

Examining social accountability as an anti-corruption approach in conservation and natural resource management

Key takeaways

- » With increasing reliance on local and community-based management approaches in natural resource management (NRM) and conservation, the ways that corruption affects local processes is a growing concern.
- » Social accountability shares important characteristics of anti-corruption strategies, especially its emphasis on transparency, accountability, and voice in citizen-based approaches for holding authorities to account.
- » Social accountability (SA) processes may help conservation and NRM practitioners and the communities they work with change the enabling environment for some forms of corruption that result in negative environmental outcomes. At the same time, its impact on forms of corruption that are rooted in higher-level political and economic dynamics or driven by criminal actors may be limited.
- » Strategies that link citizen voice to other anti-corruption and accountability initiatives may produce stronger results. Especially when these complementary initiatives are more confrontational, however, the risks to communities and individuals need to be carefully assessed.
- » Practitioners in conservation and NRM can draw on a wide range of resources introduced in this overview to assess the context for SA and to design and implement appropriate support for SA initiatives.

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The challenge

In conservation and natural resource management corrupt actions help actors seeking private gain and advantage to sidestep, derail, or even dismantle policies and processes for sustainable management of resources. These actions can take place at the source, when resources are traded, and/or where they are used or consumed. Corruption can be systemic – shaping nearly every aspect of how decisions governing resources are made – and it can also manifest in more singular or opportunistic individual actions and decisions. Importantly, it can exist at any level of a landscape or jurisdiction (country, province, etc.) and it can be related to any formal or informal authorities and functions.

As community-based or inclusive conservation objectives have gained prominence as strategies to achieve and sustain conservation and NRM outcomes (Maxwell et al. 2020, Mahajan et al. 2021, Farvar et al. 2018), the impact of corruption in local resource management processes has also grown in importance. When local communities, Indigenous peoples, and other actors at national or sub-national levels seek to manage their forests, fisheries,

and wildlife resources, they can encounter significant challenges caused by corruption.

Just a few examples illustrate the scope of the challenge:

- » management committees or resource user groups may be commandeered by local elites;
- » communities, or specific marginalized groups within them, can have their right to participate or their interests ignored in decisions that will directly affect them – for example, new infrastructure investments; gazetting or degazetting protected areas; nationalization or privatization of resources, landscapes, and seascapes;
- » promised services or benefits in return for conservation activities or in compensation for negative environmental impacts may not be delivered or meet expected levels or quality;
- » unaccountable authorities may violate the rights and undermine the well-being of communities in or near natural resources of high conservation or financial value.

All these outcomes can be a direct result of corrupt actions and/or an environment in which corruption disrupts or destroys formal lines of accountability from citizens and other affected people¹ to authorities. This short overview introduces **social accountability (SA)**, a concept and set of operational approaches that practitioners supporting local conservation and resource management may be able to use to strengthen accountability, especially at the local level, as part of a wider strategy to reduce the impact of corruption on these processes.

In conservation and NRM initiatives, SA approaches provide an alternative and complement to law

enforcement and prosecutorial approaches to addressing corruption, especially at the local level. SA socially grounds anti-corruption efforts and may lend social legitimacy and immediacy to objectives that otherwise may seem distant or unattainable to average people (Burai 2020). It can also provide an alternative language for addressing a controversial and volatile topic like corruption by focusing on the negative conservation outcomes that result from corruption, like unregulated and unsustainable logging or fishing, poorly managed or abusive ranger forces, or infrastructure or concessions that impinge on protected areas or the territorial rights of Indigenous peoples.

Box 1: Same term, different meanings

In the context of conservation and corruption, “social accountability” may be used in different ways.

- » The *conservation* field has used social accountability to mean accountability of actors, including private companies and individuals, for the social impacts of their actions (Nuesiri 2016). This tends to focus on accountability for negative social impacts and includes using legal and judicial means to redress grievances.
- » In the *development and anti-corruption* fields, and in this overview, social accountability refers to a set of citizen-based methods for holding authorities to account and improving outcomes of public policies and services. The focus is mainly on society-based (as opposed to legal or judicial) means for achieving accountability.

¹ This paper uses “citizens” as a general term for the non-government stakeholders in public resource management but includes non-citizens—such as refugees and other residents—as part of this category.

What is social accountability?

The exact meaning and boundaries of SA are [widely debated](#), but the core of the concept can be defined as citizen-driven accountability, an approach that relies on civic engagement and transparency methods and tools to improve governance functions and the management of public resources.

