Child-responsive Accountability

Lessons from Social Accountability

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CHILD-RESPONSIVE ACCOUNTABILITY: LESSONS FROM SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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Abstract. This paper links the concept and practice of accountability with child rights, by asking: (1) What accountability means when children are the rights holders, and whose role is it to exact that accountability? (2) What are the assumptions underpinning social accountability, and how can they be revised from the child-rights perspective? (3) How do social and political dynamics at community and national levels, often not linked to child rights issues, shape accountability outcomes?

The paper is addressed to child rights practitioners, while drawing from political economy and political science as well as the women's rights movement. In doing so, it seeks to link the various lessons learnt in order to lay the ground for thinking about child-responsive accountability.

Keywords: child rights, accountability, governance

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1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2011, a headline on the Guardian's Poverty Matters blog read: "Undernutrition is more than just a health problem". Drawing from the recent multi-country study of political and institutional determinants of malnutrition,[1] the entry went on to remind that "[w]e don't often hear the words politics, governance and nutrition in the same sentence. This is surprising. If governance is about a country being capable, accountable and responsive to the needs of its citizens, then undernutrition is a prime example of a problem where we need to look at governance as a whole, and not treat it simply as a health problem."[2]

The same can be said about many other issues that impact on children's rights and consequently, their well-being. It is governments' action – or failure to act – that decides whether a child can go to school and receive quality education, drink and use clean and safe water, grow up healthy and well nourished, protected from exploitation and abuse, and from risks brought by natural disasters and climate change. In fact, since children are part of their communities, all government decisions have an effect on their lives, both immediate and long-term.

Yet, if, as the quote above emphasizes, policy outcomes are the result of more than just technocratic decisions, what does it mean in practice to say that governments are accountable for implementing children's rights? From the perspective of international human rights law, as parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) governments are obliged to promote, fulfil and protect children's rights, and are held to account by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. But, since ultimately, children are the rights holders, what practical implications are there for linking accountability and child rights?

The issue becomes particularly pertinent now as accountability emerges time and again in the debates on the post-2015 agenda.[3] As they seek to consolidate the achievements towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and draw lessons for a stronger future framework, they have recognized that governance and accountability have been largely neglected.[4] The importance of accountability spans many areas. It is a control mechanism to prevent and address arbitrary exercise of power. Beyond sanctions, it is also central to the question of how to sustain policy efforts beyond a single initiative and policy cycle. Ultimately, accountability is an important link between human rights and good governance, which guide sustainable and equitable development.[5] Put another way, good governance is characterised by rights-holders being able to hold their duty-bearers to account.

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1 Mejia Acosta, A. and J. Fanzo (2012). "Fighting Maternal and Child Malnutrition: Analysing the political and institutional determinants of delivering a national multisectoral response in six countries." Institute for Development Studies.
2 Haddad, L. on the Guardian Poverty Matters Blog, 17 October 2011.
3 Accountability was highlighted in Realizing the Future We Want for All: UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda Report to the Secretary-General (2012), and was one of four key points raised at post-2015 discussions at the IMF and World Bank Annual Meetings, Tokyo in October 2012. Along with governance, it was raised as an issue in the UN-System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, a thematic think piece by UNDESA, UNDP and UNESCO, and is one of the thematic consultations in the global e-Discussion on worldwewant2015.org.
4 Burnett, N. and C. Felsman (2012). "Post-2015 Education MDGs". Results for Development Institute; Overseas Development Institute. 2012:22 (http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/7776.pdf); Realizing the Future… 2012:19; OHCRH/UNDP (2012). 'Democratic Governance and Human Rights: Criteria and measurement proposals for a post-2015 development agenda'. Expert Consultation Concept Note, 13-14 November 2012, New York.
5 United Nations, Accelerating Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals: Options for sustained and inclusive growth and issues for advancing the United Nations Development agenda beyond 2015, Annual report of the Secretary-General, 11 July 2011, A/66/126.

This is to say that accountability is not an end in itself. It provides the link between policy pronouncement and policy implementation – and between monitoring and change. Put differently, the purpose of accountability is to lead to improvement in people's lives and secure their ability to have their say on how they are governed. While these goals are implicit, articulating them and their sequence has a practical value: it allows for setting realistic goals and outlining the relationship between those and their intermediate targets. Concretely for children, the objective of accountability work is twofold: to ensure immediate change in the form of improved services that impact their lives and well-being, and to extend it into a long-term and lasting transformation of the governance system – while remaining aware that one does not automatically lead to the another.

Child rights organizations have also recognized the need for more accountable implementation of children's rights.[6] Accountability has been invoked both as a principle guiding their own work, and as an imperative applied more broadly to those responsible for their implementation, including service deliverers, government officials and policy makers. As the interaction between governance and child rights bodies of knowledge is a relatively new terrain, and as the meaning and use of the accountability concept has expanded in the recent decade, it risks having few implications beyond its normative value. Exploring the meaning of accountability beyond its semantic definition by turning to the experience and knowledge that have already been gathered on governance and accountability allows for drawing programmatic implications for different areas of child rights work.

What the governance perspective emphasizes is that policy delivery is a function of many processes. A rich and extensive body of knowledge is locked in the literature on accountability, which however, rarely, and only in passing, mentions children as stakeholders. Given the complexity of accountability, applying lessons from that literature and work to the case of children needs further exploration. What this paper recognizes is that many issues and obstacles to making accountability work for children mirror those encountered in broader work on social accountability – not least, stemming from the interaction between formal and informal accountability institutions. But importantly, children face specific challenges due to their political status as non-voters and social status defined by the customary perception of children as passive recipients of public services. The political nature of a large part of accountability work requires adults to act on behalf of children's cause. But this raises tensions and dilemmas, as children have to overcome two levels of unequal power relationships: between state and society but also that between children and adults. With all this in mind, the discussion that follows initiates the reflection on child-responsive accountability.

