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Accountability Keywords

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Translations of accountability terms on front cover

आवाज़ (Avaaz): Hindi - Voice

Bibingka: Filipino - A rice cake that is cooked by heat from both above and below

吹哨人 (chui shao ren): Mandarin (China) - Whistleblower

Controle social: Portuguese (Brazil) - Social oversight

Derecho a saber: Spanish - Right to know

Fiilifili: Hausa (Ghana) - Full transparency

Gobierno abierto: Spanish - Open government

जानकारी (Jankari): Hindi - Information

जवाब (Jawaab): Hindi - Answerability

Ouvidorias públicas: Portuguese (Brazil) - Public ombuds agencies

पारदर्शकता (Pardarshkata): Marathi (India) - Transparency

Redevabilité: French - Accountability

Rendición de cuentas: Spanish - Accountability

सुनवाई (Sunwai): Hindi – Public hearing

طلعت ريحتكم (Talaat ryhatukum): Arabic - You stink

Tanggung gugat sosial: Indonesian – Social accountability

Uwazi: Swahili - Transparency

Veedurías: Spanish (Colombia, Ecuador) - Citizen oversight

وارونا (Waruna): Sudanese Arabic - We want to know

Yeb'aal jo'nimal na' sachman: Mayan - Q'eqchi' (Guatemala) - Explaining what has been spent

1. Introduction

1.1 About this paper

This working paper is a review of keywords that communicate ideas associated with accountability. The format is unconventional, designed so that readers can dip in and out, going right to the keywords that spark their interest. Following this introduction, each of six modular sections can stand alone.

Words used to describe ideas about accountability often have different meanings, to different actors, in different contexts—and in different languages. This paper addresses the multiple, ambiguous meanings of accountability with the ‘keywords’ approach, a tradition that takes everyday big ideas whose meanings are often taken for granted and makes their subtexts explicit (Williams 1976). Conceptual keywords are a bit like icebergs—they turn out to be the more visible chunks of much larger bodies of ideas.

This analysis is informed by dialogue with diverse advocates, analysts and reformers from many countries and sectors, many of whom share their ideas in blogposts on the accompanying **Accountability Keywords** website. Discussion of each keyword weaves together lessons from history, advocates’ experiences, and research—with scholarly asides largely confined to the endnotes. Some of the accountability keywords discussed here and in the posts are drawn from a long legacy in popular cultures and vernacular languages. In contrast, others are more recently invented terms that have entered everyday usage or are used mainly within specific communities of practice.

Illustrations of different understandings of accountability are drawn mainly from cases in the international development field, but references to the persistent challenge of accountability in the US are also included. These serve as a reminder that democratic political systems and legal systems once considered robust are no guarantee of accountability.

The paper is structured as follows. The rest of the introduction maps the **landscape of accountability keywords** and discusses why analyzing them is important for change strategies.

Section 2 addresses scope—**what counts as accountability?** After all, stretching concepts too far can water them down.

Section 3 addresses big concepts that **overlap** with accountability— good governance, democracy, responsiveness, and responsibility. These keywords in the governance field are widely treated as equivalent to accountability but turn out not to be full synonyms.

Section 4 identifies **accountability adjectives**—and addresses some of the many different ways in which the idea is understood and how adjectives can add precision. Together, these first four sections address the term’s multiple ambiguities.

Section 5 turns from unpacking meanings of accountability to address **widely used keywords** in the field. The six words selected are emblematic rather than comprehensive.

Section 6 addresses **more specialized keywords**. These seven terms are directly relevant for communicating accountability issues or strategies. Like other keywords, they serve as shorthand for big ideas within specific communities of practice.

In the search to identify more ways in which ideas about accountability are embedded in popular cultures or everyday language, Section 7 addresses a range of **accountability sayings, from the ancient to the recently invented**. They illustrate the enduring and diverse nature of accountability claims.

The conclusion steps back from the keywords analysis to make a series of forwarding-looking propositions for discussion.

The hope is that analyzing these diverse terms together will make visible a whole (vocabulary) that is greater than the sum of its parts. The intent here is to inform fresh ways of communicating ideas about possible strategies for action, rather than to claim to have the answers.

1.2 Mapping the landscape of accountability ideas

Accountability is often treated as a magic bullet, an all-purpose solution to a very wide range of problems—from corrupt politicians or the quality of public service provision to persistent injustice and impunity. The concept is a very broad umbrella that has become shorthand to refer to diverse efforts to address problems with the exercise of power. This raises the question of ‘what counts’ as accountability. In practice, the usual answer is either fuzzy— ‘you know it when you see it’—or is limited to sectoral silos or specific contexts. In response, this working paper unpacks the multiple meanings of accountability.

This review of different ways of understanding accountability was provoked by the recognition that the global accountability field is at an impasse. Perhaps most striking is when politicians win elections by capturing anti-corruption agendas, and then allow corruption to persist, or make it worse. Yet only a decade ago, governance reformers experienced a heady optimism about the power of open government, new communications technology, and local feedback to promote responsive governance, reduce corruption, and encourage social inclusion. That forward motion has now stopped, in the face of top-down governments and threats to civic space.

Even before the pandemic, setbacks or stalemates were becoming the norm around the world. Social accountability practitioners puzzle over ambitious field experiments with inconclusive results, or why local innovations do not scale. Open government advocates struggle to fully implement their innovative procedural reforms. Governments convene large-scale citizen oversight programs that lack the leverage needed to transform public services. Anti-corruption advocates lament the limited impact of the international proliferation of anti-corruption agencies. International donor projects face the challenge of sustaining the virtuous circles needed to deepen reforms. In the absence of quick fixes or obvious pathways forward towards more robust accountability, this may be a good time to step back to take stock of what the idea means—to different actors, in different contexts.

The vocabulary of the accountability field communicates ideas about who should govern, how they are supposed to govern, who they are supposed to answer to—and how. These words influence the scope of the thinkable. Since accountability involves power relations, it should be no surprise that ways of communicating these ideas can be contested. But the amorphousness of accountability ideas is less widely recognized. This working paper responds to this lack of conceptual clarity by identifying both differences and overlaps between diverse understandings of accountability *ideas* – as well as the words used to communicate them.

The issue of terminology is not merely academic, and the purpose of this think piece is not theoretical. The goal here is to inform efforts to find common ground between diverse potential constituencies for just and democratic forms of accountability. After all, potential allies may express similar ideas in different ways, or use the same words to mean different things. For example, for policymakers, terms like ‘citizen engagement’ may refer to *individual* actions such as

registering reports of service delivery problems, whereas for community organizers, the idea involves *collective* action and building countervailing power.

Words in this field are also tools that can be harnessed to contradictory purposes, as when anti-corruption or pro-democracy discourse gets hijacked to defend the corrupt or to attack democracy. Anti-democratic leaders use a discourse of integrity to question the validity of elections they lose. Meanwhile, technocratic or foreign-sounding jargon can obscure the democratic potential of accountability agendas — as well as risk vulnerability to nationalist backlash. Plus, the politically biased application of sanctions in the name of accountability can weaken the idea's legitimacy.

The proposition here is that recognizing these possible disconnects can be a step towards clearer communication—which is especially important for building coalitions that reach across social, cultural, political, and language differences. A shared vocabulary is needed to work and learn together. At least some mutual understanding is needed to enable joint action. This bridge-building focus is a response to the accountability impasse mentioned above, since broad coalitions are often needed to offset backlash and resistance to change.

In the accountability field, our choice of words also informs broader narratives about the reasons for accountability failures. These 'causal stories' are relevant for guiding action because they point the finger at who is responsible for specific problems (Stone 1989). For example, the 2020 US mass mobilization against police abuse of power changed the causal story by bringing the longstanding concept of 'systemic racism' into much more widespread usage. The potentially transformative added keyword here is 'systemic' because it centers deep-rooted institutional accountability failures in the core definition of racism. Even the dictionary definition of racism is now changing.¹ This discursive shift communicates a causal story in which racism is embedded in powerful institutions—in contrast to the previously dominant causal story, which was limited to the biases and actions of individuals. This is an example of how vocabulary informs the framing of who is responsible for what and underscores the challenge of communication among the diverse actors who need to come together to sustain democratic power shifts for accountability.

To recognize that accountability has multiple, contested meanings has big implications. The idea is up for grabs. This recognition allows one to see how different actors can use accountability discourse for their own purposes. In the international development field, for example, one could frame the issue in stark terms. Critics of neoliberal governance argue that accountability discourse is technocratic and foreign, associated with induced bureaucratization and financial reporting upwards, alienated from most cultures and locally grounded social and civic actors.² Skeptics who experience broken government promises might see accountability as a label applied to official performances of public reporting that are just for appearances, watering down the idea. Yet grassroots movements also claim the mainstream legitimacy associated with accountability, taking up its banner to wave over their longstanding demands for rights and justice.³

The review of accountability keywords that follows is guided by the proposition that ambiguous or contested language can either constrain or enable possible strategies for promoting accountability. Indeed, the concept's fundamental ambiguity is a major reason why it can be difficult to communicate ideas about accountability across disciplines, cultures, and languages. Yet that ambiguity can also offer advantages—if it enables coalition-building among actors with different interests and worldviews.⁴ That is why the discussion that follows is especially concerned with learning from efforts to communicate ideas about accountability in ways that resonate with popular cultures.

1.3 Multiple meanings of accountability

The multiple meanings of accountability revolve around a core tension—between accountability *to* authorities, and the accountability *of* authorities. Contrast top-down control, managerial ‘audit culture’ with bottom-up ‘people power’ mobilizations to address impunity and the abuse of power. Contrast police actions to hold law-breakers accountable with efforts to hold police accountable for their violent abuse. These power relationships involve very different understandings of accountability. For the actors involved in each of these disparate accountability agendas, they know it when they see it.

The challenges posed by multiple meanings of the same word are magnified when working across cultures and languages. For example, observers have often pointed to the difficulty with directly translating accountability discourse into languages other than English, suggesting that is evidence of the absence of the idea in those cultures. Yet those claims may not be based on familiarity with how ideas about accountability are actually communicated in other languages (Keywords blog, [Stephenson 2020](#)). Accountability discourse can be expressed in ways that do not have direct translations—as illustrated by Box A, and many of the other Keywords blogs that accompany this working paper ([Batzin, 2021a](#); [Frisancho with Estrada, 2021](#); [Hevia 2021](#); [Isunza Vera 2021](#); [Jadhav, 2021](#); [Mohammed 2021](#); [Olana 2021](#); [Seth, 2020](#); [Yaseen 2021](#); and [Zulminarni 2021](#)).⁵ As a colleague from Ghana observed, “the concept of accountability and how it is communicated is highly influenced by the cultural and traditional usage of euphemisms that avoid touching raw nerves and tackling unpleasant issues head-on” (Keywords blog, [Mohammed 2021](#)). Yet this working paper suggests an additional reason why the term accountability is challenging to translate directly into other languages: because of its fundamental ambiguity *in English*.

The multiple meanings and ambiguity of ideas about accountability are reproduced when considering the wide range of possible accountability *claimants*. Those who call for accountability *from below* can range from citizen, voter, client, consumer, program beneficiary, or investigative journalist to title-holder, survivor, refugee, displaced person, or dissident. Meanwhile, those who hold others accountable *from above* also range widely, from minister and manager to prosecutor, police officer, faith leader, auditor, tax collector, professor—and dictator, among many others.

Where one stands on these issues depends on where one sits. After all, various kinds of oversight that some would consider to be democratic transparency may look like authoritarian surveillance to others. What some consider to be accountability for transgressions may look like unjust persecution to others. Some focus more on whether rules were followed, while others care more about tangible results. These concepts are inherently relational: who is to be transparent to whom, and who is to be accountable to whom—and for what (Fox 2007a)? Reflecting on keywords in this field helps us to begin to address these questions.

Box A. Multilingual Mayan rights defenders interpret accountability

Mayan languages in Guatemala have multiple ways of communicating ideas about community oversight and public accountability. Linguistically, the different cultures have codified their experiences over time, and the words they use are an expression of their culture, expressing their cosmovision and philosophy as a people. This makes it especially complex, and points to why we cannot simply invent new words.

Our goal in working with Mayan groups was to carry out a process of interpretation. In this case, expressing *rendición de cuentas*, the often-used Spanish translation of accountability, in Mayan languages required carrying out a process of interpretation based on expressions that already exist. Shown below are just four examples of expressions that were either equivalent to ‘accountability’ or whose meaning is close to it.

In **Kaqchikel**

K'o cheré ni qak'utüj chike ri taq kamb'äl b'ëy achike ri kismäj nikib'än pa ruwi' ri qatinamit.

One must ask the authorities about the work they do in favor of the communities

In **Ixil**

Qetz b'a'nilchite' b'aj uv'a techanal la qootzi kat ni sozszakat unq'a kib'ooq'ole' u puaaje'

We have the right to ask the authorities about how they invest the money

In **Q'eqchi'**

Xsumenkil re chi xjunil poyanam naq wan xk'ulub' re xnawb'al chi xjunil li k'a' ru nab'aanuman sa' xjolominkil li tenamit:

Ensure that every person has effective access to their right to see government documents

In **K'iche'**

Uq'lajsaxik jawi kakojwi le mer kortil

How funds are managed, the government budget is distributed, and where the money is used.

Source: This box is an abridged version of the Keywords blog by [Benilda Batzin \(2021a\)](#), director of Guatemala's Center for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health Systems.

1.4 Why keywords?

The idea of keywords gained prominence long before it signified a digital search term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites a use as far back as 1762 and defines ‘keywords’ as words or ideas “that serve as a solution or explanation for something; a word, expression, or concept of particular importance or significance.” Social and cultural theorist Raymond Williams’ seminal 1976 book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, aimed to unpack the assumptions behind terms that constituted a shared vocabulary in his field. The goal was to make those terms more accessible to those who came from different class backgrounds and therefore may not speak the same language—even if they all spoke English. Williams addressed broad social and cultural changes, but numerous other scholars have since applied the keywords approach to fields that range from environmental, disability, Latino, and media studies to evolutionary biology.⁶

Analysis of keywords has evolved from unpacking subtexts to emphasizing the contestation of big concepts and the interaction between different meanings. Consider this sociological approach:

“A keyword is a word or phrase, often mobilized by different groups of actors for different purposes, whose meanings are contested during unsettled times. Keywords incorporate ambiguous and often competing ideas and are sites where global meanings meet local, varied subcultural interpretations.... Keywords chronicle and capture cultural change by creating common categories of meaning against the cacophony of contested local use.... During times [of cultural change] people search for and create new meanings to structure their lives. Keywords assist in this process by orienting everyday action. (Ghaziani and Ventresca 2005, 524; emphasis added).”

This working paper and the accompanying blogs on keywords from around the world seek to inform efforts to “infuse new meanings into keywords that simultaneously resonate with local meanings while engaging a global audience” (Ghaziani and Ventresca 2005, 525). The approach here is informed by a scholarly tradition that looks at how abstract concepts can be embedded in everyday discourse.⁷

Readers may already be familiar with this kind of unpacking of many other keywords in governance and development studies.⁸ This includes the widely-discussed multiple meanings of terms related to accountability—like democracy, participation, power, or empowerment.⁹ Yet the many meanings of accountability have only just begun to be analyzed through this lens.¹⁰

1.5 Accountability discourse tilts agendas

Discourse analysis has long emphasized the power to name problems. What gets named influences ways of seeing—and ways of seeing influence what gets named.¹¹ For a very visible example, because of the legacy of the Watergate scandal in the US, those interested in naming and shaming ostensible violations of the public trust simply add the suffix ‘-gate’ to their target.¹² Yet the power to name may not be visible. Forms of oppression may be so normalized that they are not publicly recognized as such. Unnamed problems require changes in awareness and action to call them out in the public sphere—as in the case of gender-based violence. The power to name problems also influences how agendas are set for addressing them—just as what gets counted ultimately defines ‘what counts.’¹³ In contrast, a focus on accountability flips the script — from naming problems to naming possible solutions.

This working paper explores how discourses influence agenda-setting, first by unpacking accountability, then by discussing several emblematic terms in the accountability field. A first step towards connecting discourse analysis with agenda-setting and change strategies is to recognize how vocabulary in the accountability field can substantively tilt the framing of issues. Consider three examples of unintentionally exclusionary discourses related to different areas of the accountability landscape.

For a first example of a term’s potentially exclusionary implications, international aid donors often frame initiatives that they fund and evaluate as ‘interventions.’ In the fields of public health, economics, or anti-corruption, the term ‘intervention’ has positive, common-sense associations with field experiments and problem-solving initiatives. In the international aid industry, this approach to intervention is also closely related to the core concept of ‘project,’ which involves being “time-bound, fundable, measurable (according to certain understandings), and implementable (usually by a single actor, rather than coalition or network).”¹⁴ In contrast, for those involved with civic movements for peace or democracy, the term ‘intervention’ is indelibly associated with the adjective ‘external.’ The term ‘external interventions,’ in turn, suggests intrusive political manipulation, military occupations, and covert actions.¹⁵ The implicit association of ‘intervention’ with ‘external’ is also in tension with alternative approaches to accountability-building that emphasize more organic, bottom-up initiatives that are led by strategists embedded in their own societies.

The second example of how discourse can tilt agendas is from the field of civic technology, which involves digital civic engagement. This field often uses the terms ‘online vs. offline’ to distinguish between digital collective action and in-person organizing.¹⁶ Yet this online/offline framing implicitly relegates the diverse repertoires of in-person collective action to a residual category. In other words, the only feature that this umbrella category of offline shares is that it refers to actions that are *not* digital. Plus, in everyday usage, the term ‘offline’ also means *disconnected*, as when computers are down. This implied disconnectedness is in tension with the term’s reference to in-person collective action. The online/offline frame also implies a *dichotomy* between the two terms—an assumption that does not help to signal pathways for the kind of creative synergy *between* virtual and in-person organizing, moving ‘from the tweets to the streets’ (Gerbaudo 2012).

For a third example of a term that can have exclusionary implications, international development discourse sometimes uses the term ‘constructive engagement’ to refer to collaboration between government and civil society actors. In practice, this emphasis on seeking consensus may veto even the *option* of public criticism. For example, in Government Watch’s past experience with ‘constructive engagement’ with reform-minded officials in the Philippines, “publicly sharing government shortcomings and inefficiencies could be seen as unduly adversarial and therefore ‘not constructive.’”¹⁷ While insider access may facilitate problem-solving in the short term, that approach relies on the uncertain fate of enlightened elites. This use of the term ‘constructive’ also sends an implicit political message that divides civil society by implying that more adversarial approaches are necessarily *destructive*. The term’s associations are also marked by its international political history, since ‘constructive engagement’ was the name of the US government’s relationship with South Africa’s apartheid regime in the early 1980s.¹⁸

International development donor discourse often counterposes collaborative and adversarial strategies, assuming that they are mutually exclusive. The conventional ‘either/or’ framing of collaborative vs. adversarial implicitly assumes that civil society actors *either* challenge or partner with officials. Yet in practice, activists often *combine* collaborative with adversarial approaches—and that mixture varies across territory and over time, depending on whether they can find any officials willing to partner with them (e.g., Hernández et al. 2019; Isunza and Garza 2018). A more three-dimensional approach recognizes that some government actors may support collaboration for change, while others do not. This recognition leaves room for civil society actors to collaborate with insider reformers while *also* questioning reform opponents in the same government. This broader approach to collaborative governance can be described as ‘critical collaboration,’ which refers to coalitions between governmental reformers and social actors who seek to maintain their autonomy in the process (Burrige 2020).

These three illustrations of how meanings vary depending on where one sits show how widely-used terms—intervention, online/offline, and constructive engagement—can introduce biases. They implicitly elevate some assumptions about how change happens above others. This exercise shows not only how discourse is contested and understood differently by different actors, but why that matters.

This working paper intends to cut through the fog of ambiguity about the meanings of accountability keywords, to render the conceptual landscape more visible. Hopefully that greater visibility will help to inform efforts to communicate among diverse actors with different perspectives on accountability—a key step towards identifying shared pathways to change.

2. Unpacking a keyword: What counts as accountability?

At first glance, the definition of accountability seems obvious: you know it when you see it.¹⁹ The idea is often understood through the lens of the accountability that people would like to see. In contrast, *actually-existing* accountability is much messier—as will be discussed below. Scholars have long lamented the many different ways in which the term is defined and used.²⁰ International governance reform analysts are also concerned: “We need a new shared language to help understand our work... With the absence of common language, and a willingness to listen and think outside the box, it is very easy to get trapped in the crossfire....” (Guerzovich 2020).

When one starts looking for a more clear-cut definition of the idea, one that people with different perspectives can agree with, and one that can also be applied across issue areas, a clearly-specified definition turns out to be elusive.²¹ Precise meanings vary greatly, depending on the context, the relationships, and the agendas of the actors involved. For example, contrast the differences between political or social accountability with corporate, financial, administrative, or legal accountability.

The following section addresses what counts as accountability from three perspectives: accountability as a means to address the abuse of power by authorities; the difference between authorities explaining their actions and possible consequences; and the distinction between the accountability of individuals vs. institutions.

2.1 Take one: A false dichotomy of public and private

The focus here is on accountability of power-holders *to publics*. After all, many accountability relationships are not in the public sphere—they unfold within families, they connect students to teachers, they have employees reporting to managers, they involve mutual accountability within face-to-face membership organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous, and they play out within sports teams’ locker rooms after losing a game. The idea of public accountability is often framed in terms of relationships between power-holders and *citizens*—though the idea of citizenship leaves out some migrants and refugees, as well as people who lack standing in the eyes of occupying foreign governments or abusive corporations.

Public accountability involves relationships between power-holders and those they are supposed to represent (citizens) and to serve (consumers, clients), as well as those who may lack standing but are impacted by their decisions (workers abused on the job or communities downstream from toxics). In other words, this approach focuses on power-holders in both the public and private sectors. Yet one curious feature of both the scholarly and practitioner fields that address accountability is that they tend to treat public and private sector authorities *separately*.²² This turns out to be a false dichotomy. To hold private sector actors publicly accountable often requires government regulation, with enforcement of mandatory standards that address occupational safety, minimum wages, environmental impact, freedom of association, and discrimination based on gender, race, or disability. Conversely, private sector abuses of power are often made possible by complicity with public sector allies—to *avoid* regulation and enforcement. Yet the idea that public interest groups should encourage governments to hold private corporations accountable goes back two centuries, to the first British laws to regulate child labor in factories. The idea that the public sector has a responsibility to hold corporations accountable for meeting minimum social and environmental standards also raises questions about the widespread reliance on voluntary self-reporting and self-regulation in the field known as ‘corporate responsibility.’²³

When considering what counts as public accountability, it is worth noting that the idea of the public sphere is itself socially and politically constructed—and contested. For more than a century, public interest campaigns have questioned the free-market assumption that the social costs of business activities are strictly private matters, and therefore not fit

for public oversight. At the beginning of the twentieth century, investigative journalists, then known as ‘muckrakers,’ exposed corporate abuses of power. Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, exposed the plight of industrial workers and led to the first consumer protection laws in the US.²⁴ In the 1960s, another wave of consumer and environmental movements addressed abuses of public safety and health—notably dangerous cars and toxic chemicals. Feminists called for equal pay for equal work. These awareness and advocacy campaigns shifted the boundaries between public and private.

Government regulation to enforce standards is just one of many approaches used to encourage corporate accountability. Campaigners also try to hold corporations accountable directly, through efforts that range from gentle persuasion, calls for transparency, and shareholder initiatives to more adversarial lawsuits and consumer boycotts. For a vivid example of the cutting edge in this debate over the boundaries between public and private, diverse governments persist in leaving decisions about whether to stop methane leaks in the hands of private companies – which continue to receive government subsidies. Indeed, the climate crisis raises the puzzling issue of how to promote inter-generational accountability. Those most responsible for irreversible damage to the planet will be long dead by the time the effects of their decisions will be most harshly felt.

An especially notable accountability-related example of the shifting boundaries between public and private spheres involves gender-based violence—which few governments treated as a crime until recently.²⁵ For decades, feminist civil society campaigns have been challenging this systemic accountability failure by bringing gender-based violence into the public sphere. In the 1970s in the US, public awareness campaigns and affinity groups addressed invisible power and impunity with public ‘take back the night’ marches. In Mexico, grassroots women’s community organizations even distributed whistles in their neighborhoods, where they literally blew the whistle on gender violence (Stephen 1997: 138). In Indonesia, grassroots women’s rights organizations are engaging with the dominant discourse while calling out gender violence as a public issue (Zulminarni et al. 2018, and Figure 1). Even when advocacy campaigns manage to change laws, their implementation may still take decades – but at least the public can then seek to hold the legal system accountable if it fails to act.

This idea of shifting the definition of what counts as a problem that calls for public accountability links crimes of *commission* to crimes of *omission* and culpable negligence—terms that are used in the human rights field. Standards for professional misconduct also address negligence or malpractice (e.g., doctors and lawyers). More recently, the #MeToo campaign has used the classic accountability repertoire of ‘naming and shaming’ perpetrators, opening another chapter in the contestation of whether and how laws against abuse are to be enforced. To sum up, the broader point here for considering what counts as accountability is to recognize that its scope is shaped by socially and politically constructed boundaries between the public and private.

Figure 1. Indonesia’s women-headed household movement protests gender violence



Credit: Seknas PEKKA and Serikat Pekka Indonesia (also in Zulminarni et al. 2018, 7).

2.2 Take two: Scope—answerability or more?

One general definition of accountability refers to processes that require actors to explain or justify their actions. The original meaning of accountability in English involves ‘answerability’—to be liable to account for actions, often involving formal processes that apply specific standards of behavior or performance. While many recognize the accounting-related implications of accountability, the *Oxford English Dictionary* discussion of its historical roots emphasizes answerability.²⁶

Processes that require people or institutions to explain, justify, or just admit their actions can provide a hard edge to the process of transparency (see Section 5.1). The spotlight of public attention certainly can have a cleansing effect—including the widely-cited ‘power of sunshine’ both to punish and deter transgressors (see Section 7.9). A diverse array of public forums can deliver answerability—as when government officials have to answer unscripted questions from under-represented citizens in front of large numbers of people (see Figure 2). In the classic checks and balances of political accountability, government officials explain their actions to legislators (see Section 7.5). For those seeking accountability in the public health field, there is more of a focus on assessments that inform stakeholder deliberations (see Figure 3). With legal accountability, at least in the US, the accused are supposed to ‘have their day in court’ to tell their side of the story. Yet the accused may decline to testify. In other words, criminals can be held to account—sanctioned—without explaining their actions. This raises questions about whether direct answerability is indeed as central to the concept of accountability as many suggest.

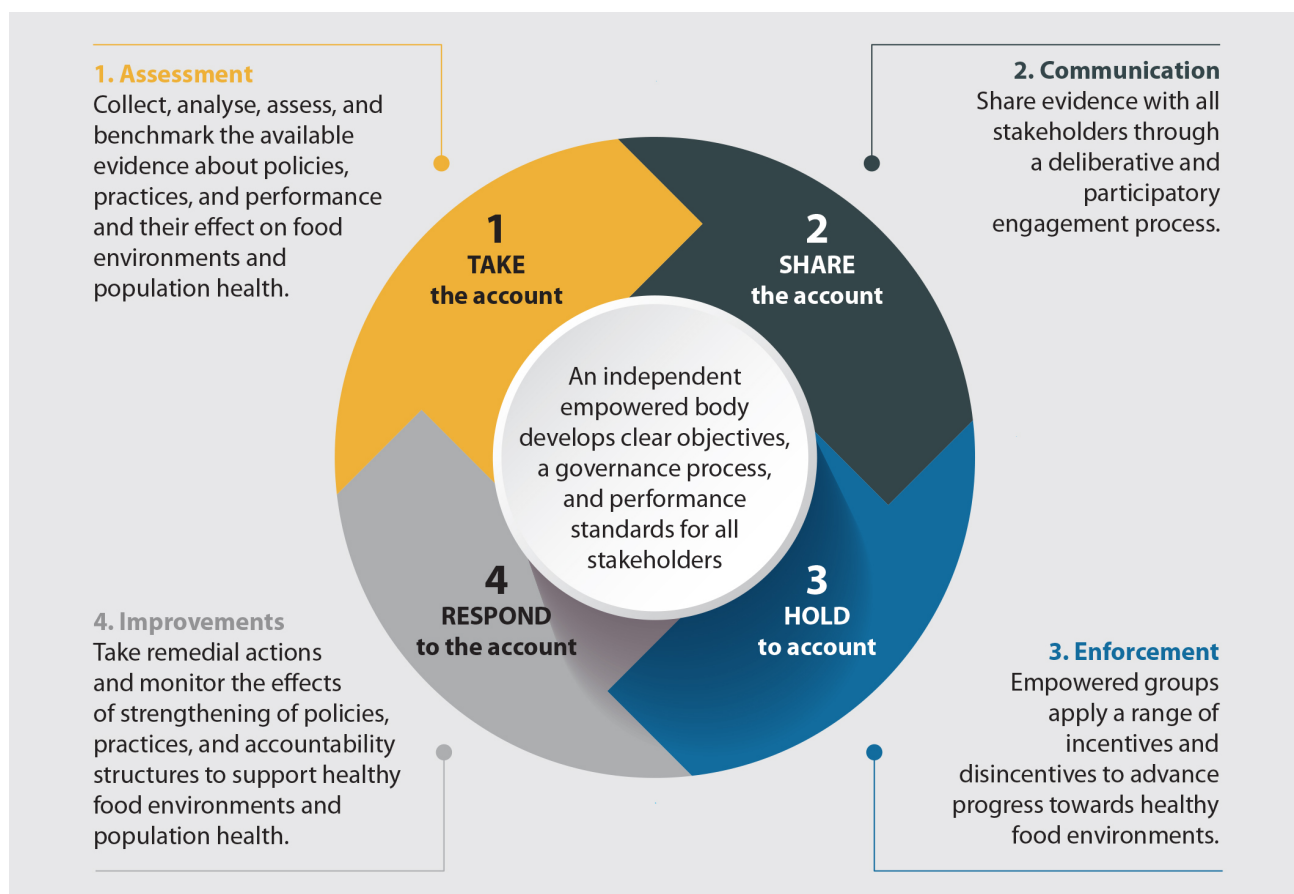
Figure 2. Answerability in action: Indigenous health rights defender questions Peru's health minister



Gloria Corimayhua of ForoSalud (Department of Puno) addresses Minister Pilar Mazzetti, during the final plenary of Peru's Second National Health Conference, Lima, August 2004.

Credit: ForoSalud (also in Fox and Halloran 2016, 10).

Figure 3. Accountability processes: A public health perspective



Source: Adapted from Swinburn et al. (2015, 2536).

For some, answerability is sufficient to count as accountability. Others prefer a definition that includes tangible consequences, including sanctions, remedy, or compensation. In this view, “unless there is some punishment for demonstrated abuses of authority, there is no rule of law and no accountability” (Schedler 1999, 17). As the English saying goes: “A fault confessed is half redressed.” For some, the integral role of sanctions in accountability is commonsensical. For others, including enforcement in the definition sets the bar high and does not acknowledge that answerability processes themselves can count as a tangible consequence (Bovens 2007; 2010). Indeed, there is little discussion in the accountability field of how responsibility is experienced by duty-bearers—except for the new idea of ‘felt accountability’ (Schillemans et al. 2020). Yet another approach to answerability recognizes tradeoffs between punitive approaches and learning, when problems are unintentional. To improve future performance, learning-oriented approaches encourage frank admission of honest mistakes without punishment—as in the case of some efforts to address medical errors, educational quality, or investigative commissions. This learning approach is implicit in collaborative approaches to social accountability, which may avoid explicit accountability terminology in order to reduce defensiveness among government officials.

Not all tangible consequences for accountability failures emphasize sanctions — consider restorative justice, apologies, restitution, and compensation. In the broad governance field, the lack of attention to these agendas is remarkable—with a few exceptions, thanks to international human rights law. Institutional accountability offices that are built into official international development agencies have begun to address compensation in specific cases, though very

unevenly (Daniel et al. 2016). Meanwhile, increased recognition of systemic racism has lifted up the idea of reparations in local and national arenas – while the idea of climate crisis reparations is now on the international agenda.

Restorative justice differs from restitution. Rights advocates who do not trust government law enforcement to be fair may have much more faith in informal ‘community accountability.’ They contend that horizontal processes of mutual accountability will make repetition less likely (Russo 2019). Whether and how such informal, locally-grounded, healing-oriented restorative approaches are widely seen as legitimate or can prevent future crimes is not clear, though Mexico’s indigenous community police report sustained success with crime prevention (Sierra 2015). Culturally-grounded restorative approaches can also be government-led. The most dramatic, large-scale experience with forward-looking restorative justice was Rwanda’s community-based *gacaca* process, which combined answerability with enforced reconciliation. This approach contrasts with the international human rights emphasis on individual criminal culpability (Clark 2012).

