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# Social Accountability in Review: From Conceptual Models to Grounded Practices of Civic Innovation

*Ward Vloeberghs and Sylvia I. Bergh*

**Abstract** This chapter offers a working definition of social accountability as any citizen-led action beyond elections that aims to enhance the accountability of state actors. We view social accountability as a broad array of predominantly bottom-up initiatives, aimed at improving the

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quality of governance (especially oversight and responsiveness) through active citizen participation. We also trace the evolution of SA as a concept in the literature over the past decades and, then, discuss some influential theoretic approaches to SAIs, pointing out strengths and weaknesses of each model. Finally, we suggest organising Arab SAIs into one of three categories: (1) transparency; (2) advocacy; or (3) participatory governance and we review each of these existing action formats by discussing their main strengths and flaws.

**Keywords** Social accountability · Civic innovation · Widgets vs watchdogs · Contextual drivers · Social contract theory · Empowerment

## 2.1 SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES AS DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

Academics have traditionally explored avenues for political change from two angles. The first looks for ways to involve citizens more directly in decision-making to fix loopholes of representative democracy. This has typically taken shape in multiple modes of deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 2018) or by reaching back to ancient democratic principles to design new mechanisms of collective governance (Landemore, 2020; Springborg, 2019). A second recipe for democratic renewal has been to redesign citizen participation by focusing on transparency and oversight. Such ideas emphasise the need to involve citizens as well as other stakeholders in the decision-making process. This perspective highlights the need for institutions to achieve a certain quality standard in their delivery of public services. Institutions are thus evaluated as good or bad by ‘the extent to which they realise four explicitly democratic goods, namely *inclusiveness*, *popular control*, *considered judgement* and *transparency*’ (Smith, 2009, p. 12, emphasis in original). Both approaches to democratic renewal share a bottom-up perspective on political change by acknowledging the need to involve citizens in novel ways.

Scholars of civic innovation

are interested in how innovative practices of community and solidarity economies, sometimes in alliances with transformative empowerment strategies ... are allowing new imaginaries of well-being and possibility to

flourish. These alternative discourses ... try hard and sometimes selectively succeed to create inroads into the mainstream development discourse. Most importantly, they contain the potential for social change that needs to be understood and acted upon. (Biekart et al., 2016, p. 4)

In this volume, we argue that civic innovation in the Arab world remains poorly studied, although everyday practices in the decade following the Arab uprisings illustrate an abundance of strategies aimed at not only coping with but also altering the social status quo. Examples from the region abound: the ‘You Stink’ protests in Lebanon, the al-Bawsala platform in Tunisia or the Transparency Maroc campaigns. To narrow down civic innovation, we focus on one specific form of civic innovation here: social accountability initiatives (SAIs).

A consensual scholarly definition of SAIs is lacking. We understand them as ‘any citizen-led action beyond elections that aims to enhance the accountability of state actors’ (Vloeberghs & Bergh, 2021, p. 8). Thereby, we intentionally adopt a scope that is broader than that of some authors, as we believe casting the net wide benefits our effort to map the politics of accountability in the Arab world during the period 2011–2021.<sup>1</sup>

Tellingly, while the *Oxford handbook of public accountability*, published in 2014, consists of 43 chapters, none of these chapters explore social accountability (SA). The book dedicates exactly one short paragraph and a handful of index entries to the term. By contrast, the *Oxford handbook of the quality of government* (Bågenholm et al., 2021) not only features a dedicated chapter on SA but also includes no fewer than 17 entries pertaining to SA in its index. This is revealing, first, because it shows that the term has gained tremendously in prominence and importance over the past decade. The passage from that handbook is also telling because it suggests a narrow understanding of the concept and future research agenda. It argues that SA has mainly been used ‘to examine administrative processes in developing countries’ and that the main research priority ‘is whether similar routines of civic engagement can open up new accountability dimensions in civil services in developed countries’ (Damgaard & Lewis, 2014, p. 238).

In the research project on which this book is based, we identified a different research priority mainly because we observed a general trend in the literature: SA was being studied in many regions (especially Asia, Latin America and Africa) but not in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). For some reason, scholarship on SA seemed to avoid the Arab

world (see Chapter 1 for a detailed review of the literature and this gap). We found this odd, especially after the spectacular series of Arab uprisings in 2011 (Ottaway & Ottaway, 2019). Many protests resurfaced in 2019, and several of these grievances are ongoing today, despite meagre coverage in the mainstream media.

