

THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

RESILIENT ROOTS CASE STUDY NO.1



JVE-Benin

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** 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 four case studies. The aim of

this first case study is to provide a general overview and provide examples of the different primary constituent accountability mechanisms that have been implemented by the pilot partners. Subsequent case studies will go into more depth and analysis; the second will compare how different types of organisations – primarily advocacy organisations and service-delivery organisations – approached the objective of increasing primary constituent accountability; the third will examine the challenges that organisations face in implementing primary constituent accountability mechanisms; while the fourth will assess the impact of these mechanisms. Together the case studies will provide insight into how other organisations can use different primary constituent accountability mechanisms to improve their relevance, legitimacy, effectiveness, and the relationship with their primary constituents.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Within the parameters of Resilient Roots, primary constituent accountability refers to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) being answerable to the individuals and communities they seek to serve, and the ways in which these primary constituents are able to hold an organisation responsible for its policies and actions. This accountability can be achieved in numerous ways, addressing various aspects of the relationship and interaction between primary constituents and CSOs. For the purpose of this case study, accountability is divided into three main **dimensions**: (1) *giving* account, (2) *taking* account, and (3) *holding* to account. These dimensions are **intertwined and must all be present together** and over time for accountability to be realised.

Giving account refers to the two-way dialogue and sharing of information between organisations and their constituents. What does the organisation do (and not do) and how does it communicate this? With whom does it work? What is the purpose or objective of the activities or services it delivers?

Taking account refers to the process of actively listening to constituents' needs and opinions, and collecting their feedback on the activities or services the organisation is providing. It also includes the process of an organisation informing its constituents about how it is responding to their queries and feedback, thus also involving a two-way flow of communication.

Holding to account refers to the ability of constituents to influence and effect change at an organisation via formal processes which enable them to assess – and potentially question – the organisation's actions.

Once again, to ensure that an accountability mechanism benefits both the primary constituents and the organisations implementing these mechanisms, it must include all three dimensions.

An accountability mechanism will usually involve the two-way flow of both qualitative and quantitative information, and a process for this information to inform decision making. Some organisations may collect information from their primary constituents quantitatively by asking them to rate certain aspects of their relationship. This will allow the organisation to get a general understanding of how primary constituents value the activities or services it provides. Other organisations may hone in on a particular aspect of their work, collecting detailed qualitative feedback to allow for a more comprehensive insight into their work. A combination of both can allow organisations to draw on the benefits of both methods.

Organisations in the cohort primarily focused on feedback mechanisms as a route to *taking account*. A smaller number used direct participation or complaints systems in order to allow constituents to hold them to account. In theory, *giving account* can happen at any time, and can be most powerful when combined with incoming information (feedback or complaints) as a valuable way to close the feedback loop. This means continuously informing/discussing with one's constituents about learnings and findings, and what changes the organisation is going through.





JVE-Benin

GIVING ACCOUNT

The most common way RR pilot partner organisations give account and share information with their primary constituents has been through the use of newsletters and brochures, as well as through social media networks and their respective websites. Through this content they reintroduce themselves and their mission to their constituents, and provide basic information about their activities or services. Simultaneously, these same tools were being used as a medium to further interact with constituents and [close the feedback loop](#).

One example of an organisation that is *giving account* in a different way is [FemPlatz](#), a women's rights organisation from Serbia. FemPlatz uses **thematic meetings** called "Coffee with a friend", to engage with rural women, provide information about the work conducted by FemPlatz and learn how they can support them better. In recent discussions, it became apparent that some women who received help from FemPlatz were shamed by their community for receiving support from an organisation from the capital. As such, the more informal "Coffee with a friend" meet-ups offer these women a safer and more judgement-free space for interaction, ensuring that they can get the support they require.

Another example of an organisation that is *giving account* a little differently is [JVE-Benin](#), working on topics such as natural resource management, renewable energy, and climate change. JVE-Benin has launched an **interactive radio broadcast station** to discuss relevant topics and spread information about the organisation and the work they conduct. They also organise listening sessions with the various constituents they work with.

Similarly, [Climate Watch Thailand](#), an organisation working with local communities to advocate for climate change justice, uses a community radio tower to give account to its primary constituents. This allows Climate Watch Thailand to reach primary constituents with information about

its campaigns and events, with no internet access or who are illiterate.

