ACTIVATING ACCOUNTABLE AND COLLABORATIVE GOOD GOVERNANCE

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To achieve sustainable development amidst the social, economic and environmental 'polycrisis' (Swilling & Annecke, 2012: 26) the world currently faces today, the underlying and deeply embedded historical, political, economic, social and environmental structures that support oppression and deprivation amongst the world's poor need to be critically addressed. Within this drive to source alternatives to this polycrisis lies a striving for sustainable development.

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A TERM ORIGINALLY coined within Our Common Future (1989), commonly known as the Brundlandt Report, sustainable development aimed to 'recalibrate institutional mechanisms at global, national and local levels...as a means to promote development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Sneddon, Howarth & Norgaard, 2006: 254). Thus began the application of sustainable development as an aspirational vision and a practical mission lying at the heart of developmental practices striving to realise equitable and effective development planning, management and assessment.

The promotion of good governance, working towards sustainable development, requires (in particular) the salient confrontation of these recognised multiplicities of economic, social, environmental and cultural challenges we face in our current world context. Within South Africa, the current state of affairs is recognised nationally to be of deep concern, with local community service delivery protests against poor service delivery, corruption, and mal-expenditure (amongst other concerns) regularly making the news. Acknowledging the urgent need for improving and promoting accountable cooperative governance – particularly at a local level – local

government stakeholders, such as the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), are consistently vocal in raising their concerns. Their voices (amongst myriads of others) signal deep apprehensions at a national level with regards to the activation of accountable good governance (and particularly performance) practices within the local government and municipal sphere.

Highlighting this in his latest report, the Auditor-General of South Africa Kimi Makwetu – well recognised for spearheading public sector accountability – has called directly for increased leadership accountability, after the latest 2015-16 local government audit outcomes report indicated that local government had disappointingly failed to maintain a previously promising five-year improvement trajectory initiated in 2010 (Auditor-General South Africa, 2017).

The South African Constitution (Section 152) calls for local government providing an accountable and democratic government to serve local communities. In recognition of this, the Auditor-General has emphasised the importance of accountability in the management of local municipal affairs, and has stressed that there are indeed consequences for persistent financial, as well as performance management, failures within government by advocating for the implementation of consequence management systems. Such consequence management systems would promote increased responsibility and accountability-holding for municipal performance by both the administrative and political leadership (Auditor-General South Africa, 2017).

To meet the complex needs and challenges of people (especially those marginalised) living within South Africa, creative accountable and collaborative planning and practice – as supported by high standards of performance - conducted by public, civil society and active community organisations is needed. This requires creativity, a holistic perspective, as well as trans/multi-disciplinary modes of thinking and doing. In particular, efforts should involve a combination of complex practical, as well as value-based, approaches that deal with concerns related to accountability and collaboration, and to do so effectively requires the clear, critical and honest assessment of the ways these practices/values interact with, support and relate to each other.

This effort is, however, no small endeavour, as oftentimes the default relationships between organisations and government is adversarial, with a lack of coordination between various groups with regards to sharing methodologies around advocating for accountability. There is currently a poor understanding about how best to engage with government around service delivery, as well as limited understandings of how to hold corporations and corporations to account in the midst of inadequate knowledge/experience/information/resource sharing across networks and institutions. Low standards of performance and insufficient monitoring and evaluation systems to manage the meeting of standards are rife, and are worsened by a leadership crisis stimulated by a lack of public / private systems effectively resulting in consequences for failing to meet the needs of the community.

Recognising, interrogating and unpacking these challenges allows for the opportunity for the expansion of better understandings of the various internal/external processes and methodologies that may improve the efficacy of lobbying and civic engagement. Drawing on the knowledge and experience of civil society organisations based country-wide thus provides us with the opportunity

to link this insight and practice with the appropriate methodologies and/or opportunities for encouraging dialogue and creating frameworks promoting more effective engagement. In turn, these links promote the building of collaborative bridges between active citizens, civil society organisations and government aimed at activating citizen-driven democracy driving sustainable development. This paper unpacks accountability and collaboration as theoretical concepts, as well as dynamic practices, within complex relationship contexts.

UNPACKING ACCOUNTABILITY

Many interpretations of how accountability can be understood, activated, and analysed exist within the field of good governance. It is important to recognise that in the current South African political-economic-social-environmental context, accountability is not only a 'hot topic', but also represents the hard-won legislative rights and aspirations of millions of people working towards improving their quality of life and access to developmental opportunities. To ensure an ethical awareness of the relevance and gravity of implementing practices within the good governance field that holds individuals, institutions and systems accountable for their actions and performance (or lack of it) holds gravity. In turn, encouraging a collaborative approach serves to pool resources, knowledge and energy for collective community building, and takes responsibility for collective interests. Within this endeavour lies the significance of holding oneself and others accountable, both individually and as a collective (in particular) for the responsibilities and resources entrusted by the public to the institutions and elected leadership.

