

# HEAL THE WINGS AND LEARN TO FLY

## Improving social accountability for better access to services

*“We are like birds with clipped feathers,  
fallen in the field”*

– Praveen’s story

Disabled women giving birth in government hospitals tell scary stories about how they are laughed at and badly served. LGBTI youth tell of how they are frightened to talk to mainstream doctors about sexually-transmitted infections. People in remote villages complain about the complete lack of services, be this health, water, or transport. How do inclusion practitioners deal with huge demand on the one side and a lack of understanding and limited resources on the other? In this chapter on improving accountability for better services, we explore how marginalised people and government bodies can engage in relationships that improve accessibility.

Accountability is about the formal and/or informal obligation of individuals and organisations to explain what they do and why they do it to the wider public, and to be transparent about what it is they do. It is also about the expectation of account-giving. Accountability is all about relationships: power plays an important part in accountability issues. The idea is that citizens have given “power to” their government to provide services (such as drinking water, education, healthcare, and security) and to protect their rights (such as equality, freedom of religion, and respect for ethnic diversity), so there

need to be ways for citizens to check on this and to sanction the government, if need be. When citizens demand accountability they retain “power over” their government. Ideally, government officials don’t sit and wait for citizens to request accountability, but actively and publicly explain what they are doing and take responsibility for their choices and actions.

All over the world, people feel that their representatives are not speaking on their behalf and do not deliver on their promises. Many groups in society feel that their views are not taken into account. Vulnerable and discriminated groups, in particular, often lack a say in the governance system. Political accountability is failing, and because government representatives tend to be detached from everyday life, they cannot hold the administration, its services and security providers to account in the way citizens want them to.

In this chapter, three inspiring case studies describe how better social accountability contributed to improved service delivery to marginalised groups in Ethiopia, Madagascar and India.

