I am pleased to be here today to discuss how social accountability improves processes and services but also positively impacts children’s lives and promotes their rights.

During my almost 6 years of work as UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation I have had the opportunity of witnessing how social accountability initiatives can have a decisive impact in realising the rights to water and sanitation. I published a Book on Good Practices, which compiles some of these – and of course other – examples of implementing these rights. On the other hand, I have been devoting a significant portion of my energy as a Special Rapporteur, to the post 2015 development agenda but accountability has always been at the core of my work. Hence there is a lot I would like to share with you today.

As I understand social accountability, it refers to formal or informal mechanisms through which citizens / residents and/ or CSOs engage to hold state officials or service providers to account. They are independently initiated – even though they may be facilitated by the State/ multilateral agencies, bilateral donors or international CSOs. They employ techniques of data collection, lobbying for access to information to evaluate budgets, monitoring public expenditure and delivery of public services.
Social accountability has – at least in theory - the potential to empower people who have traditionally been excluded or marginalized to claim entitlements and rights more effectively. It can also increase the pressure on duty bearers to explain and justify their decisions and actions - fear of reputational damage can sometimes be a stronger deterrent or incentive than legal proceedings.

Today I would like to share with you some examples of social accountability mechanisms that I came across with in my work. I will use this opportunity to try to highlight the factors that most influenced the positive, but also the not-so-positive results. I will hence try to answer to the questions raised by the organisers of what are the bottlenecks and what are the enabling factors?

Let us then start with the examples – I draw some of them from fact-finding missions I undertook to certain countries or from the Compilation of Good Practices in realising the HRTWS that I published in 2012.

1 – In Ghana (and many other countries) some communities use “Community score cards” (CSC) to create an agenda for discussions with water service providers.

Community score cards are qualitative monitoring tools that are used for local level monitoring and performance evaluation of services, projects and even government administrative units by the communities themselves. The process might include social audit, community monitoring and citizen report cards. The Community score cards process is an instrument to exact social and public accountability and responsiveness from service providers. Moreover, by including an interface meeting between service providers and the community that allows for immediate feedback, the process can also be a strong instrument for empowerment. The exercise assists local authorities and service providers to respond to users’ needs, and also changes the behaviour and attitudes of users. In one
case, this dialogue led the community to put an end to the practice of siphoning off part of the water supply for re-sale in other areas.

However, one drawback of the report card system is that it only works for those members of society who receive their (formal) services from the utility, and does not play any regulatory or monitoring role for informal service provision.

Therefore, community score cards can contribute to the realization of the rights of children improving their existing water and sanitation service, making them more accessible, available, affordable, acceptable and safer. However, they do not necessarily benefit the most marginalized and excluded families, as these will probably not benefit from utility services/are not connected to the water network.

2 – In my mission to Namibia I met with Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI). Their approach provides a good example of social accountability to identify the problems faced by communities living in slums or informal settlements. They have developed a flexible, community-driven process called enumeration, whereby data collection on access to water and sanitation and other relevant issues is conducted by community members, often in collaboration with local academics or professionals. The process involves both, a qualitative and quantitative survey of the community and is designed to ensure that information accurately reflects the problems faced by those living in slums. SDI-supported enumerations have been completed in slums and informal settlements in other countries, as South Africa, Uganda and India.

In Namibia the SDI members I met told me that the data assisted in showing the affordability levels of the different informal settlements and the maps helped to show the distances for water collection from taps in three settlements. Data collection and feedback of survey results were done with the community members in three settlements. This can obviously influence policy-making as a tool to draw attention to the challenges faced by people living in slums. It helps to get a more accurate and complete
picture of who has access and who does not have access, and may point to the complete neglect of slum. But the impact in improving access to services of the work done by organizations like SDI depends on the responsiveness by the Government.

3 – Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS) are a good example to help people understand how important it is that budgets are adequately allocated to ensure the realization of human rights. A PET Survey collects information on facility characteristics, financial flows, outputs (services delivered), accountability arrangements, etc. If carefully and competently collected, the PETS data can have multiple uses. They can serve as powerful simple diagnostic tool in the absence of reliable administrative or financial data. They trace the flow of resources from origin to destination and determine the location and scale of anomaly – in case where money that has been budgeted for something has not been spent or when the expenditures do not correspond to what is budgeted for. They highlight not only the use and abuse of public money, but also give insights into cost efficiency, decentralization and accountability. Hence PETS help individuals and groups root out malfeasance and support more responsive and accountable governance of community water services.

For instance, in Tanzania, local communities monitored how the Government spent resources using PETs to see whether funds allocated for water and sanitation were spent as planned and on their intended beneficiaries, and identified instances of malfeasance. They requested explanations from the relevant Government official and also resulted in more responsive and accountable community water services. In one instance, the PETS helped community members discover public money intended for a public water service was being used to fund a private drinking water service, which charged higher rates for the water and restricted access. Community members brought this to the attention of the local government, which subsequently fired the official in charge of the facility. The PETS has received the explicit support of the Tanzanian government, which has promulgated a series of national guidelines for other organisations that would like to participate.
In this case it is also obvious that if the people/ NGOs do not have access to the State budget, then a PETS cannot be performed. If the State does not want to provide information, social accountability does not work. Hence having legislation in place, such as a right to information act is indispensable.