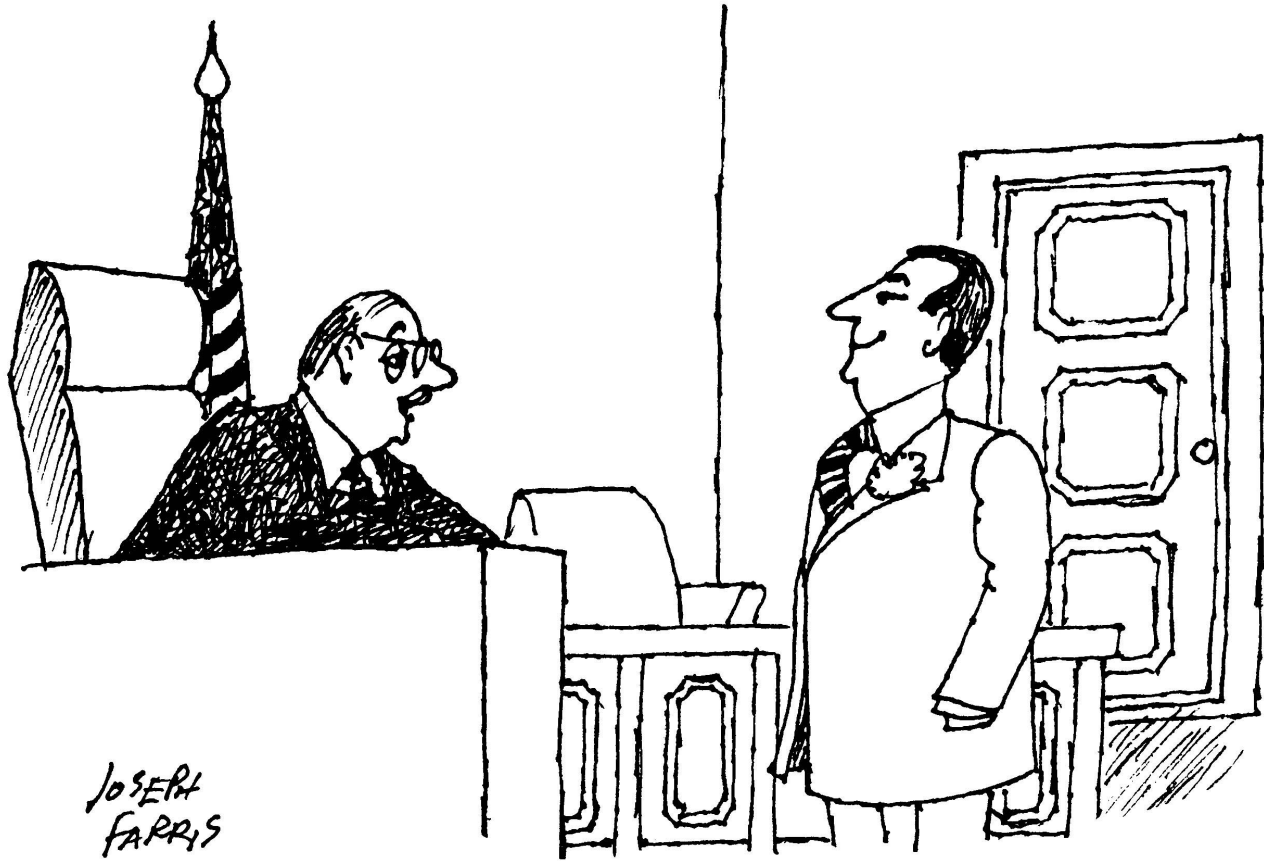
If answerability includes actually *taking* responsibility, including public apologies, then whether and how that is considered justice depends on the social and cultural context. The field of transitional justice grapples with the role of truth commissions and how truth contributes to justice. Where human rights advocates and the rule of law are politically weak, attempts at prosecution of abusers who are still armed and dangerous is often seen as risky and provocative—leading advocates to settle for some degree of transparency without sanctions.²⁷ The South African experience became an agenda-setting case, where human rights violators received amnesty in exchange for credible public confessions—followed by the 2016 Colombian Peace Accord’s more calibrated approach of connecting confessions of different kinds of responsibility with a range of consequences.

Asking what counts as accountability also raises the issue of how to tell the difference between meaningful answerability and minimalist accountability performances. Do mere gestures towards accountability count? For example, Latin America is filled with *pro forma* public spaces in which officials publicly report their claimed accomplishments—but without independent assessment. In contrast to these performances of accountability without answerability, official evaluations and social audits validate official claims (see Section 6.4).

Even when consequences follow answerability, or when sanctions are applied, the punishment may not fit the crime.²⁸ This raises the question of who decides what kinds of consequences are appropriate. Specifically, who decides how to weigh the relative seriousness of both the transgression and the sanction/redress, or what kind of reform is needed to prevent repetition of accountability failures. Everyday discourse refers to one widespread punitive tradition as ‘an eye for an eye.’²⁹ The frequent disconnect between violations with consequences — especially for the powerful — are recognized in popular culture with the everyday phrase ‘slap on the wrist’ (Figure 4). Some enforcement measures are so weak that they have the effect of legitimating the transgression. Perhaps this phenomenon of fake consequences with perverse effects warrants its own term—like ‘accountability-washing.’³⁰

The ‘slap-on-the-wrist’ problem raises a larger definitional question: is accountability an either-or concept—either one has it, or one doesn’t? Or can one speak of degrees of accountability?³¹ An approach that recognizes degrees of accountability is relevant here because often partial or incomplete accountability is the most that one can expect (see Box B).

Figure 4. Slap on the wrist: Accountability-washing?



"It's time for your sentence. Which wrist would you like to be slapped on?"

CartoonStock.com

Credit: Joseph Farris

Box B. Nixon's impeachment: An illustration of partial accountability

The Watergate impeachment illustrates the many judgements involved in deciding whether the punishment fits the crime. The case is widely seen as emblematic of what political accountability looks like. After all, the system of checks and balances managed to bring down a US president.

When the US Congress was about to charge Nixon with multiple abuses of power, his own party elders obliged him to resign. This was a very tangible sanction. But he avoided a trial, so he never had to answer for his crimes. Then his appointed successor pardoned him, so the disgraced president never served jail time—even though many of his operatives did. Even more important as evidence of only partial accountability, Congress impeached Nixon only for his violations of *domestic* laws. He avoided accountability for his direct role in the deaths of untold hundreds of thousands of civilians in Indochina, Chile, and Bangladesh.

Watergate is a clear case of partial accountability because only some crimes were considered, because there was no answerability—and because mainstream politicians and media allowed the lead perpetrator to mellow into the status of elder statesman.

2.3 Take three: Institutions or individuals?

In the wake of tragedies caused by government abuse or negligence, leaders often declare that those responsible will be held accountable. Keeping that promise requires clarity as to who is responsible. This is often not obvious, especially when opaque institutions and system failures are involved. In cases of human rights violations, entire organizational units or chains of command may be responsible. This is the rationale for the international human rights movement's focus on holding the leaders of repressive regimes accountable for the actions of their subordinates who pull the trigger (Sikkink 2011). This principle goes back to the Nuremberg trials after World War II. In the Latin American human rights tradition, those who gave the order are referred to as the 'intellectual authors' of a crime. The question of institutional vs. individual culpability also comes up when police use obviously excessive force against civilians. Debate often arises about whether to focus on individual officers or the police as an institution. In the face of undeniable abuse, institutions prefer to deflect responsibility by distancing themselves from what they claim are just 'a few bad apples' (see Box C).

The challenge of allocating responsibility across large numbers of individuals who are involved in making and carrying out organizational decisions has been called "the problem of many hands" (Thompson 1987, 40). The term 'system failure' is often used in this context, to capture institutional accountability problems. Yet sometimes abuses of power are the result of those institutions carrying out their missions — for example, to deter dissent by instilling fear. Similarly, for some governments or companies, corruption is the "operating system" rather than an exception to the rule (Chayes 2017). When institutions damage society *by design*, those problems are not system failures.

When accountability initiatives address entire institutions, they have the advantage of putting systemic change on the agenda. But such approaches can also avoid accountability for decisions made by specific individuals. Long lists of identifiable senior officials and business leaders do share responsibility for preventable disasters—such as the Beirut port explosion, the Mexico City subway collapse, the Bhopal gas leak, the Rana Plaza factory collapse, or the lead poisoning of drinking water in Flint, Michigan. After such catastrophes, official commissions of inquiry often choose not to focus on individual responsibility.³²

This section addressed some of the dilemmas embedded in just asking what counts as accountability. The next section disentangles accountability from concepts that are closely-related to it, but are not quite synonyms.

Box C. The ‘bad apples’ metaphor for police abuse: Deflection from institutional accountability

The question of whether to attribute responsibility for abuse to individual faults or system failures is at the core of debates over police violence against unarmed civilians. In the US, authorities and their allies often use an everyday metaphor to elude institutional responsibility and avoid giving up power. In the case of police violence, defenders of the status quo often claim that abuses are only caused by a few ‘bad apples’ who are exceptions — not representative of the institution as a whole. Curiously, this use of the metaphor to deflect institutional responsibility reverses its original meaning—which recognized that bad apples threaten to rot the rest of the barrel.³³

The credibility of the bad apple metaphor and its focus on individual faults is further undermined by the elaborate institutional mechanisms that prevent most US police murders from actually being prosecuted (see Table Two). These shields include legal protections for police (‘qualified immunity’), entrenched procedural protections defended by politically influential police unions, and allied public prosecutors who abuse their discretionary power to decide whether and how to prosecute crimes by police.

3. Overlapping concepts

In everyday use, terms that have overlapping meanings are often treated as synonyms. That may lead to ‘conceptual stretching’—the distortion or weakening of a concept when it is extended to cases or issues beyond its core meaning.³⁴ This academic idea has its counterpart in popular culture, with the saying: “Don’t spread yourself too thin. . .” At the risk of making distinctions that appear merely academic, here follow examples of *concepts that overlap but are not the same*. There are multiple pathways to good governance, democracy, responsive governance, and responsibility, and not all involve accountability. Not all good things go together.³⁵

Why parse these terms? First, distinguishing between, say, responsive and accountable governance may clarify how one can contribute to the other. If the two ideas are assumed to mean the same thing, then it is difficult to identify the relationship *between* them—as in, what *kinds* of government responses to citizen voice actually involve accountability? Only some do. Second, some top-down accountability measures can *contradict* good governance or democracy, such as the biased, selective, or arbitrary application of sanctions for alleged transgressions. After all, forced confessions are one kind of answerability.

3.1 Accountability is not a synonym for good governance

In theory, accountability processes that actually produce some kind of answerability with enforcement of standards are expected to improve institutional performance. In that sense accountability *contributes* to good governance.³⁶ Yet there are three reasons why accountability is not *equivalent* to good governance.³⁷ First, poor governance is distinct from weak accountability because “poor performance is not necessarily an accountability failure, as long as public officials can be made to answer for it and can face potential sanctions” (Herrera and Mayka 2019, 2). Conversely, accountability processes are no guarantee of strong performance.

Second, biased application of accountability processes is in tension with a core principle of good governance—equal treatment under the law. Politically-biased sanctions are a highly visible example, as in the case of Brazil’s 2015-16 presidential impeachment. In the law enforcement arena, corruption may also bias prosecution—as in Mexico, where top security officials pursued some criminal organizations but not others because those authorities were on the payroll of rival criminal groups. Systemic racism also biases the application of accountability measures, as in the case of the US prison-industrial complex. Specific examples include the racialized enforcement of drug control laws, or the biased application of punitive discipline in schools, which produces the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ (Alexander 2010; CPD/LIT 2018). There is a big difference between rule *of* law and rule *by* law – as discussed below (see Section 4.5).

Third, accountability is not a synonym for good governance in the sense of effective public institutions. That outcome can be reached through multiple pathways and public accountability is only one of them. If one looks around the world at states now considered effective, historic pathways that did not involve public accountability range from China and South Korea to Singapore and Rwanda.³⁸ Research that frames good governance through an anti-corruption lens stresses the importance of alignment of interests rather than public accountability as the main driver (Mungiu-Pippidi and Johnston 2017). Indeed, when governments have been successful at encouraging a strong commitment to a mission to deliver public services, the pathway often does *not* involve conventional approaches to accountability—such as attempts to tackle corruption head-on (Rothstein 2018). Analysts of innovative public sector agencies stress the agency of mission-driven public servants, rather than the carrots and sticks of accountability.³⁹ Dedicated frontline service providers who deliver good governance demonstrate a deep sense of internalized responsibility — without intrusive or punitive oversight from above or below — as in the case of community health workers.⁴⁰ Yet commitment to mission may be in tension with conventional upwards accountability measures.⁴¹ Analysts of long-term transitions to good governance also emphasize ‘deep democratization’—which involves countervailing power

more than procedural accountability—as the main pathway (Johnston 2014; Johnston and Fritzen 2021). In this view, corruption reduction is a *byproduct* of deeper structural changes in the nature of the state, rather than the result of accountability measures. In brief, accountability processes are just one means to the end of effective governmental performance, rather than a synonym for it.

3.2 Accountability is not a synonym for democracy

Political scientists often treat accountability as a defining feature of democratic political regimes.⁴² Yet to build accountability into the very definition implies that democracies are necessarily accountable. To assume that democratic regimes are accountable to voters or are governed with checks and balances—*by definition*—assumes what needs to be demonstrated.⁴³ Whether or not democratic regimes manage to produce accountability is an open empirical question. Political democracies may not produce accountability, and accountability processes may exist under less-than-democratic regimes. For example, Denmark—one of the most widely-hailed models for good governance—first launched anti-corruption reforms under an enlightened monarchy, long before it was a democracy (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). As both history and recent headlines tell us, democratically elected political leaders can also weaken, bypass, or dismantle checks and balances institutions (e.g., O’Donnell 1994; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

There is certainly *overlap* between democracy and accountability, especially since competitive elections are considered to be accountability mechanisms par excellence. If elections are free and fair, they create the *opportunity* for citizens to express their assessment of incumbents – with consequences. Yet the widespread intuitive assumption that voter choices are driven *mainly* by retrospective accountability may not hold up in practice. It turns out that analysts of elections differ over whether voting is driven primarily by future-looking or backward-looking considerations.⁴⁴ When elections turn out to be more about *future* choices, then they are less about accountability. Indeed, various legal restrictions on reelection around the world indicate limited faith in the effectiveness of elections as accountability mechanisms because of the power of incumbency to bias voter choices. Plus, elections are a very indirect instrument for holding other public officials accountable in the rest of the state, beyond elected leaders.⁴⁵

In addition to the only partial overlap between accountability and democracy, there can also be tensions *between* them. ‘Upwards accountability’ can actually conflict with electoral democracy, as in the case of Colombia’s powerful office of Inspector General and its mission to investigate and sanction public officials. That institution dates back to the early nineteenth-century days of independence from Spain, when Simón Bolívar created the office to address potential corruption in the new government. Until recently, that oversight agency had the power to remove elected officials for only *alleged* ‘administrative faults,’ without criminal charges, the involvement of the judicial system, or any recourse. When the Inspector General’s office was occupied by a far-right ideologue (2009 – 2014), he unseated an unprecedented number of elected officials, including 20 members of congress, 308 mayors, and 37 governors—and led a failed attempt to purge the mayor of Colombia’s capital city.⁴⁶ To overturn voters’ choices so extensively with the politicized application of sanctions in the name of accountability — with impunity — is an example of the ancient problem of ‘who watches the watchmen’ (see Section 7.1).

The existence of social accountability institutions under authoritarian national regimes underscores the only partial overlap between accountability and democracy. Authoritarian governments have sometimes encouraged citizen oversight mechanisms, as in China and Mexico (e.g., Fox 2007b; Tsai 2007; Zhuang 2020; and Box D). Participatory public accountability institutions of governance that are unrelated to Western-style electoral democracies also include Latin American indigenous communities’ participatory decision-making by (predominantly male) community consensus, or the *Gadaa* system of leadership selection and rotation of the Oromo people of Ethiopia, which dates to the seventeenth century.⁴⁷

Box D. 'Authoritarian accountability' in China?

Authoritarian accountability certainly sounds like an oxymoron, but reform-minded senior officials in China have encouraged 'public supervision' of local governments by citizens, "both as a safety valve and as an antidote to poor governance," often in response to protest (Zhuang 2020, 4 & 6). Some Chinese cities have citizen oversight groups, as in the case of the Civil Monitor[ing] Organization in Wenzhou, where citizens are emboldened by senior 'backers' in the government.

Ethnographic research with citizen oversight activists shows the emergence of a rights-based sensibility and discourse in an undemocratic setting. Some use Chinese terms for 'call cadres to account' and 'make cadres answerable for their actions'—and question being treated as 'nobodies' or 'shitizens.' One activist said, "It is an inalienable right to supervise the government. . . We represent the citizen power." Another reported, "We monitor and sound the fire alarm. This is what I call a mechanism of 'correction,' which provides checks and balances. With our presence, the government would not use power arbitrarily" (Zhuang 2020, 7 & 14).

3.3 Accountability is not a synonym for responsive governance ⁴⁸

Responsive governance is widely treated as evidence of accountability.⁴⁹ The ideas certainly overlap. Yet responsiveness does not necessarily involve accountability, and accountability does not necessarily involve responsiveness.⁵⁰ Influential field experiments that claim to measure whether citizen voice leads to government accountability turn out to use fuzzy indicators that at most measure a much broader category of responses (Bailey, Fischer-Mackey, and Fox 2021).

The key distinction between accountability and responsive governance is that responsiveness is at the *discretion* of those in power, rather than an institutional obligation (Fox 2007b, 28-29). After all, when under pressure, elites may make partial concessions that involve neither answerability nor enforcement of standards. Benevolent monarchs or customary authorities may well listen to their subjects, but that does not mean that their subjects can hold them accountable in the sense of obliging answerability or imposing consequences for abuses of power.⁵¹ Authoritarian, populist, or technocratic governments may all *respond* to pressure from below — but with discretionary, partial concessions rather than as the result of accountability processes. Responsiveness also underscores the difference between favors and entitlements, as when citizens seek basic public services like health care (Schaaf, Topp, and Ngulube 2017). Government or private sector actors targeted by accountability campaigns may also respond with explicit commitments to change that are then not met in practice. In brief, power-holders can be responsive to voice or pressure in ways that do not involve accountability.

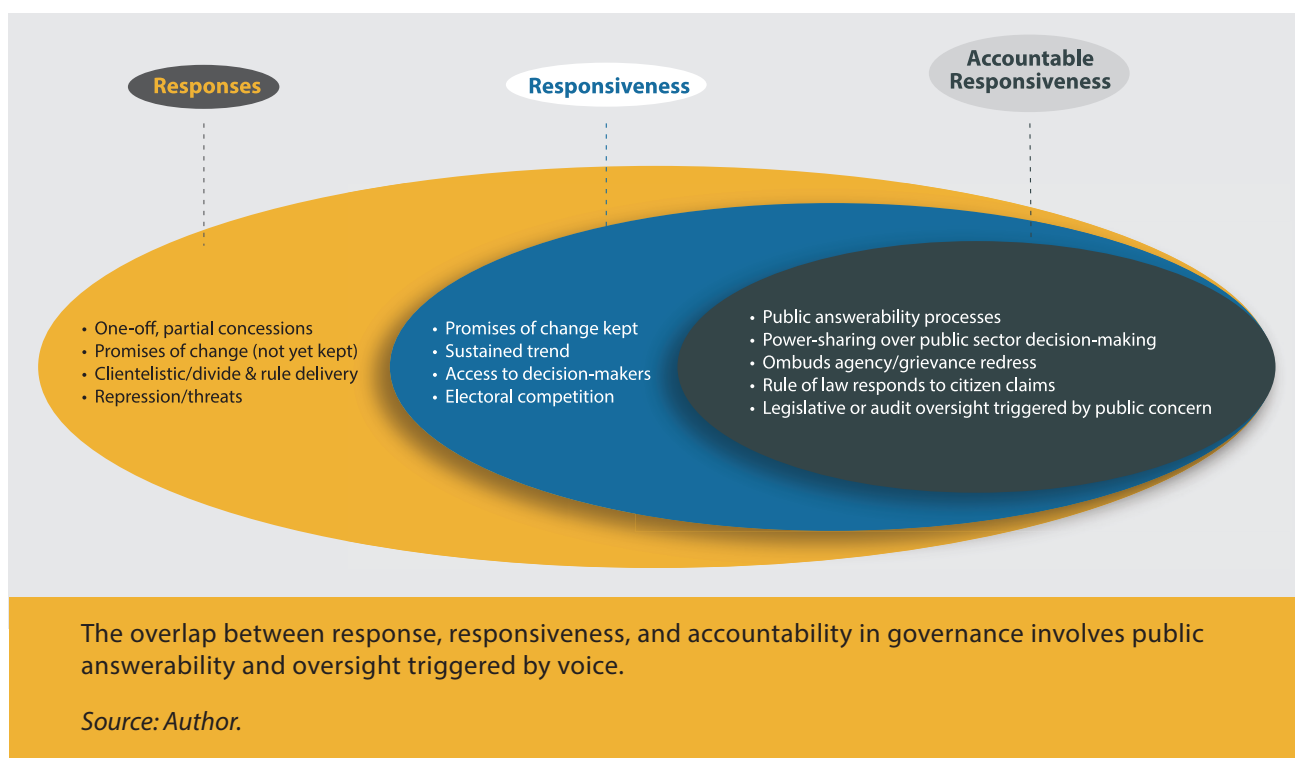
One could go further and distinguish between government responses and *responsive governance*. Responsive governance is composed of *sustained* responses to citizen voice or pressure, when authorities both make commitments and keep them. Advocates may also face government responses that deliver partial concessions in ways that divide social and civic actors. Governments can also respond with vote-buying, or temporary pay-outs that leave corrupt or partisan bureaucrats in power. Similarly, positive yet discretionary reforms can also be driven by enlightened technocrats, without involving responsiveness to voice. In these scenarios, what looks like a policy win in the short term could be easily withdrawn at the government's discretion in the future. In Figure 5 below, this distinction is depicted with three different kinds of government responses to voice, ranging from those with less to more accountability. This seemingly 'merely academic' distinction between one-off responses vs. sustained responsiveness is relevant for advocates, to determine whether they are getting traction.

For a vivid example of the distinction between government responses, responsiveness, and accountability, consider the #BringBackOurGirls campaign to free the kidnapped Chibok girls, which gained significant visibility both in Nigeria and internationally (Aina et al. 2019). This public pressure encouraged the government to respond with actions that eventually managed to free a minority of the victims—but in exchange for paying ransom and freeing imprisoned militants (Parkinson and Hinshaw 2017). The government responses were partial and one-off rather than sustained, so they fell short of responsiveness, as defined here. No public accountability was involved, neither for the kidnapers nor for the failures and abuses of the government security forces.

Figure 5 depicts these three partly overlapping yet distinct ways of seeing government responses to voice. From the point of view of citizen voice, purely discretionary responses by the powerful can range from negative to positive, but what they share is that they are fundamentally arbitrary — and therefore fall far short of accountability. The difference between often limited, one-off or even threatening kinds of responses and actual responsiveness is summed up by the distinction between official promises – and whether those promises are actually met in practice. Within that category of responsiveness, then there is a further distinction between government actions that tangibly deliver on promises (which could simply mean more fertilizer for farmers or medicines for clinics) and changes in the decision-making process that can improve governance in the future. Steps towards accountable responsiveness involve the activation of government audit or ombuds agencies, as well as open government reforms that allow the public to see whether the government is delivering on its promises. This zone of overlap, in the zone of accountable responsiveness on the right hand side of Figure 5, also includes institutionalized public participation in policy-making and resource allocation decisions — sometimes called diagonal accountability (see Section 4.3).

Not all accountable governance involves responsiveness to voice or pressure. Such measures can include the application of public audits or the rule of law more generally. How these different oversight institutions relate to each other is addressed by the umbrella concept of accountability ecosystem (see Section 6.1). After all, in principle, accountability institutions should not *require* public pressure in order to trigger their operation.

Figure 5. Unpacking government responses to voice



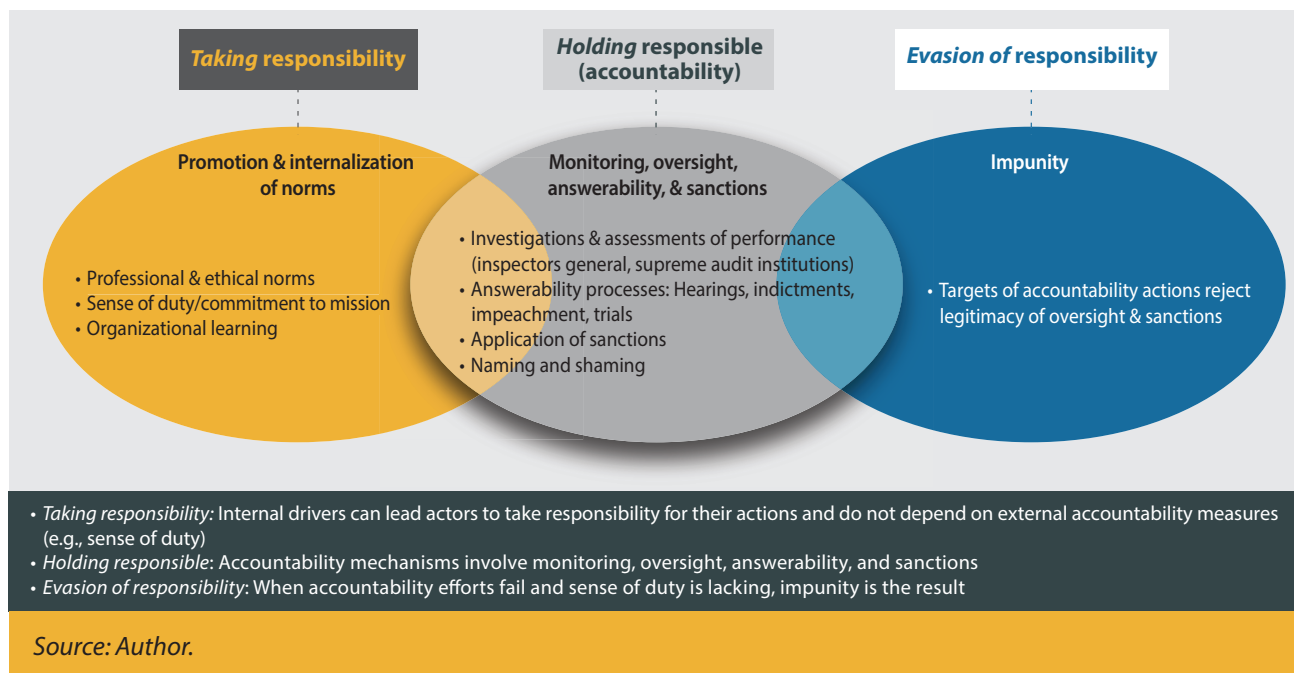
3.4 Accountability is not a synonym for responsibility

Responsibility and accountability are closely related (Bovens 1998). Accountability processes rely on identifying responsibility for decisions. As Day and Klein put it early on, “One cannot be responsible to anyone, unless one also has responsibility for something” (1987, 5; cited in Davies 2001, 75; see Box E). Moreover, various public accountability processes rely on citizens’ sense of public service, which is a form of civic responsibility. Internalized values of civic duty are involved in voting (to hold politicians accountable)—as well as service on juries (to assess whether other citizens charged with crimes are guilty). So, the idea of accountability relies on responsibility.

Yet these terms are not synonyms because responsibility may not involve accountability. Some actors may feel an intrinsic sense of responsibility without the threat or the incentive of being held accountable by others—as in the example of community health workers, mentioned above. Meanwhile, those clearly responsible for catastrophes are often not held accountable (as in Box F). Conversely, actors can be held accountable without their acceptance of responsibility. Analysts make the distinction between accountability processes as external to the actors in question, whereas the idea of responsibility can also include internal drivers, such as a sense of duty or professional norms.⁵² Consider also their respective antonyms: irresponsible is different from unaccountable.⁵³

Adding verbs to the idea of responsibility helps to pin down its various meanings, as illustrated in Figure 6 below. Note the differences between taking responsibility, holding actors responsible and evading responsibility. *Taking* responsibility involves actors accepting their agency. That process can either involve answerability in some kind of forum or can be driven by internalized motivations and values. To *hold* an actor responsible involves answerability to others—through monitoring, oversight, and possibly sanctions. Romance languages have one-word verbs that communicate this specific idea of ‘to hold responsible’ (e.g., *responsabilizar*).⁵⁴ Actors can also *evade* responsibility, denying their role and rejecting the principle that they should answer for their actions. Diverse accountability processes, from policy oversight to criminal trials, involve imposing assessments and sanctions even when actors refuse to accept responsibility for their actions (or their culpable negligence). Accountability involves relationships that hold actors responsible, as in the central oval of Figure 6. Actors can also accept or evade responsibility independently of accountability efforts, as in the left and right-hand side ovals of Figure 6.

Figure 6. Responsibility and accountability overlap, but are not synonyms



Box E. Multiple meanings in other languages: Responsible to or responsible for?

In the Spanish of the Latin American left, *responsable* is a noun. The term refers to a position in the hierarchies of their political organizations. This title is an example of an accountability term that had two different implicit meanings at the same time, in the same cultural context—to be responsible *for* (a mission) and to be responsible *to* (an authority). This term is also an example of an accountability keyword that lacks a direct translation into English.

In Central American revolutionary organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, the term referred to the higher-ranking person that a militant reported to, the person to whom a militant was accountable. At the same time, the term also referred to the mandate held by that duty-bearer: the *responsable* was the person in charge of a specific mission. Those *responsables* were presumably held to account by their superiors in the organization.

In Nicaragua, within the revolutionary opposition to the dictatorship in the 1970s, the usage of the term *responsable* reflected its vertical lines of combined political and military authority. According to participants, during the first decade of the Sandinista government in the 1980s, the term’s usage then followed two parallel paths, since militants participated in both the party and state hierarchies. Midlevel officials reported both to state and party leaders. According to participants, these parallel chains of command could lead to tensions if leadership guidance pointed in different directions—or such differences could create room for maneuver for midlevel officials, to play one set of mandates off against the other. In the case of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas in the 1990s, the term *responsables* had a more horizontal association. They were organizers, conveners whose job was to bring villages together and “build a sense of collectivity” (Fitzwater 2019, 44).

This dual meaning in everyday usage of an accountability term illustrates the subtle difference between responsibility *for* and responsibility *to*.

Box F. Responsibility without accountability: The ‘best and brightest’ who led the US military into Vietnam

Responsibility for the catastrophic US war in Indochina falls in part on a cohort of US government policy intellectuals who insisted on “brilliant policies that defied common sense” (Halberstam 1972, 578). Yet there is little evidence that they were ever held accountable. For example, emblematic Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara went from micro-managing waves of carpet bombing of civilians to go one to lead the World Bank.

One of the most well-known scholars who advised and defended the US war was political scientist Samuel Huntington. He was excoriated in Noam Chomsky’s famous essay “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” for writing that “forced-draft urbanization” could deprive the rebels of their rural civilian base (1967). Huntington’s cold term referred to the widely-used US military practice of using bombs, bullets, and napalm to drive rural civilian communities to the cities or behind barbed-wire in internment camps — thereby depriving the revolutionaries of their social base. Considered a centrist in the Democratic Party, Huntington went on to become a world famous public intellectual, with his widely-cited, agenda-setting concerns about an “excess of democracy” and the “clash of civilizations,” which later contributed to inspire US wars in the Middle East. One of the few tangible forms of accountability he experienced for his support for the Vietnam War was to be labeled a war criminal with graffiti on his front door. It turns out that Huntington’s private advice to the US government was to seek political accommodation in Vietnam, while he still supported the war publicly in order to retain insider access to policymakers (Gawthorpe 2018, 319). Other insider policy intellectuals at the time chose different paths, as in the path-breaking case of whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg’s leak of the Pentagon’s secret history of the war. He used his access and expertise to expose the government’s systematic lying to its citizens.

4. Subtypes: Accountability with adjectives

This section builds on the discussion of what counts as accountability by distinguishing between different dimensions and subtypes that are indicated by the addition of adjectives.⁵⁵ This unpacking exercise explores how adjectives help to identify different genres of accountability by exploring seven sets of distinctions.

4.1 Substantive distinctions: Political, social, corporate, and legal accountability

Consider the differences between political, social, corporate, and legal accountability. Political scientists define political accountability in a bounded way, limited to processes of holding elected officials answerable for their actions (Mainwaring 2003). That framing implicitly leaves out how the rest of the government is held accountable – which involves innumerable political decisions. With a broader frame for looking at public oversight institutions, they can be distinguished in terms of two distinct dimensions: whether their decisions are binding, and whether they themselves are politically accountable – as Table 1 elaborates. Some oversight bodies are neither politically accountable nor are their decisions binding — as in the case of most government audit agencies — as well as independent media and watchdog groups. In contrast, other accountability agencies without political accountability do make binding decisions — this describes most courts (except where judges are elected). The most notable accountability mechanism that makes binding decisions and is politically accountable would be the mutual veto power between executive and legislature embedded in systems of checks and balances. Binding authority is *potentially* politically accountable.

Table 1. Unpacking public oversight mechanisms: Which are binding and which are accountable?

	Politically accountable	
Binding decisions	No	Yes
No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent media and civil society watchdogs Government audit/oversight agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minority political opposition Non-binding legislative initiatives, public hearings, investigations
Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judicial review by insulated courts Regulatory review of independent agencies with enforcement powers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presidential veto of legislative decisions Legislative veto of presidential decisions Judicial review by elected judges

Source: Adapted from Gersen and Stephenson (2014, 215).

In contrast to political accountability, social accountability refers to both formal and informal channels through which citizen voice is expressed directly to power-holders, often in the context of public service provision (Section 5.4). Corporate accountability refers to publicly answering for the social, environmental, and human rights impacts of private business decisions (Keywords blog, Gearhart 2021). Different cultures have varying norms in terms of what kinds of disclosure are expected from businesses.⁵⁶ Legal accountability refers to liability and involves formal judicial processes that range from the enforcement of criminal law to civil processes for dealing with contracts and lawsuits.

4.2 Directional distinctions: Upwards vs. downwards accountability

Who is supposed to answer to whom? Which way does the arrow go? Much of the confusion associated with different understandings of the term ‘accountability’ can be cleared up by recognizing the distinction between *upwards vs. downwards* accountability.⁵⁷ The origins of the upwards sense of the concept dates all the way back to England in 1085, when subjects reported upwards to the crown in a royal survey of all the property in the realm (Dubnick 1998, 2007; Bovens, Schillemans, and Goodin 2014).

This question of the *directionality* of accountability relationships is especially relevant in the international development field, where compliance with donor requirements in terms of financial management and output metrics influences the way accountability is understood. This application of the accountability idea pulls it upwards and inwards, towards funders, rather than downwards and outwards, towards the public. For example, in the public health field, while international donor reporting requirements for service delivery systems have led to the creation of elaborate monitoring systems, the resulting institutional performance data is rarely publicly disclosed. If the data is not made available to inform citizen action, this is a major missed opportunity for public accountability. In addition, data collection may be limited to measuring the quantity of health system coverage, without addressing access or quality (e.g., Boydell, Fox, and Shaw 2017). Plus, donor-led health sector monitoring is often confined to top-down ‘vertical,’ siloed approaches that are limited to specific issues of international concern, rather than addressing entire health systems. Similarly, in the education field the concept of ‘educational accountability’ refers to upward-facing metrics, such as policymakers’ treatment of student test scores as indicators of teacher performance. This approach contrasts with ‘social accountability in education,’ which refers to public-facing, participatory oversight (Hevia and Vergara-Lope 2019).

Frontline public servants may be subjected to both upwards and downwards accountability. From above, managerial pressures from above deploy ‘audit cultures’ (Strathern 2000). From below, citizen voice might call for better services and more respect. In spite of these twin pressures, these ‘street-level bureaucrats’ often exercise agency — which is both key for quality and can evade both voice from below and monitoring from above (Lipsky 1980; Banerjee, Glennerster, and Duflo 2008). The accounting-oriented performance metrics of top-down oversight of development programs can also produce perverse effects.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, downwards accountability for public servants is especially relevant for addressing the abuse of citizens as they access public services. For example, maternal health rights advocates invented a new category: ‘disrespect and abuse.’⁵⁹ The abuse of mothers while in childbirth is a vivid example of the kind of accountability failure that is invisible when viewed only from above through the traditional, top-down lens—by administrators mainly concerned with counting institutional births.