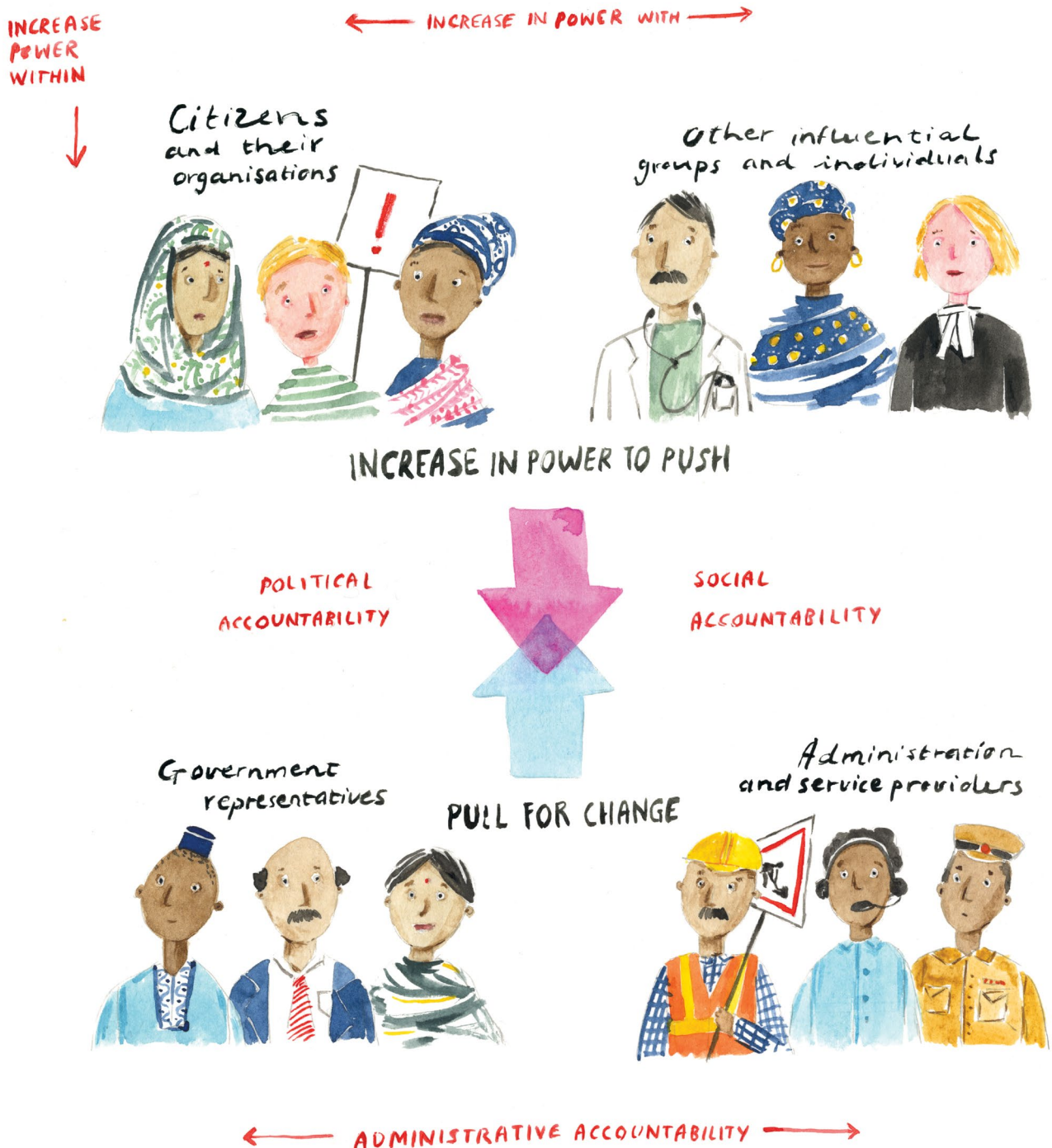


The three studies are not about the development of new policies or legal frameworks. They are about how accountability was improved within existing policies and legal frameworks by empowering marginalised groups, facilitating dialogue, and creating mutual understanding of each other's needs, possibilities and limitations. Accountability was improved through changes in social relationships. The accountability we touch on in this chapter can best be described, therefore, as "social accountability." Social

accountability initiatives aim to achieve more inclusive governance, public services that are accessible to all, and to facilitate development initiatives that "leave no one behind."

In the conclusion to this chapter we will present the main lessons about social accountability as an instrument for improving access of marginalised groups to services.

The illustration below visualises social accountability. The text on the next page explains the illustration in more detail.



## Theory:

### Governance, Accountability and Inclusion

Are elected representatives of government obliged to ensure that citizens' demands are heard and met? In most countries representatives agree they are. But the next question, then, is: are they accountable to citizens (political accountability) and are they, in turn, holding the administration to account (administrative or horizontal accountability)?

**Social Accountability** strives to overcome shortfalls and failures in the governance system. It is an active form of citizenship in which people and their diverse groups take responsibility to demand accountability from their government. In social accountability, empowered people organise to be more directly involved in government decision-making and resource allocation processes, and to monitor government services and hold them accountable.

There are many ways in which social accountability can contribute to inclusion. In this chapter, we emphasise two theoretical views on this.

*Policies and policy practices can be changed by influencing push and pull factors.*

#### **Increase the power within, the power with and the power to**

One way is to increase the “*power within*,” “*the power with*” and “*the power to*” of marginalised groups. The power within the marginalised groups can be strengthened by making these groups more confident and aware of their potentials to contribute to society. An example of how confidence and influence of such groups can grow in society is provided in Chapter 1 of this guide. This gives such groups more power to pressure for change. Empowered marginalised groups will also be in a better position to engage with other sympathetic groups in society that can support their plight: this increases their “*power with*.” The engagement with many groups in society and the empowerment process enables the marginalised groups to increase their power to push for change in policy practices. [For more on these kinds of power, see Chapter 1.]

#### **Increase push and pull factors for change**

Policies and policy practices can be changed by influencing push and pull factors. As described above, marginalised groups can increase the push factors to exert pressure on governments to better meet their needs. The chance for change is much higher, however, if the government representatives themselves also start to better understand the needs and desires of marginalised groups and also start pulling for change themselves.

