

# Improving service provision: Drawing on collective action theory to fix incentives

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## 1. Introduction

Providing access to good quality public goods and services such as health and education continues to present a challenge to developing countries, even after decades of aid investment. Identifying the underlying “collective action” problems preventing such provision can go a long way towards designing effective interventions. This paper presents a four-layered analytical approach to systematically identify and illuminate these problems in different contexts. It proposes a strategic approach to building core relationships between different actors across sectors and clarifies ways of starting to transform the “rules of the game” that may be blocking effective action. In the process it reinterprets how social accountability – accountability emerging from these relationships rather than imposed from outside – can be used to find sustainable solutions to collective action problems.

The provision of enough good quality, accessible public goods and services is critical for poverty reduction and achieving sustainable development goals. According to the 2004 World Development Report (WDR) (World Bank, 2003) and the associated publications that followed, problems with the provision of public services have been the result of broken lines of accountability at various points along the public policy making, implementation and monitoring chain of delivery. Such lines of accountability are defined in the WDR in terms of the “long route” and “short route” to accountability.<sup>1</sup> The assumption has been that democracy will provide citizens with the mechanisms and opportunities to hold governments to account and thereby enhance “faster, higher quality or better responses to the demands of citizens” (Acosta et al., 2013: p. 5).

In reality, despite the increasing numbers of countries that qualify as electoral democracies, the results in terms of access to quality public services have been mixed. Current research-based projections show that unless a different approach is taken, improvements in economic growth and additional spending by themselves will fail to improve service provision (Wild et al., 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, recent research shows that the governance challenges impeding service provision are not simply about working with citizens or civil society so that they can make their governments deliver better services (Booth, 2012; Centre for the Future State, 2010). Fundamentally, the challenge is a state-society relationship one. It is about bringing together actors involved or otherwise interested in better public services of a particular type (citizens, government, private sector etc.) so that they can find ways to act collectively and improve service provision in their own best interests. This position also significantly challenges the way we think about citizen empowerment and state accountability in relation to improvements in service provision.

This paper argues that, as an intervention, the “bringing together” of different actors so that they can find solutions to their collective action problems depends on the ability to identify and transform the incentives underlying the various actors’ interests in the provision of the specific good or service. “Incentives” here refer to the motivations that inform the various actors’ subjective positions that emerge and characterise relationships when the actual delivery of the particular common good or service is called for. By definition, incentives depend on the internal motivations of the individual or group (e.g. material gain, social advancement, reducing risk, spiritual gain) and the opportunities and constraints arising from the economic and political relationships in which the individual or group is involved (DFID, 2009: p. 26). It is the ability to transform these embedded incentives (either internal or external) that translates into “fixing incentives”.<sup>3</sup> This in turn bolsters actors’ responsibilities and mutual accountabilities, towards improving the delivery of public goods and services.

This paper explains how collective action<sup>4</sup> theory can guide the practice of finding useful entry points for fixing incentives, and thereby improving accountability for the provision of public goods and services. The author uses his action research experience with implementing the Mwananchi governance programme<sup>5</sup> and analysis of similar empowerment and accountability projects to explain some of the insights.

This paper starts with the concept of collective action theory and its relevance to improving the provision of public services. It then considers the practical elements of this theory in terms of how it helps redefine the service-provision problem and lead to the design of strategic interventions. The paper ends with some reflections on the place for social accountability as an agenda for transformative change, considering it from a collective action theory perspective rather than as a demand-side accountability framework. In this paper, the term “public goods and services” includes broadly basic services (e.g. health outcomes) and general services (e.g. transport, provision of justice).

## 2. Relevance of collective action theory

Problematic collective actions situations lie at the heart of challenges over the provision of public services for development. This is because the desired outcomes have to come about as a result of the effective participation of many actors, both outside and within the local communities concerned. Unlike private goods, public goods<sup>6</sup> and services are by their very nature consumed by many people together simultaneously, and even in cases where payment is made, those that do not pay cannot be easily excluded (Rondinelli et al., 1989).<sup>7</sup> Improving the quantity and quality of services, and access to them, is therefore hindered because the actors concerned are not naturally motivated to contribute their maximum. They are instead often motivated to contribute less than they could otherwise do, or to access the benefits without themselves contributing because they are in a situation where they can afford to “free ride” (Gibson et al., 2005).

This occurs because, as Olson (1965) observes, just because members of a group (community, region, country or any other grouping) have a common interest or concern, it does not mean they will act in order to maximise gains for the whole group. Olson’s argument is that “unless the number of individuals is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, *rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests.*” In other words, having a common interest (e.g. agreeing that there is need for better education or health in a particular locality) is not the same thing as acting based on that common interest.

