Youth as drivers of accountability: conducting a youth social audit

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The demand for social accountability in the management of public resources has been gaining ground in Kenya over the last seven years. While the country's revenues have been on an upward trend during this period, budget accountability has been a major issue of concern. About KSh 170.2 million of the constituency development funds (CDF) was reported missing in 23 constituencies in the 2006/2007 financial year and KSh 500 million in 2008/2009, according to a report by the Kenya Taxpayers Association (NTA, 2009). Pressure from citizens has therefore increased for government to account for the use of public finances in public service delivery.

Since 2009, Plan International's governance programme has been organising youth forums and workshops in Kenya for government fund managers to share information on the public funds destined for community projects and services. Youth in Kwale, Kilifi and Nairobi counties have been using social audits, which have been developed as both a participatory tool and a participatory process to enhance social

Photo: Lilian Indombera

A youth social audit team inside a classroom in one of the primary schools in Kwale County, Kenya. The team interviewed members of the project implementation committee during a social audit session.

accountability. Social audits assess systems and processes of government institutions in public finance management at community level. This note shares our experience with other practitioners.

Social audit process

As carried out by the youth in Kwale, Nairobi and Kilifi, the participatory social audit process started by making informa-

tion accessible to the public on government resources allocated to community public projects and basic services. Perceived gaps, violations of public trust and inconsistencies in the information shared often raised questions and doubts about the integrity of the service delivery process. This was the justification for users and citizens to conduct a social audit.

The youth then mobilised their peers both informally through peer interactions and formally through registered youth organisations. Plan works with the district youth councils in Kwale and Kilifi, and Jipange Youth Organisation in Nairobi (with a membership of 32 legally-registered youth groups). These provided the enabling platform for effective peer-to-peer youth organising.

The youth then met to form social audit teams that were gender balanced and incorporated other marginalised social groups. Terms of reference (TOR) for the social audit were then drawn up, based on shared questions and concerns that could not be clarified without verification of how public projects or services were delivered.

Social audit teams then brainstormed on the appropriate methodology to use for the audit. They developed a scorecard capturing their individual and collective criteria for scoring according to their satisfaction levels (highly satisfied, satisfied, fairly satisfied, not satisfied or disappointed). They also developed rules for engaging with the duty bearers at the selected project sites.

Fund managers were then asked to provide project financial documents and bills of quantities for the social audit team to verify. Fund managers included government officers or public servants, mandated to manage government finances at the local level for community development projects. A date for a site visit was agreed with them, community beneficiaries and the relevant project committee.[1]

> ### Box 1: Social audit process at a glance: tips for practitioners
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> • Organise communities into civic constituencies.
> • Generate and share information on public funds and projects among existing organisations, to trigger public demand for action.
> • Facilitate the setting up of inclusive civic action group (social audit team).
> • Strengthen the team's capacity for multi-level engagement.
> • Support team to generate appropriate customised action research tools e.g. scorecards.
> • Let the team develop their own terms of reference and indicators for project assessment.
> • Coordinate logistics for social audit team to visit project sites for assessment.
> • Support joint team reflections at project sites.
> • Coordinate feedback sessions between social audit team and project committees or public fund managers.
> • Where answers do not satisfy expectations of social audit team, let them share information with state accountability watchdogs for further investigations and action.
> • Facilitate the adoption of a social contract or citizen service improvement charter between the team and the project/fund managers if the team agrees that issues identified can be corrected at that level.
> • Coordinate the process of negotiating for change, follow-up and reviewing commitments made.

The team took to the field cameras, questionnaires, notebooks, pens, marker pens and flipcharts for capturing data. At the project sites, the social audit teams were received by the project implementation committee. The leader of the audit team shared the objectives of the visit. The youths generally identified themselves as students intending to learn more about the project rather than introducing themselves as social auditors. They did so because on a first encounter, 'social audit' is often assumed to be an attempt to politicise citizens against public servants or leaders. As the social audit process progresses, these misapprehensions are corrected and support from government actors is often forthcoming. Had the youth called them-

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[1] Project committees are bodies that oversee a project's implementation on behalf of the community. A committee generally consists of representatives of various interest groups at local level (e.g. village elders, women's leaders, youth leaders, religious leaders).

Figure 1: A simple project social audit tool				
Project type/name	**Social audit team satisfaction rating**			
	Highly satisfied	**Satisfied**	**Fairly unsatisfied/ unsure**	**Not satisfied/ disappointed**
Amount allocated				
Community participation in the project cycle				
Management of project resources				
Relevance of the project to pressing community needs				
Cost effectiveness and efficiency of resource use				
Project's impact/potential impact on poverty alleviation				
Quality of workmanship				
Number of beneficiaries				
Integrity and competency of the project management team				
Project inputs procurement process				
Promotion of accountability and transparency in project				
Project outcomes/outputs				

