Social Accountability in Challenging Environments: Case Studies from Egypt

1 author:

Yasmin Khodary
The British University in Egypt
22 PUBLICATIONS **79** CITATIONS

Social Accountability in Challenging Environments: Case Studies from Egypt

Yasmin Khodary
Professor of Political Science, The Political Science Department,
The British University in Egypt, Shrouk, Egypt
Yasmin.khodary@bue.edu.eg

Abstract

Through deploying the 2015 World Bank framework of contextual drivers for social accountability, this article seeks to examine three recent social accountability initiatives (SAIs) in the agriculture, health, and local development sectors in Egypt to identify the contextual drivers and success factors of SAIs operating in challenging environments. The article aims to answer the following questions: what roles do recent SAIs in Egypt play? What are the challenges that SAIs encounter? And how do such challenges (re)shape the processes and dynamics of SAIs? The article finds that in challenging environments–where invited spaces are controlled, citizens' collective action is limited, and commitment by state-officials is not guaranteed–the role of interlocutors becomes key in boosting the effectiveness of SAIs. It plays the role of a mediator, mobilizer to citizen and state action, and information intermediary, which generates, simplifies, and disseminates information. In this sense, this article draws on the critical missing link in SAIs through an in-depth analysis of the role of interlocutors in overcoming challenging or constraining circumstances.

1   Introduction

A year ago, I was in an international conference, giving a presentation on "Successful Local Governance and Social Accountability Initiatives in Egypt after the January 25 uprising." Two incidents occurred that made me write this article. The first is an inquiry I received about the likelihood of such social accountability initiatives (SAIs) to continue in Egypt, given that one of their major success factors was the unique momentum that existed directly after the uprising; a momentum characterized by more openness and responsiveness to public pressures and demands. The second is a remark made by the conference keynote speaker, Guy Peters, about SAIs in politically changing and unstable contexts. He emphasized the need to capitalize on 'what really works' in what seems to be challenging environments. Along these lines, and through the deployment of the 2015 World Bank analytical framework of contextual drivers for SA, this article seeks to examine three recent SAIs in Egypt to identify the contextual drivers and success factors of SAIs operating in challenging environments. The three SAIs are: (1) social accountability through governance in agriculture initiatives; (2) social accountability in health initiatives; and (3) social accountability through user feedback surveys (on local development sectors).

Employing a qualitative methodology, this article aims to answer the following questions: what roles do recent SAIs in Egypt play on the ground? What are the challenges that SAIs encounter? And how do such challenges (re)shape the processes and dynamics of SAIs? The article relies on primary data from conversations with the teams responsible for carrying out the above-mentioned SAIs. In addition, in the first SAI, the author relies also on focus group discussions (FGDs) with public officials and members of agricultural cooperatives in order to obtain better insight about the impact of the initiative.[1] Primary data is accompanied with secondary data from reports, initiatives' documents, and official e-pages.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, it provides a summary of the literature on SAIs in Egypt given the particularity of the Egyptian context. This is followed by a brief overview of the 2015 World Bank framework and the methods used in the study. Then, in three consecutive sections, the article explains the aforementioned SAIs while highlighting their main constitutive elements. In the discussion section, more analysis is offered about the

findings in the three SAIs and how they relate to the discussed framework and literature. Finally, the article closes with some lessons learned.

2   Social Accountability Initiatives in Egypt

The popularity of SAIs in Egypt, especially after the January 25 uprising, has not been matched with progress in the development of a coherent body of literature tracking and analyzing these initiatives. However, some meaningful literature discussing SAIs and issues related to them can be found in the fields of Comparative Politics, Middle East Studies, and Development, as an interdisciplinary field overlapping with health, education, and energy.[2] For example, the World Bank's contribution to studying SAIs in Egypt is undeniable. In 2012, the World Bank prepared a study on SA in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with the purpose of introducing some lessons learned from the experience of the MENA countries during the transition.[3] However, the study did not investigate the situation of SAIs in individual MENA countries in depth. Another study was prepared by the World Bank on the Egyptian Power Sector. This study found that the viability of SA in Egyptian Electricity companies was undermined by the lack of accurate and widely disseminated data as well as the lack of consumer satisfaction surveys and other means for customer feedback.[4] The World Bank recognizes also a clear linkage between transparency or availability of accurate and accessible data and SA. Though this study brings in the institutional context, it does not harness the various constitutive contextual factors.

Attempts to capture some contextual factors in Egypt exist, however, they remain within the broader literature on democracy and state-society relations and, still, without necessarily highlighting the contextual implications for SAIs or SA. For example Mohamed Arafa examines Law No.70 for 2017, which tightened the procedures related to the funding and operation of voluntary or CSOs, as an example of this restrictive approach and, more broadly, the tensions in

---

state-society relations.[5] For instance, Article 24 of the Law indicated that all donations from Egyptian and non-Egyptian entities or individuals had to be pre-approved, and if no approval was granted within 60 days, the request is automatically denied.[6] At the same time, the law prohibited NGOs from engaging in any income-generating activities, which undermined their chance for sustainability. On the other hand, Sally Ashour highlights the change of this Law 70 of 2017 as a case of civil society activism and its ability to influence state action.[7] In July 2019, after consultations with unions, NGOs, syndicates, and other CSOs, the Egyptian Parliament approved a new NGO Law No.149/2019, which grants NGOs more rights and privileges.[8] The new Law allows NGOs to receive foreign funding and establish new associations through a notifications system (article 2).[9] The new Law also facilitates the NGOs' access to funds within 60 days as, unlike Law No.70, it considers the failure to respond within 60 days as approval rather than denial.[10]

Despite the relatively growing literature on issues related to SA in Egypt, the literature on SA in Egypt continues to address SAIs from a technical perspective at the expense of exploring the involved contextual drivers. Hence, very little can be learned from these initiatives and minimal development can be made to the literature as much as to SAIs.[11] This study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by building on Vloeberghs and Bergh's argument to place emphasis on SAIs in the MENA region in order to capture the multitude of SAIs developed over the past decade.[12] Using the World Bank 2015 framework, the study explains how challenging conditions (re)shape the processes and dynamics in the three SAIs.

