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Strengthening Accountability for Urban Services

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Abstract

Participatory governance is explored in this article in the context of participatory mechanisms of accountability for urban services. Accountability has become a buzzword internationally over the past few years, and, as is the case with many such terms, there is confusion as to what exactly is meant. The people and organisations promoting accountability view it as critical to solving problems with urban services in an increasingly fragmented context of service provision. This article seeks to explore the growing interest in accountability and to assess the potential of participatory governance to improve the provision of urban services. Other objectives are to:

- Consider contemporary innovations in the way urban services are delivered – the context of accountability.
- Define accountability using the existing literature and present current models for accountability.
- Discuss how the concept of participatory governance can be operationalised in the context of urban services
- Present initial findings from case studies undertaken in South Africa, Bangladesh, South Korea and UK. These case studies are used to illustrate different functions of accountability.
- Examine the potential of accountability arrangements demonstrated in these case studies to improve the quality of local services and the responsiveness of services providers

Introduction

The term 'urban services' refers here to water and sanitation, street cleaning, solid waste management, roads, community halls and street lighting; these facilities require investments in maintenance, rehabilitation, repair, and replacement. Urban services require substantial resources and a concern with the effectiveness of their performance has resulted in management strategies to oversee operation and maintenance more effectively; financing strategies to provide resources for rehabilitation efforts; the introduction of new technologies to improve the infrastructure base; and changes to institutional design. However, it has been realised that such supply-side techniques alone will not solve infrastructure problems and, increasingly, service users are encouraged to get involved in service delivery.

A Focus On Participatory Governance

The term governance reflects a range of relationships between civil society and state[1]. The governance of urban services typically depends on many actors (municipalities, politicians, public officials, urban authorities, public agencies, customers (these may be commercial, industrial, public institutions, or domestic), NGO/ CBO, private sector, ministries (such as water, health, environment), and agencies of restraints (i.e. watchdogs and regulators). Effective urban governance has been associated with good quality infrastructure and service provision together with the politics surrounding the provision of infrastructure, which frequently reinforce the inequities in society.

Participatory governance reforms are increasingly seen as a legitimate aspect of urban service programmes. Participatory governance in this context refers to the role civil society has in holding service providers to account[2]. It is hoped that direct participation by users in service delivery and policy making will improve accountability in services and that improved accountability means that service delivery outcomes also improve as a result. In theory

1

there is a relationship between users' voice, accountability and service outputs. Tools and methodologies are being developed to facilitate participation in governance at the macro level (public participation in audits, policy and public expenditure) and micro level (user assessments of services delivery and incorporation of user perspectives into planning).

Institutional Development

The World Development Report (1994) [3] reached the conclusion that the institutions traditionally responsible for public service provision are the source of most unsatisfactory service. The provision of services has historically been seen as responsibility of the state, yet governments have been unable to provide, operate and maintain public services in pace with rapid urbanisation and population growth. Public provision of urban services has been critiqued on the basis of waste of resources, physical losses, poorly maintained assets, commercial losses due to inefficient billing and revenue collection, illegal connections, overstaffing, low service coverage, and poor quality of service. Recent policy has emphasised such reforms as the use of competition and more businesslike operation of urban services, as well as public sector management approaches (e.g. new laws, internal oversight rules and civil service pay). However, these kinds of institutional strategies have not been as effective as hoped. A more contemporary innovation has been the promotion of checks and balances from civil society[4] and especially the involvement of service users in planning, operating, regulating and financing services at the community and neighbourhood level.

Increasing citizen oversight in service delivery is intended, ideally, to make service delivery more accountable [5]and responsive to citizens and performance more effective and predictable. Service users are considered better placed to monitor the services on which they depend as they have a greater incentive in this regard as well as the information and face-to-face interaction with front line providers. In particular it is assumed that if the poor can participate in priority setting and planning for services, as well as monitoring and disciplining providers, better services will result. Such an approach tends to be pragmatic; the involvement of service users in promoting accountability compensates for weak institutions and regulation; it places an emphasis on the results of service delivery over the ideology behind decisions and has a focus on people as consumers of services rather than citizens.

Participatory Governance in Urban Services

The current debate on urban services has concerned itself to a considerable extent with the new rights of service users within a human rights based framework. However, certain commentators suggest effective services are also dependent on the fulfilment of user duties as well. Ostrom[6] contends "Good agency performance results not from strengthening public sector agencies, but from increasing their responsiveness to customers. This fosters an active, vocal constituency that puts in motion the accountability mechanisms needed for good agency performance." Similarly, Putnam[7] argues "Engaged citizens are a source of discipline and information for public agencies". By implication, then, good services are associated with a civil society characterized by reciprocity, altruism, trust and co-operation. Crook and Manor[8] suggest that civil organisations can help to foster fairer, more honest, transparent, democratic and accountable governance; and Gita Sen[9] proposes an understanding of the public sphere where "we can think of people participating along with governments in defining needs, in making choices appropriate to those needs, and in enforcing accountability."

