Strengthening accountability for urban services

S Cavill and M Sohail

SUMMARY: This article explores participatory governance in the context of participatory mechanisms of accountability for urban services. In the past few years, accountability has become a buzzword internationally and, as is the case with many such terms, there is confusion as to what exactly is meant. The people and organizations promoting accountability view it as critical to solving problems with urban services in an increasingly fragmented context of service provision. This article seeks to explore the growing interest in accountability and to assess the potential of participatory governance in improving the provision of urban services. Other objectives are to:

• consider contemporary innovations in the way urban services are delivered – the context of accountability;
• define accountability using the existing literature and present current models for accountability;
• discuss how the concept of participatory governance can be operationalized in the context of urban services;
• present initial findings from case studies undertaken in South Africa, Bangladesh, South Korea and the UK; these case studies are used to illustrate different functions of accountability; and
• examine the potential of accountability arrangements demonstrated in these case studies to improve the quality of local services and the responsiveness of service providers.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE TERM “URBAN services” refers here to water and sanitation, street cleaning, solid waste management, roads, community halls and street lighting; these facilities require investment in maintenance, rehabilitation, repair and replacement. Urban services require substantial resources, and a concern with the effectiveness of their performance has resulted in the following:

• management strategies to oversee operation and maintenance more effectively;
• financing strategies to provide resources for rehabilitation efforts;
• the introduction of new technologies to improve the infrastructure base; and
• changes to institutional design.

However, there has been a realization that such supply-side techniques
alone will not solve infrastructure problems and, increasingly, service users are encouraged to get involved in service delivery.

II. A FOCUS ON PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

THE TERM “GOVERNANCE” reflects a range of relationships between civil society and the state. The governance of urban services typically depends on many actors – municipalities, politicians, public officials, urban authorities, public agencies, customers (these may be commercial, industrial, public institutions or domestic), NGOs/CBOs, the private sector, ministries (such as water, health, environment) and agencies of restraint (i.e. watchdogs and regulators). Effective urban governance has been associated with good quality infrastructure and service provision, together with the politics surrounding the provision of infrastructure, which frequently reinforce the inequities in society.

Participatory governance reforms are seen increasingly as a legitimate aspect of urban service programmes. Participatory governance in this context refers to the role of civil society in holding service providers to account. It is hoped that direct participation by users in service-delivery and policy-making will improve accountability in services, and that improved accountability will mean that service delivery outcomes will also improve as a result. In theory, there is a relationship between users’ voice, accountability and service outputs. Tools and methodologies are being developed to facilitate participation in governance at the macro level (public participation in audits, policy and public expenditure) and at the micro level (user assessments of service delivery and incorporation of user perspectives into planning).

III. INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

THE 1994 WORLD Development Report reached the conclusion that the institutions traditionally responsible for public service provision are the source of most unsatisfactory service. Historically, the provision of services has been seen as the responsibility of the state, yet governments have been unable to provide, operate and maintain public services in line with rapid urbanization and population growth. Public provision of urban services has been criticized regarding the waste of resources, physical losses, poorly maintained assets, commercial losses due to inefficient billing and revenue collection, illegal connections, overstaffing, low service coverage and poor quality of service. Recent policy has emphasized reforms such as the use of competition and a more businesslike operation of urban services, as well as public sector management approaches (e.g. new laws, organizational checks on service providers and civil service pay). However, these kinds of institutional strategies have not been as effective as hoped. A more contemporary innovation has been the promotion of checks and balances from civil society and especially the involvement of service users in planning, operating, regulating and financing services at the community and neighbourhood levels.

Increasing the potential for citizens to monitor service delivery is intended, ideally, to make service delivery more accountable and responsive to citizens, and performance more effective and predictable. Service users are considered better placed to monitor the services on which they


2. It should be noted that participation differs from accountability. Participation means giving citizens a role in government decisions, while accountability means that people will be able to hold local government responsible for how it is affecting them. See Blair, H (2000), “Participation and accountability at the periphery; democratic local governance in six countries”, World Development Vol 28, No 1, pages 21–39.


5. Accountability also comes from users overseeing resource allocation, monitoring service provider discretion and preventing unnecessary delays, mismanagement and corruption.
depend, as they have a greater incentive in this regard as well as the information and face-to-face interaction with frontline providers. In particular, it is assumed that if the poor can participate in priority setting and planning for services, as well as in monitoring and disciplining providers, better services will result. Such an approach tends to be pragmatic. The involvement of service users in promoting accountability compensates for weak institutions and regulation; it places an emphasis on the results of service delivery over the ideology behind decisions, and focuses on people as consumers of services rather than as citizens.

IV. PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE IN URBAN SERVICES

THE CURRENT DEBATE on urban services has concerned itself to a large extent with the new rights of service users within a human rights-based framework. However, some commentators suggest that effective services are also dependent on the fulfillment of user duties. Ostrom contends that: “Good agency performance results not from strengthening public sector agencies, but from increasing their responsiveness to customers. This fosters an active, vocal constituency that puts in motion the accountability mechanisms needed for good agency performance.”

