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Conclusion: Social Accountability Initiatives as Sites of Relational Power

Ward Vloeberghs and Sylvia I. Bergh

Abstract In this chapter, we first summarise the findings from the country chapters on the multiple meanings of SA, documenting terms, translations and contrasting understandings between citizens and public officials. Second, we highlight how civil mobilisation tends to be cyclical over time and is often mediated by brokers. Strategies to spur stakeholders

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into action rely on a delicate balance of both collaboration and confrontation. Third, we examine the responses from authorities to SAIs, finding that reactions are uneven and that all civic innovators fear appropriation or co-optation by officials. Fourth, we assess overall outcomes of Arab SAIs and highlight that the transformative potential of SAIs exists especially at municipal level, if four conditions for success are present (trust, proximity, endorsement, evaluation). We also point out that the actual outcomes of SAIs in Arab societies have, so far, been limited due to design deficiencies (emphasising short-term objectives and limited context sensitivity) or because of officials' resistance in active or passive forms. We characterise SAIs as a discursive action format that is best understood with a relational approach to power. In a final section, we formulate recommendations for activists, officials and donors on how to make SAIs more effective.

Keyword Civic space · Social accountability · Middle East and North Africa (MENA) · State–society relations · Citizen participation · Donors

Social accountability (SA), both as a concept and as a tool to repair broken state–society relationships or social contracts, has gained significant traction in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region over the past decade. Understood here as formal or informal citizen-led action beyond elections that aims to hold state actors accountable for public decision-making, SA emerged from the fields of international public governance and development studies and is key to healthy citizen–state dynamics.

This volume started from a twofold paradox. First, while the literature on SA has moved beyond area studies focused on Latin America to analyse initiatives across other continents, there has been limited scholarly attention for social accountability initiatives (SAIs) in the MENA region. We find this relative negligence surprising, given the spectacular breakthrough in civic space during the Arab uprisings of 2011 and their resurgence in 2019. This hints at the second paradoxical observation, namely that Middle East Studies has largely ignored insights from international development scholars focusing on SAI as a mechanism of social change.

We argue that SAIs are a mixed and fragmented bag when juxtaposed and assessed in terms of tangible outcomes for advancing the standards of answerability among public decision-makers in Arab societies. While

clear victories exist (e.g. the adoption of progressive legislation in Tunisia, awareness-raising in Morocco and improved municipal service delivery in Lebanon), in some SAIs authorities engaged in co-optation tactics and window-dressing—without donors noticing it. We believe, therefore, that SAIs deserve closer attention because they enable us to understand how power relations between various stakeholders play out on the ground. Our case studies moreover document the potential of citizen action when certain conditions are met. Alas, analysing a decade of Arab SAIs also illustrates how citizen voice that lacks teeth can be curtailed by incumbent rulers.

When analysed from a more generic perspective, an SAI is a discursive action format that constitutes a helpful prism for analysing how power relations are produced, maintained and altered in local settings. We conceptualise ‘discursive action format’ as a package of interventions connected by a more or less coherent narrative of social change and practical arrangements (from regular meetings to physical or digital registration forms) designed to facilitate interaction between ordinary citizens and state officials. In this sense, a SAI can be seen as a ‘political artefact, an effect that is made out of processes, which involve both discursive and material components’ (Moisio et al., 2020, p. 8). These initiatives reveal interlinkages and surprisingly similar modes of operation and contestation at multiple scales (Global Partnership for Social Accountability [GPSA], n.d.). Since SAIs are increasingly present in the Global South as a tool for civic innovation and participatory democracy, it is important to understand how they greatly vary and yet are comparable across time and space.

6.1 ANSWERING OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this book, we set out to document what SA looks like for people in three key countries of the Arab world. We divided this overall question into four subquestions, focusing on multiple meanings of SA, mobilisation methods, responses from authorities and outcomes. In the process, we relied mostly on qualitative research methods (interviews with donors, activists and officials; focus groups with project leaders and stakeholders; case studies; participant observation and desk review). Below, we formulate some concluding observations for each of these four subquestions (see Table 6.1) before providing more general lessons and recommendations on SA in the MENA.

