



TESTING THE RESILIENT ROOTS HYPOTHESIS

CASE STUDY

A child rights organisation uses educational theatre to connect with children and families



BACKGROUND

A primary goal of the [Resilient Roots](#) initiative was to test the following hypothesis:

‘Civil society organisations that are more accountable to their primary constituents are more resilient to civic space-related threats.’

To do this, CIVICUS, with the support of Accountable Now, Keystone Accountability, and Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo, worked with 14 national partner civil society organisations (CSOs) of varying size, focus, location and approach, to help them design and implement year-long pilot projects aiming to increase accountability to their primary constituents (the individuals and communities that the organisation was created to serve and support).

In order to test the relationship between accountability and resilience, the Resilient Roots project team used surveys and interviews to collect data from the 14 national partner organisations involved in the initiative, and their primary constituents. This data, and additional sources of information, were then used to evaluate the relationship between accountability and resilience for the 14 national partners. A summary of the methodology and findings is [available here](#).

This case study illustrates how the relationship between accountability and resilience plays out in the real world for one of the Resilient Roots national partners. It is accompanied by [another case study](#) looking at another Resilient Roots partner organisation of a different size, operating in a different civic space context, and that had different outcomes from the project, in terms of increased perceptions of accountability.

ORGANISATION PROFILE

A relatively small-sized organisation focused on child rights and the prevention of violence against children. They have been operating for over 20 years, providing direct services to their primary constituents - children and families in vulnerable communities - running education centres and parent education, but they also advocate and campaign for child rights and related policy changes.

They do not shy away from topics which are contentious in their target communities, such as gender-based violence and violence against children within families. The country in which they operate is classified as having “Obstructed” civic space by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#). They have a higher reliance on public authorities, particularly at the local level, because they need to maintain good relationships with schools in order to work with children and their families.

ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICE

They focused their work in one community, to test the new accountability mechanism before scaling it

They started implementing the new accountability mechanisms in only one of the many communities in which they work. The plan was to test the main mechanism – a new Institutional Accountability Policy (PIRC) - in one community and then to use it as an institutionalised model of accountability practice across all communities.

The main accountability mechanism was chosen to appeal to children and their families

Because their main group of primary constituents are children, the organisation chose to involve children and parents in the design of the accountability mechanism using theatrical education. They also worked with teachers and involved children and families in designing and staging theatre performances for the wider community.

By using theatre as a way to communicate, they were able to reach groups of primary constituents that would have been harder to connect with using written and online communication, with their Resilient Roots focal point reporting: “In the communities with contexts of extreme poverty, and that are geographically complex for the logistics of a theatrical staging, it is all challenging, but at the same time gratifying because it allows us to democratise art.”

They placed a significant focus on closing the feedback loop from the beginning

Their methodology of working with the community was designed to close the feedback loop at the beginning of each next step. They used playful methods to close the loop for children, while for the larger community not attending all meetings, they used newsletters.

<p>The new accountability mechanisms are becoming an institutionalised practice</p>	<p>The PIRC was designed together with children and families from one community in order to become an institutional model applicable in all communities. By the time the project ended, the mechanism had already been strongly internalised across other organisational projects and communities they worked in, and they were planning to dedicate more resources to further institutionalise the practice.</p>
<p>They consistently used the feedback obtained from primary constituents to inform changes</p>	<p>The activities with children and families were adapted from one stage to the next based on inputs from the participants. Stories from the communities were used to create theatrical performances for those communities and others.</p>
<p>Staff were involved in designing the new accountability practices, shared learnings, and reflected on internal accountability</p>	<p>They held three workshops for their team, not just the staff working on the Resilient Roots project but others as well. During these workshops, they collected staff opinions about the accountability practices. They also reflected on how they work together and how they provide feedback to each other.</p>

EFFECTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY OBSERVED

<p>Primary constituents who participated in the accountability mechanisms increased their trust in the organisation</p>	<p>The organisation has noticed that fathers, mothers and teachers who were part of the project further “legitimise [the organisation’s] presence and the relationship becomes more dynamic.” They think that the choice of teaching through theatre has allowed them to reach a broader audience and “strengthen bonds of trust and facilitated social learning that will be useful for all participants throughout their lives.”</p> <p>Even though the organisation saw good results in the community in which it tested its main accountability mechanism, this outcome was not evident in the overall endline primary constituent accountability survey results, where they obtained lower scores than at the baseline. Their samples at baseline and endline were almost identical, so this result suggests that some of the people surveyed the first time, who were then not engaged in the accountability activities but surveyed again one year later, gave lower scores the second time around. This has practical implications for the organisation in terms of the need to scale its accountability work from one community to its others - and how to do so – in order to see more positive feedback from primary constituents across the board.</p>
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<p>Improved communication to primary constituents and wider audiences</p>	<p>The organisation has incorporated its improved primary constituent accountability approaches into its wider discourse, both within the organisation and towards the other actors it interacts with, including donors, public institutions and networks.</p>
<p>Organisational structure is shifting towards more accountability and participatory governance</p>	<p>The first change they observed was “establishing the difference between transparency and accountability at the institutional level,” and as a result they are consciously trying not only to give account to constituents, but also to listen actively, close the feedback loop and open themselves up to being held to account by constituents.</p> <p>By creating an Institutional Accountability Committee which includes a representative from each of the areas they work in, they made sure that accountability practices were distributed horizontally across the organisation.</p>
<p>Changes in team mindset and attitudes</p>	<p>The sharing of learnings from the Resilient Roots project within the larger team and the involvement of most of the team in the new accountability practices has influenced how staff approach their constituents in most activities, sometimes without explicitly using the term “accountability”.</p>
<p>Manifest and structured public support</p>	<p>By using a creative accountability mechanism involving theatre, they were able to bring many different sections of the community (children, adolescents, parents, authorities, etc) closer to their work and in a more sustained way. As a result, the organisation felt they had garnered more trust and credibility “making the organisation more resilient by having a solid community base that allows it to face the adversities of their context.”</p>



TOWARDS MORE RESILIENCE

Connectedness to primary constituents and the wider community	<p>The recognition they receive from the wider community, parents and teachers, as a result of the project's accountability work produces an important effect for the organisation because their relationship with school principals is one of their main concerns.</p> <p>In evaluating the results of the project, the organisation has specifically made reference to how the community's appreciation of the accountability mechanisms - as a result of participating in them - has generated further legitimacy for the organisation's presence. This was not an easy gain given the sensitive topics they approach but was helped a lot by their choice of method: for instance, the theatre performances with children made gender-based violence an easier topic to discuss with community members.</p>
Networks and partnerships	<p>The results of the accountability work within the project have positively influenced the organisation's relationship with donors, particularly European ones. One European institutional donor asked the organisation to share its accountability experience via the institution's communication channels.</p> <p>As criticism of the government can have negative repercussions at the local level, the organisation participates in networks with other CSOs to share responsibility of engaging in dialogue with the authorities.</p>
Capacity to communicate with clarity and creativity	<p>A significant threat to their work is that in some conservative communities topics such as gender-based violence and girls' rights are very controversial and can result in them being unable to carry out activities. The methods they used in this project have allowed them to communicate on these topics by using artistic expression in ways that resonate more across the community.</p>

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Although they have not experienced significant new threats during the project's timeframe, the organisation feels more confident in its resilience primarily because of the new and meaningful ways in which it has been able to connect with the community, including - but not limited to - its primary constituents. The Resilient Roots project focal point emphasised this by saying:

"Faced with civic space threats that may arise, we can respond with greater security since our target population feels more part of our organisation. Although we have not yet been able to verify it because there have been no significant threats experienced during the pilot project period, we feel more empowered to be able to face them if they arise."

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