CASE STUDY 16

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OPEN AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNMENT

Enhancing Social Accountability in Ethiopia

Overview

Citizens' engagement with government to address service delivery issues had long been a challenge in Ethiopia. To encourage citizens to hold service providers more accountable, the government in 2011 launched the second phase of the Ethiopia Social Accountability Program, which aimed to build on a pilot implemented from 2006 to 2009. The program partnered with civil society organizations across the country, which then worked with communities to assess and give feedback to public service providers, such as schools and healthcare centers. At the outset, there was very little trust between citizens, service providers, and the government. By 2019, when a third phase of the program began, there was significantly more trust between the different stakeholders, and there were some signs that citizens were beginning to hold service providers more accountable. While the program's scope to impact corruption was limited, it did boost citizens' knowledge on public services and the role of government, giving them the opportunity to take on a greater oversight role.

Introduction

In 2011, Ethiopia was looking for ways to better engage its citizens and improve public service delivery. A decade earlier, the country had launched a decentralization policy whereby the governments of the country's woredas (administrative divisions similar to districts) progressively took on more power and responsibility. The idea was that these local governments would be more responsive to citizens' wants and needs. "But that was on paper, not in reality," said Workneh Denekew, who worked on the Ethiopia Social Accountability Pilot Program (known as ESAP 1) from 2006 to 2009. "We had just come from a very long period with successive totalitarian regimes when everything was top-down. Citizens couldn't do much more than accept the status quo… their demands were limited."

Part of the problem was a lack of resources. While the country boasted double-digit GDP growth in 2010 and 2011, its GDP per capita was just USD1,162, ranking it among the bottom ten countries in the world according to that indicator.[55] Although resource constraints explained some of the challenges, another important dynamic was that local governments were more responsive to senior officials than to the citizens they served, and citizens feared the repercussions of voicing discontent. Since citizens did not speak out about the quality of public services, it was difficult for service providers, such as schools or health clinics, to know how they could improve.

Civil society organizations, too, had limited opportunity to influence local governments or service providers. The Ethiopian government—dominated at all levels by the

ruling political party—was effective at implementing programs from a national level that reached right down to the village level. But that top-down structure did not have any mechanism for the government to receive feedback from citizens or civil society groups working at a local level. Such feedback was critical for boosting social accountability, which involved citizen groups holding government officials and service providers accountable for delivering quality public services.

To shift the status quo, the Ethiopian government in cooperation with its development partners and the World Bank launched the Ethiopia Social Accountability Program 2 (ESAP 2) in 2012. ESAP 2 was funded by a multi-donor trust fund and implemented by VNG International, the international development arm of the Association of Dutch Municipalities (known as VNG, its acronym in Dutch). VNG International, which worked in several developing countries to strengthen democratic governance at a local level, set up an agency in Ethiopia to administer the program. The agency aimed to build on the success of ESAP 1, which had worked with 12 civil society organizations to improve social accountability in a select few regions in Ethiopia. ESAP 2's goal was to partner with civil society organizations across the country, facilitate a dialogue between citizens, service providers, and local governments, and eventually, to improve the quality of public services.

Building trust between civil society, citizens, and the government was a monumental task. At the time, civil society activity was highly restricted in Ethiopia, and the Charities and Societies Proclamation strictly limited NGOs' work on human rights and policy advocacy issues. Citizens feared speaking up about the issues they faced in accessing education, healthcare, and other services. For example, parents avoided voicing discontent about schools because they were concerned their children might face repercussions. At the same time, the administration feared being blamed for service failures, and worried that citizens would demand far more than service providers were able to deliver.

"We had to bring civil society and government together," said Lucia Nass, who went on to lead capacity development and training for ESAP 2. "It seemed very risky because there was so much animosity, but if the project was going to go anywhere, we had to do it."

The implementation process

Partnering with civil society and spreading knowledge

The first step was to identify partner organizations to work with. The management agency for the program invited interested civil society groups around the country to submit applications to be involved. Selected organizations would receive funding and training to work with local governments, service providers, and citizens on social accountability initiatives. In their applications, the organizations identified the sector or sectors they wanted to focus on (education, healthcare, agriculture, water and sanitation, or roads), and the woredas and kebeles they planned to work in. Kebeles, the smallest administrative division in Ethiopia, are usually made up of a few thousand people, and there are usually a few dozen kebeles in each woreda.