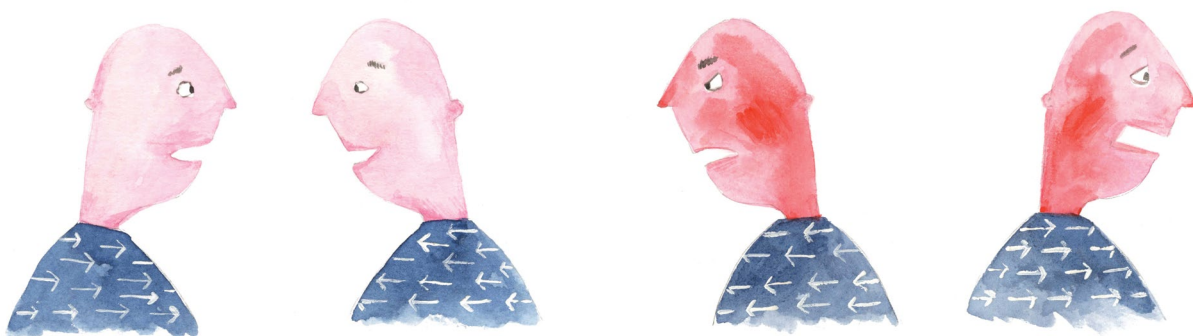
# Unlocking the inclusive potential of government policies and services

– by Lucia –

*“Systemic change is not about changing the system, it is about incremental change in habits. . . people have got to get to know each other, build friendships and start to appreciate each other as people.”*

– Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*

It was in February 2013, that I first found myself in front of a group of over 200 people to launch a social accountability programme. Nerves crept in. Were we, as the initiating International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO), doing the right thing? What were we thinking in bringing together over 100 Ethiopian NGOs with regional and federal government officials at this fragile point at the start of the social accountability programme? Did we really think that we could improve social accountability in almost 25% of the districts across the country? This was Ethiopia, a centrally led state, with decreasing space for civil society.



Fortunately, the ice-breakers did their job, and soon there was animated conversation at the tables. During the coffee break I heard mixed feedback. The NGOs were clearly pleased with their conversations with the officials, who seemed to take a genuine interest in their work. But I also sensed widespread suspicion: “This is Ethiopia, and the only reason we have the social accountability programme is because of the donors.”

In my short vote of thanks at the end of the two days, I said, “Please use this programme to demonstrate what can happen if government joins forces with NGOs. While there may be more fundamental issues you would like to work on, consider that a working relationship with your government should be one of them. And please realise that basic services affect the lives of millions of poor and marginalised Ethiopians.” I felt a bit like a preacher, and got some harsh feedback about “being in the government camp.” Anyway, it was said and done.

Now, almost four years later, it is clear that the social accountability programme has improved public services in all districts, towns and city administrations where it operated, and that this has positively affected the lives of millions of people. At the moment, despite the ongoing state of emergency, the government of Ethiopia is working with development partners, local social accountability experts and local NGOs on the design for a programme that aims to scale-up social accountability.

During the final conference, I was repeatedly asked why we were emphasising the service improvements so much. We should really emphasise the mind shift on both sides: citizens and service providers. Wow! – mind shift – I feel such pride in what this programme seems to have started. Yes, it has achieved much in terms of service improvements, but it has also started something that is going to be so much more valuable if it can keep growing: the capacity, in both citizens and local government, to listen to each other and have a productive dialogue. A mind shift indeed!

The crucial role played by the NGOs in “bridging the gap” between citizens and government should not be underestimated. NGOs have raised awareness about service entitlements. Not only citizens but also many governmental service providers do not necessarily understand what citizens are entitled to, nor what resources and support they are entitled to in order to provide basic services in the best possible

way. NGOs have identified vulnerable groups, often together with the social welfare office of the local government, by asking “who is not being served?” They were tasked to always ask about women, youth, the elderly, people with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDs, and to bring such social groups together in case they were not yet organised. They motivated CBOs to actively engage in the social accountability process, and providers to listen to how citizens experience the services and where their needs are not being addressed. NGOs also prepared citizens and service providers for productive dialogue and facilitated what were often difficult dialogues. They learned along the way how to keep the issues of women and vulnerable groups on the dialogue table, so that conscious decisions are made to support them.

There are many, many stories from the programme about what can happen when people “get to know each other.” Here are just two.