Some organisations have approached the *giving account* dimension by training intermediary bodies to interact with local communities on their behalf. A **RR pilot partner organisation** in Uganda that uses this approach, is working to advance the health and welfare of rural communities through HIV/AIDS prevention and protection, sexual education and medical care. This partner has chosen several of its primary constituents and trained them to be intermediaries who interact with the local communities on behalf of the organisation. These **intermediaries wear t-shirts**, bearing vital information about the organisation and are available to answer any questions the community members may have, as well as collect feedback, where relevant (i.e. both *giving* and *taking account*). Moreover, these intermediaries carry with them brochures to inform people about who to contact, should they need further information. Moreover, this partner has **open clinic days** for its constituents to come and visit the clinics and ask any questions they may have about their work.

Lastly, [Kusi Warma](#), works in Peru to give voice to children and adolescents who are living in poverty and promote their rights as citizens. Kusi Warma produces **semi-annual brochures** with information about the activities and goals for that particular period. Similarly, other RR pilot partners publish **virtual newsletters**, **print magazines** or even give **oral monthly reports** as mechanisms to *give account*.

All of these are examples of tools or mechanisms that RR pilot partner organisations use to *give account* to their constituents are just one component of accountability. But this can be considered the foundation for the other two dimensions – constituents can only *take account* and *hold organisations to account* if they are informed about the work the organisation is doing. Once that information exists, constituents can further engage with the organisation to provide feedback and help shape how activities or services are being delivered.



Kusi Warma

TAKING ACCOUNT

Collecting feedback from your primary constituents about the activities and/or services you are providing is the most direct way to address their needs. If done properly, this process builds a healthy and constructive dialogue and strengthens relationships with constituents, a key ingredient to increasing accountability. The emphasis is very much on generating useful outcomes and data with practical value that can be easily and quickly analysed amongst management, staff, and constituents. This data can then be used to foster close to real-time reflection and dialogue about performance and impact – planned and unplanned – identifying lessons and ideas on how to improve.

For the feedback process to be meaningful, it is important for organisations to [close the loop](#) with their primary constituents. This entails sharing the findings and learnings derived from feedback, sense-checking whether the findings and learnings resonate with the feedback providers, and involving primary constituents in the process of change. The majority of pilot partner organisations have decided to use some iteration of a feedback survey and/or interviews to understand how primary constituents are experiencing their work and activities. They engage in dialogues to determine what they are doing well and more importantly where they can improve, to then introduce a process of change. But recognising the value of anonymity in some circumstances, many organisations also included options for constituents to provide feedback in more discreet ways.

A large number of organisations have decided to set up or work with independent intermediary groups for ease of data collection, which also helps to address power imbalances that can lead to constituents exhibiting courtesy bias. Intermediaries are especially significant for organisations who work in areas that are difficult to access or with vulnerable groups who may only trust local volunteers or people who understand their circumstances. As such, some of the RR pilot partner organisations have resorted to working with committees, facilitators, advisory boards or community representatives to get closer to the communities they work with.

Organisations trying to collect quantitative data may use scorecards and other alternatives to the standard survey questionnaire when working with primary constituents who are children/adolescents, or those who are illiterate, for instance. An example is using emojis or colours that reflect certain emotions or levels of satisfaction (red for negative feedback and green for positive feedback), which enable

primary constituents to rate the services they are receiving. Some examples of tools and mechanisms that have been implemented to *take account*, include:

[Educo](#) is an organisation in Nicaragua that seeks to optimise child welfare through child protection projects focused on health, nutrition, participation, and above all, quality education. Educo conducts **evaluation sessions** with children and adolescents it works with, asking for them to provide feedback by selecting **emojis** which rate the sessions they participate in. They have also adapted traditional songs and games the children know into feedback collection exercises.

Another example of an organisation that is taking account, is [Kusi Warma](#), which uses theatre workshops to engage



children and their parents to unpack how Kusi Warma can better engage and respond to the needs of these groups. The workshops and the theatre performances are about different key questions related to Kusi Warma's work, such as "What is Kusi Warma?". Before each theatre performance, Kusi Warma starts by having a **conversation** with the audience to talk about the feedback received from the previous show (or *giving account*). Then after the show, Kusi Warma organises a **forum** with all the attendees to get feedback on the topic of the performance, and discuss in greater depth the key question(s) explored on stage by the children and mothers.

[MarViva](#), an organisation in Costa Rica promoting the conservation and sustainable use of coastal resources, takes account by **surveying** its primary constituents, a network of grassroots organisations and independent producers working to develop alternative production schemes that respect the sustainability of marine environments in the Gulf of Nicoya. These surveys allow MarViva to better measure the impact of their work with their communities and identify what capacities the network needs to strengthen. [OVD-Info](#), working as an independent human rights media project that collects, analyses, and shares data on political repression in Russia has taken a more digital approach. They use anonymous online surveys, [A/B tests](#) and [bots](#) to improve the news and type



of support they offer to activists. It also collects further feedback through a telephone **hotline**, which is also used to give legal advice.