Table 6.1 Meanings, mobilisations, responses and outcomes of social accountability initiatives in three Arab societies

	Morocco	Tunisia	Lebanon	Overall
Meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple terms circulate simultaneously (<i>redawabihitē sociale, musā'ala tijimā'iyā, mulāsaba</i>) Polysemy of social accountability (holding decision-makers to account, monitoring public policies, citizen participation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SA covers at least six dimensions: transparency, rule of law, citizen participation, answerability of authorities, access to information, monitoring and evaluation) Whereas activists speak of accountability initiated by citizens or CSOs, authorities rather speak of 'transparency' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SA is holding local authorities (esp. municipalities) to account Compliance from public servants remains conditional, cannot be taken for granted SA requires malpractice to be tackled, not just exposed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theory: SA as communal tool for improved public service delivery is 'diverse, malleable, and contested' (Fox, 2022, p. 56) CASES: multiple terms circulate simultaneously; polysemy of SA concept; state officials hold different understandings than citizens, which affects outcomes
Mobilisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intermediaries (often CSOs) facilitate contact between citizens and the (local) state Demonstrations raise awareness Occasional confrontation via litigation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SA most often led by civil society actors targeting unresponsive officials SAIs focused on elected officials need combination of persuasive and coercive strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct access of citizens to decision-makers is preferred route but limited to taxpayers residents with voting rights SAIs with municipalities mostly rooted in collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theory: gradual rather than constant mobilisation, key role for intermediaries, differences in types of CSOs CASES: SAIs are trade-offs between collaboration and confrontation, both are needed

	Morocco	Tunisia	Lebanon	Overall
Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contrasting attitudes: sensitivity to SA calls but also obstruction • Positive response more likely if mobilisation is mediated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSOs are often wary of exploitation, manipulation of SAIs by authorities • Reluctance among officials to share executive powers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SA is welcome when it is non-threatening; SAIs may create win-win configurations where citizens contribute to public service • Persistent nepotism among officials influences responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory: authoritarianism constrains accountability but SAIs exist nonetheless • CASES: tokenism (at best) or sabotaging accountability (at worst) not uncommon; scale matters (SA in small localities easier than in big cities) and credible threat (media coverage) of escalation is key to officials' response
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall success of SAIs limited due to inefficiencies of institutional protocols, complex ties between authorities and CSOs, discretionary bureaucracy • Occasional concessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability of SAIs to deliver is a variable, depends on willingness and responsiveness of bottom-up pressure and allies among authorities • Importance of local-national civil society linkages • Need for confrontation <i>and</i> collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of clear, concrete and solid results is modest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory: sandwich strategy, contextual drivers • CASES: citizens or CSOs rarely succeed on their own, need for coalitions of (unlikely) partners; response remains limited, giving citizens impression SA may be window-dressing; defusing threat more important than genuine change or cooperation; civic space evolves in cycles (opening vs closing space)

6.1.1 *Meanings*

The scholarly literature has a broad definition of SAIs, including citizen monitoring and oversight of public or private sector performance, user-centred public information access systems, public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms and even citizen participation in actual resource allocation, such as participatory budgeting. Consequently, the ‘ideas and institutions of SA are diverse, malleable, and contested’ (Fox, 2022, p. 56).

When we asked local citizens and civil society activists in Lebanon, Tunisia and Morocco what they understood by SA, we found a broad range of different interpretations connected to the relationship between state and citizens, including transparency, access to information, participation, answerability of public institutions, rule of law, performance monitoring and evaluation of public service delivery.

The term ‘accountability’ does not have a clear, single equivalent in Arabic. Across all initiatives and in civil society discussions in all three countries, two terms emerged time and again when discussing SA: *musāʿala* and *muḥāsaba*. Activists often used the term *musāʿala*, linked to the notion of questioning (*saʿala*), to indicate the answerability of public officials and their obligation to disclose information and explain their actions (or inaction) and decisions. Meanwhile, the term *muḥāsaba*, derived from the verb ‘to settle accounts’ (*ḥasaba*), has a more threatening connotation of enforcing accountability, i.e. sanctioning officials, and is mostly used in initiatives focusing on the rule of law and access to justice.

The popularisation of the term ‘social accountability’ (*musāʿala ijtimāʿiyya*) in recent years has been driven by both local demands for accountability and international donor programmes. In Tunisia, for example, the spread of the term in civil society was boosted by the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Tamkeen programme on ‘reinforcing the capacity of civil society’ (UNDP, n.d.). However, accountability has been picked up and reappropriated by local actors in their own array of initiatives, which go beyond interventions promoted by international donors. Thus, there is no straightforward process through which ideas or models are transferred. While donors play a key role in circulating concepts, these concepts are often adapted to fit a wide diversity of endogenous demands for accountability.