SA approaches were developed mainly to help citizens address problems related to poor service provision, like improved education and health delivery, with the goal of linking citizen activism to outcomes that directly affect them (World Bank 2004). Regardless of the particular objective, SA typically has three key dimensions:

- » a focus on [citizen rights and access to information](#) on policy and budget commitments,
- » efforts to strengthen citizens' [voice](#) in and access to governance processes through monitoring and feedback, and
- » creation of safe spaces and processes for dialogue and problem solving.

The objective of these efforts is to bolster accountability of officials to the public, and ultimately to improve performance related to the targeted concern, whether teacher absences, availability of water for irrigation, or distribution of proceeds from community conservancies. In the process, social norms and expectations can also change. (See Box 4 for some examples of corruption in conservation/NRM and how SA may help address it.)

A core characteristic of SA is that it seeks to change the relationship between authority and society (Hickey and King 2016). As such, is it inherently political. But politics is not always confrontational, and many SA approaches are intentionally non-confrontational. Precisely because of the power differentials they may encounter, many SA methods and approaches emphasize dialogue, information gathering, and problem solving as ways to reach better service and policy outcomes. The question of whether non-confrontational approaches are effective for achieving desired changes is increasingly debated among SA experts. This question will be explored in a later section of this overview.

While SA focuses on “citizens as critical agents of change” (Baez Camargo 2018), it also recognizes the power of institutions and individual actors—whether government, private, or even informal—to assist or resist achievement of objectives desired by citizens. Elections, audit agencies, intra-governmental checks and balances, courts, laws and regulations all form part of the [accountability ecosystem](#) that can support (or sometimes hamper) SA efforts, but they are not primarily considered as social accountability actors (Kohli 2012).²

Box 2: When is accountability achieved?

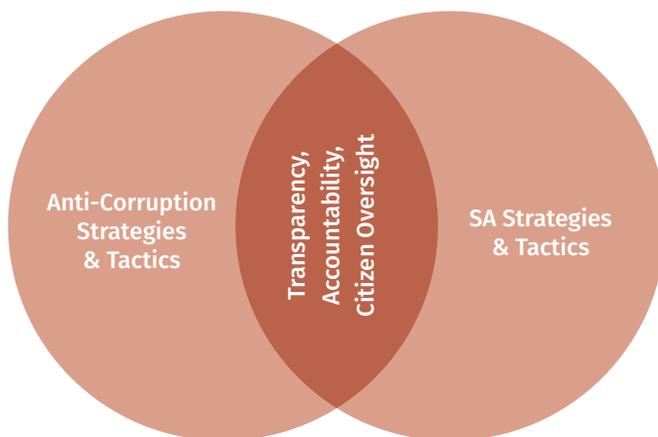
Is accountability achieved when officials or other leaders provide information and justification – when they “give an accounting” – for their actions and stewardship of resources? Or is accountability only achieved when someone in authority is sanctioned for wrongdoing? Ideally, accountability involves both, but the reality of power means that citizen-based “social accountability” may not be able to guarantee enforcement of sanctions.

² Social accountability is sometimes contrasted with the more indirect and often flawed route to accountability that relies on elections (Kohli 2012, McGee and Gaventa 2010, World Bank 2004). Rather than waiting for the public's voice to filter through the morass of political power, patronage, campaign money, and/or vote manipulation that characterizes many electoral processes, social accountability can be thought of as a way to create channels for citizens to engage directly with public officials or other authorities to shape and/or monitor their functions. As noted in this paper, however, the scale of change that can be created through certain SA mechanisms may be quite different from what effective elections can achieve.

Social accountability and (anti-)corruption

Because SA methods almost always include elements of transparency and oversight, and because corruption is itself a type of accountability failure, there is **overlap with anti-corruption strategies and tactics** (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Linkages between social accountability and anti-corruption



The core logic of an SA mechanism is that *informed public participation* through citizen monitoring can both identify failures in performance and create incentives for better performance. These changes can also close opportunities for corrupt actions in some circumstances, so **SA may be considered mainly a preventive approach to corruption**. Most SA specialists do not advocate SA as a method to directly tackle corruption because it generally relies on non-confrontational approaches and focuses on specific service delivery or other performance failures. Nevertheless, **SA can change the enabling environment for corruption** in several ways, including:

- » creating a *greater risk of detection* due to increased transparency and public monitoring;
- » changing *norms and attitudes* that may otherwise accept corruption as “the way things are,” through greater knowledge of rights or more information about the impact or scale of corruption;

- » strengthening a *sense of collective agency* through the experience of engaging authorities and working toward solutions (which may also help change norms and expectations about what is possible); and/or
- » creating a *greater risk* of consequences for corruption or its other negative results, due to changed attitudes or increased monitoring of follow-up actions.