Growing interest in accountability for urban services

Accountability has emerged as an international issue and talk of accountability has become commonplace in service delivery debate. Increasing accountability as a mechanism to tackle problems with urban services has taken place within a particular political and social context. Prevalent trends include an emphasis on the individual; result-based service delivery; demand management; the use of private sector thinking and practices in public service delivery; and attempts at creating similar working cultures across the private, public and voluntary sectors.

"A is accountable to B when A is obliged to **inform** B about A's (past or future) actions and decisions, to **justify** them, and to suffer **punishment** in the case of eventual misconduct" [10]. Accountability has a number of functions; Jabbra and Dwivedi [11] argue the term also ought to include administrative, legal, professional, political, and moral components. O'Donnel [12] (states that accountability operates in different directions, and has distinguished between horizontal accountability ("the capacity of state institutions to check abuses by other public agencies and branches of government") and vertical accountability (the means through which citizens, mass media and civil associations seek to enforce standards of good performance on officials.) Recently, citizens have been involved directly in the workings of horizontal accountability institutions, for example, through public hearings or participatory auditing. Goetz and Gaventa [13] call this 'diagonal accountability'.

Where once the focus of accountability was on government and institution building, attention is now paid to the relationship between field level service providers and users. Service providers are accountable in a number of ways: for their actions, spending, outputs and outcomes, use of resources, performance standards and so on. Front line service providers are typically accountable through hierarchical relationship upward to government and downward to services users. Proponents of more accountability claim that front line service providers have too much discretion in their activities (making them lazy, corrupt and untrustworthy) and have too few sanctions. This has allowed service providers to become ungovernable, unaccountable and unproductive [14]. The focus on front line providers seems to reflect a frustration with bureaucratic, centralised service provision, and is mostly associated with the public sector. It is suggested that it is much easier to achieve accountable urban services when users participate in service delivery [15] for example when users share responsibility for setting performance plans, goals and standards for service delivery as well as evaluating services in terms of outcomes. Accountability is also improved when users have face-to-face contact or a personalised relationship with the service provider [16][17].

Paul [18] presents a model of accountability for urban services that focuses on users' decision making when faced with declining urban services. He suggests they may "exit" (choose an alternative service) or voice their dissatisfaction about the quality of service. Paul argues that if service delivery is failing 'hierarchical control' (e.g. monitoring and incentives) relays these signals to service providers. Paul is in effect suggesting that improvements in the quality of services can best be achieved if individuals pursue their own interests. This points to a potential for less equity in service provision, which would favour those individuals who are better at bargaining for better services. The World Development Report 2004 [19] has developed Paul's framework for analysing accountability for urban service by distinguishing between a "short route" (between citizen and service provider) and a "long route" (citizen, policymakers, service provider). The delivery of urban service is then mainly a question of better management of the relationship between government, users, and providers. The World Development Report 2004 report presents a number of ways to improve the ability of service users to monitor and discipline service providers; for example, by increasing user participation in service delivery as well as by giving poor citizens a stronger voice in policy making and political process. In effect, these strategies aim to reduce the cost and to increase the user's incentive to take collective action and to monitor the performance of providers. They also increase the rewards to citizens for using their voice

The accountability 'problem' has essentially been articulated as one of communication. Improved communication, and especially the 'voice' of users, is needed by service providers if they are to understand customer needs and priorities better. User voice can also have a disciplining effect, ensuring that service delivery becomes more efficient and effective. Citizen involvement in the provision of urban services accountability can be seen as a means by which individuals protect their rights as consumers [20]. This is especially important in the absence of the market mechanisms [21]. The frequent use of term "consumer" is consistent with a business context, and deliberately contrasts with some public sector traditions and values. It is also in contrast to more political terms such as "citizen" and reflects a call for the withdrawal of the state from service delivery. Alternatively, user voice can be articulated through the political structures of representative or participatory democracy [22]. Users are expected to: become informed about the infrastructure in their neighbourhood; ensure facilities are kept in good condition; express concerns to public officials; attend meetings held about infrastructure problems; become involved in advocacy groups; demand continuous and timely maintenance; and become involved in infrastructure decisions, planning and long term investment. However, Hirschman [23] asserts that those most able to use voice, the most articulate, are those who seek high quality products, and are therefore most likely to exit when services decline in quality.

How does accountability work?

The literature typically uses the Principal Agent Theory to analyse the problem of accountability within institutions. This theory describes a relationship in which a principal (service users in this case) attempts to secure services from an agent (service providers). Agents are expected to hide the information principals require to monitor their performance; thus, contracts, incentives, sanctions are needed to induce agents to deliver the desired type of and level of performance. Participatory accountability arrangements can foster better services by reducing the transaction costs of service users. These costs associated with monitoring services can be reduced by the publication of such information such as service delivery plans and procedures, O&M schedules and charters outlining users' rights and obligations in service provision. In economic theory, information dissemination reduces the uncertainties of coordinating such collective action as participation in service delivery. Participatory accountability arrangements or 'civil regulation' [24] also provide agents with incentives and sanctions to deliver services to the desired level of performance.