5   Mohamed Arafa, "The Tale of Post-Arab Spring in Egypt," *Indiana International & Comparative Law Review* 27 (1), 2017.
6   Egypt Law Portal. Law No.70/2017: The Law of Associations and Other Foundations Working in the Field of Civil Work. Egyptian Parliament.
7   Sally Ashour, "The Influence of Civil Society Practitioners on the current Civil Society law," Egypt: The State Information Service, 2019.
8   Sally Ashour, 2019.
9   Manshurat, Law No. 149 of 2019 Organizing Civil Work in Egypt. Egyptian Parliament, 2017.
10   Manshurat, Law No. 149 of 2019, articles 24 & 27.
11   For more information about the micro and macro-context, see: Anuradha Joshi, Reading the local context: a causal chain approach to social accountability. IDS Bulletin.45, No.5 (2014), 23–35.
12   See: Ward Vloeberghs and Sylvia Bergh. "Weapons of discontent?,"2021.

3 Opening the Black Box of Contextual Factors for SA Effectiveness

The 2015 World Bank framework of contextual drivers for SA suggests that SA involves the interplay of five constitutive elements. The first element is citizen action, which includes "making demands (for information, justification, or sanctions), protesting against injustice, or claiming better public goods. The citizen action element within this framework also unpacks the collective action problem."[13] Citizen action is usually influenced by the levels of awareness of the issue, salience of the issue, intrinsic motivation, capacity for collective action, and cost or incentives for citizen (in)action on the issue.

The second constitutive element is state action, which "can be in the form of positive responses (for example, improved public services and reduced corruption) or repression and backlash."[14] Like citizen action, state action is influenced by state-officials' awareness of the issue, ability to resolve the issue, incentives, attitude, and cost associated with inaction.[15]

The third constitutive element is information. Information can be used to mobilize citizens or state actors and popularize the citizen-state interface.[16] Information can flow from citizens to state, state to citizens and civil society, and within state apparatus.[17] In some cases, information can be made available by public officials; in others, the information needed for engagement and SA are unavailable and, hence, ought to be collected through monitoring exercises to establish evidence-based and accurate grounds for accountability. As a result, informational constraints–in terms of information generation, dissemination, simplification, and accessibility–need to be considered.

The fourth constitutive element is interface. Two related factors are critical to interface: the nature of the interface and the existence and quality of interlocutors. The nature of the interface is determined by its degree of credibility, representation, and accessibility. This depends on the type of space where public decision-making takes place, whether closed, invited, or claimed. Unlike claimed spaces, which are largely "organic," closed spaces are closed to

---

13 Helene Grandvoinnet, Ghazia Aslam, and Shomikho Raha, "Opening the Black Box: The Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability," *Governance and Social Development Centre* (Washington: The World Bank, 2015), 3.

14 Ibid, 4.

15 See: Shantayanan Devarajan, Stuti Khemani, and Michael Walton, *Civil society, public action and accountability in Africa*, (Washington: The World Bank, 2011).

16 Ibid, 121.

17 Andrew Chadwick and Christopher May, "Interaction between States and Citizens in the Age of the Internet: "e-Government" in the United States, Britain, and the European Union," *Governance,* 16, No.2 (2003), 271–300.

the public and limited to small elite, which reflects less representation and accessibility in the interface, while invited spaces allow people from various backgrounds to participate, which reflects more representation, accessibility, and credibility.[18] On the other hand, because the state and civil society groups are not homogeneous, the existence and quality of organizational or individual interlocutors–skilled at building state-society coalitions, capable of managing collective action, and mediating interactions–is crucial. According to Tembo, "an organization (or individual) is an interlocutor only when it is an active game changer in the given context, and not just because it works in that context."[19] Interlocutors can take part in changing the interface, supporting game-changing, providing incentives, or creating enabling environments.[20]

The last constitutive element is civic mobilization. In most cases, SA implies actions by intermediaries to spur both citizens and state into action. Civic mobilization, in this sense, facilitates citizens' voice and action as well as state willingness and capacity to engage with citizens or take action.[21] Civic mobilization is important to SA because it can provide citizens, especially marginalized and vulnerable ones, with both organizational and leadership capacity to unite and take collective action. Civic mobilization also involves "creating accountability coalitions with pro-accountability actors from both within communities and within states."[22] In civic mobilization, it is important to investigate the existence, capacity, and effectiveness of agents and CSOs to mobilize both state and citizen actors to engage in SA.[23]

4   Study Design and Methods

In order to develop an insight into the role that SAIs play on the ground, the challenges they encounter, and how they are shaped or re-shaped by the contextual factors and the challenges they meet, this study utilizes a multiple case study approach. A number of SAIs were selected for deeper investigation.

---

18   See John Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis," *IDS bulletin* 37, no. 6, 2006, 23–33.

19   Fletcher Tembo, "Citizen Voice and State Accountability: Towards Theories of Change that Embrace Contextual Dynamics," Project Briefing No. 73, *Overseas Development Institute*, London, 2012, 1.

20   Ibid, 3.

21   Grandvoinnet, Aslam, and Raha, "Opening the Black Box,", 5.

22   Ibid, 7.

23   See: L. David Brown and Jagadananda, "Civil society legitimacy and accountability: Issues and challenges," *Centre for Youth & Social Development*, (Harvard: Hauser Center, 2007).

The SAIs selected for study had to satisfy two conditions related to time and accessibility. First, the SAIs had to be implemented after the January 25 uprising. Given that the author has already covered seven cases in earlier research, especially SAIs conducted directly after the January 25 uprising and during the transition,[24] this study aimed to address un-researched, more recent, and contemporary cases. This condition narrowed down the number of SAIs available for study. The author also had to rely on professional and personal connections to learn about SAIs that are ongoing but have not yet been announced or publicized.[25] Next is the second condition, whereby the selected SAIs had to be accessible and the teams involved in the SAIs had to show willingness to engage in the study. To the author's knowledge, all SAIs meeting these two conditions were included in the study.

