. The main mission of the sector is to ensure that the government is transparent and accountable for their actions in relation to their management of the public resources (Keevil 2020). The approaches used require, amongst others, that governments make available and accessible various documents that detail the use and management of public resources. Often times, these are the documents that social accountability practitioners utilize to monitor and demand the inclusion and recognition of their needs. Having access to the various platforms where government officials can respond to their various concerns is paramount to the progress and impact of social accountability. Furthermore, the sector encourages and promotes citizen engagement, by creating and opening up spaces where citizens can voice their concerns, and engage with their duty bearers (Fox 2015). Social accountability

practitioners seek to engage with government and civil society in various ways, including creating spaces for events, workshops, seminars, conferences and symposiums to advocate and share material learnt from practice, to better provide quality livelihoods for the public in general and more especially for those who are vulnerable. However, the restrictions and lockdowns that have been in place make it challenging to engage the relevant duty bearers using the usual mechanisms. Furthermore, there has been an urgency to ensure that the funds and services allocated to assisting communities and people are properly managed, which has increased the responsibilities of the social accountability agents. This paper aims to understand how the social accountability sector has been dealing and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic that has been disrupting the general way of living and working.

Methodology

Due to the restriction in social interaction implemented by governments to limit the spread of Covid-19, the study adapted a systematic review methodology that analysed material produced and published online focusing on social accountability work. The study only focused on material published between March and August 2020 due to time and resource restrictions. Google and Google scholar were the search engines used to collect material to inform the study. Whilst the main objective of the study was initially going to be peer reviewed published articles, focusing on social accountability, the findings indicated a general lack of such articles. The relatively long time it takes to publish peer reviewed articles, together with the timeframe of the study and the rise of Covid-19 are likely contributing factors that explain the paucity of peer reviewed articles.

Findings

The paper focused on blog articles, press releases and reports that had provided information on the developments, challenges, adjustments and guidelines for the social accountability, as well as the human rights sector. A variation of search words were used to acquire the material needed, which included “social accountability responses to Covid-19”, “Social accountability during Covid-19”, “Social accountability during lockdown”, ‘Civil society responses to Covid-19’ etc. Whilst the Google search engine produced over 119 million results when words ‘social accountability and

Covid-19’ were entered, there were only 6 articles that had ‘social accountability and Covid-19’ in their title published between March and August 2020. Google scholar only had one article that spoke to social accountability within medical students. The other articles were relevant as they had ‘accountability’, ‘social responsibility’, ‘transparency’, ‘human rights’, ‘Covid-19 lockdown’, ‘Sector response’, ‘civil society’, ‘government responses’ etc. For the purpose of the study, only articles that spoke directly to the objectives of the study were selected, most of which appeared on the first page of the Google search engine, likely indicating that they were the most popular and most read, and most likely influential and valued by readers. Due to the large number of material - content drafted by authors/organisations working across countries/regions/continents within the social accountability sector, only those with social accountability in their titles were prioritized and selected for the study. These are listed in the table below.

Table of materials reviewed on social accountability and Covid-19

Article	Author/ organization	Date	Subject covered
Promoting Accountability and transparency during Covid-19	United Nations development Program: Clarke et al.	9 June 2020	Application of a risk based prioritization framework
Supporting Civil Society during Covid-19 Pandemic	Anti-Corruption Resource Centre	2020	Online collaborations
Human Rights Dimensions of Covid-19	Human Rights Watch	19 March 2020	Application of international standards to protect human rights
Scaling up Social Accountability: Global and Local Response to Covid-19	The Larkshman Kadirgamar Institute: Gamage	7 August 2020	Social Accountability Responses to Covid 19
Social Accountability Essential in Covid-19 Response in Southern Africa	Partnership For Social Accountability Alliance	20 April 2020	Call for emergency measures during Covid-19 to be proportionate, necessary, timebound and non-discriminatory
Roundup: Social Accountability in times of Covid-19	Integrity Action: Kermeen	21 May 2020	Collection of some initiatives established to collect and demand responses during Covid-19
The Attitude of Medical Students for their roles and	Hong J et al.	2020	The role, impact and the attitudes of medical students