Demands for accountability from others imply some form of power: "To talk about accountability, is to define who can call for an account and who owes a duty of explanation" [25]. Typically, service providers are presented as neutral arbiters of competing user interests, all of who have an equal opportunity to express their views. Furthermore, there is an assumption that producers will respond to inputs in a balanced and rational manner and that better services will automatically result. However, Skelcher [26] claims there is an imbalance of power in the server-served relationship, where providers have the ability to determine the service delivery agenda and ground rules for their relationship with users. In fact, "professionalism and bureaucracy are resistant to outside participation" [27], for example "by ignoring consumer demands; making closed decisions; not providing alternative choices; breaking promises; withholding information; not providing adequate support." [28]. Plummer's research [29] found that internal reforms are required to facilitate community participation in municipal planning; otherwise the municipality may remain anti-poor, detached and inaccessible, and staff will block the development of participatory initiatives.

Methodology

This research set out to test the hypothesis that accountability arrangements improve the sustainability of urban services using the case study methodology. Case studies are based on information collected from field visits and semi-structured interviews, closed answer questionnaires[30], document review, newspaper articles and direct observation in study areas. The data was collected from July 2002 to July 2003. Case studies were chosen on the basis that they offered a different perspective on accountability. The kinds of arrangements differ in terms of innovation, reach and scope, replicability, sustainability and social impact. A short case summary is given below before key findings from an initial data analysis are presented.

Case study location	Key feature of the initiative being researched	Mechanism
Seoul, Korea	Improve the responsiveness of service providers	Information dissemination, creating competition in service delivery and customer service reforms.
Dhaka, Bangladesh	Increasing the influence of service users	Citizen scorecards, grassroots pressures groups and NGO provision
Bristol, UK	Improve the design and delivery of services	Best Value and New Deal for Communities programme.
Mdantsane, South Africa	Increase political participation in representative democracy	Ward Committees, new rights to services and customer service reforms

The Seoul case study illustrates reforms to *improve the responsiveness of service providers*. Following the IMF crisis in 1997, Mayor Goh implemented a reform of Seoul Metropolitan Government on the basis of zero tolerance of corruption. In Seoul, Mayor Goh abolished public officials discretionary administrative power, staff were regularly rotated and individual responsibility over a specific area was abolished to remove scope for discretionary administrative behaviour. Transparency was increased through 'benign ethical competition' in city administration, aimed at creating competition between departments. Seoul Metropolitan Government established online information disclosure systems; integrity systems in procurement; electronic bidding system; and citizen inspection system (related to corruption). They also introduced a Citizen Evaluative Survey[31]; Citizen's Charter[32] Saturday Date with the Mayor[33]; Email the Mayor program; and Corruption Report Card to the Mayor; as well as a public officials' code of conduct. Results are based on non-deprived areas as well as on substandard residential areas of squats called *Binilhaus* (constructed from thin wood with a vinyl covering on the outside). Service provision in the case studies included household connections for water and sewerage, tarmac roads, pit latrines and standpipes.

The Bristol case study illustrates attempts to *improve the design and delivery of services* in through integrated and more locally responsive delivery of waste collection, street cleaning, grounds maintenance, household bulky collection, gully emptying and recycling services in a neighbourhood of Bristol called Barton Hill. Project Pathfinder in Bristol is a partnership between Bristol City Council, SITA GB Ltd, ResourceSaver (an NGO which operates the kerbside 'black box' recycling collection service under a subcontract) and Community at Heart (a resident-led organisation established to deliver the New Deal for Communities anti-deprivation programme in the area). Making better use of publics services is key to New Deal for Communities and involves "bending" services (matching supply of service to the scale of the problem) and "reshaping" services (tailoring service to the needs of a neighbourhood). The principles of Pathfinder include: the location of a multi-skilled team in a dedicated area with a local one-stop-shop to act as a coordinating base; better customer relations; and more efficient and effective service provision. Project Pathfinder is gaining national recognition for its innovative approach to neighbourhood street management and democratic, accountable service delivery.