*The crucial role played by the NGOs in “bridging the gap” between citizens and government should not be underestimated.*

## The story of Hadisa, a circumcised woman

A pregnant woman, Hadisa, was given the chance to share what she went through when she went to the health centre for delivery, as the government policy decreed. The staff refused to help her. They told her to go to the hospital to deliver. The ambulance was not available, so she spent all her money to travel to the hospital over a bumpy road in the middle of the night. She almost lost her own life and her baby. However, as she vividly tells, “Thanks to Allah, we both survived the ordeal and we are even still strong today.”





Hadisa told her horror story in vivid colour to the health workers who had sent her away. In the social accountability dialogue, it became clear that the nurses had not known how to help her because they were not familiar with deliveries of “cut” women. Not knowing what to do, they had turned her away. The health workers felt terrible hearing the story: the health centre decided to

take action. Today, they welcome all women. Recently, Hadisa safely delivered a boy at the same health centre. She has now become the biggest advocate in the town for the government’s health centre-based deliveries policy.

**Hadisa told her horror story in vivid colour to the health workers who had sent her away.**

## The story of a father who realised there was a state budget for his disabled son

Each district in Ethiopia receives funding for special needs education. In one district, however, this budget was always underspent and reallocated: the district education office said there was no demand for it.

When a social accountability partner started asking around, it turned out that disabilities were a taboo and that children with special needs were kept in the family hut, away from society. An activist father, who did not know about the possibility of his disabled son receiving an education nearby, had been saving money to send his child to a special needs school far away, in the capital. When he learned about the local possibilities, he personally went from door to door to convince families that their differently abled children could have a productive life ahead of them. With the increasing demand, the district opened a special needs wing in one of its schools.

Change happened because the NGOs helped citizens as well as civil servants to listen to each other’s experiences, possibilities and limitations. These stories show how more human relationships were built as appreciation gradually developed on both sides. Civil servants have told me that it is as if they are looking into a mirror, and it is not always nice what they see. They feel they can and should do much better. Community leaders have also done some soul searching: they know that they can and should do much more to make sure everyone can be served. When everyone comes together, they can and do find local solutions.



Of course, none of this work came without struggle. How do you get the local government to approve your project when they think it is against the law for NGOs to be involved with governance work? It cannot happen without a high level political support, which we called upon when needed. That is one advantage of a centralised state: when there is commitment, it is pushed down the system. How do you subsequently convince the sector office that your project is not about blaming, but about dialogue? How do you explain that services will improve, although your project doesn't have money for infrastructure nor social development? How do you assure poor people that there will be no repercussions when they speak up? You try and fail, and try again and again, and eventually achieve some small successes.

## What we learned as facilitators of the social accountability programme

- Failure leads to deeper understanding. We, the programme staff, learned to be understanding and supportive, and created space for the NGOs to share and learn from each other (not from us, the so-called experts: we had no clue how to do it!). We always brought the government into the room. It was their programme – so what could they do to help overcome the hurdles? When small successes emerged, we let those speak who went through the change: citizens who overcame their fear of speaking up, the service providers who overcame their fear of being blamed. We gave everyone involved a variety of platforms (local, national, virtual) to be heard and be recognised. We didn't focus much on the big challenges, although they were heard, but on the small changes: has anyone been able to make a step forward? How?
- There was always something to celebrate along the way. Even the repair of a water tap in a school, after five years' of its not working, is a sign that social accountability is, in the end, going to make government care and work better for all. The tap's repair may seem a small thing, but it is big matter for all those children who can now drink water at their school because they asked to do so.

*When small successes emerged, we let those speak who went through the change*



- When excluded groups get a chance to be heard and are treated as equally deserving of opportunity, we saw that society and its government can find ways to cater to their needs. When excluded groups sat at the table, they showed themselves perfectly capable of presenting their special needs and balancing this with the wider needs of society.
- We also saw it was unhelpful to blame government for not delivering to excluded groups. Local governments have many competing interests to take into account, with very limited resources. NGOs can help them to study inclusive development objectives and to reflect upon what they can do to achieve these within the limited means available. This dialogue, and subsequent reflection on the ways forward, has multiple benefits: priorities are carefully negotiated, so that the local government can become more responsive.

At first, it was hard for us, the NGO facilitators, to make headway because social stigma, the attitudes of citizens towards the government and the government's attitude towards NGOs were all deeply entrenched. Yet we stuck with it and trusted the process: this worked towards an open dialogue.

