

SOCIAL PROTECTION

Accountability

THE GRASSROOTS ARE “BEST PRACTICE” IN ACCOUNTABILITY

The official policy assumption that formal organisations are more accountable than informal groups is misleading. Indeed, the opposite is true.

Recent governance analysis of 4,114 non-State actors of different sizes in social protection services in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda reveals that small groups tend to be highly accountable despite their lack of documentation, while large institutions are often opaque and unaccountable despite systemised regulations, record-keeping and upward reporting.

Almost all community-based organizations (CBOs) are formed and run by members on the basis of solidarity and mutual trust, and use oral traditions to set rules, decide policy and manage.

Small self-help groups and membership associations may be “off the radar” of the State, but they are under the close and constant scrutiny of their own members and communities. Their protocols, though unwritten, are known and enforced, and every cent of funding is accounted for, even if not precisely documented. CBOs are intrinsically accountable to their constituency.

Large institutions – managed, monitored and audited by modern methods, formal boards, accountants and lawyers are complex, remote, report only upwards and can remain opaque to their constituents.

The six-country studies coordinated by PASGR identifies three essential attributes which assure the integrity of CBOs:

- They are small enough that, within their sphere, everybody knows everybody else, personally and in detail.
- They are run by their own members. If funds are diverted, they defraud only themselves.

- They report downwards to their members, frequently, regularly and unfailingly. There may be no pen and paper present at their weekly/monthly meetings, but every member is there. That is a cardinal rule.

POLICY CHALLENGE

Concern that CBOs are not sufficiently accountable to be eligible for State funding is unfounded. Indeed, there is a far greater risk and incidence of misapplication or diversion of funds at the State level than among local communities. The findings CBOs demonstrate that the key to accountability lies in universal access to exact knowledge of where money is coming from and where it is going to. And that knowledge depends not on the method of recording it, but on its unfailing communication to beneficiaries: frequent, regular, clear exchanges of ideas, feelings, intentions, and aspirations – between all stakeholders – on anything and everything, using all the senses.

4,114

NON-STATE ACTORS OF DIFFERENT SIZES IN SOCIAL PROTECTION SERVICES... TEND TO BE HIGHLY ACCOUNTABLE DESPITE THEIR LACK OF DOCUMENTATION

States and donors that are worried about episodes of corruption in national agencies could learn much from the accountability mechanisms of small CBOs.

Further information, detailed data and analysis is available from PASGR.