The upwards vs. downwards distinction is also especially relevant in international development because of the influential United Nations Sustainable Development Goal metrics intended to incentivize national governments to improve. This approach emphasizes accountability in terms of annual national performance averages, which can inform international aid allocation priorities. Yet national averages are blunt instruments. While such indicators may serve to embarrass or to reward national policymakers at UN meetings, they are too generic for most national and local civic groups or social constituencies to use to target their advocacy and problem-solving efforts. In other words, the implicit theory of change behind relying on metrics based on national averages relies more on upwards accountability to international actors than on downwards accountability to national publics.⁶⁰

This distinction between upwards and downwards approaches is also relevant for understanding government reforms that attempt to address abuses by their own agencies. In the case of police accountability reforms in the US, downwards accountability reforms involve public-facing oversight agencies known as civilian review boards, which rarely have the autonomy and capacity needed to investigate, redress or prevent excessive use of force (Section 4.7). Though most urban US police departments report to local elected officials, in practice they exercise a high level of autonomy thanks to legal and contractual protections. While downwards accountability has been ineffective, additional reform

efforts sometimes involve federal government intervention from above. Yet the impacts of those efforts have also been limited.⁶¹ Indeed, the problem of US police reform suggests the limits of *both* upwards and downwards accountability strategies. So far, external oversight has rarely produced the institutional transformation needed to address systemic accountability failures. This underscores the importance of getting policing right in the first place to *prevent* abuse, rather than relying primarily on reactive accountability processes (see Section 4.7).

Upwards accountability processes are also pervasive at very granular levels. Some involve technocratic surveillance, as in the case of the social protection programs around the world involving conditional cash transfers and governmental monitoring of ‘beneficiary’ family compliance in exchange for welfare payments (Fox 2007b). Governments also try to hold their citizens accountable for adherence to contested social norms by criminalizing stigmatized behaviors such as the production or consumption of substances declared illicit. Other micro-level governmental surveillance for upwards accountability involves political bosses and bureaucrats who condition access to social programs on subordination. Studies of clientelism reveal multiple incentive and oversight mechanisms that machine politicians use to try to keep constituents in line, known as ‘perverse accountability.’⁶² The Chinese government is a more extreme example of upwards accountability, with its intensive surveillance of society for social control—now transitioning from twentieth-century neighborhood monitors and pregnancy checks to mass surveillance with artificial intelligence.

This reflection suggests that both upwards and downwards accountability have their limits when it comes to improving public service provision—they are no substitutes for public service worker commitment to their agency missions, which can be encouraged with adequate support systems and training, professional norms, *esprit de corps*, representative organizations, and meaningful stakeholder voice. As noted earlier, accountability is not the only pathway to good governance (see Section 3.1).

4.3 Spatial distinctions: Horizontal, vertical, and diagonal accountability

A third set of adjectives draws on spatial metaphors to identify different genres of political accountability relationships. The *vertical* dimension of political accountability refers to the relationship between citizens and authorities, which in democracies involves both elections and collective action (O’Donnell 1998). In contrast, *horizontal* accountability refers to the mutual oversight embedded in governmental institutions of checks and balances. Here the classic separation of powers between the courts, legislatures, and executives is supplemented by additional oversight agencies such as audit bureaus, ombuds agencies, and inspectors general.⁶³ Ombuds offices, designed as a check on bureaucracies and to encourage the rule of law, began in Sweden in 1713, long before parliamentary democracy.⁶⁴

While checks and balances are often associated with national political systems, mutual oversight institutions also operate at local levels—notably in the case of diverse community institutions for cooperative management of natural resources around the world. Yet those innovative natural resource management associations almost never have authority over intrusive non-members (e.g., illegal loggers, miners, ranchers, and fishers), who may pose the greatest threat to common property and warrant other approaches to accountability.⁶⁵ Civil society coalitions also rely on the usually informal process of mutual accountability (Brown and Fox 1998; Brown 2007).

Diagonal accountability refers to hybrid combinations of vertical and horizontal oversight, involving direct citizen engagement within government accountability institutions.⁶⁶ This can involve either participation in or direct management of official oversight bodies. Some of these official state-society power-sharing bodies are created from above, as in the case of the numerous official school or clinic management committees that constitute ‘invited spaces’ (Cornwall and Schattan Coelho 2007). Power-sharing bodies, like Brazil’s national policy conferences, can become remarkably participatory and operate at multiple scales (Pogrebinschi and Samuels 2014). Other power-sharing agencies have been created in response to broad-based citizen protest and advocacy, as in the case of independent citizen-run election administration in Mexico (Avritzer 2002; Isunza Vera and Olvera 2006). India’s official social audits

are another good example, combining independent validation of whether social programs deliver services with innovative public oversight hearings to review the audit findings (Pande and Dubbudu 2017, Keywords blog, [Pande 2021a](#), Section 6.4). In Latin America, the policy discourse of official audit agencies supports collaboration with citizens, though practices lag behind (Mendiburu 2020). These experiences with hybrid agencies and collaboration between citizens and government watchdogs shows that they can spotlight accountability failures, though follow-up in more serious cases usually falls outside their mandate.

For a US case of diagonal accountability, for many decades civilian police review boards have attempted to redress grievances and prevent abuse, to little effect—a telling reminder of the limits of citizen voice and oversight bodies that lack teeth. Curiously, police accountability is discussed and studied in isolation from the study of accountability in other public services—and vice versa.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, one of the most institutionalized forms of diagonal accountability has been largely invisible in international discussions: the jury trial. Juries are hybrid, participatory governance institutions. The government delegates power to citizen juries to assess evidence to determine whether or not those accused of crimes are guilty as charged.

These three spatial dimensions of accountability also interact with each other, raising big questions about how breakthroughs in one arena can enable progress in another. Numerous practitioner and research efforts have sought to find pathways to horizontal or diagonal accountability even where vertical accountability institutions are weak or non-existent (e.g., Grandvoinet, Aslam, and Raha 2015; Gaventa and Oswald 2019; Joshi 2019). Yet other scholars find that vertical accountability needs to be robust to achieve other kinds of accountability.⁶⁸

4.4 Institutional distinctions: Formal vs. informal accountability

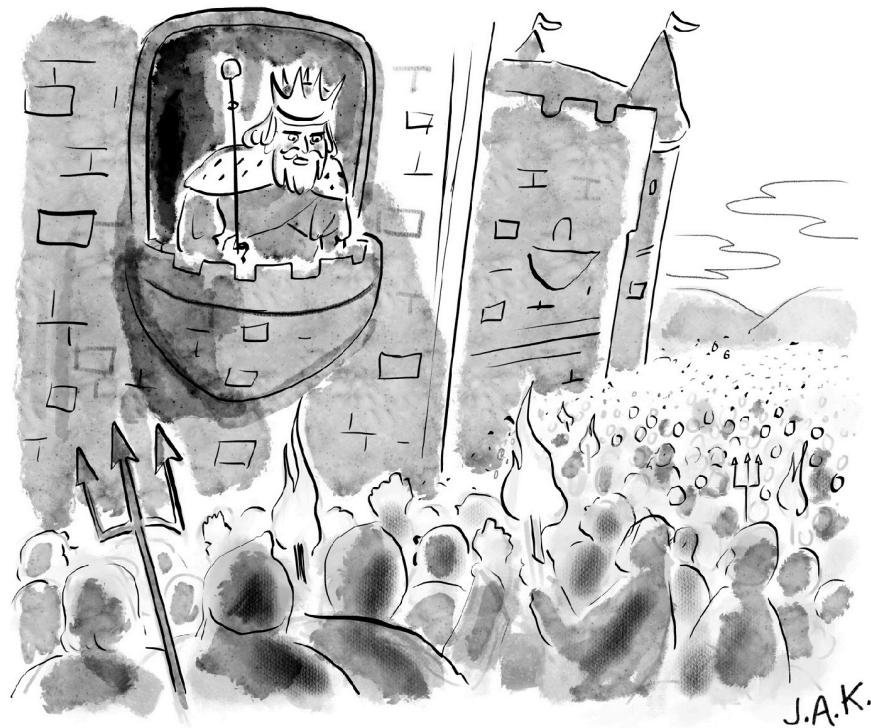
Accountable governance is closely associated with public institutions that go beyond the political system to include the administration of justice. The rule of law is the foundation, referring to equal and impartial application of the law to all citizens—as summarized in the saying ‘no one is above the law.’ The legal standards to which people and institutions are held are expected to be public, as in another everyday phrase, ‘ignorance of the law is no excuse’ (see Section 7 for more ‘accountability sayings’). These formal political and legal processes involve both answerability and enforcement of standards—sometimes including remedies or compensation. At the same time, the boundaries between formal and informal institutions may be fuzzy. Apparently formal accountability institutions may actually be governed by unjust informal norms, as in the case of the US tradition of all-white juries until the last third of the 20th century. Conversely, local governance institutions that may look informal to outsiders, may turn out to quite formal from the point of view of participants — as in the case of customary law in indigenous communities.

Where formal accountability processes are absent or lack legitimacy, people may also try to fill the gap by ‘taking the law into their own hands.’ Informal accountability processes may involve punitive sanctions that range from public shaming to violent retribution. Around the world, local communities punish alleged criminals directly when they perceive the police as ineffective or complicit. Similarly, where citizens perceive the justice system as weak, unfair, or captured, they may tolerate violent actors that ignore the rule of law to punish alleged criminals.

Beyond the criminal justice arena, informal accountability processes also include protest movements that exercise countervailing power by challenging authority in the streets. When social movements manage to activate official checks-and-balances institutions, that is a good example of synergy between informal and formal processes—without necessarily involving actual coordination (e.g., Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). The many other kinds of informal accountability channels include ‘soft pressure’ feedback and appeals (Lodenstein et al. 2018). Informal accountability claims on authorities can also be less overt, such as indirect ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (Scott 1985) where fear of reprisals reigns—as well as more direct, ‘in-your-face’ questioning of bureaucrats via ‘rude accountability’ (Hossain 2010, and Figure 7).

Informal accountability processes also include violent pushback against perceived abuses of power, as when soldiers seek to hold their military superiors accountable for putting their lives at risk for a mission they see as illegitimate. Their repertoires of resistance can range from foot-dragging and desertion to more overt confrontation—as in the case of frontline US soldiers’ widespread, often violent, insider resistance to the Vietnam War.⁶⁹ Foot-dragging can also be a form of quiet resistance by the *targets* of accountability actions, as in the case of US police who appeared to respond to public criticism in 2020 by limiting their crime-fighting efforts.

Figure 7. When rude accountability may be necessary



“Can’t you do this in a more polite way that I can completely ignore?”

Credit: Jason Adam Katzenstein/The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank.

For public interest groups, one of the most prominent forms of informal accountability strategies is known as ‘naming and shaming.’⁷⁰ This approach involves publicly naming specific individuals, agencies, or companies, in order to both sanction them by damaging their reputations and to discourage future abuses. This approach therefore combines both reactive and preventative goals (see Section 4.7). The consumer rights movement used naming and shaming for corporate accountability in the 1960s and 1970s, targeting specific companies for putting human health and life at risk

(see Figure 8 and Section 5.5). By the 1990s, the phrase was also widely associated with the international human rights movement (Drinan 2001). The relevance of the naming and shaming approach depends on the target's vulnerability, since one cannot shame the shameless (Fox 2007a, 665).

Figure 8. Naming and shaming: The Nestlé Boycott protested aggressive marketing of infant formula



While practitioners, activists, and scholars debate the strengths and limitations of 'naming and shaming,' governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) also encourage accountability by honoring the accomplishments of committed public servants. An innovative approach led by the CSO Accountability Lab flips the script by 'naming and faming,' which draws media attention to honor notable public sector workers.⁷²

Informal accountability processes also involve horizontal relationships among co-equals. Informal mutual accountability is very relevant for inspiring commitment to public service among public servants. Perhaps much can be learned from the interactions between members of sports teams or frontline military units, who hold each other accountable every day for their performance under pressure. Broad-based, voluntary associations for mutual support, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, are based on members who can hold each other accountable with monitoring and answerability. Diverse cultures also have forms of mutual responsibility that anthropologists call 'fictive kinship' — as with godparents who commit to taking care of each other's families. Some cultures also have traditions that honor and name deep lifelong friendships — which informed the name of a large-scale Indian community health worker program that calls their thousands of local organizers *Mitanin* — which means "friends" in their vernacular language (Garg and Pande 2018). The mutual support and responsibility involved in these informal accountability relationships is known in everyday language as 'I have your back.'

Informal accountability processes are especially important in fragile and conflict-affected settings. In international peacebuilding operations, the bypassing of top-down rules to informally delegate authority to diverse local actors turns out to be crucial for positive outcomes (Campbell 2018, 51). Yet much of what has been learned about accountability draws from research in less unstable contexts (Gaventa and Oswald 2019; Joshi 2019).

4.5 Fairness distinctions: Justice vs. subordination

For those who live in societies governed by the rule of law, legal accountability is often assumed to involve the application of justice. In adversarial court systems, answerability goes both ways—the accused and the accuser both have their say in public. In terms of enforcement, where the rule of law works and when a judicial decision is handed down, the conventional expectation is that ‘justice was done’—though higher levels of judicial review can offer additional recourse. Yet whether legal accountability actually imparts *justice* raises the questions of whether the process was fair. Laws may not be just, and they can be applied selectively. As a result, legal processes can produce justice—or subordination.

This distinction between just and unjust laws is addressed by the contrast between the rule *of* law and rule *by* law. As Khan put it: “it is important to distinguish between a genuine rule of law, where the enforcers of the rules are also subject to the law, and ‘rule by law’ where a strong state enforces rules on weak social organizations without being subject to rules itself” (2018, 648).⁷³ The operation of rule by law is captured in a classic South American saying: ‘For my friends, everything—for my enemies, the law.’⁷⁴ Rule *by* law suggests the systemic violation of the principle of equality under the law, whether because of corruption, political bias, or systemic racism in law enforcement. Yet the distinction can be ambiguous—in Chinese Communist Party documents, for example, “rule of law and rule by law are often used interchangeably” (*Economist* 2021).

Authoritarian rulers have long used forms of legal accountability to enforce the subordination of their subjects. They may have rule-*based* systems, but they follow rule by law rather than rule of law. Some authoritarian institutions impose elaborate ceremonial systems to require their subjects to answer for alleged insubordination. Consider the torture and trials of the Spanish Inquisition, or coerced Stalinist ‘criticism—self—criticism’ sessions. Curiously, an ancient phrase often used by contemporary human rights and open government advocates to describe accountability efforts —‘to hold their feet to the fire’— originated as a reference to medieval torture used to force religious conversions (see Section 7.2).

The use of rule by law to impose subordination rather than justice is also marked by the living legacy of extreme gender and racial exclusion, inherited and reproduced from when formal institutions treated people as property rather than as citizens. Until not so long ago, most legal systems denied women any standing other than as wards of their fathers or husbands. In the US, systemic racism in the law enforcement has been reproduced generation after generation under different regimes, taking its present form as mass incarceration (Alexander 2010). These patterns are emblematic of the distinction between rule of law and rule by law.

Democratic governments presumably have processes for changing unjust laws, but such pathways may be blocked where laws oppress the under-represented. Where exclusionary political systems block institutional attempts to change unjust laws, accountability campaigns may engage in extra-institutional resistance. From South Africa to South Carolina, such campaigns have combined direct action protest with legal strategies. Martin Luther King Jr. spelled out the rationale for protest that involves breaking unjust laws in his agenda-setting 1963 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, drawing from the Gandhian tradition of active nonviolent resistance⁷⁵ (see Box G).

Fast forward to contemporary justice reform agendas that use diverse strategies to bolster accountability with the rule of law. These agendas range from legal empowerment (with community paralegals); strategic litigation (to improve laws with precedent-setting decisions); legal reforms to criminalize corruption or abuse; police accountability reforms to reduce impunity and deter abuse; community policing grounded in locally-accountable, autonomous self-defense organizations (as in the case of indigenous communities in Guerrero, Mexico); civil lawsuits that attempt to encourage

governments to enforce laws on the books; as well as collaborative state-society law enforcement actions.⁷⁶ Direct involvement of civil society in the administration of justice brings together the spatial metaphors of horizontal and diagonal accountability. These hybrid justice reform initiatives combine voice from below with state-society power-sharing, in an effort to trigger action by checks-and-balances authorities.

Box G. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' on just vs. unjust laws

One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just and there are unjust laws . . .

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? . . .

Let us turn to a . . . concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the segregation laws was democratically elected? . . .

There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

Source: King [1963] 1918 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/letter-from-a-birmingham-jail/552461/>.

4.6 Rules/results distinctions: Accountability as process and outcome

Is accountability a process or is it an outcome? Clearly it involves both, which complicates efforts to pin down what counts as accountability. Consider answerability, which refers both to the *process* of duty-bearers having to answer for their decisions and to the *outcome* of having been held to account. In the case of legislative oversight, for example, the process involves questioning of executive branch leaders, while the outcome would be the result of that process. In the case of the criminal justice system, the trial would be the process of holding to account, whereas the court's decision and sentence would be the accountability outcome.

Why does the distinction between process and outcome matter? Because they do not always go together. Accountability processes can fail to produce accountability outcomes, as when trials turn out to be unfair and do not lead to justice

— or when audit findings are not followed up by consequences. There are also accountability outcomes that are not preceded by accountability processes—as when accused criminals are punished by angry mobs, or when bloody dictators are executed by rebel assassins.

In everyday usage, it is ambiguous whether the concept of ‘holding accountable’ emphasizes more process or outcome. In response to apparent crimes and abuses of authority, the popular call to hold perpetrators accountable implies an emphasis on processes that deliver justice in the form of tangible outcomes. Whether and how accountability processes lead to accountability outcomes is an open question, especially where such processes may not be fair and balanced. Plus, as a practical matter, accountability processes that do not deliver results will undermine their legitimacy. Indeed, some analysts express concern that an exclusive focus on processes can come at the cost of inattention to whether or not they actually deliver relevant outcomes—as in the case of many international environmental governance reforms.⁷⁷ This poses the challenge of defining accountability outcomes, which circles back to the dilemmas raised earlier regarding what counts as accountability—and who decides. That said, the simplest definition of accountability outcomes might be that they are the results of accountability processes: what do they add up to?

This process/outcome distinction has real-world practical implications. For example, the management field, with its concern for how to induce better performance from subordinates, has long addressed the pros and cons of focusing on process vs. outcome benchmarks (Patil, Vieder, and Tetlock 2014). From a manager’s point of view, process accountability focuses on oversight of whether and how their staff follow mandated processes, whereas outcome accountability focuses instead on whether outcomes are delivered (as in the case of ‘payment for results’ and ‘performance-based management’).

In practice, oversight systems often involve some kind of hybrid between process and outcome benchmarks. Debates in the education field focus on this issue: should teachers be assessed based on the quality of their teaching, or on their students’ test scores? The education field has been especially vulnerable to ‘tick-the-box’ compliance, with upwards accountability reporting metrics that have perverse effects (Honig and Pritchett 2019). Most top-down approaches that pursue educational accountability focus on carrots and sticks for teachers, even though student performance is influenced by many other factors, including systemic inequalities both inside and outside the schools (Hevia and Vergara-Lope 2019).⁷⁸ To sum up, the broader point here is that accountability processes and outcomes are often interdependent and hard to disentangle—yet they may not go together.

4.7 Sequencing distinctions: Reactive vs. preventative accountability

Intuitively, the primary focus of accountability is on holding duty-bearers responsible for actions they have *already* taken. In other words, answerability and enforcement/consequences usually take an ex-post approach (Goetz and Jenkins 2005). Yet accountability is widely expected to have preventative *effects*.⁷⁹ This distinction is also described as ‘backward-looking’ vs. ‘forward-looking’ (Sabet 2020; Sikkink 2020; Young 2011). In the fields of anti-corruption, criminal justice, and human rights, reactive approaches focus on punishment but are expected to promote deterrence.

In the human rights movement, the criminal prosecution of abusers has long been considered to make future abuses less likely. Starting in the 1990s, once-unthinkable criminal prosecutions of officials began to reach up the chain of command (Sikkink 2011). Past amnesties of abusers were reopened. Yet in spite of the prosecution of some abusers, Latin American systems of justice remain very weak, and the security forces continue to kill large numbers of unarmed civilians with impunity (e.g., Brazil, Colombia, Mexico). The same point holds for sporadic anti-corruption prosecutions. The accountability field has more work to do to address the questions of whether and how processes of reactive answerability actually have the expected preventative effects.⁸⁰

The environmental protection field has a vivid metaphor for the distinction between reactive and preventative. ‘End-of-the-pipe’ approaches try to mitigate toxic pollution shortly before it is released into the air, water, or soil—like a filter or scrubber on top of a smokestack. In contrast, ‘source reduction’ addresses the *causes* of pollution by using and emitting fewer toxics in the first place. Environmental policy analysts have long debated whether these two goals are in conflict—insofar as partial mitigation of effects might preempt efforts to address underlying causes (Dutt and King 2014). This ‘end-of-the-pipe’ metaphor is relevant for a wide range of problem-solving agendas, though its use has been siloed in the pollution control field.

Preventative approaches are especially relevant in contexts where formal institutions are weak. Reactive approaches depend on capacity for administrative oversight and the enforcement of laws and rules—without which authorities can rarely catch up to the scope of accountability failures. In the anti-corruption field, for example, low capacity leads oversight and enforcement to be selective at best—which can be a two-edged sword. Selective enforcement could either deter transgressors because they realize that they *might* get caught—or it could show violators that they will get away with it most of the time.

As a result of the limits of primarily punitive approaches, accountability advocates propose strategies that are intended to *prevent* problems that would call for answerability and sanctions. The logic behind preventative measures can be deeply embedded in popular culture, as in the old saying popularized by Benjamin Franklin in 1735: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”⁸¹ Independently, the same idea is communicated in the Spanish language idiom ‘*más vale prevenir que lamentar*’ (It’s better to prevent [a problem] than to regret it [afterwards]). Preventative efforts to reduce the likelihood of accountability failures vary widely. They include attempts to shift social norms, encourage public sector workers to commit to their missions, changes in incentives, procedural reforms to reduce opportunities for corruption or shirking, as well as clear, widely-understood standards for the behavior of public sector officials, real-time external oversight, and transparency measures intended to make transgressions easier to detect.

Preventative efforts to improve public sector performance fall into two very different categories—those that attempt to deter problems with external oversight and limited autonomy, and those that encourage more self-motivated commitment to the duty and mission of public service. In the first category, for example, many anti-corruption efforts involve reducing the scope for discretionary decision-making by tightening administrative controls on public servants, by automation with e-government or by making their decisions more public—as with open budgets and open contracting and other mandates for proactive disclosure.⁸² In the second category, preventative strategies involve encouraging the agency of public servants to be committed to their mission rather than treating them as mere cogs to be manipulated with oversight and threats. This approach focuses on professional norms such as duty to care, *esprit de corps*, and positive incentives such as respect and public recognition.

Whether such preventative efforts are most usefully analyzed through an accountability lens is an open question. Positive incentives can be understood as accountability mechanisms and commitment to professional norms can be bolstered by mutual oversight and accountability among peers. In health care settings, frank staff discussion to learn from medical errors can address their causes. Consider also the ‘duty to intervene’—for example, when police see their colleagues using excessive force. This responsibility to be proactive and block abuse as it happens can put mutual oversight in tension with shared informal norms and *esprit de corps* (see Section 5.6).

Public scrutiny measures, as a deterrent, fit the category of a preventative accountability strategy most clearly. This approach has a long history, going back to when transparency was called ‘publicity.’ Its potential deterrence effect was implied by the second and rarely-cited portion of Louis Brandeis’ adage about the cleansing power of sunshine. His famous saying “sunshine is the best disinfectant” went on to add “electric light [is] the best policeman” (1913). In other words, while the first idea addresses shedding light as a remedy for abuse, the second idea is that streetlights are expected to have a *deterrent* effect. This famous phrase about transparency combines two different, mutually reinforcing accountability strategies (see Section 7.5).

Efforts to deploy transparency as a preventative measure have a mixed track record, suggesting that more intensive external scrutiny may be no substitute for other kinds of preventative efforts to encourage commitment to public service. For an emblematic example of the limits of transparency as a deterrent, police body cameras were widely expected to deter violent abuse of unarmed civilians in the US. Yet so far, research shows that wearing body cameras does not actually influence police behavior.⁸³ Indeed, in Minneapolis, a senior police officer who was mentoring new recruits calmly murdered an unarmed, nonviolent civilian in broad daylight, right in front of witnesses' cameras. Indeed, the chilling image of the lead murderer extinguishing George Floyd's life reveals the face of impunity. The video evidence suggests that the police involved had no fear that they would be held accountable. The lead perpetrator had evidence for his implicit expectation of impunity—his numerous prior uses of excessive force had produced a long trail of complaints that did not have any consequences (Hawkins 2020). No wonder an initially optimistic tech expert concluded: "After years of police body cams and bystander cell phone videos, it's clear that evidentiary images on their own don't bring about change. What's missing is power" (Zuckerman 2020).

This distinction between reactive and preventative approaches can be illustrated by mapping diverse proposed police accountability reforms in the US. Reactive approaches involve complaints, investigation, answerability, and sanctions for abusive police officers. Preventative approaches involve efforts to make such abuse less likely. Table 2 maps these distinctions in terms of whether the accountability target is the individual perpetrator or the police agency as an institution, to take into account issues raised earlier involving systemic drivers of abuse and 'the problem of many hands' (see Section 2.3). In other words, Table 2 spotlights the difference between accountability approaches (reactive vs. preventative) and targets (individuals vs. institutions). This conceptual mapping process could be applied to disentangle various accountability strategies in any sector. The apparent failure of decades of past US police accountability reform efforts underscores the relevance of taking stock and rethinking assumptions.

Table 2. Mapping proposed US police accountability strategies

	Accountability target	
Accountability approach	Individual police officers	Police as an institution
Reactive (responses to specific abuses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire abusive officers and withhold pensions • End 'qualified immunity' for police who use excessive of force • Body cameras (with mandatory use and disclosure) • End paid leave for police under investigation • Make individual perpetrators financially liable for misconduct settlements • Mandate special prosecutors to address police criminality (state governments) • Elect independent District Attorneys willing to prosecute police criminality • Civilian Review Boards (with subpoena and investigative powers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civilian Review Boards (with subpoena and investigative power) • Require officers to report or intervene in abuse ('duty to intervene') • Limit arbitration processes that reinstate abusers • Limit police union capacity to defend abusers • Disband abusive police units • Make police departments financially liable for misconduct settlements • Independent anti-corruption investigation commissions • Binding federal oversight (consent decrees)
Preventative (changes targeted at preventing abuses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End 'qualified immunity' for police who use excessive force • Change recruitment to screen out potential abusers • High minimum national training standards • Early intervention monitoring to detect abusers • Strict use-of-force limits • Ban specific life-threatening tactics (e.g., chokeholds) • Require de-escalation responses to conflict (as in city of Newark, NJ) • Require officers to report or intervene in abuse ('duty to intervene') • Alternative training (e.g., de-escalation techniques) • Ban rehiring of fired abusers • Open data on misconduct reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reallocate police funding to frontline social services • Abolish police forces • Invest in social safety nets • End punitive drug enforcement on consumers and retail distributors • Replace police forces (as in city of Camden, NJ) • Dismantle police unions (Camden) • Demilitarize police (equipment, training) • Support alternative community safety actors (violence interrupters) • Assign traffic enforcement to unarmed authorities • Shift first response responsibilities away from police (e.g., send unarmed professionals to address mental health crises) • End 'stop and frisk' coercive surveillance policies • End biased fining for minor infractions • Federal consent decrees/judicial oversight

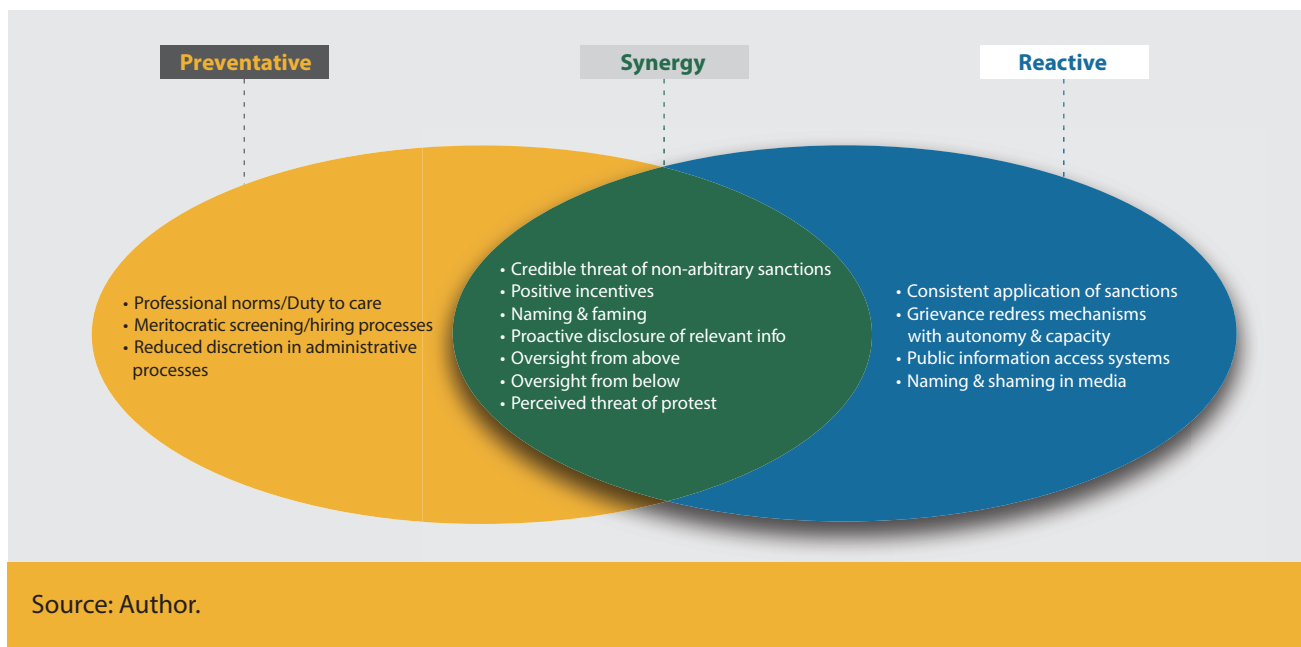
This conceptual exercise draws from the US experience, including extensive public debates following the 2020 murder of George Floyd. The table does not intend to include all possible strategies, nor does it assess their respective strengths and limitations. For more on policy reform proposals, see Campaign Zero <https://>

www.joincampaignzero.org/ and the Center for Policing Equity <https://policingequity.org/>.

Source: Author.

The distinction in Table 2 between reactive and preventative approaches circles back to the analytical puzzle—how can they reinforce each other more effectively? What does it take? How many police who kill unarmed civilians need to be found guilty of murder in order to deter future abuses? If only the tiny fraction of abuses captured on public video end up with convictions, could that have a perverse effect by showing that impunity will persist most of the time? Potentially, the effectiveness of some preventative measures can be bolstered by some reactive measures, and vice versa—but what is the nature of the dynamic interaction between the two? So far, social science has little to offer. Figure 9 offers a visualization that distinguishes preventative from reactive approaches, while also identifying potential areas of synergy. In the police accountability field, such mutually reinforcing approaches are called ‘holistic oversight’ (Harris 2012).

Figure 9. Disentangling preventative and reactive approaches to accountability



Finally, one key entry point to address the relationships between reactive and preventative approaches involves the duty to protect—or the duty to intervene. The crux of this convergence between accountability agendas involves the responsibility of professional service providers to take action if they see evidence of imminent harm (e.g., in the mental health or law enforcement fields). Professional norms intended to uphold standards are grounded in concepts like dereliction of duty or professional malpractice. Court and policy decisions can elevate these accountability standards from self-enforced professional norms to requirements backed by external oversight. These standards mean that, in principle, professionals can be held accountable (retrospectively) for failing to take preventative action.⁸⁴ Professional norms about responsibility were also central to the invention of whistleblower as a defender of the public interest (see Section 5.6). To sum up, the accountability field has only just begun to address how to promote holistic strategies that bring reactive and preventative approaches together.

5. Six accountability keywords

Building on this review of the multiple, ambiguous, and contested meanings of accountability, this next section unpacks **six keywords** that are prominent in the accountability field. The terms discussed here were chosen because of their direct relevance to actually-existing public accountability strategies—and because they are widely used in practice. This discussion does not include keywords that describe accountability *failures*—that would be a different project (e.g., corruption, impunity, prison-industrial complex).

The terms discussed below are: transparency, right to know, advocacy, social accountability, whistleblower, and boycott. Other well-established accountability-related keywords that could be addressed in the future include: bearing witness, watchdog, people power, reckoning, reparations, community policing, feedback loop, scapegoat, and open government. Curiously, some accountability keywords have contradictory dual meanings. The term ‘sanction’ means *both* to certify or permit and to punish or fine. Similarly, for centuries the term ‘oversight’ has referred both to supervisory authority and to the neglectful failure to notice or act.

5.1 Transparency

For those concerned with governance, ‘transparency’ is a metaphor.⁸⁵ It refers to the disclosure of information about what public and private institutions do—a ‘regulatory technique’ (Pozen 2019, 327). Analysts find mixed results and underscore how context shapes whether and how transparency can improve governance (e.g., Khagram, Fung, and De Renzio 2013; Kosack and Fung 2014).

The idea of transparency is quite broad, ranging from accessible, reliable, and relevant information to *pro forma* data dumps and reams of meaningless documents. How the idea travels and is understood in colloquial discourse has not received much attention (Keywords blogs by Jadhav 2021, Mohammed 2021, and Stephenson 2020; and Box H). Different cultures have their own norms, traditions, and expectations about public disclosure. Alternative terms like ‘access to information’ or ‘freedom of information’ may be more self-explanatory than ‘transparency.’ The more recent, much broader term ‘open government’ is also intuitive. The broad-based, global, multi-stakeholder Open Government Partnership defines its scope beyond transparency, including accountability and civic participation as well.⁸⁶

The meaning of transparency overlaps with much older ideas, such as freedom of the press. The links between access to information, an informed citizenry and accountable governance were spelled out during the debates that informed the US Constitution. Notably, its First Amendment directly linked freedom of the press with other freedoms *from* the potential abuse of state power, which include freedom of speech and assembly, and the less-often cited right to petition the government for redress of grievances. Related sayings include ‘knowledge is power,’ and ‘let there be light,’ which often refer to education.⁸⁷

A well-known colloquial shorthand for transparency in US discourse is another metaphor: ‘sunshine.’⁸⁸ As mentioned earlier, this draws from the widely-quoted words of Louis Brandeis, who was referring to concentrated corporate power: “sunshine is the best disinfectant” (see Section 7.9). The disinfecting role of sunshine was found to be literally true just a few years later, during the 1918 influenza pandemic, when severely ill patients who were nursed out of doors had higher recovery rates than those kept inside (Hobday 2020). Yet in practice, transparency has often fallen short of leading to accountability. Indeed, analysts have yet to pin down the specific conditions under which transparency contributes to accountability (Fox 2007a).