At its root, the practice of accountability can be understood in its basic form as a relationship between individuals that requires for an account to be made of how a responsibility that has been

delegated to a person or institution has been carried out and/or fulfilled (Schedler, 1999). As such, within the context of this chapter, accountability is recognised as a value and practice that aspires to uphold-inspire-activate ethical active citizenship, and which in turn supports and inspires efficiency and transparency within the civic and public sector for effective local community building. In this regard, accountability is thus acknowledged as promoting a positive trajectory for sustainable development within South Africa.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY – ACCOUNTABILITY AT THE LEVEL OF THE STATE

Given its multi-tiered and intricate structure, the public sector forms a complex and convoluted machine, run by myriads of detailed systems that work in tandem, intersect or run independently of each other. As such, ensuring accountability within such complexity is both a challenge as well as extremely important to ensure efficient productivity and high standards of performance.

It is no wonder then that public accountability serves as the hallmark of modern democratic governance, which, in order to ensure democratic efficacy, requires for those in power to be held accountable for their acts, omissions, policies and expenditure decisions. As a result, it can be recognised as critical to ensure democratic activation via the holding of government departments, civil servants, and politicians to account utilising the public and legislative bodies of South Africa (Bovens, 1998). Followingly, performance management and standards lie at the heart of activating public accountability, as ultimately the use and distribution of public resources and public service provision (including public infrastructure investment) is pivotal to meet the interests (and needs) of society.

Figure 1: Three levels of focus – public accountability

* **Macro:** Oversight by public representatives in the legislative arm of government, for example: legislative Acts, codes, rules and legal instruments (Education and Training Unit, 2017)

* **Community:** Public participation activities that revolve around community consultation by government departments, for example: Integrated Development Planning public participation event engagements held by a local municipality (Education and Training Unit, 2017)

* **Individual:** This level acknowledges individual citizens' rights to hold government to account for their actions/inaction, and receive feedback from departments on their decision making process as they directly affect them (Education and Training Unit, 2017)

Sources: Education and Training Unit, 2017

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

As Figure 1 shows, public accountability has three levels of focus, namely macro, community and individual. Within each level, the public sector is required to be responsive to citizens as well as civic organisations actively engaging with the state. Various ways or means of activating government accountability exist, each with their own relationship to citizen engagement, and within which various tensions operate between holding individuals to account (functional) versus collective

(institutional) accountability. For example, *preference accountability* emphasises the importance of government officials responding to citizen-expressed explicit preferences. The challenge, however, is that this may lead to the rewarding of only the most passionately expressive factions, and result in responsiveness being channelled towards the more resourced and vocally intense (often small) factions or groups. *Character accountability* emphasises the importance of officials following rules, being honest and working hard. The challenge here, however, is that an exclusive focus on rules and competency can lead to technocratic approaches which are disconnected from the expressed needs of citizens. In exercising *performance accountability*, government administrators produce policies aimed at improving societal and citizen welfare, as based on the expressed needs of citizens. *Performance accountability* thus works most effectively when combined with character accountability, whereby maximum accountability impact can be achieved (Drutman, 2013).

IN SEARCH OF COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT

In order for accountability to be fully activated and/or realised then, a process or practice with which to hold anything or anyone to account needs to exist. To operate with most efficacy, it is therefore imperative that we act as a collective in order to hold institutions or individuals to account by way of setting up, activating and ensuring accounting and performance

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processes and practices are implemented (and importantly) utilised by both government, corporate, as well as civil society organisations. In turn, forms of collaboration that enable a broad range of actors acting across the system of accountability (both within and without the state) need to be included and engaged with in order to ensure effectivity of achieving goals.

The ways in which civil society attempts to engage with the state comes in a variety of shapes and sizes, and in many cases, the form of the engagement influences or elicits a differing level or resulting accountability. Citizens engage with the state on issues for a variety of reasons, ranging from having a personal interest in a specific concern that is directly affecting their life (*instrumental citizen engagement*), to collectively working together in support of a policy or initiative due to its resonance with their values (*collaborative citizen engagement*). It is pertinent to note, however, that different types of engagement can result in varying repercussions for achieving accountability. As such, a direct relationship exists between the saliency of a concern and the ease of access to the engagement opportunity, in supporting collaborative citizen engaged initiatives and strategies that successfully promote sustainable accountability (Vila, 2013).