Box 2: Citizen-state relationship framework for social accountability
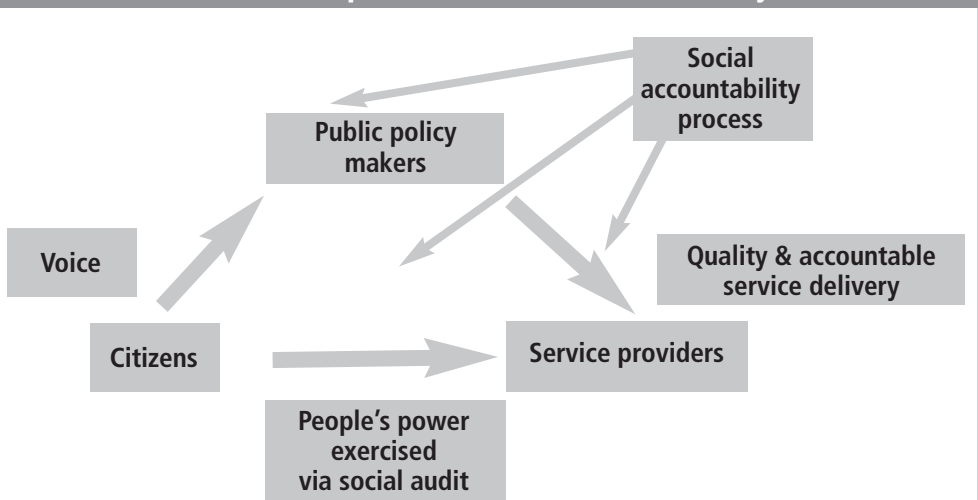
The figure above shows how public accountability relies on strategic civic engagement, where ordinary citizens and/or their organisations participate directly or indirectly in demanding for quality service delivery. Social audits lead to greater social accountability and can either be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both, but very often it is demand-driven and operates from the bottom up.

Box 3: Questions most frequently asked by social auditors in interviews and focus groups

• How was the project conceived?
• Was the community involved?
• Does the community like the project?
• Who benefited from the project?
• Did the project give employment to the local community?
• Does the project provide a proper service to the target population?
• Did the project change the lives of the beneficiaries?
• Did the community get value for the money spent in the project?
• Did the project have any side effects? (e.g. a school feeding programme may increase dependency syndrome).
• Is there evidence of long-term project impacts? For instance, poverty reduction or improved standards of living.
• Are there mechanisms for the project to be sustained by the community?

A youth social audit team on the right giving feedback to a school teacher, parent representatives and school improvement project committee chairperson at Vanga Primary School, Kwale County, Kenya.

selves social auditors from the start they would have risked being denied access immediately.

One team used focus group discussions (FGDs) to engage the project committee. They used a series of carefully thought-out, non-emotive questions while the others engaged with the community project beneficiaries in another focus group.

The team members then undertook project verification to determine the quality of workmanship in terms of whether it was implemented to required standards or specifications. Some members of the team also visited the public fund manager's offices to conduct key informant interviews with them, so as to capture additional information for triangulation and validation of facts.

The social audit teams gathered, reflected on and debated the key observations, messages and issues arising from the process. They prepared a report on the good practices they had observed and the aspects that needed more clarifications and improvements. A feedback meeting was held between the stakeholders and the beneficiary communities and youth. A

social contract, in the form of an action plan, was drawn up detailing how the service or facility would be improved, and the process of negotiating for change and action ensued.

One example is a classroom construction project at Moyeni secondary school in Kwale County. The work done was in contravention of the specifications. Even though a certificate of completion had been issued, the audit found cracks in the floor and poorly-fitted windows and doors. The exercise generated an action plan which required the contractor to repeat the entire exercise, and this was done.

Lessons learnt

Social audits can:
• help increase public access to information on key governance topics (e.g. various types and use of decentralised funds, relevant legislation);
• enhance citizens' knowledge about policy processes, public accountability and transformative leadership, thus enhancing the engagement between citizens and the state;
• help trigger public action towards securing citizen rights and responsibilities by participating in decentralised civic processes;
• catalyse the emergence of strong

community watchdog groups able to effectively participate in projects' prioritisation and monitoring the use of public funds under the stewardship of local leaders;
• improve citizens' inputs on key public finance management issues, especially prioritising and implementing pro-poor community projects, with equity and targeting implications; and
• strengthen implementation and accountability mechanisms of audited and non-audited projects at community level.

By way of critical reflection, however:
• It is vital to understand the local context, including factors that unite or trigger community divisions, particularly in fragile societies. This helps in managing emotions and tensions that can arise between communities and service providers during the sharing of social audit findings.
• The tool is as good as the process applied and the attitudes and credibility of the individuals involved. Mutual trust, confidence and buy-in among citizens and government are essential if it is to function as a public service quality improvement tool and a means for people to assert collective power and influence over service delivery practices. To overcome apprehension and suspicion, the young social auditors in Kwale obtained letters of introduction to junior officers written by their superiors, with instructions to cooperate as partners rather than engage as adversaries.
• While social audit processes foster youth participation, there are intra-youth power relations related to team members' contrasting ages, education levels and family socioeconomic circumstances. These can breed exclusion and affect the quality of participation at the same time. Young women and people with disabilities, particularly, may not have equitable and dignified space to assert their positions, within the team or to the service providers. Such dynamics can run counter to the potential of social audit processes as platforms for equalising power relations.
• A social audit is neither an event nor an end in itself, but a process that is perfected through continuous reflection and learning over time. For it to contribute to catalysing desired changes it must be applied with due transparency and in conjunction with other social accountability mechanisms by other actors, such as anti-corruption initiatives and human rights campaigns.

Conclusion

The Kwale, Kilfi and Nairobi youth have been using social audits to sharpen the management of public resources. Social audits can be flexible and inclusive both in terms of the approach and application. It is consensus-driven and can integrate the voices of diverse interest groups in public finance planning and management decisions, through both vertical and horizontal consultative processes. It also limits unequal power relationships that often lead to various forms of citizen exclusion in formal government-driven accountability processes. Through continuous self and group reflections, it allows young people to appreciate the power of masses in claiming public space, which is necessary for influencing shared public agendas while at the same time internalising a culture of probity. The youth get progressively socialised to the virtues of integrity and accountable citizenship as they grow up.

By mentoring youth to be drivers of social change, social audits prepare them to question and influence dominant value systems: within themselves, their communities and government. They also help to institutionalise the same practices of accountability in the organisations they serve. This culture of accountability under construction could provide the structural foundations of anti-corruption in Kenya's public and private life.

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