Box H. Spelling out transparency in Spanish

In Latin America, the Spanish word for transparency is now widely used across the political spectrum and is beginning to reach everyday discourse, along with the term ‘open government’. Two decades ago, however, the term sounded technical and ‘other.’ Yet related ideas were already present in Latin American popular culture, as in the case of the everyday phrase ‘*cuentas claras*’ (a clear accounting).

Consider an early effort to reframe the term ‘*transparencia*’ to make it resonate more with popular discourse. Back in the mid-1990s, when the term was rarely used in Mexico, grassroots organizer Manuel Fernández tweaked the word to make it more amenable to communicating with rural communities about government programs. He founded and named a civil society watchdog group with a little-used but still technically legitimate alternative spelling of the Spanish word for transparency—*trasparencia*—which omits the first letter N present in the conventional spelling.⁸⁹ Grassroots organizers were concerned that the more commonly used term for transparency sounded too close to *transa*, a slang word for fraud and betrayal. A second reason for the alternative spelling was that it allowed the organizers to unpack the words into two parts—*tras las apariencias*—which meant they could talk about the need to go ‘behind appearances,’ an idea that could engage grassroots movements for fairer governance. Their logo, below, even separated the word into two parts.⁹⁰



Translation: Transparency, civil society organization: Information on projects financed by multilateral development banks in Mexico.

Source: Author's archive.

As with accountability, transparency is a concept that is taken up across the ideological spectrum. Like accountability, its meaning is malleable and contested, harnessed to competing political goals (Birchall 2021, 4). Since both transparency and accountability are ambiguous, ‘trans-ideological’ ideas, it follows that they can also be in tension with each other. Indeed, public disclosure measures are sometimes considered *alternatives* to using sanctions to encourage accountability, rather than being a step in that direction. Advocates of market-led approaches tend to prefer transparency measures over regulatory enforcement. In environmental policy, this debate pits advocates of using information disclosure as an indirect means of regulation of the private sector against the more direct approach of strengthening the government’s capacity to monitor and enforce pollution standards (see Section 6.3). In addition, trends involving transparency and accountability may even diverge. This is the puzzle raised by Mexico’s recent experience with a combination of major access to information reforms with persistent impunity (see Figure 27), as well as the concept of ‘openwashing’ (see Section 6.5).

Critics across the spectrum also question the assumption that transparency is necessarily positive. Critics of neoliberalism highlight elite projects that use transparency to protect private property through the production of documents.⁹¹ In India, for example, landlord elites used disclosure of land records to take over poor people’s land that was not fully documented (Morozov 2013). Critics of top-down approaches to transparency also note that they can

be used more for surveillance of the poor than for public oversight of the government, as in the case of means-tested, conditional social programs (Box I).

Box I. Scrutinizing social programs: Transparency for the poor—or of the poor?

A decade ago in Guatemala, transparency became the number two presidential election campaign buzzword after ‘security.’ The newly-elected president then called for making social programs transparent in the name of depoliticizing them. Yet some elites interpreted the public scrutiny of government programs as part of their right as ‘taxpayer-citizens,’ and their *target* was low-income Guatemalans who participated in social programs (Dotson 2014). Official transparency discourse focused more on the choices of the poor than on elites’ use of public funds.

Meanwhile, for low-income Guatemalans, their main interest in transparency involved land rights, compensation for the victims of the armed conflict, and access to government information in their own indigenous languages. A decade later, that same president was jailed for corruption. Dotson concludes “In Guatemala, as elsewhere, demands for increased visibility and access to information serve a wide range of political agendas and conceptions of citizenship, rights, and responsibilities” (2014, 365).

At the same time, diverse social justice activists have also taken up the transparency banner. Advocacy campaigns to address police violence call for public disclosure of the names of officers who have been named in citizen complaints or fired for the abuse of force, with the goal of preventing them from continuing to work as police officers. Union organizers have tried to use information requests to gain countervailing power in the workplace (Williams 2003). Environmental justice movements around the world call for transparency of toxic threats and land-grabs (see also Sections 5.2 and 6.3). Activists in India use the Right to Information Act to promote grassroots oversight of anti-poverty programs (Figure 10).

As in the case of accountability, the meaning of transparency also varies depending on adjectives. For example, *active* transparency refers to proactive disclosure of information by authorities, in contrast to demand-driven or request-based systems, sometimes called *passive* transparency.⁹² Different understandings of transparency also vary in terms of positionality; what one person considers to be transparency is experienced as surveillance by another—as in the case of intrusive government monitoring of citizens captured in popular culture in the novel *1984*, the science fiction movie *Minority Report*, and the corporate commodification of personal data through what is now called ‘surveillance capitalism.’ Perhaps this kind of monitoring could be called ‘upwards transparency,’ along the lines of ‘upwards accountability.’ Digital surveillance threats are now addressed with a new keyword: ‘algorithmic accountability,’ which involves public disclosure of how artificial intelligence makes decisions in order to reveal hidden bias.⁹³

Transparency critics point to the limited usefulness of raw official data as a reason for skepticism about open government (e.g., Sunstein 2020). This is where independent ‘infomediaries’ come in, with their capacity to transform raw data into meaningful information. When civic data experts process the data to produce relevant, accessible information and then those transparency measures *still* don’t improve accountability, there are two possible kinds of explanations. Either reliable information was insufficient to inform the citizen initiatives and government action needed to overcome vested interests that opposed accountability, or the data that was disclosed in the name of transparency was too unreliable, arcane, or incomplete to actually count as a good test of the power of sunshine. The first scenario would be a failure of transparency to leverage accountability, whereas the second is a failure to be transparent—and cannot therefore be an adequate test of the power of transparency. Consider the case of police body cameras: if they are not turned on when they should be, that would be a failure to be transparent, rather than a failure of transparency. Those two very different issues need to be disentangled before concluding whether and how transparency measures work. In other words, there is a big difference between a *failure of transparency to deliver* and a *failure to deliver transparency*.

The scope of the term ‘transparency’ is also constrained by its implicit focus on access to information that is *already* in the hands of the authorities or private corporations. This is a problem, especially for health, the environment or police abuse, because so much important data is not actually collected by authorities—especially inconvenient information. For example, governments rarely document whether medicines are actually available to the entire population or patterns of disrespect and abuse by service providers; nor do they measure the toxicity and volumes of numerous chemical substances in everyday use in homes, factories, and fields. Transparency reforms to expose hidden dangers have been central to both occupational safety campaigns and consumer rights movements (Schudson 2015). The existence of relevant documents may also be secret, which underscores the crucial role of whistleblowers and their disclosure of inside information that can constitute ‘smoking gun’ evidence regarding who should be held accountable (see Sections 5.6 and 7.8).⁹⁵

These issues are addressed by the distinction between ‘opaque’ and ‘clear’ transparency (Fox 2007a). Opaque, or fuzzy transparency involves the merely nominal disclosure of information that is in practice unreliable or illegible. Official open data may require extensive efforts by ‘infomediaries’ to translate it into accessible formats (Avidon, Etzioni, and Gehman 2018). In contrast, clear transparency refers to reliable, accessible information that reveals what those in power do, whether disclosed proactively or in response to information requests.⁹⁶ This conceptual distinction is relevant because insofar as transparency discourse becomes increasingly *de rigueur*, the forces opposed to it are likely to express their resistance indirectly. This leads to providing opaque transparency, with unreliable, inaccessible, or incomplete data that does not add up to usable information. Where government compliance with transparency reforms is limited, sometimes electoral competition can incentivize responsive disclosure (Berliner 2017). Extreme cases of opaque, or fuzzy transparency, where the *appearance* of disclosure is used to cover up or distract from accountability failures, can be called ‘openwashing’ (see Section 6.5).

By revealing what authorities are actually doing, clear transparency allows pro-accountability actors—both insiders and outsiders—to target their strategies for change. Advocates need to knock on the doors where decisions are actually made (see Figure 11). Examples of clear transparency would include data about how local governments spend public funds, specific threats to human rights, independent certification of private sector compliance with environmental and social standards, independent audit or ombuds reports, publicly accessible third-party policy evaluations, and the names of police found guilty of abusing civilians.

This proposed distinction between opaque and clear transparency helps to clarify their respective relationships with accountability. There is no reason to expect opaque transparency to enable accountability. One could make a similar distinction between two different dimensions of accountability—one could call answerability the ‘soft face,’ while the ‘hard face’ also includes the possibility of sanctions.

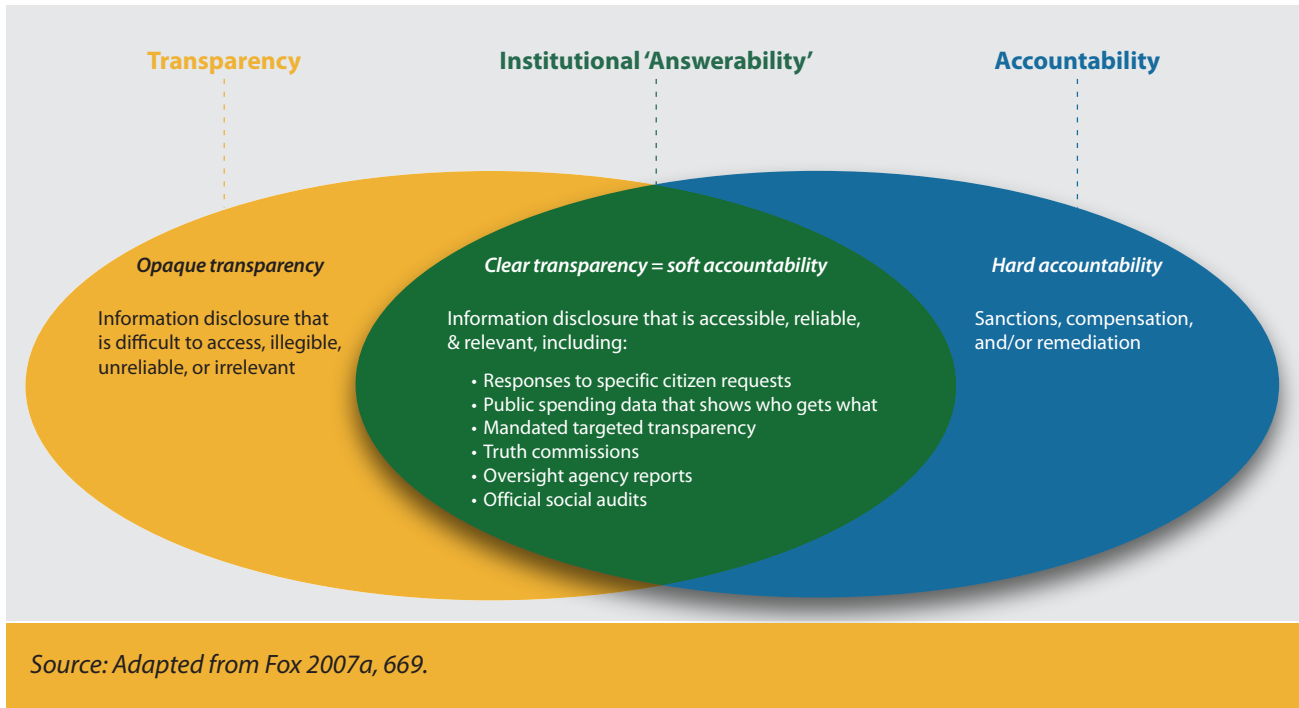
Much of the discussion in this section has focused on disentangling transparency from accountability, a distinction needed in order to determine when and how transparency can contribute to accountability. Yet when it comes to answerability, when targets of accountability efforts provide explanations of their actions, that idea turns out to *overlap* with transparency. Indeed, one could argue that *clear* transparency constitutes a form of *soft* accountability (answerability), insofar as power-holders who have to account for their actions are also disclosing relevant information. For example, consider the World Bank Inspection Panel’s disclosure of their investigations into whether and how the institution may have violated its own social and environmental safeguard policies. This space of partial overlap is visualized below in Figure 12. To sum up, “transparency and accountability need each other and can be mutually reinforcing” (TAI 2017).

Figure 11. Informed citizens engage with municipal authorities



Credit: Amaury Velázquez Martínez. See also García Jiménez (2019).

Figure 12. Do transparency and accountability overlap?



5.2 Right to know

The right to information was first codified in law in 1766, in Sweden. Most other countries were slow to catch up. The US passed its Freedom of Information Act two centuries later, and the past two decades saw a wave of national freedom of information laws around the world. Yet the right to know is broader than official access to information processes, with its focus on access to official data and documents.

The 'right to know' is often used interchangeably with transparency, but its scope goes beyond disclosure of information already in the hands of the state or private corporations. This limitation on the concept of transparency is implicit and not widely recognized. In contrast, the right to know refers more broadly to all kinds of information that citizens actually need to address risks and accountability failures (see Figure 13).⁹⁷ Skeptics question this rights-based approach, concerned instead with whether or not official data disclosed is useful to citizens (Sunstein 2020, 189). In this view, technocrats should decide what information is useful, when, and to whom. Yet the history of right-to-know campaigns suggest that establishing the principle of disclosure is just one of many steps towards gaining tangible access to legible, reliable, and relevant information.

Figure 13. How public are public documents?



These paper files document municipal investment projects, in the Philippines Department of Agriculture (DA) in Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Credit: Joy Aceron, also in Aceron (2019, 34).

The term ‘right to know’ was first popularized in Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which inspired what became a mass environmental movement by the end of that decade (Murphy 2005). Carson brought to public attention the previously invisible harm caused by the indiscriminate use of toxic agrochemicals, and the idea that people have the right to know what poisons are being put into their environment. These campaigns for environmental protection reached a milestone when the US Congress passed the 1986 Emergency and Community Right-to-Know Act. Efforts by a nation-wide grassroots anti-toxics movement reached a tipping point after 1984, when the US chemical company Union Carbide caused an industrial disaster with mass casualties in Bhopal, India (Hadden 1989). The law mandated industrial corporations to report the volumes of their toxic emissions to the government (albeit limited to a list that left out many dangerous chemicals). The first data disclosed was not legible, but the US public interest group Environmental Defense then invested in a pioneering website that made the emissions data user-friendly at the level of postal codes.⁹⁸ The idea behind this effort was that if citizens had access to this granular, locally-relevant data, they would be motivated to call for public oversight of dangers located in their own backyard, while also being empowered by the identification of the specific company behind the threat. The 1986 law provided tools to promote the enforcement of existing laws. This was an emblematic case of actionable ‘targeted transparency’ (see Section 6.3).⁹⁹

The idea of the right to know may translate more easily than the transparency metaphor into colloquial terms in other languages. For example, the direct translation into Spanish is widely used and understood: ‘*derecho a saber*’ gets more than 22 million Google hits (in quotes). In Mexico, grassroots organizers use it in slogans (Figure 14). In India, the national right to information campaign launched the slogan “right to know, right to live” in 1996 (*Jaan-ne ka Adhikar, Jeene ka Adhikar*). This call was inspired by grassroots organizers in the MKSS movement, who strategically linked their

social justice and anti-corruption struggles with demands for the right to information about government anti-poverty programs (Pande 2014; Swamy 2020; Figure 10).

Figure 14. “The right to know: Let’s make it work—and a duty to inform as well”



5.3 Advocacy

When advocates seek to influence how power-holders make decisions, they address who is supposed to be accountable to whom, and for what. Some advocates work within existing systems to solve problems and influence specific decisions by power-holders without necessarily changing who is supposed to be accountable to whom. In contrast, other advocates seek to change the rules of the game and broaden who has the standing to make accountability claims.

The scope of ‘advocacy’ as an idea has changed significantly over time. Today, the idea of policy advocacy is widely seen as focused on national and global policy influencing—yet the original idea focused on individuals. A century-old study found that the idea of advocacy and the role of the advocate date back to ancient Greece and Rome: “From

time immemorial the principle that a person has the right to select another to plead his cause has been recognized” (Timberlake 1922, 25). The term came to refer to lawyers’ defense of their clients. Indeed, in Romance languages, the term for ‘lawyer’ is a cognate version of ‘advocate.’ That meaning later extended to the role of other service providers, who were tasked with defending the interests of individual clients—notably social workers—in administrative and legal proceedings. The reach of these case-based advocacy efforts led by professionals expanded to include the training of grassroots ‘lay’ advocates—as during the US War on Poverty in the 1960s (Piven and Cloward 1971, 315). The community paralegal approach is now called ‘legal empowerment,’ dedicated to squeezing bits of justice out of unjust systems.¹⁰⁰

In the wake of the 1960s and 1970s movements for peace, racial justice and gender equity, the scope of the idea of advocacy broadened beyond individual cases to encompass the defense of social and political causes. This adds an adjective: policy advocacy. Different terms are used to describe this process in different contexts. In Europe, policy advocacy is referred to as campaigning or policy influencing.¹⁰¹ Various terms communicate the idea in Spanish, including some that highlight the difference between advocacy focused on individual cases vs. broader causes (Box J).

Some consider advocacy to necessarily involve confrontational tactics, while others also include insider influencing approaches to promote policy change (Green 2020). The term had less adversarial implications during the early stages of its original politicization in the US. In the 1960s, an influential cadre of liberal policy professionals promoted community participation in government anti-poverty programs as part of what was then called ‘advocacy planning’ (Piven 1975). Yet this professional-led approach to advocacy was not necessarily grounded in relationships of accountability to those whose interests were ostensibly being defended. At the time, critics argued that advocacy planners’ focus on official channels for participation—what are now called ‘invited spaces’—was in tension with then-widespread mass protest, which they considered to be the principal lever for pro-poor policy influence (Piven 1975). This legacy of tension over who sets advocacy agendas leads some grassroots organizers to conclude that the whole idea of advocacy is limited to lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and media firms—leaving out grassroots leaders.¹⁰² These different understandings of advocacy also influence the organizational charts of large organizations. For example, large Northern development NGOs may have very separate units for media-oriented campaigns and international policy advocacy on the one hand and their ‘programmatic’ work on the other (the aid sector term for support for in-country local and national work).¹⁰³

Advocates concerned with the question of who speaks for whom refer to ‘people-centered advocacy’ or ‘citizen-centered advocacy.’¹⁰⁴ This idea emphasizes not only the agency of directly-affected grassroots constituencies, but also linkages between frontline action and policy arenas at multiple levels. Indeed, advocates operating at different levels often have different targets: while national campaigners may focus on changing laws, policies, and budgets, local advocates may focus more on monitoring and influencing their implementation (Fox and Acheron 2016, Section 6.6).

Box J. Dilemmas for translating ‘advocacy’ into Spanish: Influencing agendas and defending causes

Like accountability, advocacy is another one of those terms whose contemporary meaning in English was politically constructed and lacks a precise equivalent in Spanish. The direct cognate is ‘*abogacía*’, which refers to the practice of law (as in its original sense in English)—in contrast to the broader notion of *policy* advocacy.

In the view of a Latin American activist interviewed two decades ago: “We’re not certain whether we have a translation for ‘advocacy’ or whether we should just use the word ‘advocacy’ in English. Part of the confusion has to do with the way the concept was imported from the United States as if it were a new technology—as if we didn’t already know advocacy. Latin America’s history is full of examples of people facing power. How can we think that advocacy is new?” (cited in VeneKlasen and Miller 2002, 17).

Fast forward two decades and one Spanish term of choice for advocacy in Latin America is often ‘*incidencia*’, meaning ‘influencing.’ This term was invented through cross-border dialogue in mid-1990s partnerships between human rights and public interest groups in the US and Central America, in the context of a civil society shift in the region ‘from protest to proposal.’¹⁰⁵ An older related term in Spanish is ‘*promoción*’, which refers broadly to grassroots organizing, which may or may not involve policy advocacy. The term ‘*cabildeo*’ refers specifically to lobbying, which is only one of several possible tactics for influencing public policy – and its use is limited by the term’s strong connotations of ‘influence peddling.’

The Spanish term for “defenders” is also increasingly used – especially in the human rights movement. *Defensoras* refers specifically to women activists who address both specific cases and underlying causes.¹⁰⁶ Some Latin American governments use a related term, *Defensoría*, to refer to governmental ombuds agencies that engage in advocacy with other government agencies to address specific cases of threat or abuse. Whether such ombuds agencies also address broader public interest causes in practice is an open question, as in the case of the Colombian government’s People’s Defender (*Defensoría del Pueblo*) agency.¹⁰⁷

5.4 Social accountability

The term ‘social accountability’ has different meanings to different actors in different fields. In communications, for example, the term refers to the multiple ways in which people account for their actions (Buttny 1993). In the corporate social responsibility field, the term is associated with ‘social accounting’ and refers to reporting on the social and environmental effects of corporate economic action. In this context, corporations tend to control the agenda-setting, the definition of the norms, the assessment of compliance, and the disclosure of the reports, usually without redress mechanisms.¹⁰⁸

In the governance field, social accountability refers to citizen voice and action efforts to improve public sector performance, often institutionalized into two-way interfaces.¹⁰⁹ This is a broad category, without clear boundaries. For some, social accountability is just a new term for what was called ‘participatory development’ back in the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹⁰ Activists may wonder “why do we need to learn new terms coming from outside to name actions and strategies that social movements have been doing or pursuing for decades?”¹¹¹ While this term may be old wine in new bottles in some ways, the idea of social accountability does emphasize whether and how government institutions actually listen and *respond* to voice. Whether focused on the public or private sector, social accountability raises the question of what determines power-holders’ responsiveness to voice and the role of countervailing power (see Sections 3.3 and 6.2). In other words, social accountability initiatives involve both citizen power to question authority – and to get answers (as illustrated in Figure 15).

Figure 15. Indian health rights advocates seek to improve government social programs by questioning authorities



Insofar as social accountability encourages governments to listen to citizens, it is a political process—yet it is distinct from the political accountability of elected officials, where citizen voice is usually delegated to representatives in between elections (Section 4.1). In a more technical sense, social accountability covers an evolving umbrella category that includes a range of tools: citizen monitoring and oversight of public and/or private sector performance; user-centered public information access/dissemination systems; public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms; and citizen participation in actual resource allocation decision-making, such as participatory budgeting.¹¹²

The idea of social accountability was first applied to the public sector in Latin America, in the early 1990s, under the rubric of “social oversight.” The region’s broad democratization process included widespread governmental innovation with citizen oversight institutions. Sociologists then focused on “citizen action aimed at *overseeing political authorities...* The emergence of rights-oriented discourse and politics, media exposés of government scandals, and social movements organized around demands for due process are only some of the examples of this new politics of societal accountability” (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000, 147, emphasis added).¹¹³ This version of the concept emphasized the political nature of citizen action and its potential to activate checks and balances institutions with enforcement powers. The focus was on bearing witness and making public evidence of abuse, including—but not limited to—“invited spaces” of dialogue and interfaces with government (see Figure 16).¹¹⁴

Then international development agencies also began using the term social accountability—most notably the World Bank (e.g., Malena, Forster, and Singh 2004). On a parallel track, the World Bank’s influential 2004 *World Development Report* on service delivery also promoted the *idea* of social accountability, though without actually adopting the term. That report proposed a conceptual framework that differed from the earlier Latin American framing in at least three major ways. First, it encouraged an exclusive focus on local level service delivery via direct interfaces between frontline public servants and citizens. Second, its framework counterposed a dichotomy between what it called the ‘short route’ to accountability (local citizen voice) and the long route (voting for the elected officials who govern public sector managers), suggesting that the latter route was too indirect to allow voice to influence service delivery.¹¹⁵ Third, the World Bank framework excluded a role for governmental oversight institutions—in contrast to the original version’s emphasis on citizen voice that could trigger governmental investigations, oversight and enforcement processes.¹¹⁶ This approach considered citizen voice to be constructive insofar as it followed a ‘short route’ to local problem-solving, with little emphasis on how voice could encourage policy change, fairer budgets, or law enforcement. Inspired by this influential World Bank report, large international NGOs adopted an approach to social accountability that tended to focus on localized monitoring of service provision and dialogue with frontline collaborative approaches, without a role for countervailing power—at least at first (see Section 6.2). The idea of social accountability continues to be a ‘big tent’ that covers a wide range of strategies for change.

The wide range of understandings of ‘social accountability’ creates challenges for expressing the idea in different languages. Literal translations from English tend to sound especially awkward and forced. A translation into French stresses ‘holding responsible’ (*responsabilisation sociale*), while a translation into Spanish emphasizes auditing (*auditoría social*). Yet in Latin America at least, diverse terms that are not translations have been used to describe participatory oversight institutions since the early 1990s, well *before* the term social accountability was taken up in English.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the uptake of equivalent Spanish language terms turns out to be more widespread than the use of the term in English, according to the rough indicator of Google search terms (See Figure 17). In Latin America, the history of the *idea* of local citizen oversight actually goes further back, as with the case of community checks and balances built into Mexican agrarian reform legislation in the 1930s (See Box K).

The specific terms used to communicate the idea of social accountability in Latin America vary by country, with *contraloría social* used in Mexico, and *veeduría* widely used in Colombia and Ecuador.¹¹⁸ The term ‘*control social*’ is probably the most widely used in the region, as well as its Portuguese equivalent in Brazil, *controle social*.¹¹⁹ This idea of social or community oversight often refers to monitoring of local infrastructure projects, but it extends to a farmer-to-farmer approach to coca control efforts in Bolivia (Grisaffi, Farthing, and Ledebur 2017). In Guatemala, in contrast,

the same term is associated with government control of society rather than with community oversight—so CSOs there tend to use a different term for oversight: ‘vigilance’ (Keywords blog, Flores 2021). These terms in Spanish and Portuguese are often translated into English as ‘social control.’ Yet the term ‘control’ in English suggests a degree of power for social accountability that is at best aspirational. ‘Social oversight’ may be a more precise translation.

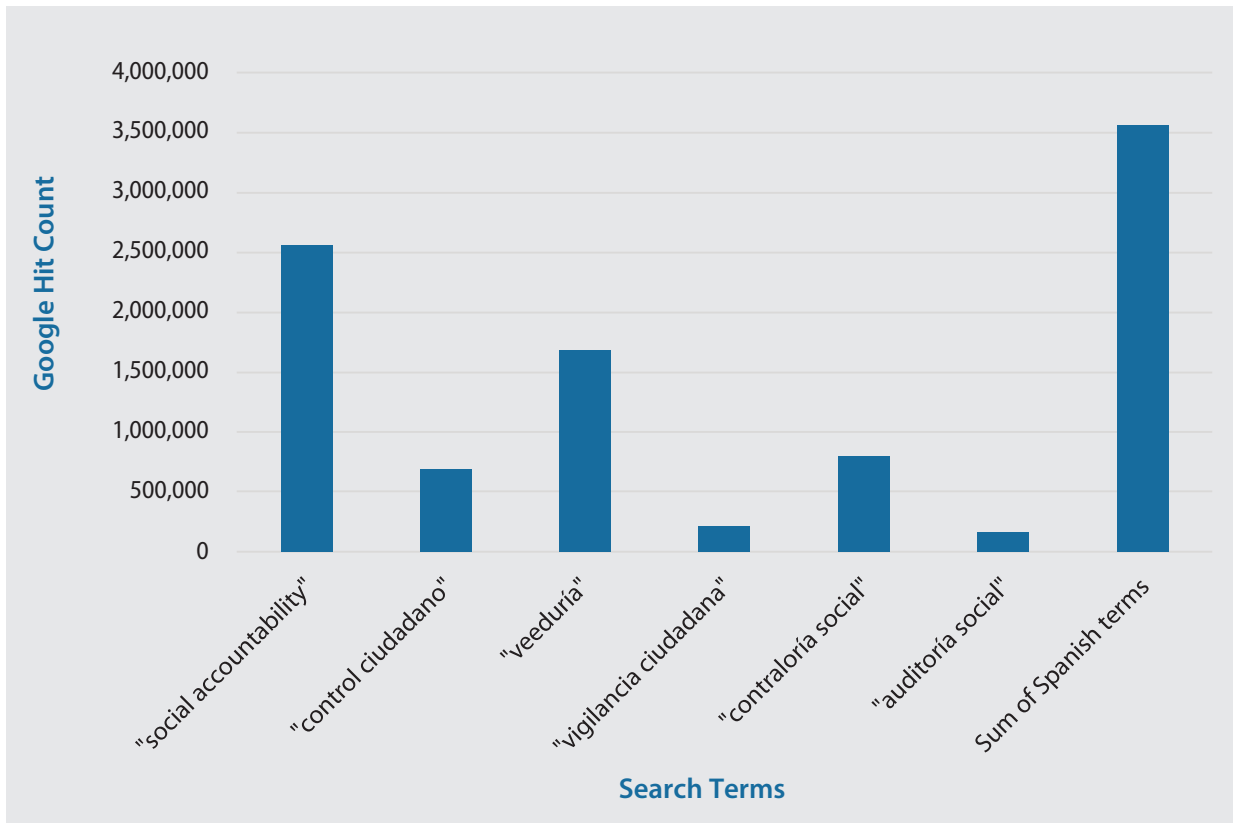
There are four shared cross-cutting issues behind the different discourses used to communicate the idea of social oversight. The first is the effort by both government reformers and CSOs to institutionalize and normalize citizen oversight practices. The second shared issue is that these invited spaces vary widely in terms of their autonomy and capacity to actually carry out oversight—ranging from pro forma validation of conventional government practices to actual independent scrutiny and voice. Third, social accountability initiatives vary in terms of their relative emphasis on tackling underlying causes vs. one-off problem-solving to address service delivery problems. Indeed, identifying those underlying causes poses a huge challenge to local level citizen oversight efforts—especially when ‘end-of-the-pipe’ service delivery problems, bias and exclusion are caused by decisions made at higher levels of government. Researchers address this distinction between addressing causes vs. symptoms in terms of “widgets vs. watchdogs” and “tactics vs. strategy” (Joshi and Houtzager 2012; Fox 2014; 2015). A fourth cross-cutting issue involves concerns about reprisals — the rarely-discussed ‘fear factor’ (Cepeda 2022; García Jiménez 2019). In spite of a rich research and evaluation literature on social accountability, so far sectoral silos have slowed synergy between applied research on citizen oversight efforts in social service provision, public security, and natural resource management. Like so many other dimensions of accountability, the ideas and institutions of social accountability are diverse, malleable, and contested.

Figure 16. Villagers submitting complaints under the Right to Hearing Act in Rajasthan, India



Credit: Digvijay Singh, also in Swamy (2020: 7).

Figure 17. Spanish language words for 'social accountability' are more widely used than the English term



This data refers to the frequency of search terms rather than total usage. The search language was Spanish for Spanish terms (with accents), and English for 'social accountability'; all search terms were in quotes. To ensure more reliable figures and considering the daily fluctuation in search indices, the hit counts shown represent the average number of search results over the course of one week.

The Google hits for the Spanish terms are summed, for comparison with the English equivalent, 'social accountability.' An alternative approach would be to add related terms in English like 'citizen oversight' (average 1,501,000 hits) and 'social audit' (189,143), bringing the English total closer to the sum of Spanish terms. Perhaps the most widely used Spanish term for social accountability, '*control social*,' would add more than 7 million additional hits, but it is not included here because it sometimes is used to refer to concepts other than social accountability (see Keywords blog, [Flores 2021](#)).

Source: This graph updates 2017 data first published in Fox (2018). The Google searches were conducted by Megan DeTura between 11/7/21 and 11/13/2021.

Figure 18. Social accountability oversight in the time of COVID



In the Philippines, G-Watch and its partner organization, Integrity Watch for Accountable Governance, conduct interviews to verify COVID assistance in Agusan del Sur, Mindanao, at the start of the pandemic in May 2020.

Credit: G-Watch/IWAG.

Box K. Elected oversight institutions were embedded in Mexico's agrarian reform almost a century ago

In Mexico, the historical roots of the idea of citizen oversight in the Spanish language go back at least to the 1930s, with the term '*vigilancia*' (oversight, literally vigilance). When the government's agrarian reform created *ejidos*, local institutions for governing new communities of land recipients, their authority was based in member assemblies that elected community leaders. In addition, these land reform communities also elected member-led oversight councils (*consejos de vigilancia*), which were intended to serve as a check on the power of the elected community leadership (according to the 1934 Agrarian Code). Even more innovative was the method for *naming* the oversight council. A 1942 reform of the Agrarian Code spelled out that these oversight councils should be constituted by the *losers* of the community leadership elections, to encourage independent oversight of the election winners.¹²⁰ Decades later, with a revision of the agrarian reform laws, the process for choosing the oversight council was changed to a conventional majority vote.

5.5 Boycott

Boycotts involve intentional shunning of visible targets. They are widely used by accountability campaigns to target products, organizations, or governments whose actions are considered unacceptable because they violate some minimum standard of behavior. Boycotts can either be informal and voluntary or can take legal form via national governmental or international sanctions. Civil society campaigns may manage to delegitimize their targets to the point of being codified into law—as in the case of the anti-apartheid movement’s international divestment campaign in the 1970s and 1980s, which built on UN sanctions.