The South Africa study focuses on the role of ***representative democracy and political participation*** in attempts to get more appropriate and accessible public services. South Africans have two key mechanisms for improving the responsiveness and performance of service providers: popular participation in government through direct and representative methods, and a focus on providing more results-based and client-orientated public services. Ethical and fair service delivery is one of the hallmarks of post apartheid South Africa, where previously services were explicitly organised around apartheid imperatives. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, (1996) grants all citizens an equal and inalienable right to housing, health care, water and social security. Local government is supposed to be developmental i.e. it works with citizens to find sustainable ways to meet their needs and improve the quality of their lives. The Municipal Structures Act (1998) outlines the mechanisms for consulting citizens, encouraging the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government, and setting out the role of ward committees and the community liaison officers in promoting participatory democracy. The Municipal Systems Act (2000) outlines a system of participatory governance and focuses on the duties of residents and communities to pay for services and to participate in the affairs of the municipality in planning, performance monitoring, service delivery, communication and decision-making. The following observations are based on a study of a suburb of East London called Mdantsane, which, under apartheid, was developed as a dormitory town in the former Ciskei, politically and administratively separate from East London. It was incorporated into the city in 1997. Mdantsane is the 2nd biggest black location in South Africa after Soweto. Service provision in Mdantsane includes household connections for water and sewerage, tarmac roads, pit latrines and standpipes.

The Dhaka case study is intended to illustrate attempts to ***increase the influence of service users*** in holding service providers to account for performance, particularly where service providers are unwilling to accept legal responsibility for slum dwellers. A feature of service delivery in Dhaka is competition; there is an increasing number of profit and non-profit service providers as well as 'proxy' market indicators to stimulate better responsiveness. The case study investigated community initiatives that fill the gaps in service provision. For example municipal waste collection cannot match the demand in the city in certain wards of Dhaka community organisations have been created to collect household waste. These community-based organisations are run on a cost recovery basis as micro-enterprises and are usually found in middle income areas where householders are willing to pay for a house-to-house collection service. In lower income areas water and sanitation projects have been implemented by NGOs to ensure residents have access to a safe and legal supply of water and sanitation. . The research also investigated the use of governance scorecards and grassroots pressure groups to improve service delivery. Research focused on non-deprived areas as well as squatter areas of the city.

Reflections from case studies

Based on a brief overview of the case studies, there seem to be four key things that organisations promoting accountability for urban services are doing:
- Directing attention towards improving the effectiveness of the service itself;
- Making accountability a function of good customer relations and improving the capacity of the individual service user for action and initiative;
- Creating mechanisms to support a more collectivist approach through campaigning, lobbying and advocacy to services at both local and national levels;
- Improving services through encouraging competing, alternative provision.

These kinds of support for accountability are clearly different and represent contrasting understandings of accountability and of what constitutes adequate service performance.

Failing urban services

In the last 12 months, the majority of respondents in Bangladesh and Bristol complained about water and sanitation services. In Mdantsane complaints were about roads, and in Seoul the main problem was refuse collection. In general all respondents were concerned with overall provision, with the quality of, and information about, drains, roads, streetlights, and community halls, and also with the information supplied on refuse collection. In Bristol respondents were most dissatisfied with street sweeping. Men tended to complain more often about sanitation, roads and drains; women complained mostly about streetlights. Those in non-deprived areas tended to complain more about refuse collection and streetlights, whereas respondents from deprived areas complained more about sanitation and roads. Access to community services (like streetlights, drains, and community halls) and the level of household services were both typically lower in deprived areas.

In Dhaka, Seoul and Mdantsane the majority described urban services as undependable, unresponsive, inefficient, disinterested, and undependable. Respondents in the main were also dissatisfied with their relationship with service providers, claiming that providers didn't care and didn't take complaints seriously. Typical comments were: '*Its difficult to get improvements', Service providers don't take complaints seriously'*, and '*service providers don't care about people like me'*. However, respondents in Seoul and Bristol also noted that '*Service providers are helpful and friendly'*; in Seoul, they said '*Users are kept informed about the progress of complaints'* and in Bristol, '*Service providers are more responsive now'* and '*are happy to hear users' ideas*'.

The use of participatory mechanisms and processes

Following the transition to democracy in South Korea, civil society continues to exert influence over government in a variety of ways at the municipal level, at the *Gu* (ward level), *dong* (neighbourhood) and *ban* (street or block) level. At the municipal level, participation occurs through a number of mechanisms: assemblies that monitor how budgets are spent; city hall meetings; resident requests for audit and investigation of local administration; committees set up by SMG, such as the Citizens Committee for a Green Seoul; Citizen Petition (used primarily by interest groups to initiate local policy change); resident voting on serious local government matters (but this has never been undertaken in practice). People can also visit local *Gu* and *dong* level administrative offices if they have problems with services in their neighbourhood as well as attend *Bansanghoe*. These are widely held monthly meetings to discuss *ban* (street level) matters, report problems, and promote good relations with neighbours. These meetings are unofficial but residents are encouraged to attend. Organised civil society also serves as a check on the influence of the state and private companies, and monitors corruption in Korean society.

The Project Pathfinder in Bristol also attempted to regularise participatory mechanisms of accountability into these kinds of durable, institutionalised structures through the introduction of weekly and monthly stakeholder meetings. However, residents in Bristol preferred accountability to be more ad hoc and opportunistic, taking place outside formal organisations. For residents, catching the Pathfinder team on their rounds or calling into the one-stop-shop and leaving a message on the Project Pathfinder notice board were more important in shaping accountability.

