

Summary

For the past few decades, strengthening public accountability has been central to scholarly discussions about democratic governance and the delivery of public services. Since the 1990s, social accountability initiatives (SAIs) have been promoted by donors and international organisations as part of the good governance paradigm, with the aim of amplifying citizens' voices and addressing institutional failures in the Global South. Many of these initiatives have employed various accountability mechanisms based on an understanding of accountability that is rooted in rational choice and principal-agent theory. These mechanisms have focused on closing the information asymmetry gap, improving feedback loops, and addressing failures on the so-called supply and demand sides of accountability. However, a growing body of scholarly work highlights the limitations of these approaches in the Global South. Moreover, with the increasing control of citizens' voices and actions for greater public accountability, as well as a growing tendency towards political clientelism, populism, and autocratic rule, it becomes crucial to understand how accountability institutions function, or not, as authoritarian incumbents try to either sabotage or entirely dismantle existing forms of accountability systems.

This dissertation challenges the predominant approach of many social accountability initiatives in the Global South, which focuses on closing the information asymmetry gap and strengthening feedback loops between citizens, politicians, and service providers. While providing information is necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure accountability. Focusing solely on filling information gaps overlooks the complex power dynamics involving state and non-state actors, the evolving role of private actors in public service delivery, the growing influence of donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) over service provision, and state-society relations shaped by patrimonial and clientelist structures. Therefore, the success or failure of accountability efforts hinges on these broader social and political dynamics, which this dissertation emphasises as central to understanding accountability.

This dissertation examines the politics of accountability in the delivery of social policy programmes in Uganda. The main research question that informs this dissertation is: *How do political dynamics reconfigure accountability mechanisms and citizens' ability to hold state and non-state actors accountable for the provision of quality public services in Uganda?* Three key reasons underpin the decision to focus on Uganda as the primary country case. First, Uganda's social policy trajectory over the past three decades has been heavily shaped by its reliance on foreign aid to finance social policy programmes. Second, the early promise of democratic innovation through decentralisation reforms, expected to strengthen accountability and bring citizens closer to service providers, has been eroded, contributing instead to the consolidation of patrimonial networks. Third, the decline in democratic norms, driven by the ruling regime's increasingly authoritarian tendencies, the securitisation of development, and a clientelist political settlement, has reversed many of the country's earlier democratic and developmental gains. Employing a case study methodology and multi-method approach utilising available grey and academic literature, secondary data, and primary data collection spanned

over two stages (April to June 2023 and October to December 2023) in Kampala and across several districts in northern Uganda (Nebbi, Yumbe, Amuru, Gulu, and Nowya), each empirical chapter (Chapters 4 to 6) of this dissertation addresses the politics of accountability in social service delivery by focusing on a specific case study through its own methodological design.

Chapter 4 examines the first case study, exploring the various accountability mechanisms embedded in the implementation of Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme. The chapter investigates the relationship between these accountability pathways and the performance of the UPE programme across various rural districts. The chapter employs a two-step, multi-method analytical approach to examine governance conditions proposed in the literature as a means of enhancing accountability and improving educational performance. By combining qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) with grounded theory analysis, the study provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of accountability mechanisms in the primary education sector. In this chapter, I argue that accountability mechanisms embedded in the primary education sector in rural Uganda are shaped by distinct institutional and power dynamics across governance levels. First, the politicisation of the programme since its inception, coupled with its labelling as 'free education' despite parents' contributions to the running costs of schools, and insufficient investment by the state, has distorted the relationship of trust and entrenched clientelist dynamics among stakeholders in the delivery of the UPE programme. Second, religious institutions and faith-based organisations play a crucial role in the accountability chain as the founding boards of the majority of UPE schools in Uganda, given their responsibility for selecting the majority of school management committees that ensure schools are run effectively. Third, the proximity of schools to urban centres plays an important role in enforcing the mandates of school inspectors as a key administrative accountability mechanism in the education system, and has subsequent implications on the quality of education services provided. Fourth, parents' capacity to act as accountability agents during annual general meetings or school management committees, which are intended to be important social accountability mechanisms, is undermined by their limited social and political capabilities to influence school management and local dynamics among local elites.

Chapter 5 introduces the second case study, examining the politics of citizens' claims-making in the context of social cash transfers and focusing on the Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) programme. Through a qualitative research design combining field observations, FGDs and key informant interviews, the chapter examines the implementation of accountability mechanisms embedded in the design and delivery of social cash transfer programmes, such as grievance redress mechanisms. In this chapter, I argue that the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in social cash transfer programmes can be undermined by several factors. First, the nature of citizens' complaints (particularly those resulting from the incoherence of targeting mechanisms) stresses the need for a universal approach and an improved civil registry system to address the exclusionary outcome of current targeting mechanisms. Second, the state's capacity to respond to citizens' demands for greater

programme coverage and sufficient grant amounts is hampered by austerity measures and a dysfunctional administrative system that undermines the capacity of the system and impedes effective national implementation and institutionalisation of the programme. Third, social accountability efforts in social cash transfers that aim to enhance state-citizen relations are crippled by clientelist politics and the handout logic of these programmes. However, anecdotal evidence indicates a more nuanced understanding of citizenship, where individuals navigate a complex landscape of both fear and empowerment.

Chapter 6 investigates the third case study, focusing on the growing role of NGOs in the development sector, which has sparked significant scholarly debate over the past two decades about their legitimacy and accountability. Through a social media analysis of the #UgandaNGOsExhibition X (formerly Twitter) campaign, this chapter investigates perceptions among Uganda's urban public (X users) of the legitimacy and accountability of NGOs within Uganda's civic space. In this chapter, I argue that holding NGOs accountable in closed civic spaces can take various collective forms beyond direct government control and co-optation, and beyond increased donor scrutiny. Prioritising naming, shaming, and peer accountability, the urban public appealed to NGO leaders to be more altruistic and practice the same ethos of social justice and accountability they demand from the government. However, NGOs should be receptive to valid criticism to maintain their legitimacy across various accountability loci.

In summary, this dissertation puts forward three main claims that answer the main research question by highlighting the political incentives among state and non-state actors, the power and institutional configurations among elite coalitions vis-à-vis their social foundations, and the state's institutional capacity to address citizens' demands. First, accountability mechanisms are influenced by structural factors, such as patronage and clientelism, and by institutional factors, including weak state administrative capacity, inefficient civil registries for targeting, and fragmented service-delivery processes. These factors undermine the promise of accountability mechanisms to enhance state-society relations and improve service delivery processes, thereby hindering the delivery of quality public services. Second, the increasing role of non-state actors in service delivery processes and in policy making, such as private sector institutions, transnational actors, and religious institutions, diffuses and blurs the responsibility of service provision between these actors and the perceived role of the state as the primary provider of public services. The role of non-state actors also distorts accountability relations between the state and citizens by shifting the social contract towards external non-state actors. Third, efforts by NGOs to promote democratic governance and social accountability can be undermined by their lack of transparency and accountability to their constituencies. Particularly, citizens will hold NGOs to a high moral standard, as they are expected to uphold high ethical conduct and play a watchdog role against the state's authoritarian tendencies; however, this role can be compromised when NGOs' legitimacy is at stake, and they are perceived by the public to be as corrupt as state institutions.