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6 See for example: Save the Children (2009), "Improving Accountability for Child Rights: The Need for a New International Mechanism" Policy Brief; Save the Children (2010), "Accountability Matters in Emergencies: Listening to children and responding to their feedback during Save the Children's humanitarian response in Myanmar (Burma)"; WHO, UNICEF (2012), "Building a Future for Women and Children" Countdown to 2015: Maternal, Newborn & Child Survival. The 2012 Report. (Part 3); HAQ: Centre for Child Rights (2009) "Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Children and Governance: Holding the State Accountable." July 20-22, New Delhi; E. Ganguly Thukral (ed.) (2011), Every Right for Every Child: Governance and Accountability, HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, New Delhi: Routledge.

2. METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The question that runs through this paper is how to link the concept and practice of accountability with child rights. Specifically it asks, (1) What accountability means when children are the rights holders, and whose role is it to exact that accountability? (2) What are the assumptions underpinning social accountability, and how can they be revised from the child-rights perspective? (3) How do social and political dynamics at community and national levels, often not linked to child rights issues, shape accountability outcomes?

The paper is addressed primarily to those working on child rights, as it seeks to bring in pertinent knowledge from other areas. It draws from the perspectives of political economy and political science as well as the women's rights movement. In doing so, it seeks to link the various lessons learnt in order to lay the ground for thinking about child-responsive accountability. As such, and given the breadth of knowledge and constant new developments and thinking, the current piece does not purport to provide a comprehensive view on the topic. By focusing on areas previously little explored, it extends an invitation for further reflection and debate. Following this, it identifies a number of questions as starting points for further research.

Throughout the paper, the main focus is on the experiences of social accountability, reflecting the currency of this approach in the broader governance and development thinking. This by no means implies that national and international legal frameworks and state accountability mechanisms are not part of the discussion on child-responsive accountability. Rather, as an *approach*, social accountability allows for considering both formal and informal forms of accountability, and the way they interact – the dynamics particularly pertinent when thinking about child-responsive accountability.

The paper begins by sketching key concepts in order to construct a working definition of child-responsive accountability. Particular attention is given to including a variety of real-life examples, as the discussion seeks to resonate with child rights practitioners concerned with implementation on the ground. It notes the particular challenges and limitations of social accountability when applied to children, especially in relation to children's direct participation. Reflecting the research questions, the sections discuss the following issues, respectively:

1. <u>Adult intermediacy is necessary for exacting accountability for child rights.</u> At the same time, as the women's rights movement highlights, for accountability to work for a specific group of rights holders, they themselves have to be part of the process of exacting it. While children cannot be politically present in the same way as women, inclusive consultations with children ensure that the process is informed by their views rather than driven solely by adults. However, unlike in the practice of democratic representation, interpreting the contribution of child participants requires consideration of whether they represent other children or their individual views. Analysis here draws from the experiences of the organizational structure of women's self-help groups in Kerala, inclusive child participation initiatives in Nepal, as well as evaluations of school councils in England.

2.   Examining the assumptions behind social accountability and the initiatives focused on access to information, empowerment of rights holders and community-based monitoring – allows for articulating more realistic expectations of child-responsive accountability. Understanding when access to information and community-based monitoring contribute to improved accountability is particularly relevant to those representing children in public forums. While children's direct involvement is rarely feasible, from the rights-based approach perspective, their empowerment and participation are goals in themselves. At the same time, linking them with broader public interest is important for making child-responsive accountability more than a token principle. Examples in this section include the analyses of community scorecards in Malawi, children's participation in public budget monitoring in Brazil and Disaster Risk Reduction in India, and the Multi-stakeholder Forestry Project in Indonesia.

3.   Informal sources of legitimacy and accountability that form the existing pattern of power distribution, often differ from or conflict with the conventional definition of accountability used in the international development discourse. Some of these patterns pose a particular challenge to child-responsive accountability, while others present an opportunity to create an incremental change. But foremost, the existing power relations, tightly woven into the social fabric, imply the need for caution when attempting radical changes. The section refers to the analysis of local patterns of accountability in Tanzania and informal sources of legitimacy through village temple communities in China.

4.   Thinking politically is indispensable, given that any accountability work seeks to redefine power relations. Building a child-responsive accountability system is a long-term project and an endeavour aware of its political scene. Here, research is cited on the effect of competition between central and local governments on urban service delivery in Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda, along with the study of political and institutional factors in Peru's national strategy against malnutrition.

A number of important themes as well as questions that need further inquiry emerge throughout all sections. These will be pulled together in the concluding remarks.

3. DEFINING CHILD-RESPONSIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

As a concept, child-responsive accountability highlights that broadly based initiatives do not automatically address the rights of children. Children are in many situations the most vulnerable members of society, but, especially for the purpose of this discussion, it is helpful to look at children as representing a "*different* vulnerability" (Nolan 2011; emphasis added) and requiring therefore, a particular focus. This section outlines how child-specificity adds another layer of complexity to the existing accountability concepts.

Accountability has been defined as the "obligation of power-holders to take responsibility for their actions" and it describes the "rights and responsibilities that exist between people and the institutions… that have an impact on their lives" (UNDP 2010:8). While the first part of the definition captures the general meaning of accountability that refers to oversight and control of power, the second part reflects the increased emphasis on the principle that power holders are

accountable to people whose lives are affected by their decisions. This is to say that power holders are also accountable to children, especially because their decisions and actions affect not only their current but also future well-being.

Social accountability elaborates this principle and provides an approach to building accountability that is rooted in human rights. Having emerged originally as a response to ineffective state accountability mechanisms, it has been defined as an approach that "relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability" (Malena et al. 2004:3).[7] As an approach to, rather than one type of, accountability, social accountability is best understood in relation to state mechanisms (and not as their replacement) and in the broader context of national politics. Furthermore, the rights-based perspective of social accountability emphasizes that for the civic engagement to represent the whole of a society, it needs to make special provisions to include the views of those who tend to be excluded or marginalised, such as women, the poor, people with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities. The importance of inclusion and participation is reinforced in the case of children given their lack of full political rights and the customary perception of childhood. At the same time, because of children's limited political participation, adults who represent their rights – their families, guardians, as well as child rights organizations – have a pivotal role in exacting accountability for children's rights.