Secondary and Primary data were then collected about the three SAIs. Grey literature, reports, initiatives' documents, and official e-pages of the initiatives were analyzed. In addition, primary data was collected through a range of methods according to each case study or initiative. In the SAI on agriculture, the author relied on two FGDs, which were conducted with public officials in Beni-Suef and Minia Governorates,[26] and five FGDs with members of agricultural cooperatives in Beni-Suef and Minia, in order to obtain better insight into the process and impact of the initiative. Each FGD included 8–10 participants and lasted for 80 minutes. In the SAI on health, a semi-structured interview was held with Karim Tarek, the researcher and data collection officer responsible for the Eghospital initiative in Shamseya. Finally, in the SAI on local development sectors (user feedback survey), two semi-structured interviews were conducted; one with the field coordinator of the user feedback survey and the other with a CARE International Board member. In all three of the SAIs,

---

24   Yasmin Khodary, "Social Accountability Initiatives in Egypt: Unlocking the black box of contextual factors," in Sylvia Bergh, Sony Pellissery, and Christina Sathyamala, *The State of Accountability in the Global South, forthcoming,* (Edward Elgar, 2022); Yasmin Khodary, "An Analysis of Social Accountability and Local Governance Interventions in Egypt During the Transition," in Hamid Ali and Shahjahan Bhuiyan, *Institutional Reforms, Governance, and Services Delivery in the Global South*, International Series on Public Policy, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

25   This applies to the User Feedback Survey, where limited information was published about it at the time of the study.

26   Local administration in Egypt is divided into administrative units across Upper and Lower Egypt, including 27 governorates, 186 districts, 225 cities, 85 neighborhoods, and 4737 villages, see: The State Information Service, Local Administration, (Egypt: The State Information Service, 2019).

informed consent was taken voluntarily from the participants.[27] Data were then stored in written and data analysis was later conducted manually.[28]

Data analysis of primary data was carried out using deductive thematic analysis, both within the case study and across the three case studies.[29] The pattern of themes was deductively generated from the 2015 World Bank analytical framework, including: state action, citizen action, information, interface including the role of the interlocutor, and civic mobilization.

5   Social Accountability through Governance in the Agriculture Initiative

5.1   *Background*
In 2016, CARE International in Egypt decided to conduct an assessment of governance in agriculture with the purpose of identifying the degree to which agricultural cooperatives and public officials in Agricultural Extension and Cooperation sub-sectors[30] apply good governance.[31] This initiative relates to SA in two ways. First, with collecting the governance data, an act of monitoring was implemented in order to confront the public officials and cooperatives with such data.[32] Second, unlike other SAIs, such as community evaluations or community score cards, the information collected in this SAI does not present an overview about the efficiency of service provision or the quality of services delivered, but rather about the governance structures and practices, including the understanding and application of accountability.

---

27 In some parts of the study, the names of the participants are not mentioned. This means that the participants consented to participate in the interview but no clear approval was given to disclose their names.

28 Data analysis was conducted manually through identifying the themes, categorizing raw data, reviewing the themes, and then analyzing data. See: Tehmina Basit, "Manual or electronic? The role of coding in qualitative data analysis," *Educational research* 45, no. 2 (2003): 143–154.

29 See: P. Liamputtong, *Qualitative Research Methods*, (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2009).
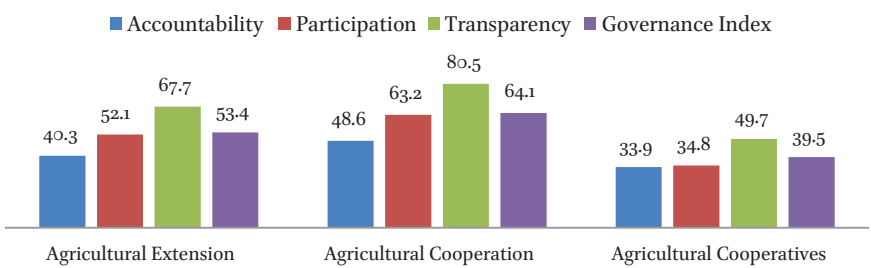
30 For more information about the organizational structure of the Ministry of Agriculture, see: Yasmin Khodary, *Governance Assessment of the Agricultural Sector in Egypt: Agricultural Extension and Cooperation* (Egypt: CARE International in Egypt, 2016), 18.

31 This initiative was implemented between 2013 and 2017 in cooperation with two NGOs: the 'Better Life' organization in Beni-Suef and 'The Future Eve' organization in Minia.

32 The initiative aimed at strengthening civil society participation in the agricultural sector in Egypt through building the capacity of NGOs, agricultural cooperatives, and government authorities. See CARE, Strengthening Civil Society Participation in the Agricultural Sector in Egypt (Austria: CARE International, 2017).

The governance in agriculture assessment was implemented in two pilot governorates in Upper Egypt, which are Beni-Suef and Minia. In Beni-Suef, purposive non-probability sampling was used in collecting data from public officials and members of cooperatives (N=54), representing all the staff present in the workplace during the time of data collection.[33] However, in Minia, CARE's request to obtain formal approvals and security clearances for data collection was denied.[34] Hence, instead, CARE decided to generate information in Minia through FGDs.

CARE then collected data for three composite indices[35] assessing the levels of governance in Agricultural Cooperation, Extension, and cooperatives. A scale from zero to 100 was used, where zero is the lowest and 100 is the highest. The scale was divided as follows: Zero to 25 (very low); 26 to 50 (low); 51 to 75 (moderate); and 76 to 100 (high). As appears in Figure 1, while Agricultural Cooperation (64.1) and Agricultural Extension (53.4) obtained moderate scores, the agricultural cooperatives obtained a low score (39.5). All actors performed their best in transparency despite the clear difference between Agricultural Cooperation, which obtained a high score (80.5), Agricultural Extension, which obtained a moderate score (67.7), and agricultural cooperatives, which obtained a low score (49.7). In contrast to transparency, accountability obtained the lowest scores in Agricultural Extension (40.3), Cooperation (48.6), and cooperatives (33.9).