In South Africa, ward committees have become the preferred way of structuring participation and involving communities in municipal affairs. Each ward committee has a ward councillor and 10 elected members; five represent the community of the ward and five represent sectors, such as youth, women, business, religion, and sport/ culture. Ward committees assist and advise their ward councillor, act as a communication channel between

the community and ward councillor, ensure that their ward councillor accounts for his/her actions, and encourage resident participation in attempts to improve quality of life in their ward. Special provision is made for people who cannot read and write, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups. The main function of the ward committee is to ensure that communities participate in setting development priorities for their ward and in the preparation, implementation and review of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Municipalities are required by law to report annually on progress against their IDP objectives, which are linked to the political term of office, and can be seen as a contract between the municipality and the community for service delivery and good governance. Service delivery performance can also be measured against the Batho Pele or People First principles[34].

Ward committee members in Mdantsane felt they had a responsibility in service delivery, most had written letters to the municipality, called or visited the public works office; talked to staff and held meetings to discuss resident's problems with the services in Mdantsane. However the majority of members had received no response to their complaints, one member said "we do say things but we don't have a voice". Committees have been trained to take on responsibility for planning and budgeting according to the priorities of residents in their ward, however fieldwork revealed capacity is still lacking. The ward committee studied faced a number of constraints: they lack resources (and often fund expenses themselves), powers, office and administrative equipment and limited knowledge of their role and function. The lack of resources and capacity affects the committee's ability to get the needs and priorities of residents recognised in the agenda and practices of service providers. The committee has also been criticised for not consulting or even conflicting with existing civic structures (such as SANCO – South African National Civic Organisation). The observation was made that the ward committee was politicised (members revealed party alliances in meetings) and not entirely inclusive in practice (for example men tend to dominate discussion). Committee members have been made scapegoats by residents for nationwide frustration with the delivery of services, which at times is violent.

Attention was also focused at the ward level in Dhaka. Ward commissioners are responsible for inspecting municipal services in their wards and also hear residents' complaints. They, in turn, verbally communicate the matter to the zonal office for action or take it up with the departmental head in the City Corporation for special attention. This is typically a loose arrangement with no scope for citizens to access information on the progress of complaint. A recent attempt to assess user satisfaction as well as the quality of infrastructure in Bangladesh has been the Governance Scorecard, a collaboration between PROSHIKA, Survey and Research System (SRS), World Bank and donors. The Scorecard was completed in 2001 and its use revealed that the majority of people are dissatisfied with services. The Scorecard is built on the following premises: that the information it yields will be is new and useful to service providers; that service users will lobby for improvements; and that service providers will respond to negative feedback and user demands. Since the completion of the Scorecard, PROSHIKA organised a workshop with the service provider agencies to discuss the findings of the Scorecard. It seems that service providers are all too aware of the state of the services delivery and there has been little follow up activity since on the part of civil society. Report cards have been used more successfully by Transparency International Bangladesh, in the main because the NGO also created grassroots pressure groups called Committees of Concerned Citizens (CCCs) to disseminate report card findings, generate debate on infrastructure provision and lobby for higher quality public services through a variety of means – citizens meetings, newsletters, research papers, seminars and a press campaign to improve local services.

The Dhaka case study also investigated a partnership among Dushta Sasthya Kendra, WaterAid, World Bank, UNICEF, and the government utility (DWASA) to provide legal access to safe water points, latrines, washing blocks, solid waste management, storm water and drainage in slum areas. Community mobilisation, along with the

fact that dwellers are now paying for legal access to services, has empowered residents to approach and negotiate with DWASA and Dhaka City Corporation. *"There was a time that slum people never had the ability to talk to the DWASA people but now they play with WASA [Dhaka Water and Sanitation Authority] (..) Recently, one senior engineer attended a workshop [with slum communities] and he was astonished (..) he said why these people are shouting? He is telling to me that it is the first time he heard the community voice and they are blaming us"* (NGO worker). However, accountability to local clients can also be undermined when public service functions are contracted out to the private or NGO sector (Wood, 1994; 541).

Instances of non-participatory accountability

The potential of payment for services was raised as a means to amplify people's voice, in Mdantsane in particular. Payment can make users more vigilant and demanding of improvements in service efficiency and accountability, and the threat of non-payment can act as an incentive for service providers. Non-payment for services is a significant problem in South Africa; academics have provided two conflicting explanations of this trend. The first is that non-payment for services relates to an inability to pay for services or people are unwilling to pay for services due to a 'culture of non payment' that developed during apartheid or because of the low quality of services provided. Whatever the reason, non-payment means that municipalities aren't collecting sufficient revenue to improve the service and thus a "catch 22" develops. The Dhaka case highlighted the potential of unofficial payments (bribes) to circumvent the system and solve problems with services; these may be asked for by officials or paid by users in anticipation of problems. However, this strategy appears to be only a stopgap in cases of acute problems since supply often remains unpredictable. Users complain of regular power outages, low water pressure, and infrequent garbage collection, and resolving these chronic problems usually necessitates further under the table payments or the influence of powerful intermediaries (political leaders; influential friends, and *mastaans* -muscle men). Dhaka City Corporation has a grievance redressal system for complaints about its services. However, only a small proportion of households are aware of it or bother to use formal mechanisms[35]. People feel that there will be no follow up to their complaint and that officials are often unavailable or indifferent.