In all three countries, state officials seem to have understandings of accountability that differ significantly from those of citizens. This polysemy affects the outcomes of SAIs. For example, despite the creation of explicit constitutional principles and institutions ostensibly dedicated to oversight and the eradication of corruption, in practice it remains very difficult for Moroccan citizens participating in SAIs to achieve accountability. One conclusion of this challenging reality hints at a lack of (state) capacity due to bureaucratic inefficiency, coordination problems or resource shortages. Some argue, however, that such a view is naive and that reality is both more complicated and more cynical: accountability is elusive not because of poor capacity but because state officials actively undermine accountability mechanisms. There are good reasons to substantiate such a view when looking, for instance, at how political elites in Lebanon have ‘managed to obstruct and even quash the domestic judicial process for holding those responsible for the [2020 Beirut Port] blast accountable’ (Nassar & El Machnouk, 2023).

6.1.2 *Mobilisations*

The impunity of corrupt public decision-makers fuelled Arab societies to revolt against dictators in 2011 and has continued to nourish civic mobilisations across the region ever since. In all three countries analysed in this volume, such spectacular eruptions were the result of the ‘gradual build-up of contentious mobilisations witnessed over the past years’, in most cases stretching back decades (Daher, 2021; see also Bogaert, 2015; Gobe & Salaymeh, 2016). This suggests that citizen mobilisation is a cyclical phenomenon in which periods of more dynamic mobilisation activity alternate with spells of quiet networking activities in the face of an unreceptive political climate, theorised as abeyance (Geha, 2019). In other words, timing is key in identifying the moment at which the socio-political climate presents opportunities for change.

This book has documented a variety of mobilisation strategies throughout the Arab world over the past 15 years. These strategies were almost always a mix between collaboration and confrontation among officials and citizens. When collaboration alone was chosen, there was a risk of co-optation or appropriation; when only confrontation was privileged as a strategy, the dangers of sidelining or repression loomed around the corner. Effective mobilisation thus seems to require direct, personal ties

between citizens and officials as well as indirect (social) media attention; it needs a good balance of both persuasive and coercive tactics.

In nearly all cases, intermediaries from civil society organisations (CSOs) connected providers and recipients of public services, be it via awareness-raising activities among specific target groups (youth, women, illiterate people,...) or through attempts at outright confrontation (from demonstrations to naming-and-shaming campaigns and litigation against corrupt officials). Our cases seem to confirm the findings of recent scholarship suggesting that the role of intermediaries is key (Anderson et al., 2022; Berdou & Shutt, 2017; Kirk, 2023), because such brokers can act as ‘translators of accountability’ with agency (Marini et al., 2018, p. 1905). Intermediaries’ or brokers’ political identities should receive more attention from donors as well as scholars, as they determine to a great extent whether SA programmes can challenge clientelism effectively (Kirk, 2023, p. 10).

It is essential, therefore, to properly distinguish between the various actors who intervene in SAIs, as one cannot assume that CSOs are monolithic actors (Kherigi, 2020). Nor can CSOs be seen as one homogeneous group; the sector has become highly professionalised over the past decades and its diversity has only increased. For example, an ad hoc association of villagers demanding access to electricity in rural Morocco differs considerably from an institutionalised multinational donor organisation such as Oxfam or Save the Children.

The Tunisia chapter in this book illustrates how fragmentation among CSOs can cause programme (and outcome) incompatibilities for people on the ground. This finding echoes similar insights about different types of CSOs and the political contexts in which such organisations operate (Mako & Moghadam, 2021). The distinction between different kinds of CSOs and their attitudes to the political regime (adversarial, boycotting or collaborative) profoundly affects how authorities will likely respond to SAIs and can thus be seen as a key variable of SA.

6.1.3 Responses

We know from the theory that accountability initiatives always face the risk of being merely cosmetic, i.e. challenging existing structures of power only superficially rather than profoundly transforming these regimes. Mariz Tadros has labelled this ‘the risk of authoritarian accountability’:

‘Authoritarian systems of governance are kept intact or even strengthened by being associated with Western-style accountability programmes’ (Tadros, 2018). Furthermore, more recent scholarship (Hassan, 2022; Khodary, 2022; Sika, 2023) has shown that mobilisation depends on the extent and type of authoritarianism. Fortunately, these studies show how stakeholders can navigate the restrictions imposed by authoritarian regimes: the degree of repression impedes mobilisation but also determines the chances of protesters to obtain concessions from their authoritarian rulers (Sika, 2023). Put simply, the extent of repression influences the degree of policy concessions citizens can extract.