On a basic level, based on the above definitions, child-responsive accountability, as a principle, implies that those responsible for realising child rights are accountable to children and that children have the right to participate in processes to exact that accountability, according to their evolving capacities.[8] The formal accountability framework is set by the standards defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments. Governments, as parties to the Convention, are accordingly subject to the international oversight of the Committee on the Rights of the Child as well as their national accountability mechanisms, including national law. Ultimately, for the realization of the commitments undertaken by signing the CRC, the state is accountable to children and has the duty to provide mechanisms accessible to children to participate in exacting that accountability.

Yet in practical terms, child-responsive accountability calls for the additional distinction of different parties in accountability relationships. The CRC recognizes that parents have both the responsibility for the realization of the child's rights, and the right to claim them on the child's behalf, for example in court. In this context, the state's obligations under the CRC include supporting parents and guardians (Doek 2008:18). Applied to accountability, this implies a distinction between accountability *for* children's rights, and accountability *to* children. In accountability *to* children, parents and guardians are treated as duty-bearers, along with state officials, service deliverers and other institutions and individuals who implement children's rights.
Accountability for children's rights is a broader concept that reflects children's limited ability to participate directly in the accountability process, as well as the relationship with their families and communities. This is to say that, while children are the primary rights holders, the concept

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[7] In this definition 'social' emphasises the agency of society members. This should be distinguished from the usage in other contexts, such as public administration or private sector, where 'social accountability' is used to refer to these sectors' being responsible *towards* society.
[8] See Landsown, G. (2005) "The Evolving Capacities of the Child." Innocenti Insight. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

recognizes at the same time the state's obligations towards parents and guardians given the centrality of family to the realization of children's rights.[9] With this in mind, the paper focuses for the most part on accountability *for* children's rights. At the same time, the rights-based approach emphasizes that accountability for children's rights can only be meaningful when it is rooted in and guided by the participation of the rights holders themselves (as will be explored below).

Furthermore, as regards formal accountability mechanisms, different levels of accountability are targeted by different mechanisms. *Individual* cases of violations of children's rights are handled through formal institutions at national level, such as the police, judiciary system and in some cases, independent human rights institutions, as well as international mechanisms such as the recently established complaints mechanism of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.[10] On the other hand, accountability for the rights of children as a *group* aims at improving the performance of an institution and on a larger scale, of a governance system, for outcomes for children. This paper deliberates on society's claims for accountability for children and as a group. By examining the thinking on governance and political economy, it provides a starting point to access and utilize the body of knowledge that remains inconsistently explored by child rights practitioners.

4. ADULT INTERMEDIACY WITH CHILD PARTICIPATION

One of the main challenges for establishing a meaningful link between accountability and child rights stems from the fact that in the majority of countries children are precluded from full participation in public processes on account of their political status, in a way that, for example, women or the poor are not. Therefore, whether accountability for children's rights is enforced relies extensively – if not entirely – on the intermediacy of adults. Having said this, the full value of its processes and the quality of its impact rely on the active participation of the rights holders themselves.

This means that accurate representation of children's interests is guided by consultations, ensuring that the process is not shaped solely by adults' own views of what matters for children. The participatory research behind the *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan 2000) found for example, that dignity mattered to the poor in a way that had not emerged in anti-poverty discourses or initiatives. By the same token, effective and relevant child representation is one that is also grounded in children's perspectives. There are numerous examples of studies which have specifically sought to incorporate children's views on issues affecting them, and their implications can also inform the discourse and practice of child-responsive accountability. For example, a study which used a participatory approach to defining child poverty in South Africa observes that the value of taking into account the perspectives of children lies precisely in the fact that they differed from adults on what they viewed as necessary for an acceptable standard of living for children (Barnes and Wright 2008).

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[9] The preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "[Family, as] the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community."
[10] UN Assembly "The United Nations create a complaint mechanism for children" Joint Press Release, New York, 19-Dec-2011.

The following section discusses what lessons can be drawn from the women's rights movement for seeking accountability *for* children's rights. It then positions child participation within that framework, as a proxy for accountability directly *to* the rights holders. It examines the challenges particular to representing children, as opposed to other vulnerable groups by highlighting two issues: inclusiveness of child participation mechanisms and the representativeness of individual children's views.

Lessons from the women's rights movement for children's representatives

The women's rights movement emphasizes that the participation of the rights holders themselves is instrumental in exacting accountability. This part of the discussion is based on the recognition that in general children cannot have the same political presence that their parents, guardians and representatives can.

The 2008/2009 report on the Progress of the World's Women identifies two essential elements for making accountability systems work for women. Firstly, gender equality and women's rights must be made one of the standards for assessing public officials' performance. The gender equality advocates have focussed on strengthening the formal accountability framework by calling for changes to national constitutions, legal review of government decisions and ratification of international conventions of women's rights (UNIFEM 2009). Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been widely ratified and in many countries followed by the reform of domestic law.[11] As an approach, social accountability recognizes that legal reform, though an essential building block that establishes the necessary conditions does not by itself bring about greater accountability.

Secondly, building an accountability system responsive to women requires that women be part of the decision-making and oversight processes. To overcome their exclusion from influencing public actions, gender equality advocates have asked, for example, for temporary quotas to be introduced within public administration at national and local government levels. Women have also engaged directly in formal oversight structures, such as public consultations on public spending and vigilance committees, as well as parallel, community-based processes, such as citizens' report cards and public hearings on budget allocation (UNIFEM 2009:111).

The women's microfinance Self Help Groups (SHG) in Kerala (India), as they evolved in line with the decentralization reform, demonstrate how women's engagement in local government has been put into practice. As the result of the SHG structure, the population below the poverty line was organised in a federal network of Area Development Societies consisting of Neighbourhood Groups of 15 to 40 families, each represented by a woman. While studies of the Kerala SHG movement focus on their effectiveness for micro credit operations, its structure, by mirroring the levels of decentralised government has facilitated a feedback process between poor women and the government (Vijayanand 2005). The focus on children is most effectively created at the micro and local level, given the primary role of their families and communities in ensuring their rights and

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[11] See UNICEF (2007) Protecting the World's Children: Impact of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Diverse Legal Systems. Cambridge University Press.

well-being. The Kerala experience suggests that this locally-generated focus can be carried on upwards through a structure reflecting that of the government.