I would add to this that it is now often widely agreed (and also frequently stated in constitutions, policy documents and legal instruments) that public office holders will account to citizens. However, it does not naturally happen that they will account or that citizens will successfully hold them to account on the delivery of a public service or performance in a public office. Collective action, and the forms of accountability that come with it, requires the transformation of incentives.<sup>8</sup>

In essence, when the actors concerned have to contribute from their different positions of strength to solve a public goods and services problem, the situation creates a myriad of social dilemmas<sup>9</sup> for them. In situations where they know that other actors will also benefit, they themselves will think and work politically in the way they position themselves and negotiate the situation (Tembo, 2003). As a result, they end up largely choosing strategies that produce less than the desired outcomes. The challenge therefore is how to generate incentives for co-operation among these actors so that they adopt strategies that can achieve better outcomes, defined in terms of “access, quantity and quality” of any given good or service.<sup>10</sup>

These incentives are such that merely increasing resources (e.g. through aid) without due regard to the nature of these incentives could do more harm than good (Bano, 2012). For instance, communities can withdraw their contribution of labour, leaving it to the government or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide everything. The goods and services would still be provided, but the provision by NGOs or government creates opportunities for patronage relationships where communities become increasingly disempowered. The withdrawal of contributions in these situations does not occur because the actors are no longer interested, nor because they don't see the need. The withdrawal happens because the actors' efforts or contributions are not directly linked to the outcomes, and hence they see that they can get away with either less or no contribution (free riding). Therefore, throwing money at situations where public goods or services are lacking (e.g. poor access to health services) without addressing the underlying collective action problems is clearly addressing the symptom while the cause is still entrenched.

Genuine co-operation<sup>11</sup> thrives on incentives that are non-material in nature, or what are called "psychosocial needs" (Bano 2012). These non-material motivations include such needs as "a good reputation", "trust" and "reciprocity". They lead individuals and groups or organisations into different types and levels of co-operation – or non-co-operation where they are lacking – and multiple configurations of accountabilities. These needs define the core relationships among the actors and they are cultivated (both inputs and outcomes of) within these relationships, as Ostrom points out:

"When some individuals initiate co-operation in a repeated situation, others learn to trust them and are more willing to adopt reciprocity themselves leading to higher levels of co-operation. And, when more individuals use reciprocity, gaining a reputation for being trustworthy is a good investment as well as an intrinsic value. Thus, reputations for being trustworthy, levels of trust, and reciprocity are positively re-enforcing. This also means that a decrease in any one of these can generate a downward cascade leading to little or no co-operation" (2007: p. 23).

The level of co-operation in turn determines the gains from co-operation, which in this case emerge in the form of improved contributions to solving collective public goods and service provision problems, and ultimately the quality and quantity of goods and services. It is during this co-operation that multiple power relations and accountabilities are also construed and developed, in the form of the rules of co-operation, both formal and informal. Therefore, it is crucially important to pay attention to the levels and nature of trust, reciprocity and reputation around a given public good or service, if we are to understand whether the various actors concerned would co-operate and how responsibilities and accountabilities are constructed.

It is the presence or absence of these non-material attributes that shows if those concerned could co-operate in a proposed project to improve service provision or not. It also suggests the kinds of accountabilities (who is to hold who to account) that might be possible and how that might change with interventions that seek to transform accountabilities in certain direction (e.g. wanting to see poor people hold duty bearers to account). This is a different approach from seeking collaboration or co-operation just because the actors concerned appear on the same list of needs or that they are the public officers associated with the sector in question.

The following two sections focus on how collective action theory might help with problem identification and definition, and then how it can help with finding solutions to the public goods and services provision challenges at different levels and in different contexts. They deliberately emphasise problem identification/definition because unless we know the problems and their characteristics, any attempt at finding solutions will be like shooting in the dark. In essence, the right solutions are intricately dependent on knowing the right collective action problem in question.

### **3. Identifying collective action problems in the provision of public goods and services**

As discussed earlier, the process of providing public services easily lends itself to the emergence of collective action problems because, by their very nature, people cannot be excluded from using or accessing these goods and services. As Olson (1965) puts it, “they must be available to everyone if they are available to anyone”, because it is not feasible to exclude others. This ultimately results in under-provision of the good or service in question as actors (even those that take some action) are locked in social dilemmas where they are likely to make less than optimal contributions to the solutions.

From a collective action theory standpoint, therefore, the aim is to identify the underlying pervasive motivations that sustain the poor provision of public goods and services at various levels. Ostrom (2007) explains that the core individual-level motivations for building trust are reciprocity and reputation within relationships. Hence, whether people co-operate and maximise their contribution to finding solutions to common problems, is linked to structural variables that support or undermine the trust, reciprocity and reputation at the individual and group level.

