

The church building good governance

Learning from successes in Zimbabwe

In the period from 1980 to 1995, Zimbabwe achieved broad-based economic growth and notable improvements in social welfare but since then, has undergone political and socio-economic regression.¹ Among the many characteristics of this regression, corruption and an absence of accountability have progressively weakened local authorities and parastatals, resulting in a degeneration of basic infrastructure, health and education facilities.² Currently, civil society is also weak in that its engagement with the state is generally characterised by contestation and antagonism. The overall effect is that citizens lack much-needed mechanisms for holding authorities and public service providers to account.

It is in this context that a partner of Tearfund – the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) – has sought to enhance four communities' capabilities to engage with their local authorities in a manner that is well-informed, non-confrontational and constructive. A one-year project, implemented in partnership with local churches, supported the communities to choose from and then use a variety of tools known collectively as *social accountability* tools because they are designed to build accountability and good governance among power-holders from the bottom up.³ Moreover, EFZ's social accountability approach emphasises citizens' responsibilities, not just their rights and entitlements, thus promoting *two-way* accountability: citizens fulfil their responsibilities, and local authorities are held to account to fulfil theirs.

Social accountability project

Location: Irisvale (Matabeleland South), Tsholotsho (Matabeleland North), Shurugwi (Midlands) and Maravanyika (Mashonaland Central), Zimbabwe

Period of implementation: 2019–2020

Implemented by: Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ)

Funded by: Tearfund

Evaluated: In July and August 2020 by an independent evaluator

¹ Muchadenyika, Davison (2017) 'Civil society, social accountability and service delivery in Zimbabwe', *Development Policy Review*, 35 (2): pp 1–18.

² The Office of the Auditor-General of Zimbabwe (www.oag.devpreview.net/) testifies to these trends. Of 59 issues reported by the Auditor-General in 2021 in relation to local authorities, 34 were issues of poor governance and 25 related to compromised service delivery. In the same year, the Auditor-General's report on parastatals raised 69 issues, of which 53 related to poor governance.

³ Malena, Carmen, Reiner Forster & Janmejy Singh (2004) *Social accountability: an introduction to the concept and emerging practice*, Social development papers, no 76, Washington DC: World Bank www.ndi.org/node/22204.



📷 Young boys work together to carry water home. Photo: Tearfund

What impact are we celebrating?

An evaluation has offered us an opportunity to celebrate ways in which members of the four communities, their local churches and local decision-makers are doing things differently as a result, in part, of the social accountability project. Community members consulted as part of the evaluation reported that they had previously tried and failed to engage decision-makers. In contrast, all demands made on the basis of their chosen social accountability tool were considered by decision-makers and led to feedback, if not action. In all four communities, project participants had chosen to use the same tool, the community scorecard. Some perceived that the attitudes of local decision-makers had shifted in their favour because the scorecard had helped to generate structured evidence on the issues of concern. Moreover, it was evident that their own attitudes had changed. The insights of key informants showed that questioning those in authority is counter-cultural in Zimbabwe, including among local churches, even if the questions being raised are legitimate.

'It's not everyone who can engage with local authorities [...]'

Yet project participants' willingness and confidence to engage with local authorities increased through the course of the project because of the additional knowledge and skills they acquired, and because being introduced to the social accountability tools gave them a defined process to follow. Participating churches' willingness to support this engagement also increased, realising that they have a non-confrontational but crucial role to play in being a 'holder' of knowledge about government plans, budgets and processes and thus increasing their communities' access to this information.

'[...] but the training taught us that we can all come together and when we speak

*with one voice, the authorities will listen.*⁴

Actions taken by local authorities in response to dialogue with the communities included improving water supply in Shurugwi (Midlands) and initiating road rehabilitation in Tsholotsho (Matabeleland North). Such improvements have been monitored and recorded by the communities themselves, through continued use of the community scorecard.