To fill this gap in our knowledge, this book proposes a systematic analysis of SA in three key countries by contextualising the contrasting understandings of SA in Arab societies. To do so, we explore what SA means in political as well as practical terms for people on the ground (see Chapter 1 for the detailed research questions). Before we turn to the three case study chapters, this chapter briefly charts the surge of SA as a concept and then presents the theoretical framework of SA used in the subsequent chapters. The final section discusses SAIs, arguing that they fall into one of three broad categories—(1) transparency; (2) advocacy; or (3) participatory governance—and discussing their possible outcomes.

## 2.2 FROM ACCOUNTABILITY TO SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The most recent mutation of accountability into social accountability as a governance concept has been driven by the recognition that institutional protocols can fail to provide responsible governance on countrywide scales. Institutional arrangements—such as oversight of the legislative and/or judicial branch over the executive branch—are themselves the outcomes of centuries of citizens’ attempts to hold rulers accountable for their decisions by prioritising the rule of law above the ‘rule of men’.

Traditionally, political scientists have approached the study of accountability as the analysis of citizens holding governments responsible during elections. Citizens are theorised to express a retrospective judgement via the ballot box by either punishing or rewarding executive representatives for their performance (Maravall, 2007). This delegated chain of authority so typical of representative democracies—from voting citizens via chosen politicians to executive policy-makers managing service delivery—has been labelled the ‘long route of accountability’ (World Bank, 2003).<sup>2</sup>

The ensuing shift in the study of accountability came early in the new millennium, at the impetus of experts who hailed the concept of the ‘short route of accountability’ as a way to combat corruption, clientelism and state capture (Ackerman, 2005). Strengthening the direct links between

citizens and service providers was thought to empower the former while fostering transparency and participation. Thus, the notion of democratic oversight came to include the idea that citizens can act as principal agents of improved governance—especially if local participatory mechanisms can be devised to increase the dissemination of information that enables them to demand the realisation of their entitlements.

Yet, neither the ability of short routes to supplement longer routes of accountability nor the existence of horizontal accountability (in which branches or agencies of the state keep each other in check), nor the availability of vertical accountability mechanisms (institutionalised occasions on which citizens provide feedback to representatives, e.g. elections or referenda) have, by themselves, led to improved democratic governance. In any polity, the size or complexity of the bureaucracy can present overwhelming obstacles to (congressional) oversight attempting to guarantee conscientious behaviour by executive officeholders. Moreover, for direct accountability to function, other factors—such as principled public servants, politically engaged citizens and dense civil society networks—need to prevail (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014). By contrast, where corruption is rife, self-interested individuals may derail even well-conceived oversight procedures.

It is no coincidence, then, that the notion of accountability is a central concept for democratisation theorists, who have defined its scope as being much broader than procedural elections. Schedler (1999), for one, suggests that accountability has three main features: information, justification and punishment or compensation. From this perspective, it should not be a surprise that, in her exploration of authoritarianism as democracy's polar opposite, Glasius (2018, p. 525) defines authoritarianism as those practices that sabotage the very notion of accountability.

Because of the difficulty of establishing institutional oversight as a safeguard for accountable governance on a large scale, and given the global persistence of corruption and authoritarianism, SAIs have gained traction over the past few decades—especially in settings marked by weak or imperfect state capacity. Such civic-engagement initiatives intend to bolster citizens and local communities in acting as instigators of state responsiveness (Hydén & Samuel, 2011).

Today, even though scholars acknowledge that all circulating definitions of SA have conceptual flaws—which, moreover, complicate attempts to measure the impact of such initiatives—there is agreement that SA is an

evolving umbrella category that includes a range of tools: citizen monitoring and oversight of public and/or private sector performance, user-centred public information access/dissemination systems, public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms, and citizen participation in actual resource allocation decision-making, such as participatory budgeting. (Fox, 2022, p. 55)

In short, SA encompasses any citizen-led action beyond elections that aims to enhance the accountability of state actors. However, the sheer diversity of these action formats explains why conceptualising SA has proven such an arduous task.