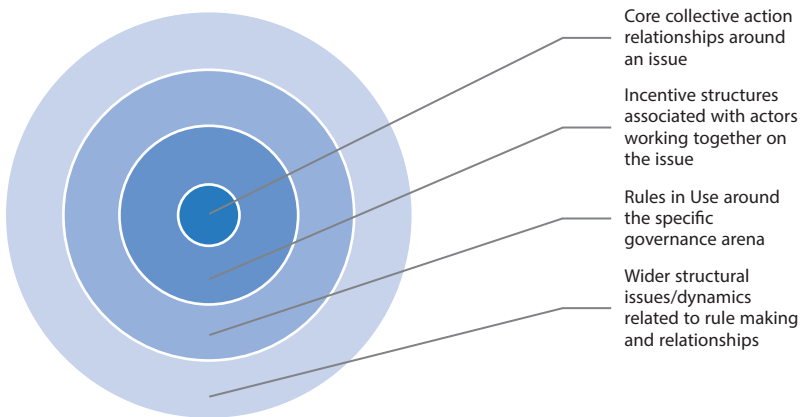
Ostrom discusses structural variables in terms of different characteristics of groups and relationships within them, and how they affect trust, reciprocity and reputation, mostly geared towards common property resources. However, a slightly different approach is required for the kinds of collective action problems associated with projects aimed at improving public goods and services of the type that we are concerned with (e.g. health and education). Instead of

characterising communities or groups in generic terms, away from the service of good in question, we have to specify the good or service in question that is either underprovided or provided with poor quality, or not accessible, in a given context. It is then around this specific good or service that we seek to understand the nature and levels of core relationship characteristics (trust, reputation, reciprocity etc.) among the actors involved (individual citizens, communities, civil society organisations, private sector, government, etc.).

Interestingly, most social accountability projects and collaborative governance practices already bring forward a lot of these motivation and relationship problems. However, the traditional project design and monitoring approaches do not lend themselves to going beyond needs or problem analysis, stakeholder and power-mapping exercises as the main basis for deciding on appropriate interventions. During monitoring and evaluation phases, any relational outcomes that emerge are at best considered as “middle-of the range” (ICAI, 2013) or “mid-point” processes or impacts (Wild et al., 2015). The real motivation, however, is often about trying to quickly get to results in terms of reduced corruption, increased attendance in schools, citizen feedback etc. – and even better if there were also policy reforms and some externally defined evidence of good governance,<sup>12</sup> being reported. This is a mirror image of the way problems are conceived in the first place.

While implementing the Mwananchi programme, I developed a tool that might, with some discipline, help systematically identify and analyse core collective action relationship problems involved in the provision of specific public goods or services, from micro to macro levels, and vice versa, as shown

**Figure 1. Unpacking the structural factors relating to core actor relationships in service provision**



Source: Tembo, F. (2013), *Rethinking Social Accountability in Africa: Lessons from the Mwananchi Programme*, Mwananchi Programme, ODI, London, p. 40.

in Figure 1. These core relationships are then analysed for the incentive structures that inform them, the rules of the game in which they are located and the wider historical and political dynamics in which they are situated. The discussion that follows Figure 1 explains these layers of analysis.

### **Characterising core relationships**

The first layer, according to the framework in Figure 1, is to understand the characteristics of the core collective relationships (levels of trust, reciprocity etc.) around a specific service provision problem such as lack of water or good schools. This is the start point for defining the problem. The core relationships involved should be understood as between actors with different interests (state, private sector, civil society and community) sharing the common problem of the service in question. Box 1 provides some examples of how these problems appear in practice.

#### **Box 1. Two Mwananchi project examples demonstrating how trust affects service provision**

##### **Example 1: farmers' co-operatives in Ethiopia**

The project in this case aimed to enhance citizens' ability to hold the Federal Government of Ethiopia accountable for its provision of audit and extension services to poor farmers through their primary co-operatives and the Farmers' Cooperative Unions (FCUs). The problem was described as "low farmer productivity and sales of produce on the market resulting in poor livelihoods because they are not receiving adequate and good quality extension services from the government". However, analysis of the problem showed that the immediate problem was the quality of self-governance within primary co-operatives and between primary co-operatives and the FCUs; and then between FCUs and the Zonal and Woreda governments (the decentralised structures of governance in Ethiopia).

Official documents regulating co-operatives in Ethiopia stipulated the required core values of co-operative societies as including self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equitable economic and power distribution, and solidarity. The ethical values expected included honesty, transparency, social responsibility and caring for others. However, the research conducted by the FCUs themselves in co-operation with their primary co-operatives showed that these values were sometimes in short supply, which in turn weakened their ability to demand the auditing and extension services that they wanted from the government. Furthermore individual members had started voting with their feet by avoiding selling their produce through co-operatives.

### Box 1. Two Mwananchi project examples demonstrating how trust affects service provision *(continued)*

#### **Example 2: provision and regulation of transport services in Sierra Leone cities**

As a post-conflict country, Sierra Leone still faces huge infrastructure challenges, including the quantity and quality of the roads. This includes roads within cities where most of the citizens live (the war contributed to the dramatic increase in rural urban migration because cities were where most people run to for protection). The project in this case was to improve the motorbike transport services. This involved youths who rode the motorbikes, known as bike riders (BRs) or locally as “Okadas”. The focus was on improving regulatory mechanisms. However, it was observed that, although everyone agreed that motor bike transport was important but needed improving, it could not be improved before the relationships between the bike riders, the police, the Sierra Leone Roads Authority and the people using the transport service were resolved.

