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Book review: *Accountability through Public Opinion: From Inertia to Public Action*
Sina Odugbemi and Taeku Lee (eds.), World Bank: Washington, D.C., 2011

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The book is the result of contributions in the context of a workshop held in Paris in November 2007 (*Generating Genuine Demand with Social Accountability Mechanisms*). Some specially commissioned chapters were added afterwards. Authors come both from practice and academia, which gives the book an interesting plurality of approaches that the reader should bear in mind. According to the editors “the workshop explored three broad questions: First, How can we use social accountability (SA) mechanisms more effectively and selectively to ensure greater impact and generate genuine demand? Second, what is needed (at both the policy and the practice levels) to help ensure that SA tools create the behavior change they intend (change the behavior of public authorities or agencies in some positive way)? And third, what can the fields of communication and other forms of collective action) teach us?” (p. 9)

It is a challenge to review a book containing 30 contributions that study accountability, governance, democratization, and the media from a wide set of perspectives and points of view. Nevertheless, *Accountability through Public Opinion* is a thoughtful proposal that intends to gather together academic discussion about accountability with practice in different jurisdictions. The book is diverse to say the least. It covers a wide range of conceptual and practical discussions linked to governance, accountability, civic journalism, social movements, social networks, social capital, etc. Its main purpose, though, is not scholarly discussion.

The ideas of ‘direct accountability’ and ‘social accountability’ are seen as the conducting lines along which the book’s chapters develop. In the introductory chapter, Odugbemi and Lee set out the motivations and explain the purposes of the book. ‘Direct accountability’ means for them accountability mechanisms that work outside the logic of the state (ombudsmen, courts,

parliaments, etc.) and are rather embedded in society and public opinion, especially those related with the strengthening of independent media. They mention the ‘accountability turn’ in the context of foreign aid to developing countries. This ‘turn’ emphasized accountability to the donors rather to their local constituencies. But the challenge, the authors claim, remains in a ‘grassroots,’ bottom-up process of accountability.

According to the editors, the book tries to respond to two questions: how to fill with content a ‘buzzword’ often mentioned in speeches: ‘accountability;’ and what the implications of more and better accountability are. Or, to put it in other words, “what does it mean to make governments accountable to their citizens? In addition, how do you do that?” (p. 4). The concept of accountability around which most contributions revolve is tied to the discussion of ‘non-state-centric’ governance, as a “textured, embedded, networked process in which citizens and government officials argue, bargain, and sometimes, come to agreement” (p. 5).

The book is organized into sections, within which each chapter chimes with three, four or five related ones. The first section is about *Foundations*. Sina Odugbemi and Taeku Lee write the introductory chapter (*Taking Direct Accountability Seriously*) setting out the purposes and motivations for the book and synthesizing the main challenges for generating demand for accountability. In the second chapter (*The (Im)possibility of Mobilizing Public Opinion?*) Lee gives the reader an insight into his understanding of public opinion and its communicative dimension. He sets out the idea that *public opinion* is not something given but a result from a process of discussion within society. He lists and explains some mechanisms by which this discussion could be carried out. In the third chapter (*The Public and Its (Alleged) Handiwork*) Odugbemi introduces his understanding of the concept of *public sphere* and lists some accountability mechanisms rooted elsewhere the constitutional structure of the state.

Second section is labeled *Structural Context*. Chapter 4 (*Gaining State Support for Social Accountability*) written by Harry Blair, interestingly classifies and describes different types of State intervention or support for accountability mechanisms. In the next chapter (*The Workings of Accountability: Contexts and Conditions*) the reader can thank Enrique Peruzzotti that he has taken the time to explain the concept of accountability in the context of other related phenomena (culture, institutional conditions in state’s organization, NGOs’ involvement, etc.). Finally,

Amaney Jamal shows the importance of context with her findings on democratization and social capital in the West Bank (Palestine).

The third section (*Information and Accountability*) begins with a chapter written by Arthur Lupia (*Necessary Conditions for Increasing Accountability*). The author claims that information has to be processed to increase the demand for accountability on a given population, and to do so certain requirements of social attention have to be met. In chapter eight (*Information Processing, Public Opinion, and Accountability*) Charles S. Taber and Everett Young describe the cognitive process of information from the individual to the social stage. They highlight the paradox of an uninformed, uninterested individual American citizen that creates an informed and strong public opinion. The third chapter of the section (*Information, Social Networks, and the Demand for Public Goods: Experimental Evidence from Benin*) presents Leonard Wantchekon and Christel Vermeersch's findings from a study done using quantitative evidence from elections held in 2001 in Benin.

The next section (*Building Capacity through Media Institutions (Media and Journalism)*) starts with Laura Zommer's account of an Argentinean project to train journalists (*Training Journalists for Accountability in Argentina*). In chapter eleven (*Well-Informed Journalists Make Well-Informed Citizens: Coverage of Governance Issues in the Democratic Republic of Congo*) Mary Myers explains why better-informed journalists should enable better information in wider societies. Instead of providing the reader with an abstract argument, she describes the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Finally, Anne-Katrin Arnold describes the usefulness of information and communication technologies (ITCs) in rebalancing communication flows in the public sphere, benefiting citizens.

