

COMMON CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTING PRIMARY CONSTITUENT ACCOUNTABILITY

RESILIENT ROOTS CASE STUDY NO.3



The Resilient Roots (RR) [initiative](#) examines whether organisations who are accountable to their primary constituents, that is, the individuals and communities they support and serve, are better able to withstand external threats related to [closing civic space](#). The Resilient Roots team believes that there are several ways to [examine and measure changes in primary constituent accountability \(PCA\)](#) and, as a result, a cohort of 14 pilot partner NGOs were supported to design and implement accountability mechanisms suitable to their distinct contexts. Considering these diverse contexts and the various challenges each organisation faces, the accountability mechanisms used varied greatly. In an attempt to better understand the importance of accountability mechanisms in the work of the pilot partners, Resilient Roots will be presenting several case studies.

PRIMARY CONSTITUENT ACCOUNTABILITY CHALLENGES

The [first case study](#) looked at three dimensions of accountability (*giving, taking, and holding to account*) and

provided examples from the Resilient Roots cohort of pilot partners for each one. The [second case study](#) distinguished between organisations that are primarily service delivery focused and those who are more advocacy focused to examine some of the implications these differing approaches may have on primary constituent accountability (PCA) mechanisms. This case study examines the various common challenges that pilot partner organisations faced in the implementation of their PCA mechanisms.

These have been grouped into four main areas: (1) Buy-in, (2) Practicalities of engagement, (3) Feedback, and (4) Capacities and resources. Some of these challenges are cross-cutting and shared by various organisations (e.g. getting other stakeholders to *buy-into* the meaning and value of PCA), whereas others strongly depend on the organisation's specific context (e.g. the types of human resources available to an organisation). The following sections take a deep dive into each challenge, and provide examples from Resilient Roots partners to unpack their implications.



Climate Watch Thailand

1 BUY-IN

Early on in the initiative, it became clear that without a *shared understanding of the value of PCA* – among both staff and primary constituents – it would be difficult to apply PCA approaches in pretty much any context and type of organisation. Pilot partner organisations expressed that it took longer than expected to fully disseminate and internalise the concept of PCA. This challenge was particularly interesting as it resurfaced at various stages throughout the initiative. Once there was a perceived shared understanding of the concept, new related challenges arose, such as the difficulty of translating ‘PCA’ into languages other than English, or tackling the various interpretations of a term such as ‘accountability’, which seemed to differ across cultures, age groups, etc.

PREP FOR BUY-IN: CREATING OWNERSHIP FROM THE START

Following the initial hurdle, it was up to each organisation to make sense of the concept internally and begin to implement mechanisms addressing PCA. As a result, several pilot organisations introduced trainings to discuss the concept of PCA and ensure that both staff members and different constituent groups had a shared understanding of its importance, especially in their specific context. While slightly more time-intensive, this appears to be a necessary step for an organisation to make genuine progress.

One organisation that tackled this challenge early on is [Climate Watch Thailand](#) (CWT). As “accountability” does not easily translate into Thai, CWT were required to find an alternative and more accessible way to engage with their primary constituents (PCs) on this subject. CWT created *internal accountability working groups*, in which the various values of accountability were tackled, rather than solely referring to the concept itself. As a result, a co-defined definition of accountability emerged, which spoke to shared values

such as respect, responsibility, active listening and voice. This allowed CWT to help its PCs better understand and buy-into the concept, while also making the practice of accountability a shared commitment between the organisation and its partners.

Similarly, it is necessary for an organisation’s PCs to fully understand what PCA means in order for its accountability mechanisms to function properly. The [Palestinian Centre for Communication and Development Strategies](#) (PCCDS), for instance used a social media bus where a group of PCs – who were selected due to their relatively high levels of engagement with the organisation – visited various communities where it works and collected feedback, which was then shared on Facebook. This mechanism failed to work, however, until PCCDS realised that the PCs traveling on the bus needed some initial training on the concept and value of PCA, for them to be able to perform this role adequately.

CONTINUED BUY-IN

Another related challenge that arose throughout the initiative is around *momentum*, or guaranteeing continued buy-in from constituents. This is about maintaining engagement with PCs and their willingness to provide feedback. We have observed that PCs are often very involved when an accountability mechanism is first implemented, but this engagement decreases over time. This is often the result of constituents feeling that they have already provided their feedback, considering the interaction a one-time activity. It is therefore in the interest of the implementing organisation to communicate that accountability mechanisms are both interactive and iterative, to allow for a constant flow of information and the opportunity to actually influence the work of the organisation.