BRs have a strong sense of group identity generated over the years. They gather daily at their taxi parks, mainly around road junctions, to deliberate on their affairs and socialise. Their regular interaction and bonding creates an opportunity to deliberate on group challenges and solutions with participation by their peer group and group members. A key element strengthening the cohesion of their group identity is negative stereotyping of them by the public and their sense of victimisation by the traffic officials. The community’s negative perception stems partially from the notion that most of the BRs are ex-combatants from the war. In their group formation, they use the language of war. The elected leader is called the Commander and his team is called a Task Force, reminiscent of the militia operations during the war. They call driving through back roads and paths “operation driving”. They were all at a similar stage of life, they share a lifestyle of working ten hours per day and, amongst other social issues, share the same physical health hazards and risks of the road that belong to the work.

On the other hand, the state actors also shared their own sense of identity that brought them together as either police or local government officers. They tended to look at the BR youths from a certain perspective, which then informed their actions, including punishments imposed on them. The result was protracted and entrenched lack of trust among the various actors, mainly between the youths and traffic police, affecting the provision of the service.

The two examples in Box 1 demonstrate how the erosion of trust, reciprocity, credibility and similar relational attributes impeded the provision of services even when everyone identified with the common problem. They also resulted in the erosion of accountabilities. There were a lot of these situations where underlying relationships between actors with different



networks and identities could not create crossover linkages/relationships with the other actors required to solve the common challenge. This created collective action problems when action of a certain type was required so that service provision could improve.

In the Mwananchi programme, there was an attempt to facilitate a process of getting to understanding prevailing relational characteristics through the Outcome Mapping (OM)<sup>13</sup> process. OM is traditionally used as a tool for intentionally designing projects with a focus on actor behaviour as outcomes, especially of “boundary partners”.<sup>14</sup> It was noted that the OM process was generating a lot of relational characteristics that included issues of trust and reciprocity among the various actors.<sup>15</sup>

Social network analysis is another way to get to prevalent relationships in terms of the nature and levels of trust and reciprocity, and the associated configurations of accountability that seem to be potentially useful.<sup>16</sup> Social networks are linked to levels of trust and reciprocity that exist among individuals and collective groups, which are in turn linked to configurations of how people identify themselves with respect to others and things around them (Long, 2001). The various configurations of these networks around the provision of different goods or services can reveal the various collective action problems as well as opportunities. It is possible, for example, to see the higher density of networks across government, civil society and private sector actors around health projects, but not the same thing in education.

In terms of identifying the core relationship problems associated with specific goods or services therefore, the existing networks need to be examined for their nodes, content and structure across different services. This is a way to redefine the problems associated with the provision of specific goods and services in a given context in terms of prevalent social relationships in a given sector and context.

### **Identifying actor incentives**

Understanding the second layer shown in Figure 1 requires asking the question, “what underlying motivations exist in the relationships that we are seeing?” This layer locates the prevailing problems within the incentive structures with which they are associated. This pertains to the actors involved in the process of providing the public service or good in question, i.e. our understanding of the motivations behind the specific strategies (the observable behaviour) that these actors involved are showing.

In exploring this layer, we find that the motivations are often linked to the prevailing identities and values which bring people together. These might be a common culture or because they face the same external threat to their livelihoods (e.g. being affected in the same way by a government policy). These are the same identities that create corresponding discontinuities and

cleavages (“us and them”) among individuals and communities. In other words, trust, reciprocity, reputation and other social network attributes are drawn from how people construct their identities which could be based on culture, ethnicity,<sup>17</sup> religion, political party etc., and which might come into play when the provision of a particular good or service is in view.

This means that, whereas having similar identities can bolster collective action, at the same time they exclude other actors that do not share that identity and hence access to public goods and services. For example, because of the strength of the ruling party political identity defining resource distribution in Malawi, some of the Mwananchi projects failed to improve the management of Constituency Development Funds for improving education and health. The implementing organisations in this case did not share the identity of powerful stakeholders, and hence the organisation and citizens had a voice but could not get the response they needed from the government. This had nothing to do with the case that they were making but everything to do with how they were perceived by the government through the ruling party’s eyes.

As a methodology for identifying these incentives, the Outcome Mapping process for trying to understand actor behaviour is also able to generate a lot of pointers to actor incentives. Specifically, the process of coming up with progress markers<sup>18</sup> generates a lot of insights into the prevailing incentive structures among the different actors involved in the provision of the specific good or service. Furthermore, some of the interactive social accountability tools, such as community scorecards, also reveal a lot of underlying actor incentives within communities and among state actors, especially during interface meetings. The issue is to systematically identify the indicators of the various actor incentives as they emerge in different ways within the project design, implementation and monitoring processes

### **Rules in use**

The third layer in Figure 1 places these various incentives in terms of the prevalent rules in use,<sup>19</sup> which structure or attempt to constrain the behaviour of actors in a particular context. The idea is that the actors concerned, each with their various incentives, situate themselves in relation to these rules in order to devise successful strategies in their best interest. Their strategies do not just reflect motivation (as explored in the second layer) otherwise every actor would simply do what they feel motivated to do. This means that, while rules create opportunities for some people (and that’s why they are sustained), they create barriers to access for those that cannot follow them, whether they agree with the rules or not. In other words, the rules in use frame the incentives for contributing to or having access to goods and services (see Box 2 for an example).