The experience shows that all people, including those in local and regional governments, can live up to their potential to doing the right thing. The main role of the facilitator is to enable social groups to be heard at the table where government budgets are planned and evaluated. As NGOs, we avoided speaking on behalf of vulnerable people because we have seen that their own voices and stories are much more powerful than ours!





## Using technology as a tool to make voices of marginalised villagers heard

– by Praveen –

In April 2013, I travelled to the district of Kalahandi in Odisha, a remote area of India. I visited the villages there to talk to the villagers about the challenges they face. Godapokri village is one of these villages, far from the main road, where the basic healthcare centre (Anganwadi) is situated. The women there told me there were 150 households with around 500 people, the majority of which are from Kond tribes (a tribal group in Odisha state). The primary healthcare centre was three kilometres away, at the panchayat Urladhani. The stream which flows between the road and the village fills up during the rainy season, cutting off the village from the road, as people cannot cross the torrent. The women told me they had no electricity in the village and there is no mobile phone network. This leaves them and their children at risk. As the government is at a distance, the villagers were not able to complain about their situation to any authority.

My meeting was with the self-help group women that is supported by the NGO Seba Jagat. Their leader is Rajkumari Mjhi, a strong woman, who some two-years previously had become the leader of the group as a result of her conviction and passion for changing the fate of the women in her village. The self-help group operated through a thrift and savings activity. The members were happy to meet once in a fortnight in order to save Rs.5 or Rs.10 and to discuss village issues.

I asked them what they did for drinking water. They replied that there were only two hand pumps in the village, both not functional. They had submitted an application for their repair at the panchayat office but to no avail. I asked them how long it was since they had submitted the application. The

answer was over a year ago, and still there was no action. They had to go to the stream to fetch water, which meant that they had to walk two-and-a-half kilometres to get a pot of water.

**“As the government is at a distance, the villagers were not able to complain about their situation to any authority.”**



Another issue was that the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife who should visit the village every fortnight doesn't come regularly. Pushpa Maji, a housewife and a mother of three, shared with me that she had missed out on antenatal care during her pregnancy and that she was not aware of the importance of immunisations. She told me she had lost her first child at birth: it was a home delivery. "This is a critical issue in my community." Her tears streamed down her face as she spoke. As dusk descended, we could hear the noises of the sheep and goats passing by. I asked the self-help group members what other challenging issues they encountered. Rajkumari answered, "There is no paid work for us and we do not have much to do. Our children do not study as they cannot access schooling beyond primary level. We live in darkness. The government does not listen to us." She ended with words that kept resonating in my head: "We are like birds with clipped feathers, fallen in the field."

I asked the women how the situation could be improved. The women did not see real options. "We can go to the block headquarters, which is 20 kilometres away.

The next option is to go to the district administration office in Bawanipatna, and that is 80 kilometres away from here." Pondering this, they added, "Each time we go there, we forego our work, our daily labour. We end up spending most of our savings without anything in return. It's a tedious process and it feels like hitting our heads against the wall."

As I walked back to my room that evening I wondered what could make the government more responsive to the women of this isolated community. How could they air their grievances and get a response from the government?

The next day we had meetings with the district collector of Kalahandi, Mr. Bijay Ketan Upadhyay, I.A.S. I shared with him how technology was helping to support local governments to fulfil their duties in other districts. I described how service delivery in Koraput district had been strengthened, since citizens could directly demand and track their service entitlements under national and state government programmes with the help of an internet-based SMS platform, "Samadhan" (Samadhan means resolution). At first, the district collector was reluctant to engage, but as I kept on sharing some of the success stories and explained the process step by step, I noticed him getting more and more interested and drawn into the possibilities. I was pleasantly surprised at his curiosity and positive reaction, which I had not expected, since the Samadhan system promotes transparency, accountability and citizen participation. I was happy to be proved wrong: the collector asked my organisation, VSO India, to develop the technology platform and to also train the district administration staff in its use as quickly as possible. He asked us to be ready for the launch of the system within three months.



**We live in darkness.  
The government does  
not listen to us.**

## Short description of the steps of the Samadhan system

### Step 1

Citizens file a complaint by sending a simple text message to a helpline number.

### Step 2

The message is registered and a reference number is sent to the complainant.

### Step 3

The relevant line department is linked to the complaint and action is taken.