Momentum loss can happen at any point in a project cycle and in various ways, such as poor attendance at an event, a low survey response rate, limited contributions in focus group discussions, low newsletter open rates, etc. An organisation that observed slowing survey response rates and a loss of interest from their PCs to engage was [FemPlatz](#). Instead, they noticed how one of its PC groups was interested in photography, and decided to organise an *excursion to a photography exhibition* to further interact with its PCs and keep their interest and motivation up. Altering your means of engagement based on the profile of your PCs can be a powerful way to encourage interaction and sustain buy-in from your constituents.

2 PRACTICALITIES OF ENGAGEMENT

Several organisations also reported *challenges with simply reaching PCs* and discerning the most appropriate PCA mechanism for their particular context. Examples of factors that influence the way and extent to which organisations are able to engage with PCs includes access to the internet, geography (i.e. rural or urban populations), type of community (i.e. the degree to which a community is 'open' or 'closed'¹), literacy levels, language barriers, and even the constituents themselves (i.e. are you dealing with children? People who have experienced trauma?, etc). It is crucial to take all of these factors into account, as they will set the foundations for how to relate and engage with your primary constituents.

One example of an organisation that was dealing with challenges relating to the ease of engagement with rural and urban communities, is the [Poverty Reduction Forum Trust](#) (PRFT). Amongst others, PRFT works with closed communities who tend to be distrusting of people who are not members of their community. To surmount this challenge, PRFT decided to work with *intermediary groups* to bridge the community with the organisation. This provided PRFT with necessary access to these more closed communities, allowing for more timely communication and more regular data collection, while also progressively building trust with the constituents.

However, using intermediary groups can also unearth new challenges: sometimes they can in fact lead to a greater gap between the organisation and its PCs. It is therefore important for intermediary groups themselves to be accountable to both the PCs and the organisation. As such, clarity of roles and responsibilities, communication, and potentially even training, are all key, and it is vital that the interests and goals of the intermediary group and organisation are aligned.

Another organisation that is dealing with issues around the practicality of engagement is a pilot partner organisation in Uganda, which has struggled to engage with PCs due to the low literacy level of the communities it works with. As a result, the pilot partner adapted its engagement and data collection strategy to focus on in-person interactions (e.g. through interviews, focus groups, etc.), rather than through written communications.



Similarly, [Kusi Warma](#) has adapted its means of engagement with its PCs, because engaging with children or adolescents is different to engaging with adults. Young people often have a different cognitive and social development, and thus require more interactive or playful means of engagement. Kusi Warma has been able to engage with its PCs much more effectively, primarily through the use of theater and drama.

Access to constituents can therefore play a crucial role in an organisation's ability to engage and build trust, or even respond in a timely and valuable way; and these are all factors that should directly affect the PCA mechanisms an organisation decides to implement.

3 FEEDBACK

Another challenge identified by our pilot partner organisations was around the management and use of feedback.

MANAGING FEEDBACK

Before delving deep into feedback, partner organisations first had to inform themselves of the different systems and processes to collect and analyse data. This directly influenced their ability to engage with the data and subsequently their PCs, as feedback helps inform our decision making. How should you interpret feedback data? How can you use insights from PCs to improve how you operate? How should you respond to negative feedback? These questions, alongside the fear of not managing expectations in an appropriate manner, makes working with feedback a challenging process.

Especially when collecting feedback from PCs for the first time, the idea of suddenly being criticised for your work can feel very intimidating. One organisation that has dealt with such a scenario is [Video Volunteers](#)

¹A 'closed community' refers to communities that solely engage with people who have either been born into the community or who have been accepted by the community as one of their own. As such, closed communities are less likely to engage with people they do not usually frequent and who have not gained their trust.

(VV). Before collecting feedback, many staff members at VV were worried about not being able to manage expectations, or letting their primary constituents (community journalists) down by not being able to respond to or integrate all of their feedback, suggestions, and demands. Not responding to feedback in an appropriate manner could negatively affect the level of engagement and trust in the organisation. However, they learned that collecting feedback does not mean an obligation to fulfil every request PCs have. What creates trust is using feedback to engage in a continuous and open dialogue. Clearly explaining why a certain expectation cannot be met and coming up with solutions together needs to be an integral part of [closing the feedback loop](#). This involves a two-way flow of communication where organisations do not merely extract information from PCs, but instead go through a process to address the information that has been shared with them and then report back to their PCs about the results and responses. The main challenge around this particular aspect is determining what information to share with PCs and how to disseminate this information.

UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

- When we open the doors of our organisations to comments and feedback, sometimes unexpected consequences may arise. From the get-go you should try to pre-empt context-specific risks and how to mitigate them. One organisation that has had to deal with unexpected consequences is [Projet Jeune Leader](#) (PJL). Besides working with young people, it also sees parents as an important group to be accountable to. In one of their feedback collection exercises, PJL realised that many parents were not aware of what the organisation does, while others had serious concerns about sex education and even wanted to remove their children from the programme. This was an important unexpected consequence of their accountability efforts to clarify what the organisation does and does not do. They addressed this unexpected consequence by training staff on how to respond to criticisms and concerns, and engaged sceptical parents and teachers in theatre workshops designed to breakdown negative cultural attitudes towards sex education. This approach had the added value of making parents and teachers supporters of their work.



4 CAPACITIES AND RESOURCES

A particularly significant challenge for many of our pilot partners has been around the *capacities and resources required to successfully implement PCA mechanisms*.

One such challenge is staff capacity. Several pilot partner organisations struggled to dedicate sufficient staff time, or mobilise colleagues with the right skills and experiences, to effectively implement their PCA mechanisms. This was particularly true for smaller organisations, which had limited human resources to begin with. Moreover, considering that several of the organisations work in areas with limited access to the internet, there may be a heavy reliance on having to engage PCs more directly, which puts additional strain on staff resources. This made it more burdensome to aggregate and pass on information and get wider staff members comfortable with the PCA mechanisms they were piloting. Having only one focal point liaising with the RR team also slowed down the learning process for the rest of the organisation and meant more time had to be invested in building internal staff capacity.

A second resource challenge was around *technology* and *tech-savviness*. Some of the organisations did not have the necessary technical skills, means, or tools to undertake the data analysis and dissemination required for some of their PCA mechanisms. Knowing how to interpret and analyse feedback data is fundamental for any organisation to identify valuable insights and learnings, and ultimately establish a constructive open dialogue with their constituents.

A third resource challenge was around the *cost-effectiveness* of some of the PCA mechanisms. Partner organisations attempted to introduce mechanisms that would allow them to adapt to specific contexts

and encourage sustainability, without having to start from scratch. Creating PCA mechanisms that are easily sustained and of high value but without incurring high costs was key to the success of the RR pilot projects. Many organisations found that mechanisms that were easy to integrate into current operations were also the most cost-effective and relevant ones for their contexts. It should be noted that because this initiative was a pilot, there was no readily available repository of relevant resources or tested examples, and thus organisations had to co-design all their approaches. However, as we currently find ourselves in the final phase of the initiative, this [repository of relevant resources](#) and examples of best practice has grown and will be shared moving forward.

Similar to the cost-effectiveness of some PCA mechanisms, the ability to continuously and honestly *reflect upon the suitability and value* of different PCA mechanisms has been challenging for some pilot partners. One of the main learnings regarding this challenge, was around understanding that no PCA mechanism is perfect from the get-go and that it takes time and patience to find the mechanism (or variation of it) that is best for both PCs and the organisation. Therefore, creating a culture of adaptive learning that allows organisations to evaluate and course correct is integral. To allow for and support organisations in fostering a culture of adaptive learning, the Resilient Roots team encouraged pilot partners to critically interpret the feedback they were given and think outside of the box.



CONCLUSION

To sum up, ensuring the appropriate level of PCA buy-in from PCs and your colleagues, engaging with PCs in the most appropriate manner, managing the feedback you receive, and critically reflecting on the capacities and resources required to adequately implement PCA mechanisms have proven to be the main challenges RR pilot partners encountered. While some of the challenges discussed in this case study are cross-cutting and similar for all organisations irrespective of their specific circumstances, others vary greatly across different organisations and contexts. Overall, it should be noted that these challenges have been crucial learning opportunities for both the partner organisations and Resilient Roots team. The final case study, will examine the broader impact of PCA at our partner organisations beyond the implementation of PCA mechanisms within the various pilot projects.

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