Measuring Changes in Accountability

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The aim of the Resilient Roots initiative is to test whether organisations who are more accountable and responsive to their roots - namely, their primary constituents - are more resilient to external threats from governmental and non-governmental sources. We believe that if civil society is accountable to and engaged with its constituency, it will be able to rely more upon them to come to its defence, bridge resourcing gaps, and safeguard its long-term sustainability when it is under political or structural attack. Our approach involves prioritising innovation, taking calculated risks, embracing failure, and most importantly sharing what we learn from our pilot partners with a broader community of interested stakeholders. The initiative consists of three main components; (1) providing support to fifteen pilot partners in diverse geographies and civil society contexts around the globe, (2) improving civil society accountability and determining its relationship with resilience, and (3) fostering an environment of peer-learning and wider uptake.

This article focuses on the second component and in particular, the approach the Resilient Roots team is taking to measure changes in accountability over the course of the initiative among the pilot partners. Below you will find an overview of our methodology and some recommendations of things to consider when setting up your own mechanisms for measuring accountability. We are still working to improve our methodology and invite you to use it yourself, share your experiences with us and provide feedback on our approach. Please also share any similar approaches that you are aware of, or that you have used in your organisation with Resilient Roots (resilientroots@civicus.org).

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Measuring accountability

Primary constituent accountability[1] itself is a complex concept, and thereby difficult to measure. For the purpose of this initiative it is important to measure not only an organisation's accountability at a single point in time, but also how this accountability changes over time; and

[1] Primary constituent accountability refers to the accountability of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the ways in which an organisation is held responsible for its policies and actions by - (and is answerable to) - its primary constituents.

furthermore, to do this for individual organisations and for the pilot cohort as a whole. A final consideration is how to ensure that accountability information is useful and actionable for the organisations involved, i.e., that the act of measuring accountability and changes thereof is more than a simply a research exercise for research's sake, but in itself contributes to the project goal of improving constituent accountability.

This begs the question: *Which tool allows us to gather information about the accountability of each pilot partner as well as the entire group, and how this accountability changes over time, while also providing information that is relevant and actionable?*

The most obvious tool for this would be a traditional evaluative baseline, collecting data on a range of external indicators relating to accountability. While this approach is valid and would meet most of the criteria listed given above of a method that would allow changes in accountability to be tracked over time amongst a cohort and at organisation level, it would not meet the final criteria of contributing towards improved primary constituent accountability. This approach would also not tell us much about the factors which influence accountability from the perspective of primary constituents, or bring in lived experience and perceptual data of those involved affected.

Instead, our solution is to use accountability surveys. Surveys centred around the collection of perceptual data, and incorporated into a continuous feedback loop, provides deeper insight into how accountability is experienced by those working within and alongside our pilot partners. This is done by focussing on how services are delivered and what role the relationship between pilot partners and their primary constituents as well as staff and volunteers play in helping or hindering a change in accountability. The act of inviting feedback itself can help to build a sense of connection between an organisation and its constituents, demonstrating a willingness to learn from and involve primary constituents in an organisation's work and building channels of communication outside of the usual process of service delivery. Compared with large-scale evaluative data collection, perceptual data provides valuable and actionable information in real-time that can contribute to increased accountability, and ultimately improve performance.

Surveys also allow us to address the same accountability questions across a highly disparate group of organisations, each with their own unique fields of expertise, primary constituents, environment, culture, resilience challenges, etc. Using a standardised approach to data analysis (see below) will allow us to compare data across this diverse group and also analyse changes in accountability for each pilot partner individually.

Approach

To measure changes in accountability over the course of the initiative, two surveys are being conducted:

1. A *baseline* survey is conducted at the beginning of the initiative, providing data on the starting point of each pilot partner in terms of their accountability to different constituent groups. A baseline accountability survey can provide organisations with a general idea of any accountability issues (trust, transparency, communication, etc. - a detailed list is provided below) and give ideas on the kinds of strategies that could help to improve accountability over time. Baseline surveys are a useful tool for organisations that have not previously considered accountability issues, as well as for those who are aware of potential accountability issues but have previously lacked the data to take improvement actions.