### Step 4

The complainant receives a message telling how the problem has been handled by the line department.



Exactly three years later, in May 2016, I visited Kalahandi district again. Already over 3,000 complaints had been received through the Samadhan system and many women and children had benefited from the increased responsiveness.

One of those to benefit is Seema, who was 32-years-old and living in Durladhani, a village with a predominantly tribal population that has a low level of literacy and limited access to services. She told me: "During my pregnancy, I was aware about the various health facilities set up by the government through the community health club in my village promoted by VSO. I registered at the local Anganwadi and visited it regularly, taking the trouble of travelling the three kilometres in pain to Ghodapokhri for all the routine check-ups, as I know that they are important for me and my child. During my pregnancy and after my delivery I was entitled to receive MAMATA (government financial support for pregnant and lactating women). But I did not receive it. Every alternate day I checked with the Anganwadi centre but the Anganwadi worker turned me away saying there was no news. It was like going to the fair price shop (a ration shop that distributes food grains to the poor) and returning without the food grains. I had heard about the Samadhan system through one of the meetings I attended. I filed a grievance on the Samadhan in July 2014 through SMS. In August, I received a response and I also got my MAMATA grant. I was so thrilled that my problem was solved through investing one rupee for the text message!"



***“I was so thrilled that my problem was solved through investing one rupee for the text message!”***

There are many more stories of improved government response due to the introduction of the simple Samadhan system. Yet, what this experience underlines for me is that it was the “small” introduction of simple mobile technology that most improved transparency and encouraged responsiveness: this can make a world of difference to women living in remote villages of India, like the ones that can be found in Odisha.

## Using radio as means to create inclusive dialogue in southern Madagascar

– by Yvonne –



In 2010, Madagascar found itself in a political crisis following a coup d'état. With no democratically elected leader in power, the country was in a state of instability with plummeting development indicators. As the crisis advanced, the disenfranchisement of local populations in the country's governance, profoundly lacking even at the best of times, was deepening. The international community shut off funding. In consequence, development projects and local services were struggling to meet local needs.

In the south of the country, the crisis added yet another layer to the existing communication gap between citizens and decision makers. As an NGO, we asked ourselves how we could build on our ten years of successful experience using local media, especially radio, as a tool for development to engage citizens in improving the situation – we wondered how we could promote dialogue that could foster greater social cohesion, more transparent systems for social service provision, and more accountable development action.

This was no small challenge. Communication gaps are prevalent in Malagasy society, especially in the remote southern regions where profound isolation, deep poverty, environmental hardship, drought, and low literacy rates conspire with traditional taboos and belief systems to maintain social hierarchies and exclude many from civic participation, especially women and young people. Additionally, the widespread self-censorship of media in the face of repressive laws and the risk of imprisonment for journalists, demanded courage and creative mechanisms to engage all parties without creating social conflict and media closures.

It was a hopeful sign that we found that many in the villages in which we were working were prepared to discuss their community's problems, and to identify and collectively debate the key issues they were facing. However, they were fearful about identifying themselves publicly on radio on controversial topics for fear of reprisal. To ensure villagers felt safe to engage with leaders, we had to offer a form of immunity. The only way for us to ensure that all ages, educational levels, gender, economic status and abilities could be included in the radio programming was to keep the citizens' voices anonymous.

The question for us was, how do we ensure that local decision makers would agree to participate and respond publicly on the radio to the citizens' questions? We were worried that vested interests and the desire for self-protection might hinder our efforts. However, many local decision makers understood the benefits of using the medium to reach Madagascar's communities, as most of them had participated in our previous radio projects. Most importantly, they trusted the local project director and team because the results of their working together in the past had been both reliable and impactful. A range of decision makers agreed to participate, including regional authorities, ministry representatives, local mayors, service providers, such as the local police, the local energy supplier, and NGOs.

**We aimed to circumnavigate the barriers to inclusion by setting up Radio Listening Groups (RLGs).**

**What are Radio Listening Groups?**

Radio Listening Groups (RLGs) provide a safe space to discuss issues. Citizen groups formulate their concerns in the form of a question and then elect someone to record this on their behalf, anonymously. The citizens' question is taken to the office of the relevant government authority, who listens and records a response or commitment to action. The question and answer are edited together as if in a live debate and this is then broadcasted through the local radio station.