### Box 2. An example of informal rules in use impeding girls' education in Northern Ghana

Belim-Wusa Development Agency (Bewda-Ghana) emerged as an umbrella organisation of women's groups aimed at strengthening capacities of women and increasing their access to development resources. The Mwananchi project was designed to improve girls' education, especially to reduce dropout rates due to early marriages, among other aims. However, instead of launching a campaign on girl's education directly, they worked out the kind of informal rules that informed the way different actors (youth groups, queen mothers, parents in general, traditional leaders and others) were interacting. They noted that it was the bride-price culture that led to many girls' education being cut short as parents pushed their daughters into marriages in order to receive the dowry. In this case, the issue was not that people didn't agree that girls' education was important but when it came to it, the underlying informal rules in which the various actors' incentives were anchored often prevailed over the general statistics and formalised government analyses and policies on education.

Therefore, unearthing the rules of the game that are associated with the provision of specific goods and services is critical to finding ways to transform them. The rules of the game influence how actor relationships are managed, and how certain behaviours are responded to. For example, in some communities using government resources for personal gain while in a position of authority might be expected and tolerated to some extent, while in other communities it can be a big crime.

Rules in use include those that have been formally written (e.g. decentralisation policy, a piece of legislation passed in parliament or in the constitution) and are known to the actors, as well as those informal rules that have been developed and internalised over time. The informal rules in use become norms defining what is acceptable to do (which is often drawn from culture but not always), and how the breach of these rules is normally sanctioned, even if this sanctioning just means withdrawing reciprocity (returning favours) from the breaker of the rules or having them lose face or reputation.

In the field of political economy analysis (PEA), there are well-developed methodologies for unearthing these rules of the game (For example the World Governance Assessment, see Hyden et al., 2008; and the Framework for Strategic Governance and Corruption Analysis, see Unsworth and CRU, 2007). The rules of the game also emerge strongly in the results of problem-driven political economy analysis (Fritz et al., 2014).

### ***Wider structural patterns and dynamics***

The fourth and last layer in Figure 1 focuses on how the rules in use are themselves linked to the wider structural dynamics, and hence draw their influence on local incentive structures and vice versa. These include historical patterns or foundational factors (Fritz et al., 2014; Unsworth and UCR, 2007), and the wider context beyond the immediate realm of the public service provision project or programme (e.g. donor policies or relationships with the regime in power). For example, in a study on the political economy of scorecards in Malawi, it was noted that the patterns of “big-man” rule and patronage, tendencies to diverge from formal and informal rules in the society, patterns of traditional governance, uneven and limited decentralisation, and weak structures of local service delivery all had a significant impact on the results of the scorecards (Wild and Harris, 2011). The wider governance systems also had a significant influence on the Mwananchi projects in Ethiopia, as demonstrated in Box 3.

#### **Box 3. The political settlement and development orientation of Ethiopia**

Ethiopia has a strong drive for democratic developmental states as reflected in the national Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP). A key ambition of the GTP is to generate increased levels of domestic resources and rely on those, reducing dependence on donor funding. In terms of democratic practice, however, among other things, the Ethiopian federal government has introduced the Charities and Societies Law regulating the work of civil society organisations. Under this regulatory framework, only “Ethiopian charities” or “Ethiopian societies” that do not receive more than 10% of income from foreign sources are allowed to work on governance and advocacy projects.

In this case, the only feasible way to work on governance was to work through one of the Ethiopian associations, the Gurage Development Association. In other words, the broader governance structure within Ethiopia constrained some actors (especially non-governmental organisations) as well as providing opportunities to certain actors (associations) in the way state-citizen engagement could happen.

These wider contextual realities need to be understood as also generating incentives in two ways. The first is how the local actors (here referring mainly to the actors interacting directly with a given service either in the form of demand or supply) position themselves so that they can benefit from the wider policy positions. The second is in the way the wider contextual dynamics, such as adoption of a global or regional policy on gender, influence local practice (in some ways succeeding while in some ways failing). These influences work on the rules in use, the prevailing incentive structures, and

ultimately shape the core relationships of trust, reciprocity and reputation. Methodologically, there are already established PEA methodologies that include elaborated steps for unpacking wider structures, as well as the associated historical patterns (e.g. Unsworth and CRU, 2007).

So far, this paper has discussed how to identify and define or redefine service provision problems as collective action problems, in order to then devise appropriate intervention strategies for improvement. It has shown how a four-layer analytical approach can illuminate these problems in different contexts. It has suggested linking outcome mapping to political economy analysis as a practical method of analysis, along with other methods such as taking advantage of the interactive social accountability tools (e.g. community scorecards), and social network analysis to identify collective action problems. The next section explains how interventions could be designed based on this problem analysis. This section will be brief because solutions follow directly from the kind of collective action problem at hand, they are not to be devised separately.