Some civil society organizations were initially skeptical about the government's commitment to the project. Many wanted to take a human rights-based approach to their work, but government legislation limited any human rights advocacy. Fortunately, the highly influential finance ministry—which led the ESAP 2 steering committee—strongly supported the effort to improve social accountability. The government granted civil society organizations permission to work on the program, and the finance ministry's endorsement was crucial in signaling to civil society that the government supported its involvement.

After recognizing the government's commitment—and the possibility of securing funding for their activities—civil society's interest in the program grew. There was significant funding available, and the program ultimately aimed to improve the livelihoods of the poor in Ethiopia—a goal shared by many civil society groups.

In total, 118 civil society organizations were selected to work in 240 different woredas, about a quarter of the total woredas in the country. Within each woreda, each organization initially focused on about 3-5 kebeles, and then scaled up to cover more kebeles over time.

Education and health were the most common sectors to work in, followed by agriculture. For example, some organizations opted to work with primary schools or health centers. In the agriculture sector, organizations

worked with extension agents that provided technical support to farmers at the kebele level. Only a few organizations chose to work with water and roads, as these areas often required intervention from the regional or central government—something beyond the program's scope.

Before disbursing funds, a team of trainers held a workshop with the selected organizations. The training focused mostly on how to use five distinct social accountability tools: Community Scorecard, Citizen Report Card, Participatory Planning and Budgeting, Public Expenditure Tracking Survey, and Gender Responsive Budgeting.[56] As well as introducing the tools, the trainers also taught attendees about the governance system in Ethiopia and how budgets were allocated. The trainers found that there was little awareness about how government functioned in Ethiopia and the important roles that woreda councils, civil society organizations, and citizens had in the governance process. The Financial Transparency and Accountability team (a separate component of the Protection of Basic Services Program that ESAP was part of) led budget education activities throughout the country.

Setting up social accountability committees

After being trained and receiving funds, the civil society organizations began forming "social accountability committees" in the woredas and kebeles they planned to work in. The committees had a tripartite structure, being composed of elected representatives from woreda or kebele councils (who were in charge of oversight and resource allocation), public administrators (in charge of service delivery), and citizens (including civil society representatives).

In some areas, earning approval and participation from the local government proved to be quite a challenge. When they faced resistance from woreda councils, civil society organizations tried different strategies to win their cooperation. In some cases, this meant involving higher levels of government, for example someone from the regional government or a representative from the Ministry of Finance. Often these higher-level officials could "nudge things forward," according to Nass. In other cases, civil society organizations sought help from peer organizations that had already established working relationships with government.

Each committee had a unique structure, partly tailored to the area it was working in, and partly down to who volunteered to participate. "Some committees were dominated by service providers, while others were mostly citizens," said Meskerem Girma, who worked with Nass on the program. "There were usually 9 to 15 people on each committee."

The committees also included members of the woreda council. In theory, councils were supposed to provide oversight of service providers, but few had been able to do so effectively. "Gradually council members, civil society organizations, and regional governments began to understand the role councils could play," said Meskerem.

Implementing social accountability tools, meeting with service providers, and developing joint action plans

Although ESAP 2 introduced civil society organizations to several different social accountability tools, the most widely used by far was the community scorecard. The community scorecard involved communities holding discussions and developing indicators to assess the performance of service providers, with the service providers also conducting self-evaluations. The assessments were followed by a joint discussion to reconcile differences in the scores and come up with a joint action plan to improve service delivery moving forward.

The quality of the action plans—and to what extent they were implemented—varied greatly. "Some service providers were extremely enthusiastic about the action plans, and really wanted to improve service delivery," said Meskerem. However, there was no enforcement mechanism to ensure follow through. "If nobody worked on the action plans, then nothing happened," Meskerem said.