In some cases, SA initiatives might also link up with official oversight or enforcement bodies, like audit or investigative institutions. Providing information to or assisting the monitoring functions of public bodies may be another avenue for increasing the likelihood of detection or consequences. Annex 1 provides an overview list of specific social accountability tools and guides.

While **SA cannot necessarily achieve the same objectives as more direct anti-corruption tactics** like investigations or prosecutions, SA can complement these approaches. For example, through consultation and monitoring, SA can identify problems that may be driven by corruption, elevate those problems among the many priorities of relevant authorities, or even prevent them altogether by increasing the transparency with which decisions are made or resources are managed. Box 3 illustrates some of the ways that social accountability mechanisms can promote these more indirect anti-corruption outcomes. Whether this indirect and usually localized approach will make a *big enough* difference in the face of higher-level drivers of corruption (like powerful interests running politics, law enforcement, or the judiciary—see Klein et al. 2021), or even localized power differentials, must be assessed in each case and context. The following section outlines a number of other critical considerations that practitioners need to make as they assess the viability and appropriateness of SA approaches for achieving their objectives.

Box 3: Using social accountability mechanisms in conservation and NRM: A case study from the forest sector in Tanzania

From 2016 to 2019, the CARE-WWF Alliance supported participatory forest management, including implementation of sustainable harvesting plans, in southern Tanzania. In Mbondo village in Nachingwea District, competition between village leaders over the use of funds earned through timber sales and conflicts due to financial mismanagement were initially common. Further, lack of community and government support for the Village Natural Resource Committee (VNRC) diminished morale among members of this critical community-based group.

In 2018, the Alliance introduced an SA approach, CARE's Community Score Card (CSC) process, to address this complex natural resource governance challenge. Staff used the CSC process to build local capacity for facilitating dialogue among community members, VNRC leadership, and government officials. Through the iterative process, community members and the VNRC

registered their concerns about the management of the community's natural and financial resources and cooperatively developed action plans to resolve those concerns.

More than half of the agreed actions were completed. For example, the village office posted forest revenues, and this increased transparency enabled citizen monitoring of the use of revenues from community timber harvests. This also increased funding available for community-driven conservation and development initiatives, like providing boots and equipment for forest monitoring, building a preschool, and providing health care to elders.

Iterative participatory monitoring using the scorecards at six-month intervals helped to build trust, ensure that plans were implemented, and identify additional actions to improve the collectively-prioritized areas. District forest and wildlife officials lauded the CSC for fostering greater transparency and accountability within village governments and contributing to improved implementation of national forest management laws at the local level.

Critical assumptions: What can derail social accountability?

The logic of SA could apply to a range of issues in NRM (see Box 4), such as delivery of resources for local conservation efforts; proper execution of infrastructure projects; management of common resources like water, fisheries, or forests; or monitoring the behavior of rangers. The logic makes several **critical assumptions**, however, that practitioners should question as they consider SA efforts:

- » **Are providing information, increasing knowledge, and building capacity sufficient to facilitate effective participation?** For this to be true, several enabling conditions need to exist:
 - The issue must matter enough to citizens that they take time, and sometimes even risks, to get involved. When the initiative directly or indirectly targets corruption, quickly demonstrating to citizens the concrete benefits of their participation may be even more important (Burai 2020).

- Citizens must have sufficient opportunities and power for their preferences to be translated into desired outcomes. Especially when corruption is involved, this assumption must stand up to powerful interests that benefit from poor performance, perhaps also tied to organized crime (see Klein et al. 2021).
- Information must be accessible in forms that can be easily understood and used. Participants in SA initiatives need to possess the literacy and technical knowledge required to understand the budgets, accounts, management plans, building specifications, or other information provided (Otto et al. 2019).
- When information is complex, technical, or difficult for citizens to understand, civil society organizations can be important “translators” of public information (van Zyl 2014).