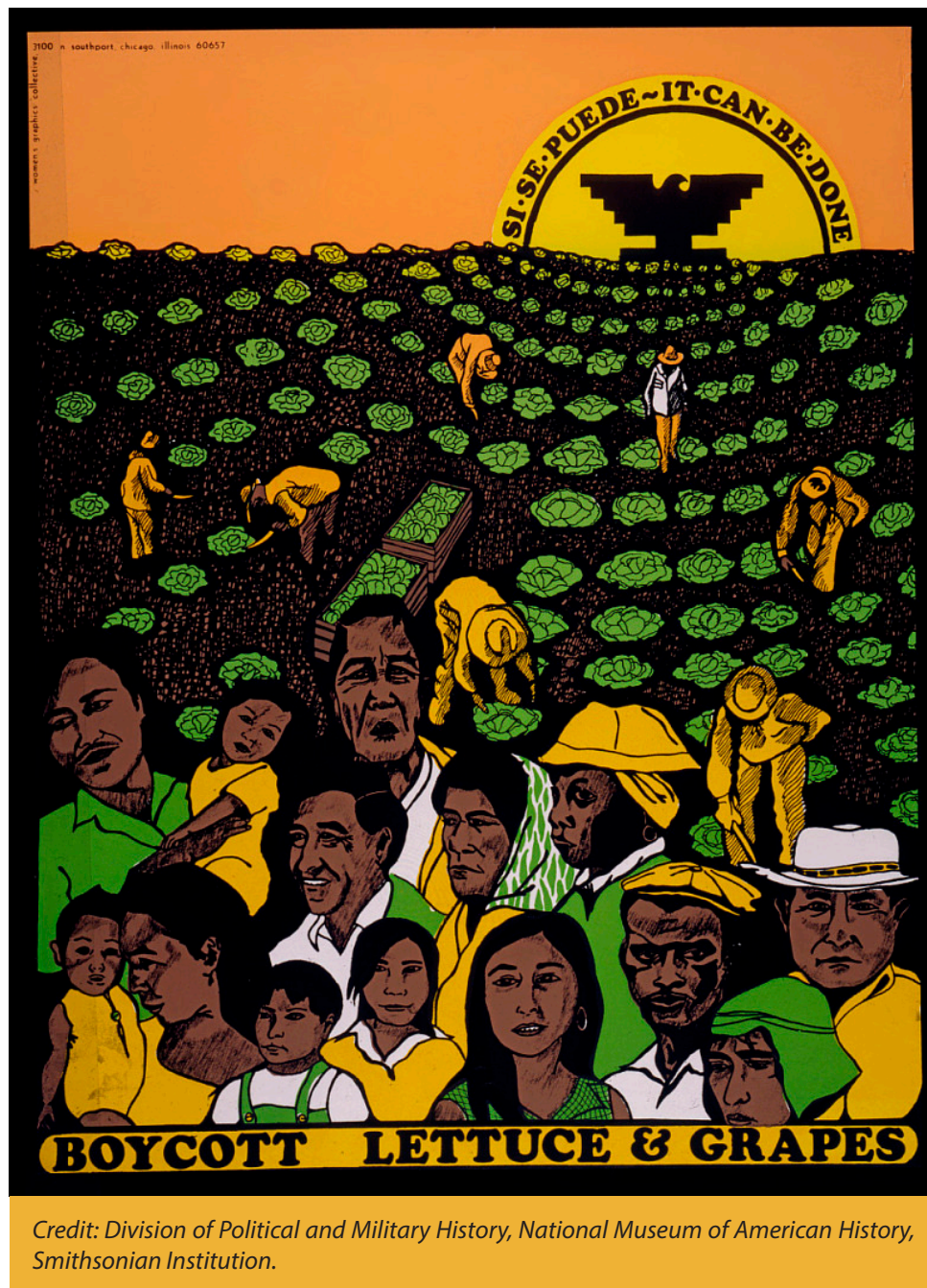
‘Boycott’ is both a noun and a verb and is used in multiple languages. The term is relevant for discussion here because it is an especially clear-cut case of an accountability-related keyword that was invented in an identifiable time and place, and then became embedded in popular cultures. The term originated in 1880 during the Irish agrarian struggle against colonial English absentee landlords, known as the ‘Land War.’ The Land League targeted ‘Captain’ Charles Boycott, a landlord’s agent, ostracizing him “as a test case ‘to gain the eyes and ears of the world.’”¹²¹ Via international media coverage, the term quickly came to be widely used to refer to organized shunning.

Since then, protest campaigns have widely used boycotts as “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985). They are a form of collective action that can be anonymous and therefore lower the risk of reprisals. Once the target is identified, boycotts can allow otherwise isolated individuals to act together without requiring intensive coordination. They open up multiple pathways, combining market pressures—if large enough numbers of people join in—with the political threat of government bans. Boycotts can be considered tools for accountability when they try to sanction power-holders for violating principles of human rights, civil rights, or self-determination.

Boycotts have consistently been used as part of broader campaigns, notably for national self-determination and against corporate power. Anti-colonial boycotts helped to forge national identities. They were used in the American Revolution, the 1891 Iranian boycott against a British tobacco monopoly, the 1912 Tunis tram boycott, the Indian independence movement and the contemporary Palestinian call to pressure the Israeli government. Anti-racist boycotts include the emblematic campaigns of the US civil rights movement such as the 1955–1956 Montgomery bus boycott, but they reach farther back in history to include the abolitionist consumer boycott of sugar grown by enslaved workers, which contributed to the end of Britain’s direct involvement in the slave trade in 1807.¹²²

Boycotts have also been widely used to support workers’ rights campaigns, as with iconic United Farmworkers grape and lettuce boycotts of the 1960s and 1970s. That campaign was especially notable because it projected nationwide a new collective identity which rejected a caste system that denied farmworkers their right to association and poisoned them with pesticides (Pulido 1996; Figure 19). In 1977, a path-breaking accountability boycott then targeted a specific corporation to challenge Nestlé’s aggressive marketing of infant formula in settings that lacked safe water (see Section 4.4; Figure 8). While some boycotts emphasize consumer action, others emphasize building the power and agency of those directly affected, as in the case of worker rights (Friedman 1999; Seidman 2007).

Figure 19. The United Farmworkers used consumer boycotts to hold companies accountable



Credit: Division of Political and Military History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Boycott is an especially relevant accountability-related keyword because it transcends the curious split between governmental and corporate accountability initiatives. While these two agendas rarely engage with each other, boycotts are used in both arenas. They are especially prominent in campaigns for corporate accountability in part because they are so consistent with market logic, using consumer power and prominent brand names for leverage. Moreover, they can be much more readily targeted than government legislation or regulation. Boycotts also broaden coalition-building possibilities because they are tools available to allies and sympathizers who may be geographically and socially dispersed or distant from the direct stakeholders.

5.6 Whistleblower

Whistleblowing existed long before it was named. Until the twentieth century, the practice mainly involved reporting private lawbreakers to the authorities—in contrast to its contemporary association with insiders who report governmental malfeasance. Indeed, governments have offered incentives for citizens to inform on private transgressions going back at least to seventh-century England.¹²³ An early whistleblower who informed the public of governmental transgressions was a British imperial insider who in 1772—via Benjamin Franklin—revealed letters that exposed the authorities’ plans to repress dissidents in the colonies.¹²⁴ The first anti-corruption law to encourage whistleblowing dates to the US Civil War, when the Congress passed the False Claims Act to address private profiteering and corruption. That law allowed ‘relators’ with direct knowledge of profiteering and corruption crimes to sue contractors on behalf of the government. As an incentive, they were allowed to keep a portion of the funds recovered. Yet it was not until a century later that this practice came to be called whistleblowing.

The term ‘whistleblower’ refers to insiders who report on abuses by their own organizations—either internally to superiors, or externally. If whistleblowers go public, their organizations often treat them as traitors. They often lose their careers and social networks in spite of ostensible protections against retribution (Alford 2001, and Figure 20). In the public domain, in contrast, the term now has widespread positive connotations because whistleblowers are recognized as putting their sense of civic duty and social responsibility ahead of their own careers.

Whistleblower used to have a narrower meaning, referring to sports referees or to the police on the street (because they blew whistles in response to wrongdoing).¹²⁵ In 1969, the pro-war press in the US used the term in an effort to stigmatize Ron Ridenhour, the soldier who revealed the infamous My Lai massacre of hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians.¹²⁶ By the early 1970s, the growing consumer rights movement in the US gave the term its current civic content. One of the first repurposed definitions was shared by agenda-setting consumer protection advocate Ralph Nader at a 1971 conference on professional responsibility: “the key question is, at what point should an employee resolve that allegiance to society (e.g., public safety) must supersede allegiance to the organization’s policies (e.g., the corporate profit), and then act of that resolve by informing outsiders of legal authorities?” (Nader, Petkas, and Blackwell 1972, 5; Box L).¹²⁷

Box L. Early adopters of the whistleblower idea recognized the challenge of inventing a new term

[T]he phenomenon known as whistleblowing [is] a novel approach to organizational decay. . . The phrase itself causes a certain noticeable discomfort.... This awkwardness in expression is partly a failure of language. The time-worn words of contempt.... words like ‘turncoat,’ ‘traitor,’ and ‘scab,’ have a strength that has persisted onto a time when.... conflicting loyalties are assured for people who choose to see them. Their persistence obstructs new words that might recognize the courage of those who expose from within when they have a good case that their employing organization is inflicting unconscionable harm upon the public. ‘Whistle-blowing,’ drafted by default into this word vacuum, suffers from the flippant image of its origin: the caricature of the bulbous-cheeked English bobby wheezing away on his whistle when the maiden [sic] cries “Stop, thief!”... [W]histle-blowing fails to capture the anguish and higher loyalties of the act.

Source: Peters and Branch (1972: 17-18)

This effort converged with the 1971 breakthrough by dissident government national security analyst Daniel Ellsberg, whose disclosure of the Pentagon Papers’ secret history of the Vietnam War revealed the government’s longstanding official story to have been false. This triggered a landmark Supreme Court case that confirmed the freedom of the press to challenge government efforts to cover up its own documents.¹²⁸ As Schudson put it, “His action consolidated the

meaning of the term ‘whistleblower’ and helped to give it the quasi-Robin Hood aura that it has retained to this day” (2015, 242-43). Shortly afterwards, an anonymous senior government security official contributed to the exposure of the Watergate scandal, bringing the idea of whistleblower to popular culture under the pseudonym Deep Throat, a reference to a well-known movie of the time (see Section 7.11).

Figure 20. Whistleblowing is risky



Source: <https://blog.transparency.org/2016/06/20/new-whistleblower-protection-law-in-france-not-yet-fit-for-purpose/index.html>.

‘Truth-teller’ is an alternative term for those who put the public interest ahead of their own career or security.¹²⁹ Such alternative, self-explanatory terms are relevant for considering whether and how meanings can be reinvented in other cultural contexts. This is especially relevant for whistleblower, since the word can have strong negative associations with ‘informer.’ Other slang terms include rat, squealer, fink, snitch, tattler, and stool pigeon. In Spanish, there is no widely-used version of “whistleblower” that includes its positive civic meaning, so it is often rendered as *informante* or *denunciante* (informer). This legacy is especially deep in many societies that either recall or still experience authoritarian regimes that widely deployed informers.

Recent test cases suggest possibilities for inventing fresh ways of communicating the civic meaning of whistleblower. Three are in political systems that have experienced many decades of one-party rule—China, Mexico, and Rwanda (Figure 21). In Mexico, the Public Administration Ministry launched a newly-invented term: ‘citizen watchdog’ (*ciudadano alertador*)—literally, ‘alerter.’¹³⁰ Critics alleged the program— with its anonymity protections — would be used with political bias. That term has also begun to be used in Spain, where CSOs argue that it is more precise and culturally appropriate than whistleblower (Whistleblowing International Network 2020). Whether it will be taken up in Latin America remains to be seen. A similar term for a whistleblower in French is ‘*lanceur d’alerte*’ (thrower of alerts).¹³¹

The whistleblower idea is also emerging in China as a new social category that is distinct from ‘informant,’ especially following the waves of online ‘netizen’ sympathy for Dr. Li Wenliang from Wuhan, who revealed the danger of the novel coronavirus and then died from the disease. The new term for his civic action took off: *chui shao ren* (whistleblower). The doctor had shared test results that came from a colleague, who was called a ‘whistle-giver.’ The Chinese

government pushed back by defining whistleblower as an ‘inside informer.’ As Li (2020) points out, informers report to the *government*, while whistleblowers (may) report to *the public*—so the two terms “are textbook examples of the difference between upwards and downwards accountability.” Informers report to power-holders, while whistleblowers report on power-holders.

Figure 21. Rwanda’s Ombuds agency promotes whistleblowing



6. Specialized accountability keywords

This section addresses seven more terms in accountability discourse that can be considered keywords because they distill big, complex ideas that are relevant for informing accountability strategies into shorthand.¹³² In contrast to the widely-used keywords discussed above, however, usage of these terms is largely limited to specialized communities in the accountability field. This section considers: accountability mechanisms, countervailing power, targeted transparency, social audits, openwashing, vertical integration, and sandwich strategy. Other specialized accountability keywords that could be addressed through the same lens include principal-agent, open government, grievance redress, corporate accountability, audit culture, legal empowerment, feminist accountability, (socio-environmental) impact assessment, big bang (anti-corruption strategies), infomediaries, and algorithmic accountability, among many others. Keep an eye out for possible uptake of a new accountability keyword, invented during the pandemic in the Philippines. The shared identity of “accountability frontliners” recognizes that community civic leaders take risks as they uphold their civic commitment to monitoring government services during the health crisis (Keywords blog, [Aceron 2021](#)).

6.1 Accountability mechanisms

Accountability mechanisms are institutional processes that use public reporting to encourage compliance with norms and standards. In contrast to the rule of law, they use ‘soft enforcement’ approaches (OECD 2015). ‘Soft’ refers here to public assessments and reporting as a form of answerability, while ‘hard’ accountability refers to capacity to sanction or provide redress (see Section 5.1 and Figure 12). The idea of accountability mechanisms has been applied across a wide range of fields and sectors, but it has received little comparative analytical attention as an umbrella category.

This concept is potentially very broad. Most often, the term refers to organizations, or units within them, that do oversight. They respond to reports of problems and complaints with investigations, dispute resolution, and possibly redress.¹³³ Some rely exclusively on reporting, while others have some capacity to respond with remedies or enforce standards. Their autonomy and capacities vary widely. In the world of international development policy, environmental lawyers informed the design of what became a global network of accountability mechanisms embedded in official development agencies (see Box M).

Box M. International accountability mechanisms broaden and deepen

In response to international advocacy campaigns in the early 1990s that damaged the credibility of the World Bank’s management, its board of directors created the precedent-setting Inspection Panel. The Panel was designed to investigate claims that World Bank-funded projects had violated its own minimum social and environmental standards, later known as policy ‘safeguards.’ It was very innovative for a multilateral organization controlled by nation-states to recognize the standing of directly-affected communities. Multilateral development agencies around the world followed suit and now have their own association of international accountability mechanisms.¹³⁴ Civil society advocates emphasize that to ‘count’ as an accountability mechanism, these offices need to combine principles of independence, transparency, fairness, professionalism, accessibility, and effectiveness.¹³⁵

These international mechanisms bridge upwards and downwards accountability insofar as they both report their assessments of complaints to agency leadership and they publicly disclose their findings. For some international accountability mechanisms, mandates are limited to identifying agency violations of their own policies, but others also have a mandate to seek negotiated compromises or redress—as in the case of the International Finance Corporation’s Compliance Advisor/Ombudsman office (Altholz and Sullivan 2017). The World Bank has also committed to embedded grievance mechanisms in all of its investment projects, though internal assessments suggest little evidence of capacity to redress grievances — as indicated by the evocative title of a recent report: “Gaining Traction or Spinning Wheels?” (Pfiel and Agarwal 2021).¹³⁶

The term ‘mechanism’ is a metaphor insofar as it refers here to institutional tools and processes rather than to machines. As with engineered systems such as airplanes or rockets, the reliable performance of accountability mechanisms requires multiple, layered systems that include failsafe provisions (Romzek and Dubnick 1987). That is, redundant systems can be *positive*—if one system fails, others should be in place to back it up (Schillemans and Bovens 2011). This idea of positive redundancy is also relevant for understanding how different accountability mechanisms fit together and can reinforce each other, as in the concept of ‘accountability ecosystems’ (Keywords blog, [Halloran 2021](#)).

Yet the term ‘mechanism’ is limited insofar as the analogy with mechanical hardware implies that these institutions function *consistently*. Well-made gadgets should operate the same way, predictably, time after time—yet many accountability mechanisms operate inconsistently. Only sometimes do they have the autonomy and capacity needed to play their oversight roles, and only sometimes do those processes lead to tangible accountability outcomes. Indeed, many accountability mechanisms rely fundamentally on the open-ended, soft power of investigations and dissemination, so a term that implies well-oiled precision hardware is an incomplete fit.¹³⁷

Back in the 1970s, the usage of ‘accountability mechanism’ in US political science was very open-ended, and included public opinion, protest, as well as checks and balances processes such as congressional impeachment of executive authorities (Havens and McNeil 1978, 17). Analysis of congressional oversight uses the related metaphor of police patrols vs. fire alarms to contrast proactive monitoring by officials with reliance on citizens to alert authorities (Box N).

Box N. Unpacking the ‘police patrols and fire alarms’ metaphor used in political science

In political science, analysis of oversight institutions has been strongly influenced by a metaphor, the distinction between ‘police patrols’ and ‘fire alarms’ (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; Siavelis 2000). In this view, the key distinction is between centralized public agencies that engage in ‘command and control’ monitoring by authorities vs. decentralized, indirect approaches that delegate the task of monitoring to citizens, who are mandated to sound the alarm when danger strikes (Smulovitz 2003).

The fire alarm image resonates with social accountability because it literally projects the voices of citizens concerned with defending themselves or their communities. Loud alarms are difficult to ignore. They also have the advantage of potentially protecting the identity of those sounding the alarm from possible reprisals from arsonists. At the same time, the metaphor implicitly assumes that public agencies are both willing and able to respond once they are alerted to a threat. For the fire alarm metaphor to be effective at capturing how institutions respond, first one must hope that a fire department is actually located nearby and adequately funded. The metaphor also assumes that the first responders are the solution rather than part of the problem—consider the risks of armed responses when calling the police to address mental health crises, for example. In other words, the police patrol and fire alarm metaphors highlight the ‘alerting’ process, without addressing the question of what kinds of incentives encourage public institutions to act in the public interest.

Different kinds of alarms are needed to address multiple possible sources of institutional failure. Individual alerts to localized service providers are insufficient to address systemic problems that result from power imbalances that are located further upstream in the policy decision-making process. The street-corner alarm box cannot ensure that the fire department has the right staff and equipment, nor is it adequate for reporting corruption in the fire department itself. Moreover, the fire alarm metaphor also conflates the difference between individual and collective action involved in alerting the authorities to problems. This distinction is relevant insofar as collective action is likely to be more effective than individual alarms at holding unresponsive institutions accountable, at least for under-represented communities.

Source: This text is adapted from Fox (2007b, 243–244).

Over time, accountability mechanism has referred primarily to more specific kinds of official oversight agencies, including anti-corruption investigation agencies, ombuds offices, grievance redress mechanisms, human rights commissions, and public audits, both in national governments and international institutions. One of the most high-profile kinds of accountability mechanisms is the governmental anti-corruption agency. In spite of a few notable success stories and high hopes among international donors, most such agencies have either proved to be weak or rolled back (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Meanwhile, public interest groups, researchers, and policy reformers address other kinds of accountability mechanisms separately, in disconnected silos (e.g., national human rights institutions, multilateral agency investigative bodies, public service grievance redress mechanisms, and social audits). In spite of this diversity, many accountability mechanisms share the common feature of responding to citizen claims with some kind of investigative reporting—yet usually without the capacity to act on those reports.

Public-facing accountability mechanisms began to be recognized in international law in the early 1990s, notably with the UN's Paris Principles, which encouraged what became the rapid diffusion of national human rights institutions. Two decades later, approximately 130 countries had such agencies (Goodman and Pegram 2012). International relations specialists focus on these agencies' diffusion of rights, norms, and national compliance with international commitments, though local and national rights defenders may frame national human rights institutions more in terms of their own democratization struggles (e.g., Cardenas 2012). When seen through an accountability lens, such agencies can potentially produce some degree of answerability, when they have the investigative capacity to question other government officials. They can also record testimony and validate claims by victims.¹³⁸ Whether or not governments act on their findings and recommendations is usually in the hands of other agencies.¹³⁹

Some national human rights institutions include officials who are willing to invest their political capital to form coalitions with grassroots rights defenders. Such partnerships are forms of collaborative social accountability between reformers in state and society — though they may involve challenging other government agencies. For example, Guatemala's grassroots indigenous health rights defenders network works in partnership with the national government's semi-autonomous human rights defense agency to oversee public clinics.¹⁴⁰ In Peru, a similar coalition between grassroots women's health rights defenders and a provincial office of the government's human rights ombuds agency officially deputized indigenous community watchdogs to carry out oversight of public health services—though this partnership proved difficult to sustain over time.¹⁴¹

National governments also rely on a range of often semi-autonomous investigative bodies, ranging from one-off special commissions created to address specific crises to highly institutionalized audit agencies. The most influential official audit agencies are known as supreme audit institutions, which are often mandated by legislatures to oversee executive authorities. Their role is usually limited to retrospective assessments—often limited to finances, but sometimes including broader performance issues. Even national audit agencies with high degrees of autonomy and capacity—as in Mexico—may apply a narrow lens and miss systemic problems, and even when they have strong findings they are often ignored.¹⁴² Audit results are often so technical that getting the attention of legislators and the public requires in-depth media attention—and even that may not be sufficient for legislatures and legal systems to act. The potential for synergy between independent audit agencies and civil society action has barely begun to be tapped in most countries, though the Citizen Participatory Audit in the Philippines stands out as a sustained case.¹⁴³

Another widely used kind of governmental accountability mechanism involves public-facing grievance redress agencies or offices (GRMs). They appear to be proliferating around the world, though with little evidence of whether and how they actually manage to redress grievances.¹⁴⁴ Like audits, most are designed to address specific problems rather than being intended to identify and respond to systemic issues. While *patterns* of complaints can reveal systemic problems and can thereby guide preventative reforms, such data is rarely proactively disclosed, limiting the potential for synergy between insider reformers and public interest groups.¹⁴⁵ The problem-solving capacity of grievance redress mechanisms could be bolstered by open government reforms, but reliable data on whether they actually redress grievances is often lacking. Meanwhile, initial optimism about the capacity of civic tech to close feedback loops in the global South has not been borne out by the evidence.¹⁴⁶

One kind of public-facing grievance redress mechanism with a long track record involves citizen oversight of policing. Starting back in the mid-twentieth century, US civil rights movements led waves of efforts by local governments to launch civilian police review boards. They vary widely in mission, structure, and capacity, to very limited effect so far. They are hybrid institutions that bridge government and civil society — a form of diagonal accountability, in terms of the spatial metaphors discussed above (see Section 4.3).

Civilian review boards follow three basic models in the US, increasingly in combination. Investigation-focused oversight tries to address specific complaints. Review-focused models assess completed police-led investigations. Auditor/monitor-focused agencies are newer and review broader, more systemic patterns in investigations of complaints. Shared patterns include resistance from the police, limited investigative capacity, and no enforcement powers.¹⁴⁷ The US experience with civilian police review boards raises broader questions about whether oversight bodies with some voice but no teeth really count as accountability mechanisms.

The diversity of official processes that fall under the umbrella of accountability mechanisms also underscores the question of reactive vs. preventative approaches (Section 4.7). Most are clearly reactive, but some governments have created agencies that attempt to protect journalists and civil society activists where attacks are common. In Colombia, for example, the government's 'People's Defender' agency operates an early warning system to recognize activists under threat. The Interior Ministries of some governments also have "protection mechanisms" that respond to some reported threats by providing panic buttons or occasionally bodyguards for activists or journalists under threat — as in Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia. These official protection efforts have a long history, with a mixed record among social and civic leaders.¹⁴⁸

To sum up, there is no clearly bounded definition of 'accountability mechanism.' In contrast to traditional top-down or internal official inspection bodies, they respond to citizen reports of grievances, abuse, or service delivery performance failures with investigations—and they make their findings public. They test the power of information by emphasizing public disclosure, but the question of whether they lead to accountability circles back to the distinction between the soft and hard varieties. When they provide some degree of answerability for what *other* agencies have done, they offer soft accountability. In the rare cases where they have enforcement power to provide redress or levy sanctions, they can deliver hard accountability as well.

Figure 22. Independent health rights defenders exercise their legal right to monitor public clinics in Guatemala



Credit: Sandra Sebastián, also in Flores (2018, 7).

6.2 Countervailing power

Countervailing power is the capacity to push back (Fox 2020). More precisely, countervailing power refers to “mechanisms that reduce, and perhaps even neutralize, the power advantages of ordinarily powerful actors” (Fung and Wright 2003, 260). This has different meanings for different actors. Its original meaning referred to the balance of power between organized labor and business (Galbraith 1952). For grassroots actors, it may refer to capacity to deter security forces from using repression. For legislatures or courts, it would refer to their capacity to use the legal or political system to constrain executive power. Note the emphasis here on capacity, rather than on specific actions. Spaces for “deliberative contestation” are key.¹⁴⁹

The exercise of countervailing power may not require confrontation in order to get authorities to respond. For example, strong unions can get employers’ attention without having to go on strike. Countervailing power involves bargaining power—the leverage needed both to question authority without reprisals, and to get those in power to listen. It can be expressed in *either* adversarial or collaborative terms (Fung and Wright 2003). That is, countervailing power does not necessarily involve overt conflict, since it can gain a seat at the table, or have a deterrent effect.

The idea of countervailing power draws on a much older accountability keyword: checks and balances. In political theory, that idea is primarily framed in terms of the separation of powers between different branches of government (see Section 7.5). For social, political, and civic actors, the extent of countervailing power depends in part on their capacity to mobilize and represent their constituencies, to broaden their base, to recruit coalition allies, to gain mainstream recognition, and to prevent reprisals (Box O).

This idea of capacity to restrain the abuse of power is relevant for contemporary accountability strategies because purely information-led or reporting-based strategies assume that actors have the clout to use that information to leverage change. In addition, policy reforms and externally-supported invited spaces often encourage collaboration between citizens and government authorities—without building the broad-based, autonomous social and civic constituencies that may be needed to persuade officials to be more responsive. Such ‘voice without teeth’ approaches may well deliver problem-solving—if and when already-enlightened policy-makers have room for maneuver at upper or middle levels. Even in such settings, however, replication, sustainability and more systemic policy changes are still likely to require some form of countervailing power, insofar as pro-reform policy elites need constituencies in order to survive. For example, in the field of health governance, governments and international NGOs often convene local interface meetings between un-organized citizens and health clinic staff (e.g., Gullo et al. 2020). Yet few of these problem-solving efforts also invest in efforts to scale up autonomous social organizations that could generate the bargaining power needed to convince higher level authorities to go beyond local problem-solving and put systemic change on the agenda (e.g., Bailey and Mujune 2021; Shukla et al 2022).

To learn about the process of organizing broad-based constituencies for accountability, the governance field has yet to tap into lessons from the analysis of social movements and nonviolent civic resistance—such as the centrality of identifying shared collective identities, grievances, targets, and entry points.¹⁵⁰ Then there is the question of how to address well-founded fears of reprisals for speaking out. The construction of countervailing power for the socially excluded may also require finding common ground with other social and civic actors—as in the case of civic movements fighting systemic corruption or authoritarian rule (Bellows 2020). To sum up, the concept of countervailing power is worth attention because purely information-led or projectized external interventions may take it for granted.

Box O. Representation of social constituencies requires offsetting the ‘iron law of oligarchy’

For organized social constituencies, countervailing power depends in part on their capacity for representation—which involves their leadership’s accountability to their members. The study of labor unions and social movements addresses this issue through the lens of internal democracy. Sociologists have long recognized the ‘iron law of oligarchy.’ This concept refers to the powerful structural pressures that drive the leadership of large membership organizations to develop their own interests, distinct from those of their constituencies (Michels [1911] 1962). Yet there is a difference between an always-dominant *law*, versus an often-powerful *tendency*—which can in turn be offset by countervailing forces *within* mass membership organizations, notably through decentralized leadership, and internal checks and balances (Fox 1992; 2007b). In other words, internal democracy *within* social, civic, and political membership organizations is key for them to actually represent their constituencies and exercise countervailing power on their behalf (Smith-Sreen 1995). Meanwhile, non-Western political traditions of customary law have generated their own, ethnically distinct approaches to leadership accountability.¹⁵¹

6.3 Targeted transparency

Targeted transparency measures are designed to proactively disclose accessible and actionable information that citizens will see as relevant to their lives. The term was invented to describe this specific genre of transparency initiatives (Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007). The targeted approach emerged because many governmental transparency reforms do not reach everyday citizens (Figure 23). To be of practical use, demand-based ‘access to information’ systems require high levels of prior understanding of how government institutions work, in order to know what specific information to ask for. Governmental systems for public access to information can also require familiarity with complex official request procedures, as well as persistence through multiple rounds of back and forth with authorities before relevant information *might* be disclosed. In contrast, *proactive* disclosure measures can avoid these problems, but they may also involve other obstacles—such as disclosure of volumes of raw data that need extensive processing and analysis before it can be legible, actionable, or perceived as relevant. The data may also be overly generic — for example, aggregate national or statewide data on toxic emission trends says little to specific communities about the dangers that they face—considering the unequal distribution of toxic burdens. In contrast, geographically targeted information that indicates which company emitted specific toxics allows people to identify direct threats that lurk behind the tall fence at the end of the street.

Figure 23. Targeted transparency is relevant because conventional official websites may not answer citizens' questions



Targeted transparency initiatives are distinctive in three principal ways. First is the nature of the information involved—very specific and comparable, to ensure relevance to users. Second is the design of its delivery, which is user-centered—the information needs to be easy to find and interpret. Third, this approach uses government-mandated information disclosure requirements to pursue regulatory goals (such as the reduction of toxic emissions) by disclosing specific kinds of information in order to inform public action.¹⁵²

Targeted transparency emphasizes the importance of mandating the disclosure of 'actionable' information—that is, information which people can use to inform their decisions (for example, about whether to buy a gas-guzzling car, or to identify who is responsible if they want to file a grievance), presented in a usable way (for example, to allow meaningful comparisons; see Figure 24). When policy architects apply user-centered design principles, they try to put themselves in the shoes of consumers or citizens, so that mandated disclosure can be perceived as relevant and actionable. For instance, the US government mandate for the sellers of new cars to post the vehicle's fuel efficiency rating in a large sign on the windshield is intended to make relevant information unavoidable by consumers who

are making car-buying decisions. The US Toxic Release Inventory described in Section 5.2 was another emblematic example, since it allowed citizens to identify the companies responsible for nearby emissions (once its data had been processed by a public interest group to allow for geographic targeting).¹⁵³

Figure 24. Targeted transparency promotes usable information



Targeted transparency calls for powerful institutions to disclose information that is perceived as accessible, relevant, and actionable—especially by those directly affected. In this diagram, worker rights advocates call on the International Labor Organization to move its open data efforts in this direction.

Credit: Vanessa Long of Sketchpoststudio for Laudes Foundation, also in Laudes Foundation (2021).

The concept of targeted transparency faces three main limitations. The first is characteristic of many terms that are launched with a sharp edge and then gain broader uptake—its meaning can be watered down in the process. For example, the Mexican government adopted the term ‘targeted transparency’ (in translation) but defined it much more broadly as ‘useful information.’ This included the display of flight information on signs at the airport. Second, the framework can rely heavily on a consumer-driven model of change, in which the aggregate of many individual decisions is expected to drive change—in contrast to government regulation or collective action. That said, key examples of targeted transparency, like India’s social audits, were driven by public interest advocacy campaigns. Third, in spite of its extraordinarily wide potential application, the idea of targeted transparency has not yet been taken up

much in the global transparency and accountability field. Curiously, an innovative keyword that is all about uptake has had less international uptake than one might expect.¹⁵⁴ To sum up, targeted transparency is especially relevant for accountability strategies because its user-centered approach focuses attention on the specific kinds of information that are most likely to enable targeted citizen action at scale.

6.4 Social audits

Social audits are public, third party assessments of an organization's performance, often focused on their social and environmental effects. The first one was applied to the Swedish public sector in the late 1980s, and then the term became widely associated with corporate social responsibility self-reporting. 'Social accounting' is closely related, dating back to the 1970s and referring to "public analyses of accountable entities undertaken (more or less systematically) by bodies independent of the entity, and typically without the approval of the entity concerned" (Gray 2001, 9). The term then took on a broader meaning, to refer to participatory social audits that oversee public services and programs. They can do direct problem-solving and redress some grievances. They can also complement official audit processes, since citizen eyes and ears can identify problems that top-down approaches limited to the paper trail might miss.

Social audits that focus on government programs are distinctive because they combine verified assessments with public deliberations about the findings. They can be carried out by NGOs, social movements, and government programs.¹⁵⁵ The Indian grassroots right-to-know organization MKSS pioneered independent, participatory social audits of government social programs. Activists campaigned for access to official program information, in order to compare the official story with facts on the ground—and then made that information accessible with bold, innovative public hearings that allowed the ostensible beneficiaries to question official claims. In 2005, India's right-to-know advocacy coalitions then persuaded a reformist central government to pass a law that applied social audits to one of the largest anti-poverty programs.

India's state governments of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana led the way with large-scale, regular audits of an increasing number of social programs. Those states' semi-autonomous social audit agencies validate social program performance and then present their findings in public hearings that can both expose malfeasance and enable on-the-spot problem-solving. These official social audits even make reelection of corrupt local officials less likely—though more serious corruption cases are turned over for action by enforcement agencies that may or may not follow up.¹⁵⁶

For the better part of a decade, most Indian states declined to carry out the 2005 law and did not institutionalize social audits. This began to change in 2015, when the national audit agency, backed by the Supreme Court, mandated the state governments to establish their own social audit promotion agencies. Plus, the national government's audit institution and judiciary adopted grassroots proposals from the MKSS to raise the minimum standards for claimants' rights in official social audit processes (Keywords blog, [Pande 2021a](#); Swamy 2020; and Figures 10, 17, and 25). This ongoing rollout process has been extensive, though very uneven so far. Only two states have complied with the mandate to launch official Vigilance Agencies, which suggests that for most state governments, local answerability is more politically acceptable than anti-corruption enforcement. So far, even India's most robust governmental social audits offer more voice than teeth.¹⁵⁷

Social audits can render invisible problems visible, making the concerns of the under-represented both legible and legitimate. The concept is relevant to accountability strategies because it puts validated assessments of institutional performance into the hands of stakeholders for public deliberation. Yet their impact beyond local problem-solving depends on their capacity to trigger actions by higher level authorities and the rest of the accountability ecosystem.

Figure 25. Social auditors in India register citizen grievances



Credit: Suchi Pande.

6.5 Openwashing

Addressing the role of transparency in accountability strategies is challenging because the term covers many different approaches to public disclosure—only some of which produce clear, reliable, relevant information. In practice, transparency measures range from ‘clear’ to ‘opaque’—and the goal of the latter may be to create merely the appearance of transparency. This watering down may be another cost of the mainstream uptake of a reform idea that began as more edgy.

This problem led to a recently-invented term: ‘openwashing.’ This is a variant of the metaphors ‘whitewashing’ or ‘window-dressing’—ideas widely used across cultures.¹⁵⁸ Whitewash is a kind of cheap, thin paint that is used to cover up rough surfaces. At least since the nineteenth century, the verb ‘to whitewash’ has referred to efforts to gloss over unwelcome information or misdeeds, to cover up or to exonerate with a superficial or biased investigation. Spinoff terms abound. For example, in 1989, the Greenpeace anti-toxics campaign deployed the term ‘greenwashing’ to expose corporations that claimed to have good environmental credentials by engaging in small or superficial actions to protect their brand, while their core business continued to be environmentally harmful. The idea of greenwashing has since

gained widespread mainstream acceptance. ‘Blue-washing’ is another spinoff term, referring to marine conservation efforts that ignore the devastation caused by the impunity of industrial fishing (Schott 2010). Bluewashing is also used to refer to United Nations efforts to promote corporate responsibility that lead to window-dressing (Berliner and Prakash 2015).

