

3

Holding service providers to account: community scorecards and district-level forums

by CLEMENT A. AKASOBA and LANCE W. ROBINSON

Introduction

In recent years there has been increasing interest in public accountability. 'Public accountability' implies that citizens have an input into government plans, policies and budgets, in tracking budgets and disbursements, and assessing the performance of government service providers.

One method for assessing the performance of service providers is the citizen report card. This uses the techniques of market research – particularly sample surveys of the 'consumers' of government services – and applies them to social (rather than commercial) ends. However, a limitation of this method is that it is essentially an extractive research approach. Researchers collect data from citizens, and take that data away to analyse and use it.

An alternative approach is the community scorecard method. Citizens are participants, providing the feedback on service providers themselves, analysing it, and directly expressing their concerns to service providers. The methodology is adapted from PRA and makes particular use of scoring techniques.

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education, water and sanitation, and local government. A key component of the community scorecard methodology is the opportunities for dialogue that are created, especially when communities are brought together and assisted to express their concerns at higher levels such as the district level.

This article describes the community scorecard process used in the Information Flow, Accountability and Transparency (INFAT) project, managed by the Northern Ghana Network and three of its member organisations, with financial assistance from the Commonwealth Education Fund. It

Table 1: INFAT project stages

Project stage	Activities
Preparatory work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building awareness among service providers and other stakeholders. • Selecting participating communities. • Collecting supply-side information (enrolment rates, standard test results, infrastructure and learning materials provided to schools, etc.). • Project personnel train volunteer facilitators.
Community interventions: first meeting	<p>General meetings held in each of the 32 communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community members informed about the project. • Community members select general themes about the service provider to be assessed and specific indicators for each theme. For example, under 'pupil-teacher ratio', community members would decide on criteria for scoring, e.g.: less than 30 to 1, good (a score of 3); between 30 and 40 to 1, fair (a score of 2); greater than 40 to 1, poor (a score of 1). • Division of community into focus groups (normally, three to five groups).
Community interventions: focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In each community, facilitators meet with focus groups (including one focus group of teachers). • Each group gives scores according to agreed indicators. • Participants give reasons for the scores and suggest possible solutions to problems identified. Facilitators record these.
Community interventions: interface meeting	<p>General meetings are held in each of the 32 communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of focus group scores. • Discussion of reasons for scores. • Reaction and feedback from service providers. • Discuss possible solutions. • Community members informed of the district-level multi-stakeholder forum and encouraged to attend.
Synthesis workshop	<p>In each district, a facilitation team meeting is held in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brief each other. • Collate and compile results from the 16 communities in that district. • Plan the district-level multi-stakeholder forum.
District-level multi-stakeholder forum	<p>In each district, a public forum is held:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of the scorecards by facilitators and/or community members. • Expression of concern by community members. • Reactions from the service providers. • General discussion, suggestions and recommendations. • Closing remarks.
Dissemination and advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication of scorecard results in a report. • Comparison of results from the two districts. • Dissemination of results through the media. • Scorecard results shared with relevant networks, coalitions, policy processes, etc.

focuses in particular on the use of district-level multi-stakeholder forums.

The INFAT project

The Northern Ghana Network for Development is an umbrella organisation for over 60 non-governmental and community-based organisations operating in the three regions of Ghana's north. In 2003, the INFAT project and

the network, together with three of its member organisations, and a team of volunteers, applied the community scorecard methodology to the education sector, in particular, primary schools.¹ The project assisted citizens from 16 communities in each of two districts to assess the performance of the primary school(s) in their communities and to

¹ The NGOs Amasachina Self-Help Association, Gub-Katimali Society, and PRIDE.

Table 2: An example of a scorecard for one community

Themes	Indicators/criteria	Community consensus score	Comments
Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)/School Management Committee (SMC) meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No meetings: poor • 1–2 meetings/year: fair • > 2 meetings/year with good attendance: good 	3 (good)	
Pupil-teacher ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • < 30 to 1: good • Between 30 and 40 to 1: fair • > 40 to 1: poor 	1 (poor)	The newest teacher has 51 pupils. SMC will lobby district Director of Education for more teachers
Drop-out rate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • < 50% of pupils finish primary: poor • 50% to 80% of pupils finish primary: fair • > 80% of pupils finish primary: good 	3 (good)	
Teaching and learning materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Textbooks are shared between > 2 pupils: poor • 1 textbook per two pupils: fair • Every pupil has a textbook: good • Also, do teachers have a variety of teaching materials? Poor, fair or good 	3 (good)	SMC contributed
Teachers' accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No accommodation for teachers in the community: poor • Not all teachers have accommodation and/or quality is poor: fair • Accommodation available for all teachers, acceptable quality: good 	3 (good)	Teachers stay at the district capital and travel to the community. Funds for constructing teachers' housing was misspent.
Teacher-community relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers greet and participate in community activities: poor, fair or good 	2 (fair)	

express their concerns to the service providers (teachers, headmasters, and Ghana Education Service personnel) and to other stakeholders (especially district assemblies). The facilitation teams were made up of a mix of NGO personnel and volunteers from the participating communities. Volunteer community facilitators were selected by the NGOs and community leaders, most of them being people with some facilitation skills and with whom the NGOs had worked previously.