Article	Author/ organization	Date	Subject covered
social accountability in the Covid-19 pandemic			
Social Accountability and CLD in Covid-19 response	Global Partnership for Social Accountability: Kalb	29 June 2020	Responses to Covid-19 and social accountability led by community leaders
How to do social accountability during distancing and lockdowns?	Mullard S and Aarvik P.	May 2020	Minimizing the risk of getting infected by Covid-19 whilst conducting social accountability through applying digital tools and other innovations
Transparency and Accountability lacking in National Covid-19 responses	Centre for Natural Resource Governance	9 April 2020	Reporting on the lack of and need for transparency in the Zimbabwean's government response to Covid-19
'We're still Open" Balancing government transparency and accountability with effective crisis response	Pact World: Keevil L.	2 July 2020	Civil society being sidelined during Covid-19 and the plea for government to balance responsiveness and accountability
Covid-19 Vulnerable Sector response	Saskatoon inter-agency Response to Covid-19: Alhassan et al	May 2020	Mapping out the areas that need most attention during Covid-19
Covid-19: A chance to empower citizens through social protection	Global partnership for social accountability: Knowledge Platform	30 April 2020	Need to adjust due to lockdown to ensure citizen empowerment and protection
Putting Integrity and Accountability at the heart of government response to Covid-19 especially in the water sector	Water Integrity network: Schmoll	11 May 2020	Ensuring accountability, transparency and inclusion during Covid-19 response
Public Integrity for an effective Covid-19 response and recovery	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): Bacio Terraccino	19 April 2020	Challenges that arise during crisis management that affect integrity in the management of public resources and delivery of public services

COVID-19 and social accountability

Amongst the material that has been produced and published that focus on Covid-19 and social accountability, those that report on the responses to the crisis are most common (Bacio Terraccino 2020; Gamage 2020; Partnership for Social Accountability Alliance 2020; Kalb 2020; Centre For Natural Resources Governance 2020; Keevill 2020; Alhassan et al 2020; Schmoll 2020; Kermeen 2020).

There was also material published focusing on the challenges faced by the frontline workers, such as psychological stresses. These articles were mainly focused on advocating for the support of the most vulnerable and the civil society that aims to protect and assist them (Global Partnership for Social Accountability 2020; Park J and Chung S 2020; Anti-Corruption Resource Centre 2020; Mullard S and Aarvik P 2020).

Government transparency, integrity and accountability has also been mentioned in a number of articles, with an emphasis on opportunities to improve participation and anti-corruption measures (Clarke et al 2020, Centre for Natural Resource Governance 2020; Keevill 2020). Taetzsch and Kant further corroborate by stating that the crisis will provide a chance for the humanitarians to empower citizens as means of social protection (Global Partnership for Social Accountability 2020).

Government Accountability, Transparency and Integrity

The global community responded urgently to the Covid-19 threat, endeavoring to address gaps in order to provide services and alleviate the struggles that the populace has been facing due to the pandemic crisis. However, the Covid-19 pandemic is not just a problem affecting the humanitarian sector, but also the government structures as they are expected to provide adequate relief aid for the citizens affected by the crisis. Bacio Terraccino (2020) reports that times of crisis tend to present opportunities for corruption, such as awarding dubious amounts in terms of tenders to procure personal protective equipment, or distribution of awareness material. The crisis could potentially provide opportunities for the reduction of transparency and accountability that could have been building up for years (Schmoll 2020).

Lack of integrity can also compromise the recovery processes when service delivery is not monitored accordingly, in such cases as when governments are not transparent or accountable to the citizens. Balancing accountability and transparency has always been a challenge for most government structures, as well as being able to justify why and how public resources are being managed, which compromises the public's trust of the government (Keevill 2020). Therefore, it is important for government to be cognizant of challenges that come with procurement, control and oversight, as well as the risks of mismanaging public resources during these times of crisis.

It has been emphasized that in order to prevent the misuse of resources, governments needed to be transparent and accountable whilst encouraging participation and implementing anti-corruption initiatives (Schmoll 2020). Initiatives by the government should be tailored for each context and adopt a multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral oversight body network inclusive of government officials, academics, civil society and oversight institutions to prevent corruption but also raise awareness of the crisis and the various mechanisms adopted to mitigate it (Clark et al 2020).

Governments needed to document decision making processes and have clear lines of communication and responsibilities to provide oversight bodies with guidelines to implement ethical and accountability frameworks. (Bacio Terraccino 2020). Whilst it would be ideal for government to initiate these interventions, citizens across the globe, especially those from developing countries indicate that governments were not prepared to deal with the crisis. There is a rise in a number of people being affected, especially with the lockdowns and restrictions closing down people's means of subsistence and service provision (Centre for Natural Resources Governance 2020). The crisis seems to be widening the gap of inequality within countries, as it is felt by those who are marginalized and previously disadvantaged the most. There is limited trust that governments can effectively manage the crisis and ensure proper management of the public resources to elevate citizens, therefore the role of the social accountability sector and civil society increases significantly in ensuring accountability and transparency (Keevill 2020).