### 2.3 SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY: A THEORETICAL SYNOPSIS

The surge of SA in reaction to the deficit of traditional public services and goods delivery has been so spectacular that scholars have struggled to keep track of the phenomenon. As a result, SA is ‘a broad category, without clear boundaries’ (Fox, 2022, p. 53). To complicate matters further, the heterogeneity of SA mechanisms has been matched by the diversity of its observers: not only have social scientists, lawyers and economists picked up SA, so too have education specialists and health professionals. In addition to scholars, policy-makers (politicians, experts, public managers and international donors as well as civil society organisations [CSOs]) have contributed to the debate.

SA, then, denotes programmes aimed at making ‘government institutions actually listen and respond to citizen voice’ through mechanisms of citizen participation (Fox, 2022, p. 54). The underlying assumptions are that practices of citizen oversight should be normalised, that campaigns widely differ in their capacity and autonomy to actually implement oversight, that initiatives are often uneven in addressing service delivery superficially or structurally and that well-intended initiatives can trigger unintended consequences, leaving the actors involved (be they citizens or authorities) more exposed or vulnerable than before their engagement.

One actor, the World Bank, has stood out in terms of knowledge production on SA, and extant scholarship widely credits the organisation with the global spread of the concept. Building on this lead, the United Nations provided a major boost by including the concept in its Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Goal 16 calls for building ‘effective, *accountable* and inclusive institutions’, thus increasing funds

earmarked for SAIs (United Nations, 2023, emphasis added). Nowadays, the World Bank continues to provide scholars and practitioners with leading expertise in the field and hosts the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA)<sup>3</sup>—even though some scholars have adopted a critical stance towards the international promotion of a reform agenda advocating SA as a governance tool (Gaventa & McGee, 2013; Joshi & McCluskey, 2018; Rodan & Hughes, 2012). We will turn to some of this criticism below.

A useful way to start thinking about SA in conceptual terms is by distinguishing between upward and downward accountability (Hickey & King, 2016). The former corresponds to bottom-up initiatives by non-state actors (i.e. citizens, local communities or CSOs) whereas the latter denotes top-down mechanisms (e.g. anti-corruption bureaus, open budgeting, legislative oversight, capacity-building, grievance-redress mechanisms and legal or fiscal public-sector reform). Development economists sometimes speak of the demand side and supply side of accountable governance to indicate this same division. However, such reliance on market metaphors also suggests an ‘invisible hand’ that will, somehow, regulate demand and supply in governance—and this has proven unrealistic (Fox, 2015). Instead, the most effective SAIs are those that integrate elements of both the demand and supply sides in their project design (Hickey & King, 2016, p. 1226).

The distinction introduced by Hickey and King not only highlights a difference in SA interventions depending on the kind of actors involved but also helps set apart initiatives that are arguably predominantly technical in nature from others that are more eminently political. On the one hand, there are SA interventions driven by external actors (CSOs, international donors) who ‘projectise’ communities’ involvement in monitoring activities, such as public expenditure tracking surveys or citizen report cards. These are what Joshi and Houtzager (2012) have labelled ‘widgets’. This type of SA is often marked by a top-down logic. The authors believe that this first category is too technical and depoliticised, and they contrast it with SAIs labelled ‘watchdogs’, which focus on active political engagement by local social forces rooted in a specific context. In this configuration, social actors confront the state as part of a long-term pattern shaped by past exchanges and current imperatives. Joshi and Houtzager (2012) maintain that widgets create conceptual as well as empirical problems in terms of impact evaluation. They advocate for a more dynamic view by examining ‘social accountability actions as one part