» **Is participation meaningful and inclusive?**

Being asked to attend meetings is not the same as [effectively participating](#). Even when open participation is generally available, ensuring meaningful voice for marginalized people (e.g., women and girls, Indigenous peoples, lower caste persons, disabled people, sex workers) may require extra efforts and accommodations to build confidence and create safe space for their contributions. While this may seem irrelevant to SA’s impact on corruption, superficial or exclusionary participation processes can undermine community solidarity in the face of resistance from more powerful actors or may put certain groups at greater risk.

» **Will participation and transparency translate into accountability?** The level and scale of the SA effort must align with the levels and arenas at which decisions about the service or resource are made (see “Scale Matters” below). Power differentials cannot be so great that people’s

voices are irrelevant to decision-makers (see “Power Matters” below). Informal political, economic, social, or criminal networks and interests may also influence decision makers, so SA activities also need to assess their potential impact on power dynamics (Otto et al. 2019, Klein et al. 2021).

» **Will socially imposed accountability reduce the relevant corruption and improve specific natural resource outcomes in a particular context?**

This is the highest-level result in the logical chain and the most difficult to assess or ensure. If the corruption driving poor outcomes is beyond the reach of social impact (for example, politically motivated bribery and kickbacks to change protected area designations or build major infrastructure), social accountability may not be the right tool. However, complementary strategies of vertical integration (see below) and alliance-building may amplify the impact of SA efforts toward this high-level outcome.

» Finally, it is critical to be transparent and **check assumptions about SA project activities and implementers:**

- Are the objectives of the project in line with the stated needs and priorities of the community members? Does the activity’s [theory of change](#) reflect these priorities?
- Are some objectives or interests (including those of a project implementer) prioritized over others (like the well-being of citizens)?
- Does the project practice transparency and accountability in its own management and interactions with communities?

For any SA initiative, these assumptions need to be made explicit and then monitored. Success will depend to a great degree on whether they hold true or can be appropriately addressed if they do not.

Box 4: How can social accountability be used to address corruption in conservation and NRM?

SA mechanisms, with their focus on improving governance and service delivery performance, could help address the environment for corruption that may drive a range of problems in conservation and NRM.

Participatory planning and monitoring of

resource use: In [Nepal](#), Community Forest User Group members (who are [rights holders](#)) meet annually to assess performance with user group executive committee members (who are [duty bearers](#)). Management processes and outcomes are assessed during a *public hearing*, and *public audits* review financial transactions, including the status of the group fund. Participants agree on a set of recommendations, which are reviewed the following year. These processes do not target corruption directly, but they create an environment of accountability that can help reduce opportunities for corruption.

Addressing distrust between rangers and

communities: [Rangers](#) from local communities are responsible for reducing poaching or deforestation. But they may simultaneously be subject to pressure from their professional or social networks, for example, to work with corrupt networks in assisting illegal actors. Rangers may also be the victims of corruption, for example when resources for salaries, equipment, or support services are skimmed, stolen, or misdirected. Where conditions allow, communities might be supported to monitor and assess the performance of rangers to shed light on problems and address abuses of power. A *community scorecard*, *citizen report card*, or *public hearing* process could surface problems related to corruption and support negotiation of improvements. Where conditions are not as favorable, *grievance* and *conflict resolution mechanisms* may be more appropriate.

Climate finance integrity: Resources to mitigate and adapt to climate change are massive, and some are going into public financial management systems that don't meet core standards of transparency and accountability. [Open budgeting and citizen monitoring](#) mechanisms may help address this challenge.

Project-level feedback and accountability: In the Central African Republic, the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) works with the Human Rights Centre to ensure that traditionally disadvantaged voices are heard, through a [conflict resolution and grievance system](#). In a context of systemic corruption, such mechanisms can be channeled through a trusted and capable third-party intermediary to help fill accountability gaps and identify cases that corrupt systems may otherwise ignore.

Monitoring compensation or services: In a country in Latin America, Indigenous groups were promised public services and a security perimeter for their protected territory in compensation for a dam flooding a portion of the area. These services have not been delivered, and political corruption and criminal networks are among the suspected causes. If decisions about these services are made locally and there is opportunity for dialogue, *community scorecards*, *citizen report cards*, *public budgeting*, or *public hearings* could be used to identify failures in the delivery of promised resources or services and reach better delivery.

For resources about and guides for using these and other SA tools, see Annex 1.

What can we learn from the evidence?