In our case studies, we found that all participants were concerned about authorities’ responses to SAIs. Citizens and brokers were wary of the risk of appropriation by authorities. From their side, officials were eager not to expose themselves to sanctions by their superiors—which can occur when they give in too rapidly to calls for accountability or when they underestimate the risk of demands snowballing out of control. We conclude that two factors matter for SAIs hoping to nudge authorities into action: the scale of intervention and the risk of contagion. Indeed, authorities in small localities seemed easier to convince than those in charge of big cities or larger polities. Besides, authorities were more likely to respond favourably to demands when there was a credible threat that such claims would spill over. It is here that (social) media coverage provided valuable leverage. The more autonomous and/or larger the media channel and hence its coverage was, the higher the chances of responsiveness, even though some media attention was already more effective than none.

State capacity proved to be another crucial variable in the way authorities responded to SAIs. In settings where states were strongly institutionalised (like Morocco and Tunisia), SAIs tended to meet more resistance from authorities than in contexts with more fragile state capacity, like Lebanon. This means, surprisingly perhaps, that SAIs may have higher chances of success in fragile than in strong states, because officials in ‘stronger’ states can perceive SAIs as attempts to curtail their implementation prerogatives or challenge their decision-making powers. By contrast, under conditions of weaker state capacity, SAIs can be perceived as providing municipal actors with complementary, non-threatening assistance to ensure public service delivery. In such cases, participatory initiatives can be a welcome supplement to state action, as long as they do not overtly contest the established hierarchy.

Participants in our project invariably expressed serious concerns about the potential threat of authorities responding with tokenism (at best) and manipulation (at worst). Indeed, the risk of authorities reacting to SAIs with lip service only or with counter-efforts to appropriate campaigns to their own advantage is never absent. Whether aiming to undermine accountability protocols or to present themselves as initiators of participation, authorities' window-dressing responses are well known, corroborated by recent scholarly attempts to theorise them. Fox (2022, p. 74), for example, speaks of 'openwashing' by actors who 'appear to promote transparency but actually hide the persistent abuse of power and impunity', whereas Kirk (2023, p. 9) refers to 'isomorphic activism', which occurs when 'public authorities appropriate others' opportunities to participate in politics and, in the process, undermine democratic norms', based on his fieldwork in a context marked by clientelism.

6.1.4 *Outcomes*

In an ideal world, SAIs constitute new forms of citizen–state interfaces in which Grandvoininnet's contextual drivers, i.e. state action, information, citizen action and civic mobilisation (Grandvoininnet et al., 2015, p. 12; see also Sect. 2.3 in this book) positively align or realign to generate what Fox calls a 'perfect sandwich strategy'. In such a strategy, citizen voice can equip itself with teeth that ensure shifts in accountability outcomes (Fox, 2022, p. 82). On the one hand, our case studies confirm this promise of a new social contract. At a limited scale, tangible results do exist (e.g. new legislation) and municipalities clearly stand out as the most promising level at which to launch SAIs. If all stakeholders accept that real change is often small and slow, civil actors can be successful catalysts of change and become credible partners for both the demand and supply sides of the accountability chain.

On the other hand, the sobering reality we encountered across the region is that outcomes of SAIs are highly variable and that success stories are rare, since pressures from below rarely find responsive allies inside state administrations (see Table 6.2). We found several reasons for these relatively poor outcomes. Before discussing these, however, we highlight four conditions for successful outcomes in SAIs based on our case studies.