Similarly, Putnam argues that: “Engaged citizens are a source of discipline and information for public agencies.” By implication, then, good services are associated with a civil society characterized by reciprocity, altruism, trust and cooperation. Crook and Manor suggest that civil organizations can help to foster fairer, more honest, transparent, democratic and accountable governance; and Sen proposes an understanding of the public sphere whereby, “…we can think of people participating along with governments in defining needs, in making choices appropriate to those needs, and in enforcing accountability.”

a. Growing interest in accountability for urban services

Accountability has emerged as an international issue, and talk of accountability has become commonplace in service-delivery debate. Increasing accountability as a mechanism to tackle problems with urban services has taken place within a particular political and social context. Prevalent trends include an emphasis on the individual, results-based service delivery, demand management, the use of private sector thinking and practices in public service delivery, and attempts at creating similar working cultures across the private, public and voluntary sectors.

“A is accountable to B when A is obliged to inform B about A’s (past or future) actions and decisions, to justify them and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct” (emphasis added). Accountability has a number of functions. Jabbra and Dwivedi argue that the term also ought to include administrative, legal, professional, political and moral components. O’Donnel states that accountability operates in different directions, and has distinguished between horizontal accountability (the capacity of state institutions to check abuses by other public agencies and branches of government) and vertical accountability (the means through which citizens, mass media and civil associations seek to enforce standards of good performance on officials). Recently, citizens have been involved directly in the workings of horizontal accountability institutions, for example, through public hear-
Where once the focus of accountability was on government and institution building, attention is now paid to the relationship between field-level service providers and users. Service providers are accountable in a number of ways, namely, for their actions, spending, outputs and outcomes, use of resources, performance standards and so on. Frontline service providers are typically accountable through hierarchical relationships upwards to government and downwards to service users. Proponents of more accountability claim that frontline service providers have too much discretion in their activities (which makes them lazy, corrupt and untrustworthy) and suffer too few sanctions. This has allowed service providers to become ungovernable, unaccountable and unproductive. The focus on frontline providers seems to reflect a frustration with bureaucratic, centralized service provision, and is mostly associated with the public sector. It is suggested that it is much easier to achieve accountable urban services when users participate in service delivery, for example when users share responsibility for setting performance plans, goals and standards for service delivery as well as evaluating services in terms of outcomes. Accountability is also improved when users have face-to-face contact or a personalized relationship with the service provider.

Paul presents a model of accountability for urban services that focuses on users’ decision-making when faced with declining urban services. He suggests that they may “exit” (choose an alternative service) or voice their dissatisfaction about the quality of service. He argues that if service delivery is failing, “hierarchical control” (e.g. monitoring and incentives) relays these signals to service providers. He is, in effect, suggesting that improvements in the quality of services can best be achieved if individuals pursue their own interests. This points to the potential for less equity in service provision, which would favour those individuals who are better at negotiating for better services. The 2004 World Development Report has developed Paul’s framework for analyzing accountability for urban services by distinguishing between a “short route” (between citizen and service provider) and a “long route” (citizen, policy makers, service provider). The delivery of urban services is then mainly a question of better management of the relationship between government, users and providers. The report presents a number of ways to improve the ability of service users to monitor and discipline service providers, for example by increasing user participation in service delivery as well as by giving poor citizens a stronger voice in policy-making and in the political process. In effect, these strategies aim to reduce the costs and increase users’ incentive to take collective action and monitor the performance of providers. They also increase the rewards for citizens for using their voice.

The accountability “problem” essentially has been articulated as one of communication. Service providers need improved communication, especially the “voice” of users, if they are to understand customer needs and priorities better. User voice can also have a disciplining effect, ensuring that service delivery becomes more efficient and effective. Citizen involvement in accountability for the provision of urban services can be seen as a means whereby individuals can protect their rights as consumers. This is especially important in the absence of market mechanisms. The frequent use of the term “consumer” is consistent with a business context, and is a deliberate contrast to various public sector traditions and values. It also contrasts with more political terms such as “citizen”, and reflects a call for the with-


drawal of the state from service delivery. Alternatively, user voice can be articulated through the political structures of representative or participatory democracy.(23) Users are expected to become informed about the infrastructure in their neighbourhood. They should also ensure that facilities are kept in good condition, express any concerns to public officials, attend any meetings concerning infrastructure problems, become involved in advocacy groups, demand continuous and timely maintenance, and become involved in infrastructure decisions, planning and long-term investment. However, Hirschman(22) asserts that those most able to use voice, i.e. the most articulate, are those who seek high-quality products and who, therefore, will be the most likely to exit when services decline in quality.

b. How does accountability work?