We discovered quickly that decision makers would not always provide full answers, or offer all the information or solutions required in one and the same session. In response to this, RLGs were helped to reformulate and pursue new iterations of their question, until they were finally satisfied with the response they had received from the decision makers. We thus created a “spiral of engagement.”

The broadcasts delivered both an explicit response from a decision maker and also another unspoken message: that it was acceptable to engage in dialogue with leaders, to ask a decision maker for information, to express your views and opinions, and to hold those with power to account. A monthly radio phone-in programme opened up topics for broader public debate within the wider community: the RLGs' mobile phones helped their communities to participate.

These activities offered citizens an unprecedented opportunity to determine the agenda and create spaces for inclusion and democratic public discourse that had hitherto been unavailable. People's questions were now being answered directly on the radio and misunderstandings were being cleared up on the spot.

Citizens in the villages reported unexpected social change as a result of such engagement, including the sharing of financial benefits and support between women in polygamous marriages, more usually the source of jealousy and conflicts: “I chose to share my husband's salary with his second wife, though I did not have to.” Parents stopped beating their children. Villagers reported feeling courage: “I am young and I want to progress,” as well as a sense of self-respect gained from helping others.

Decision makers also appreciated the benefits of this approach because, once people were clear about how things worked, they accepted their own responsibilities.

**“People's questions were now being answered directly on the radio and misunderstandings were being cleared up on the spot.”**

At the same time, many policy makers came to understand that their assumptions about those living in the villages were often wrong. This bottom-up process led to decision makers for the first time comprehending many aspects of the villagers' lives, bridging communication gaps hitherto hidden from them. This changed the ways decision makers and agencies listened to local people who, in turn, were also more confident in speaking up. This experience in Madagascar demonstrates that inclusion is not only about making space for everyone irrespective of gender, age and other social determinants, but is also about building the confidence to occupy that space and to participate in it in meaningful ways. The RLGs are just one example of how a safe space can be created where different voices can meet to discuss important issues.

## Concluding remarks on what counts in strengthening accountability

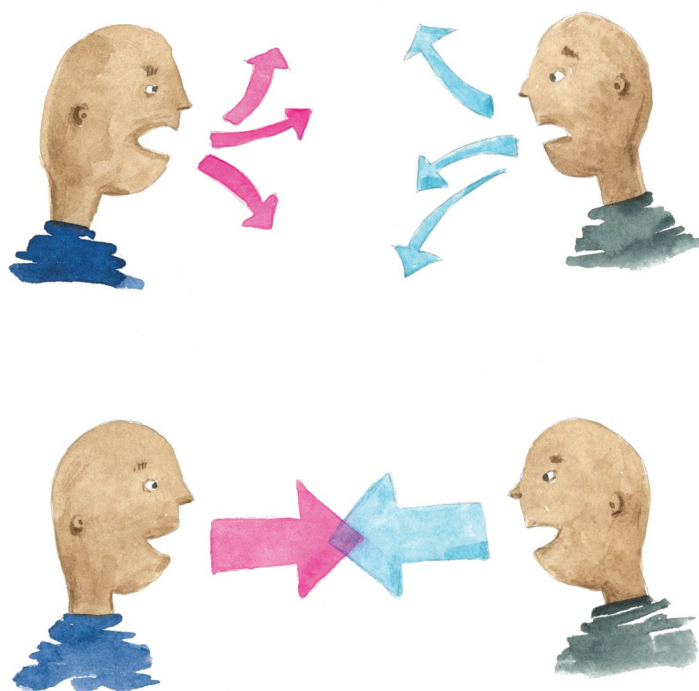
The authors of this chapter all started their stories with a sketch of their reality in which marginalised citizens felt unheard, desperate, even apathetic, and where government departments lacked initiatives and ideas about how to make their government resources and services more accessible. At the start of these programmes, the practitioners were nervous, as they were not following well-laid-out plans: they had to trust the process.

The practitioners assisted the two parties to listen to each other and to create a dialogue to develop solutions, without knowing what the result would be beforehand. During the process set in motion by the practitioners, many of the citizens' incorrect assumptions and lack of knowledge about the workings of the government were cleared up – as well as those of decision makers about citizens. This led to both parties understanding each other better, greatly improving the quality of dialogue. Much to the relief of the practitioners, this better dialogue eventually led to improved accessibility to services.