Primary education was selected as the focus of the project because it is a government service that is visible in, and relevant to, most rural communities in Ghana. Also, many of the member organisations of the Network have experience of the education sector. We felt that the Ministry of Education, being slightly more decentralised than most government ministries, might be more amenable to public influence from the grassroots.

The project went through three general stages of preparation, at community, district and national-level. The work was broken down into seven main activities (Table 1).

Community-level activities

During the community-level activities in the project, community members identified criteria for assessing the performance of their local school. These were added to five standard 'themes' used in all 16 communities (the first five 'themes' shown in Table 2).

Community members identified a number of indicators for each theme. Based on these indicators, interest/stakeholder groups in each community gave the school a score. Focus group scores were combined into each locality's community scorecard. The scorecard results from each community were then summarised for presentation at the district-level multi-stakeholder forum (Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of scorecard results in Bongo district

Community	Themes					Mean ²
	PTA/SMC Meetings	Pupil-teacher ratio	Pupil drop-out rate	Teaching and learning materials	Teachers' accommodation	
Kanga	2	2	1	3	1	1.8
Vea	3	1	2	3	1	2.0
Tarongo	1	1	1	3	1	1.4
Gambrongo	3	1	1	3	1	1.8
Anafobisi	3	1	3	3	1	2.2
Gowrie Central	3	1	3	3	2	2.4
Kunkua	2	1	3	3	1	2.0
Gowrie-Tingre	2	1	3	1	1	1.6
Gorogo	2	1	3	2	2	2.0
Dua	1	1	3	2	2	1.8
Salibga	2	1	3	2	2	2.0
Soe	3	1	3	2	1	2.0
Balungo	2	1	2	2	1	1.6
Lingo	3	1	2	1	2	1.8
Kadare	3	1	3	1	2	2.0
Goo	2	1	1	1	2	1.4
Mean	2.3	1.1	2.3	2.2	1.4	

Scores were given from 1 to 3: 3 = good, 2 = fair, 1 = poor.

District-level multi-stakeholder forums

The climax of the community scorecard process is the district-level multi-stakeholder forum. The main reason for having the district-level forum as well as the community-level interface meetings is that feedback and dialogue are needed at different levels. Some problems and concerns can be addressed at community level by headmasters and teachers. Other problems can only be solved by action at higher levels so giving community members a voice beyond the confines of their own community is important.

In the INFAT project, the district forums were very lively. The community-level activities helped prepare community members for these forums by encouraging them to learn more about, think about, and discuss the issues and concerns they had. This gave them the confidence to stand up in the district forum and tell the education authorities and district assembly personnel their thoughts.

Example: district forum in Bongo district

Participants in the forum included:

- community members

- district assembly co-ordinating director
- district Directorate of Education:
 - district director of education
 - director in charge of education
 - circuit supervisors
- traditional authority representatives (chiefs)
- head teachers of schools
- district assembly members from concerned communities
- Parent-Teacher Association/School Management Committee representatives of schools
- representative from Institute for Policy Analysis
- representatives from PRIDE
- observers
- representatives from Nicaragua's parliamentary select committee on education who were visiting Ghana at the time.

After introductory remarks, including an explanation of the project, the scorecard results for each community were

² It is recognised that it is not statistically valid to calculate a mean for an ordinal variable; nevertheless, the means are shown here for each community and for each indicator in order to give a general impression of community feelings on these issues.

A participant speaking at the Bongo district-level multi-stakeholder forum.



Photo: Gariba Development Associates

presented (Table 3). This immediately generated a buzz, as it became easy for community members and other stakeholders to compare between communities. Data on the specific indicators for each theme were also presented, and reasons for poor scores discussed. Some of the main issues of concern that arose included:

- teacher absenteeism and lateness, and lack of incentives for teachers;
- teachers' accommodation/teachers travelling each day to their post, and arriving late;
- a lack of teachers and improper distribution of teachers;
- only some schools benefit from pupil incentives given by the World Food Programme and World Vision;
- teachers going on study leave or transfer;
- alleged maltreatment of teachers by the district Directorate of Education;

- parents withdrawing their children on market days or for farm labour;
- teachers using instructional hours for games and other things;
- teenage pregnancy; and
- school infrastructure (185 students/classroom in one community).

