



## NIOGN Factsheet - Public Accountability

### What is public accountability?

*Public Accountability is one of those golden concepts that is an end in itself. It's an umbrella term that includes other distinct concepts like democracy, efficiency, responsiveness, responsibility, and integrity. It conveys an image of transparency and trustworthiness; and it holds strong promises of fair and equitable governance.*

### What does public accountability involve?

*'Accountability' refers not to those in power holding their subjects to account, but to the authorities being held accountable by their citizens.*

*'Public' refers to 'openness', in the sense that the account is not rendered discretely, behind closed doors, but is open to the public.*

*Public accountability involves the obligation to: provide information about performance; to explain decision making; and to justify conduct. It implies the possibility of debate, of public questions and governmental answers and eventually of judgment by citizens. And such judgement in turn implies the imposition of sanctions on government in case of malperformance.*

*These sanctions can be highly formalized, such as fines, disciplinary measures, civil remedies or even penal sanctions, but they can also be based on unwritten rules, as in the case of the political accountability of a minister to parliament, where the sanction can comprise calling for the minister's resignation. Often the punishment will only be implicit or informal, such as the very fact of having to render account in front of television-cameras.*

### Political Accountability

*Voters 'delegate' their sovereignty to popular representatives, who in turn delegate the majority of their authority to a cabinet of ministers. The ministers subsequently delegate authority to their civil servants or to various independent, administrative bodies. The mechanism of political accountability operates precisely in the opposite direction to that of delegation. In parliamentary systems with ministerial accountability, public servants and their organisations are accountable to their minister, who must render political account to parliament.*

### Social Accountability

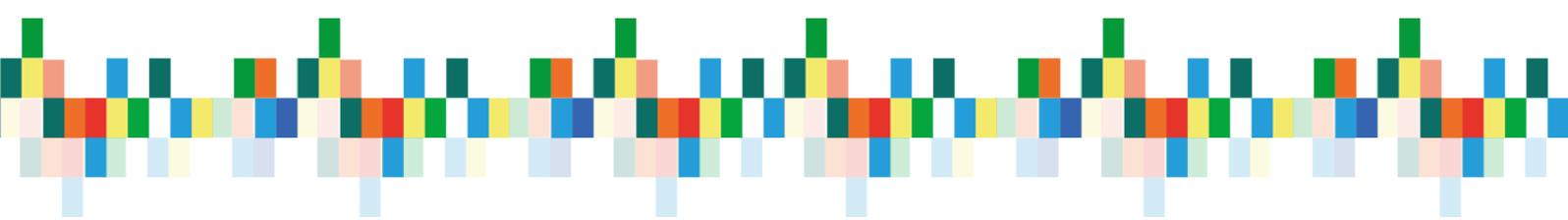
*In reaction to a perceived lack of trust in government, there is a demand in many western democracies for more direct and explicit accountability relations between public agencies on the one hand and clients, citizens and civil society on the other hand. Particular attention has been focused on the role of NGOs, interest groups and customers or clients as relevant 'stakeholders' in determining policy. And the rise of the internet has given a new dimension to this form of public accountability.*

### Why is public accountability important?

*Public accountability is important because it provides a democratic means to: monitor and control government conduct, prevent the development of concentrations of power, and enhance the learning capacity and effectiveness of public administration.*

### Democracy & Popular Sovereignty

*Public accountability is an essential condition for the democratic process, as it provides citizens with the information they need to judge the propriety and effectiveness of the conduct of the government.*



*The prevention of corruption and abuse of power*

*Public accountability can act as a check on the 'tyranny' of overly presumptuous elected leaders and 'privatised' executive power. The remedy against an overbearing, improper or corrupt government is the organisation of institutional countervailing powers. Other public institutions, such as an independent judicial power or a Chamber of Audit are put in place next to the voter, parliament, and political officials, and given the power to request that account be rendered over particular aspects.*

*Enhancing the learning capacity of public administration*

*Accountability is not only useful as a check, it also leads to prevention. Accountability forces administrators to trace connections between past, present and future. An administrator who is called to account is confronted with his policy failures and he is aware that, in the future, he can be called upon again, even more pitilessly, to render account. The public nature of giving account teaches others in the same position about the accountability process. Parliamentary inquiries, for example – especially when broadcast on TV – cast their shadow well ahead, far beyond the concrete issue forming the subject of the inquiry, and can oblige numerous administrators and public servants to adjust their policies.*

### **Why would more public accountability be good for government?**

*Public accountability can help to ensure that the legitimacy of the public administration remains intact or is increased. Media, interest groups and citizens are all adopting an increasingly more critical attitude toward the government. Respect for authority is fast dwindling and the confidence in public institutions is under pressure.*

*Processes of public accountability in which administrators are given the opportunity to explain and justify their intentions, and in which citizens and interest groups can pose questions and offer their opinion, can promote acceptance of government authority and the citizens' confidence in the government's administration.*

*In the incidental case of tragedies, fiascos, and failures, processes of public account giving may also have an important ritual, purifying function - they can help to provide public catharsis. Public account giving can help to bring a tragic period to an end because it can offer a platform for the victims to voice their grievances, and for the real or reputed perpetrators to account for themselves and to justify or excuse their conduct.*

### **What Accountability deficits exist in Northern Ireland? What challenges exist here?**

- *There is a disconnect between citizens and their Executive and Assembly, and a general disaffection with politics*
  - *We are faced with a number of socio-economic problems – departmental budget cuts, welfare reform, pressure on the health service, the lack of a poverty strategy, growing inequality, youth unemployment & an aging population*
  - *These are seemingly intractable problems that are intensified by the unwillingness or inability of our politicians to agree a common strategy on how to deal with them*
  - *This lack of agreement is a threat to, not only the integrity, but the future of the political institutions*
  - *Key discussions & negotiations take place behind closed doors; public conversations are contrived, shallow & dangerous; and people are left feeling angry, ignored & disenfranchised*
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- *Our democracy is closed & opaque, exclusive & excluding, arrogant & unaccountable. It feels restrictive, pulling us down to a normative state of inaction*

**What commitments and actions are required? What Vision and impact would you like to see?**

- *Democracy is everyone's responsibility; and to co-create a system that works, we need everyone involved*
  - *A more networked democracy would let us focus on mutuality, trust & co-creation*
  - *A more open government would promote those cultural processes that support accessibility & engagement*
  - *A more engaging government would acknowledge & embrace alternative views that contain wisdom, energy & solutions*
  - *More interactive policy making would mean better service design & more appropriate service delivery, which would reduce costs and improve effectiveness*
  - *More transparency would restore integrity to government and make politicians more accountable to the people they serve*
  - *Transparency is the embodiment of public control as an end in itself. Democracy, after all, is not about the people necessarily being right, but about the right of the people to be wrong.*
  - *In the old world, trust is assumed; power is internalized, held on to. But trust has been lost, politics is seen as divisive & power corrupts. In the new system, trust is earned through mutuality, co-creation and by demonstrable action. Power is dispersed around those in the process based on contribution, skill & knowledge. The culture is based on co-operation & shared values. It looks for a vision, not necessarily a consensus. It looks to harnessing the whole community in making decisions real. To do this it values the skills, knowledge & experience of all the community.*
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