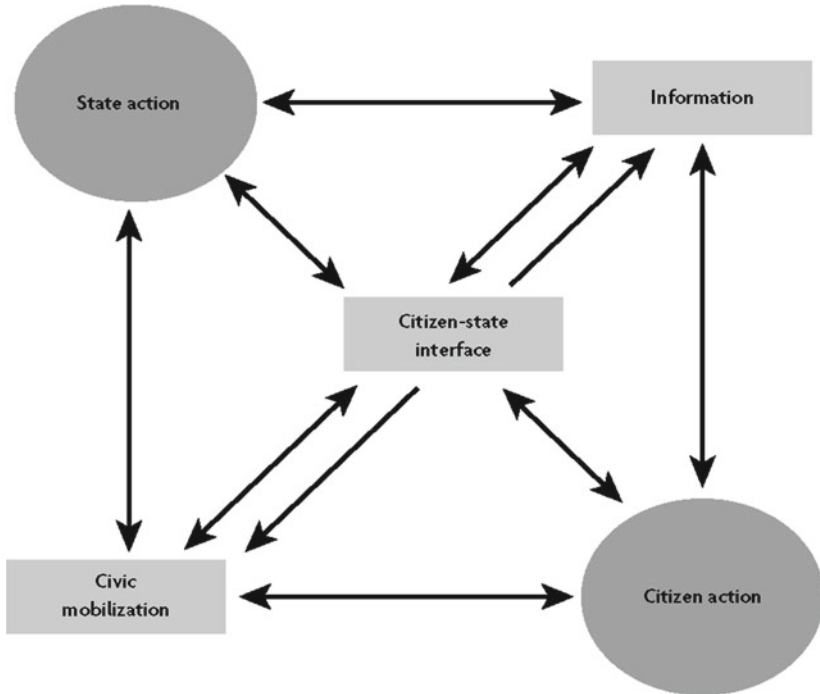
of a broader and longer process of engagement between collective actors and the state' (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012, p. 155) because they believe '[it] is those very political processes that lie at the heart of successful accountability actions from below' (p. 152). In SA theory and practice, there has been a clear trend 'away from a narrow technical blueprint approach towards a more context-sensitive, politically "savvy" approach but it is unclear whether this "watchdog approach" has already trickled down to the reality on the ground' (Kuppens, 2016, p. 23).

In practice, most 'approaches cut across these [conceptual] boundaries' (Grandvoinet et al., 2015 p. 27). Grandvoinet et al. (2015, p. 118) emphasise that SA trajectories are unique because they are 'typically circular and iterative: each incremental change reconfigures the contextual conditions for the next [SA trajectory]'. However, they managed to isolate a set of recurrent factors. When clustered, these characteristics amount to five so-called contextual drivers that are constitutive elements present in nearly all SA arrangements. These five drivers are: citizen action, state action, state–citizen interface, civic mobilisation and information (see Fig. 2.1).

Three principles animate the permanent reconfiguration of these five core elements. First, SA is a result of the interplay between state action and citizen action. Second, information, the state–citizen interface and civic mobilisation act as levers on state action and citizen action. Third, there is a fundamental imbalance of power among the actors involved, with the state coming out on top. This being said,

links between these constitutive elements are not straightforward, and there is no generic sequence among them. For example, SA may be spurred by citizens but also by the state, and both state and citizens may initiate any of the three 'levers': information may be made available by state action or through civic mobilization, and it may be generated or exposed by citizen action; mobilization may be spurred by information or precede it. Creation of the interface may be the starting point or the ending point of an SA approach. (Grandvoinet et al., 2015, p. 37)

The beauty of this model is that it captures the complexity of SA mechanisms while at the same time pinpointing some of its striking features in one single image. One such strength is the visualisation of information as a crucial variable of SA.



**Fig. 2.1** Social accountability as the interplay of five elements (*Source* Grandvoininnet et al. [2015])

In an accountable and responsive state that engages citizens in decision making, information flows are needed from citizens to the state, from the state to citizens, between the various parts of civil society, and within the state apparatus. A wide range of information is needed to ensure accountability, and it is often highly technical in nature (for example, laws, policies, standards, targets, performance, assets, budgets, revenues, and expenditures). In many cases, the information needed for social accountability may not even exist. ... Ensuring that citizens and civil society have access to information, understand it, and make good use of it takes considerable efforts and skills. For these reasons, intermediaries – whether a person, an organization, or the media – are almost always needed to improve access to information, simplify it, clarify it, and point out its implications. (Grandvoininnet et al., 2015, p. 38)

Social scientists like David Apter (1968) have long hinted at the delicate balance between information and coercion in altering levels of accountability in society and bringing about political change. Adding to this, Grandvoinet and colleagues highlight the crucial role of intermediaries (like brokers, women, challengers and so on) in bringing about SA, especially in settings where state capacity is uneven (Gaventa et al., 2023).

Unavoidably, however, schematised models are nothing but simplified renderings of complex social realities. They thus need to be refined and adapted to represent concrete SA mechanisms in a specific setting, i.e. the MENA region in our case. In the following section, we therefore propose a more refined typology of SAIs which we found on the ground.

## 2.4 SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY TYPOLOGY AND OUTCOMES

Roughly speaking, SAIs in the MENA region fall into one of the following categories: (1) transparency; (2) advocacy; or (3) participatory governance.