Note: Data were compiled from the Governance Assessment of the Agricultural Sector in Egypt Report.[36]

FIGURE 1   Governance in Agriculture

33   Yasmin Khodary, *Governance Assessment of the Agricultural Sector in Egypt: Agricultural Extension and Cooperation* (Egypt: CARE International in Egypt, 2016), 35.

34   No reasons are provided upon denial.

35   A composite index presents one figure that summarizes the performance of a set of principles or dimensions, involving sub-dimensions, indicators, and sub-indicators.

36   Khodary, *Governance Assessment of the Agricultural Sector in Egypt*, 2016.

This can be traced back to the institutional culture in Egypt, which is less familiar with principles and practices of participation and accountability.[37] Overall, the assessment revealed major weaknesses in financial transparency, external participation,[38] and social accountability.

5.2   *The Constitutive Elements to the Process*

This SAI is shaped by different constitutive elements, which seem to be interconnected and mediated through the interlocutor (CARE). With the absence of information about governance in the agricultural sector in Egypt, CARE decided to engage in monitoring exercises through conducting the assessment. CARE here presents itself as an interlocutor and information intermediary, generating the absent information needed in order to hold public officials and other actors accountable. This involved taking three major decisions: (a) limiting the assessment to three governance principles deemed to be what is unique about good governance (transparency, participation, and accountability); (b) collecting data only on agricultural cooperatives and two agricultural sub-sectors (Extension and Cooperation); and (c) focusing on two pilot governorates before replicating the assessment nationally.[39]

In addition to being an information intermediary, CARE in this SAI plays the role of an interlocutor that is also a game changer. Instead of confronting agricultural cooperative and public officials with the results of the assessment and asking them to act upon them, CARE realized the difficulty of, first, driving the attention of these actors and, second, convincing them to improve governance principles and practices that they are unaware of in the first place. Hence, CARE decided to carry out training for the members of cooperatives and public officials in order to enhance their knowledge of governance principles and practices.

In this SAI, the interlocutor seems to have improved the potential and capacity for 'citizen action' through civic mobilization. According to collective-action theory, citizens faced with a common problem are not expected to act the same, since each actor is surrounded with a complex web of interests and incentives.[40] Despite this, agriculture is an issue that farmers have an

---

37   Yasmin Khodary, "Good governance: a new perspective for institutional reform-a comparative view of water, education and health institutions in Egypt," *International Journal of Public Policy* 12, no. 3–6 (2016): 359–377.

38   External accountability here refers to "allowing the community and farmers' to participate in the formulation of agricultural policies and/ or decision making." See Yasmin Khodary, *Governance Assessment of the Agricultural Sector in Egypt*, 53.

39   Ibid, 23–33.

40   Fletcher *Tembo, Rethinking social accountability in Africa: Lessons from the Mwananchi Programme* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2013), vii.

intrinsic motive in improving,⁴¹ farmers did not have the ability to collectively communicate with service-providers or hold them accountable. It was through this training that farmers learned how to voice their complaints through the agricultural cooperatives, which in turn discussed the complaints with relevant government entities. In the FGDs with farmers, they stated, "to communicate with government officials, we speak first to our agricultural cooperative board of directors. For example, if there are no sufficient fertilizers, we address our cooperative board and it submits a complaint on our behalf." Farmers also explained that, "the boards of directors of the agricultural cooperative holds formal meetings where problems and concerns are discussed and, then, approve solutions in the minutes of the meetings." In the minutes of one of the meetings, a dredging excavator to purify the canals was requested and the cooperative raised the issue with the government officials. The farmers concluded that, "we communicate with public officials through our agricultural cooperative, which, in turn, takes the necessary steps towards solving the problem." The interlocutor here played a key role in mobilizing farmers for collective action. It can be seen as a social mobilizer that provided citizens/farmers with the organizational capacity to act through their agricultural cooperatives.

The last constitutive element that played a major role in this SAI is the state action and commitment, which is influenced by the awareness of state-officials and ability to resolve the issue. One has to note here the quality of interlocutor and the role it played in raising the awareness of the actors and improving their ability to apply good governance measures and practices. As mentioned earlier, the training, which CARE delivered not only to public officials but also to members of cooperatives, improved the actors' capacity to act and presented CARE to the public officials as an unbiased interlocutor. In the FGDs, it also appeared that the majority of trainees were high-rank and senior officials. This ensured that those with the power and authority to act were targeted.⁴² Overall, it is important to ensure buy-in from decision-makers from the very beginning and to engage actively with senior ranking individuals and various state-officials, even if through training. Otherwise, the outcome of the SAI will remain limited in scope and range. This should be accompanied, however, with a clear role for the youth in the SAI.

---

41   Farming is considered the major and, sometimes, the only source of income for around 30% of the Egyptian population, many of whom are poor and concentrated in rural areas.

42   It can be noted here how this structure also undermines the representation of youth.

6   Social Accountability in the Health Initiative

6.1   *Background*

In 2012, after the January 25 uprising, a group of young volunteers formed a civil society organization in Cairo called Shamseya for Innovative Healthcare Community Solutions. Shamseya aimed to "find innovative healthcare solutions that put patients front and center."[43] The young volunteers come from various backgrounds, including mainly medicine and surgery, but also anthropology, sociology, media, and web-development. One of their accomplishments is an initiative called "Eghospitals" to monitor and evaluate health services provided by public, private, and non-profit service-providers. Eghospitals is an electronic portal that publishes the results of what Shamseya calls 'community evaluations' for various hospitals and health service-providers. The electronic portal includes evaluation results for over 650 public, private, and non-profit hospitals that exist in both rural and urban areas in 16 governorates in Egypt.[44]

The community evaluations undergo a systematic process. In the interview with Karim Tarek, the researcher and data collection officer for Shamseya, he explained that the community evaluation process starts with 'recruiting' the local community evaluators or data collectors and then training these local community members on the criteria of the evaluation. Karim Tarek explains that the community evaluations are based on seven indicators, including patients' safety; patients' rights; buildings, medical equipment and resources; the emergency services; clinics; internal stay; and the medical staff. These seven indicators are assessed through 109 questions.[45] Three team members visit the designated site separately at different times to experience the medical service themselves–as patients–and fill out the evaluation.[46] Tarek adds that the results of the three evaluators are then picked up by the team in Shamseya to compare, validate, analyze, and finally publish on the Eghospitals portal. The findings published on the website are presented in a simplified and clear

---

43   Shamseya for Innovative Healthcare Community Solutions, "About Us," https://shamseya. org/about-us/.

44   Shamseya for Innovative Healthcare Community Solutions, "Eghospitals.com," https:// shamseya.org/eghospitals-overview/.