First, our findings confirm that civil society actors (whether multi-national donors or modest, purpose-built committees) can facilitate connections and commitment between citizens and officials. Repeated

Table 6.2 Promise and limits of social accountability in three Arab societies

	<i>Morocco</i>	<i>Tunisia</i>	<i>Lebanon</i>	<i>Overall</i>
Promise of social accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAIs can fill legitimacy vacuum: CSOs increasingly replace parties and unions, who lost credibility • Citizens have created tools and platforms to connect with decision-makers • Civil society can raise awareness; has resilience and drive for long-term change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important achievements (in legislation) in 2011–2021 • Focus on local politics, especially municipalities • SAIs can rebalance state–society relations away from nepotism towards social justice • Joint trainings helps officials respond to SA demands and activists identify implementation obstacles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen and (municipal) state collaborations yield better access to public services as well as better use of human resources and funds • Such synergies improve delivery and acceptance (legitimacy) of public goods as well as the credibility of all actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic innovators <i>can</i> be successful drivers of social change as credible partners enjoying legitimacy • Many initiatives have been launched <i>but</i> real change is small and slow • Tangible results do exist, often at municipal/local levels • Key condition for successful SAIs is trust between officials, donors, citizens

(continued)

Table 6.2 (continued)

	<i>Morocco</i>	<i>Tunisia</i>	<i>Lebanon</i>	<i>Overall</i>
Limits of social accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drip system accountability rather than systemic approach to accountable state–society relations • Decision-makers guard their discretionary powers • Duration of funding affects sustainability of SAI outcomes • Response dependent on proximity between authorities and brokers • Officials can obstruct advances and there is reluctance to scale up micro-level successes to nationwide reforms, despite the existence of institutional accountability protocols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project-based approach of international donors can undermine accountability outcome • SA cannot simply be transplanted via toolkits; it should rather work on local needs by crafting tools sensitive to specificities • Systematic evaluation of SAs can inspire more efficient strategies • CSOs and intermediaries face internal fragmentation and a lack of local–national coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interest and/or sabotaging from officials in SAs • Only residents enjoying full citizenship rights (nationality, voting registration, taxation) can access participatory initiatives (vulnerable people within a community are not represented) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalising SA mechanisms triggers risk of reappropriation or downsizing mechanisms by authorities • Lack of enforcement powers prevents SAs from gaining ‘teeth’ • Strategic opacity in chains of decision-making undermines efficiency of SAs • Who participates and how are key questions in evaluating SAs • SAs can be a form of discourse • Copying tools and formats for intervention is unhelpful

interactions can then lead to reciprocal trust, which is needed for initiatives to succeed. Personal ties of proximity bind stakeholders together and motivate them to overcome obstacles. Second, once alliances and shared understandings of SA have been forged at the local level, it is crucial that these are relayed to and endorsed higher up in the respective institutional hierarchies: micro-level success does not guarantee national-level success without backing at the higher echelons. Similarly, advances at the local scale are easily undone, even when formal protocols or bodies exist. Third, for SAIs to be successful, it is essential to learn from failure. Modes and means of participation should be systematically evaluated while taking the context into consideration and providing opportunities for adjustment. If projects do not acknowledge flawed designs and implementation shortcomings, the same blind spots (who participates?) and pitfalls (how is participation measured?) risk being reproduced. Fourth, all successful SAIs combine forms of cooperation and confrontation: letting citizens or activists train officials can be a successful collaboration strategy to strengthen accountability, as CSOs can lend credibility and know-how to state officials. Conversely, allowing officials to cooperate with civic innovators in SAIs enables authorities to point out implementation obstacles when rolling out projects in specific communities. Finally, confrontation strategies (e.g. the shaming of local officials by social media) sometimes appear as the most appropriate pathway towards change.

Alas, all too often, evidence of clear and concrete outcomes where all these conditions are met is scant, as the overall response from authorities remains limited. One reason for this, among others, is that there is less and less space for people to demand SA. Whereas in 2011, citizens broke through the barriers of fear (Weyland, 2012, p. 926), over time rulers have launched counter-strategies to reassert their power that successfully repressed citizens seeking change.

In all three countries, calls for SA have been sidestepped: in Morocco and in Tunisia we clearly saw how the space for civic innovation has considerably evolved over the past 15 years. While in the beginning, spaces opened (Tunisia), even including a moment of invited space (in Morocco during the run-up to the 2011 referendum, leading to the unprecedented capture of executive power by the moderate Islamist party *Parti de la Justice et du Développement* [Justice and Development Party, PJD]), these spaces gradually closed, culminating in a presidential coup in Tunisia and the restoration of the monarchy's allies in Morocco. In Lebanon, the impunity of public officials responsible for the Beirut Port

blast of August 2020 and the downward socio-economic spiral triggered by the massive devaluation of the national currency have been spectacularly evident.