#### 4. Interventions for improving service provision

The challenge for interventions to improve service provision is one of “bringing together” different actors faced with common problems so that they each contribute their maximum to finding solutions. This pertains particularly when facing collective action problems. The analytical framework for identifying collective action problems in Section 3 suggests that the focus should be on changing relationships into those based on trust, reciprocity and social reputation. These relationships should then be supported with appropriate incentives, and become institutionalised through appropriate rules both for local action as well as in their interface with the wider political economy, such as national policies.

Collective action relationships also provide opportunities for changes to existing rules or the introduction of new ones, which then imply reforms (Wolleb, 2007). The opportunity to transform institutions (rules of the game), introduces an element of intentional design to collective action theory. This means that it is possible to come up with new or modified rules that can discourage free riding, enhance the creation of social capital, raise levels of knowledge and enhance economic efficiency at different levels (Wolleb, 2007).

However, the new insight from the discussion above is that in order to secure actors’ commitment, the rules should be anchored in the changing relationships, and not the other way round. This is because focusing on rules without relationships only works well in situations where there are strong top-down disciplines enforcing and monitoring local accountability mechanisms, such as in the case of service provision in Rwanda (see Booth, 2012). However, whereas these country contexts are desirable, there are still very few countries of this type in the world.

In the majority of countries where discipline is weaker, the “second best solution” might be to draw on localised social accountability projects to build strong trust-based relationships. It is these relationships that then need institutionalising into patterns that are “fit-for-context”, incrementally, and from the inside out. The fact that social accountability projects produce trust and similar “middle-of-the-range” or “mid-point” outcomes, rather than the bigger institutional impacts (ICAI, 2013; Wild et al., 2015) is thus a good thing. Therefore, there is no need to force these projects to achieve more than these outcomes within the often short-term lifespans during which they are funded. What these “middle-of-the-range” outcomes mean for wider scale institutional changes and political settlement patterns is a different question. It has to be answered based on the testing of the assumptions in the theory of change for the programme or project as made by the designing team. It should not be confused with direct assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of the social accountability projects within the shorter time frame.

When thinking about how to intentionally grow “trust and reciprocity” in projects, the assumption is that the existing social network nodes and structures will suggest areas or configurations where there is already some degree of trust and reciprocity. This further suggests that the interventions for improving service provision should seek to use existing organisations and ways in which they are institutionalised because they are already attuned to finding collective action solutions within their arrangements. However, whereas this is true, it is important to note that these configurations might also be part of the problem. For example, they might be excluding direct participation by women and youths. Therefore, interventions would have to use these configurations as entry points but at the same time seek to transform rules towards inclusion.

The lesson that can be drawn from this is that, when it comes to designing interventions the focus should be on enhancing appropriate collective action relationships for improving the provision of specific goods and services, and then incrementally growing incentives and rules that best support these relationships. It is these processes that in my view should be scaled up in terms of linking the local to the national and global. The main idea would be to develop interventions that use the prevalent, locally-driven collective action practices as entry points for change and then seek to transform incentives incrementally.

## **5. Identifying and supporting the right interlocutors**

A very important consideration for this approach is which actors could be instrumental in leading these kinds of interventions. Not all organisations, whether government, private sector agencies, individuals or NGOs, can promote the growth of these collective action characteristics effectively

(Tembo, 2013; Tembo and Chapman, 2014). Interventions for improving public services are also about finding and supporting organisations that can best orchestrate the growth of these psychosocial incentives (trust, reputation and reciprocity) as the main drivers of co-operation among actors of diverse interests who are interested in a given public service.

This means the organisations themselves have to primarily exhibit trust, reciprocity and reputation within themselves, ahead of all the nice project proposals, log-frames and having a lot of money to spend. Additionally, they have to have the political entrepreneurship skills to motivate local actors to commit to finding local solutions, as well as to strategically draw in external actors who are able to add value to change processes. All these intervening organisational characteristics are a key part of intervention packages contributing to improving service provision. Some call organisations with these collective action characteristics “interlocutors”<sup>20</sup> (Tembo, 2013; Tembo and Chapman, 2014), while others call them “development entrepreneurs” (Wild et al., 2015).

The focus on these organisational characteristics means that we cannot arrive at which organisations can best intervene in a given situation without the prior analysis of what is going on in a particular context. It is well recognised that sometimes even civil society organisations can inhibit collective action, promote narrower sectarian interests and nourish clientelist political competition (Deverajan et al., 2011). The actors that are needed for governance reforms to improve service delivery are those that are genuine interlocutors of change in a given context, regardless of the formal categories to which they might belong (Tembo and Chapman, 2014).

## 6. Embedded accountability to improve service provision

The strategy of enhancing core relationships at the local level to enhance co-operation around a specific public service, will, over time, build trust among the actors involved. This will eventually lead to higher levels of co-operation in the group (Ostrom, 2007). As more individuals act on trust, the value of having a reputation for being trustworthy, and what it delivers, will grow and become a good investment. In this way, trustworthy behaviour, levels of trust and reciprocity will be reinforced, as was the case with farmer’s co-operatives in Ethiopia. In this case, as trust within co-operatives and with government increased, there were corresponding significant improvements in both government services to co-operatives and farmer’s sales through co-operatives.