Openwashing refers to the actions of powerful institutions that appear to promote transparency but actually hide the persistent abuse of power and impunity.¹⁵⁹ Its usage began at least in 2009, when a blogger concerned about corporations using openness as a selling point defined openwashing as: “to spin a product or company as open, although it is not.”¹⁶⁰ In 2014, the Open Knowledge Foundation blogged about “the difference between opening your data and simply making them available” (Villum 2014). In 2015, the World Wide Web Foundation found that openwashing was jeopardizing progress on governance reforms across the globe, noting that “many governments have advertised their open data policies as a way to burnish their democratic and transparent credentials,” but, “[d]isturbingly. . . we saw a backslide on freedom of information, transparency, accountability, and privacy indicators in some countries” (World Wide Web Foundation 2016, 8). For a vivid example, when Guatemala joined the Open Government Partnership, the Vice President was put in charge of the government’s follow-up—but she later ended up in jail for corruption, suggesting that she had much to hide (Figure 26). While this looks like an unusually straightforward case of openwashing, whether or not the term applies to other cases in which those committed to transparency fail to deliver is less clear-cut.¹⁶¹

Figure 26. Open government champion charged with corruption: Evidence of open-washing



Guatemala’s former vice-president, Roxana Baldetti, the senior official responsible for the Open Government Partnership, was arrested and convicted on corruption charges.

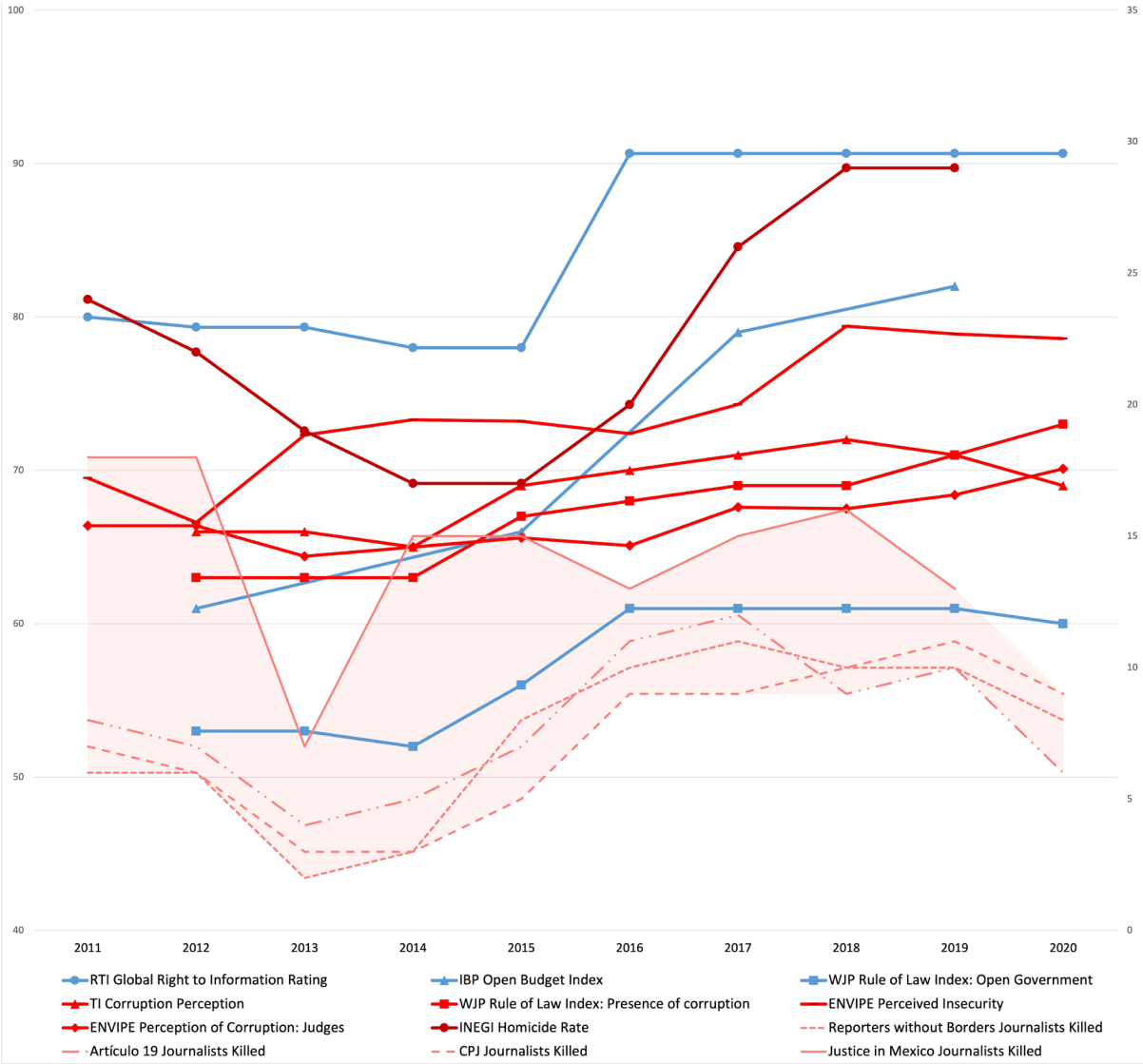
Credit: elPeriódico, <https://elperiodico.com.gt/nacionales/2017/06/08/estados-unidos-reclama-a-roxana-baldetti-por-vinculos-con-los-zetas/>.

The concept of openwashing has a strong intuitive quality but defining it with precision is still a work in progress. Here is the challenge: the term could refer both to weak transparency initiatives that *coexist* with persistent accountability failures, and to more deliberate attempts to *cover up* abuse and impunity. Yet only the second sense of the term includes openwashing's implicit emphasis on the *intent* to deceive. That raises the question: *who* is doing the openwashing? For example, where international multi-stakeholder initiatives certify social and environmental practices that turn out to violate those standards, those validation systems appear to both greenwash and openwash, as in the case of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (EIA 2015; 2019). That said, the existence of loopholes in a certification system does not speak to motives.

The Mexican government's transparency reforms illustrate the dilemmas involved in defining openwashing. Mexico's demand-driven public information access system is ranked as one of the most advanced in the world.¹⁶² At the same time, Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a journalist. Persistent systemic corruption, abuse of power, and impunity are well-documented. Moreover, until a president was elected in 2018 on an anti-corruption platform, Mexico's ranking with Transparency International was worsening— during the same period when its public information access system was rated as number one in the world. The data visualization in Figure 27 uses multiple indicators to show how Mexico's transparency and impunity trends *both* went up during the same period of time.

This recent Mexican experience combines high transparency with low accountability, a counter-intuitive process that would appear to fit the definition of openwashing. But who is presumably doing the openwashing? Does the term's implicit focus on intent to deceive refer to the national politicians who presided over the government's accountability failures, for whom open government may have provided a convenient fig-leaf? Or does openwashing refer to actions by the public information access bureaucracy that carried out the disclosure policy? The administrators of transparency policies are likely to be different from those responsible for accountability failures. This case shows the difficulty in pinning down a core element of the concept—intent—because *who is driving* the openwashing remains ambiguous. To sum up, the idea of openwashing is relevant to accountability strategies because in a field that relies heavily on information-led approaches, it focuses attention on the potential disconnect between transparency and accountability.

Figure 27. Mexico: Transparency and impunity trends point in the same direction (2011–2020)



This graph contrasts international indicators of open government (lines in blue) with several indicators of impunity (lines in red). To facilitate comparison of these two trends, several indicators included in this graph have been rescaled and/or adjusted. The graph depicts the inverse of the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, so that a score of 0 signifies very clean and 100 signifies highly corrupt. The World Justice Project Presence of Corruption indicator, which is the inverse of the WJP’s Absence of Corruption score. In addition, Mexico’s INEGI Homicide Rate and assorted values for numbers of journalists killed are plotted on the secondary Y-axis (ranging from 0 to 35). Both are indicators of impunity because the guilty are almost never successfully prosecuted. Finally, as there is no uniform count of journalists killed in Mexico, the pink shading represents the range of higher and lower tallies recorded by four different press freedom organizations.

Source: Megan DeTura, with input from Jonathan Fox.

6.6 Vertical integration

Vertical integration refers to coordinated civil society monitoring and advocacy across more than one level of public sector decision-making (local, subnational, national, and/or international).¹⁶³ The term is considered a keyword because it refers to a potentially significant strategy that is sometimes pursued by practitioners but has not had an explicit name.¹⁶⁴ This emphasis on multi-level approaches contrasts with the usual way in which international aid and philanthropy operates, which is to categorize initiatives in terms of local/subnational or national work. Meanwhile, 'local' can mean very different things to different actors (see Box P).

Box P. What counts as local?

The idea of 'local' is another ambiguous one, where 'you know it when you see it.' The term usually refers to a small area, whether for a community consultation or for administering an anesthetic injection. But what 'small' means varies widely, since where one stands depends on where one sits. In the governance field, 'local government' usually refers to subnational levels of government, yet they may not be so small.

In Mexico, for example, 'local' refers to municipal or state governments—even though they have populations that are comparable to Central American countries. The use of 'local' in Mexico tends to reflect a capital-city-centric viewpoint to mean all other levels of government—yet even in a vast metropolis like Mexico City, people refer to its government as 'local.' Meanwhile, the idea of 'local' has multiple layers. From the perspective of a state capital, 'local' may refer to other, smaller municipalities. Seen from a district or municipal center, smaller outlying communities are in turn seen as local (and are called 'localities').

In contrast, if one flips to the international level, policymakers in Washington, DC, or London often use the term 'local' to refer to entire countries. To sum up, as a participant in a Mexico City workshop on vertical integration observed, 'local' refers to a territory that is seen as the smaller 'other' from wherever one is positioned (Fundar 2015, 7). The idea of local is inherently relative—and implicitly hierarchical.

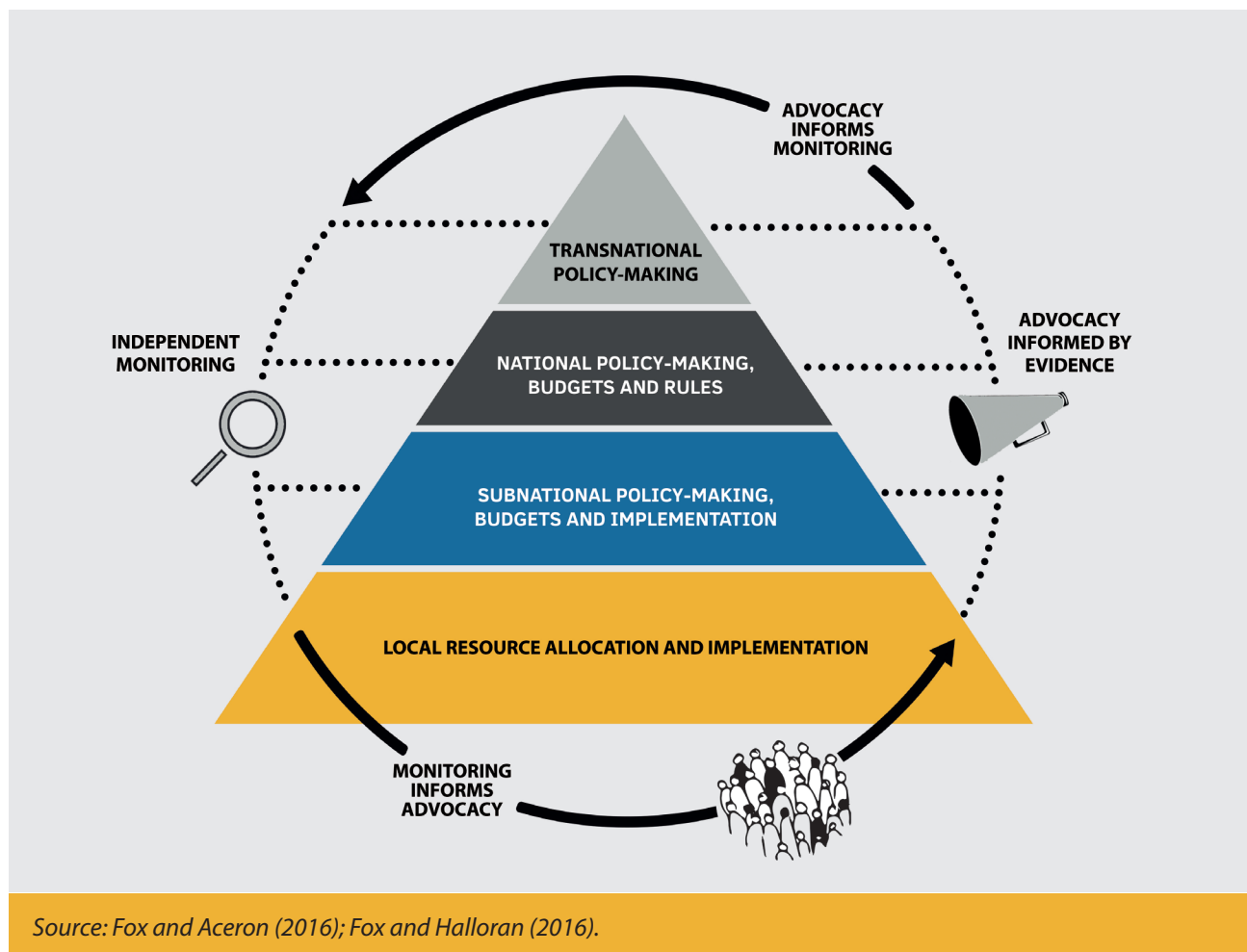
The idea of vertical integration originated in early twentieth-century political economy, where it referred to an enterprise's control of its own supply chain, including both backward linkages (inputs, parts) and forward linkages (distribution, sales, and service).¹⁶⁵ In contrast to its meaning for business, where 'integration' refers to centralized *control*, in the civil society arena the term is a metaphor that points towards much looser *coordination* of independent monitoring and advocacy.

Multi-level monitoring of the various links in a chain of official decision-making can help to guide advocacy efforts, to ensure that they knock on the right door. This systemic approach to oversight also anticipates the possibility that advocacy targets will seek to deflect answerability by pointing the finger at other branches or levels of government—a problem known as 'squeezing the balloon.' In order to assess official claims that problems identified are not their responsibility, advocates need independent information on where specific decisions are really made.

Figure 28 illustrates this process of multi-level independent civil society oversight, which runs parallel to the multiple layers and structures of governance. The concept was originally developed to describe monitoring of multilateral development bank projects (Fox 2001). In practice, 'full' vertical integration of independent policy monitoring and advocacy is rare. Oversight capacity that covers each link in the 'supply chain' of service provision is very challenging, requiring a high degree of institutional capacity as well as the sustained coordination of many 'moving parts.' Yet, partial degrees of vertical integration (e.g., from community to district or provincial levels) are much more common.

They can generate more comprehensive, civil society oversight efforts than isolated monitoring of any one link in the chain of government decisions.¹⁶⁶

Figure 28. Vertical integration of monitoring and advocacy



Textbook Count in the Philippines was an emblematic case of a vertically integrated collaboration between civil society and government reformers. NGOs and broad-based membership organizations worked with Education Department leadership to monitor the entire supply chain of textbook production and delivery, leading to significant reductions in corruption and improvements in performance (Acheron 2016). In its heyday, this Textbook Count campaign also achieved extraordinary territorial reach, covering 80% of school districts. Government Watch, the public interest group that led Textbook Count, then built on this analysis to organize a study of six cases of diverse public interest campaigns that all pursued multi-level monitoring and advocacy strategies (Acheron 2018). The cases ranged from reproductive rights reform to anti-mining campaigns, disaster risk reduction policy, and agrarian reform. These issue-focused campaigns had all been pursuing multi-level strategies for years and 'vertical integration' provided an umbrella concept to name and analyze what activists had already been doing for years.¹⁶⁷ Yet what may look to activists like a common sense, politically pragmatic approach is excluded from evaluations whose claim to methodological rigor requires exclusively localized interventions (Bailey and Mujune 2021).

Figure 29. Under India’s National Health Mission in Maharashtra, community-based monitoring networks engaged in problem-solving at multiple levels



As part of India’s National Health Mission, the Community-Based Monitoring and Planning initiative combined monitoring and advocacy for health system problem-solving at multiple levels in the state of Maharashtra.

Source: Shukla, Marathe, Yakkundi, Joshi and Fox (2022)

The metaphor of vertical integration faces at least two significant limitations. First, the original, ‘command and control’ corporate version may get in the way of communicating its intended reference to much less centralized, more balanced civil society approaches to coordinating policy monitoring and advocacy. At the same time, the idea of *integration* underscores the coordination across levels that gives the strategy its leverage. Second, the concept does not address the key horizontal dimension of territorial reach. In principle, vertical integration could involve either broad or narrow territorial coverage.¹⁶⁸ In contrast, the term ‘multi-level’ may be a more self-explanatory synonym. Horizontal reach can also be brought in with another adjective, as in ‘broad-based, multi-level monitoring.’

The vertical integration idea offers three different ways of seeing that are relevant for strategy. The first suggests a way for reformers to ‘see’ different layers of decision-making within the state, in ways that identify both entry points and bottlenecks with precision. The second lens underscores the relevance of seeking synergy between national level policy advocacy and subnational efforts to promote implementation of policy reforms by bolstering bottom-up monitoring and advocacy. Vertical integration offers a third lens by providing a shorthand name for multi-level strategies that reformers and advocates may already be pursuing under other rubrics.

6.7 Sandwich strategy

Sandwich strategies involve openings from above that enable mobilization from below. They potentially create new space and leverage for power-shifting reform coalitions. This idea emerged from research in the early 1980s which discovered that a Mexican government program to provide low-income rural consumers with low-cost staple foods enabled the emergence of a broad-based, autonomous movement that advocated for the program to deliver on its promises. That dynamic was not supposed to be possible—at least according to academics and dissidents at the time (Fox 1992). In spite of the authoritarian regime, insider reformists managed to create civic space for scaled-up, semi-autonomous collective action that made a long-term difference, in spite of backlash from vested interests both inside and outside the government (Fox 2007b).

The sandwich idea tries to describe mutually-reinforcing interaction between pro-reform actors within both state and society. ‘Sandwich’ refers here to both a noun and a verb. This metaphor attempts to communicate the relevance of convergence between some kind of pressure from both above and below to offset entrenched anti-accountability forces. Like vertical integration, sandwich strategy is a proposed accountability keyword here because it describes an approach pursued by reformers and activists in diverse settings for decades, yet it has not had its own name.¹⁶⁹

Defining what counts as a meaningful opening from above is challenging, insofar as social actors often hear political elites make promises of support that they do not keep (Section 3.3). A new comparative study of sandwich strategies defines them more precisely, focusing on cases where state actors managed to tangibly reduce the risks/costs of autonomous collective action.¹⁷⁰ Possible examples include state actors who deliver material resources that enable community organizing at scale, challenge impunity for rights violators, extend legitimacy or provide political ‘cover’ for autonomous collective action, or credibly reduce the fear of reprisals. This focus on tangible initiatives leaves out purely discursive government measures, such as campaign promises, laws, and policies that exist only on paper. Some of these openings from above are internally-driven by reformers, while others are responses to external pressures. The motives and staying power of state actors are open questions, rather than defining characteristics of sandwich strategies.

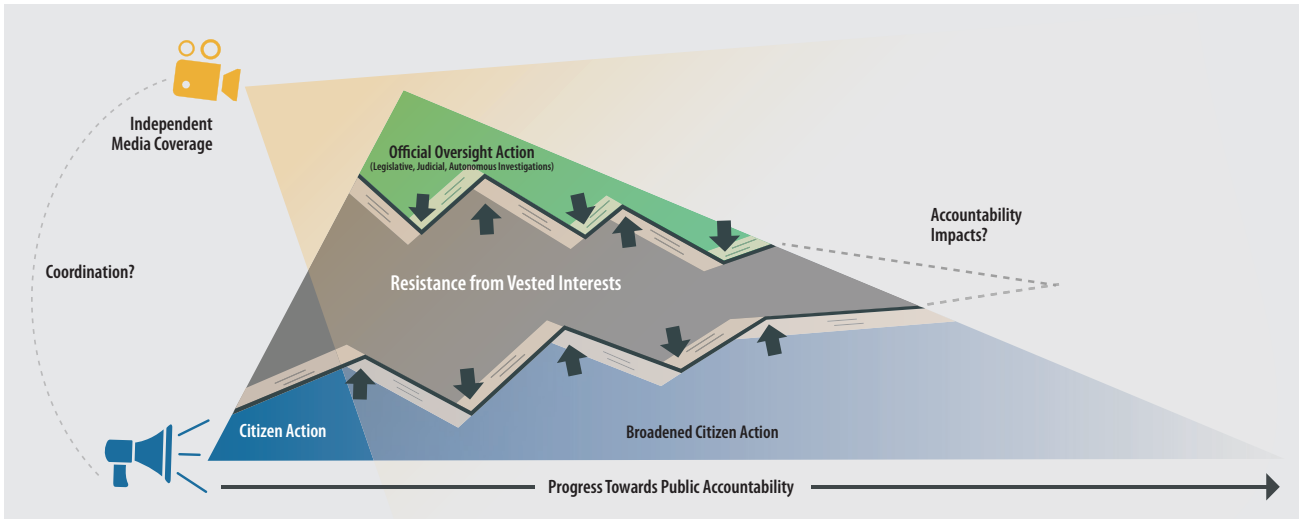
Sandwich strategy processes overlap with the broader category of collaborative social accountability, insofar as social actors ally with some state actors while challenging others. This framework offers a three-dimensional alternative to the conventional two-dimensional dichotomy between collaborative and confrontational approaches. Indeed, one central message of the sandwich strategy is that the construction of accountable governance needs countervailing power both in state and society in order to weaken anti-accountability forces (Section 6.2). This contrasts with approaches to collaborative governance that rely primarily on the goodwill and influence of enlightened elites.

Because sandwich strategies have yet to be recognized and studied systematically, their possible pathways are not yet well-understood. Figure 30 depicts how a prototypical sandwich strategy process might unfold, as pressure from both above and below manages to shrink the power of anti-accountability forces. In this visualization, mutually reinforcing citizen action and media attention both target anti-accountability forces and bolster pro-accountability state actors. The jagged lines along the pathway are intended to communicate a non-linear path that takes into account likely friction and resistance to accountability efforts. In this aspirational model, pro-accountability actors in state and society both start off weak, and their convergence eventually manages to weaken anti-accountability forces. In this proposed scenario, iterative, virtuous circles of *mutual empowerment* between pro-accountability forces in state and society are the main driver of change.

Figure 30. How does voice trigger teeth? Media spotlight bolsters sandwich strategy power shift

HOW DOES VOICE TRIGGER TEETH?

Media spotlight and citizen action drive sandwich strategy power shift towards accountability outcomes



- Independent Media Coverage:** Refers to outlets with the capacity to influence public opinion (print, broadcast, online)
- Official Oversight Action:** Refers to public authorities with investigation and possibly sanctioning powers (horizontal accountability)
- Citizen Action:** Refers to a wide range of possible repertoires, ranging from institutional civic engagement to street protests and social media voice
- Vested Interests:** Refers to the political and economic actors that are responsible for or benefit from corruption, abuse and secrecy

Source: Author.

The term sandwich strategy has so far traveled little beyond specialized communities of practice and academics—with one exception. The concept gained significant uptake in the Philippines, where activist scholar Saturnino ‘Jun’ Borras invented a cross-cultural adaptation (Borras, 1999, Figure 31). His idea was to describe the strategy in terms of the ‘bibingka,’ a rice cake baked both from above and below. The term still resonates widely among national public interest groups in the Philippines (see Keywords blog by [Isaac and Aceron 2021](#)).

Having reviewed this series of specialized accountability keywords—many with uptake still limited to specific communities of practice—the next section returns to popular culture. Analysis of widely-used sayings can shed light on the diverse ways in which ideas about accountability are embedded in everyday common sense.

Figure 31. The Bibingka strategy: Pressures from both above and below



Source: Borras (1999).

7. Accountability sayings: Wise words from the near and distant past

To follow up on the proposition that popular cultures can have their own accountability discourses, this last section brings together a series of ‘accountability sayings,’ presented in chronological order. These are catchphrases, idioms, or proverbs that are widely recognizable, dating from the Roman Empire through the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico to contemporary Twitter hashtags. These sayings are presented here, together with the keywords already discussed, because they sketch a portrait of diverse ways in which ideas about accountability are present in popular cultures. They are therefore emblematic of existing cultural resources that accountability initiatives can draw on.

This collection over-represents sayings in English, reflecting the author’s linguistic and civic formation—though the series of blogs that accompanies this working paper provides examples from many other cultures and languages. At least two challenges were involved with the criteria for selecting the sayings discussed here. First, many widely-used proverbs and idioms refer to problems involving the *lack* of accountability, such as injustice or corruption, without actually making an explicit connection to accountability *per se*. Second, when attempting to identify the original sources of sayings, experts have found widespread misattribution, even in sources considered authoritative. It turns out that famous quotations are often attributed to the famous people who popularized them, rather than their original authors (Keyes 1992). The reflection that follows tries to briefly identify when and how they became popular common sense.

7.1 Who guards the guardians?

Who ensures that those in power will govern well? This classic accountability dilemma was first posed in ancient Rome by the poet Juvenal, and later by nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill. The phrase evolved into ‘who watches the watchmen?’ and has been widely taken up in popular culture—most notably in science fiction, from Robert Heinlein in 1948, to *Star Trek*.¹⁷¹

The idea is often applied to the challenge of sustaining civilian control over the military and police. For example, ongoing US police violence against unarmed civilians has led to persistent demands for investigations to be carried out by independent authorities, rather than by the police themselves. When the family of an unarmed man killed in 2004 won a civil case against the police in Kenosha, Wisconsin, they used the funds to pay for public billboards that read: ‘when the police kill, should they judge themselves?’ (Figure 32).

Figure 32. Family members of victims ask their neighbors: Who polices the police?



Credit: Mike Devries, The Capital Times, https://madison.com/ct/news/local/writers/pat_schneider/heenan-shooting-sparks-community-pushback-with-growing-impact/article_2ad27e02-6cb4-11e2-b719-0019bb2963f4.html.

7.2 Hold feet to the fire

This evocative metaphor—widely used by advocates across the political spectrum to refer to the application of pressure for accountability—is grounded in historical experience. The idiom refers to a medieval European method of torture used by church leaders on ‘non-believers’ (Figure 33). Authorities applied ‘trials by ordeal,’ forcing the accused to walk on hot coals, or applying flames to the feet to extract confession for heresy or to force conversion. The Spanish Inquisition brought the practice of “foot roasting” to the Americas. The phrase began to be used figuratively in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷² Curiously, the widespread contemporary use of the phrase—notably in human rights and open government campaigns—appears to have been completely delinked from its original, literal meaning.

Figure 33. European church authorities held the feet of accused ‘non-believers’ to the fire



Source: Désiré-François Laugée, 1881. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mus%C3%A9_alvet_Laug%C3%A9_D%C3%A9sir%C3%A9-Fran%C3%A7ois_La_question_1881.jpg

7.3 [S]he who pays the piper calls the tune

This proverb says that those who pay for services expect to get what they pay for, which is a kind of accountability. There are two different interpretations of its origins.¹⁷³ The simple version refers to when pipes were a key form of entertainment. Since the lord of the castle paid the piper, he chose the music to be played.¹⁷⁴ Another, more edgy, interpretation refers to a folk tale with medieval German origins, the thirteenth-century story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin (later recounted in Grimms’ tales in the early nineteenth century). In that story, townspeople hired the Pied Piper to get rid of their rodent problem. He lured the rats away with his music, but the citizens refused to pay him as agreed. He took retribution by using his pipes to lure away their children, who were never seen again. This possible origin suggests that the saying refers to the negative consequences paid by those who break their agreements.¹⁷⁵ There is a vernacular saying in Spanish which makes a related point: ‘*cuentas claras, amistades largas*’ (clear accounts make for long friendships). Academic theorists later addressed this issue with the concept of the ‘principal-agent framework,’ which stresses that those who are ostensibly in charge (who pay the piper) may not know what their agents are actually doing (whether the pipers are actually playing as expected).

7.4 Name and shame

This phrase sums up a classic, widely used accountability strategy, which is to identify, stigmatize and shun perceived transgressors. The phrase dates back to the 15th century.¹⁷⁶ Especially since the 1990s, the phrase has been widely used by advocacy campaigns for human rights and for corporate accountability. One challenge, however, is that it is difficult to shame the truly shameless (Fox 2007a). Analysts find evidence both for and against the power of shaming.¹⁷⁷ Starting in 2015, the international NGO Accountability Lab flipped the script and brought an inverted alternative version of the phrase to the accountability field, with their emphasis on ‘naming and faming.’ This approach deploys a different theory of change: “our idea was not to ‘name and shame’ the law-breakers, but to ‘name and fame’ those officials who were doing the right thing.”¹⁷⁸ Governments pursue this strategy as well, as in the cases of Colombia’s National Accountability Day, the US government’s International Anti-Corruption Champions, and the United Nations’ Public Service Day.

7.5 Checks and balances

This phrase refers to the distribution of power within an organization such that different elements offset others. Federalism is the political system that pioneered checks and balances, sharing power between central and subnational units of government—going back to the Achaean League of city-states in ancient Greece. Well before the European Enlightenment, one of the longest-running systems of participatory governance—the Six Nations of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy—pioneered an indigenous regime of checks and balances (Figure 34). Benjamin Franklin began promoting lessons from this political system to his colonial counterparts in 1754, and the Six Nations were invited to address the revolutionary Continental Congress in 1775, before the US Declaration of Independence.¹⁷⁹ Other eighteenth-century revolutionaries were more inspired by French philosopher Montesquieu’s ideas about the separation of powers. James Madison advocated for the idea in the Federalist papers, a series of published debates that informed the 1789 US Constitution. This argument explicitly frames checks and balances as a control or accountability “device” to prevent the abuse of power (Figure 35).¹⁸⁰ These different origins show that diverse cultures came up with their own approaches to decentering power through checks and balances.

Figure 34. The Six Nations regime of checks and balances long predated the US Constitution



Leaders from five Iroquois nations (Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca) assembled around Dekanawidah c.1570, French engraving, early eighteenth century.

Source: *Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1880-1881*, edited by J.W. Powell, 1883, reproduced in <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iroquois-Confederacy>.

Figure 35. Checks and balances refers to co-equal branches of government



7.6 Power concedes nothing without a demand

This proverb was coined by the abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass in 1857, as the US Civil War loomed. His full speech outlines a detailed theory of change which grounds numerous accountability strategies that still resonate today (Figure 36). He called it a ‘philosophy of reform.’ In his words:

“The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. . . If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand.”¹⁸¹

Douglass’ analytical proposition for how reform happens has informed diverse possible action strategies, even within the same movement. Consider the mid-twentieth century US chapter in the centuries-long global struggle against systemic racism, which included both Malcolm X’s ‘by any means necessary’ approach, and militant, disciplined non-violent civil disobedience.¹⁸² As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, cited above: “Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with” (Box G). As civil rights defender John Lewis put it: “History has proven time and again that non-violent, peaceful protest is the way to achieve the justice and equality that we all deserve,” coining the catchphrase ‘good trouble,’ meaning: “when you

see something that's not right or fair, you have to do something, you have to speak up, you have to get in the way" (Nichols 2020; Tensley 2020). A gendered version of this theory of change is also encapsulated in a rare quote from an academic that went viral, ending up on T-shirts, bumper stickers, and coffee mugs: "well-behaved women seldom make history."¹⁸³ These various catchphrases all communicate both the relevance of exercising countervailing power and the limits of 'proper channels.'

Figure 36. A nineteenth century rights slogan with twenty-first century relevance



Credit: Ricardo Levins Morales, <https://www.rlmartstudio.com>.

7.7 Government of the people, by the people, for the people

This broad nineteenth-century statement of democratic principles, widely associated with the most famous speech of President Abraham Lincoln, reveals how the question of who is supposed to be accountable to whom depends on context. In the original version of the phrase, ‘the people’ referred only to white men. When pre-Civil War US statesman Daniel Webster coined the first version of this phrase in 1830 to refer to constitutional government and the rule of law, he made an explicit reference to answerability: “the people’s government, made by the people and answerable to the people” (cited in Keyes 1992, 97). Yet Webster was also a supporter of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, a concession to the Southern states that required authorities in the Northern so-called ‘free states’ to capture and return enslaved people who had managed to escape—and criminalized the civilians who supported them. This saying became much more famous with President Lincoln’s more pithy adaptation 33 years later in his Gettysburg Address: “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” In contrast to Webster’s idea of answerability “to the people” — deeply marked by white supremacy — Lincoln used his version of the phrase to honor soldiers who died in a war that ended slavery.

7.8 Smoking gun

The idea of the ‘smoking gun’ goes back to a Sherlock Holmes detective story in which the perpetrator was found standing over a body holding a recently fired, still-smoking gun (Conan Doyle 1894). Today the phrase is widely used to refer to clear-cut evidence of who is responsible for a crime. It was first used in a political context during the Watergate scandal, when secret office tape recordings revealed the president’s direct complicity (Safire 2003). The use of the phrase took on international significance before the invasion of Iraq, when United Nations inspectors reported that they found ‘no smoking gun,’ referring to the lack of evidence for US government claims of weapons of mass destruction. Social scientists also adopted the term to refer to clear-cut evidence for a causal explanation.¹⁸⁴ The idea of smoking gun evidence is very relevant to accountability initiatives because it points the finger at those responsible in a broadly convincing way. Such clear-cut evidence is related to causal stories, which are needed to target accountability efforts.¹⁸⁵ The Sherlock Holmes approach to evidence-gathering is especially relevant for accountability work where identifiable perpetrators are involved—as when ‘follow the money’ investigations go beyond generic assessments of corruption risks to identify how specific vested interests divert funds or influence public policy.

7.9 Sunshine is the best disinfectant, electric light the best policeman

Louis Brandeis, then a public interest lawyer, coined this saying in *Harper’s Weekly* (1913). He had already invented a major concept that addressed the opposite of transparency: the ‘right to privacy’ (Warren and Brandeis 1890). He then became a leader of the Progressive movement, campaigning for government regulation to restrain a wide range of abuses of corporate power, such as workplace safety and private monopolies. He also pioneered a key tactic for evidence-based advocacy—the submission of expert testimony in legal cases—and was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1916.

While the first part of Brandeis’ famous saying has become a widely-used touchstone for right-to-know campaigners, the second part is much less well-known. Though the full sentence is widely assumed to refer to the same process—transparency—each of the two phrases actually suggests a distinct causal proposition about the power of transparency (Section 5.1). The first refers to the power of openness to *respond* to problems—Brandeis called this a ‘remedy’—while the second implicitly refers to its *deterrent effect*. This distinction underscores the relevance of disentangling reactive and preventative approaches (Section 4.7).