The literature typically uses the “principal agent” theory to analyze the problem of accountability within institutions. This theory describes a relationship in which a principal (service users in this case) attempts to secure services from an agent (service providers). Agents are expected to hide the information that principals require to monitor their performance and, thus, contracts, incentives and sanctions are needed to induce agents to deliver the desired type and level of performance. Participatory accountability arrangements can foster better services by reducing the transaction costs of service users. These costs associated with monitoring services can be reduced by the publication of information such as service-delivery plans and procedures, operation and maintenance schedules, and charters outlining users’ rights and obligations in service provision. In economic theory, information dissemination reduces the uncertainties of coordinating such collective action as participation in service delivery. Participatory accountability arrangements or “civil regulation”(23) also provide agents with incentives and sanctions to deliver services to the desired level of performance.

Demands for accountability from others implies some form of power: “To talk about accountability is to define who can call for an account and who owes a duty of explanation.”(24) Typically, service providers are presented as neutral arbiters of competing user interests, all of whom have an equal opportunity to express their views. Furthermore, there is an assumption that producers will respond to inputs in a balanced and rational manner, and that better services will automatically result. However, Skelcher(25) claims that there is an imbalance of power in the server–served relationship, whereby providers have the ability to determine the service-delivery agenda and the ground rules for their relationship with users. In fact, “…professionalism and bureaucracy are resistant to outside participation”,(26) for example “…by ignoring consumer demands; making closed decisions; not providing alternative choices; breaking promises; withholding information; not providing adequate support.”(27) Plummer’s research(28) found that internal reforms are required to facilitate community participation in municipal planning, otherwise the municipality may remain anti-poor, detached and inaccessible, and staff will block the development of participatory initiatives.

V. METHODOLOGY

USING CASE STUDY methodology, this research set out to test the hypothesis that accountability arrangements improve the sustainability
of urban services. Case studies are based on information collected from field visits and semi-structured interviews, from closed-answer questionnaires, document review, newspaper articles and direct observation in study areas. Data were collected between July 2002 and July 2003, and case studies were chosen on the basis that they offered a different perspective on accountability. The kinds of arrangements differ in terms of innovation, reach and scope, replicability, sustainability and social impact. A short case summary is given below, before the key findings from an initial data analysis are presented.

The Seoul case study illustrates reforms to improve the responsiveness of service providers. Following the IMF crisis in 1997, Mayor Goh implemented a zero tolerance of corruption reform within Seoul’s metropolitan government. He abolished public officials’ discretionary administrative powers, staff were regularly rotated and individual responsibility over a specific area was abolished to remove any scope for discretionary administrative behaviour. Transparency was increased through “benign ethical competition” within city administration, aimed at creating competition between departments. Seoul metropolitan government established online information disclosure systems, integrity systems in procurement, an electronic bidding system and a citizens’ inspection system (relating to corruption). They also introduced a Citizen Evaluative Survey, a Citizen’s Charter, a Saturday Date with the Mayor, an E-mail the Mayor programme and a Corruption Report Card to the Mayor, as well as a code of conduct for public officials. Results are based on non-deprived areas as well as on sub-standard squatter residential areas, where people live in houses called binilhaus (constructed from thin wood with a vinyl covering on the outside). Service provision in the case study areas included household connections for water and sewerage, tarmac roads, pit latrines and standpipes.

The Bristol case study illustrates attempts to improve the design and delivery of services through integrated and more locally responsive delivery of waste collection, street cleaning, grounds maintenance, household bulk collection, gully emptying and recycling services in a neighbourhood of Bristol called Barton Hill. The Pathfinder project in Bristol is a partnership between Bristol city council, SITA GB Ltd, ResourceSaver (an NGO which operates the kerbside “black box” recycling collection service under

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study location</th>
<th>Key feature of the initiative being researched</th>
<th>Mechanism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seoul, Korea</td>
<td>To improve the responsiveness of service providers</td>
<td>Information dissemination; creating competition in service delivery; customer service reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bristol, UK</td>
<td>To improve the design and delivery of services</td>
<td>Best Value and New Deal for Communities programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mdantsane, South Africa</td>
<td>To increase political participation in representative democracy</td>
<td>Ward committees; new rights to services; customer service reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaka, Bangladesh</td>
<td>To increase the influence of service users</td>
<td>Citizen scorecards; grassroots pressure groups; NGO provision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Summary of case studies

29. A random survey of about 100 respondents was conducted in deprived (squatter settlements) and non-deprived areas of Mdantsane, Dhaka and Seoul, and was intended to give an overall impression of user satisfaction rather than a statistically significant sample. In addition, please note that the idea for the case studies selection came from: One World Action (2002), *Influence and Accountability*, One World Action, London, page 7.

30. Conducted bi-annually by Gallup Korea; the results are widely distributed and are used to rate service performance on the basis of results and also in budget preparations for the next financial year.

31. This sets out guidelines on how officials should treat the “customer”, as well as detailing the service that citizens can expect from government officials.