45   For more information, see Shamseya for Innovative Healthcare Community Solutions, "Evaluation Process," https://shamseya.org/evaluation-process/.

46   The team members or the community evaluators are recruited from the relevant 16 governorates. They experience every part of the health care service that they assess as patients (e.g. they pay for the service, wait for their turn, receive the service, etc...). See: Shamseya for Innovative Healthcare Community Solutions, Assessing the New Comprehensive Healthcare System in Portsaid, https://shamseya.org/uncategorized/ assessing-the-pilot-of-the-new-comprehensive-healthcare-system-in-portsaid/.

manner with a separate score given to the above-mentioned indicators and a total score for the hospital, which improves the public's understanding and access to such information. According to Shamseya, this enables "patients to have access to all the information they need to make a decision."[47] Finally, copies of the evaluation findings are sent to the assessed service providers, state officials, NGOs, and other CSOs.

6.2　*The Constitutive Elements to the Process*

This SAI is shaped by several contextual drivers related to the first constitutive element or 'citizen action,' including the salience of the issue for citizens, their intrinsic motivation, and citizens' capacity for collective action. Health is considered one of the very basic human needs and is one of the services that Egyptian citizens are eminently interested in improving. Nonetheless, citizens' capacity to act is constrained by the lack of information about the provided health service and their inability to come together in collective action to demand information, monitor service providers, or pressure them to improve the health services. As noted by Shamseya, for more than 75% of the service providers they assess, Eghospitals is the only source of online information about them.[48] As noted in the 2015 World Bank report, information can be used to popularize the citizen-state interface.[49] Hence, with providing a venue for simplified and accessible information, Shamseya can contribute to popularizing the citizen-state interface.

Here, with a team of young volunteers, Shamseya plays the role of a game-changing actor, or 'interlocutor.' First, they train members of local communities and equip them with the tools to assess service-providers; hence playing the role of a mobilizer for citizen action by providing local communities with the tools to monitor services' quality and the skills or capacities needed to perform SA. Their major strength, however, lies in providing information that, though essential, seems to be missing. On their official page, they state,

> In a country where up to 73% of total healthcare costs are paid directly from people's pockets; Shamseya recognizes that patients not only need to be supported with their recovery but also need to be empowered to understand how to navigate and improve their healthcare system.[50]

47　Ibid.
48　Ibid.
49　Grandvoinnet, Aslam, and Raha, "Opening the Black Box," 121.
50　Shamseya for Innovative Healthcare Community Solutions, "About Us," https://shamseya.org/about-us/.

In this sense, those young volunteers believe in the 'power' of information (the third constitutive element in the World Bank framework), from which, once service users access it, they become 'empowered' and able to make informed decisions, whether to take the service from a particular service-provider or shift to another. Shamseya, here, plays the role of information intermediary that overcomes the existent health care informational constraints in terms of information generation, simplification, dissemination, and accessibility.

In this SAI, the interlocutor took advantage of available technological advancements to ensure more effectiveness. According to Gaventa, information and communication technology (ICT) plays a transformative role in generating and disseminating information, facilitating civic mobilization, and changing interfaces.[51] The young volunteers in Shamseya capitalized on their ability to use ICT to offer smart monitoring tool services. With more than 8000 visits a month,[52] the interlocutor popularizes the SA interface, which becomes accessible to many citizens. Very recently, Shamseya created another initiative to complement the Eghospitals portal, which is Melior. Melior is a "smart feedback and complaints management tool that allows patients to submit their feedback and complaints through an app."[53] The patients' feedback and issues raised are then posted on a dashboard that is accessible for health service providers. Although ICT seems to have played a key role in generating and disseminating information and increased the chances for popularizing the interface, its implementation has not resulted in increased civic mobilization.

Another important constitutive element that shapes this initiative is state action. In constrained or challenging environments, there is a considerable chance state-action can be negative and might even take the form of repression and backlash. In the interview, Karim Tarek clarified that there is an advantage to focusing on 'health services,' which Tarek calls a 'safe entry point.' Tarek believes that the initiative was allowed to work freely and publish findings and that the local evaluators were allowed to carry out their evaluations without interruptions "because 'health' is not seen as a political issue that can worry the government. In fact, 'health' presents itself as a safe domain for local activism and social accountability." This ensured a neutral attitude from the side of state officials.

---

51   Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change," 23–33.
52   Shamseya for Innovative Healthcare Community Solutions, "Eghospitals.com," https://shamseya.org/eghospitals-overview/.
53   Shamseya for Innovative Healthcare Community Solutions, "Melior – Feedback and Complaints Management System," https://shamseya.org/melior-feedback-and-complaints-management-system/.

7   Social Accountability Through a User Feedback Survey

7.1   *Background*

In April 2019, the Ministry of Local Development (MLD) in Egypt–through its Upper Egypt Local Development Program (UELDP)–decided to gain a solid grasp on the citizens' opinions about three local development sectors, namely roads, electricity, environmental improvement,[54] and technological centers services.[55] Hence, MLD called for a third party to assess the users' levels of satisfaction concerning these three sectors in Sohag and Qena Governorates. MLD required that the third party use what it called a 'participatory social accountability tool.'[56] Based on its prior and extensive experience in SA, especially in Upper Egypt, CARE International in Egypt was selected to implement a "User Feedback Survey." The survey aimed to: (1) identify the degree of users' satisfaction about the responsiveness to their needs and complaints; (2) determine the degree of accessibility to local services and information; (3) determine the extent of users' satisfaction with participating in services' planning; and (4) assess the quality of the service delivery process and the satisfaction of the beneficiaries.[57]

Prior to conducting the survey, CARE carried out 9 public hearings in Qena, including 392 participants, and 14 public hearings in Sohag, including 740 participants, in order to inform the local communities about the user feedback survey and the purpose of undertaking that exercise.[58] The hearings also aimed at preparing the end-users for the data collection process.