These stories show that strengthening social accountability requires careful process-holding. This contains the following elements:

### 1. Process-holding is key in improving social accountability

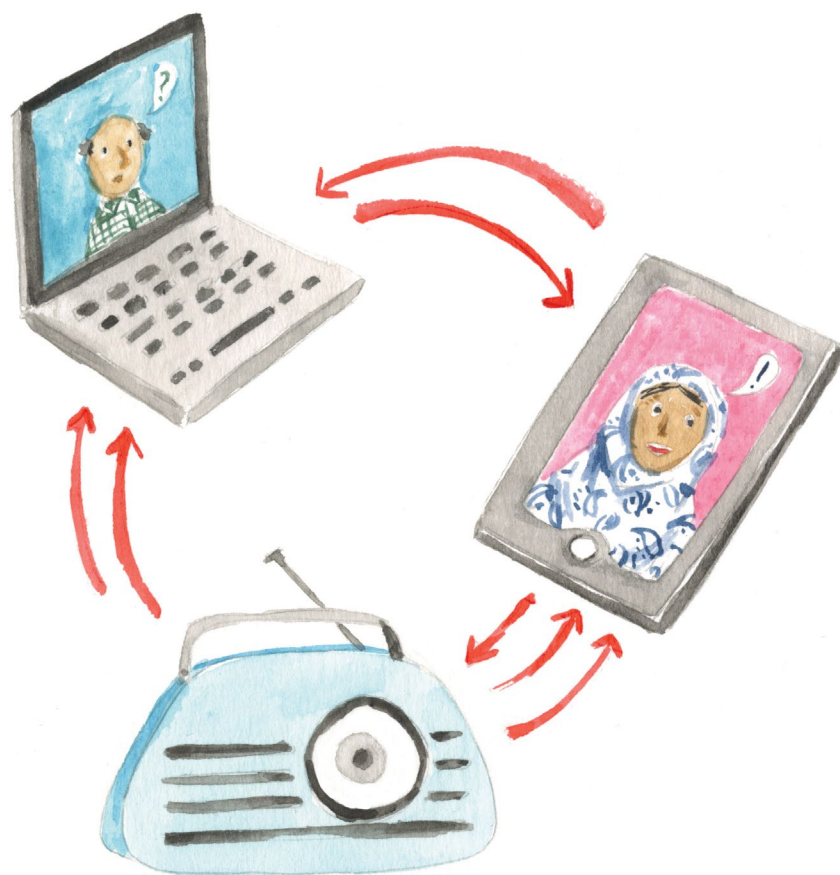
- Strengthening social accountability is not something that can be forced on people: what is required is to create the circumstances that can enable



this to happen. The results may be large or small, as their magnitude and characteristics need to emerge from the process and can't be fully planned for in advance. It is very important to celebrate changes in attitude, be these small or large, as well as to provide role models and the space and time to voice the needs and requirements of marginalised groups.

- By enabling open communication between diverse groups of citizens and policy makers, it is possible to help remove the barriers created by incorrect assumptions about each other's attitudes and requirements, thereby opening up new possibilities.

- Citizens and frontline service providers need to be made aware of existing policies and rules: often they lack the necessary knowledge of these.
- These stories show the power of constructive, appreciative and opportunity-based approaches. It is usually unhelpful to tell governments how deep the gaps are between the needs and the delivery and then blame them for this. Local governments have many competing interests to take into account, and often have only very limited resources. Civil society actors can help them to study inclusive development objectives. By reflecting together on what can be done, surprisingly often, mountains can be moved despite all the hurdles.



## 2. Technology can be very helpful in improving social accountability

- It helps when the expressed needs of the citizens are channelled to the relevant departments: the use of technology can prove very helpful in this.
- Technology can also be used to overcome the physical distance between policy makers and citizens, especially those living in remote areas.
- Technology can help in creating safe spaces in which citizens can meet, enabling them to remain anonymous.

All these stories illustrate that the attitudes of development practitioners towards government often need to be examined and questioned. If practitioners do not start to expect better from their government, then that government is unlikely to ever live up to its potential for furthering inclusive development.