Section five is labeled *Deliberation and Accountability*. Its first chapter (*Minipublics: Designing Institutions for Effective Deliberation and Accountability*), written by Archon Fung, delves into the role that *minipublics* (gatherings of people in the tens, hundreds or thousands, but not in the millions or tens of millions) might have in improving the quality and effectiveness of accountability and public deliberation. He then provides the reader with three applications of *minipublics* in real life. Baogang He (*Deliberation and Institutional Mechanisms for Shaping Public Opinion*) explains the way in which participatory and deliberative institutions have been introduced in China. In the third chapter of the section (*Creating Citizens through*

Communication Education in the United States) William Keith emphasizes the ‘demand-side’ of citizens’ communication. If the government does not know what citizens want, how would it be accountable to them? In his opinion, the answer is to educate the citizens so that they can convey their *public reasons* in an articulate (Habermasian) way. In chapter sixteen (*Participatory Constitution Making in Uganda*) Devra Moehler shows that public participation in the making of a constitution in Uganda can provoke better democratization, knowledge, discernment, engagement and attachment to the constitution in the citizens.

Section six (*Power and Public Opinion (Mobilizing Public Opinion)*) is perhaps one of the most imaginative and enlightening part of the book. It begins with another chapter (*Collective Movements, Activated Opinion, and the Politics of the Extraordinary*) written by Taeku Lee. The author makes a clear synthesis of the literature and academic discussion about social movements and how a particular movement is activated. Marshal Ganz (*Public Narrative, Collective Action, and Power*) offers a passionate and well-structured account of the important role that narrative (plot, character, and setting) plays to inspire and engage individuals in a particular social movement. Peter Levine (“*Social Accountability*” as *Public Work*) successfully argues that social accountability is not only a way of assessing the performance of government while supplying public services, but also a way of addressing common problems and *creating* public goods. In the following chapter (*Holding Government Accountable through Informal Institutions: Solidary (sic) Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China*) Lily Tsai argues that the judgment about an official ‘moral standing’ (moral prestige) by the local population can be a strong accountability mechanism in places where democratic or bureaucratic accountability is weak. She uses the Solidary Groups in Rural China to make her point. Finally, Steven E. Frinkel (*Adult Civic Education and the Development of Democratic Culture: Evidence from Emerging Democracies*) assesses the effectiveness of some civic education programs at providing a democratic political culture in emerging democracies (Dominican Republic, Kenya, Poland, and South Africa). The author finds that the programs are indeed effective at fostering political culture.

The final section shows six very interesting case studies. Vera Schattan P. Coelho (*Is Social Participation Democratizing Politics?*) analyses a set of mechanisms of social participation in Brazil. Samuel Paul (*Stimulating Activism through Champions of Change*) presents the case of

the ‘citizen report cards’ in Bangalore. Gopakumar Thampi (*Informed Public Opinion and Official Behavior Change*) relates the cases of the *People’s Audit* in Delhi, and the implementing of citizen report cards in the context of water supply and sanitation in Kenya. Imraan Buccus and Janine Hicks (*Overcoming Inertia and Generating Participation: Insights from Participatory Processes in South Africa*) present the case of political participation in South Africa. Adrian Gurza Lavalle (*Civil Society Representation in Sao Paulo*) assesses whether civil organizations in Sao Paulo, Brazil play a representative role. Finally, Rob Jenkins (*Embedding the Right to Information: The Uses of Sector-Specific Transparency Regimes*) analyses the transparency provisions contained in India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005.

Given that the book’s purpose is to provide content to and describe some of the consequences of ‘accountability,’ it is striking to find so little reference to the concept of accountability, or at least an empirical description of it. The collaborations of Enrique Peruzzotti (Chapter 5) and Peter Levine (Chapter 19) are perhaps the unique exceptions. Peruzzotti interestingly says that

“The notion of accountability involves a specific form of exchange between two autonomous actors that can be characterized by three distinctive properties. First, the exercise of accountability is always *external* –that is, it entails an act of control by someone that is not part of the body being held accountable. Second, accountability is an *interaction*, a two-way social exchange between those demanding accountability and those being held accountable (the seeking of answers, response, rectification, and so on). Third, relationships of accountability presuppose *a structural asymmetry of power in favor of those who have the right to demand answers* (Mulgan 2003). Delegation of power occurs only within a hierarchical relation: Accountability means that the principal has the right to withdraw the conditionally delegated authority.” (p.54)

Then, Peruzzotti classifies accountability mechanisms into *horizontal* and *vertical*. The first category is formed by those that belong to the “internal controls established by the representative democratic state,” (p. 54). The second type includes those mechanisms that emphasize non-state actors’ involvement, or collective action by the citizenry.

Peter Levine defines social accountability as “a set of concrete experiments in which ordinary people—including very poor people in developing countries—assess their own governments’

performance. These experiments are part of a broader effort to enhance economic and social development by strengthening civil society and civic engagement.” (p. 291) The word ‘assessment’ –though Levin does not quite clearly mention it– means an ex-post and external revision of government’s officials’ conduct.

In this way chapters four, ten, and twenty three (that talk about different accountability mechanisms and state’s involvement; forming journalists for accountability in Argentina; and citizen report cards in Bangalore, respectively) would be filling out the conceptual content and describe the consequences of accountability. Other chapters of the book, although very well written and insightful, cover other phenomena such as participation, governance, transparency, democratization, citizen education, public deliberation, etc. These concepts are indeed related with accountability and they some times enable it, but accountability is–or should be–a process with identity, defined along the lines of the descriptions provided by Peruzzotti and Levine, transcribed above.

One misses a better explanation about the relationship between governance, representation, transparency, fluxes of information, participation, public opinion and accountability, both conceptually and in practice. Nevertheless, as the editors show in the conclusion of the book, the chapters are insightful regarding ways of activating and conducting collective action in a given society. The book is worth reading and its chapters provide a diverse account on the role that non-state actors play and can play to improve the quality of government in their societies.