Stratified random sampling (N= 1150) was then adopted in order to collect the user feedback survey data and ensure fair representation of various groups (males & females, youth & elders). The sample included 450 citizens from Qena and 700 citizens from Sohag.[59] The results of the survey indicated the existence of relatively clear differences between Qena and Sohag, between the rural and urban areas, and between males and females, in contrast to the results of youth and older age groups, which did not witness clear differences.

---

54   In Egypt, environmental improvement includes services such as garbage collection, waste management, cleaning villages, increasing green areas, etc.

55   The technological center is a place where citizens can request many local services, such as renewing licenses, issuing replacements for lost documents, paying fines, etc.

56   UELDP, Terms of reference for carrying out an assessment to users' feedback on the services: A User Feedback survey, (Egypt: Ministry of Local Development, 2019), 3.

57   The Governance Unit, Final Report on "User Feedback Survey in Sohag and Qena" April 2019 – June 2020, (Egypt: CARE International – Egypt, 2020), 17–19.

58   Ibid, 18.

59   Ibid, 19.

Sohag showed higher overall levels of satisfaction compared to Qena.[60] The survey found that the local development sectors were not always responsive to the needs and demands of the rural areas. There was also limited satisfaction with the way local development entities handled the users' complaints and their response times, especially in the rural areas, which witnessed very low response rates to complaints. The survey also found that there was insufficient information shared about the available local development sectors and the existent channels or mechanisms for participation. In addition, the users explained that invitations to participation in planning and other activities related to the services were restricted to districts and senior management or leaders, while excluding villages, rural areas, females, and youth. In assessing the quality of the local development sectors, the respondents referred to the lengthy process of paving streets and the absence of technological centers in villages.[61]

7.2 *The Constitutive Elements to the Process*

Like the previous SAIs, this initiative was marked by an active role for the interlocutor. CARE International in Egypt, through collecting the 'user feedback survey' data, played the role of information intermediary that was able to generate, simplify, and present information to both citizens and state-officials. The selection of CARE as a third party to carry out the survey, reflects a level of trust from the side of state-officials in both the reputation and extensive experience of CARE. CARE as an interlocutor also enjoys confidence from the side of citizens in Upper Egypt. According to one of the participants in the hearings, "we could not believe what was said in the beginning of the public hearing, but after we saw with our own eyes and we talked and you heard us, we have a great confidence in CARE and that the study will communicate our voice to the officials."[62] Hence, the study seems to have provided a platform for communication and consultation between citizens and state-officials. The role of a reliable interlocutor here is very important. To some extent, the trust vested in the interlocutor was translated into confidence in the worthiness of the SA tool and the state-officials, who, as is apparent from the participant's statement, do not enjoy much trust from the side of citizens.

The role of 'state action' as a constitutive element in this SAI is crucial. The attitude and willingness of MLD to carry out this survey, its initiative to collect data about users' satisfaction, and its commitment to the results of the survey,

---

60   The Governance Unit, Final Report on "User Feedback Survey in Sohag and Qena," 94.
61   Ibid, 28–92.
62   The Governance Unit, Final Report on "User Feedback Survey in Sohag and Qena", 15.

are all factors that clearly shape this SAI. According to Malena et al., mechanisms of SA can be initiated and supported by the state, but in most of the cases they are bottom-up and demand-driven. This SAI is one of the rare cases where the state is driving SA by giving the space for citizens to participate indirectly in performing accountability.[63] The state action here manifests through various incentives, including service improvement and the implementation of Egypt's 2030 vision.[64] This was clear in the MLD's call for a third party, where it stated,

> Obtaining regular feedback from service users has proven to be a powerful mechanism through which SA and public service performance can be improved. The commitment to promoting social accountability and citizen's satisfaction with services is also part of Egypt's 2030 vision, which emphasizes the institutionalization of the process of obtaining citizen opinions.[65]

But this was not the only incentive for MLD to carry out the survey and commit to its results. In fact, SA and citizens' participation in the UELDP comes as one of the requirements for Egypt to receive a $500 million loan from the World Bank. According to the World Bank loan document, "support will be provided for strengthening the participation, transparency, and social accountability elements of the Program [...] through parallel technical assistance on conducting user feedback surveys."[66] In this sense, the World Bank can also be seen as an external interlocutor that attempted– through the promotion of a 'more inclusive' neoliberal policy–to foster change and strengthen SA. It has created both an incentive for MLD to carry out the user feedback survey and a cost associated with MLD or state-officials' inaction (i.e. noncompliance with the loan terms). However, this raises questions, as will be explained in the following section, concerning the true potential for institutionalization and sustainability of such SAIs given that they were concomitant to donors' stipulations.

---

63   Carmen Malena et al., "Social Accountability: An introduction to the concept and emerging practice," Washington, World Bank, 2004.⌉

64   Egypt's Vision 2030 is a national agenda launched in 2016. It articulates Egypt's long-term strategic plan to achieve what the Vision calls 'balanced regional development' and 'comprehensive sustainable development.'

65   See UELDP, Terms of reference.

66   World Bank, "Program Appraisal Document on a Proposed Loan in the Amount of $500 Million to the Arab Republic of Egypt for an Upper Egypt Local Development Program-For-Results," (Washington DC: World Bank, 2016), 125.

8   Discussion

This section provides some insight on the five contextual factors for the effectiveness of SAIs operating in challenging environments in Egypt, uncovering the existence of not only challenges, but also opportunities for these SAIs. The order of factors in this section differs from the World Bank framework to ensure an efficient and logical flow of ideas.