Exit, rather than attempts to improve the quality of service through campaigning, lobbying and advocacy, has therefore become a pragmatic consequence of poor urban services. NGO service provision has been used, particularly in Dhaka – for waste management for middle class areas in Dhaka and water and sanitation in slums. In theory, this is assumed to create competitive pressure on public providers for better services and also to have a role in inducing public pressure for better services. Although pragmatic, the focus on alternative service provision is perhaps at the expense of political analysis and political movements to improve municipal services. Exit (and the ability to buy choices) from service provision undermines the position of those people who depend on municipal services. In recognition of the tendency for certain users to exit public service provision[36] and of the weak voice of users of public services, aid conditionality was used in Dhaka to discipline providers and substitute for users' voice (for example private sector involvement was a pre-requisite for World Bank funding).

How effective are participatory mechanisms?

The hope that participatory mechanisms of accountability for urban services will create rationality and predictability in service delivery depends to a great extent on how well information is converted into action, specifically the detection of wrongdoing. Information can increase trust, reduce information asymmetries, and substitute for responsiveness to service users. Respondents from the case studies found out about services in a number of different ways, some directly from service providers (in the form of leaflets) and some in indirect and

general ways such as through TV, newspapers, and also word of mouth. In general, users were more likely to be informed about service related issues than to engage at an earlier stage of service delivery i.e. policy formulation. However respondents hadn't typically used the information they had about services to get improvements. This is particularly true of those in deprived areas and those with inadequate incomes. Most respondents stated that they hadn't seen any information (issues of information asymmetry) and that they weren't interested in finding out about services. Service users in Mdantsane and Dhaka didn't know what kinds of service they were supposed to be getting, what workers were supposed to be doing, or what they could expect of service quality. Users hadn't in general made the leap from experiencing a problem with a service to realising that better information about declining services could act as leverage to help solve the problem.

The effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on a shared understanding between users' and providers' concept of accountability. In South Africa, the majority of respondents thought service providers should be accountable for meeting service quality requirements; in Seoul, for responding to complaints; and in Dhaka, for consulting users. These varying kinds of accountability also represent different stages of service delivery. However, most service providers considered themselves only accountable for the quality of service delivered, and considered user satisfaction with services a by-product of getting the technical hardware right. Service providers were keen to stress respondents' responsibilities – for example, in cleaning water tanks and replacing pipes, putting refuse out at the correct times or in separating recycling.

Improved services?

Of those respondents who had complained directly to service providers about services, the majority in Bangladesh and South Africa were dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled. Those in South Korea were mostly fairly satisfied. Most complaints were about private, excludable services like water and sanitation, as well as specific community services like refuse or roads. Far fewer respondents complained about streetlights and drains. Those in non-deprived areas were more likely to use the official channels and to be satisfied with the handling of complaints. However, respondents had different perceptions of complaint mechanisms. In South Africa, the majority of respondents perceived them as fair. In Seoul, these mechanisms were reported to be easy to use. Respondents in Dhaka said they are well publicised. Self-interest predominates as the reason why respondents complained about urban services in the case studies, particularly in non-deprived areas. Interestingly, those in deprived areas were more likely to say they complained in the community or general public interest, and these respondents' choice of complaint mechanism (i.e. meetings, petitions, protest) also revealed a bias toward collective activities.

Analysis of the case studies revealed that respondents from deprived areas solved problems with urban services in more roundabout ways. Sometimes this took place through formalised and structured means like public meetings, meetings with councillors, voting for politicians, and approaching other public figures who also have a catch-all responsibility; sometimes in more spontaneous and opportunistic ways such as protests and petitions. Unlike those in non-deprived areas, the poor generally did not use the channels offered by service providers (free phones, Internet sites, visits to offices, suggestion boxes and so on). This finding seems to challenge some of the existing thinking on accountability. The poorer respondents appear to diversify their approaches to accountability and to have a repertoire of activities and strategies to deal with failing urban services. This may be related to their claim that service providers' offices aren't easily accessible, but also to the fact that they didn't trust services providers. In contrast, wealthier respondents from non-deprived areas tended to have one predominant strategy, which is a dependence on the mechanisms offered by service providers. These respondents were also more likely to perceive

an improvement in the delivery of urban services following on the improvement of accountability. Thus, for this group, service provider-related mechanisms for accountability seem to work better than ad-hoc arrangements in terms of improving services, although whether these channels would be as effective for poorer respondents is unclear. It might be that it is not the mechanism but the personal characteristics of users that is key in securing better services. This finding has significance for the current interest in promoting short rather than long routes for accountability (WDR 2004), but also for those officials who stated that they know a service is satisfactory when there are no more complaints.