7.10 Pass the buck

This expression is said to have come from a US nineteenth-century custom in poker, a card game in which players take turns dealing the cards. A marker known as a 'buck' (possibly a reference to a deer-horn-handled knife) would rotate around the table to indicate whose turn it was. Poker players who did not wish to deal would 'pass the buck,' deferring responsibility. 'Passing the buck' has come to be widely used to refer to deflecting responsibility to others.

This saying provoked another phrase that directly addresses political accountability: "the buck stops here." The term was popularized in the US by 'plain-spoken' President Truman in 1945, when he displayed the saying prominently on his desk (Figure 37). This proposition makes clear that those who exercise authority are to be held responsible for what happens 'on their watch' (meaning on duty). He had already made accountability a priority in 1941, when he led a Senate committee that engaged in real-time oversight to control corruption expected to accompany rapid increases in government war spending.

"The buck stops here" became an everyday idiom that refers to leaders who take responsibility. This common-sense idea only became controversial when a more recent president denied any responsibility for his administration's failure to respond to the COVID pandemic. The Reagan presidency, on the other hand, provides an example of the opposite — an invented description for leaders who *succeed* in deflecting responsibility. Then-congressional representative Pat Schroeder captured Reagan's capacity to avoid taking blame for numerous problems on his watch by calling him 'Teflon-coated.' This phrase refers to non-stick cooking pans and it quickly went viral (Keyes 1992, 72).

Figure 37. Common-sense acceptance of responsibility: The buck stops here



Credit: Harry S. Truman Library. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/trivia/buck-stops-here-sign#footnote>

7.11 Speak truth to power

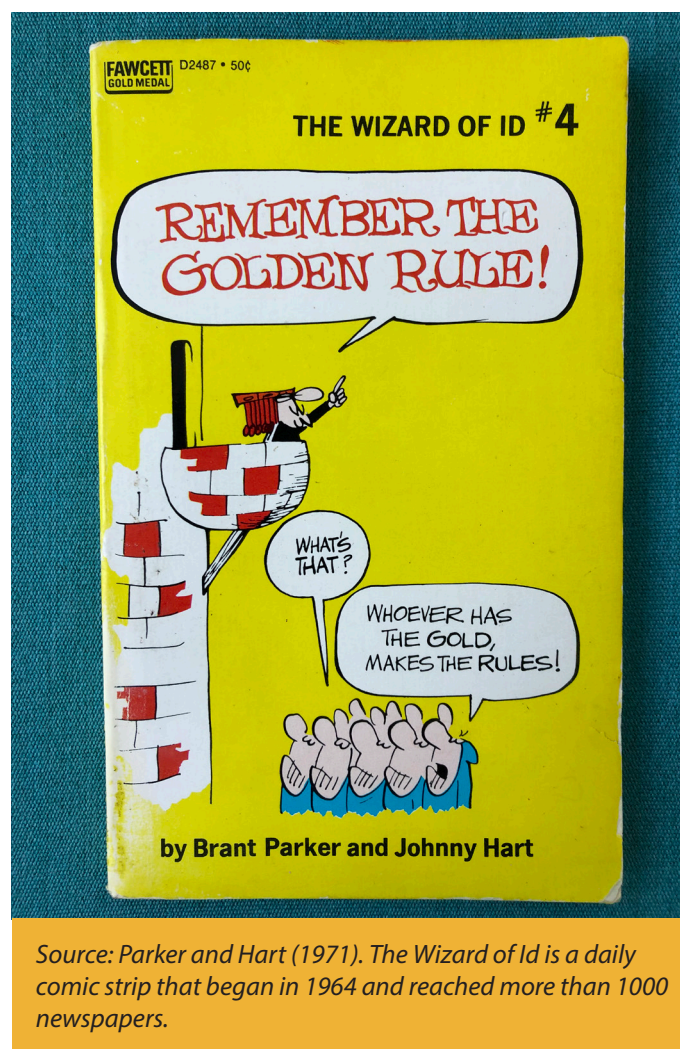
This expression is widely used in human rights, democracy, and press freedom campaigns. It was the title of a 1955 booklet published by the American Friends Service Committee as part of their Quaker-inspired promotion of peaceful approaches to reduce international tensions. One of its (unattributed) authors, civil rights organizer and peace activist Bayard Rustin, appears to have coined the phrase in 1942 (Green n.d.). Related ideas were expressed in classical Greece with *parrhesia* and in Gandhi's *satyagraha*. According to a leading historian of the civil rights movement, Rustin adapted the phrase from a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, from the *Mishkat al-Masabih*: "The most excellent jihad is when one speaks a true word in the presence of a tyrannical ruler."¹⁸⁶ This trajectory underscores the creative possibilities of inter-cultural approaches to communicating big accountability ideas.

7.12 Follow the money

This saying addresses accountability because it refers to a method for figuring out who is ultimately responsible for wrongdoing. The idea is to look beyond the direct perpetrators of a crime, to identify who was *really* behind it. The phrase took off because it was a signature line in the 1976 film about Watergate, *All the President's Men*, so it is associated with investigative journalism and detective work.¹⁸⁷ The book that the film was based on does not actually use the phrase, the first recorded use of which was in a 1974 congressional hearing.¹⁸⁸

'Follow the money' provides a name for a causal story, the need to identify who is pulling the strings. Identifying elite interests and relationships is a key element of many accountability campaigns, a method that draws on the power structure research tradition in political sociology.¹⁸⁹ The saying's message about focusing on who is really in charge is related to a satirical spin on a biblical proverb that entered US popular culture via an anti-authoritarian 1964 cartoon, The Golden Rule: 'Whoever has the gold, makes the rules' (Figure 38). This association between money and power has venerable roots, going back to philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1764, who said "the rich hold the law in a purse."¹⁹⁰

Figure 38. Reframing a golden rule as a top-down accountability relationship



7.13 To lead by obeying

The contemporary Zapatista movement in Chiapas came to the world's attention in 1994, with a dramatic rebellion that eventually settled down into a tense, de facto long-term coexistence with the Mexican government.¹⁹¹ In Zapatista territory, autonomous municipal governments operate in parallel with official authorities. In the 1990s, their panache and philosophy attracted broad interest, from indigenous rights movements, urban youth, and from diverse activists around the world who were seeking alternatives to corporate-led globalization. Informed by their pan-ethnic Mayan heritage of community self-governance grounded in deliberative assemblies and inflected with revolutionary ideology, their approach to accountable governance is summed up with their commitment 'to lead by obeying' (*mandar obedeciendo*).¹⁹² This approach to participatory governance stands out because of the Zapatistas' commitment to a long-term struggle for gender equality, as well as their rejection of direct engagement with what they call the 'bad government,' which includes all conventional political parties.¹⁹³

The autonomous Zapatista governance process includes their own municipalities, as well as their own institutions for providing health, education, justice, radio, and media (Figure 39). At the core are their seven guiding principles of good government:

1. To serve others not oneself
2. To represent not supplant
3. To build not destroy
4. To obey not command
5. To propose not impose
6. To convince not defeat
7. To go below not above.¹⁹⁴

As one interpreter of Zapatista discourse put it: "The principles of government by obeying imply a form of government where the governing authorities always look 'below' to the words of the communities and never 'above' to the accumulation of power" (Fitzwater 2019, 2).

Figure 39. Leading by obeying



"You are in Zapatista territory. Here the people are in charge and the government obeys. Good Governance Council, Central heart of the Zapatistas facing the world, Altos Zone."

Source: <https://globalsocialtheory.org/topics/zapatismo/>.

7.14 #MeToo

This hashtag slogan came to name a movement. The message names the systemic problem of sexual harassment and abuse, and the movement focuses on holding perpetrators accountable. The campaign took off with accountability tactics that included naming and shaming, boycotts, and the criminalization of previously tolerated abuses of power. The slogan was first launched on social media in 2006, and in 2017 celebrity voices led it to take off globally. This survivors' movement repertoire built on the LGBTQ rights movement's longstanding emphasis on 'coming out' (of the closet)—overcoming stigma by building solidarity through empathy and showing strength in numbers.

The widespread uptake of the message revealed the systemic nature not only of the problem of abuse, but of impunity as well. Yet it differed from past gender equity movements by exposing specific perpetrators. The definition of the slogan's author is now in the dictionary: "#MeToo founder Tarana Burke says Harvey Weinstein's conviction sends the message that 'regardless of your money, or your wealth, or your race that you have to answer and be accountable for the crimes that you commit.'"¹⁹⁵ As Burke put it: "A lot of times survivors aren't even asking for people to be fired. A lot of times they just want their story to be told. They want to say it out loud and have some level of accountability. We have to talk to survivors for what they need. We are the ones who have to define what justice looks like. And so the other part of it is around community action. We firmly believe that you can organize around ending sexual violence. People do every day" (quoted in Snyder and Lopez 2017). This explanation of the slogan's context broadens the frame for understanding accountability.

7.15 Black Lives Matter

This slogan embodies a demand for accountability. This decentralized mass US protest movement and hashtag was named in response to the 2013 court acquittal of the killer of Trayvon Martin and began to take off after the 2014 police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. The movement's catalytic message called out the systemic impunity for killers of unarmed African-Americans and went viral globally.¹⁹⁶

To put the slogan into context, the Movement for Black Lives is the latest chapter in more than a century of struggle against impunity for racist violence either caused or tolerated by the US government. The fight against lynching grounded the 1909 founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The fight against police brutality grounded the 1966 founding of the Black Panther Party, which became famous for deploying armed citizen patrols to do 'cop-watching.' The current wave of citizen action for police accountability took up a related longstanding slogan—'No justice, no peace'—that has been used at least since 1986. This saying suggests that persistent impunity *causes* the lack of peace, in the form of angry protest.¹⁹⁷

The message of the Movement for Black Lives gained widespread, unprecedented legitimacy in the wake of the public 2020 police lynching of George Floyd, which constituted undeniable evidence of both police violence and police expectation of impunity—in a city that had *already* gone through conventional police reform. National US public opinion about the slogan to shift dramatically between 2018 and 2020 from net negative to 27% net positive support—though this wave of support proved temporary among many whites (Chudy and Jefferson 2021; Cohn and Quealy 2020). This public acceptance was both cause and effect of one of the broadest mass protest mobilizations in the US in living memory. The remarkable trajectory of the Black Lives Matter slogan is emblematic of the political construction and contestation of how accountability is understood.

8. Conclusion: Propositions for discussion

Readers looking for answers to the ‘what works?’ question may be disappointed at this point. Rather than try to explain how to *get* accountability, the focus here was on recognizing many different ways of *understanding* accountability. The point of departure was the recognition that the term’s multiple meanings complicate efforts to find common ground and risk miscommunication between potential allies. This reflection was also provoked by the recognition that accountability discourse can get hijacked and manipulated for corrupt and undemocratic purposes. In response to these challenges, this review proposes that finding shared language can contribute to grounding collaboration across sectors, cultures, identities, and interests. This is the rationale for addressing what counts as accountability—and for whom—to inform the actions needed to make it happen.

This review emphasized whether and how different ways of expressing ideas about accountability are embedded in everyday discourse. Yet what sounds like common sense today had to be invented at some point or another. The analysis here, and in the accompanying Keywords blogs from around the world, suggests that broad-based uptake of accountability discourse depends on its resonance with popular cultures. The same would go for efforts to twist, hijack, or water down accountability agendas. In other words, whatever motives are behind the messages, the suggestion here is that they are more likely to stick if they are grounded in already-accepted common sense. To connect the dots, the practical reason for this review’s focus on how meanings are constructed is to encourage creative approaches that draw on accessible ways of expressing ideas about accountability.

This review of the conceptual landscape suggests several propositions for discussion:

The persistent malleability of ideas about accountability is both an opportunity and a threat to democracy. The meanings of accountability have long been contested terrain. For rights defenders, the centrality of accountability to democracy, social inclusion, and good governance seems obvious. Over time, they managed to embed big ideas into everyday language with shorthand terms like ‘right to know’, ‘boycott’, and ‘whistleblower’, not to mention numerous accountability sayings that have become everyday common sense, like ‘holding feet to the fire’ and ‘follow the money.’ Yet some powerful actors also seek to control accountability agendas by attacking their opposition with false charges of corruption, by removing elected officials who may not be guilty of crimes, or by biased law enforcement. Pro-impunity forces take advantage of the malleability of accountability discourse by successfully appropriating and twisting it, as with the slogan ‘law and order’ or false claims that fair elections were fraudulent. Officials may also water down the idea of accountability with minimalist performances or openwashing gestures, weakening its credibility. This battle of ideas poses challenges to rights defenders, especially for coalitions that try to bring together diverse actors that may have different ways of thinking and talking about accountability.

Diverse actors need shared understandings of accountability for their coalitions to stick together. In contrast to the optimism about governance reform a decade or two ago, the current impasse in the global accountability field suggests that much more civic muscle is needed to take on vested interests and deepen democracy. This underscores the need both to broaden and to bring together diverse constituencies for change (Bellows 2020). This includes the possibility of strange bedfellows. For example, a comprehensive review of reform experiences in the global South stressed the importance of coalitions between grassroots organizations and professionals (Adhikari et al 2017). Identifying shared interests is crucial for cross-sectoral coalition-building, yet finding common ground across social, cultural, and language differences is easier said than done. This review’s exercise with unpacking accountability ideas shows that while potential constituencies may have overlapping goals, one cannot assume that they use the same language to express them. For example, an institutional problem that an elite think-tank frames through a technical anti-corruption lens may be seen by community-based organizations as a social justice cause. Plus, organizations of the under-represented may consider exclusionary elite policy decisions to be corrupt, aside from whether or not they are formally illegal. These alternative ways of seeing accountability problems may also be associated with very different

targets, strategies, and tactics. Yet where goals overlap, then some shared language can help to identify the common ground needed to inform joint action.

Cross-sectoral coalition-building for accountability can bring together those concerned about processes with those who prioritize tangible outcomes. Accountability advocates are driven by diverse motives—some are more focused on the processes, while others are more concerned with the outcomes. Around the world, frontline rights defenders risk their lives to uphold their values. Some advocates make accountability their profession, including some lawyers, judges, campaigners, investigative journalists, policy analysts, community paralegals or auditors—upholding procedural standards as ends in themselves. Yet values-driven advocates rarely wield enough civic clout—all by themselves—to address system failures. Meanwhile, for potential allies who may have more clout—such as politicians or leaders of organized interests who need to deliver tangible results to their constituents—calls for accountability may be mainly a means to instrumental ends. Recognizing these different agendas can inform strategies to bring together diverse coalition partners—while also creating the space to agree to disagree. Finding some shared understanding of what counts as accountability is especially relevant here.

Accountability is an indirect and uneven path to upholding rights. This review finds that, by itself, accountability is no magic bullet for achieving justice or rights-based development. Reactive or punitive approaches to accountability still dominate conventional wisdom—and often fall short of achieving the institutional change needed to prevent future accountability failures. Even if applied fairly, reactive approaches are often limited by their focus on *symptoms* of deeper problems. Such ‘end-of-the-pipe’ approaches range from attempts to prosecute criminally violent police without transforming public safety, to clean up pollution without slowing its production, or earnest community-based efforts to improve public services through dialogue with frontline public servants that do not address key policy decisions made elsewhere. Plus, even when (reactive) accountability efforts *do* deliver results, they are often partial, incomplete, and temporary—and evaluations have difficulty capturing them. Multiplier or spillover effects often remain out of reach. This raises questions about the limits to accountability as a pathway to institutional change. To rely exclusively on citizen voice or external sanctions as the means to create more just and effective public institutions leaves out the deep institutional transformations needed to address the causes of systemic problems. More than carrots and sticks are needed for public servants to better serve the public. This is the key reality check for accountability reforms: *preventing* system failures requires change agendas that go beyond accountability—and citizen voice.

Persistent silos in the international accountability field block peripheral vision, limiting ways of seeing paths to change. For going on two decades, the international development field has seen a high degree of consensus in favor of the values of accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion. Yet years ago, development policy analysts pointed out gaps between this consensus in theory and the lack of synergy between these reform agendas in practice (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). Almost a decade later, the silos between these agendas remain firmly in place, blocking the visibility needed to see across and beyond them. For example, democracy promotion efforts often stick to free and fair elections narrowly defined, without addressing how social programs may be used for vote-buying, or how the lack of government identification cards can deny citizens the right to vote. On the flip side, international anti-corruption efforts still tend to steer clear of investing in broadening the social and political constituencies for the cause—even though experts underscore the central role of deepening democracy (Johnston 2014). Meanwhile, top-down governance reform efforts bet heavily on transparency to do the heavy lifting by itself, without also engaging with anti-corruption enforcement or activating broad-based constituencies (e.g., Aremu 2022). Budget-monitoring efforts rarely address how partisan politics and clientelism can manipulate public spending. Social accountability programs remain disconnected from human rights protections for those who dare to speak out. Donors still tend to frame most projects in terms of sectors, rarely connecting the dots between governance reform over here and health systems or natural resource management over there. In international development policy agendas, cross-cutting issues that are potentially mutually reinforcing—like gender or ethnic rights and social accountability—rarely converge. Indeed, to sum up, technical or sectoral policy reforms and people power rarely converge—yet each needs the other. As long as

these silos continue firmly in place, opportunities for synergy will be missed, and the whole will be less than the sum of the parts.

To take stock of accountability strategies, new frameworks are needed. In light of the current impasse in the accountability field, the influential ‘what works’ question may well be moot in much of the world, where stalemate and rollback are the dominant trends. That said, when and where gaining some traction may be possible, lack of consensus on what counts as progress also complicates efforts to answer the question of what works. Clear, shared understandings are needed to know *whether* and *how* accountability efforts are reaching their goals. This poses the challenge of measuring processes that are inherently partial and uneven, and which vary in the eye of the beholder. For example, national policy reformers may declare victory when new laws, policies, budgets or reporting systems are approved, whereas grassroots constituencies are more likely to take a ‘wait and see’ approach until they see whether promised changes actually reach the ground. To take stock of whether accountability initiatives gain traction, recognition of these different perspectives is needed. Plus, while some incremental changes are steps in the right direction, towards system-wide change, others turn out to be one-off or dead ends. Which is which? How can one tell? These questions require navigating in between the risks of either dismissing or overstating partial wins. To address these uneven processes and to identify diverse possible pathways, it would be useful to develop the concept of *transitions to accountability* (Fox 2007b; Taylor 2018).

To sum up, this review points to at least three very distinct ways of thinking about accountability. First, it refers to tangible *processes* dedicated to public answerability for authorities, with clear sets of rules involving public forums, reporting, oversight, checks and balances—and consequences. Second, accountability is also grounded in *relationships* that are less tangible, such as invisible power, countervailing power, and the capacity to push back. A third way to think about accountability goes beyond specific processes and offers a *way of seeing* power relationships. After all, who is supposed to be accountable to whom is still widely debated.

Notes

- 1 See Hauser (2020). A widely used synonym is ‘institutional racism,’ originally coined by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967). The concept of systemic, or structural racism has both evolved and provoked backlash since the 1970s.
- 2 See, for example, Biradavolu et al. (2015); Hetherington (2011); Martinez and Cooper (2017).
- 3 See, for example, Fox, García Jiménez, and Haight (2009) and Hetherington (2011).
- 4 Thanks to Rachel Robinson for this point.
- 5 This issue of what direct translation means has long been addressed by specialists, sometimes framed as the distinction between ‘dynamic equivalence’ and ‘formal equivalence.’ Dynamic equivalence emphasizes readability over literal translation.
- 6 For the most comprehensive expansion and update of Williams’ approach, see MacCabe and Yanacek (2018) and its accompanying online resource: <https://keywords.pitt.edu/>. For a sample of the keywords approach in other fields, see numerous titles at <https://keywords.nyupress.org/>.
- 7 Schaffer addresses this issue of the politics of language extensively in the case of the concept of democracy in Senegal: “by comparing ideals cross-culturally, we will be better able to understand how the meaning of electoral institutions varies from place to place, and better able to describe the intentions of people who make use of them” (1998, 9). This study finds that the term ‘*demokaraasi*’ in Wolof—though apparently borrowed from the French—is instead understood to refer to mutual solidarity, with the implication of economic security (Schaffer 1998, 75). In contrast, the term borrowed for ‘politics’ in Wolof refers to “mutual trust betrayed, reciprocal obligations snubbed, social bonds abused and *demokaraasi* thwarted” (1998, 76). Schaffer’s work on the embeddedness of concepts in specific cultural contexts and moments in history involves three steps: grounding, locating, and exposing. “Grounding. . . aims to identify how people themselves identify a concept.... Locating investigates the situated use of terms in different ages and languages. . . Exposing. . . sheds light on the relationship of concepts to power” (Schaffer 2016, 26, 55 and 74).
- 8 Debates over development discourse have been analyzed in depth (e.g., Sachs 1992). Cornwall and Eade deconstructed prominent buzzwords in the field, calling them “essentially contested concepts”—which are “terms that combine general agreement on the abstract notion that they represent with endless disagreement about what they might mean in practice” (2010, 2, citing Gallie 1956). Indeed, they warn that “sometimes such terms have been captured and co-opted by powerful agencies and in the process have lost any radical or critical edge that they might once have had.... More often, a buzzword will have a multitude of meanings and nuances, depending on who is using it and in what context” (2010, viii). For a recent study of usage of international development buzzwords, see Schnable, DeMatte, Robinson, and Brass (2020).
- 9 On different definitions of democracy, see Collier and Adcock (1999), among many others. On power, see VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) and McGee and Pettit (2020), among others. See also Batliwala’s analysis of “the depoliticisation and ‘downsizing’ of the concept of empowerment” (2010, 557). There is a very academic-sounding name for words with multiple meanings: polysemy.
- 10 Dubnick was the first to address accountability as a ‘cultural keyword’ because: “what we are dealing with is not merely a set of institutional arrangements or managerial mechanisms, but a cultural phenomenon that is dominating, altering, and consuming our traditional notions of governance” (2014, 25).
- 11 The phrase ‘ways of seeing’ here is an homage to Berger’s classic rethinking of how we understand art (1972).
- 12 See Seitz-Wald and *National Journal* (2014).
- 13 See, among others, Chambers (1997) and Holland (2013).
- 14 Brendan Halloran, International Budget Partnership (email communication, September 25, 2020). See also Krause (2014).
- 15 For example, the transnational 1980s movement for peace in Central America self-identified as ‘anti-intervention’ because it opposed US government backing of regimes that repressed national movements for self-determination.

16 Early on, Micah Sifry proposed an influential definition of the civic tech community's agenda: "civic tech ought to be seen broadly as any tool or process that people as individuals or groups may use to affect the public arena, be it to gain power, influence power, disrupt power or change the processes by which power is used. In the broadest sense, civic tech includes centuries-old methods. . . . But today I think there's a general agreement that when we refer to 'civic tech' or 'the civic power sector' or 'using the Internet to organize people for good' we're talking about the new environment of radically cheaper networked communications, sensors, and collaboration" (2014). See also Jordan (2021) and Steinberg (2014), among others.

17 Joy Acheron, G-Watch (email communication, October 27, 2021).

18 It is notable that the World Bank's Global Partnership for Social Accountability has moved away from its earlier use of the term 'constructive engagement,' shifting instead to its more recent and official term 'collaborative social accountability' (see: <https://www.thegpsa.org/about/collaborative-social-accountability>). According to staff, "this shift was partly in response to informal internal concerns about the term's associations with political doctrine, albeit unwitting."

19 This section draws on Fox (2007b).

20 The multiple, often inconsistent uses of the term have even been called a 'pathology' that can undermine organizational performance: 'multiple accountabilities disorder' (Koppell 2005). As Flinders put it, "[T]here is little doubt that the concept of accountability appears to be emerging as the über-concept of the twenty-first century. And yet at the same time it appears that the concept is in some ways more nebulous, contested, and vague than it has ever been.... It appears that accountability appears destined to provide an example of conceptual *stretching* (i.e., vague, amorphous conceptualizations that say more and more about less and less) rather than conceptual *travelling*, in which a tight and broadly coherent framework is applied across a range of cases" (emphasis added, Flinders 2014,661).

21 For comprehensive overviews, see Behn (2001); Bovens (1998, 2010); Bovens, Goodin, and Schillemans (2014); Goetz and Jenkins (2005); Mulgan (2000, 2003); Newell and Bellour (2002); O'Kelly and Dubnick (2020); and Schedler (1999), among others.

22 For example, the concept of social accountability has one meaning in the corporate responsibility field and a very different meaning for those working to encourage citizen voice to improve public services (as will be discussed in Section 5.4).

23 See Keywords blog from Gearhart (2021). Corporate responsibility is a fuzzy concept, with at least 37 definitions (Tamvada 2020). For a critique, see AFL-CIO (2013).

24 As a recent retrospective observed: "When Upton Sinclair set out to write his 1906 novel *The Jungle*, he was trying to bring attention to the dismal living and working conditions for immigrants working in the meatpacking industry. Instead, his novel inspired a national movement for food safety" (Francis 2020). As the author put it: "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach" (Greenspan 2018). A related dynamic unfolded in the 1960s when the farmworker rights movement first campaigned against the threat of pesticides to field workers—the government responded with consumer protection measures (Pulido 1996).

25 "In 1995, only 13 countries around the world had laws criminalizing domestic violence; today, more than 150 nations do" (Vogelstein and Klein 2020). For example, the US campaign to push the criminal justice system to treat rape as a crime began in the early 1970s. A turning point involved the transformation of legal evidence-gathering with the invention of the 'rape kit'—followed decades later by campaigns to get criminal justice systems to actually use them (Kennedy 2020).

26 The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) discusses answerability as: "liable to be called to account or to answer for responsibilities and conduct; required or expected to justify one's actions." So, accountability equals "the quality of being accountable; liability to account for and answer for one's conduct, performance of duties, etc. (in modern use often with regard to parliamentary, corporate, or financial liability to the public, shareholders, etc.); responsibility." The OED identifies uses of the word 'accountable' going back to the 1400s. See also Dubnick (1998, 2007).

27 See, among others, Lessa and Payne (2012); Nobles (2008); Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena (2006); Rotberg and Thompson (2000).

28 The long tradition of 'retributive justice' assumes some proportionality between the punishment and the crime—and involves procedural standards. For example, the biblical version of 'an eye for an eye' refers to the ancient Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. See Garcetti (2015).

29 Some extreme traditions force retribution on innocent victims, as in the case of the practices and laws that privatize and absolve the murder of women under the rubric of ‘honor killings’ (e.g., Khan 2021, 3).

30 In everyday language, the addition of ‘washing’ to a concept to signify a cover-up goes back to the idea of ‘white-washing,’ which involves the concealment of flaws with superficial measures. See references to greenwashing and openwashing, Section 6.4.

31 In Bovens’ view, for example, “you are either accountable or you are not. There is no middle way, you cannot be ‘somewhat’ or ‘fairly’ accountable, and you cannot call someone a little bit to account” (1998, 31). This view rejects the problem of slaps on the wrist—and also implies some objective standard to assess whether a given process of answerability or sanctions is sufficient to count as accountability. Collier and Adcock ask a similar question about how to conceptualize democracy: is it ‘either/or,’ or a matter of degree? (1999).

32 While some commissions of inquiry in response to crises focus more on retrospective accountability, others are more forward-looking (e.g., Tama 2014).

33 The original phrase goes back centuries. In nineteenth-century sermons the full sentence was “As one bad apple spoils the others, so you must show no quarter to sin or sinners” (Cunningham 2020). In Rochester, New York, the chair of the city’s Police Accountability Board took a different version of the metaphor to refer to persistent police violence against unarmed civilians: “People always talk about good apples and bad apples.... But the problem is, we have a rotten tree” (Witte 2021). Comedian Chris Rock added new insight to the bad apple metaphor when he observed that “some jobs can’t have bad apples, ok? [In] some jobs everybody got to be good.... like pilots.... American Airlines can’t be like ‘you know most of our pilots like to land, we just got a few bad apples that like to crash into mountains, please bear with us...’” (Rock 2020).

34 The classic on conceptual stretching is Sartori (1970). See also Adcock and Collier (2001) and Collier and Mahon (1993). Bovens attributes the conceptual stretching of the idea of accountability to a conflation of normative with analytical goals, it is treated “as a synonym for many loosely defined political desiderata, such as good governance, transparency, equity, democracy, efficiency, responsiveness, responsibility, and integrity.... Whilst this has its uses in political rhetoric, white papers, and media commentary, it has been a strong impediment to systematic comparative, scholarly analysis.... To paraphrase Aaron Wildavsky: ‘If accountability is everything, it may be nothing’” (2010, 946-47). This idea is also captured by an idiom in Spanish: “*El que mucho abarca, poco aprieta*” (those who cover a lot, squeeze just a little).

35 For another example, as Carothers and Brechenmacher observed: “Four key principles—accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion—have in recent years become nearly universal features of the policy statements and programs of international development organizations. Yet this apparently widespread new consensus is deceptive: behind the ringing declarations lie fundamental fissures over the value and application of these concepts. Understanding and addressing these divisions is crucial to ensuring that the four principles become fully embedded in international development work” (2014, 1).

36 For a critique of ‘good governance’ as a development buzzword, see Mkandawire (2007). For an interpretation of good governance through an Islamic scholarly lens, see Tauriq (2015).

37 For an example of a definition of accountability that sees it as a synonym for good governance, consider: “We define ‘government accountability’ as the extent to which those in government—including politicians, public officials, street-level bureaucrats, and front-line service providers—act in the public interest” (Tsai et al. 2019, 4).

38 See Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2017) and <http://www.effective-states.org/>

39 See, among others: Abers and Keck (2013); Harris (2017); Levy (2014); McDonnell (2020); Rich (2019); Tandler (1997).

40 Successful community health worker programs manage to both draw on and nurture shared normative values, like social responsibility and esprit de corps (e.g., Garg and Pande 2018; Schaaf et al. 2018 and 2020; Tandler and Freedheim 1994, among others).

41 For diverse perspectives on perverse effects of accountability efforts, see Gersen and Stephenson (2014); Honig (2018); and Rich (2021).

42 Consider, for example, Schmitter’s explicit definition of political democracy as “a regime or system of governance in which rulers *are held accountable* for their actions in the public realm” (emphasis added, 1999, 59, citing Schmitter and Karl 1991). Grant and Keohane also consider accountability to be a defining feature of representative democracy, rather than a possible outcome (2005, 29).

Schmitter later cast accountability as a measure of the quality of democracy, and therefore a variable—while retaining his view that it is a defining feature of democratic regimes (2004). Diamond and Morlino also address accountability as a dimension of the quality of democracies (2005), as does Rose-Ackerman's definition of "full democracy," which "cannot be attained unless the policy-making process is accountable to citizens through transparent procedures that seek to incorporate public input" (2005, 1).

43 This is an issue for the application of the principal-agent theoretical framework to political democracy, since that framework assumes that—by definition—voters are the principals and that elected officials are their agents. For an overview of that framework, see Gailmard (2014).

44 Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin contend that electoral democracy is much more about forward-looking voter choices than it is about sanctioning past actions and the inherent accountability of politicians to voters (1999). Achen and Bartels agree, making a strong empirical case that voting decisions are more prospective than retrospective, and therefore elections are not primarily accountability mechanisms (2016). Brazil's recent electoral experience, including the reelection of numerous corrupt officials, also raises questions about assuming that elections are retrospective accountability mechanisms (Da Ros and Taylor 2022).

45 The causal chain between elections and public sector performance, passing from elected officials to policymakers to managers to frontline service providers, is memorably described as the 'long route' to accountability by the 2004 World Development Report (World Bank 2003).

46 See [Keywords blog by Roberts \(2021\)](#), plus Jiménez Herrera (2013) and Petro Urrego (2013).

47 See [Keywords blogs by Batzin \(2021b\)](#) and [Olana \(2021\)](#).

48 This section was informed by discussions with Brendan Halloran and Rosie McGee in the context of the International Budget Partnership's Learning with SPARK program, as well as with Tom Aston, Megan DeTura, Moses Ngulube, and Naomi Hossain. It draws on a policy brief prepared for IBP (Fox 2020).

49 For example, Faguet's analysis of municipal governance in Bolivia treats responsiveness and accountability as synonyms (2013) as well as Achen and Bartels (2016) in the US. For literature reviews on responsiveness, see Speer (2012) and Grossman and Slough (2022), among others.

50 As Aston put it "In practice, most [social] accountability work is probably about 'responsiveness' rather than 'answerability' or 'sanctions'" (2020a).

51 For contemporary African perspectives on responsible leadership of customary authorities, see the [Keywords blog by Msoro VII and Ngulube \(2021\)](#). On the tensions between customary and democratic authorities, see Ribot (2004), among others. On the long medieval tradition of royal advisors who advise monarchs to preempt possible dissent and threats to their rule by listening to their subjects, see Chayes (2015).

52 See Mulgan (2000; 2003, 15-18). For example: "Whereas responsibility refers to the obligations to be fulfilled by one actor, accountability involves one actor answering to another actor, the account holder, who is empowered with the authority to assess how well the former fulfils obligations to achieve specific goals" (Swinburn et al. 2015).

53 The term 'unaccountable' goes all the way back to Milton (Keyes 2021, 133).

54 See discussions about Portuguese in Gomes de Pinho and Silva Sacramento (2009).

55 This heading alludes to the term 'democracy with adjectives,' a phrase that distinguishes between different subtypes of democratic regimes (Collier and Levitsky 1997). This is a rejoinder to Krauze's argument that democracy is democracy and therefore modifying adjectives are not appropriate (1986).

56 For example, the ancient Islamic tradition of Zakat mandates Muslims to make charitable donations, which scholars find includes public disclosure practices that aim to serve the public interest (Basri et al. 2016; Hanafeh et al. 2020; Taufiq 2015). Thanks to Joy Aceron for these references.

57 See, among others, Fox (2007a, 2016) and Lindberg (2013). Note that while upwards and downwards point in opposite directions, they both focus on the vertical dimension of accountability, between actors with more versus less authority within a hierarchy,

when other directions are possible (see further discussion of spatial metaphors for different accountability relationships in Section 4.3).

58 See Honig (2018, 2020), Biradavolu et al. (2015), and Rich (2021). In Honig and Pritchett's critique of "accounting-based accountability to serve managerial control," they find "the development discourse's frequent semantic misunderstanding of the term 'accountability' has pernicious effects on system reform efforts." (2019, 3). Their compelling critique focuses on upwards accountability and does not address the possible relevance of downwards, public-facing approaches, such as social accountability (Honig and Pritchett 2019, 5). Another skeptical view finds that in a purely managerial application of accountability, "the tools of the trade—disclosure and surveillance, standards and regulation, monitoring and compliance, sanctions and deterrence—are more likely to serve the interest of the powerful than the weak through the control of those very tools and expertise employed to validate them" (Ebrahim and Weisband 2007, 15). These critiques are spot on, but they focus almost exclusively on upwards accountability. Related framing of downward accountability is limited to feedback mechanisms for data collection, without answerability or countervailing power (Ebrahim 2019, 224-228).

