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Enhancing Accountability in the Provision of Public Services through Direct Citizen Participation

Egypt Network for Integrated Development

Policy Brief 023

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BACKGROUND:

The quality of basic services provided by the Egyptian government whether in health, education, transportation, solid waste management, or other areas, is lacking. The problem is more aggravated in rural areas and in Upper Egypt.

The main assumption posed by this policy paper is that one of the main reasons for the persistent low quality of services provided by government, is the lack of ability of local citizens to hold government accountable. Although the concept of representative democracy, or indirect citizen participation, is fine in itself, yet there is also a need for direct citizen participation in holding government accountable. The policy brief looks at the current status of public service delivery and quality in rural areas and in Upper Egypt, recognizes the urgent need for improvement, investigates what tools and initiatives are available in Egypt for enabling citizens to directly monitor and evaluate public services, what lessons can be learnt from international experiences that empower citizens, and ends up with a number of policy recommendations.

CONCEPTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION:

In simple terms citizens' ability to hold government accountable means that they can use various mechanisms to penalize government if it is not delivering on needed and agreed to services as needs be. The mechanisms may vary between voting, organizing protests, or speaking and writing complaints or criticisms. The opposite of accountability is government having 'impunity' and being able to do as it pleases without citizens having any say about it.²

Meanwhile, the concept of direct citizen participation refers to the situation where members of a society, who do not have formal positions in the administration or government, have a share in the decision making process related to their community. Although direct citizen participation may take place at different levels of government, for practicality purposes due to problems of scale, it is more prevalent at the local level. Traditional or conventional means of direct citizen participation include: serving on juries, attending public hearings, being part of commissions or task forces, responding to questionnaires or surveys, or filing complaints. Meanwhile, more innovative means of direct participation may include large groups coming together to deliberate about a certain issue, or the possible use of online resources for cyber democracy.³

CURRENT STATUS OF PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY AND QUALITY IN EGYPT:

In the Human Development Report of 2013, Egypt ranked 112 out of 187 countries, positioning itself in the medium human development category, and from 1980-2012, Egypt

realized an increase of 63% in Human Development Index value. However, when the index is adjusted for inequality, Egypt loses points and its IHD reaches 0.503 points instead of the original 0.662.⁴

Poverty has increased steadily over the past two decades. In 2011, 25% of the population (21 million) fell below the national poverty line. Nearly a quarter of the population live in informal settlements. Healthcare services are becoming more unaffordable. Less than 5% of the budget is allocated to healthcare, approximately 50% of Egyptians have health insurance compared to 99% in Tunisia and 83% in Jordan.⁵ According to 2009 figures, there were 2.8 physicians and 1.7 beds per 1000 citizens with larger concentrations in Cairo and Alexandria compared to other regions.⁶

The Global Competitiveness Report 2013/2014 ranked Egypt 148/148 countries in terms of quality of primary education. The 2014/2015 report showed Egypt ranking for the same indicator to be 141/144, signifying very little progress being achieved and a very gloomy picture for the quality of education.

There is a need for much improvement in these and all other public services offered. Elements behind the causes of poor delivery are shared: that is, centralized planning, lack of voice by local communities, and poorly mastered mechanisms of accountability.

POLICIES/PROJECTS/INITIATIVES IN EGYPT TO ENHANCE CITIZENS' ABILITY TO HOLD GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE:

Egypt has passed through four years of revolutionary upheavals that toppled successive governments and which present an extreme case for citizens' direct action and interference when they are not satisfied with government's performance. However, in this policy paper, the focus is on direct participation of citizens in the policy making process, not for the purpose of drastic changes in regimes, but for the purpose of improving quality of services offered, especially at the community level. In the following section a number of select past and ongoing initiatives to enhance citizens' ability to hold government accountable for quality public services are presented:

Case of Citizens Mobilization in Damietta – Agrium Chemical Factory:

In 2008, citizens in the governorate of Damietta in Egypt mobilized successfully using an array of tactics in order to protect the environmental quality of their governorate. They called for the shutting down or the moving away of the Agrium plant owned by a Canadian investment company producing petrochemicals and located in a prime touristic location in Ras Al Barr, a place where the Nile meets with the Mediterranean sea. Petitions, protests, media campaigns, experts' consultations, vigils, strikes, reaching out to members of parliament, lawsuits and formal complaints were among the mobilization tools employed. The government finally relented by appeasing the protestors, shutting down the polluting industry and reaching a settlement with the foreign investors.⁷ The importance of the Agrium case was not the specific success achieved by the citizens, but rather the symbolic representation of people's power and ability to hold government accountable and get it to rectify its ways when things go wrong.