Social Accountability Responses

When the Covid-19 epidemic was first identified as a threat that needed to be mitigated by all means necessary, many governments introduced regulations to try and enforce social distancing and lockdown restrictions. Despite the inconvenience that affected the protection and realisation

of human rights, most global citizens were willing to abide by the emergency crisis regulations to combat the scourge of the epidemic. However, those that were not able to due to their work were urged by the states' law enforcement forces to abide to these laws by wearing masks in public and observing curfews (Good Governance Africa 2020). Whilst these inhibitions to human rights were acceptable, there were others that were not, especially those that violated humans' rights to quality health services, food and shelter. The prohibitions brought by lockdown limited access to health services highly impacting those who were most prone to the Covid-19, such as people living with HIV or were suffering from chronic diseases, like diabetes (Human Rights Watch 2020). Furthermore, whilst lockdowns were justified, they affected businesses, causing people to lose jobs, and took away the only means of subsistence for informal workers and small businesses, creating worse of conditions for their livelihoods. International agents intervened and provided crisis relief funds, however, the distribution of those funds was disrupted by corruption in most states, especially those already rife with mismanagement of public resources (Centre for Natural Resources Governance 2020).

During the early stages of lockdown, civil society was also restricted from following its mandate of holding the government accountable. However, with the increase of human rights violations and the lack of transparency in the use of emergency relief funds injected into the economy by international agents, the social accountability sector mobilized to intervene. In-fact the crisis was perceived by others to bring about opportunities to open up the civil spaces that were shrinking and offer up their expertise in advising and engaging with the government to better provide services and limit the impact of the pandemic to the general population (Keevill 2020). Social accountability called on the government to be more inclusive and transparent in decision making, provide grants to those displaced and unemployed, provide information related to Covid-19, provide testing and treatment sites in marginalized communities as well as cater for the disabled communities and those subjected to gender based violence (Centre for Natural Resource Governance 2020, Human Rights Watch 2020). There was also a huge emphasis on providing asylum for the desolate, food for those living below the poverty line and personal protection equipment for the essential frontline workers, such as the medical staff and the community health workers (Human Rights Watch 2020, Partnership for Social Accountability Alliance 2020). The right to education was also highlighted as one that should not be violated, even during lockdown, mechanism were put in place by various governments to ensure that learners and students continue

with their academic studies. These were mostly reliant on the use of technology, which further exposed inequalities and the technological divide between those privileged and the disadvantaged populations. Recommendations include adapting strategies that will pay more attention to the previously disadvantaged to ensure that they are not left behind, especially girls and the disabled learners (Human Rights Watch 2020).

A report published by the Anti-Corruption Resource Centre focused on outlining the challenges faced by the social accountability sector as well as the opportunities provided by the crisis. The challenges that the social accountability or civil society face such as restrictions in movement prevent them from conducting meetings that require their physical presence (Mullard and Aarvik 2020). Which can be a major drawback in ensuring engagement with the government. Therefore, effective implementation of social accountability and ensuring that public resources management analysis and recommendations reach the intended audience required practitioners to think differently about their strategies and activities. Whilst there is an overload of information, there is also the problem of misinformation and fake news, and access to timely information, regarding the number of cases per region, for example is limited. With limited spaces to engage the duty bearers, participation in decision making and budgeting is restricted. Even though there is great emphasis in using online platforms in countries that are implementing social distancing and lockdown measures, these digital platforms are often costly and inaccessible to disadvantaged communities.

It is important to note however that whilst the majority of the work occurs digitally, there have been protest and food distribution initiatives that require people to be physically present. This calls for the provision of personal protection equipment and sanitizers to ensure that the virus does not spread (Farrington 2020). These physical engagements have mostly been witnessed amongst the disadvantaged communities, without the skills or resources to engage on the digital platform. The disregard for social distancing in the name of social accountability need to be considered, and there should be strategies in place to ensure that even the marginalized can get involved in the social accountability process without risking their lives.