32. This is an informal meeting with the mayor, whereby he can hear about citizen’s problems in more detail: “It is the underprivileged who most often come to the Saturday Date because the privileged know where they have to go and who can help them.”
sub-contract) and Community at Heart (a resident-led organization established to deliver the New Deal for Communities anti-deprivation programme in the area). Making better use of public services is key to New Deal for Communities, and involves “bending” services (matching service supply to the scale of the problem) and “reshaping” services (tailoring services to the needs of a neighbourhood). The principles of Pathfinder include the location of a multi-skilled team in a dedicated area, with a local one-stop shop to act as a coordinating base; better customer relations; and more efficient and effective service provision. The Pathfinder project is gaining national recognition for its innovative approach to neighbourhood street management and democratic, accountable service delivery.

The South African study focuses on the role of representative democracy and political participation in attempts to get more appropriate and accessible public services. South Africans have two key mechanisms for improving the responsiveness and performance of service providers: popular participation in government through direct and representative methods, and a focus on providing more results-based and client-oriented public services. Ethical and fair service delivery is one of the hallmarks of post-apartheid South Africa where, previously, services had been explicitly organized around apartheid imperatives. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) grants all citizens an equal and inalienable right to housing, health care, water and social security. Local government is supposed to be developmental, i.e. it works with citizens to find sustainable ways of meeting their needs and improving the quality of their lives. The Municipal Structures Act (1998) outlines the mechanisms for consulting citizens, encouraging the involvement of communities and community organizations in matters of local government, and setting out the role of ward committees and community liaison officers in promoting participatory democracy. The Municipal Systems Act (2000) outlines a system of participatory governance, and focuses on the duties of residents and communities regarding payment for services and participation in the affairs of the municipality with regard to planning, performance monitoring, service delivery, communication and decision-making. Observations are based on a study of a suburb of East London called Mdantsane which, under apartheid, was developed as a dormitory town in the former Ciskei, politically and administratively separate from East London. It was incorporated into the city in 1997. Mdantsane is the second-biggest black location in South Africa, after Soweto. Service provision in Mdantsane includes household connections for water and sewerage, tarmac roads, pit latrines and standpipes.

The Dhaka case study is intended to illustrate attempts to increase the influence of service users in holding service providers to account for their performance, particularly where they are unwilling to accept legal responsibility for slum dwellers. A feature of service delivery in Dhaka is competition, whereby there is an increasing number of profit and non-profit service providers, as well as “proxy” market indicators to stimulate better responsiveness. The case study investigated community initiatives that filled the gaps in service provision. For example, municipal waste collection cannot match the demand in the city and, in certain wards of Dhaka, community organizations have been created to collect household waste. These community-based organizations are run as micro-enterprises on a cost-recovery basis, and are usually found in middle-income areas where householders are willing to pay for a house-to-house collection service. In lower-income areas, water and sanitation projects have been implemented
by NGOs to ensure that residents have access to a safe and legal supply of water and sanitation. The research also investigated the use of governance scorecards and grassroots pressure groups to improve service delivery. Research focused on non-deprived areas as well as on squatter areas of the city.

VI. REFLECTIONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

BASED ON A brief overview of the case studies, there seem to be four key things that organizations promoting accountability for urban services are doing:

• directing attention towards improving the effectiveness of the service itself;
• making accountability a function of good customer relations, and improving the individual service user’s capacity for action and initiative;
• creating mechanisms to support a more collectivist approach through campaigning, lobbying and advocacy of services at both local and national levels; and
• improving services through encouraging competing, alternative provision.

These kinds of support for accountability are clearly different, and represent contrasting understandings of accountability and of what constitutes adequate service performance.

a. Failing urban services

Respondents were asked whether they had complained about urban services in the last 12 months. The majority of respondents in Bangladesh and Bristol had complained about water and sanitation services. In Mdantsane, complaints were about roads, and in Seoul the main problem was refuse collection. In general, all respondents were concerned with overall provision, with the quality of, and information about, drains, roads, street lights and community halls, and also with the information supplied on refuse collection. In Bristol, respondents were most dissatisfied with street sweeping. Men tended to complain more often about sanitation, roads and drains; women complained mostly about street lights. Those in non-deprived areas tended to complain more about refuse collection and street lights, whereas respondents from deprived areas complained more about sanitation and roads. Access to community services (such as street lights, drains and community halls) and the level of household services were both typically lower in deprived areas.

In Dhaka, Seoul and Mdantsane, the majority described urban services as unresponsive, inefficient, unconcerned and not dependable. Respondents in the main were also dissatisfied with their relationship with service providers, claiming that providers didn’t care and didn’t take complaints seriously. Typical comments were: “…it’s difficult to get improvements”, “…service providers don’t take complaints seriously” and “…service providers don’t care about people like me.” However, respondents in Seoul and Bristol also noted that: “…service providers are helpful and friendly”; in Seoul, they said: “…users are kept informed about the progress of complaints”; and in Bristol: “…service providers are more responsive now” and “…are happy to hear users’ ideas.”
b. The use of participatory mechanisms and processes

Following the transition to democracy in South Korea, civil society continues to exert influence over government in a variety of ways at the municipal level, at the gu (ward) level, at the dong (neighbourhood) level and at the ban (street or block) level. At the municipal level, participation occurs through a number of mechanisms, including:

• assemblies that monitor how budgets are spent;
• city hall meetings;
• resident requests for audits and investigations into local administration;
• committees set up by SMG (Seoul Metropolitan Government), such as the Citizens’ Committee for a Green Seoul;
• citizen petitions (used primarily by interest groups to initiate local policy change); and
• residents voting on serious local government matters (but this has never been undertaken in practice).