This process also builds positive incentives because, as the value placed on being trustworthy and having a good reputation grows, so too do levels of transparency and accountability among the actors. This happens because individuals and groups start to vigorously pursue and protect their newly established values and expected behaviour, thereby raising the stakes for

performing better. They will also start to invest in long-term gains. This equally applies to government actors who find their reputation of doing good in the communities where they work reinforces their careers. This is because community members support them even when they sometimes have not met the government's set performance standards (Hall, 2012)

Increases in transparency can in turn reduce free riding, and encourage the emergence of sanctions that are more appropriate and effective because they are drawn from value-based performance standards or expectations. For example, sanctions come about because keeping the values is seen as important by those involved in the situation, as was the case with FCUs in Ethiopia. In this case, sanctions arise out of the relationships of trust and reciprocity, and not just because of a demand from an external actor who is not part of the relationship.

In other words, if public office holders perceive it to be important to be trusted, they will make themselves accountable in order to cultivate more trustworthiness. This is because it meets their psychosocial needs even if their actual salaries and other material benefits are low. The cost of not meeting expectations increases because expectations have become a social norm: people are in effect policing each other, feeding into rules of the game, albeit in an informal way. All these are part of the informal incentive structure and rules in use around specific public services.

However, these localised and informal forms of accountability might not always work for the poor, because they are often also embedded in complex webs of external/or wider relationships and hence incentives and interests. The process of building accountability relationships might have to be combined with more procedural and legally based institutional accountability. These pertain to the formal disciplines and legal instruments that might be relevant and the building of incentives to enforce them,<sup>21</sup> as a way of working at the fourth "wider dynamic" layer of collective action problems. This is where social accountability needs to have a higher objective of contributing to state building.

Given the incentive-structure challenges associated with formal institutions (see numerous examples in Kayizzi-Mugerwa, 2003), the evolution of these linkages between informal and formal rules as a form of social accountability brings significant improvements to policy reforms. It is this incremental making and institutionalisation of informal rules which, when reinforced with more formalised procedural accountability, can build accountability relationships that work.



## 7. Conclusion

Bringing together local actors so that they can find solutions to their collective action problems over the provision of public goods and services lies at the core of sustainable service delivery. Collaboration between actors, including the private sector, civil society, government and communities is seen as the way to deliver development. However, those designing interventions often fail to think through how the various actors' interests and incentives, as acted out within different political contexts, are to be managed. This paper has shown a way to draw on collective action theory to inform the identification of service delivery problems. This goes a long way towards unearthing what is happening behind the statistics derived from "big data" thinking and the preoccupation of project designers.

Service provision is often seen in terms of "lack of schools in community X" or "lack of hospitals in communities Y and Z". This narrow definition of the problem leads to social accountability projects that are too "symptom-focused", without an understanding of significant underlying issues. The four-layer analysis discussed here provides a way of understanding existing actor relationships around a specific good or service. It starts with the prevailing relationships among actors, situating these within the incentive structures, rules of the game, and ultimately the wider economic and political dynamics and historical factors. This analysis represents the micro-to-macro, "within micro" and macro-to micro systemic inter-linkages of service provision. Such a layered analysis provides opportunities to understand where the problems really are.

In terms of the external interventions themselves, enhancing the growth of core relationships must be a key focus of change, because with the strengthening of relationships comes local creativity to solve local problems. Any attempt to introduce new rules of the game has to be cognisant of the fact that the rules that work best are those anchored within the prevailing relationships so that they are part of the internal motivations for change and not externally imposed disciplines. Imposed rules increase transaction costs through monitoring and sanctioning, for example having to pay an NGO to conduct social audits or facilitate community scorecards. This applies mainly in countries where top-down disciplines are weak.

Social accountability projects, such as community scorecards, do have a great potential for institutionalising rules within local communities themselves and scaling them up to higher subnational and national levels, based on what works in terms of delivering services. This can happen if they focus more on the nuances of the kinds of relationships and rules that are evolving, rather than just upstream results such as reduction in corruption.

The role of external agencies (NGOs, donors, and others) has to be carefully thought through in order to provide the right incentives for local

problem solving. There is a need to identify and support the actors who are best placed to facilitate relationships of this type, drawing on their own trusted characteristics.

Finally, the understanding of accountability from a collective action perspective becomes one of mutual accountability among the actors that are working to find solutions to their common problem. This kind of accountability can be reinforced through legal and other formalised mechanisms, but only in support of the local forms of accountability appropriate to the context.