COLLABORATION AS COMPLEX PRACTICE

Working and acting as a collective is no small endeavour, and as such, collaboration can be recognised not as a static condition, but rather investigated as an emergent or dynamic process (O'Leary & Vij, 2012). This includes an 'emergent process between interdependent organizational actors who negotiate the answers to shared concerns' (Gray, 1989: 12-13), and who 'work in association with others for some form of mutual benefit' (Huxham,

1996: 01). It can also be unpacked as 'any joint activity by two or more agencies working together that is intended to increase public value by their working together rather than separately' (Bardach, 1998: 08).

Given the added complexity of working within extended systemic teams, collaboration also requires a highly creative approach which includes lateral thinking. When combining extended resources and the creative insight of multiple organisations, it is more likely that a collaborative and collective advantage can be achieved (Huxham, 1993). As such, collaboration between complex conglomerations of diverse individuals and organisations is a very complex endeavour which is often fraught with dispute and disagreement (O'Leary & Bingham, 2007).

CHALLENGES, PARADOXES AND COMPLEXITIES

A multiplicity of challenges, complexities and paradoxes exist within the endeavour to collaborate while holding others and oneself to account. Not all municipalities are created equal, with some being more/less resourced with sufficient financial, leadership and skills support. Collaborative engagements involving multiple organisations include differing agendas whereby various interests with different/conflicting agendas and objectives of various role players may clash with each other. Differing organisational cultures are at play within institutions, and which drive a unique approach and value system for collaboration as well as holding oneself and other accountable. Varying methods of operation, as linked to hierarchy and management control, are utilised and impede direct and smooth communication between institutions. As such, a baseline alignment of organisational culture, as supported by approachable organisational systems, is necessary for effective collaboration (O'Leary & Vij, 2012).

POWER AND TRUST

Accountable collaborations are challenged by power imbalances which often result in co-optation as well as conflict, and which can directly impact on collaborative success rates. To counteract this, both governance structures and mechanisms require the capacity to source and remedy unequal power differentials and imbalances, as a means to delineate power-sharing authority and arrangements between collaborators (O'Leary & Vij, 2012). This additionally protects institutions from the negative impacts of corruption and nepotism within the state, civil society and corporate sector. Acting as a core value within this endeavour, trust is therefore critical for the longevity of accountable collaborations. And if upheld, strong trust can support transparency, goal alignment, clear communication, and information sharing. Understandably then, it is important trust be development and sustained, as once broken, it is not easily retrieved (Tschirtart, Amezcua, & Anker, 2009).

BUILDING ACCOUNTABLE AND COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEXT

Accountability and collaboration are commonly seen as endeavours that are set as diametrically opposed in the South African developmental context, with organisations often being aligned with one or the other. Donor funding has in some ways contributed to this division in that many donors have begun to show a preferential interest in and support of accountability-promoting activities, often at the expense of approaches that focus on sustained collaborative governance work. This situation may stem from the relative ease of monitoring the impact of accountability-promoting endeavours (e.g. number of submissions made/marches organised) versus the challenge of monitoring the qualitative impact of activities such as community empowerment workshops.

Promoting transparency and individual accountability both to the institution and the collaborative partner is key, and as such, prior to agreeing to a collaborative arrangement, it is critical to determine how the collaborative group will hold themselves and others accountable both to citizens as well as public officials (O'Leary & Vij, 2012).

In response to this increase in accountability-promoting activity, the public sector (unsurprisingly) has unfortunately shown a tendency to not welcome initiatives that hold its decisions, actions and performance to account; the resulting tension commonly leads to the reception of an often defensive response from government to civil society organisations attempting to engage with these concerns. Activating/upholding accountability within collaborative effort operates to, 'ensure that collaborators work together in ways that accord with the intent of voters and public officials who authorize their joint efforts' (Page 2008: 138).

In light of these challenges, factors that support dealing with this complexity can include assessing the context in order to balance the various relevant factors. Promoting transparency and individual accountability both to the institution and the collaborative partner is key, and as such, prior to agreeing to a collaborative arrangement, it is critical to determine how the collaborative group will hold themselves and others accountable both to citizens as well as public officials (O'Leary & Vij, 2012). Other factors that may support handling the challenging dynamic include identifying the purpose/mission of the collaboration explicitly, carefully selecting team members and building their capacity, communication system development, and utilising technologies to engage wide audiences in order to general shared capital (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Waugh & Streib, 2006) and shared meaning (Gray, 2000).