People can also visit local gu- and dong-level administrative offices if they have any problems with the services in their neighbourhood, as well as attend bansanghoe. These are widely held monthly meetings to discuss ban (street-level) matters, report problems and promote good relations with neighbours. These meetings are unofficial but residents are encouraged to attend. Organized civil society also acts as a check on the influence of state and private companies, and monitors corruption in Korean society.

The Pathfinder project in Bristol also attempted to regularize participatory mechanisms of accountability into these kinds of durable, institutionalized structures through the introduction of weekly and monthly stakeholder meetings. However, residents in Bristol preferred accountability to be more ad hoc and opportunistic, taking place outside formal organizations. For residents, catching the Pathfinder team on their rounds or dropping into the one-stop shop and leaving a message on the Pathfinder project notice board were more important in shaping accountability.

In South Africa, ward committees have become the preferred way of structuring participation and involving communities in municipal affairs. Each ward committee has a ward councillor and ten elected members; five represent the ward community and five represent sectors, such as youth, women, business, religion and sport/culture. Ward committees assist and advise their ward councillor, act as a communication channel between the community and ward councillor, ensure that their ward councillor accounts for his/her actions, and encourage resident participation in attempts to improve quality of life in their ward. Special provision is made for people who cannot read or write, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups. The main function of the ward committees is to ensure that communities participate in setting development priorities for their ward, and in preparing, implementing and reviewing the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Municipalities are required by law to report annually on progress relating to their IDP objectives, which are linked to the political term of office and can be seen as a contract between the municipality and the community for service delivery and good governance. Service delivery performance can also be measured against the “Batho Pele” or “People First” principles.

Ward committee members in Mdantsane felt that they had a responsibility in service delivery. Most had written letters to the municipality, called or visited the public works office, talked to staff and held meetings to discuss residents’ problems with the services. However, the majority of

33. These include consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress and value for money.
members had received no response to their complaints. One member said: “...we do say things but we don’t have a voice.” Committees have been trained to take on responsibility for planning and budgeting according to the priorities of the ward residents; however fieldwork revealed capacity is still lacking. The ward committee studied faced a number of constraints. They lacked resources (and often funded expenses themselves), powers and office and administrative equipment, and had limited knowledge of their role and function. This lack of resources and capacity affects the committee’s ability to get the needs and priorities of residents recognized in the agenda and practices of service providers. The committee has also been criticized for not consulting, or even conflicting with, existing civic structures (such as SANCO – South African National Civic Organization). The observation was made that the ward committee was politicized (members revealed party alliances in meetings) and not entirely inclusive in practice (for example, men tended to dominate discussions). Committee members have been made scapegoats by residents for a nationwide frustration with the delivery of services which, at times, is violent.

In Dhaka, attention was also focused on the ward level. Ward commissioners are responsible for inspecting municipal services in their wards and for hearing residents’ complaints. They, in turn, verbally communicate matters for action to the zonal office, or take it up with the Dhaka City Corporation departmental head for special attention. This is typically a loose arrangement, with no scope for citizens to access information on the progress of a complaint. A recent attempt to assess user satisfaction, as well as the quality of infrastructure in Bangladesh, has been the governance scorecard, a collaboration between PROSHIKA, Survey and Research System (SRS), the World Bank and donors. The scorecard was completed in 2001 and its use revealed that the majority of people were dissatisfied with services. The scorecard is built on the following premises: that the information it yields is new and will be useful to service providers; that service users will lobby for improvements; and that service providers will respond to negative feedback and user demands. Since the completion of the scorecard, PROSHIKA has organized a workshop with the service provider agencies to discuss the findings of the scorecard. It seems that service providers are all too aware of the state of services delivery, and there has been little follow-up activity since then on the part of civil society. Report cards have been used more successfully by Transparency International Bangladesh, in the main because the NGO also created grassroots pressure groups, called committees of concerned citizens, to disseminate report card findings, generate debate on infrastructure provision, and lobby for higher-quality public services through a variety of means – citizens meetings, newsletters, research papers, seminars and a press campaign to improve local services.

The Dhaka case study also investigated a partnership between Dushta Sasthya Kendra, WaterAid, the World Bank, UNICEF and the government utility (DWASA) to provide legal access to safe water points, latrines, washing blocks, solid waste management, stormwater management and drainage in slum areas. Community mobilization, along with the fact that dwellers now pay for legal access to services, has empowered residents to approach and negotiate with DWASA and Dhaka City Corporation: “There was a time that slum people never had the ability to talk to the DWASA (Dhaka Water and Sanitation Authority) people but now they play with them ... Recently, one senior engineer attended a workshop [with slum communities] and he was astonished ... he said why these people are shouting? He is telling me that
it is the first time he heard the community voice and they are blaming us” (NGO worker).