The evidence on the effectiveness of SA approaches is decidedly “mixed,” in part because so many different initiatives and approaches are grouped under the SA umbrella (Fox 2015). But experience is growing, and lessons about what helps create successful SA initiatives are plentiful.

Context matters

“One size does *not* fit all” is the core lesson from years of experience with anti-corruption initiatives. SA may not be appropriate or successful in every setting. **The specific power dynamics, the type of resource and who is interested in it, the level at which decisions affecting management of the resource are made, the degree of political repression or instability, public attitudes and expectations about corruption,** and even the **degree of social cohesion** in a community will all make a difference (Bukenya et al. 2012, O’Meally 2013). Many of the following lessons also refer to aspects of context; this section covers a few others.

Table 1 presents some aspects of the *social* context that may affect opportunities for successful SA efforts.

When corruption is the likely explanation for undesirable outcomes, context can be even more important. Two specific economic or institutional factors that may make corruption a more likely problem and SA approaches more difficult include:

- » whether the resources to be managed are **high value and attract the attention of political, economic or criminal actors** (Klein et al. 2021), and
- » whether managing the resource involves **government actors or functions** (e.g., procurement or law enforcement) **that are known centers of corruption** (Ensminger 2017).

Finally, context matters because **addressing the interests and powers that drive corruption and poor governance can be dangerous**, especially for ordinary citizens. The number of [environmental defenders](#) and [anti-corruption activists](#) who have been killed is only the most horrific indicator of the ways that powerful interests can resist change, especially in countries where civic rights are few or where criminal networks reign. If the context includes closed or closing civic space, regular disregard for human rights, or other threatening indications, SA may not be the right approach. In some cases, it may still be possible to make progress on specific issues, but the linkage between those issues and larger power dynamics must be carefully and sensitively evaluated.

Table 1: Community characteristics that shape opportunities for SA

Characteristic	Specific indicators or aspects that support SA
Collective action potential in community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of horizontal social networks • Levels of participation in voluntary associations • Communitarian or individualistic patterns for problem-solving • Importance of social norms such as solidarity, reciprocity, and gift-giving
Predominant citizen attitudes and expectations toward institutions, leaders, and service providers •	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of rights • Levels of trust in institutions • Attitudes or norms that gift-giving is acceptable • Sense of vulnerability or fear vis-à-vis authorities

Source: Baez Camargo 2015 and 2018

Power matters

Power matters not only because corrupt actors can be dangerous opponents. SA usually seeks changes in the actions of an authority with power over a resource. When that authority fails to respond or to sanction wrongdoing or poor performance, an SA initiative is much less likely to succeed or be sustainable (Wetterberg et al. 2016, Baez Camargo 2018). But public authorities often hold significantly more power than citizens, so **assessing the realistic chance of SA impact** is important. Power dynamics are also particularly relevant when the targeted issue is related to security, where authorities may be armed. If authorities are uninterested or antagonistic to the objective, and other authorities cannot be identified to serve as allies, SA may not be an appropriate strategy. At minimum, the costs and risks of an SA strategy need to be carefully assessed.

Within communities, **respected or powerful individuals may dominate SA initiatives**, and community members may not feel empowered to question their choices. In some cases, **lower-level authorities may be connected to broader networks of corruption or criminality** that influence their actions more than the interests of their community do. **Power differentials may also influence who participates, and how effectively.** Ethnic, gender, caste, or other differences may limit some people's opportunities to participate effectively or have their concerns taken seriously.³

Ownership, capacity, and trust matter

Social accountability efforts must resonate with the needs and perceptions of the people who are expected to participate in them. This means **listening to how citizens and community members define their problems and how they define corruption.** SA initiatives are more likely to succeed if they address problems that the participants prioritize

Box 5: Power and accountability in beach co-management

A study of Beach Management Units (BMUs) on Lake Victoria in Kenya concluded that although “the leaders of [BMUs] are democratically elected, they are hardly accountable to their constituents and use the devolved powers [of co-management arrangements] to advance their personal agendas.” The study recommends more extended engagement through community scorecards, social audits, or budget monitoring, and including other stakeholders such as government and civil society groups, to help balance power differentials at the local level (Etiegni et al. 2019).

(Burai 2020, Wetterberg et al. 2016). Different norms and expectations about what corruption is and isn't, who is involved, and what the response should be can greatly affect the success or failure of anti-corruption efforts (see Jackson and Kobis 2018 for more on understanding social norms and their impact on anti-corruption efforts).