It follows that accountable and collaborative engagement and relationship building as an effective change mechanism is not a simple endeavour as they rely heavily on the complex relationships that exist between individuals in order to get things done (Huxham, 2000; Huxham & Vangen, 2005). These relationships are commonly challenging, as human beings continue to prove themselves to be complicated, erratic, emotional, unreliable, and oftentimes plainly biased in favour of their own agenda.

For viable/productive relationships to sustain themselves, a fundamental shift in attitude is required, which will result in an eventual change of behaviour and way of doing things, as a means to deal with the multitude of challenges, paradoxes and complexities active within the developmental field. Useful tools for navigating these challenges include communication and information technology and access mediums for sharing ideas, asserting views, conducting negotiations, problem solving, and resolving conflict within collaborations (Bingham, O'Leary, & Carlson, 2008). To support this activity, personal characteristics such as flexibility, honesty, goal oriented and diplomacy; interpersonal skills such as good communication and people skills; and group process skills including facilitation, collaborative problem solving, understanding of group dynamics, conflict resolution, and mediation (O Leary & Vij, 2012) are amongst the various skills required for the actors engaged in the developmental field.

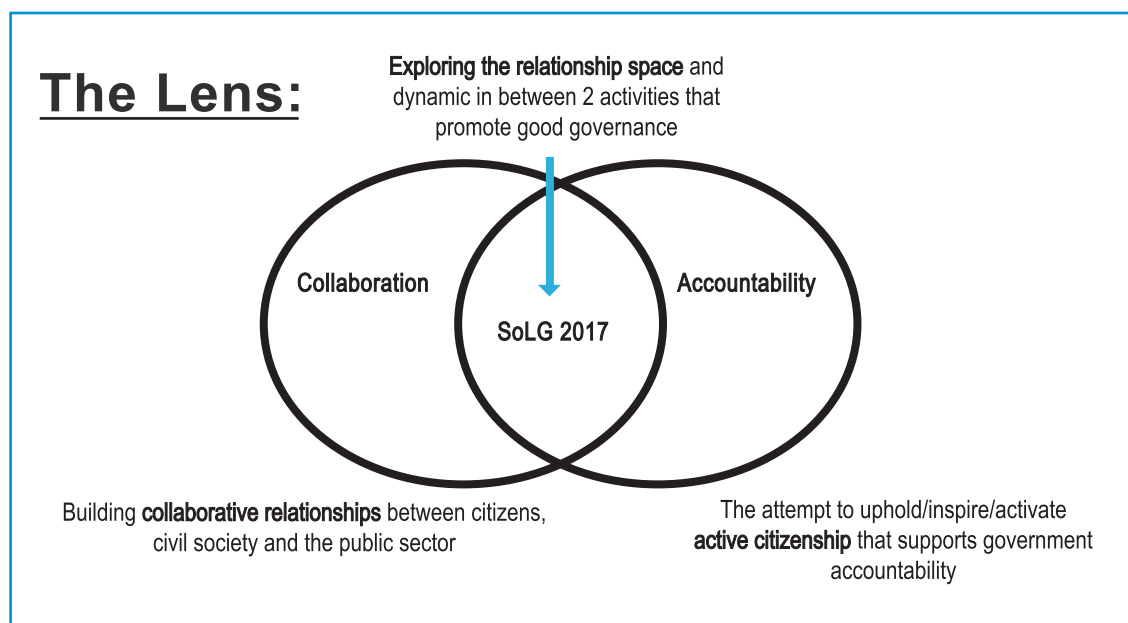In summary, these characteristics and skillsets are recognised as enabling viable relationships that support accountable collective mobilisation, encourage direct and clear communication and knowledge sharing, as well as building trust which support collaborative efforts for developmental decision making processes that are accountable to their collaborative partners, as well as the constituencies they serve. Offering a means to improving the effectiveness of advocacy for quality service delivery, strong high quality performance, as well as citizen engagement with government, the uptake and utilisation of accountable practices through collaborative effort requires a collective social/organisational culture to develop and encourage. This requires buy-in, open and clear communication systems, trust, sharing common value systems, with a clear and shared vision and mission.

SOLG 2017: SHARING STORIES OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND COLLABORATION

As can be discerned from the discussion so far, collaboration and accountability, as values and practices promoting good governance, are both grounded on effective relationship development which hold each other to account while simultaneously attempting to perform within complex and challenging developmental contexts. In this regard, the 2017 theme, '*Navigating Accountability and Collaboration in Local Governance*', acts as a lens within which GGLN member organisation contributors have endeavoured to engage and wrestle with the complex 'wicked' problems (and opportunities) that are enmeshed within this dynamic relationship space that plays itself out between the drive for accountability and the need for collaboration by various civic and public sector role players promoting good governance.