## Notes

1. The long route to accountability is where citizens are able to hold politicians accountable for allocating resources and monitoring results; and politicians in turn are able to hold service providers – teachers, doctors and nurses – accountable for quality delivery of services. The short route is where citizens are able to directly hold the frontline providers to account for the delivery of services.
2. This research, for instance, argues that only 10 of the 33 sub-Saharan African countries for which data was available, would have all children completing their primary school education by 2020.
3. This term is borrowed from Bano (2012).
4. “A **collective action problem** exists where a group or category of actors fail to co-operate to achieve an objective they agree on because the first-movers would incur costs or risks and they have no assurance that the other beneficiaries will compensate them, rather than ‘free riding’. The problem is more likely to arise when the group in question is large and the potential benefits are widely shared (‘non-excludable’). Solutions to collective action problems involve enforceable rules (‘institutions’) to restrict free-riding and thereby motivate actors to act in their collective interest” (Booth, 2012: p. 11).
5. Mwananchi (which is a Kiswahili word for “ordinary citizen”) was a five-year, DFID-funded Governance and Transparency Fund programme, which was implemented in six African countries (Ethiopia, Uganda, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Malawi and Zambia) from 2008-2013. The programme aimed to strengthen citizen abilities to hold their governments to account through working with civil society organisations, media, traditional leaders and elected representatives.
6. Public goods (including services) are those that are consumed jointly by members of a community, where one person’s consumption does not subtract from the availability of the good to others. More specifically, they refer to benefits from whose enjoyment it is impossible or difficult to exclude community members who have not contributed to their production, and which tend to be underprovided by the market as a result (Booth, 2012).
7. These authors further argue that payment, whenever it is made, tends not to be closely related to demand or consumption. Decisions on allocation are made primarily through political processes, individual choices regarding whether to consume or not are marginal to the provision, and the quality and quantity of these goods or services are difficult to measure.
8. It is of course recognised that constitutions, policies and legal instruments also generate incentives or other sources of coercion on actors. However, the emphasis here is on making these incentives practically generate the actions that they are meant to make happen, which is not always the case.

9. Ostrom defines a social dilemma as “a setting in which individuals choose actions in an interdependent situation. If each individual in such situations selects strategies based on a calculus that maximises short-term benefits to self, individuals are predicted to take actions that generate lower joint outcomes than could have been achieved” (2007: p. 1).
10. It is important to emphasise that this co-operation first occurs at the level of incentives and strategies before it emerges as co-operation in the form of collaborative or independent efforts but working for the better common good.
11. I introduce this term here in view of the distinction that Bano (2012) makes between “material rewards” and “psychosocial rewards”. Genuine co-operation emerges when individuals or groups are driven primarily by psychosocial motivations that are in their best interest to achieve. Material rewards can work for a time but they eventually erode actor commitment and result in deterioration of actor performance and inability to mobilise other actors to join in the action. Actors tend to depend on the continued flow of material goods (such as aid money) that they receive and not on their creativity and commitment to actions because of “belonging” and other attributes that collective action brings.
12. Wild et al. (2015) categorise this level of higher-level impact as “institutional”.
13. Outcome Mapping focuses on one specific type of result: outcomes as behavioural change. Outcomes are defined as changes in the behaviour, relationships, activities or actions of the people, groups, and organisations with whom a programme works directly.
14. These are individuals, groups, and organisations with whom the programme interacts directly and with whom the programme anticipates opportunities for influence (Earl et al., 2001).
15. While facilitating an OM workshop for grant partners in Malawi, I invited a specialist on Community Scorecards from the Kalondolondo programme implemented by Plan Malawi and other partners to train grant partners in the scorecard methodology. It was very evident that the scorecard methodology and process also had a lot of issues of trust, reciprocity and other relational issues but which were not illuminated as they should. Wild and Harris (2011) also identify this challenge of having a theory of change for scorecards that does not include these relationships characteristics and yet they are the main achievements of the methodology.
16. Social Network Analysis (SNA) can be defined as “a body of methods developed for analyzing social networks. ... A social network is a number of actors connected by some kind of relationship. Actors can be individuals, groups, or organisations. Relationships can be of any kind, from formal to informal, financial, sexual, friendship, professional, etc. ... The most important point of difference between SNA and other forms of analysis of social phenomena is that attention is paid to the structure of relationships between actors. This is in contrast to the analysis of the attributes of actors (and different categories of actors). Focusing on attributes, we could describe a group of intravenous drug users in terms of their average age, education status, ethnicity, employment status, etc.” (Davies, 2009: p. 3).
17. Daniel Posner (2006) makes an interesting distinction between “identity construction” and “identity choice” here, with the former referring to the long-term ethnic sense of belonging, and the latter referring to the deliberate political choice that an individual makes to emphasise one ethnic identity over the other out of the multiple identities (e.g. regional or tribal) that he or she carries, dependent on which one he or she thinks can best help them have access to public resources. In this layer, I am referring to the ethnic identity construction that makes people identify with one group and not the other. I come back to identity choice under “rules in use” below.
18. Progress markers reflect the intervention’s understanding of the changes required for boundary partners to understand and fulfill their roles and responsibilities as implied in the vision statement (Earl et al., 2001).

19. “Rules in use” refers to rules as they are understood and followed by participants (the way participants are expected to behave in a given context), and enforced (Gibson et al., 2005).
20. “Interlocutors” are organisations or individuals with those “game-changing” characteristics that are necessary for addressing, or contributing to addressing, a specific collective-action problem (Tembo, 2013: p. 7).
21. Recent ODI research shows that the enforcement of policy disciplines is different from context to context and makes a significant difference to the provision of public goods and services (see Booth, 2012).

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