The **Poverty Reduction Forum Trust** (PRFT), a research and advocacy organisation working to address the root causes and diverse manifestations of poverty in Zimbabwe, uses **citizen score cards** to collect feedback and evaluate its work with its constituents. Similarly, **Projet Jeune Leader**, working for a comprehensive sexual-reproductive health education, asks the children it works with to anonymously rate different aspects of the class **using beans** in an **evaluation session**, to make taking account and information/feedback collection more interactive and engaging. The **Palestinian Center for Communication and Development Strategies**, working towards the economic empowerment of women and youth in the West Bank, has set up **accountability sessions** to discuss successes and challenges in implementing their services. This thus creates opportunities for constructive and direct communication between the organisation and its primary constituents.

Taking account is a valuable way to improve communication and information sharing, as well as to get new ideas from those directly affected, which encourages innovation and adaptation of activities or services. This, in turn, builds trust between the pilot partner organisations and their constituents. Inviting feedback can help to deepen the connection between organisation and constituent, by demonstrating a willingness to learn from and involve primary constituents in an organisation's work, and building channels of communication beyond its usual activities. In turn, this can lead to a feeling of mutual responsibility for agreed outcomes, which makes organisations more accountable to their constituents.

HOLDING TO ACCOUNT

In order for an organisation to be fully accountable to its constituents, it must also enable them to actively assess or even question its actions, and inform its decision-making processes. This is mainly done by integrating constituents into the organisation's ways of working, or creating grievance processes which allow them to raise specific complaints. The following examples demonstrate how RR pilot partner organisations have done this in their particular contexts.

Avanzar, an organisation working to improve the quality of life of some of the most vulnerable communities in Buenos Aires, has set up an **advisory group** of "promotores barriales" in each neighbourhood they work in, to ensure primary constituents have an active voice in the decisions and governance of the organisation. The advisory groups suggest and shape possible new trainings, and Avanzar has also involved them in participatory fundraising activities.

Solidarity Now, an organisation working to support migrant populations in Greece affected by economic and humanitarian crises, introduced a Concern Response and Feedback Mechanisms (CRFM) from the onset of the initiative. The CRFM included the introduction of a **complaints box** to offer primary constituents the opportunity to anonymously share their criticisms, concerns, or complaints, as well as provide their perception and ideas on a particular programme or activity.

Lastly, **Video Volunteers** empowers marginalised citizens in India by supporting them to elevate community voices through video journalism. Video Volunteers has approached the holding to account component by enabling its primary constituents to assess the effectiveness of all the organisation's policies and practices, ranging from its training methods to how it shares online content. Constituents are then informed about the changes made through a document Video Volunteers shares with them called "VV ke Nushke", which constituents then have the opportunity to provide further feedback on.



MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF PRIMARY CONSTITUENT ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

The Resilient Roots pilot partner organisations are still learning how to implement effective feedback mechanisms which include all three dimensions of accountability. Accordingly, this involves determining which mechanisms are the most suitable for their primary constituents and their specific contexts.

There is no right way to measure the success of the chosen accountability mechanism, or to know in advance if it is the most suitable way forward. Each mechanism adopted by a RR pilot partner organisation is highly context-specific and dependent on both internal and external factors. On the one hand, these include the support sought by primary constituents and their reasons for engaging with the respective organisation, and on the other hand, the factors that may influence their interaction (age, gender, literacy rate, languages, connectivity, security, location, means of communication, etc.).

There are various indicators RR pilot partner organisations are using to help them evaluate the effectiveness of their mechanisms. These range from directly asking constituents about the suitability and usefulness of the tool itself, examining response rates, assessing improvement rates (changes in feedback over time), assessing changes in the attitude of constituents, and many more.

The evaluation of any tool or mechanism can also be integrated into the regular activities of the mechanism itself, such as adding a question to a standard feedback survey ("How useful do you find the community intermediary group for sharing feedback and receiving updates from the organisation?"), or looking at the number of people who read (or taken a copy of) your newsletter. The different approaches taken by the RR pilot partner organisations to determine which feedback mechanism was the most appropriate for increasing accountability in their context, will be covered in later case studies.



CONCLUSION

While there are various tools and mechanisms available to help you address the different dimensions of accountability, all have the potential power to improve your relationship with your primary constituents, and in turn, your activities or services. Subsequent case studies will move beyond how the various mechanisms implemented by the RR pilot partner organisations relate to different dimensions of primary constituent accountability, to dig deeper into the challenges that organisations face in using them and understanding the value they bring.

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