Dialogue at the forum

It was as these issues were discussed that the forum became particularly lively. The district director of education responded to a number of the concerns, and in many cases was challenged by community members. However, the focus was on dialogue rather than lodging complaints. This was important for a number of reasons, including the fact that community members did not have all of the information on all of the

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issues. For example, one of the main concerns was teacher absenteeism and lateness. Through discussion, community members realised that this is not always due to teachers being irresponsible. Teachers pointed out that often they are forced to deal with bureaucratic matters in the district capital, for example, chasing up paycheques. A few communities proudly reported that they had built teacher housing, helping to tackle the problem. They challenged other communities to solve some of their own problems and not expect the state to do everything for them.

Identifying solutions and recommendations, for example, timely payment of teachers’ salaries, improving the sense of responsibility of teachers and providing teacher accommodation in the communities, was an important part of the forum. However, people tended to identify actions others should take. There was no real action planning by stakeholder groups. This aspect of the district forum needs to be strengthened in future.

Impact, lessons learnt and ways forward

One positive outcome was the forum’s effect on community members’ level of understanding of the issues. They realised that it is possible for any community to have a dialogue with any perceived authority in order to seek solutions for their problems. They also realised that some problems are not beyond their own means of solving. There were also more tangible impacts. Following the district forum, one community in Tamale took the initiative and organised a radio programme to demand that the education authorities explain some of the problems that were found.

One lesson learnt from the forums conducted is that it is important to have all the relevant stakeholder groups represented. In the case of the Bongo forum, for example, the inclusion of a representative from the Ghana National Association of Teachers would have strengthened the forum, and increased the likelihood of useful information coming out. NGOs working in the education sector might also have

offered solutions to some of the problems identified. Efforts to engage the forum in serious action planning are likely to suffer unless all relevant stakeholders are present.

Perhaps the greatest value of the district-level multi-stakeholder forums was the opportunity for dialogue they created. Groups that would normally never even meet each other had an opportunity to interact and understand the others’ point of view. Communities were brought together, a wide variety of stakeholders interacted in serious dialogue, problems were identified and possible solutions discussed. By focusing on dialogue, the process was able to contribute to the education and to raising stakeholders’ awareness of the issues. A process based on lobbying, the lodging of official complaints, or legal empowerment would not have had the same potential for this kind of mutual education. This is not to say that more adversarial approaches do not have their place – one of the weaknesses of the INFAT project was that lobbying and follow-up after the district forums were poor. Linking the dialogue focus of the district forum more closely with other activities focused on advocacy and lobbying would likely have strengthened both aspects, and improved the overall impact of this project.

One way to do this would be to ensure that the entire community scorecard process – and the district forum within it – is treated as part of a larger, ongoing planning and policy process. The district forum itself could be broadened to include not only discussion and brainstorming, but also actual planning. Alternatively, other multi-stakeholder planning activities could be added after the district forum.

Another way to make a link to a larger, longer-term process would be to repeat the activities in the same districts and communities every year or two and begin doing comparisons over time. This would strengthen any advocacy initiatives that may emerge from the process, whether at the regional or national level by civil society organisations such as NGO networks, or at the district level by grassroots community members and their organisations. Being able to assess progress over time should also be useful for managers of service provider agencies. The Network and its member organisations are working to ensure that the process can be regularly repeated in the participating districts and communities. If this can happen, then the value of doing the assessments and being able to track progress will become readily apparent.

In the interests of financial sustainability, the Network has resisted the urge to include in the budget anything more than token amounts for facilitator honorariums. The Network has not (yet) obtained funds to allow the process to be repeated across all 32 communities. However, in Tamale, one of the

participating NGOs, Amasachina Self-Help Association, has raised funds to repeat the scorecard process in some of the same communities. The long-term vision is for PTAs/SMCs to take responsibility for implementation of scorecard activities, perhaps through an umbrella association, and for the North-

ern Ghana Network for Development and its member organisations to shift to the role of facilitating the process as consultants working at the behest of the PTAs/SMCs. In any case, some level of funds will still be needed and no permanent funding solution has yet been found.

CONTACT DETAILS

Clement A. Akasoba
PRIDE
c/o Zamse Secondary Technical School
PO Box 203
Bolgatanga
UER
Ghana

Lance Robinson
Robinson Orozco Associates
128 Plainsview Dr.
Regina
SK, S4S 6L2
Canada
Email: Lance@roboroz.ca

NOTE

For more information about the INFAT project or the community scorecard methodology in Ghana, contact the Northern Ghana Network for Development: ngndnet@hotmail.com. See also www.roboroz.ca/scorecard