What this also implies is that an accountability system that works for a particular group needs their institutionalised, rather than *ad hoc*, participation. Again in Kerala, local government structures of Grama Sabhas or Ward Sabhas, that is, village wards or electoral constituencies of a Municipality Member, function as forums for exercising direct social accountability. They meet four times a year to formulate the plan for development programmes, select their beneficiaries, and monitor the functioning of institutions and implementation of the programmes. The Sabhas suggest development projects, for which, if not considered or accepted, they have the right to seek justification. This is also where all accounts have to be presented. However, the Sabhas have been undermined by the limited participation of the non-poor sections of the population. To make up for this, compulsory consultations were introduced with different stakeholder groups to reflect the various local interests, including agriculturalists, traders, industrialists, as well as youth groups (Vijayanand 2005). Consulting groups that represent different interests reveals that what works for one group may conflict with another's demands. The implications – and challenges - for child-responsive accountability are that children's representatives must have a constant presence at these consultative forums, and their vote must count equally in the final decision-making. But prior to that, just as consultations need to be inclusive for adult groups, those who represent children need to be clear about which groups of children they consult and whom they represent.

Consulting children as a group: issues of inclusiveness and representation

Beyond specific settings at a micro level, for example schools or local communities, the political realities and power dynamics of accountability mean that it is uncommon and rarely feasible for children to participate directly in accountability processes. Following the rights-based approach, child-responsive accountability can only be fully realized with the participation of children. However, in practical terms, consulting child rights holders during processes that lead to exacting accountability becomes a proxy for their direct involvement.

The concept of the evolving capacities of the child provides a framework for thinking about the types of mechanism for child participation and its scope. While age boundaries seem the most practical way of applying the concept, "[c]hildren do not acquire competencies merely as a consequence of age, but rather through experience, culture and levels of parental support and expectations" (Lansdown 2005:11). The challenge lies therefore in balancing the desire for the tangible impact of children's participation with their competencies.

One channel for consulting children on a national scale is through forums such as children's parliaments. Given that children are not a homogenous group, one of the weaknesses of children's parliaments, for example, has been that they often fail to reflect the diversity of the child population. They are often overwhelmingly dominated by children from better-off backgrounds, or by boys, or with little presence of children with disabilities or from ethnic minorities (IPU and UNICEF 2011). In 2008, the Nepalese Ministry of Local Development initiated a pilot programme on child-friendly governance in Biratnagar municipality. Various stakeholders were consulted from political parties, government line agencies, civil society and the media – as well as children,

through child clubs.[12] As a result, a number of key municipal policy documents reflected children's recommendations. For example, indicators on the child-friendliness of local governance were developed and incorporated into the municipal periodic plan. Importantly, the consultation reached out to the Working Children's Club, whose members raised the issue of the lack of respect child workers endured from children who attended school. As a solution they suggested forming child clubs in state schools to sensitize school children to child rights from the perspective of working children. These clubs were set up using municipal funds, initially on a pilot basis in 2009 in nine out of 89 schools, and expanded to all schools a year later (Dhakal and Pradhan 2012). This provides an example of an effort to involve, listen to and address the marginalization and discrimination of specific groups of children, while involving children themselves in the process.

Where most experiences of child representation depart significantly from adult-oriented initiatives is in the need to consider children's capacity to look beyond their age group and own experiences. In concrete relation to children's parliaments or other forums, the question is about whose views a child participant represents. While for adults, parliaments constitute – in principle at least – an institutionalised form of social accountability whereby parliamentarians represent the constituencies which elected them, a mechanism of representative democracy does not necessarily work in the same way for children. Beyond election, members of participation mechanisms for children are determined in various different ways. For example, the Youth Advisory Bodies to independent human rights institutions for children are recruited through an application process in Tasmania (Australia), through existing structures at school at municipal and national levels in Peru, or through statistical representation in Denmark.[13] As Ireland's Children's Ombudsman observed on her work with the Youth Advisory Panel, "We are clear with the young people that they are not expected to represent the views of all young people in Ireland but are there representing their own views." (Ireland Children's Ombudsman 2008:50)

Studies of school councils, which are in general elected student bodies, offer a micro-level view of how representative democracy works among children. A report conducted in schools in England finds that children are aware that students who are clever, well-behaved and popular are most likely to be elected to the school council, but at the same time many point to the value of including a mix of students that would be more representative of the whole student community (Davey et al. 2010:16). The same report quotes children with disabilities and children in care, who feel that participation initiatives at school are non-inclusive, and who therefore tend to shy away from participating (ibid:17).

In the school council context, another study concludes that, "[s]chools must… endeavour to include all pupils in their provision for pupil voice, not just those actually on the school council or who are most comfortable expressing their views in a school context" (Whitty and Wisby 2007:8). This emphasizes again that child participation, while it serves to guide their representatives in demanding accountability for their rights, has its caveats. Child participation mechanisms, be it

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[12] School- and community-based child clubs promoting children's participation in local development has been part of the initiative to strengthen community-based accountability mechanisms by Decentralized Action for Children and Women Program of the Child Friendly Local Governance framework (CLFG) in Nepal. As of 2012, there are 4,263 child clubs, gathering 119,591 child members aged 12-18 years (Dhakal and Pradhan 2012:55).
[13] Based on the research conducted for the forthcoming publication by UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti *Championing Children's Rights: A Global study of independent human rights institutions for children.*

child parliaments, school councils or other forums, are modelled after adult representative democratic structures, but it is important to consider how the views and opinions collected through them are interpreted.

5. ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD-RESPONSIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

For the most part, social accountability relies on strengthening the rights holders' capacity and ability to voice their demands before their duty bearers. The logic behind most initiatives rests on a number of assumptions linking the empowerment of rights holders to improved policy outcomes: first, it is assumed that provided with information on their entitlements citizens will want to participate in public decision making; second, that faced with citizens' demand and provided with their feedback, power-holders will act on it, in other words, that they are responsive (Wild and Harris 2011); finally, it is held that issues which manifest themselves at the local level are best solved or can be solved at the local level. Questioning these assumptions allows us to formulate more realistic claims for child-responsive accountability.

