Reflections on the Global Partnership for Social Accountability 2016 Forum at the World Bank: Constructive Engagement and its Limits

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After three years - two days each year - of speaking about social accountability in the precincts of the World Bank’s Global Social Accountability Partner’s Forum, I cannot help but muse on the future of social accountability.

We had some great speakers and topics at the 18th and 19th May 2016 Forum. The Chief of Staff, Office of the President of the World Bank, Mr. Junaid Kamal Ahmad who gave an inspiring opening and a short video message from the President himself. He noted that the World Bank is committed to social accountability and is now in the process of ensuring that social accountability is embedded all their work. He announced that the World Bank is committing another 20 million dollars to the Global Social Accountability.

I am not sure if this announcement diluted the passionate preamble to the Forum since it seems a paltry amount compared to what the Bank gives to other projects. I think the Bank can do more to support social accountability work financially.

Kamal Ahmad described some important experiments in social accountability, one that struck me was his reference to the Bangladesh local governance project that learnt from the Uganda Local Government Development Program and has become one of the best examples of participatory local governance. He declared that the battle for social accountability is far from done. He took a couple of questions after which he disappeared as if into thin air.
His act was followed by a keynote address by Thomas Carothers – Vice President of Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace who spoke on the topic of Social Accountability for Development Impact. He made very interesting points, but those that particularly caught my attention are; the idea that it has taken development practitioners nearly 50 years to move from talking about participation in development to the idea of accountability – which he described as being the ‘disciplining’ aspect of participation.

Carothers offered several reasons for why things have changed and why accountability has to be viewed differently. He noted the reality that politics is changing because the capacity of individuals to associate and organize has taken new directions and forms. The revolutions in technology, a point that is made nearly at every global event, came up again.

He added that people around the world are more empowered today but they are also looking for more. One of the characteristics of asking for more is the fact that fighting corruption is now a ‘signature fight’ in many countries. He quoted some of the work he has done with others that found out that the majority of regime changes in many countries around the world were very much a mobilization of the many – Ukraine, Tunisia and other places - and in most times people are pushing for accountability. He pointed us to his recent work on Ideas for Future work on Transparency and Accountability as a space we can learn more on these issues of accountability.

I did ask him if indeed we are not now living in a world of contradictory accountability. In some of the places where we see changes, they are based in the mobilization of the powerful and the discomfort of the middle class. The examples I had in mind were the impeachment of the Brazilian president and the credibility of the leaders of the movement against her; I also recalled the Filipino president that calls for a death sentence to be reinstated and yet ends up being very popular; or even the presidential candidate in the US who is ruffling all feathers on every issue including dictators in Africa. His response to these issues was very much about the need for us to keep reflecting and engaging with these questions.
We then went through several very interesting parallel sessions that touched different projects being implemented by the GPSA grantees and partners. One phrase that was overly mentioned and repeated several times was how advocacy should be about ‘constructive engagement’. Several of the projects were able to show how ‘constructive engagement was yielding results in water, education, road projects. We were even treated to a panel based on a case study from Ghana on monitoring the education budget. A representative of civil society narrated how a CSO in Ghana constructively engaged with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance in Ghana and had good results.

Going through the panels I felt a bit uneasy with what I saw as some kind of white-washing of social accountability advocacy. In my mind it was clear that while ‘constructive engagement’ is an important and good strategy that many civil society organizations use in advocacy, to make it look like it is the best option for social accountability advocacy is to depoliticize advocacy work.

I was bailed out in the late morning of the second day by an interesting parallel session on Political and Horizontal Accountability moderated by Brendan Halloran of the International Budget Partnership. The session focused on the issue of horizontal and political accountability. While it presented some interesting cases on accountability, we ended up spending time on some interesting insights.

From India we heard from a project manager who indeed was able to share how her project was successful because the chief minister of the state she worked in saw it as a good opportunity for him to be re-elected and indeed reach the people in the constituency.

We were provoked to think harder when another presenter suggested that it would be good for civil society movements and organizations to consider becoming political parties – because sometimes accountability may require such kinds of crossovers. We debated this and other kinds of perspectives on politics and accountability.

A couple of government representatives in the room made the usual point that civil society should not be political and should not become a breeding ground for politicians. In the discussions, we reminded ourselves that there is indeed a difference between politics and partisanship – a point made many times but never understood or appreciated.