External actors also need to be particularly attentive to ways they might be perceived as corrupt. For instance, the comparatively high salaries and new cars of expatriates, regardless of how “legal” they are, may appear “corrupt” to some observers. Outsiders also need to understand that some community values, such as gift-giving or caring for one's family, may result in actions that may appear to be corrupt but are considered appropriate by some, if not all, SA participants.

Trust and ownership take time and commitment. **Sustained effort and iteration are needed** to learn from experience and adapt to contextual changes (Wetterberg et al. 2016), and **building the capacity of**

³ Experience applying the International Institute for Environment and Development's (IIED) Governance Assessment for Protected and Conserved Areas, for instance, found a systematic problem of weak or non-existent participation of women in decision making. It also found examples of exclusion or marginalization of indigenous groups and fear of speaking out in front of senior government representatives or community leaders (Franks and Booker 2018).

participants is important to ensure the conditions for real ownership. Capacity building may focus on the technicalities of the targeted resource issue or on the skills needed to effectively work with other community members and officials. This role is often played by NGOs or other aid implementers, who must be careful to integrate their assistance into existing processes and formal or informal institutions (O’Meally 2013). Intermediaries who help translate and disseminate information on complex issues (sometimes called “[infomediaries](#)”), whether in the media or civil society, are often needed and may require capacity support as well.

Intention matters

Social accountability efforts should be clear about their intention to address corruption either directly or indirectly. One reason is **monitoring progress and checking assumptions.** If an objective of an SA activity is to reduce corruption that negatively affects conservation outcomes, then that objective should be clear (at least to those participating), and baseline data (either qualitative or quantitative) will be needed to assess whether the theory of change and key assumptions are accurate. Previous projects have often failed to assess an explicit baseline related to corruption and therefore were not able to check their effectiveness (McGee and Gaventa 2010).

Additionally, clear objectives **help set expectations among participants and avoid situations where communities support the SA but decision-makers do not.** This “tone at the top” can make or break community efforts to manage resources more transparently and effectively (See Box 6).

Clear intention, however, does not necessarily mean that “fighting corruption” must be the stated or public objective of the SA effort. **Objectives can be stated in different ways:** greater efficiency, community empowerment, improved livelihoods, better service delivery, safer supply chains, or greater justice and fairness. But **clarity about the impact of corruption on the objective and on the expected pathway(s) toward the objective** helps to elucidate

Box 6: Is everyone on board with the intention of transparency?

Two community-driven development projects in countries with high levels of perceived corruption - one in Kenya and one in Indonesia - demonstrate the importance of tone at the top. In Indonesia, the main government counterpart included enthusiastic reformers, transparency was a stated objective and mode of operation, and other reformers were attracted to the project. In Kenya, leaders acted secretly, and enthusiastic reformers were discouraged and left the project. For this and other reasons, evaluation revealed that the project in Kenya suffered significantly more loss due to corruption than the project in Indonesia (Ensminger 2017).

which stakeholders may be helpful or unhelpful in the process, where the most serious barriers to progress might lie, and risks associated with the chosen strategy.

When addressing corruption is an objective, it’s also essential to **assess the risks and trade-offs that may be involved.** Targeting corruption can be dangerous, as discussed above. It can also potentially endanger other objectives, for instance by alienating important partners. On the other hand, not addressing corruption that undermines conservation or NRM objectives may equally endanger those objectives. There is no “right” answer to these questions; each initiative needs to assess its own situation.

Tactics matter

Seeking improvement in services, better resource management, or reduced corruption means seeking changes from authorities who may or may not be very willing or very able to deliver those changes. As discussed at the beginning of this overview, many SA approaches are intentionally non-confrontational,

and such tactics may not seem like the right fit if the problem is power and will.

Reviews of evidence on whether SA can be an effective approach for sanctioning (punishing) authorities are few, but **existing evidence suggests that collaborative SA is generally more effective at delivering transparency and a degree of responsiveness than it is at delivering sanctions** (Aston and Zimmer Santos, forthcoming). This conclusion reinforces the idea that SA is a useful tool for creating an environment that is less conducive to corruption (prevention). Whether more confrontational tactics are necessary – or advisable – when collaborative approaches don’t work is a question that must be answered individually for each new situation, taking into account the possible risks and trade-offs (Aston and Zimmer Santos, forthcoming).

Scale matters

Generally, **social accountability at the local level is best suited to addressing local problems**. When decision-making power over management or distribution of targeted resources lies at higher levels, strategies to bridge the gap may be necessary.