Accordingly, this section examines these assumptions by looking at access to information and transparency, rights holders' empowerment, and duty bearers' responsiveness as elements of the social accountability process. It begins by clarifying linkages between transparency and accountability, as access to information and greater transparency of government institutions often serve as proxies for accountability (data for PETS - public expenditure tracking surveys, or child-sensitive budget monitoring are examples). It then restates the importance of empowering the rights holders when they are children.[14] Considering both the immediate and long-term impacts, empowering children becomes a legitimate goal for child-responsive accountability work. Finally, the section examines the relationship between community-based monitoring and responsiveness of local-level duty bearers, as it seeks to better understand the effectiveness of some social accountability initiatives.

Access to reliable and usable information

Increased transparency and access to information do not automatically generate greater accountability, but they provide the basis for rights holders to monitor their duty bearers' performance. Yet not all information accessed is reliable or useable. Setting clear boundaries for differing degrees of clarity helps to better match specific types of transparency to the type of accountability it can bring about. In the table below, the distinction between opaque and clear transparency refers to reliability and usability of the information revealed. For example, while an institution may reveal the data about its operations, such as budget figures, information about how decisions are made or what results they produce remain obscure (Fox 2010). Depending on what institutional capacities are present, transparency and accountability do or do not overlap. As Fox notes, "This distinction allows us to identify both the limits and the possibilities of transparency, which at minimum should help to calibrate realistic expectations." (Ibid: 252)

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[14] Community empowerment is not discussed here, since lessons from broad-based accountability can be applied to children's representatives (parents, guardians).

Figure 1 *The relationship between transparency and accountability (Adapted from Fox 2010:252)*

Transparency		Accountability	
Opaque	*Clear*	*Answerability*	*Enforceability*
Dissemination and access to information			
	Institutional answerability		
		Sanctions, compensation and/or remedies	

The central role given to the use of information reveals another conjecture that evidence is the main drive behind policy decisions and actions. Evidence is what makes a well-founded case for policies. But the political economy perspective highlights the importance of considering a plethora of factors discussed in the following sections that pertain to power relations and political and social dynamics at work (Wild and Harris 2011, McGee and Gaventa 2011).

The short- and long-term impacts of children's empowerment

Understanding what change is sought for children through accountability helps to determine the impact of the efforts to strengthen the voice of rights holders. In other words, "[i]n order to discuss [their] impact – what they *have achieved* – we need to be clear about their aims – what they *sought to achieve*" (McGee and Gaventa 2011:13). The objectives of social accountability initiatives focus around three themes: the quality of governance, development effectiveness, and empowerment, especially of disadvantaged and marginalized people. While these objectives are inter-connected, they also suggest a hierarchy of outcomes and should be framed explicitly in order to avoid overstating their scope.

Improved quality of governance is a long-term outcome and contingent on a systemic change that the relatively young concept of social accountability, with a particular focus on the demand-side of governance, cannot demonstrate. The constituent outcomes related to development effectiveness, on the other hand, address what is closer to local people's immediate concerns, and can be communicated in more specific terms. For example, social accountability initiatives such as participatory budgeting and planning, and public expenditure tracking surveys, have the concrete objective of calling for better budget utilization. Under certain conditions, social audits, transparency initiatives and citizen report cards can create sufficient pressure for improved service delivery (ibid.). The implication for those who design social accountability initiatives for children is the need to be clear about what change is sought and modest about what can be achieved in relation to accountability in the short term and within a given scale/level.

Empowerment of rights holders is often thought of as an input, the first step towards demanding improved service delivery and ultimately a more responsive and accountable government. But for children as accountability holders, and as the Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) to programming emphasizes, empowerment through the principle of inclusive participation is also an end in itself. This is to recognize that children's capacity to participate directly in political processes is limited, while reiterating the value of encouraging and facilitating their engagement in community activities. For accountability work, child rights practitioners can draw insights from their experience in implementing initiatives for children's participation.

Child councils in Tanzania provide an example of challenges common to establishing a mechanism for children's on-going participation due to their status in society, as lacking knowledge and competence to participate in public life. Although child councils contributed to raising awareness of children's issues and generally met with positive attitudes from local authorities, their engagement in local decision-making was only occasional, for example to mark the Day of the African Child (Couzens and Mtengeti 2012). The experience such mechanisms offer of participating in governance presents a value in itself, both to child participants and to their communities. On the other hand, the intuition is that when met with little response from adults, this can be at times discouraging – and potentially disempowering in the long term. One way of addressing this is by linking their participation to the actual process of decision-making, for example through follow-up mechanisms to ensure that the outputs of children's deliberation are heard in public forums (IPU and UNICEF 2011), and even if their suggestions are not implemented – that the rationale for this is explained to them (Davey et al. 2010).

The initiative by an NGO in Brazil, Cedeca-Ceará, shows that, supported by training, children's contribution can be substantial – in this case through monitoring of the public budget. Adolescents already involved in community projects in the city of Fortaleza, Caerá were trained to first understand how public budgets are made and then to apply this knowledge for analysis and mobilizing their more disadvantaged peers. The results achieved were both quantitative and qualitative: an additional R$ 2 million for children's development allocated to education and social care, and greater political visibility of adolescents' organizations in public forums (Marques 2011). Demonstrating the value added by children's participation contributes to changing societal perception of their status.

Another example is child-led Disaster Risk Reduction which shows a way of integrating the case for children's participation in the broader community interest. In Bangladesh, after the hurricane in 2009, Save the Children trained 200 adolescent girls in child protection, and resource mapping, among others, to build their community resilience. The girls then trained a further 1,000 women in households, produced child protection assessment reports and participated in a video documentary to advocate for adolescent-sensitive response among decision makers. All these actions changed the way their community perceived them, strengthening their confidence and sense of acceptance (Cameron and Norrington-Davies 2010). Linked to community priorities, children's participation avoids being merely tokenistic. By the logic of a gradual transformation, meaningful participation in local governance paves the way for a long-term process of fostering an active and engaged society.