However, accountability to local clients can also be undermined when public service functions are contracted out to the private or NGO sector.(34)

c. Instances of non-participatory accountability

The potential of paying for services was raised as a means of amplifying people’s voice, in Mdantsane in particular. Payment can make users more vigilant and demanding of improvements in service efficiency and accountability, and the threat of non-payment can act as an incentive for service providers. Non-payment for services is a significant problem in South Africa, and academics have provided two conflicting explanations for this trend. The first is that non-payment for services relates to an inability to pay; the second is that people are unwilling to pay for services due to a “culture of non-payment” that developed during apartheid. Whatever the reason, non-payment means that municipalities aren’t collecting sufficient revenue to improve services, and thus a “catch-22” situation develops. The Dhaka case study highlighted the potential of unofficial payments (bribes) to circumvent the system and solve any problems with services. These payments may be demanded by officials or paid by users in anticipation of problems. However, this strategy appears to be only a stopgap in cases of acute problems, as supply often remains unpredictable. Users complain of regular power cuts, low water pressure and infrequent garbage collection, and resolving these chronic problems usually necessitates further under-the-table payments or the influence of powerful intermediaries (political leaders, influential friends and mastaans – muscle men). Dhaka City Corporation has a grievance-redress system for complaints about its services. However, only a small proportion of households are aware of it or bother to use formal mechanisms,(35) People feel that there will be no follow-up to their complaint and that officials are often unavailable or indifferent.

Exit, rather than attempts to improve the quality of services through campaigning, lobbying and advocacy, has therefore become a pragmatic consequence of poor urban services. NGO service provision has been used, particularly in Dhaka, for waste management in middle-class areas and water and sanitation in slums. In theory, it is assumed that this will create competitive pressure on public providers for better services and also have a role in encouraging public pressure for better services. Although pragmatic, the focus on alternative service provision is perhaps at the expense of political analysis and political movements to improve municipal services. Exit (and the ability to buy choices) from service provision undermines the position of those people who depend on municipal services. In recognition of the tendency for certain users to exit public service provision,(36) and of the weak voice of users of public services, aid conditionality was used in Dhaka to discipline providers and act as a substitute for users’ voice (for example, private sector involvement was a prerequisite for World Bank funding).

d. How effective are participatory mechanisms?

The hope that participatory mechanisms of accountability for urban services will create rationality and predictability in service delivery depends to a great extent on how well information is converted into action, specif-
ically the detection of wrongdoing. Information can increase trust, reduce information asymmetries and substitute for responsiveness to service users. Case study respondents found out about services in a number of different ways, both directly, from the service providers (in the form of leaflets), and more generally, such as through TV, newspapers and also word of mouth. In general, users were more likely to be informed about service-related issues than to engage at an earlier stage of service delivery, i.e. policy formulation. However, respondents typically hadn’t used the information they had about services to obtain improvements. This is particularly true of those in deprived areas and those with inadequate incomes. Most respondents stated that they hadn’t seen any information (issues of information asymmetry) and that they weren’t interested in finding out about services. Service users in Mdantsane and Dhaka didn’t know what kinds of services they were supposed to be getting, what workers were supposed to be doing or what they could expect of service quality. In general, users hadn’t made the leap from experiencing a problem with a service to realizing that better information about declining services could act as leverage to help solve the problem.

The effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on a shared understanding of concepts of accountability between users and providers. In South Africa, the majority of respondents thought service providers should be accountable for meeting service quality requirements; in Seoul, for responding to complaints; and in Dhaka, for consulting users. These varying kinds of accountability also reflect different stages of service delivery. However, most service providers considered themselves only accountable for the quality of service delivered, and considered user satisfaction with services a by-product of getting the technical hardware right. Service providers were keen to stress respondents’ responsibilities – for example, cleaning water tanks and replacing pipes, putting refuse out at the correct times or separating for recycling.

e. Improved services?

Of those respondents who had complained about services directly to service providers, the majority in Bangladesh and South Africa were dissatisfied with the way the complaints had been handled. Those in South Korea were mostly fairly satisfied. Most complaints were about excludable services that depend on gaining access to a facility or network, such as water and sanitation, as well as specific community services, such as refuse or roads. Far fewer respondents complained about street lights and drains. Those in non-deprived areas were more likely to use the official channels and to be satisfied with the handling of complaints. However, respondents had different perceptions of complaint mechanisms. In South Africa, the majority of respondents perceived them as fair. In Seoul, these mechanisms were reported to be easy to use. Respondents in Dhaka said that they were well publicized. Self-interest predominated as the reason why respondents complained about urban services in the case studies, particularly in non-deprived areas. Interestingly, those in deprived areas were more likely to say that they complained in the community or general public interest, and these respondents’ choice of complaint mechanism (i.e. meetings, petitions, protest) also revealed a bias toward collective activities.