“Vertical integration” between local SA initiatives and higher-level advocates and reform champions is sometimes recommended to **address any mismatch between the level at which citizens and communities are engaged and the level at which decisions that affect the targeted issue are made**. This may also help to avoid local officials passing blame up the “chain of command” and claiming they are powerless to address the local problem (Fox et al. 2016). Vertical integration is more than just scaling up local initiatives to cover more areas; it involves **“connecting the dots”** among different types of accountability, advocacy, and institutional reform initiatives at the local, national, and even regional/international levels. Depending on the context, a good strategic choice could be to focus on the next-higher level of

government from the level of the initiative, where local officials’ most influential managers or patrons may sit (Wetterberg et al. 2016).

Government and politics matter

While SA focuses on citizens as critical agents of change, the **capacity and will of public authorities to respond effectively will decisively affect the impact of SA** on corruption that affects conservation and NRM outcomes. This is sometimes referred to as the “supply” of accountability—reflected in the ability to deliver desired services and governance—to meet society’s “demand.” SA efforts should also consider whether and what capacity and resources are needed on the government side (Wetterberg et al. 2016). Meeting this requirement might involve assistance to selected public sector entities, or it could instead rely on selecting government partners that are committed to investing in the desired changes.

Some parts of government may not be interested in such investment, or they may not even accept the idea that the public has a legitimate voice in their work. While SA mechanisms can sometimes change these dynamics, the power and interests of government (and sometimes non-government) actors can always push back. SA should *not* be understood as a way to avoid politics, and some evidence suggests that **SA may be more successful when it aligns with existing networks or pressures for accountability and is embedded in existing formal and informal institutions of government and society** (O’Meally 2013). On the other hand, it can be difficult to find the right balance between working with communities who seek redress, especially if they believe the government is part of the problem, while at the same time seeking collaboration and support with government authorities. This brings us back to the original lesson – that understanding the context and identifying the most workable options in a given setting – is a top priority.

Recommendations

The lessons outlined above indicate several steps that practitioners in conservation and NRM can take to assess the conditions for and successfully implement different social accountability strategies and tactics.

- » **Remember that social accountability is not always the right approach for addressing corruption**, though it may be an effective way of addressing other conservation and resource management challenges. SA may help make the local environment less conducive to corruption; it may be less effective if the goal is to punish corrupt acts that have already been committed.
- » **Assess the context** for effective social accountability, and especially SA's viability as an anti-corruption strategy. Context analysis can include broad assessments of the [political economy](#) of conservation, or more focused tools such as the framework for assessing community characteristics described above.
- » Follow guidance and methodologies that help **assess and address power differentials and exclusion** and to build trust and ownership of SA initiatives, such as IIED's [Site-level Assessment of Governance and Equity](#) (SAGE) or the [Participatory Governance Assessment Tool](#) developed by WWF and CARE.
- » **Listen to stakeholders** to understand what is important to them and how they define corruption, then select SA mechanisms that will target the issues they want to address most effectively.
- » **Commit the time and sustained effort necessary to build trust, capacity, and ownership**, as well as to adapt to the lessons that experience will provide. SA is not a one-and-done "event," but a way of implementing ongoing initiatives.
- » **Be explicit about social accountability objectives** in project planning. How openly and directly corruption is targeted should be agreed with participants, using a shared definition of the problem. If corruption is a target, the theory of change should explicitly address how the activity will address corruption, either directly or indirectly.

- » **Define and monitor the assumptions** behind the theory of change and collect data that will assist evidence-based management by illuminating whether assumptions remain true and expected changes are emerging.
- » **Develop robust strategies** that emphasize both citizen input and government ability or willingness to respond. Additionally, assess whether changes at multiple levels are necessary to achieve the desired outcomes, and develop multi-level strategies in response if needed.
- » **Identify and align with existing pressures for accountability and/or formal and informal institutions** rather than trying to establish stand-alone SA activities and institutional entities. One pathway toward this is to avoid the notion that social accountability is a "project" with a specific beginning and end, but rather an existing framework into which supporting programming must be integrated and adapted and which will continue beyond any project.
- » **Consider new issues and cross-sector partnerships** to achieve improvements in NRM and conservation outcomes. Working toward accountability for conservation outcomes, including reducing corruption that endangers those objectives, may seem "political," but this is true of most changes in how natural resources are managed or protected. SA offers processes for ensuring that these changes reflect the needs and priorities of those most directly affected and for monitoring over time whether authorities are responding effectively.