Power holders' responsiveness to community-based monitoring

Looking at accountability through the lens of complexity theory, which is increasingly making its way into political economy analysis, magnifies the observation that its various agents are linked by different relationships and their choices are guided by different goals. Therefore, to improve the accountability system as a whole, "it is necessary to attend to the web of relationships between the parties and to the resources they bring to the setting" (Ramalingam 2008:22). Managing this multi-stakeholder interaction helps explain the channels through which improved access to information and participatory monitoring initiatives can link to accountability.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, social accountability evolved as a reaction to deficiencies in state accountability. It is complementary to a state's internal accountability mechanisms, rather than replacing them. This implies that building an accountability system requires bridging the divide between the demand and supply sides (UNDP 2010). An analysis of a community scorecard initiative in Malawi observes that in some cases the scorecards were indeed effective in bringing about an improvement in service delivery. Importantly however, it attributes this outcome to their ability to bring together different stakeholders, both duty bearers and rights holders, rather than the information they generate. The follow-up stage of presenting the findings from the scorecards provides a common "collaborative space". An important role is played by facilitators/moderators of such meetings, who come from local communities, thus lending legitimacy to and instilling trust in the process (Wild and Harris 2011). On a literal level, success depended on gathering service users and providers physically into one space. On an analytical level, this served to reduce the distance between them that is normally imposed by administrative and political processes. What this example underlines is that social accountability can work, but it is important to understand why it does.

A similar principle is highlighted through inclusive multi-stakeholder processes as they aim to build a comprehensive assessment of the situation and reconcile conflicting demands. An example of successfully bridging the gap between different stakeholders is provided by the Multi-stakeholder Forestry Project in Indonesia, which operated through a number of initiatives that brought together a variety of actors, from civil society and government. These included setting up different working groups to consult local government on community-based forest management, and conducting a Participatory Action Research to assess issues and possible conflicts around natural resource management based on the input from communities, local NGOs, universities and provincial and district officials. This multi-stakeholder approach led to agreements on how to solve the problems and conflicts relating to resource management around the Gunung Rinjani National Park (Sharma 2008:21).

These examples show positive outcomes of engaging various stakeholders, including duty bearers, in participatory mechanisms. When applied to children's participation, additional challenges around their engagement in governance processes need to be acknowledged. As remarked earlier on, adult intermediacy is often necessary; this means that bridging the distance between duty bearers and children is not always possible or effective. Adapting the conclusion drawn from the above examples would mean creating a space conducive to dialogue between children and the representatives of their rights, who then engage with the government officials and service providers. Articulating the act of bridging the gap between child rights holders and/or their representatives, and the duty bearers as part of child-responsive accountability, explicitly addresses the challenge of linking the voices of rights holders with a response from duty bearers. Adding this clarity to the underpinning theory of change directly helps to inform a design of such initiatives.

Setting feasible objectives of social accountability

The non-linear reality of social accountability work raises the question of managing public expectations. Strengthening people's ability to voice their demand and participate in public

processes does not in itself constitute accountability – and nor does presenting evidence and generating users' feedback automatically trigger action. This is captured in the following words: "[M]uch of what we call accountability reflects only the weaker category, answerability. While citizen-led or public initiatives often involve 'soft' peer or reputational pressure, they rarely involve strong enforceability" (McGee and Gaventa 2011:11). Therefore, being clear and modest about what the objectives are of the specific social accountability initiative prevents practitioners from setting unrealistic targets and leaving participants' expectations unmet.

The examples cited above emphasize that while accountability work is often communicated as a long-term project with the ultimate objective of instilling a transformation towards better governance, social accountability initiatives need also a set of well-developed short-term objectives which they can deliver in order to sustain the engagement of its local participants. Here again, as in the example above of children's engagement in Disaster Risk Reduction, integrating children's issues in community priorities, can provide a framework for defining short-term outputs.

But as noted at the beginning of this section, not all problems identified at the local level can be solved at the local level. The analysis of the use of scorecards in Malawi points out that many problems identified by local communities cannot be addressed by local level officials but require a systemic change, which is more complex and occurs over time. The problems in question include issues around service delivery, such as staff performance and incentives, for which the contributing factors are traced back to the central level. It is also the central level that administers most of the funds for development projects (Wild and Harris 2011). Beyond the need to articulate realistic objectives, this also implies that for the effort generated at the local level to carry an impact, it needs to build on a holistic understanding of the social and political dynamics at the local and national levels.

6. IDENTIFYING THE INFORMAL SOURCES OF LEGITIMACY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The first challenge faced by development practitioners is how to reconcile the international discourse on social accountability with various dynamics at work locally. Alternative normative frameworks[15] compete and coexist, which shape people's perceptions and expectations of governance and childhood. Child rights practitioners are familiar with the issue of customary perception of childhood, which can pose a particular challenge to exacting accountability for children's rights, especially where social norms condone practices harmful to children. This section presents the experiences from social accountability work.

A study on various patterns of accountability found that in the Arumeru district in Tanzania, the legitimacy of local leaders was founded on their ability to bring material benefits to their communities, irrespective of whether this involved acts of corruption. On the other hand, a leader that fails to deliver such benefits to their community is perceived as "unaccountable", even if he had abided by the principles of good governance. In such cases, where informal institutions dominate and community leaders act as patriarchs, referring to transparency and answerability

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15 The focus here is on lessons from social accountability work. For a legal perspective on competing normative frameworks, see UNICEF (2007) Protecting the World's Children: Impact of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Diverse Legal Systems.

might not be perceived as relevant by local rights holders and attempting a radical change to the existing accountability culture might bring negative consequences by disrupting the social fabric (Lawson and Rakner 2005). The foremost implication is therefore to approach change cautiously, and base any intervention on an understanding of alternative, including patriarchal, cultures of accountability. Understanding them is a starting point for child-responsive accountability work, especially given that under patriarchal or patron-client relations, services may be delivered to some, but at the cost of other groups. Such discrimination can have a disproportionately acute impact on children.

The prevalence of informal sources of power does not preclude a functioning formal accountability framework. However, in such cases the rule of law tends to be weakly institutionalized. Again, in the Arumeru district, even though state accountability mechanisms do operate and rules and procedures exist, they are not applied consistently and instead are invoked when convenient, often aligning with the informal accountability relationships of political allegiances (Lawson and Rakner 2005:18).

