

ACADEMIC PAPER

Social accountability in local government: Lessons from Vuwani (South Africa) and Gweru (Zimbabwe)

Modimowabarwa Kanyane^{1,2}  | Edson P. Mutema³  | Thobekile Zikhali¹

¹Developmental, Capable and Ethical State,, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Public Administration, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa

³Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Correspondence

Modimowabarwa Kanyane, Developmental, Capable and Ethical State, Human Sciences Research Council, Private Bag X41, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa.
Email: bkanyane@hsrc.ac.za

What do experiences in South Africa and Zimbabwe teach us about the relationship between social accountability and public participation? The relationship between social accountability and public participation is widely acknowledged as important, yet the nuances that inform such a relationship are not critically discussed. To understand such nuances, this paper critically engages two cases: Vuwani (South Africa) and Gweru (Zimbabwe). The study underscores the importance of social accountability and public participation in local governance. Robust and open citizen engagement is critical to hold the state accountable. Thus, the two cases show how lack of a constructive participatory framework, wherein all relevant stakeholders are given a voice and informed about all developments, is problematic and can cause destructive outcomes in one case and sustained political frustrations in another. Using interviews with various social actors, document analysis and observations to bring to the fore social accountability and public participation nuances, this paper argues that public participation applies in different contexts and forms part of social accountability initiatives which largely depend on the extent of public engagement with non-state actors.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Accountability is generally known to hold government officials and corporates answerable to their actions. Given the history of social injustices, poverty, governance failures and the number of public service delivery protests in Africa, it is necessary to extend accountability mechanisms to citizens in order to place the state in check. For Gaventa and McGee (2013:3), social accountability is “an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, for example in which it is ordinary citizens and or civil society organisations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability.”

Therefore, public participation is the cornerstone of social accountability (Pandeya, 2015). This includes not only inviting stakeholders to participate but also ensuring that they are informed in advance and knowledgeable about the objectives as well as expectations of such participation.

In most available work, social accountability is viewed as a democratic factor that encourages participation. However, missing are comprehensive and practical ways of defining what participation entails.

In their study on social accountability in Cambodia, Babovic and Vukovic (2014: 2) recommend that

Any future attempts to promote social accountability and to increase the proactive engagement of citizens should take a more diversified approach to citizens and explore the various potentials and limitations of social groups in relation to their structural positions, interests and capability to engage in various types of actions.

The study uses the institution theory and Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation lenses to explore the implementation of public participation and social accountability practices in the two local government organisations: Vuwani (South Africa) and Gweru (Zimbabwe) (henceforth Vuwani and Gweru, respectively). Yet, missing in these studies is how public participation or citizen engagement can be used as an effective tool to demand accountability from governments. It is against this reason that issues of social accountability from empirical perspectives using two qualitative case studies in Vuwani and Gweru