8.1   *State Action*

 Limited action is seen on the side of the state. The only exception to this is the third SAI on the user feedback survey. This was only possible because of the donor's stipulations, which moved the state officials to conduct the survey–through a third party–and raised the cost associated with inaction. With the absence of donor pressure in the SAI on health, the Eghospital initiative hardly led to any state action. This inaction and inability to resolve issues resulted from the officials' lack of willingness and resources. Still, the initiative did not drive any negative response from the side of the state officials, in terms of repression and backlash, because health was considered apolitical and was seen as a safe entry point.

While the previous two SAIs are characterized by either state action or inaction, the SAI on agriculture provides a more dynamic picture. Although there was limited state action following the assessment at the beginning, this inaction was the result of a lack of awareness rather than a lack of willingness or resources. Hence, once informed about good governance principles and trained on good governance practices, positive state action was driven in terms of introducing channels and mechanisms for participation, transparency, and accountability. Therefore, understanding the exact reasons behind state action or inaction facilitated informed decisions on how to approach or design an effective SAI.

8.2   *Citizen Action*

Overall, despite agriculture, health, and local development–particularly roads and waste management–all being salient services that citizens have an intrinsic motivation in improving, none of the SAIs reflected clear citizen action, at least initially. This can be traced back to citizens' limited capacity to act, which was constrained by a lack of information about the provided services and their inability to come together in collective action as well as their frustration with deriving any state action. As a result, citizens were unable to monitor service providers, make demands for justification or sanction, or claim better services.

The change (or lack of change) in the status of citizen action, state action, and citizen-state interaction can be explained in light of the three levers: interface, information, and civic mobilization. The interlocutor, in particular, seems to have played a significant role in motivating citizen-state interaction through activating information and civic mobilization and even influencing the interface. In this sense, the interlocutor became a factor independent from the interface and deserves to be looked at separately as follows.

8.3   *The Interlocutor*

A key player that undertook a range of different but chief roles in the three SAIs is the interlocutor. In all three SAIs, an organizational interlocutor existed, whether Shamseya or CARE. The quality and characteristics of the interlocutors, as well as their differential organizational skills, determined the nature of the roles that they played. Both interlocutors played the role of information intermediary, generating unavailable, yet needed, information in the three SAIs. In the SAI on health, Shamseya continued to simplify and disseminate information over an electronic portal, relying on their ICT skills. In the SAI on agriculture, in addition to being an information intermediary, CARE also played the role of a mobilizer, managing farmers' collective action through more capable agricultural cooperatives. In doing so, CARE relied on its organizational abilities and experience in providing training and capacity building programs as well as the ties they developed over the years with agricultural cooperatives and state officials in Upper Egypt. In the third SAI, the interlocutor, CARE, also played the role of a mediator between the state and society throughout the hearings, while relying on their good professional reputation and the trust vested in them by local communities and state officials.

8.4   *Information*

The three SAIs operated in a context where information was unavailable. Hence, all teams had to engage in monitoring exercises, to collect information needed to establish evidence-based and accurate grounds for accountability. In doing so, the information intermediaries had to be open not only about the multiple tools with which they can gather information, but about available alternatives. The different information tools utilized in the three SAIs include governance assessments, community evaluations, and user feedback surveys. In the first SAI on agriculture, CARE's request to carry out quantitative data collection in Minia was, however, met with denial, which constituted an additional informational constraint. To meet this challenge, CARE replaced quantitative data collection with qualitative means for data collection–namely FGDs–to generate information.

Once collected, information was used differently in each SAI. While in the SAI on agriculture, information was used as the basis for training and capacity development programs for state officials and members of cooperatives (farmers), which eventually contributed to farmers' mobilization. In the second SAI on health, information was simplified and made accessible directly to the public. In this sense, information was used in the first SAI to motivate state action and citizen action through collective action, while information was used in the second SAI to popularize the citizen-state interface through an electronic portal. In the third SAI, or the user feedback survey, information assisted the state officials, who initially made the call for a third party to conduct the survey, to make informed decisions about services' improvement.

How information is used in each SAI can be explained in light of the organizational skills of the information intermediary–the interlocutor–and the understanding of SA. While CARE has extensive experience in designing and implementing training and capacity building programs in Egypt as well as a number of connections with state officials and cooperatives, the younger team at Shamseya are skilled in using ICT, creating smart tools and presenting data in an interactive manner. Finally, in the third SAI, information had to be used simply in a way that satisfies the donor's conditionality (the terms of the World Bank), which indicates "strengthening the participation, transparency, and social accountability elements of the Program […] conducting user feedback survey."[67] There is, however, no reference to how this user feedback survey, as a tool for information generation, can be sustained. Each party seems to have capitalized on their individual skillsets–whether training, ICT, or conditionality imposition–to achieve what they understood as SA.

8.5   *Civic Mobilization*

Civic mobilization is one of the constitutive elements that witnessed a clear variation across the three SAIs, depending on the capacity and ability of the interlocutor to carry out this role and whether or not this was seen as the purpose of the SAI. In the SAI on agriculture, the interlocutor played a key role in fostering civic mobilization through promoting the role of the cooperatives and raising the farmers' awareness about the role of cooperatives in representing them. Civic mobilization in this sense provided farmers, especially marginalized ones, with both organizational and leadership capacity to unite and take collective action. At the same time, the interlocutor mobilized the state officials throughout the training, which also prepared the state officials for the citizens' action and brought together what could be seen as pro-accountability actors.

---

67   World Bank, "Appraisal Document," 125.

In the second SAI on health, despite Shamseya or the interlocutor's attempt to foster civic mobilization, no clear signs exist of collective action having been fostered on the side of patients or service providers. Signs of civic mobilization can only be found on the side of the team of local evaluators, who were put together for the task of evaluation by the interlocutor, Shamseya. It was neither the purpose of Shamseya nor in their capacity to bring patients together in collective action. When it comes to the third initiative, there are some signs of citizen collective action or state action having been fostered through the hearings, where the interlocutor played a key role in moderating discussions and bringing the service recipients and service providers closer. Like the SAI on health, the researchers from the local information centers, who engaged with CARE in collecting the data of the user feedback survey, can be understood to have been put together in collective action for the task of implementing the survey. The interlocutors in this sense contributed in spurring both citizen and state action.