One way of managing the interaction between formal and informal accountability rules is demonstrated through a pilot programme by the Justice for the Poor (J4P) in Sierra Leone. It was designed to complement a national Free Health Care Initiative (FHCI) introduced in April 2010 to provide free healthcare for children under five, pregnant women and nursing mothers. To J4P programme was put in place to address the operational and governance problems, including nurses' absenteeism and charging of unofficial fees. While its impact is still being evaluated, one of the observations has been that it was "important to establish a partnership given dependency on local service providers and risk of retaliation" (World Bank 2012). Reflecting this insight is for example, the use of a 'two-way contract' between communities and nurses to share responsibilities and rate each other's performances, thus strengthening the sense of a common purpose. Furthermore, the programme has partnered with community paralegals already present in more than a third of Sierra Leone's chiefdoms. While traditionally focussed on helping community members access basic justice services, they are instrumental in raising service users' awareness of their legal entitlements established by the FHCI (ibid).

What this example emphasizes, especially in relation to using caution when working with the local context, is the importance of creating a sense of community ownership over child-responsive accountability work. Child representatives who come from the local community are better equipped to become legitimate, trusted and thus effective agents of change for an accountability relationship.

This also implies that, as rights and accountability holders, children and their parents are part of their communities and its practices, but so too are the duty bearers. This explains why in some cases existing social institutions and the dynamics they create can reinforce state officials' exposure to public scrutiny. A study found that in rural villages in China, local temples, as institutions which traditionally enjoy high public regard, imposed effective pressure on local officials to act accountably. The temple community 'embedded' local officials, meaning that its membership was inclusive, and it represented the values and interests they shared with other community members. It thus provided a forum in which their performance was evaluated by other

members and where the officials could publicize their good performance for the benefit of the community, bringing them increased prestige and support from their constituency. While these informal sources of accountability and legitimacy are not replacements for formal structures, here they provided an opportunity to create an incremental change (Tsai 2011). This case illustrates that the effectiveness of social institutions as informal sources of accountability depends on whether they are open to local officials and embed them through shared values and interests. Before these institutions can be effective for children, they need to embrace the principle that children come first.

7. PUTTING CHILD-RESPONSIVE ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE BROADER CONTEXT

Social accountability emphasizes rights holders' participation in governance, but focusing solely on the demand-side of governance risks neglecting the existing formal mechanisms and the broader governance context. National politics influence the way in which these mechanisms operate and how effective they can be. These include parliamentary oversight, ombudspersons, watchdog institutions and the media (Sharma 2008:19). For example, child rights advocates have engaged with parliamentarians on child rights issues and worked to strengthen their oversight role (UNICEF handbooks 2004,[16] 2009[17]). Recent examples include UNICEF's contribution to advocacy for a stronger evaluation function of the Moroccan parliament.

Having said this, the oversight role of the Legislature can be undermined by the dominance of the Executive in policy making and the lack of political plurality. In Tanzania, the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party, which has been in power since independence despite the shift to multiparty system in 1992, holds a vast majority in Parliament. The party structure permeates the state structure, further weakening accountability to the public. Party members are subject to internal checks and balances created by intra-party competition, but this informal source of accountability is guided more by loyalty to political patrons than to the electorate (Lawson and Rakner 2005, Harris et al 2011). This still highlights the importance of strengthening the existing accountability mechanisms to balance the power of the Executive, but what is important for child rights advocates is the need to position child-responsive accountability work within the broader dynamics of national politics.

In some cases this can mean direct involvement with the powerful Executive that dominates policymaking. Coupled with political timing, it presents an opportunity to raise the profile of children's issues and secure the commitment towards child-responsive accountability. The analysis of the success of policies against malnutrition in Peru shows that one of the decisive factors was the ability to enlist the support of presidential candidates for the national nutrition agenda. The Child Nutrition Initiative, an advocacy coalition comprising international agencies, captured the key political moment of the presidential elections in 2006, as they framed the fight against malnutrition as part of the national strategy to reduce poverty. Presidential candidates signed a pledge to make nutrition a priority in the national agenda. Once elected, President Alan Garcia was again approached by the Child Nutrition Initiative members to enact a policy draft within the first 100 days of government (Mejia Acosta 2011). Communicating children's issues as a key element of

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[16] http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/evidence_based_policy_making.pdf
[17] http://www.unicef.at/fileadmin/medien/pdf/UNICEF_Guide_to_working_with_Parliaments.pdf

the national development agenda secured a political buy-in. Enlisting powerful support at the national level brought children's rights to the fore and helped generate stronger internal pressure for accountability.

This being said, the state is not a homogenous entity and domestic political struggle can harm accountability. As emerges from studies of decentralization, local accountability is inevitably linked to that broader context (Chhatre 2008). For example, as a recent UNU-WIDER study demonstrates, being held accountable can serve political ends in partisan competition. The study focuses on the delivery of sanitation, potable water, sustainable housing and electricity in, respectively, four cities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Nairobi, Dakar, Cape Town and Kampala. These were selected as illustrative of vertically divided authority, a growing trend within the region, characterised by an opposition party controlling the sub-national government. Urban centres hold political significance for policy-makers. Since performance on service delivery could provide an advantage or disadvantage in subsequent elections, the central government will attempt to take credit for good performance or shift the locus of accountability to local government for poor performance. This is done by, for example, replacing elected officials within an opposition-controlled municipality with a government appointee, limiting local tax-raising authority, reducing inter-governmental transfers or making the division of responsibility for service delivery less clear. These have been found to negatively impact on local service delivery (Resnick 2012).[18] This is important for children given that services key to the realization of most of their rights tend to be administered by the local government. Considering the power dynamics between national and subnational governments helps explain the relationship between decentralization and accountability outcomes – and highlights the limitations of social accountability initiatives that focus solely on exacting accountability at the local level.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Children's issues are seldom framed in political terms but building a child-responsive accountability system is a political endeavour that spans formal and informal institutions. Who is accountable to whom, or who can control whom, delineates power relations, which is why any accountability work inevitably goes to the very core of political structure. Child-responsive accountability faces a compounded challenge because it relies on redrawing two layers of unequal relationships: between children and adults, and between state and society.

To say that child-responsive accountability work is political serves to refocus the familiar emphasis on the importance of context to the existing patterns of power distribution. These, being intertwined with social dynamics and norms, include informal sources of legitimacy and accountability that may differ, or even conflict, with the accountability discourse among the international development practitioners. Because these informal sources of power are, however, part of the social fabric, the main implication for child-responsive accountability work is to tread cautiously.