A panelist from IDEA made the point that it is okay for civil society leaders and civil society movements to become political. There are cases of this in India and even Spain and it is a way to ensure that civil society groups become part of the processes that they demand.
Returning to the question of social accountability in this session, I did make the point that we should not over sugar-coat accountability and make constructive engagement as the only way. I argued that without political risk sometimes accountability cannot be exacted. What makes accountability real is the ‘creative tension’ between the demand side and supply side – but accountability without any tension may end up looking like a car without an engine. My sense is that this is one element that GPSA has to deal with. But one can understand that the World Bank is probably not wired for this kind of accountability-talk but at least the kind that is promoted through GPSA should be seen as just one model of the very many models out there and the other models should probably be given space to be presented at GPSA Fora.

We came away from this session with a number of interesting lessons; the session moderator did indeed give us a good formulation when he made the point that we need to move from a linear understanding of accountability to a more nuanced understanding that sees accountability as an ecosystem that is dynamic rather than a linear process with two nodes. In this case we can then be able to reflect on a number of perspectives.

Professor Jonathan Fox of the American University set out the issues well for us with his elaboration on nuances around accountability. He gave the example of weaknesses of accountability in Brazil where those asking for accountability have more corrupt cases to answer than the President they are impeaching. He spoke about the limits of constructive engagement – which was for me a breath of fresh air. He spoke of issues like collaboration versus criticism as important tensions in accountability work.
The session also made an important point that we need to frame issues of accountability as issues that are driven by power negotiations. For politicians in any accountability context, power is an important variable, but one thing that we all need to watch are the limits of how power is negotiated. One that still rings in my mind is what he called ‘party-orcracy’ versus democracy. The emergence of allegiance to the political party and not to people is indeed an issue for us to watch in the accountability ecosystem we were warned. He made reference to some work on – connecting the dots - that has he has been involved in around ensuring that accountability work takes into account the eco-systems of accountability.

Another powerful session was a presentation of the 2017 World Development Report that will come out later this year. The framing and conceptualisation of this report is really refreshing. The topic is the role of governance and the law in the economic development and it examines the institutional foundations of a well-functioning state as well as the interaction between economic development and the quality of governance. The WDR 2017 will work with literature from political economy, anthropology and social science issues. Some of the questions it will consider are the role of elites in accountability and even focus on issues like functions and norms and the role of elites – words that are not common in the World Bank lexicon. To summarize its focus are three statements; 1) think about functions and not only form 2) think about power and norm and not only capacity, 3) think about the role of the law not only the rule of the law. Very interesting formulations and certainly I look forward to reading the whole report.

The issue of elites and accountability was really refreshing for me. I think is an important one that we need to revisit. This is a question that for me became clear at the beginning of the year here in Uganda when we had the general elections. For example in a paper I did for a retreat of the Inter Religious Council of Uganda, I did argue that what Uganda needs today is an ‘elite consensus’ – based on the question - how should the elite treat each other?. I am glad the World Development Report resonates with my thinking and I am happy that now we are returning to the question of the elite and how societies function. I think a formulation that focuses on the elite – not as an economic
category but a social category is very important especially in making accountability useful. This is because it is clear that unless there emerges an elite consensus in many countries it will be hard for social accountability to take root.

The highlight for me was the closing synthesis by John Gaventa of IDS Sussex, who used the analogy of the bridge in defining social accountability and explained it as being a ‘bridge’ between the demand side and supply side of accountability.

In his use of the imagery of the bridges he went on to add that – bridges have to have strong foundations and indeed social accountability should have strong foundations, that the bridge has to have strong anchors on both ends – so there should be strong anchors at the demand side and supply side, that no two bridges are alike – every context of social accountability will differ, that bridges require not architects and engineers only but also leaders and champions and that we need to watch and ensure that we do not cross the bridge and find deep crevices on either side. This analogy of the bridge indeed closed off the forum well. This year as usual it was well attended with over 200 participants and colleague from Guinea won the award for the best exhibitor, which was also a space that was full of interesting cases.

As all this was happening the news was trickling in about the way Uganda was selecting its Speaker and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, the presence of the President in Parliament, then someone shared with me the missive by Whittaker on the alleged walkout of the Ambassadors at the swearing in and in all these cases my preoccupation was what type of social accountability should we embark on in Uganda. It looks like we now need to develop a new foundation and build a new bridge because it seems that ‘banks of the river’ of governance are busting and a new form of social accountability is required.

Will constructive engagement deliver on its promise in our context? This is a question my colleagues in the Social Accountability Platform that we host at UNNGOF should grapple with!