All service providers claimed in interviews that greater accountability had 'tremendously' improved the services they provide. However, in most cases user satisfaction with services had not increased markedly since changes to provider responsiveness had been introduced. This could be because of raised expectations and standards -- better-informed citizens may be less tolerant of poor performance. For example, the results of the Citizen Survey in 1999 in Seoul led to higher service standards and better customer relations being instituted in the Water Works department; nonetheless, in 2000 citizens rated water as one of the worst services. Similarly, the Project Pathfinder has the best standard of work in Bristol and a more customised way of providing services, yet the majority of respondents said there had been no improvements in services or the appearance of the area. Service providers from South Africa were clear that, despite improvements in service delivery since democracy, service users expect a higher standard than the minimum RDP standards. Residents are not happy with gravel roads, pit latrines and standpipes and furthermore they are not likely to be happy if their standard of living hasn't improved in other ways (for example if they are unemployed.) In Seoul, the general public distrusts the quality of water supply – residents complain about the colour, taste, smell, or sediment in their water supply and are worried by media scares about bacteriological quality. To date, strategies to recreate trust include proof of quality, free bottled water, involving residents in water quality inspection, and international benchmarking like ISO 9000, and Charters . However, even if service providers give more and more information, users may remain dissatisfied unless service providers produce the kind of information that generates trust. The Water Works department, as a result, has paid for marketing and favourable media reports.

Evaluation of participatory mechanisms for accountability

Accountability is premised on a relationship with another; you have to participate to get accountability. However, few citizens (and particularly marginalized groups) exercise their rights to participate. There are many reasons for this; for example 'customers' of urban services make different use of services, have different levels of dependency on services, different perceptions of entitlements and priorities, and different capacities to organise. In some instances, respondents were willing to devote time and resources to common effort to pursue common goods, for instance through complaints about the operation and maintenance of roads, community halls, streetlights and drains. However, a substantial number of respondents, when faced with problems, chose not to take any measures, at least not officially, despite being affected by adverse outcomes. This was true even where organisations have been established and information asymmetries reduced. Respondents were more likely to opt for individual interests at the household level (i.e. complained about water supply or sanitation) over common interests. On one level it seems that some respondents had performed a kind of cost benefit analysis as to whether to participate in collective action (based on resources, benefits, sense of responsibility for services, trust, predicted outcomes, relative bargaining power and fall back position), and that they decided they were better off not contributing, but hoping the problem would be resolved by the participation of others. However, the issue of relative bargaining power should be given closer examination. Some respondents would never dream of approaching service providers or felt discouraged by personal experiences; ("If they laugh in your face (..) you are not going to shout about

things," said a respondent from Bristol). The key point is that accountability is not simply formulaic – a matter of put the mechanisms in place, and demands for better services will follow. It has far more emotional complexity than this. When ease of communication or empowerment is perceived to be an issue, users may prefer shortened lines of communication with front line providers and word of mouth solutions as in Bristol, more anonymous or distancing IT solutions as in Seoul [37], or institutionalised ward structures as in Dhaka and Mdantsane.

Surprisingly, the research revealed that the perception of having a voice in service delivery was mainly associated with respondents with low incomes living in deprived areas. This was particularly true in Dhaka. However it was clear that service providers did not feel equally accountable to all service users. While the poor felt they have a voice in service delivery, it is clearly not a very powerful or effective voice since service levels in their neighbourhoods remain technically inadequate and it has failed to increase the political risk of inadequate services (the 'threat from below'). On the other hand, users from non-deprived areas tended to be dissatisfied because of high expectations that providers are not able to meet; these users were also less tolerant of poor performance. Care should be taken in promoting greater accountability to pay attention to issues of power and equality, in order to avoid what Gaventa [38] (2002) calls "voice without influence."

Likewise, the focus on front line providers within a principal agent framework seems somewhat shortsighted. The Bristol case study reveals the importance of non-monetary incentives such as good will, job satisfaction and commitment as the basis for accountability to improve urban services. In Dhaka, frontline workers are presented with a moral obligation (as well as financial incentive from bribes) to provide services to citizens regardless of the legal status of their dwellings, particularly given the absence of penalties and the existence of loopholes in bureaucratic procedures. Under Project Pathfinder, employees felt empowered by their jobs. They had greater responsibilities as well as greater flexibility to tailor services to customers and to deal with emergency repairs. Some residents in Bristol said "*It's not the services; it's the people who make a difference*". This suggests that accountability could be viewed as an extension of methodological individualism i.e. good service is a sum of all individual service provider actions. However, in Dhaka, respondents rejected this tendency to confuse the accountability of the organisation with the person working for it; instead good people depend on good systems; "*Its not my friend: it's the system we are talking about,*" said a respondent from Dhaka.