The nature of the interface: The nature of the interface seems to have taken different forms that can be seen across a dynamic continuum, rather than being seen as dichotomous or static. In the SAI on health, though Shamseya communicated the results of the assessments with service providers and decision makers, the SAI seems to be operating within a closed space where minimum representation and accessibility of interface is available. As mentioned earlier, ICT plays a transformative role in generating and disseminating information, facilitating civic mobilization, and changing interfaces.[68] Here, the young team capitalized on ICT to disseminate information and popularize the interface. Yet, there is no clear evidence that this contributed much to civic mobilization or changed the nature of the interface in terms of representation, accessibility, or credibility. On the other hand, the initiative on agriculture, despite having initially operated in a near to closed space in terms of limited accessibility to information and limited representation or participation of cooperatives, seems to have improved with the increased mobilization for collective action on the side of farmers and increased mechanisms and channels for participation, transparency, and accountability on the side of the state officials. In a sense, this has changed the nature of the state-citizen interface. Finally, the third initiative operated, from the beginning, under different circumstances. As a state-led initiative, implemented in compliance with the donor's stipulations, the user feedback initiative operated in an invited space where some representation and accessibility were allowed via the hearings and, later, the survey. Though it did not transform into an open space, the

---

68   Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change," 23–33.

invited space was enhanced as a result of the hearings and the survey, which increased representation and state credibility.

9   Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Ten years after the January 25 uprising, the momentum that facilitated the effectiveness of many SAIs in Egypt has mostly faded. SAIs in Egypt lost an influential contextual driver, which is the open or invited spaces that accepted people's participation and responded to their pressures and demands. However, availability of unfavorable contexts should not discourage SA actors and initiatives. It only means that SAIs can embrace diverse and dynamic SA processes.

In this regard, some lessons can be drawn from the above SAIs. First, the nature of the interface is only one factor. A second factor critical to interface is the existence and quality of interlocutors. In challenging environments, where invited spaces are controlled, citizens' collective action is limited, and commitment by state-officials is not guaranteed, the role of the interlocutor becomes key in boosting the effectiveness of SAIs. It plays the role of a mediator, providing a platform for communication and consultation between citizens and state-officials. It can also become an information intermediary, which generates, simplifies, and disseminates information. In addition, it can raise the awareness of actors and improve organizational skills and potential for collective action, mobilizing citizen and state action and deriving attitudinal and behavioral change. Hence, it is important to understand and support the role/s of 'interlocutors.'

Second, the interlocutor has to enjoy certain qualities. It has to present itself as a 'fair' or unbiased broker who deals with different actors on equal footing. In addition, to undertake the role of a mediator, it has to enjoy good reputation and trust from the sides of state-officials and citizens. It also has to be capable of managing collective action and mediating interactions.

Third, in constrained or challenging environments, there is little cost associated with state-officials' inaction and, hence, either a cost has to be created or incentives have to be made for them to act. In such circumstances, and in order to ensure a positive state response, understanding and sometimes changing the incentives facing state officials is necessary.[69] For example, state-officials have to understand the consequence of unavailability of information. When sufficient information about the service is missing, service recipients usually confuse this with the absence of the service, corruption, or bad service

---

69   Grandvoinnet, Aslam, and Raha, "Opening the Black Box," 4.

TABLE 1   Constitutive elements in the three SAIS

Theme SAI	SAI 1 (Agriculture)	SAI 2 (Health)	SAI 3 (User Feedback)
State action	- Limited state capacity to act upon the findings of the assessment (before training) - Signs of improved state capacity and increased commitment post-training	- Limited willingness to act - Limited signs of commitment	- Capacity and willingness to act - Some signs of commitment available
Citizen action	- Salience of issue - Limited citizens/ farmers action prior to the SA - Improved citizen action after the SAI	- Salience of issue - Limited evidence on citizen action all through the SA despite the salience of the issue	- Citizen action regulated and moderated through hearings and user feedback survey
Interlocutor	- an information intermediary and mobilizer fostering collective action	- an information intermediary	- an information intermediary and mediator - Another interlocutor (the World Bank) supported the initiative
Information	- Absent information - Through monitoring exercises (assessments), the interlocutor played a role in information generation	- Absent information - Through monitoring exercises, the interlocutor played a role in information generation, simplification and dissemination - ICT was used to popularize the interface and disseminate information	- Absent information - Through monitoring exercises and sharing the information back with service providers and users, the interlocutor played a role in information generation and dissemination
Civic mobilization	- The interlocutor fostered civic mobilization through activating the role of the cooperatives and raising farmers' awareness	- Some attempts for civic mobilization, but no evidence on fostering citizen collective action or state action	- Through the hearings, the state and the interlocutor contributed in fostering civic mobilization

TABLE 1 Constitutive elements in the three SAIs (*cont.*)

Theme SAI	SAI 1 (Agriculture)	SAI 2 (Health)	SAI 3 (User Feedback)
The nature of the interface	- Near to closed interface at the beginning in terms of of accessibility to information and limited cooperatives' representation - Improved nature of interface after the assessment	- Closed interface in terms of accessibility representation and credibility	- Invited space for citizen-state interface - Enhanced invited space as a result of the SAI

delivery. Hence, it is rewarding for state-officials to provide information about services. Of course, on the other hand, sharing information can lead to uncovering some deficiencies in services' provision. In this case, sharing information concerning the reasons for these deficiencies, how they can be resolved, and the steps that are being taken to address such deficiencies and redress grievances could prove useful.

Fourth, instead of excluding state-officials from SAIs, involving state-officials in training, dialogues, surveys, and evaluations is crucial. It increases the credibility of SAIs and leads to behavioral change among state-officials. Training state-officials not only improves the actors' capacity to act, but also plays a major role in changing the perceptions, habits, and practices of state-officials.

Finally, the role of youth in holding service providers accountable and spearheading service improvement is very important. It communicates young people's voice, empowers them, and enables them to influence state-officials or hold them accountable. It contributes to changing social and power-relations for the benefit of the youth. It also capitalizes on the youth's ability to use ICT, which in turn popularizes the SA interface. Young people should, however, lobby for, and regularly follow up on, service-providers' commitments and promises.