Opportunities highlighted by the Anti-Corruption Resource Centre (2020) include the need to be creative, stressing the potential for civil society to increase its legitimacy and engage widely using online platforms, building networks and collaborations with various players, as well as playing a significant role in validating information. There has been a wide range of webinars occurring

online, with practitioners sharing their experiences of the Covid-19 responses as well as the different ways they have been holding government's accountable. Webinars are not only used to share information, but they are platforms to discuss latest trends within the sector, what is working and is not. Gatherings and meetings now mostly occur online, which also poses a challenge in terms of reaching out to the people that need assistance the most, who are not often able to afford the software, hardware and the data to engage online effectively. However innovative interventions such as erecting tech hubs in underprivileged communities have been helpful in allowing the citizens to engage in online platforms. In addition to digital platforms, other platforms such as local radios and television stations can be used to reach the masses and distribute information. Phones, SMS and social media platforms are also perceived as useful tools to engage and create networks that explore the various challenges and seek solutions to combat the crisis. The digital platforms are widely perceived as productive measure for different players to connect, collaborate and co-exist (Mullard and Aarvik 2020). Digital platforms have also been used to collect data, through surveys, creating funding websites, and sharing information using multi-media formats.

Supporting Social Accountability

Funding was mentioned as the major factor in ensuring that social accountability work continues. Donors should also assist in monitoring the initiatives to ensure that they reach the targets and that the information circulating is relevant and accurate. It is important to consider the small initiatives that do not often get platforms to gain momentum. Donors should endorse these initiatives and engage with different players within the sector including religious organisations, local media and radio, sports clubs and community based organisations. Scaling up on technology is crucial in ensuring inclusivity and representation in social accountability initiatives. There is also a great need to provide capacity building, digital tools and guidelines to ensure effective and impactful interventions (Mullard and Aarvik 2020).

One of the major findings has been the impact of the crisis on the psychological wellbeing of society, most specifically those who are infected by the virus and affected due to compromised job and food security as well as the frontline workers who are exposed and therefore under immense stress. Several studies have been conducted that indicate the rise of psychological issues amongst the frontline workers, most specifically health care workers (Lee et al 2020, Hong et al 2020).

Psychosocial interventions have been highlighted as necessary to assist citizens and practitioners to deal with the stresses and pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Hong et al 2020).

Conclusion

Whilst the social accountability sector is familiar with making use of digital platforms, such as social media, community of practice websites, webinars to share and interact with each other, most of the engagements were deemed more effective and productive when facilitated in real time and face to face. However, with countries implementing lock downs and social distancing, a range of the usual activities that the sector embarks on have been affected. Apart from the inability to easily travel to meetings, conferences and offer live courses and workshops, interactions with diverse players including the government and communities have been disrupted. Civil society spaces have been under fire and the threat of shrinking spaces has been plaguing certain contexts and countries for a few years now (Buyse 2018). The emergence of COVID-19 and its restrictions on movement and work practices have placed further strains on the progress of the sector that was already struggling to maintain platforms to support and further their social accountability initiatives. Conducting social accountability work is proving more challenging due to the spread of the COVID-19, however, the sector is not taking it lying down (SAI 2020). Civil society organisations (CSOs) and other social accountability stakeholders have been exploring various mechanisms to ensure that the very important work that the sector is engaged in continues and remains relevant. These alternatives include shifting the work to the digital platforms where various players, including the marginalized and vulnerable communities, can engage the government. Driving their main purpose of encouraging the government to be transparent, accountable and prioritize the needs of those who are most affected by Covid-19.

References

Alhassan J., Gough H., Heilman B., Hanson L., and Christopherson- Cote C. 2020. Report on Covid-19 Vulnerable Sector Response in Saskatoon March – May 2020. Saskatoon Inter-Agency Response to Covid-19. <https://engagingfortheequity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Report-June-19.pdf>

Bacio Terraccino J. 2020. Public integrity for an effective COVID-19 response and recovery. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). 19 April. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/public-integrity-for-an-effective-covid-19-response-and-recovery-a5c35d8c/>

Buyse A. 2018. Squeezing civic space: restrictions on civil society organizations and the linkages with human rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*. 22:8, 966-988, DOI: 10.1080/13642987.2018.1492916

Centre for Natural Resource Governance. 2020. Transparency and Accountability lacking in national Covid-19 Responses. In *Campaigns*. 9 April <https://www.cnrgzim.org/transparency-and-accountability-lacking-in-national-covid-19-responses/>

Clarke D., Wierzynska A., DiBiase M., and Timilsina A. 2020. Promoting accountability and transparency during Covid-19. United Nations Development Programme. 9 June. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2020/promoting-accountability-and-transparency-during-covid-19.html>