The process to form joint action plans was often difficult, as was the case when the Addis Ababa Women's Association, a civil society organization based in Ethiopia's capital city, worked with Addis Hiwot Health Center to improve healthcare service delivery. "The hardest part of the process is building trust; that takes the longest time," said Mussie Yasin, project coordinator for the association. "During the initial meetings at Addis Hiwot, all of our discussions were heated." Community members accused doctors

of misdeeds, and the doctors felt attacked and responded in a defensive manner. "But after a while, the tone changed, and the consultations began to be about finding solutions to the problems together." To respond to the concerns that community members expressed in the face-to-face meetings, the medical center recruited more midwives, installed a power generator and water pump, and allocated more funding for medicine purchases.[57]

Building trust and sharing ideas

After the first year of implementation across the country, ESAP 2 hosted an event to bring all of the civil society organizations together with selected service providers from the 240 woredas involved, as well as government representatives. "We were looking for important innovations that were working," said Nass. "That encouraged others to look beyond what they were already doing." Social accountability committees were encouraged to create videos of their efforts to improve services in their districts, and the event included a video competition to celebrate those successes.

ESAP 2 held similar events annually, with 250 or more people attending each year. Over time, the events attracted a wider range of stakeholders, including representatives from regional governments that had not originally been included in the program. According to Nass, most government representatives—including woreda councils, woreda administrations, and regional government officials—were reluctant to participate at the beginning but grew to fully embrace the program after they saw the positive impact it was having in communities across the country.

Overcoming obstacles

When ESAP 2 came to a close, there was strong enthusiasm from those involved to continue supporting civil society in Ethiopia to improve social accountability. However, changing political dynamics and other factors meant a new project to build on ESAP 2 was slow to materialize. To ensure that the achievements of ESAP 2 were not lost, several donors chipped in to fund a "bridging phase" until the new project (which would be known as ESAP 3) came together. While some of the civil society organizations and social accountability committees continued throughout the bridging phase, others struggled to maintain momentum. "A lot of

social accountability committees went dormant, and some joint action plans were never followed up on," said Meskerem.

Further difficulties ensued in October 2016, when the country entered a state of emergency that lasted nearly a year. "In some regions our partners found it very difficult to continue," said Nass. Civil society organizations halted operations when the situation worsened, but picked up their work again when the situation improved.

Following an administration change and government reforms in 2018, the ESAP 3 project, also administered by the World Bank and managed by VNG International, finally launched in May 2019. Around the same time, the new government rescinded the Charities and Societies Proclamation, opening the door for civil society organizations to work on a wider range of issues and take on a stronger policy advocacy role.

The new project team began working on ways to deepen social accountability in Ethiopia and ensure their efforts were sustainable. For example, the ESAP 3 team planned to work closer with longstanding local governance organizations, such as kebele councils, community-led structures, and other groups, which were likely more sustainable than parallel structures like the social accountability committees. In addition, the ESAP 3 team planned to integrate their work with higher levels of government—which could work on a wider range of issues—as well as focus more on planning and budgeting at the woreda level. By 2020 ESAP 3 was operating in 317 woredas and was set to disburse funding to civil society organizations through the end of 2023.

Reflections

ESAP 2 did not directly target corruption, and its goals were mostly to increase public participation, build better relations between local governments, citizens, and civil society organizations, and to improve service delivery. Nevertheless, those involved in the project suggested that the initiative likely had some spillover effects in reducing corruption, even if on a small scale. "At the district level, there is not much money that can be captured by corruption," said Nass. "In that sense, the scope to reduce corruption was not very large. However, there is a lot of petty corruption, which is

especially difficult for poor people. ESAP 2 helped citizens understand what services are supposed to be free and what services need to be paid, and how much they cost. With greater transparency and accountability, corruption becomes more difficult."

In addition, ESAP 2 spread knowledge about the important role that woreda councils play in overseeing service delivery. "There is now a much better understanding that councils have an oversight role," said Nass. In theory, increased oversight would reduce opportunities for corruption.

Citizen oversight increased too. Several people involved in the implementation of ESAP 2 reported that there were some indications that citizens had become more willing to voice their concerns about public services. One example of this was through increased participation in parent teacher association meetings at primary schools. Participation in such avenues that allowed them to demand better public services was potentially a sign that citizens were beginning to hold government accountable.

According to Nass, Meskerem, and others closely involved in the program, its biggest result was increased trust between civil society, service providers, and the government—something that had been severely lacking when the program began. "Over the years ESAP has developed a strong position of trust with both civil society and the government," said Paul Hamilton, who was leading ESAP 3, and added "We hope that the trust will deepen now that the project has entered its third phase in 2020."