The extent to which accountability arrangements have made society more governable is debateable. In theory, user participation will lead to more accountable service providers and better services will result. Although to be fully accountable implies the use of sanctions to prevent or punish misbehaviour, the existence of sanctions as well as the capacity to make use of sanctions is often lacked by users in deprived areas [39]. Participatory modes of accountability have the potential to undermine traditional notions of horizontal accountability (such as professional accountability), conflict with vertical accountability (such as managerial accountability and political accountability) and result in the containment and management of user dissatisfaction. However, in cases where accountability arrangements have coordinated users' voice (such as ward committees or Committees of Concerned Citizens), this appears to have generated a consensus on a range of conflicting interests, reduced the number of competing claims on financially limited resources, and increased the efficiency of response to complaints and in the use of resources. However, in other cases accountability arrangements have fragmented users' voice. The outcome can be that more problems are presented than can be dealt with by service providers and that urban governance has been undermined. Civic involvement has sometimes been frustrating for service providers when, despite all their efforts, services fail to meet the expectations of more informed, motivated, effective and empowered citizens. This was particularly true of NIMBY concerns about incinerators in Seoul. Accountability arrangements may have transformed city governance but not for the better. However in the Bristol case,

participation in service delivery was definitely perceived as a mechanism to improve personal feelings of empowerment and urban governance; *"from being a person who is on benefits and taking just what life deals them to getting to a point to where they connect with other people's lives around them, doing things together, collaborating to take charge of something. It is very important and Pathfinder is an important part of that process"* (respondent from Bristol).

Conclusion

It would be expected that greater participation in services would improve the accountability of service providers and that more accountability should enhance service outcomes. However, this research found that in practice, accountability does not seem to fulfil the particular functions described by theoretical approaches. This research investigated different mechanisms of accountability to citizens. These included improving the responsiveness of service providers through better customer services and formal grievance procedures; increasing the influence of service users through opinion surveys, grassroots pressures groups and NGO provision; improving best value in the design and delivery of services in low income areas; increasing political participation in representative democracy and giving citizens new rights to services. This research found that the reforms made front line providers of services more accountable to some extent, and that the performance of services improved marginally as a result. However, the analysis suggests that improvements to accountability haven't improved user satisfaction with planning, delivery and maintenance of urban services. On the whole, respondents thought they were only slightly better off than they had been before reforms were introduced. The majority reported that levels of services has remained the same or worsened, and user satisfaction with agency response to requests and complaints has not changed markedly. Thus, it could be concluded that there has been no substantial change in user satisfaction during the period since practices have undergone change. However, in the long run (this might mean decades) one would expect participatory accountability mechanisms to lead to improvements in service outcomes and user satisfaction.

The research found that approaching councillors and voting for politicians, public meetings, protests and organising petitions emerged as the most useful mechanisms for securing accountability. In particular, users from deprived areas appeared to prefer more participatory mechanisms, those with an indirect influence on service providers, as well as arrangements where residents could sort out problems directly with front line service providers. By contrast, service users in non-deprived areas seemed to prefer to engage with systems of hierarchical control over front line service providers through an upward chain of command. Furthermore, this research suggests that, particularly in deprived areas, service users seldom rely on a single mechanism to produce accountability. It was observed that participation in such attempts depends on a range of factors, including resources, incentives and motivation to improve urban services, the kind of benefits to be gained (personal or common), the nature and location of the services in question, the intensity of concern with services, and the sustainability of the accountability created.

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30. A random survey (of about 100 respondents) was conducted in deprived (squatter settlements) and non-deprived areas of Mdantsane, Dhaka and Seoul, and was intended to give an overall impression of user satisfaction rather than a statistically significant sample.

31. Conducted bi-annually by Gallop Korea and the results are widely distributed and used to rate service performance on the basis of results as well as in preparations of budget for next financial year

32. Sets out guidelines on how officials should treat the 'customer' as well as detailing the service citizens can expect from government officials

33. An informal meeting with the mayor, whereby he can hear about citizen's problems in more detail, "*It is the underprivileged who most often come to the Saturday Date because the privileged know where they have to go and who can help them*"

34. These are consultation: service standards: access: courtesy: information: openness and transparency: redress: value for money

35. For example a questionnaire found that the service most people had complained about in Dhaka was water supply. Nonetheless, despite widespread, chronic problems only 23% of respondents had complained to DWASA.

36. There may be a particular concern with the more affluent exiting public services, when they fund these through taxes

37. "*The advantage of internet complaint system is that citizen can complain harshly when they need to complain, when you meet someone face to face you will be nice, even though you have a problem. With Internet the city hall can reply quicker and there are no bad feelings*" (respondent from Seoul).

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39. After all non-payment often only results in the service being disconnected