E-Government:

E-government includes the provision of some government services to citizens via the internet and online means. Much interest was directed to expanding the type and kind of services offered

through e-government during the time of the then Minister of State for Administrative Development when in 2004 his office took ownership of the e-government initiative. One of the main successes was the complete automation of the process of high school graduates' applying to public universities and the revamping of the traditional '*tanseeq*' or coordination office.

One of the ideas behind expanding on the availability of e-government services is to separate between the citizen as a receiver and the front line government employee offering the service. This has its proven merits in reducing the chances for corruption. A survey of government administrators in 2011 showed that there was agreement that e-government has had an influence on reducing administrative discretion in local government in Egypt.⁸ When local government employees have less discretion and less opportunity for corruption, citizens are automatically empowered and there are greater chances for improved public service.

Egyptian Local Development Observatory:

This is one of the programs of the Local Administration Development Unit affiliated to the Ministry of Local Development that started operations in 2012. The Observatory aims at monitoring local development, improving the quality of local services, and enhancing local good governance. The Observatory sets indicators for measuring elements of good governance including the quality of local public services offered and the degree of citizens' satisfaction reference those services. In 2014, the Observatory in coordination with the Social Contract Center at the Information Decision and Support Center (IDSC) of the Cabinet of Ministers, implemented a pilot opinion poll in Fayoum governorate to solicit citizens' satisfaction of the services received from the local administration units covering road services, public illumination services, and environmental services with a focus on cleaning. Questions asked covered nine different dimensions of perceived good governance in the governorate and included: efficiency, effectiveness, fighting corruption, justice and equality, participation, transparency accountability, and responsiveness. Results showed very low levels of satisfaction by citizens.⁹ The question is what action is going to be taken and how would these findings affect local government's performance, if at all. Having the Observatory affiliated to a government ministry automatically detracts from its independence and objectivity. To be able to publish the results of the survey findings requires a ministerial approval. This so far has not happened by September 2014.

Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA):

Under the auspices of Care International, ANSA was initiated in Egypt to create awareness and promote the concept of social accountability and build capacity on the use of different social accountability tools. According to ANSA, by 'Social Accountability' is meant the ability of citizens and communities at the micro level to have an important role in how their government performs. An example of their awareness raising activities, in 2013 ANSA launched an online course that was offered through cooperation between ANSA Arab World and the World Bank. ANSA has four target audiences represented in government, civil society, media and the private sector and in assessing the degree of social accountability in a nation focuses on the access to information, freedom of association, financial transparency and citizen led monitoring. In assessing the status of social accountability in Egypt in 2013, positive comments were made about the e-government initiative set up before the revolution and its being a good start for information dissemination, similarly the degree of media engagement in covering social issues, and the examples for community led initiatives supported by multiple donor agencies. Still found lacking were the presence of a social accountability culture among government and citizens, the

clarification of roles and responsibilities of different government agencies at the central and local level, and the relatively limited enforcement of laws fostering transparency and information sharing.¹⁰

REACT: An Effective Initiative for Community Development in Menia:

REACT (Representative, Effective, Accountable and Transparent) is an example of a USAID funded project implemented starting 2006 in Minia governorate in Egypt and that continued for two years.¹¹ The project worked on promoting citizens' participation in community development and enhancing their ability to hold local government accountable. Among its main activities was the organization of committees of citizens' representatives that worked with the Local Popular Councils in determining their community needs, whether in waste management, sanitation, or water treatment. Community priorities were discussed jointly and decided upon, and then the Citizens' Committee continued to play a role in monitoring implementation. The project was considered a success story in the final evaluation report with recognized potential for building upon if more local associations are developed that would provide similar capacity building to local popular council members nationwide.¹²

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE:

The following section briefly presents a number of diverse international experiences of citizen based initiatives, mostly from developing countries, to hold government accountable for better services. Some of the experiences demonstrate success and some still require further development and enhancement.

Health Councils in Sao Paulo, Brazil

The idea behind the development of management councils in Brazil was to make democracy more participatory and create 'new space' for civil society enabling its participation in the formulation, management and monitoring of social policies. The 1988 Brazilian Constitution marking the country's transition to democracy, called for enhanced citizens' participation in policy making. Around 28 thousand Participatory Social Management Councils were thus created in the health, education and environment sectors at all levels, local and federal, with civil society representatives having 50% of seats, government officials 25% and service providers 25%. In Sao Paulo, where there are huge social inequities, participatory health councils following the previous model were greatly promoted by the Workers Party as the way to resolve the inequities. Although the health councils debated and discussed problems related to the healthcare system, and presented a great opportunity for participatory democracy to be realized on the ground, yet they were perceived to have very little real impact on health policies. Among the main reasons for the limited impact were the lack of sufficient preparation, technical knowledge and communication ability of the civil society representatives compared to the government officials, and lack of clear discussion and decision-making procedures followed.¹³ Work and creative solutions are needed to overcome these hurdles.