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[18] http://unu.edu/publications/articles/decentralization-and-service-delivery-in-african-cities.html

Another overarching lesson is how much child-responsive accountability depends on closing the political and administrative divide between duty-bearers and rights-holders. Social accountability initiatives such as score cards, multi-stakeholder processes or public audits, contribute most to bringing about accountability through their ability to bring together different stakeholders. The values and interests shared by local officials and other members of community, to which they also belong, can provide opportunities for creating an incremental change. For the gatekeepers of those community values to also be part of the child-responsive accountability system, they need to be first instilled with the sense that children in their community come first. Articulating the theory of change behind child-responsive accountability in these terms provides a clearer roadmap.

Making children's issues relevant to broader public interest helps make child-responsive accountability politically meaningful. At the local level, this means integrating children's rights with community priorities and interests, emphasizing both their greater vulnerability to adverse impact as well as their ability and competence to contribute to community action. At a macro level, the success of child-responsive accountability work relies on the ability to engage with national politics. This requires seizing the key political moments and framing children's issues as being key to national development strategy, emphasizing that investing in childhood is a crucial investment in the national human capital and economy.

While the society as a whole may be collectively facing an issue (e.g. climate change), it incorporates many different, often conflicting, voices. Children need strong representation in public fora, if the call for prioritizing them is to be heard and reckoned with. As in the case of the women's rights movement, as a marginalized group of rights holders, a reminder of children's rights needs to be plugged into each stage (and level) of decision-making and oversight. Given that this implies direct engagement with government structures, most of the time, this needs to take place via their adult representatives.

Nor is the state side a homogenous entity as it consists of multiple departments, levels, as well as political factions. Local government tends to be responsible for providing the essential public services for children but it often does not have the capacity or remit to effectuate a change or respond to the demands of service users. This may be because of a power conflict between subnational and national governments or because of the lack of a system to link the information generated at the local level to the processes and debates at the national level. Formulating a realistic scope of social accountability recognizes that in order to bring about change at the local level, the work needs to link to thinking at the national level where key decisions occur.

Finally, child-responsive accountability requires clarity about what change is sought through an intervention. At the local level, the ability to demonstrate on-going, tangible results within a short-term timeframe helps sustain the momentum and community's participation. At the same time, the ultimate goal of any accountability work is improved governance, which requires of those who work on accountability a different set of approaches and tools, and the political skills to look at the national power dynamics, and to understand them in terms of the multiple relationships they contain.

Introducing the idea of accountability to children on the ground may seem overly ambitious while children are still perceived largely as passive recipients of public services, but children are gateways to building a culture of accountability – crucial to sustainable development, in international parlance, but importantly, key to building their own future. The first step is to recognize that the outcomes for children's lives are shaped by factors beyond policy interventions articulated in their functional terms of health, education, or water and sanitation. Working with political contexts, informal sources of power and redrawing accountability relationships begins by engaging in a systematic manner with the knowledge that is already available on governance and political economy.

9. IDENTIFYING FURTHER RESEARCH

The objective of this paper has been to initiate a discussion on child-responsive accountability among child rights practitioners and highlight the relevance of accountability lessons from other areas of work to that of child rights practitioners. As the paper recognizes and sought to indicate, the lessons from social accountability as practised in relation to adult rights holders cannot always be applied directly to the case of children. The discussion on child-responsive accountability raises a number of issues that call for further exploration.

Children's participation in social accountability mechanisms and its long-term impact on systemic change. The impact of rights holders' empowerment on an accountability system is likely to be gradual in most cases and therefore only meaningfully measured over a long term. Given that social accountability is relatively young this points to the wealth of information offered by longitudinal studies of changes in stakeholders' behaviour. For this purpose, child participation in governance processes is an attractive starting point – based on the recognition that children become eventual stakeholders, both as rights holders and duty bearers.

Challenges inherent in child rights holders' reliance on adult intermediacy. Particularly pertinent to children, given their limited opportunities for public participation, is the process of channelling their voices. The representativeness of adult intermediacy is implicit in accountability for issues such as education or health. More in-depth and nuanced understanding of who represents children on what situations and when is adult intermediacy more suitable than direct child participation would help to consolidate the practice of child-responsive accountability. It would also guide a more deliberate choice between developing child-specific accountability mechanisms and fitting children into the existing ones.

How does child-responsive accountability fit into local patterns and mechanisms of accountability. The interaction between children and their adult representatives, and between them and other duty bearers, will inevitably be shaped by the existing social norms and patterns of power relations. Introducing externally defined concepts and practices of accountability that do not resonate with local dynamics risks, at best, being ineffective, and at worst, disrupting the social fabric. Therefore, a study examining how children fit into local definitions of accountability and the existing mechanisms will help to identify an intervention that best fits the local context. All the

while, the inquiry needs to be linked to the broader context of national politics to strengthen the political awareness of child rights practitioners.

Where and to what extent does the data and evidence generated at the local level link with the decision-making. Recognising that policy making is a process that involves different stakeholders with different sets of motivation and priorities, implies that evidence and data are only two of a range of factors that shape decision-making. While monitoring and data collection provide the ground for exacting accountability, it is equally important to understand how the information is then used, and for what purposes. An empirical study is needed to trace the "journey of evidence" to understand different capacities for learning, while accounting for factors such as power relations and political traditions.

Finally, without losing sight of the indivisibility and interrelatedness of rights, child rights span a wide range of sectors. For example, education and health policies tend to be more easily subject to monitoring. Building on the extensive knowledge that already exists on accountability in health, education and water and sanitation sectors, additional research is needed to understand accountability issues from the *holistic* child rights perspective and in relation to other areas of child rights work,[19] Together, these questions reiterate the recognition that the impact of child-responsive accountability work relies on a more systemic interaction of child rights work with perspectives from others bodies of knowledge, most notably that of governance.

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[19] A framework for analysing sector-specific accountability issues is proposed in McIoughlin, C. and R. Batley (2012) "The effects of sector characteristics on accountability relationships in service delivery." London: Overseas Development Institute. Working Paper 350.

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