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Figure 2: The Lens of the SoLG 2017 Theme

The Lens:

Exploring the relationship space and dynamic in between 2 activities that promote good governance

Collaboration

SoLG 2017

Accountability

Building **collaborative relationships** between citizens, civil society and the public sector

The attempt to uphold/inspire/activate **active citizenship** that supports government accountability

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This theme thus encourages the network to unpack the dynamic tension (as identified within the network's 2016 publication entitled '*(Re)Claiming Local Democratic Space')* that lies both within and (in) between the need for building collaborative relationships between citizens, civil society and the public sector, and the attempt to uphold/inspire/ activate active citizenship that supports government transparency and accountability for effective local community building. As a result, the authors focus on the various nuances of what accountability and collaboration can mean within the context of active citizenry and building democracy, with authors engaging actively with the positive and negative connotations associated, as well as the grey area in between, as a means for the bolstering of both practice and policy development. In practical terms, this entails chapter exploration of the various ways in which accountability and collaboration are:

❋ Interpreted and activated as *activities* (methods and technologies) by exploring methodological approaches that promote accountability within and (in) between government and civil society, mobilise community collaboration, relationship building, and engaging partnership building within and between government and civil society. The use of tools and technologies for promoting accountability, as well as support collaborative engagement, is included.

❋ Reflected on as opportunities for *learning* by exploring opportunities for learning and the various challenges and intricacies faced within the attempt for sectoral collaboration, while holding government to account. These chapters explore the art of 'reflective practice' through reflection on lessons learnt by exploration of the various impacts of conflict, power, and trust on achieving accountability outcomes and realising collaborative activities.

Within the framework of these focus areas, the chapters explore the intricacies of the varying nature of relationships and roles the various citizen, civic, and public sector actors play while engaging and operating within the sphere of good governance.

Speaking directly to concerns with power imbalances and the importance of trust as a means to bolster accountable collaboration, the paper by Habitat for Humanity South Africa and Ubuhle Bakha Ubuhle kick-starts the publication with a call to action to encourage active citizenry, by encouraging citizen-based power and capacitation. Recognising the challenges and disappointments experienced through attempts to engage with the state, the paper talks directly to the role of citizens as agents of change; explores the relationship dynamics that link power and participation, and trust and collaboration; and emphasises the value of intermediary support via information, knowledge and skill building for community capacitation as a means for supporting citizen agency.

The Development Action Group (DAG) takes this discussion further by focusing on the importance of relationship building through the formalising of collaborations as a means to enhance accountability with the state – both in its role as stakeholder, as well as partner supporting the community. Recognising the varying levels of collaboration achieved as dependent on the role played, DAG unpacks learning by doing as a reflective practice, and highlights methodologies appropriate for facilitating community collaboration, relationship building, as well as formalising collaborations within and between government and civil society actors.

Exploring the importance of partnered collaborations and individual accountability, the Isandla Institute paper provides a reflection on the role of accountability within a partnership project, whereby partners are accountable to each other while engaged

in the Accounting for Basic Services project (ABS).

The paper by the Socio-Economic Rights Institute then explores the strategy and tactics utilised for instances when collaborative relationships with the state do not work, and analyses how confrontational, complementary and cooperative methods can be utilised together or separately to promote social/spatial justice as well as advance accountability; in doing so, the interface between the state and civil society is explored.

PDG's paper speaks to the promotion of formal collaborative processes with government by exploring the use of public evaluation methodologies as a collaborative process. Arguing for the deepening of the role of beneficiaries and representatives in evaluations, the paper promotes the methodology as a means for encouraging greater accountability of government to citizens. Speaking to an alternative methodological approach, Planact's paper follows with a critical assessment of the various usages of social auditing as a social accountability methodology for encouraging an active citizenry to monitor the public sector directly.

Promoting civic technology as a means to support citizen participation within government and civil society spheres by enabling both individual and collective action-promoting accountability initiatives, Open Up's paper provides a lens for scaling interventions (such as the ones mentioned in previous chapters), which is offered as a means to narrow the gap between government and citizens.

The publication ends with an In-Profile by the Democracy Development Program which talks to the importance of speaking to the various realities of working with youth organisations as partners as a means to re-think collaborative and accountability practices and values within the broader sphere of activity-promoting sustainable development.

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