Case of Citizens' e-Petitioning in India:

The idea is that using e-petitions can empower citizens' ability to hold government accountable. A case study of an e-petition signed electronically in the state of Kerala in India showed how citizens managed to collectively complain about the water canal pollution in their community

and how they succeeded in getting the government not to renew the license for the main culprit, a polluting hospital. Through raising media attention to the cause and through mobilizing citizens electronically, e-petitioning had a greater impact than the traditional petitioning methods.¹⁴

Case of Public Hearings in China:

Although China up to now does not conduct elections, recently since the early 2000s local governments have started conducting public hearings to openly discuss selected public legislative and administrative issues with citizens. The aim is not to enable citizens to influence public policy, but to have them play a consultative role. Usually it is the officials in a particular government office that call for a public hearing and invite government representatives, citizen representatives from trade unions and consumer associations, plus citizens who directly respond to the announcement.¹⁵ Although the representation on public hearings is not ideal, and although citizens are not fully empowered, yet the practice shows potential for change even in the most democratically restricted nations.

Citizens' Journalism in Nicaragua:

Realizing the importance of holding local government accountable at the municipality level in Nicaragua where citizens receive their services from the front line bureaucrats, an NGO named Global Communities, through support from the USAID, decided to give the necessary professional training to the local journalists. Training covered writing web stories, means of collecting relevant data and information, using cameras and audio equipment, plus understanding concepts of citizen participation and gender equity.¹⁶ This proved a highly effective means to highlight failures in public policy and to exert influence on local administrators.

Informal 'Rude' Accountability Mechanisms in Bangladesh:

An interesting term that comes up when researching citizens' direct participation is that of 'rude accountability' referring to informal pressures exerted by citizens to influence government performance and call for improvement in services offered. In a study about health services in Bangladesh, citizens were reported to use loud voice and public humility of street level bureaucrats in order to induce them to improve the service provided, and these informal pressures usually worked in getting the officials to pay more attention to the complaints and grievances of poor citizens. In Bangladesh in particular, where front line bureaucrats valued greatly their reputation and public office prestige, the 'rude' accountability measures used by citizens seemed to work effectively.¹⁷

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Although many challenges may face direct citizen participation initiatives such as reduced impact, lack of citizens' sufficient preparedness, complexity and impracticality sometimes, yet the potential for improved applications especially using the newly available technology is great and should be explored further. Citizens are entitled to fight for their rights and demand better quality service from governments. Egyptians can benefit from international experiences and the myriad tools available for direct citizen participation to enhance accountability of government. To move forward with direct citizen participation in holding the Egyptian central and local government accountable, different stakeholders can choose a number of options most fitting to the Egyptian context as follows:

- **Citizens** can use internet based tools for mobilization, for petitioning and for attracting media attention to specific problem areas in local communities and therefore expedite problem solving. Egyptian youth are particularly savvy about using social media for mobilization, as was evident during the past four years since the 25th of January revolution. Similar effective usage directed to resolving local problems and improving services is needed. Citizens can also learn to simply ask for their rights from front line public officials by raising their voices and being adamant about their right to a quality public service. Passivity is not rewarded and ‘rude’ accountability sometimes is needed. With the development in information and communication technology and with a growingly sophisticated media awareness, citizen journalism can play a more active role in reporting on problems and on suggesting solutions especially at the local levels.
- **Civil Society** should play a more active role in continuing to monitor and report on government performance in public service delivery, but should organize better to raise citizens’ awareness about their rights to quality services and should advocate for citizens’ rights to basic service information, making use of international experience related to providing information to citizens through citizen charters and scorecards applied at the service point.
- **Donors** can replicate successful capacity building initiatives such as ANSA and REACT to enhance social accountability awareness and train citizens on the use of the various tools available. These initiatives have proved their value for replication and provide needed support to local efforts. Donors have also proved successful in providing the professional training needed for more effective citizen journalism in its many aspects. However, more is needed if success stories are to spread nationwide.
- **The Egyptian Government** if keen on improving the quality of services offered, and if keen on regaining people’s trust, should allow more space to civil society and citizens to engage in participatory models of public policy making, including public hearings and local representative committees consulting with the local popular councils, and have them work together on identifying priorities at the community level and on monitoring implementation later on. Greater transparency and information dissemination is also needed at all levels. E-government initiatives should be the means for further dissemination of service-relevant information but initiatives should also be creatively designed to accommodate the needs of a largely illiterate population. More government performance monitoring units and observatories keen on collecting citizens’ feedback should be established and their reports considered carefully in needed policy modifications. These should be made available to the general public.

End Notes:

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