59 See Bowser and Hill (2010) and Freedman et al. (2014). Thanks to Marta Schaaf for the reference.

60 For an effort to address this issue in the context of the SDGs, see: <http://participatesdgs.org/prg/>. Publicly disclosed SDG data also turns out to be of very uneven quality (e.g., Morcuende, Darbishire, and Hanna 2020). For an overview of the SDGs, see Nelson (2021). For an analysis of SDGs and accountability that stresses diverse monitoring and accountability strategies from governments to their peoples, see GEM (2017). On SDGs and upwards vs. downwards accountability, see also Esser and Ha (2015).

61 See Alpert, McLean, and Wolfe (2017); Chanin (2017); Chapell (2017); Goh (2020); Powell, Meitl, and Worrall (2017).

62 As Stokes puts it: "Perverse accountability is bad for democracy: it reduces the pressure on governments to perform well and to provide public goods, keeps voters from using elections to express their policy preferences, and undermines voter autonomy" (2005, 316). Indeed, much of the political science literature focuses on vote-buying, though it has been largely stumped by the difficulty of determining how those informal deals are enforced (Hicken and Nathan 2020). When parties use targeted material incentives to compete for voter support but lack credible enforcement mechanisms, then their efforts may produce lopsided bargains but probably fall short of upwards accountability. Yet other forms of clientelism clearly do have enforceable controls, especially when they involve government social programs that monitor beneficiaries and can grant access in exchange for political subordination (Fox 2012; Mares and Young 2019).

63 Note that checks and balances do not fit easily into theoretical models that assume principal-agent relationships, which involve hierarchical reporting rather than horizontal oversight relationships (Fox 2016). Both in theory and practice, democratic institutions involve diverse combinations of oversight, participation and representation (Isunza Vera 2006).

64 See: <https://www.jo.se/en/About-JO/History/>. Ombuds offices have proliferated around the world in recent decades. As with other kinds of grievance redress mechanisms, research has lagged.

65 Ostrom's pioneering work on the bottom-up management of common-property resources (1990) identified a whole genre of bottom-up social institutions that offset the 'free-rider problem' with institutions of mutual monitoring for accountability. This widely-recognized approach does not address how such representative institutions might try to hold governments or intruders accountable.

66 See, among others, Ackerman (2004), Goetz and Jenkins (2005, 2010), Isunza Vera (2006), Paul (1992) and Speer (2012). In Spanish, diagonal accountability is sometimes described as *transversal*, meaning "cross-cutting."

67 For diverse views, see Ali and Pirog (2019); Archbold (2021); Clarke (2009); De Angelis, Rosenthal, and Brucker (2016); Goldsmith and Lewis (2000); Harris (2012); Sen (2010); Vitale (2017); and Walker and Archbold (2014).

68 See Khemani et al. (2016); Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg (2019); and Moreno, Crisp, and Shugart (2003). Where weak horizontal and vertical accountability systems reinforce each other, one can speak of 'low accountability traps' (Fox 2007b). On the possibility of positive synergy between short and long routes to accountability, see Dewachter et al. (2018).

69 The little-known repertoire of resistance to the US war in Indochina known as 'fragging' stands out. Drafted soldiers resisted being ordered to risk their lives in what was perceived as an illegitimate, lost war. The invented term 'fragging' refers to a form of deliberate friendly fire—rank-and-file soldiers' use of fragmentation grenades to assassinate their immediate superiors, mainly the

sergeants and officers responsible for ordering them to risk their lives in battle. Collective forms included ‘bounty-hunting,’ whereby “enlisted men pooled their money to be paid out to a soldier who killed an officer or sergeant they considered dangerous” (Brush n.d.).

70 The origin of the phrase does not appear to have been studied, but a search of historical newspaper archives finds the earliest use of ‘name and shame’ in the mid-nineteenth century—as a noun rather than a verb. See: <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/476709/origin-of-name-and-shame>. While the noun form described a transgressor, such as a convicted felon, the verb form is the accountability strategy.

71 The Infant Formula Action Coalition led the Nestlé boycott from 1977 to 1984, suspending it when the company agreed to follow WHO guidelines for marketing infant formula. Despite this agreement, NGOs have since accused Nestlé of deceptive advertising and of influencing doctors to recommend infant formula, prompting calls for a renewed boycott. See, for example, Baby Milk Action’s resource page on the Nestlé boycott: <http://www.babymilkaction.org/nestlefree>. For descriptions of aggressive advertising in Peru, see AP News (2019); regarding a complaint filed by Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India for Nestlé’s alleged violation of Indian law, see Chandna (2019); and for an open letter signed by 18 NGOs accusing Nestlé of false advertising in Laos, see: http://info.babymilkaction.org/sites/info.babymilkaction.org/files/Aid%20Agencies%20in%20Laos%20refuse%20to%20apply%20for%20Nestle%20cash_30%20May%202011.pdf. International corporate accountability work has branched out into numerous sector specific initiatives. For an overview see: <https://www.corporateaccountability.org/>

72 See Glencorse and Parajuli (2015) and www.accountabilitylab.org

73 For a somewhat different usage, see Ginzburg and Moustafa (2008). The concept of ‘lawfare’ is also relevant—the term reframes on “warfare” to refer to the use of law as a ‘weapon of conflict.’ See Lawfare Institute (2021).

74 The source is Oscar Benavides, a Peruvian military leader who became president (1933-1939)

75 This classic proposition has been either taken for granted or forgotten in most contemporary discussions of governance reform, with the notable exception of discussions on nonviolent civil resistance. This is another example of the silos that still divide the accountability field. See: www.nonviolent-conflict.org.

76 For a dramatic example of government-civil society partnerships for law enforcement, consider joint efforts to control fishing crime at sea. The bold environmental defense organization Sea Shepherd made a remarkable transition from being widely considered as vigilante pirates to become government law enforcement partners—as in the notable case of Liberia. See: <https://www.sea-shepherd.org.au/latest-news/dso-liberia/>. Watchdog organizations also contribute to law enforcement by playing a Sherlock Holmes detective role to independently gather ‘smoking gun’ evidence, as in the case of the Environmental Investigation Agency. See: <https://eia-international.org/> and Section 7.8

77 For example, analysts of environmental governance find that: “Accountability is a limited tool for improving the environment through better governance because authority holders may point to accountability procedures (transparency, justification and reasoning, monitoring and evaluation) as leading to outputs (labeling standards, treaties, conventions, protocols) but not necessarily to outcomes (preventing or mitigating harm)” (Kramarz and Park 2019, 14).

78 Notably, UNESCO’s 2017 Global Education Monitor pushed back with a strong emphasis on downwards accountability (GEM 2017; Fox 2017).

79 As Bovens put it, “accountability mechanisms keep public actors on the virtuous path and prevent them from going astray” (2010, 963).

80 This question is related to the broader literature on whether punishment deters crime. It turns out that the likelihood of getting caught has a greater deterrent effect than punishment (National Institute of Justice 2016). Analysts of police accountability use the term “proactive” rather than preventative (Harris 2012).

81 Though the saying appears to refer to public health, Franklin’s reference was to fire safety. He wrote an anonymous letter to his local newspaper recommending the creation of a trained and equipped (volunteer) fire-fighting association, regulation of chimney sweeps, and that residents keep leather buckets in their homes (Independence Hall Association n.d.). See also Keyes (1992, 30).

82 On open budgets, see the International Budget Partnership: <https://internationalbudget.org/>. On open contracting, see the Open Contracting Partnership: <https://www.open-contracting.org/>.

83 See Bokart-Lindell (2020) and Doleac (2017).

84 The Minneapolis police force had a “duty to intervene” policy on the book years before the police murder of George Floyd. The policy reads: “It shall be the duty of every sworn employee present at any scene where physical force is being applied to either stop or attempt to stop another sworn employee when force is being inappropriately applied or is no longer required” (Willets 2020).

85 As Georgiadou, Lungo, and Richter put it, “Transparency refers to the open access to government information and allows citizens to ‘see’ and monitor government’s actions” (2014, 518). For history, see Engels and Monier (2020). See also Pozen (2018, 2019).

86 See: <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/>. For analysis of the different ways in which founding OGP participants framed “open government,” see Clarke and Francoli (2014). More broadly, see also Yu and Robinson (2012), Gonzalez-Zapata and Heeks (2015), and Peixoto (2013; [Keywords Blog, 2021](#)). International multi-stakeholder initiatives have multiplied in both the public and private sectors (e.g., Brockmyer 2016). Their effectiveness is debated, especially for addressing human rights (see MSI Integrity 2020).

87 On ‘knowledge is power,’ see Alimodian (2018). Ella Baker, noted frontline 1960s civil rights organizer in the US South, had her own version: “Give light and people will find the way.” She was referring to a radical democratic approach to movement-building, driven by grassroots organizing rather than charismatic leaders. Her words have since made it onto many lists of inspirational quotes—though often without that political context (Wilkinson 2020).

88 See, for example, the annual Sunshine Week, organized by US press freedom advocates: <http://sunshineweek.org/>

89 Between 1995 and 2005, the civil society organization *Transparencia* engaged in grassroots organizing, coalition-building, and multi-level advocacy to encourage informed citizen action involving World Bank-funded rural development projects (Fox 2001, 2007b). The author served as researcher advisor.

90 For another example of invented Mexican accountability discourse, consider the phrase first proposed by the Zapatista movement in Chiapas in 1994, ‘*mandar obedeciendo*’ (to lead by obeying). See discussion in Section 7.13.

91 See James Scott’s back-cover comment on Hetherington (2011), as well as skeptics in West and Sanders (2003). Hetherington’s study of rural Paraguay takes this critique as his point of departure but finds that in practice many peasants “have adopted the very ideas that implicitly exclude them, have tried to make transparency their own, and to adopt new political practices through which they can insinuate themselves into the nooks and crannies of bureaucratic reform” (2011, 3).

92 According to civic technology expert Tiago Peixoto, this distinction dates back at least to the early 1990s, in two contexts, the European Union and arms control negotiations (email communication, May 14, 2020).

93 For an in-depth institutional study of how algorithms can reproduce bias, see Brayne (2021). See also Bowser (2020); Caplan et al. (2018); Kolkman (2020); and New and Castro (2018).

94 For example, in the 2021 US debate about climate policy, the single most influential US senator profits directly from the coal industry. This case is emblematic of systemic corruption that is not illegal – and is fully transparent.

95 This revelation was a turning point in the film *Erin Brockovitch*, based on a true story about a community paralegal’s campaign for justice for victims of deliberate industrial poisoning.

96 Consider the experience with US farm subsidy data. By law, government data on who gets farm subsidies, and how much, are supposed to be disclosed to the public, beginning in 1995. As in the case of the Toxic Release Inventory, for the data to actually become publicly accessible information, a public-interest watchdog organization, the Environmental Working Group, had to invest enormous resources and six years of difficult technical work in order to produce a user-friendly online platform that showed who got how much (Becker 2002). See: <https://farm.ewg.org/>. This ‘infomediary’ initiative inspired the Mexican farm subsidy website, hosted by Fundar, which first launched in 2008: <http://subsidiosalcampo.org.mx/> (Cejudo 2013). After the 2018 election, participants in that CSO transparency innovation joined the Agriculture Ministry and they launched an official version: <https://www.suri.agricultura.gob.mx:8017/buscadorBeneficiario>.

97 For a different frame, in terms of ‘information rights,’ see Bovens (2002).

98 The site was www.scorecard.org, no longer online. For a recent data journalism mapping of toxic exposure, see <https://www.propublica.org/article/toxmap-poison-in-the-air>

99 The volume of reported emissions of listed toxics dropped dramatically during the first decade of the law's implementation (Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007). Subsequent research found limited evidence that citizen action was the main driver of reduced reported toxic emissions (Kraft, Stephan, and Abel 2011). Moreover, government audits found that the law mandating disclosure did not enable the government to impose tangible penalties on companies that were found to under-report their toxic emissions (Fox 2007a).

100 See Maru and Gauri (2018), as well as Golub (2010); and the Legal Empowerment Network convened by Namati at: <https://namati.org/>.

101 See Unsicker (2013, 4). In VeneKlasen and Miller's view: "We understand advocacy as a political process that involves the coordinated efforts of people in changing existing practices, ideas, and distributions of power and resources that exclude women and other disadvantaged groups. From this perspective, advocacy deals with specific aspects of policymaking, as well as the values and behavior that perpetuate exclusion and subordination. Thus, advocacy is both about changing specific decisions affecting people's lives and changing the way decision making happens into a more inclusive and democratic process" (2002, 1). According to Unsicker: "Policy advocacy is the process by which individuals, NGOs, and other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to build social and economic justice, environmental sustainability, and peace by influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations and other powerful institutions" (2013, 6).

102 See McAlevy (2016, 9).

103 For a distinctive case of an INGO-led national-international advocacy initiative that involved an unusually high degree of coordination between its country programming and international advocacy departments, see an Oxfam example in Mohammed (2017).

104 For Samuel, drawing from the Kerala experience, "people-centered advocacy seeks to challenge and change unjust power relations at all levels. . . Though focused on public policies, the larger purpose of people-centered advocacy is social transformation such that all people realise their human rights" (2010, 188). For a detailed example, see Bailey and Mujune (2021).

105 Email communications with former directors of the Washington Office on Latin America, Joy Olson (Oct. 2, 2017) and George Vickers (Oct. 4, 2017). For an early manual for activists, see McKinley (2002).

106 See Keywords blog by Batzin (2021b), as well as the use of the term by the Mesoamerican Women's Human Rights Defenders Network: <https://im-defensoras.org/es/>.

107 This Colombian government agency uses the term to refer to two distinct, complementary roles. According to Articles 281-284 of the Colombian constitution, it refers to both the legal advocacy in the judicial setting (public defender role) and also a broader advocacy/human rights promotion role. Thanks to Charles Roberts for the reference.

108 Scandals have revealed significant watering down and weak application of corporate certification standards. For example, after deadly industrial fires consumed just-certified factories in Pakistan, "for labor groups, academics and some industry insiders, the recent fires confirm longstanding fears that the voluntary system is weak, opaque, and inherently flawed" (Walsh and Greenhouse 2012). See also Section 6.5 on openwashing and the Keywords blog by Gearhart (2021).

109 One of the largest international NGOs, World Vision, calls their extensive social accountability program "citizen voice and action." See www.wvi.org/our-work/socialaccountability.

110 When one tracks the breadth of the term's usage, approximately 3 million Google hits turn up—though this total includes the multiple meanings described here, making it difficult to determine which usage is more widespread. See Figure for a comparison of trends in usage of terminology in English and Spanish.

111 Walter Flores (personal communication, Sept. 28, 2020).

112 For reviews of definitions, see Aston (2021); Fox (2015); Grandvoinnet, Aslam, and Raha (2015); and Guerzovich and Poli (2020), among others. Citizen scorecards that assess local public services would be an emblematic example of a social accountability tool (e.g., Gullo et al 2020).

113 This article was followed by Peruzzotti and Smulovitz (2002; 2006). The latter book's title, *Enforcing the Rule of Law*, underscores how much the term's mainstream usage subsequently shifted towards collaborative problem-solving.

114 In terms of the spatial metaphors discussed above, the idea was that vertical and diagonal forms of accountability would trigger the actions of horizontal accountability institutions (Section 4.3; Isunza Vera and Olvera 2006).

115 More than a decade later, a prominent World Bank research report instead concluded that the viability of the short route depended on also influencing the incentives of politicians — in other words, the long route (Khemani et al. 2016).

116 Support for national checks and balances institutions is still notably absent from the World Bank's portfolio, in spite of its agendas for promoting citizen engagement and social accountability (Nadelman 2020). For example, the manager of the World Bank's Governance Global Practice recognizes the importance of citizen input into national governmental audit oversight, but there is little public evidence of tangible support for such efforts in World Bank operations (Olowo-Okere 2020).

117 See translations of Fox (2014) into French, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic at: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/964041607326557934/social-accountability-what-does-the-evidence-really-say>.

118 See [Keywords blogs by Hevia \(2021\)](#) and [Isunza Vera \(2021\)](#) as well as Cepeda (2022), Hevia (2009), and Isunza Vera (2006).

119 See [Keywords blog by Cunha Filho \(2021\)](#). Discussions with colleagues in Brazil suggest that the Portuguese term for social accountability, 'controle social,' has diverse connotations, after almost two decades of institutionalization. While for some in public administration the term has neutral associations, referring to citizen oversight mechanisms, for others—perhaps more influenced by recent political polarization—the term was ideologically associated with the center-left Workers Party governments. On Brazilian debates over translating accountability more generally, see also Gomes da Pinho and Silva Sacramento (2009).

120 Thanks to Helga Baitenmann for this reference. In spite of the vast agrarian studies literature on Mexico, there is no published academic research on these community "vigilance" councils—though they are widely considered to have withered away after the peak of agrarian reform activism in the 1930s, as the central government took greater control over community affairs.

121 See <https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/captain-boycott-man-and-myth/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Boycott.

122 See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z3rj7ty/revision/7>. For a list of cases, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_boycotts.

123 According to Whistleblowers International (2020): "The earliest example of this type of ruling dates to 695, in the declaration of King Wihtrud of Kent, which explained that "if a freeman works during [the Sabbath], he shall forfeit his [profits], and the man who informs against him shall have half the fine, and [the profits] of the labor." This declaration represented the first example of a law that allows private individuals to collect a bounty for reporting a violation of their country's legislation."

124 "There must be an abridgement of what are called English liberties" (Quoted by Smith, Jr. 2013).

125 In late eighteenth-century Mexico City, a similar term was used to refer to night watchmen: *guardas de pito*—'whistle guards' (Puck 2017).

126 See <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/whistle-blower.html>.

127 The first use in the New York Times was in 1971 (Morris 1971). See also Peters and Branch (1972) and extensive early coverage in the investigative magazine *Washington Monthly*.

128 During the same period, in 1971, when the Indochina War was still raging, the US State Department leadership responded to its difficulty with getting accurate information from the field by creating a first official internal channel for staff to express dissent with policy. Decades later, such internal dissent channels had been replicated across US government agencies, though an independent assessment found that they neither influenced policy nor protected staff from reprisals (Davidson 2020).

129 To commemorate the exposé of the My Lai massacre of civilians by the US military in Vietnam, the Ridenhour Awards now publicly honor the courage of truth-tellers each year: <http://www.ridenhour.org/>. Ron Ridenhour was a US soldier who assembled

multiple testimonies by other soldiers and participants into a narrative that he shared with members of Congress. See: http://www.ridenhour.org/?page_id=2366.

130 The Secretary of Public Administration followed up with a whistleblower protection protocol, but its implementation is unclear. See https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5603032&fecha=19/10/2020

131 Thanks to Charles Roberts for this reference. See also: <https://whistleblowingnetwork.org> and <https://www.pplaaaf.org/>.

132 Proposing new terms is easier said than done. The process often involves repurposing or modifying existing words—often driven by cultural, social, or technological changes. New terms can jump to broader usage from literature (Orwellian, Catch-22) or technological innovation fields (laser, robotics). Terms that have had negative baggage can be appropriated and given positive meanings (queer). There is even a scholarly term for invented words, phrases, or meanings whose uptake is a work in progress: neologism. Few attempts to launch new terms are successful. As Keyes' comprehensive overview put it, "Supply far outstrips demand. Coined words are like swarms of salmon eggs: few hatch, fewer mature, and only a handful make it upstream" (2021, 10). He stresses uptake as a 'trickle-up' process that often does not involve intentionality. At the same time, some well-known keywords did take off from identifiable authors— such as 'paradigm,' a term for cognitive frameworks that took off from science studies to many other fields—as well as the transformation of the term 'disruption' into a positive term associated with innovation (Keyes 2021, 35 and 37). Yet many words with invented meanings are borrowed and repurposed from existing terms.

133 For a review of the concept through a legal lens, see Davies (2001).

134 See: <http://independentaccountabilitymechanism.net/>.

135 See Hunter and Bridgeman (2008). For independent research on accountability mechanisms in multilateral development banks, see Clark, Fox, and Treakle (2003); Daniel et al. (2016); Hunter (2020); and Udall (1998). Advocacy groups involved include the Bank Information Center (<https://bankinformationcenter.org/>), Accountability Counsel (<https://www.accountabilitycounsel.org/>), and International Accountability Project (<https://www.accountabilityproject.org/>), Center for International Environmental Law (<https://www.ciel.org/>) and Inclusive Development International (<https://www.inclusivedevelopment.net/>), among others. On human rights accountability mechanisms in other kinds of international organizations, see Johansen (2020).

136 The World Bank's Environmental and Social Framework now requires grievance redress mechanisms in investment projects. They are also encouraged by its commitment to 'citizen engagement.' See Nadelman (2020); Nadelman, Sah, Htun, and Le (2019); as well as earlier work by Gauri (2013) and World Bank (2014).

137 In debates over checks and balances in the writing of the US Constitution, James Madison used the term "devices" (Section 7.5). Ernesto Isunza Vera suggests that in Spanish, the equivalent term (*dispositiva*) is a better metaphor for accountability institutions than mechanism (email communication, October 3, 2021). This raises the issue of the distinction between a machine (understood as an object) and a mechanism, which can also refer to a system or a process (thanks to Helen Shapiro for this observation).

138 On testimony as evidence in the human rights context, see Stephen (1994, 2017).

139 Assessments of national human rights institutions are challenging (Mertus 2012). Progress can look like failure, insofar as increased public awareness of abuses and resulting appeals to grievance mechanisms can lead to increased reporting of abuse that is not new, as in the notable case of gender-based violence. Specialists find that the most successful human rights defense agencies are those that "have succeeded in managing a creative tension between responsibly handling individual complaints and ambitiously addressing systemic human rights problems" (Goodman and Pegram 2012, 23). The cross-cutting problem is that national human rights institutions "are most constrained where they are most needed" (Cardenas 2012, 45). Kumar points out the risk that national human rights institutions could be 'double-edged swords,' if they are manipulated by authoritarian regimes—as in the case of so many accountability mechanisms (2003, 265).

140 See Fischer-Mackey et al. (2020); [Keywords blog](#), [Batzin \(2021b\)](#); and Figure 22).

141 See Aston (2015); Frisancho and Vasquez (2014); Samuel (2016); [Keywords blog](#), [Frisancho with Estrada \(2021\)](#).

142 See Zamudio Santos (2018) and additional Mexican CSO analysis of audits in the water sector at <https://controlatugobierno.com/>. Thanks to Mayli Sepúlveda for this reference.

143 See <https://cpa.coa.gov.ph/>. For Latin American cases, see Mendiburu (2020).

144 See Pande and Hossain (2022) and Gauri (2013). See also [Keywords blog by Cunha Filho \(2021\)](#).

145 For example, in Pakistan's large-scale mobile phone-based Citizen Feedback Model, after citizens accessed a public service, they received an automated survey call in the voice of the Chief Minister himself (Bhatti et al. 2015, 75). While the responses were not made public and the goal was not to solve specific problems, the feedback solicited did serve an upwards accountability purpose by informing senior officials where hotspots and bottlenecks were causing problems.

146 See Peixoto and Fox (2016); Peixoto and Sifry (2017) and McGee et al. (2018).

147 See De Angelis, Rosenthal, and Buchner (2016). Currently, 160 local governments in the US have some kind of civilian review board and another 130 are trying to create one, out of 18,000 law enforcement agencies. Few have independent investigative capacity or subpoena powers and some are prohibited from even recommending disciplinary action. These "well-meaning reform attempts often end in failure and frustration" (Dungca and Abelson 2021). For a striking example, Louisville, Kentucky police officers were not charged for shooting health worker Breonna Taylor while sleeping in her own bed. By design, the toothless local Citizens Commission on Police Accountability could do nothing.

148 Colombia's National Protection unit has sometimes done its job, as in the 2019 case of their bodyguards' defense against an attack on the Black Communities' Process (PCN) leadership. Grassroots leaders call for the government to support more preventative approaches (Alzate 2021). Mexican human rights activists also consider their government's protection agencies to be weak (see Figure 28).

149 According to Gibson and Woolcock: "Deliberative contestation" refers to marginalized groups' practice of exercising associational autonomy in public forums using fairness-based arguments that challenge governing elites' monopoly over public resource allocation decisions" (2008: 151).

150 On people power approaches to accountability in the anti-corruption sense, see Beyerle (2014), among others.

151 See Zapatista accountability saying 'to lead by obeying' (Section 7.13), and [Keywords blogs by Batzin \(2021b\)](#) and [Keywords blog on Ubuntu by Msoro and Ngulube \(2021\)](#).

152 In the anti-pollution field, the 'regulation with information' approach builds on overlapping agendas of consumer rights advocates who favor informed public decision-making, environmental justice campaigners who want to spotlight polluters, and neoliberal technocrats who rely on behavioral economics and administered doses of information to 'nudge' behavior as their preferred, market-friendly policy tool (see Section 5.1).

153 See <https://www.epa.gov/toxics-release-inventory-tri-program> and Coglianesi, Zeckhauser, and Parson (2004); Hamilton (2005); Kraft, Stephan, and Abel (2011). Internationally, related public information systems are called "pollutant release and transfer registries" and versions have operated in many countries, including Japan, Canada, Korea and Indonesia. See, for example: <https://www.oecd.org/chemicalsafety/pollutant-release-transfer-register/>. Initial enthusiasm about replication appears to have waned.

154 As one of the term's authors, Archon Fung, put it: "It may be very difficult to do good targeted transparency as an external intervention, as opposed to coming from an organic process of political contestation, because it's often hard to know ex-ante what kinds of information will be most important and useful to organized political and social forces" (email communication, June 5, 2020).

155 By this definition, social audits overlap with community scorecards—though the latter are more associated with NGO-led approaches, pioneered by CARE in Africa (e.g., Gullo et al. 2020). For a discussion of definitions and how to distinguish social audits from other social accountability tools, as well as an evidence review, see Pande (2022).

156 See Aiyar and Mehta (2015) and Pande and Dubbudu (2017). In spite of this institutional division of labor between answerability and enforcement whereby the social audits have no influence over follow-up, an influential study has been interpreted as evidence of limited social audit effectiveness rather than as evidence of weak political will from state governments to take action (Afridi and Iversen 2014).

157 See Centre for Social Audit (2018, 30 and 2019, 43). Thanks to Suchi Pande for the reference. For a study of official social audits in Karnataka, see Kumar and Madheswaran (2019). For Indian practitioner insights, see the Social Accountability Forum for Action and Research: <https://safar-india.org/> and the results of a major national exchange of experiences: <https://socialauditin.wordpress.com/>.

158 See [Keywords blog by Jadhav \(2021\)](#) on how 'window-dressing' is understood in the Marathi language in India.

159 As Noé Pino and Halloran put it more precisely: "Open washing refers to political actors undertaking superficial actions to promote transparency, with the primary motive of reaping reputational gains rather than ensuring more accountable governance, often alongside efforts to undermine civic and/or political rights." (2016: 1).

160 See Thorne (2009) and Yehuda (2011).

161 See Brockmyer's comparative analysis (2016) of three countries, involving three different multi-stakeholder open government initiatives (Open Government Partnership, Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, and Open Contracting Partnership). Consider also the case of the voluntary corporate Global Reporting Initiative (Dingwerth and Eichinger 2010).

162 See: <http://www.rti-rating.org/>.

163 This section draws from Fox and Acheron (2016) and Fox (2016)—which concludes with a series of hypotheses that have yet to be tested.

164 Academic geography scholars use the term "multi-scalar," but it does not appear to have caught on with practitioners. Academic international relations address multi-level interactions by focusing on the interface between international and domestic authorities, but without addressing interactions between multiple levels within national governments (e.g., Drezner 2003). This is embodied in the international relations metaphor of 'two-level games.' A multi-level approach that addresses national politics would suggest at least a 'three-level game.'

165 This business strategy was pursued by large-scale, capital-intensive industries in the early and mid-twentieth century. According to a leading business historian, with vertical integration "the visible hand of management replaced the invisible hand of market forces in coordinating the flow from the suppliers of raw materials to the ultimate consumer" (Chandler 1977, 315).

166 Recent related applied research on international development programs addresses how they 'take scale into account' (Anderson, Fox and Gaventa 2020).

167 One of the few academic literatures that explicitly addresses vertical integration focuses on peacebuilding and development (McCandless, Abitbol, and Donais 2015).

168 As Joy Acheron of G-Watch commented, "this also makes vertical integration flexible. It can be done by a few cadres present from international to local and still see the systemic problem in a given policy and program simply by being present and analyzing the different levels" (personal communication, Sept. 2, 2020).

169 The sandwich strategy idea also describes, but has not been applied to, diverse efforts by national government reformers to support collective action intended to weaken entrenched local elites, as in the cases of Mexico's agrarian reform in the 1930s, Colombia's National Association of Peasant Service Users in the late 1960s, the 1960s US War on Poverty's Community Action Programs and Bolivia's 1994 national Popular Participation Law, among others (e.g., North and Raby 1977; Piven and Cloward 1971; Zamosc 1986).

170 The definition proposed here draws on an ongoing ARC research project that compares approximately 20 cases across diverse countries and issue areas. This definition is more bounded than the original formulation in Fox (1992). A revised formulation was proposed in Fox (2005; 2015). The concept of autonomous here is relative, including civic spaces or repertoires of action that may appear to be narrow and officially bounded, but which can become contested terrain and lead to further openings (i.e., 'invited spaces' can become 'claimed spaces'). The assumption here is that such pathways may not be predetermined. See: <https://accountabilityresearch.org/sandwich-strategy-research/>.

171 More recently, in an HBO adaptation of a popular graphic novel that brought the infamous 1919 Tulsa race massacre to widespread public attention, the phrase was applied to the abuse of power by white supremacists (Reiher 2019). For more examples, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quis_custodiet_ipsos_custodes%3F

172 See: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hold-someone-s-feet-to-the-fire> and Idiomation (2014). See also: <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-origin-of-the-phrase-feet-to-the-fire?share=1>.

173 There is also a version in Spanish, which appeared to emerge independently: ‘quien paga manda’ (s/he who pays, gives the orders).

174 See: <https://www.funtrivia.com/askft/Question25241.html>

175 See Ashliman (2021)

176 See: <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/476709/origin-of-name-and-shame>

177 See, for example, Hafner-Burton (2008), Krain (2012), and Snyder (2019).

178 See Glencorse and Parajuli (2015) and www.accountabilitylab.org. For a slightly earlier use of ‘naming and faming’ in the management context, as a complement to naming and shaming, see Morrison (2014). The practice—though not the term—also has deep roots in Mexican indigenous communities, with their custom of honoring outstanding citizens and external allies with ceremonial public recognition of service through the award of a symbolic leadership staff (bastón de mando). This practice is reproduced in communities of indigenous migrants in the United States.

179 Historians debate the degree to which the Iroquois Confederacy influenced the design of the US Constitution. See Jacobson (2014).

180 As Madison put it: “It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices [checks and balances] should be necessary to control the abuses of government.... If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself” (1788).

181 Douglass [1857] (2007).

182 In 1962, President John F. Kennedy suggested a related theory of change, from a governmental point of view: “Those who make peaceful reform impossible, make violent revolution inevitable” (Kennedy [1962] 2015). At the time, the context was the Cold War motivation of the governmental Alliance for Progress with Latin America, but the proposition is still more widely applicable.

183 The phrase was first used in a 1976 scholarly article by historian Laurel Ann Ulrich, but with a different meaning—she was referring to the difficulty of finding historical records of women’s lives and intended to suggest that well-behaved women should make history. In the author’s words, the saying’s uptake “was a weird escape into popular culture,” taking on a completely different meaning. She later published a book with that title in 2007. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laurel_Thatcher_Ulrich and Marshall (2007).

184 See Van Evera (1997) and Aston (2020b). While Sherlock Holmes is widely considered to apply the ‘science of deduction,’ in contemporary social science terms his main method is actually inductive reasoning – finding explanations based on following clues rather than seeking evidence to test a predetermined explanation (Kincaid 2015). Thanks to John Lawrence for the reference.

185 As Keck and Sikkink’s agenda-setting analysis of transnational advocacy networks put it, “in order to campaign on an issue it must be converted into a ‘causal story’ that establishes who bears responsibility or guilt. But the causal chain needs to be sufficiently short and clear to make the case convincing” (1998, 27).

186 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speaking_truth_to_power and <http://www.kouroo.info/kouroo/concepts/SpeakTruthToPower.pdf>. For related historical references on speaking truth to power in the medieval Islamic world, see Chayes (2015).

187 The word Watergate itself became emblematic of a politically constructed keyword, because in popular political discourse in the US, when a scandal emerges it gets names with the word ‘gate’ attached to signify abuse of power. This usage has spread to languages other than English. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_%22-gate%22_scandals.

188 See: <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-origin-of-the-phrase-Follow-the-Money?share=1>. See also Doyle, Meider, and Shapiro (2012, 168), who quote Borrell and Cashinella (1975): “Mr [James] Crane usually offers this piece of sound advice to all new officers

joining his fraud department: 'Always follow the money. Inevitably it will lead to an oak-paneled door and behind it will be Mr Big.' It is a tip that has paid off in scores of cases."

189 See, for example: Burris (2012) and "Who Rules America" at: <https://whorulesamerica.ucsc.edu>.

190 See Komlick (2014).

191 The Zapatista movement that appeared in 1994 was named after the early twentieth century Mexican agrarian revolutionary, whose movement is widely associated with the slogan 'land and freedom.' Emiliano Zapata's original 1911 land reform proposal, the *Plan de Ayala*, had concluded with a very different slogan: 'Liberty, Justice, and Law.' Though less catchy, it was intended to call out the then-new Mexican government for its unfulfilled promises of land restitution and therefore put public accountability directly on the agenda. See: <https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-3-mexico/primary-documents-with-accompanying-discussion-questions/document-6-plan-de-ayala-emilio-zapata-1911/>.

192 The most likely first published use of the phrase was in an early 1994 Zapatista communiqué calling for a "truly free and democratic election." See: https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Discurso_del_Subcomandante_Marcos_%22Mandar_obedeciendo%22. Initial translations into English, before dialogue with outsiders, were more literal: "to command by obeying."

193 Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, also used the phrase frequently (Morales 2006). Later Bolivian government decisions led some to question whether his policies followed those principles (Grisaffi 2021; Zamorano 2011). Even though the Zapatistas consider the government of President López Obrador to share many of the flaws of his predecessors, he has also referred 'to lead by obeying.' (López Obrador 2019).

194 See López (2016).

195 See: <https://www.dictionary.com/e/gender-sexuality/metoo/>.

196 See Ross, Winterhalder, and McElreath (2020). Defenders of the status quo responded to BLM with a counter-slogan, 'all lives matter.' In spite of that superficially non-controversial content, in the US political context that message served to deny the existence of systemic racism.

197 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_justice,_no_peace.

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