Transparency initiatives range from formal oversight bodies or right-to-information legislation to ombuds(wo)men and citizen report cards. They aim to increase citizens' access to information as a way to reduce corruption and other abuses of power. For example, the Moroccan Open Budget Index aims to measure the availability of national budget information to citizens and the degree to which citizens are included in its development and implementation (see Chapter 3). Lately, however, scholars have started to question the conviction that transparency automatically induces good governance. Empirical testing of this supposedly causal relationship by Bauhr and Grimes (2014, 2017) suggests that public exposure of endemic corruption may in fact erode institutional confidence and demobilise the demos rather than enhancing pressures for accountability. Although there are reasons to assume that transparency can breed indignation and willingness to act

among citizens already highly interested and involved in political matters ..., our analysis suggests that this effect is not universal. Especially in settings in which corruption is the *modus operandi*, transparency may instead give rise to resignation and a withdrawal from political life. (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014, p. 309)

This insight undermines the assumption that citizens will act as principal agents of public indignation or that they will press for reform when provided with access to potentially explosive information. Instead, it suggests that information alone is not enough; for SAIs and transparency reforms to be effective, they need to be accompanied by other institutional arrangements that encourage fellow citizens to hold officeholders accountable.

Advocacy initiatives focus on informal pressures used by citizens to claim public goods and services. They usually adopt a more confrontational approach as they tend to address contentious actions by public bodies or state employees. Such initiatives range from popular protests and demonstrations to civil disobedience or public-interest litigation. An example from Tunisia is the Manich Msemeh public campaign. Launched in 2017, it was a protest against an amnesty law which would absolve public officials and businesspeople from corruption charges committed under the previous regime (see Chapter 3). The success of these tools often depends on context-based factors, such as the capacity and commitment of CSOs to engage with both civil and political society, the interests of power holders involved, the levels of inequality between citizens and the character of state–citizen relations (Hickey & King, 2016, pp. 1227–1228). In assessing these contextual factors, Hickey and King (2016) suggest the existence of two different types of context. One is favourable to the effective implementation of SA, i.e. a situation in which civil society has capacity and the government is willing to engage. A contrasting type of context is characterised by a much weaker government willingness and the absence of a legal framework and/or political system facilitating access to information, making it a much less favourable setting for successful experiments with SA.

This finding shows that the attitude of incumbent officeholders and the institutional structure are crucial: whereas denunciation and advocacy can be powerful tools, without the availability of credible enforcement mechanisms, calls for SA can be ignored, defused or diverted. Without sufficient ‘bite’, SAIs can be captured by established elites.

Finally, participatory governance mechanisms provide groups of (under-represented) citizens with opportunities to engage directly in the policy process. Moreover, participatory institutions are said to improve the poor’s well-being (Touchton & Wampler, 2014). Such tools include participatory budgeting or community co-management of education, water or health facilities, thus emphasising the collective dimension of SA.

Whereas examples exist in which such mechanisms have led to tangible development impacts, empirical evidence on participatory governance outcomes is mixed (Fox, 2015). In particular, the assumptions ‘community participation is democratic’ and ‘decentralisation brings government closer to the people’ turn out to be weak. This does not mean that SA tools systematically fail to trigger virtuous circles of mutual empowerment, but for that to happen some conditions should be met.

Fox (2015) advocates for a ‘sandwich strategy’ that consists of both *voice* (citizen capacity for collective action in support of accountability) and *teeth* (defined as the institutional capacity to respond to citizen voice) in these words:

The sandwich strategy’s point of departure is that anti-accountability forces, deeply embedded in both state and society, are often stronger than pro-accountability forces. To break these ‘low-accountability traps’, resistance is likely and therefore conflict would be both expected and necessary. While initial opportunities for change are necessarily context-driven and can be opened either from society or from the state, the main determinant of a subsequent pro-accountability power shift is whether or not pro-change actors in one domain can empower the others .... In this scenario of mutual empowerment reformists within the state need to have actual capacity to deliver to their societal counterparts, by providing tangible support and the political space necessary to provide some degree of protection from the likely reprisals from vested interests. (Fox, 2015, p. 356)

The strength of Fox’s model lies in his recognition that incumbent power holders and anti-accountability forces are deeply embedded in both state and society. However, the question is whether his model goes beyond a revamping of prevailing perspectives on SA as widgets. Even though Fox acknowledges that ‘many accountability campaigns are led primarily by pressure from below’, his strategy emphasises a state-first, top-down reasoning.