*'When we identified the challenge of limited access to water in our area, we had to agree among ourselves who would go and engage the people with the most potential to assist. We targeted the council secretary and the engineer. At first, they did not want to engage with us [...]. [But] after continued engagements with them, presenting evidence and outlining the non-political nature of our advocacy work they became more open and willing to engage. That is when we recorded some improvement in the frequency with which we received water.'*⁵

In Irisvale (Matabeleland South), maternal health services have been a subject of contestation with local authorities for a number of years. The community built a mothers' waiting shelter in 2016 – a place for pregnant women to stay in close proximity to the health clinic. The community successfully mobilised some



📷 Irisvale Village Health Worker presenting at an interface meeting. Photo: EFZ

⁴ A key informant interviewed by the evaluation team in Irisvale, Matabeleland South. Quoted in: Yekeye, Innocent (2020) *Social accountability project evaluation*, Zimbabwe: Tearfund/Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, p 5–6.

⁵ A key informant interviewed by the evaluation team in Shurugwi, Midlands. Quoted in: Yekeye, Innocent (2020) *Social accountability project evaluation*, Zimbabwe: Tearfund/Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, p 8.

external – NGO – support for this construction project, but received no support from local authorities. In contrast, a contribution of the social accountability intervention has been to facilitate interface meetings in which women have registered their ongoing concerns about maternal healthcare with local authorities – for the first time. Thus, the contribution of the project has been towards improved relationships between communities and their duty-bearers, where before those relationships had been antagonistic and unproductive.

What lessons are we learning?

The evaluation has also helped us to understand what specific factors enabled the project’s – and indeed communities’ – success. One of the most important ‘enablers’, as identified by the evaluation team, was the involvement of local churches. All four communities were ones in which the church and community mobilisation process (CCMP) was being undertaken. Through CCMP, churches had mobilised community members, and activated their agency and solution-seeking, so that they more readily sought to address their needs with their own resources. When it came to engaging with decision-makers, they often demonstrated that they were making tangible community contributions of their own, as opposed to exclusively seeking external support. Project participants in Maravanyika (Mashonaland Central), for example, outlined that their engagements were assisted by the fact that the community had already provided labour, stones and bricks for additional classroom blocks.

‘After we identified the challenge of inadequate classrooms the resolution was to contribute towards building new classroom blocks. As a community [...] we decided to mould bricks and to find stones. This was done and the next step was to engage the district office for support with cement, roofing materials and other requirements which we could not meet. They commended our efforts.’⁶



 Bricks drying in the sun. Photo: Tom Price/Tearfund

⁶ Community member who participated in a focus group discussion, Maravanyika, Mashonaland Central. Quoted in: Yekeye, Innocent (2020) *Social accountability project evaluation*, Zimbabwe: Tearfund/Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, p 8.

It was also found that local churches' endorsement of the project neutralised community tensions based on political affiliation, having a unifying effect among community members and encouraging decision-makers to be more responsive. Under the project, and in each community, EFZ initially trained leaders from the local churches to become 'social accountability champions'. Thereafter, these champions trained other members of the community and led all actions that the community decided to take in response to the training, including facilitating 'interface meetings' – crucial platforms for presenting evidence and engaging in dialogue – with local decision-makers. On one hand, the identity of the Church, and the trust assigned to it, contributed towards decision-makers being more willing to collaborate and respond in those spaces and meetings. On the other hand, the perceived neutrality of local churches and universal appeal of their values made it clear that all community members were free to participate in social accountability training and follow-up actions, regardless of their political affiliation. In turn, this ensured that policy makers did not mistakenly associate demands for accountability with opposition politics. Faced with multi-stakeholder groups, decision makers did not feel threatened. This is in a national context where accountability can readily become highly politicised. In the words of one community member:

*'The fact that churches were involved was very important. Requests for accountability are usually mistaken for opposition activism. But with the involvement of local churches, this perception changed.'*⁷

⁷ Community member who participated in a focus group discussion, Shurugwi, Midlands. Quoted in: Yekeye, Innocent (2020) *Social accountability project evaluation*, Zimbabwe: Tearfund/Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, p 7.

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Each year, we analyse the past year's worth of Tearfund and partners' project evaluations. We then synthesise key learning and evidence of impact from them. This social accountability evaluation was one of 39 that we synthesised in 2021. It was selected for this case study because it was one of the most high scoring against the [Bond Evidence Principles](#) of voice and inclusion, appropriateness, triangulation, contribution, and transparency.

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