Analysis of the case studies revealed that respondents from deprived areas solved problems with urban services in more roundabout ways.
Sometimes, this took place through formalized and structured means such as public meetings, meetings with councillors, voting for politicians and approaching other public figures who also have a catch-all responsibility. Sometimes, it took place in more spontaneous and opportunistic ways, such as protests and petitions. Unlike those in non-deprived areas, the poor generally did not use the channels offered by service providers (free phones, Internet sites, visits to offices, suggestion boxes and so on). This finding seems to challenge some of the existing thinking on accountability. The poorer respondents appear to diversify their approaches to accountability and to have a repertoire of activities and strategies to deal with failing urban services. This may be related to their claim that service providers’ offices aren’t easily accessible, but also to the fact that they don’t trust service providers. In contrast, wealthier respondents from non-deprived areas tended to have one predominant strategy, which is a dependence on the mechanisms offered by service providers. These respondents were also more likely to perceive an improvement in the delivery of urban services following on an improvement in accountability. Thus, for this group, service provider-related mechanisms for accountability seem to work better than ad hoc arrangements in terms of improving services, although whether these channels would be as effective for poorer respondents is unclear. It might be that it is not the mechanism but the personal characteristics of users that are key to securing better services. This finding has significance for the current interest in promoting short, rather than long, routes for accountability, but also for those officials who stated that they know a service is satisfactory when there are no more complaints.

All service providers claimed in interviews that greater accountability had “tremendously” improved the services they provided. However, in most cases, user satisfaction with services had not increased markedly since changes to provider responsiveness had been introduced. This could be because of raised expectations and standards – better-informed citizens may be less tolerant of poor performance. For example, the results of the 1999 citizen survey in Seoul led to higher standards of service and better customer relations being instituted in the Department of Water Works; nonetheless, in 2000, citizens rated water as one of the worst services. Similarly, the Pathfinder project has the best standard of work in Bristol and a more customized way of providing services, yet the majority of respondents said that there had been no improvements in services nor in the area’s appearance. Service providers from South Africa were clear that, despite improvements in service delivery since democracy, service users expected a higher standard than the minimum RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) standards. Residents were not happy with gravel roads, pit latrines and standpipes and, furthermore, were not likely to be happy if their standard of living didn’t improve in other ways (for example, if they were unemployed). In Seoul, the general public distrusted the quality of the water supply – residents complained about the colour, taste and smell of sediment in the water supply, and were worried by media scares about bacteriological quality. To date, strategies to recreate trust include proof of quality, free bottled water, involving residents in water-quality inspection, international benchmarking such as ISO 9000, and charters. However, even if service providers give more and more information, users may still remain dissatisfied unless service providers produce the kind of information that generates trust. As a result of this, the Department of Water Works has paid for marketing and favourable media reports.

37. See reference 18.
VII. EVALUATION OF PARTICIPATORY MECHANISMS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

ACCOUNTABILITY IS PREMISED on a relationship with another; you have to participate to get accountability. However, few citizens (and particularly marginalized groups) exercise their right to participate. There are many reasons for this. For example, “customers” of urban services make different use of services, have different levels of dependency on services, different perceptions of entitlements and priorities, and different capacities to organize. In some instances, respondents were willing to devote time and resources to a common effort to pursue common goods, for instance with complaints about the operation and maintenance of roads, community halls, street lights and drains. However, a substantial number of respondents, when faced with problems, chose not to take any measures, at least not officially, despite being affected by adverse outcomes. This was true even where organizations had been established and information asymmetries reduced. Respondents were more likely to opt for individual interests at the household level (i.e. complain about water supply or sanitation) over common interests. On one level, it seems that some respondents had performed a kind of cost-benefit analysis of whether to participate in collective action (based on resources, benefits, sense of responsibility for services, trust, predicted outcomes, relative bargaining power and fall-back position), and had decided that they were better off not contributing but hoping that the problem would be resolved by the participation of others. However, the issue of relative bargaining power should be more closely examined. Some respondents would never dream of approaching service providers, or felt discouraged by personal experiences: “If they laugh in your face (...) you are not going to shout about things” said one respondent from Bristol. The key point is that accountability is not simply formulaic – i.e. a matter of putting the mechanisms in place and demands for better services will follow. It has far more emotional complexity than this. When ease of communication or empowerment are perceived to be an issue, users may prefer shortened lines of communication with frontline providers and word-of-mouth solutions, as in Bristol, more anonymous or distancing IT solutions, as in Seoul, or institutionalized ward structures, as in Dhaka and Mdantsane.

Surprisingly, the research revealed that the perception of having a voice in service delivery was mainly associated with respondents with low incomes living in deprived areas. This was particularly true in Dhaka. However, it was clear that service providers did not feel equally accountable to all service users. While the poor felt that they had a voice in service delivery, it is clearly not a very powerful or effective one, since service levels in their neighbourhoods remain technically inadequate. Furthermore, the voice of the poor has failed to increase the political consequences of inadequate services. On the other hand, users from non-deprived areas tended to be dissatisfied because of high expectations, which the providers are unable to meet; these users were also less tolerant of poor performance. Care should be taken when promoting greater accountability to paying attention to issues of power and equality, in order to avoid what Gaventa calls “voice without influence”.