In many societies (including those in the MENA region), the main question is not how openings from above can meet mobilisation from below. Rather, it is the other way round: how to ensure that when pressure builds from below, there will be receptive openings at the top? In the words of Bauhr and Grimes (2014), how to channel indignation into socio-political transformation by avoiding resignation?

Indeed, the question of which SA strategies yield the best results lingers on as a leading theme throughout the literature (Khodary, 2022; Smith & Benavot, 2019; Yang & Pandey, 2011). Not all scholars agree that increased emphasis on context and dynamics from below are salutary. In fact, there is emerging consensus that initiatives which combine bottom-up forms of accountability with reforms that strengthen the responsiveness of public-sector officials tend to work best. In this vein, Fox has pleaded for a shift away from tactical towards strategic SA approaches. This is more than a semantic shift. Tactical approaches are bounded interventions, focusing mostly on local arenas on the assumption that access to information alone will drive collective action to trigger improved public-sector performance. By contrast, strategic approaches deploy multiple tactics, encourage environments that enable accountability and coordinate citizen voice initiatives with governmental reforms, bolstering pro-accountability coalitions that bridge the state–society divide through iterative, often contested processes (Fox, 2015, p. 352).

Trajectories of social change like these are the desired outcome of most SAIs. Such improved levels of governance and development amount to what some have called ‘new social contracts’. These authors emphasise that

social accountability is more likely to emerge when the political settlement ... becomes more inclusive of broader social groups. At this stage, it becomes possible to discuss state–society relations in terms of a ‘social contract’ which refers both to the legitimacy of political rule, including the capacity of citizens to hold rulers to account, and to the pursuit of social justice as a fundamental principle of government. (Hickey & King, 2016, p. 1233)

Indeed, it seems ‘likely that citizen-led forms of accountability will emerge as citizens come to see the goods that are distributed to them through various social protection instruments as entitlements rather than as a form of patronage’ (Hickey & King, 2016, p. 1236). More recent work suggests that while citizens expect authorities to deliver the three P’s (provision, protection, participation), when urged to rank priorities they tend to value the first P (provision of socio-economic services) more than the other two P’s (protection and participation) (Loewe & Albrecht, 2022).

It is important to acknowledge the extent to which Hickey and King (2016) incorporate insights from authors discussed above. Like Fox (2015), they recognise that successful SAIs ‘are as likely to require demand- as well as supply-led sources of power’ (Hickey & King, 2016, p. 1235). Yet, at the same time, like Joshi and Houtzager (2012), they point out that few SA studies have ‘paid any in-depth attention to the role of context and politics in shaping their success’ (Hickey & King, 2016: p. 1237). Successful SAIs clearly illustrate how, as suggested by Grandvoinet et al. (2015), challenges to the status quo are never the result of only one set of actors becoming actively engaged. Rather, shifts in state–society relations are always the outcome of interactions between civic mobilisation and state action.

Inspired by recent research projects that take a grounded and relational approach to studying SA, such as the five-year Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) research programme (see Anderson, 2023), we aim to address the role of context and politics, as well as the nature of these interactions, in this volume.

## NOTES

1. Among others, Borång and Grimes (2021) offer a narrower definition by excluding campaigns waged at a (trans)national level as well as efforts initiated by non-state actors. While we are aware that the latter are usually analysed as contentious politics (see Allam et al., 2022), we maintain that such campaigns are intimately connected to calls by communities or citizens for better delivery of public services and stronger accountability by decision-makers—at least in the countries under analysis here. In this sense, we align with the view of Jonathan Fox on what accountability is and what it is not: ‘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’ (Fox, 2022, p. 30).
2. See also Bergh et al. (2022) for a more detailed discussion of various types of and approaches to the study of (social) accountability.
3. This initiative was launched in 2012 to foster ‘constructive engagement between governments and civil society in order to create an enabling environment in which citizen feedback is used to solve fundamental problems in service delivery and to strengthen the

performance of public institutions’. The GPSA makes funding available to CSOs only in countries where governments have consented to ‘opt in’. As of March 2023, this covered 55 countries across all continents, including five countries that are part of the MENA (Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen). The GPSA is supporting over 50 projects in 34 countries (including one on education in Morocco and two on health and education in Tunisia). See <https://www.thegpsa.org>.

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