[Farrington. 2020. Community Engagement during Covid-19. A guide for community facing staff. Oxfam. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/gd-covid-19-oxfam-community-engagement-guide-270420-en.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/gd-covid-19-oxfam-community-engagement-guide-270420-en.pdf)

Fox A. 2015. Social Accountability. What does evidence really say. *World Development*. 72, 346-361. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.03.011>

Gamage A. 2020. Scaling up Social accountability: global and local responses to Covid-19. *Pandemic – The Progression*. The Larkshman Kadirgamar Institute. 7 August. <https://lki.lk/blog/scaling-up-social-accountability-global-and-local-response-to-covid-19/>

Good Governance Africa. 2020. Covid-19: A GGA Response. *Patrolling during a pandemic*. Africa Portal. May. https://media.africaportal.org/documents/patrolling_during_a_pandemic.pdf

Guo Y, Cao Q, Hong Z, Tan Y, Chen S, Jin H, Tan K, Wang D and Yan Y. 2020. The origin, transmission and clinical therapies on coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak – an update on the status. *Military Medical Research*. 7:11 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40779-020-00240-0>

Hong J., Jung I., Park M., Kim K., Yeo S., Lee J., Suh S., Hong Y., Park J., and Chung S., 2020. The attitudes of Medical Students for their roles and social accountability in the Covid-10 pandemic era.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343737671> The Attitudes of Medical Students for Their Roles and Social Accountability in the COVID-19 Pandemic Era

Human Rights Watch. 2020. Human Rights dimension of Covid-19 Response. 19 March. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response>

Kahn, J.S. and McIntosh, K. 2005.. History and Recent Advances in Coronavirus Discovery. The Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal 24 (11) 223-227.

Kalb M. 2020. The movement for community-led development. Social accountability and CLD in Covid-19 response. Global Partnership for Social Accountability. 29 June. <https://mclcd.org/2020/06/30/social-accountability-and-cld-in-covid-19-response/>

Keevill L. 2020. 'We're still Open:' Balancing government transparency and accountability with effective crisis response. Pact World. 2 July. <https://www.pactworld.org/blog/%E2%80%98we%E2%80%99re-still-open%E2%80%99-balancing-government-transparency-and-accountability-effective-crisis>

Kermeen I. 2020. Roundup: Social Accountability in times of Covid-19. What we are learning/ blog. Integrity Action. 5 May. <https://integrityaction.org/what-we-are-learning/blog/roundup-social-accountability-in-times-of-covid-19/>

Kumar D, Malviya R and Kumar S. P. 2020. Corona Virus: A Review of COVID-19. Eurasian Journal of Medicine and Oncology. 4(1):8–25.

Mullard S, and Aarvik P. 2020. Supporting civil society during the Covid 19 pandemic. The potential of online collaborations for social accountability. U4 Guide 2020:1. Anti- Corruption Resource Centre. CMI CHR. Michelsen Institute <https://www.u4.no/publications/supporting-civil-society-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf>

Mullard S. and Aarvik P. 2020. How to do social accountability during distancing and lockdowns? CMI CHR. Michelsen Institute. May 2020. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7244-how-to-do-social-accountability-during-distancing-and-lockdowns>

Partnership for Social Accountability Alliance. 2020. Social Accountability Essential in Covid-19 Response in Southern Africa. COPSAM. 20 April. <http://copsam.com/social-accountability-essential-in-covid-19-response-in-southern-africa/?fbclid=IwAR1ribJHkEruvg-fdHEfg1NKtmTqmEhNvnamlPI6KtW71VDj3dVknOuaFM>

Schmoll O. 2020. Putting Integrity and accountability at the heart of government response to Covid-19, especially in the water sector. Covid-19 and Water Integrity: 4 measures to move forward. Water Integrity Network. 11 May. <https://www.waterintegritynetwork.net/2020/05/11/water-integrity-covid-19-response/>

Social Accountability International. 2020. SAI Information during COVID-19 epidemic. <http://www.sa-intl.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=1978>

Taetzsch K. and Cant S. 2020. Covid-19: A chance to empower citizens through social protection. Global Partnership for Social Accountability: Knowledge platform blog. 30 April. <https://gpsaknowledge.org/covid-19-a-chance-to-empower-citizens-through-social-protection/>

World Economic Forum. 2020. In Pictures: High Noon during Coronavirus lockdown. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/high-noon-lockdown-around-the-world/>

World Health Organization: Europe. 2020. <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/international-health-regulations/news/news/2020/2/2019-ncov-outbreak-is-an-emergency-of-international-concern>