Learn more

[Social Accountability: A practitioner's handbook](#) provides guidance for matching SA tools to different contextual characteristics, along with examples of SA projects.

[Governance and Service Delivery](#): Practical applications of social accountability across sectors draws on detailed case studies of several SA initiatives to provide concrete design advice for SA projects. While none of the cases involve conservation or NRM, the lessons will apply across sectors.

[Mobilizing Accountability](#): Citizens, Movements, and the State is a short "think piece" that explores how external support for SA may fail to link up with existing social and political dynamics, especially social movements, and gives examples of better approaches from several countries.

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Annex 1: Types of social accountability mechanisms

This table lists several common social accountability approaches and provides additional links to resources to help practitioners understand and use them. It's important to remember that definitions differ among practitioners, and practice varies even more, depending on the adaptations required by a given context. For example, something called a “community scorecard” in one place may look a lot like a “citizen report card” somewhere else. What's critical is to *understand the goals and logic of each activity, regardless of the name it is given*.

Annex Table: Overview of Social Accountability Tools

Tool	Core features	Further information
Complaint mechanism	Enables individuals and user groups to raise complaints, ideally in combination with a redress mechanism.	Complaint mechanisms: Reference guide for good practice (Transparency International) For project accountability: Guidance for Creating Effective Feedback and Accountability Mechanisms (CARE)
Resource user groups*	User groups with a legal role and status for raising demands to the service provider or regulator.*	Consumer engagement guideline (WASREB Kenya) Water watch groups (NWASCO Zambia)
Social audit	Participatory examination of the impact or performance of a program or service provider.	Social audits for local development projects: A field guide (CARE) A practical guide to social audit as a participatory tool to strengthen democratic governance, transparency, and accountability (UNDP)
Community score cards	Feedback through dialogue on a service between mobilized citizens and local authorities; local focus, including real-time problem solving.	The community score card (CSC): a generic guide for implementing CARE's CSC process to improve quality of services
Citizen report cards	Household surveys for citizen feedback on government performance. Can be combined with public debates or advocacy campaigns on findings.	Citizen Report Card: A powerful social audit tool (Civil Society Academy)
Citizen charters	Public agency commitments, often developed with users, to uphold standards of quality and transparency.	Developing a Citizens' Charter: Guidance Note (CARE)

Public hearing	Open dialogue between government bodies or service providers and citizens.	Hariyo Ban Program Internal Governance Tool 1: Public Hearing and Public Auditing (CARE + WWF) (CARE and WWF) Conducting a Public Hearing (Community Tool Box)
Participatory budgeting	Citizens participate in local budget decisions, either deciding over an earmarked portion of the budget or giving recommendations.	Participatory budget: The beginners' guide (Civil Society Academy) Participatory budgeting handbook (GIZ)
Budget monitoring	Monitoring budget allocation and execution. Often combined with advocacy.	Our money, our responsibility: a citizens' guide to monitoring government expenditures
Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS)	Quantitative exercises tracing the flow of resources from origin to destination.	(International Budget Project) expenditure tracking survey (PETS) (CIVICUS) Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) and Quantitative Service Delivery Survey (QSDS) Guidebook (Gauthier and Zafar 2012)
Community monitoring of procurement and infrastructure development	Civil society following procurement processes and raising red flags, physically checking infrastructure development.	Monitoring Public Procurement in South Africa: A Reference Guide for Civil Society Organizations (International Budget Partnership) Getting to the heart of the community: local procurement monitoring in Mongolia (Open Contracting Partnership)

Source: This table is adapted from Otto et al. 2019, with updated and revised resource links.

***NOTE:** Resource user groups in the SA context may be distinct from “user group” in the natural resource and conservation field. The latter is defined as a group of legitimate users authorized to access, use, and control decision-making over natural resources in a defined area. In the SA context, a resource or service user group would be a group of “customers” or others affected by the quality of a resource management function or availability of a service.

About Targeting Natural Resource Corruption

The Targeting Natural Resource Corruption (TNRC) project is working to improve biodiversity outcomes by helping practitioners to address the threats posed by corruption to wildlife, fisheries and forests. TNRC harnesses existing knowledge, generates new evidence, and supports innovative policy and practice for more effective anti-corruption programming. Learn more at tnrcproject.org.

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