4. I will finish with an example from my last country mission to Brasil!

I visited one of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro – the Complexo do Alemão. This is a big community – with maybe 100 000 inhabitants. Many of the people do not have access to sanitation and some don’t have access to water at home. Some years ago, some community led organisations made an inquiry inside the settlement about peoples’ priorities in terms of investments. They answered overwhelmingly that they wanted water and sanitation. The government built a cable car (now mainly used by tourists). In this case, the government decided to invest the 100 M $ in a service the community had not elected as a priority and disregarded the community request. However in Rocinha – another favela in Rio – the community is being even more vocal and, based on the bad experience of Complexo do Alemão, is again fighting for water and sanitation (and against the cable car).

Benefits of Social Accountability

I will not spend too much time in telling you about the possible benefits of social accountability:

Generating accountability
Empower people who have traditionally been excluded/ marginalized
Increases pressure on duty bearers to explain and justify decisions
Expose corruption/ reduce waste of resources/ redirect resources to poor communities
Challenges of Social Accountability

Social movements are not perfect
Social movements don’t necessarily protect the most marginalized and vulnerable
Ultimately their success will depend on good will of duty bearers
Politicians ignore findings
Politicians often agree only to token changes
Bureaucracies resist reforms
Access to government data is restricted/ lack of access to information
Politicization of the monitoring work
Civic groups face capacity, resource and time constraints

Social accountability has worked best when the rules and frameworks in place provide legal sanctions in the event of wrongdoing and permit civil society to monitor effectively and access essential information. The transformative value of social accountability depends on willingness of duty bearers to engage with them. Hence it might be more successful when it is used to complement formal accountability mechanisms existing in the country. When those formal accountability mechanisms do not work, social accountability has hence less chances of being successful!

It is also essential that there is a consistent dialogue between civil society representatives and community members in order to explore what the data collected means and how it will be used. Equally important, individuals and civil society representatives must have some knowledge of the normative or legal frameworks upon which they are basing their appeal for better services. This could be the international human rights framework for instance, but it could also be national legislation or policies. They must also know the roles and responsibilities of various actors in order to ensure that they are appealing to the appropriate authority.
Pre-requisites for Social Accountability to succeed

Social accountability initiatives are increasingly expected to facilitate positive development outcomes – more responsive local governments, exposing government failures and corruption, empowering marginalized groups and ensuring that local and national governments respond to the needs of the poor and marginalized.

However, there are certain pre-conditions that must be met for social accountability approaches to lead to better governance outcomes. Put in a slightly provocative way, people’s voice is ineffective unless it can elicit answerability and enforceability.

What are these pre-requisites? In short, Social accountability should involve an informed person exercising voice that is transmitted to those with enforcement capacities in order to generate answerability from service providers and local authorities.

1. Information/ Awareness raising/ Capacity building about human rights
2. Inclusive and accessible participatory processes
3. The information gathered should be aggregated and articulated >> complaints/ requests/ actions should highlight specific shortcomings, unmet targets, etc.
4. Information needs to be transmitted to relevant actors and decision makers. Adequate mechanisms must be used and transmitted to the right target audience. This might be difficult.
5. Enforceability of solutions
6. Answerability
7. Feedback – to the people
Hence voice + enforceability + answerability should be present (at least to some extent) for a meaningful and sustainable impact on the provision of public services.

Social accountability tends to be used in areas of precarious statehood, because of inadequacy of formal structures of governance. However in these cases people face same or even heightened challenges:

a) physical insecurity
b) elite capture
c) lack of administrative capacity
d) lack of community trust
e) constraining effects of poverty

Social accountability brings a bottom-up approach that can strengthen governance and is meant to complement top-down interventions – such as judicial reform, anti-corruption strategies, capacity building for public servants etc.

**Conclusion**

Social accountability only produces results with a responsive State.

But in this process, individuals can get empowered understanding much more what their human rights are. In particular in the case of children – by involving them in social accountability initiatives, we are promoting the CRC (namely right to be heard, and also the right of the child to be prepared "for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace,
tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;”)

In ratifying the CRC, States become accountable to fulfil children’s rights, including the right of children to be heard and to participate in decisions that affect them. Yet because of their political, cultural and social status, children are often precluded from direct participation in many public processes of accountability, and unlike women, the poor and other marginalized groups who participate, must count on “third parties” (adults) as intermediaries.

Through social accountability mechanisms, we are giving children the opportunity to participate directly, as it happens for instance, in school councils or municipal child councils. This applies to all children, without any kind of discrimination, also to those who live in urban settlements or in rural areas or those with disabilities or those who live in the streets.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my intervention, I have been advocating on the inclusion of the principle of non-discrimination and equality in the post-2015 development agenda. I believe that the only way to eliminate inequalities in the water and sanitation sector, but also in all areas in our societies, is by integrating a commitment to progressively eliminate inequalities in the achievement of all other goals. I believe this is the first step, but others are needed as well. In order to monitor the principle of non-discrimination and equality we will need different mechanisms, such as the creation of national and international accountability mechanisms.

Through them, inequalities cases will be identified and UN MS will be held to account in the realization of the future development goals.

But, how do we ensure that we will identify all instances of inequality, for instance? How do we know that those children living in urban settlements or rural areas have been also identified and can also participate in the monitoring process to see how their inequalities disappear? Social accountability can play an important role in this regard by ensuring the participation of children in these activities, including those who are
most disadvantaged or marginalized. States need to understand that the reality is different from the facts that currently existing data tells us. That existing data does not show the reality of millions of people who do not enjoy their rights to water and sanitation. Through social accountability mechanisms real data can be provided, allowing also a monitoring process - based on adequate indicators - that could be included, for instance, in actions plans or water strategies at national level, where civil society should also participate and verify that the elimination of inequalities in the water and sanitation is truly happening.

Hence the consecration of national and international accountability mechanisms in the post 2015 development agenda could serve as a basis that would lead to the emergence of social accountability mechanisms at the local level.