Likewise, the focus on frontline providers within a principal agent framework seems somewhat short-sighted. The Bristol case study revealed the importance of non-monetary incentives, such as good will, job satisfaction and commitment, as the basis for accountability to improve urban services.

38. “The advantage of the Internet complaint system is that a citizen can complain harshly when they need to complain; when you meet someone face-to-face you will be nice, even though you have a problem. With the Internet, the city hall can reply quicker and there are no bad feelings” (respondent from Seoul).

In Dhaka, frontline workers are presented with a moral obligation (as well as a financial incentive from bribes) to provide services to citizens regardless of the legal status of their dwellings, particularly given the absence of penalties and the existence of loopholes in bureaucratic procedures. Within the Pathfinder project, employees felt empowered by their jobs. They had greater responsibility and greater flexibility to tailor services to customers and to deal with emergency repairs. Some residents in Bristol said: “It’s not the services; it’s the people who make a difference.” This suggests that accountability could be viewed as an extension of methodological individualism, i.e. good service is a sum of all individual service provider actions. However, in Dhaka, respondents rejected this tendency to confuse the accountability of the organization with the person working for it; instead, good people depend on good systems: “It’s not my friend: it’s the system we are talking about” said a respondent from Dhaka.

The extent to which accountability arrangements have made society more governable is debatable. In theory, user participation will lead to more accountable service providers, and better services will result. Although to be fully accountable implies the use of sanctions to prevent or punish misbehaviour, users in deprived areas often lack the capacity to make use of sanctions. Participatory modes of accountability have the potential to undermine traditional notions of horizontal accountability (such as professional accountability), may conflict with vertical accountability (such as managerial accountability and political accountability), and may result in the containment and management of user dissatisfaction. However, in cases where accountability arrangements have coordinated users’ voice (such as ward committees or committees of concerned citizens), this appears to have generated a consensus on a range of conflicting interests, reduced the number of competing claims on financially limited resources, and increased the efficiency of responses to complaints and in the use of resources. However, in other cases, accountability arrangements have fragmented users’ voice. The outcome can be that more problems are presented than can be dealt with by service providers, and that urban governance has been undermined. Civic involvement has sometimes been frustrating for service providers when, despite all their efforts, services fail to meet the expectations of more informed, motivated, effective and empowered citizens. This was particularly true of Nimby (Not In My Back Yard) concerns about incinerators in Seoul. Accountability arrangements may have transformed city governance, but not for the better. However, in the Bristol case, participation in service delivery was definitely perceived as a mechanism for improving personal feelings of empowerment and urban governance: “...from being a person who is on benefits and taking just what life deals them, to getting to a point where they connect with other people’s lives around them, doing things together, collaborating to take charge of something. It is very important and Pathfinder is an important part of that process” (respondent from Bristol).

VIII. CONCLUSION

IT WOULD BE expected that greater participation in services would improve the accountability of service providers, and that more accountability should enhance service outcomes. However, this research found that, in practice, accountability does not seem to fulfil the particular functions described in theoretical approaches. The research investigated differ-
ent mechanisms of accountability to citizens, including:
• improving the responsiveness of service providers through better
customer services and formal grievance procedures;
• increasing the influence of service users through opinion surveys, grass-
roots pressure groups and NGO provision;
• improving best value in the design and delivery of services in low-
income areas;
• increasing political participation in representative democracy; and
• giving citizens new rights to services.

The research found that the reforms made frontline providers of services
more accountable to some extent, and that the performance of services
improved marginally as a result. However, the analysis suggests that
improvements in accountability hadn’t improved user satisfaction with
planning, delivery and maintenance of urban services. On the whole,
respondents thought that they were only slightly better off than they had
been before reforms were introduced. The majority reported that levels of
services had remained the same or had worsened, and user satisfaction with
agency responses to requests and complaints had not changed markedly.
Thus, it could be concluded that there has been no substantial change in
user satisfaction during the period since practices underwent change.
However, in the long run (this might mean decades), one would expect
participatory accountability mechanisms to lead to improvements in service
outcomes and user satisfaction.

The research found that approaching councillors and voting for politi-
cians, public meetings, protests and organizing petitions emerged as the
most useful mechanisms for securing accountability. In particular, users
from deprived areas appeared to prefer more participatory mechanisms,
i.e. those with an indirect influence on service providers, as well as arrange-
ments where residents could sort out problems directly with frontline
service providers. In contrast, service users in non-deprived areas seemed
to prefer to engage with systems of hierarchical control over frontline
service providers, through an upward chain of command. Furthermore, this
research suggests that, particularly in deprived areas, service users seldom
rely on a single mechanism to produce accountability. It was observed that
participation in such attempts depends on a range of factors, including
resources, incentives and motivation to improve urban services, the kind
of benefits to be gained (personal or common), the nature and location of
the services in question, the intensity of concern with services, and the
sustainability of the accountability created.