On the whole, incumbents gradually co-opted dissidents or reframed reforms to their benefit. Consequently, authorities and political elites were reluctant to grant initiatives real enforcement powers, prioritising their own survival. Thus, defusing tensions by occasionally giving way was preferred over systemic change. Such drip-system accountability underlines the key role of appointed or elected officials in determining outcomes of SAIs. Another, related reason for the rather meagre outcomes of SAIs in the Arab world is that authorities often perceived projects that included an element of citizen participation as potential threats rather than as opportunities to renew their legitimacy. If initiatives are approached as a nuisance factor to be contained, then a lack of interest—or worse, active resistance—is to be expected. A third reason for the modest harvest of Arab SAIs so far touches on structural vulnerabilities: donor-funded projects were typically short-term interventions involving multiple stakeholders who often had specific standards and modes of operation used to streamline their operations across continents (e.g. particular types of citizen-score-card mechanisms). Such templates can impede successful intervention, as sustainable advances in accountability take time to emerge and often require objectives and tools that are context-dependent (Anderson et al., 2022; Bergh, 2019; Harb, 2018; Loewe et al., 2021; Tadros, 2020).

6.2 SAIS AS RELATIONAL SITES OF POWER

While this book is organised into several chapters that discuss SAIs in settings using national boundaries as a unit of analysis, we explicitly encourage readers to also look at our case studies transnationally and seek out recurrent patterns and themes. We believe that SAIs can best be understood via a relational approach that views them as a ‘discursive action format’ that, despite its many manifestations, has a number of common features and understandings. Studying SAIs from a grounded perspective illustrates how they are relational sites of power: they not only shape their environment but are also shaped by the particularities of their respective environments. Thus, paraphrasing Eyben’s study on international aid (2008, p. 20), we can say that a relational understanding of

[SAIs] would not see [them] as a thing. Rather, SAIs would be understood as a particular pattern of social relations shaped by context-specific and historically derived configurations within the broader fields of power and meaning in global and local politics.

Such a relational approach to SAIs furthermore makes it possible to take into account that power dynamics are relational: they are ‘a complex and polymorphous reality that is best analysed from several entry points’ (Silvester & Fisker, 2023, p. 3, citing Jessop, 2016, p. 51). SAIs are affected by notions of reach and connection as well. Power is

exercised through the interactions of different sets of actors and institutions whose relationships—both proximate and distant—are conditioned to attain certain political ends. Presence and proximity are no longer simply about physical distance; rather, thinking about reach and connection bring into view how institutions and movements also change *what* can be demanded politically and *how* it may be brokered, contested and countered. (Clark et al., 2022, p. 270, emphasis in original)

Therefore, we view SAIs as various manifestations of a globally circulating discursive action format that enable us to excavate often implicit power relations that can contribute to the ‘operation of state power in the micro-geographies of the state’ (Moisio et al., 2020, p. 8). As such, we maintain that the SAIs analysed in this volume reveal politics at multiple scales (local, regional, national, international, global) and ‘enrich our understanding of how local politics operate and are produced, navigated, negotiated, contested and challenged, and thus how local power is (re)shaped’ (Clark et al., 2022, p. 258).

Looking critically at SAIs as manifestations of relational power—integrating various levels of governance and aligning modes of governance across entities—puts the spotlight on a fundamental risk of SAIs when they are promoted as an instrument of intervention, namely that the *modus operandi* becomes more important than the quality of public service delivery itself. In this sense, emulating tools and methods across countries can be counterproductive. While transposing SAIs from one setting to another may enable experts and international donors to streamline and compare projects more extensively, their specific set-up can become a straitjacket for local participants, citizens, CSOs and officials alike. Stakeholders on the ground need time to develop mutual trust and measures adapted to their respective communities or environments,

rather than having forms of collaboration imposed on them. They need continuity and long-term stability in resources and commitment, rather than short-lived campaigns or temporary project managers eager to make ‘their’ project a successful step in a globetrotting career.

What we observe, then, is a lesser-known aspect of SAIs as a discursive action format that becomes a blueprint for intervention in settings with imperfect accountability. Here, SAIs can be seen as sites of relational power, in which SA mechanisms or tools appear as a form of discourse espoused by global organisations (such as the World Bank, UNDP, Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere [CARE] or Transparency International) and shared with—or imposed on—local ‘partners’, authorities, CSOs and citizens. The professionals (be they regular staff or consultants) are often interlinked and expose a form of assembled power that projects its instruments (know-how, deliverables) onto local communities with very diverse needs and backgrounds. SAIs in this view are relational sites of power because they present a discursive format of action that performs globalising tendencies of governance (i.e. a set of steps to be rolled out aimed at ‘more responsive governance’, the ‘fight against corruption’ and ‘enhanced delivery of public goods’). SAIs easily circulate far beyond the MENA region thanks to this shared discourse and because of their ontological character as a template that can be used by projects fostering citizen participation elsewhere in the world and that other initiatives and practitioners can *relate to* precisely because they understand this discourse and partake in this shared format of action.

6.3 GROUNDED LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final section, we formulate insights and recommendations based on our findings. We set out to examine what SA looks like on the ground. First, we found that the very notion of SA is so malleable that all stakeholders bent it to their interests. The malleability of SA and its contested nature are both a threat (giving rise to obstruction and openwashing) and an opportunity (to reformulate claims and demands) for civic innovators.

Not surprisingly then, we found that what SA looks like greatly depends on local conditions and specific circumstances. SA has potential and appeal in the MENA region (and other contexts marked by democratic deficiencies) because it holds the promise of providing ordinary citizens with agency to monitor authorities, thereby empowering them as a key actor in a relation of mutual trust between state and society. In

other words, there is a glimmer of hope in SA for despondent citizens who wish to combat impunity and tackle corruption. In practice, however, we have reason and evidence to believe that it is exactly this potential of SA that pushes authorities, officials, politicians and bureaucrats to sabotage, hollow out or undermine SAIs by any available means as soon as they fear losing their ill-gained privileges or one-sided clientelist relationships. Indeed, we found that officials used SA as a public relations strategy at best and sabotaged its mechanisms at worst. A preferred tool here was the strategic, i.e. intentional, opacity in hierarchies of decision-making, which undermined the efficiency of SAIs. The detailed reviews in the country chapters show that situations where the conditions for effective SA were met were rare. Most importantly, there was no one-size-fits-all format: the trajectories we encountered were never the same, often winding and reversing, indirect and ‘partial, incomplete, and temporary’ (Fox, 2022, p. 97).

Despite the overwhelming variety in what SAIs look like on the ground, we would like to offer a concise set of recommendations to policy-makers and practitioners. First, keep in mind that actual change is often more modest and slower than initial ambitions. Consequently, to avoid losing the momentum of mobilisation and achieve advances in SA, all actors should acknowledge erstwhile opponents as potential coalition partners, however uncomfortable or unlikely this scenario may seem *ex ante*. This is because neither citizens nor intermediaries or authorities can achieve success on their own. While civic innovators may be most resilient and drive to push the boundaries of state–society relations and improved public services, they need persuasive mediators and subtle coercion to convince officials to use their executive power or nudge their superiors towards institutional reform. Measures that build trust between citizens and authorities appear as the most promising glue to achieve tangible accountability results. It is here that (international) donors as well as (local) ad hoc associations can make meaningful contributions, as they have the resources and legitimacy to bridge gaps in know-how and/or funding, provided they commit to a long-term (four to eight years) rather than short-term investment, as is often the case. Such a longer-term presence would also enable them to draw more heavily on the relational character of SAIs by strengthening the local–national linkages of committees, associations and civil society actors and ensuring alignment between headquarters and teams on the ground or between programme managers and staff working with local communities on the ground.

To conclude, SAIs in the three countries under study have proven to yield mixed results so far. On the ground, we saw that projects either remained limited to mere discursive devices for politicians and managers to muster goodwill through interventions that were partial or superficial or yielded concrete socio-economic advances for local communities but failed to be implemented at larger scales and/or with sustainable impacts.

Nevertheless, despite the overall disappointing evidence of the effectiveness of SAIs in the MENA region, we hope that this book will encourage scholars, practitioners, officials, donors and activists to critically question and, where possible, strengthen SAIs and push initiatives fostering accountability in the Arab world. Civic innovation holds major opportunities for imagining future societies based on equality, accountability and social justice. This will require extending the debate from a programmatic one (how to promote accountability at local and national levels) to one that includes legal reforms and a political praxis focused on enforcing laws against individuals, institutions and private companies. This requires changing organisational behaviour to create a more accountable culture of public decision-making, in which malpractice is not merely exposed but also tackled and sanctioned.

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