2. An *endline* survey is then conducted at the end of the project, using identical (or near identical[2]) questions to the baseline survey. Endline surveys allow pilot partners and the Resilient Roots team to determine whether accountability has changed over the course of the initiative, and assess to what extent the accountability measures that organisations have adopted over the course of the initiative have contributed to these changes. This causality is difficult to prove; however, adding additional questions in the endline survey could be a means to gathering constituent insights on any potential causal links[3]. As with baseline surveys, endline surveys provide organisations with a rich source of perceptual data to support organisational learning and performance management.

Both the baseline and endline surveys are administered to the primary constituents of each pilot partner, as well as their core staff and volunteers. It is important to note that these surveys can only tell us about these constituents' *perception* of a pilot partner's accountability towards them. Constituents themselves cannot judge to what extent organisations are *actually* accountable to them, as that would require access to internal operational information about the basis for decision-making within that organisation. With this in mind, it is important that data from these surveys is compared against data collected directly from the pilot partners, so that *perceived* accountability can be triangulated against *actual* accountability, as evidenced, for example, by the number of decisions taken as a result of feedback received from primary constituents, as reported by pilot partners.

In order to provide Is comprehensive insights into the accountability situation of each organisation, the survey addresses questions[4] about the following themes:

- **Demographics**: To provide statistical information on the respondent type

[2] The same questions asked in the baseline survey should be repeated in the endline survey, in order to achieve time-series data showing changes in accountability over time. Additional questions may be added to the endline survey, providing they are relevant, actionable and useful.

[3] For example, *'To what extent has X organisation's accountability to you been improved by the following activities undertaken in the previous 12 months: (0 = not at all, 10 = significantly)?'*

[4] See Annex 1 and 2 for the full list of questions.

- **Trust and respect**: Information about the organisation's relationship with respondents
- **Voice and responsiveness**: The extent to which respondents' opinions are valued and used
- **Communication**: Engagement with respondents and understanding thereof
- **Accountability**: Overall accountability of the organisation to its constituents.

These themes are explored in the surveys through a mixed methods approach, comprising both quantitative and qualitative aspects. The strength of quantitative data - collected through survey questions on a 0-10 scale, for example - is that it provides a numerical value for analysis, thus simplifying the process of comparing results between constituents and over time. Qualitative data - collected through open text questions, for example - can offer more nuanced insights into the reasoning behind quantitative scores.

Analysis methodology

So, what happens once we have collected this multitude of perceptual data on accountability from constituents? How do we analyse the information to provide actionable and meaningful learnings?

The approach we have chosen to use is *Net Promoter Analysis*[5], which uses scores given to closed questions on a scale from 0 (most negative) to 10 (most positive), and divides respondents into three categories:

- **Promoters**: These are the constituents that give a score of 9 or 10. They are likely to be wholehearted supporters of your activities and would recommend you to their friends, colleagues or other people in a similar situation.
- **Passives**: These are the constituents that give you a score of 7 or 8. They do not have major issues with your work, but they are also not overly enthusiastic or loyal to you. With the right encouragement, they could well become promoters; but they could equally become negatives if they have a bad experience.
- **Detractors**: These are the constituents that give you a score of 6 or lower. They have generally negative perceptions of you or your work and might even say negative things about you to other people or organisations. Similarly, with the right encouragement, these constituents may be persuaded to become passives if not even promoters.

Subtracting the percentage of **detractors** from that of **promoters** (passives are not included) provides a ***Net Promoter Score (NPS)***, a single score between -100 and +100 which allows for the interpretation and comparison of data with other organisations and over time. Pairing these quantitative scores with qualitative responses to open text questions, provides organisations

[5] The Net Performance Analysis is based on the classic Net Promoter Analysis which historically has been used in the customer satisfaction industry. For more see: www.netpromotersystem.com, as well as the open source net promoter community at www.netpromoter.com.

with deep insights into their constituents' perspectives. This feedback can in turn be used to improve performance over time.

There is no magic Net Promoter Score that organisations should aim for – although of course positive scores are better than negative ones. Rather, organisations should aim to continuously improve their NP scores between each survey, by listening to the feedback given and making strategic changes as a result. The process of aligning an organisation's activities and strategic direction to the feedback of its core constituents should be reflected in improved NP scores over time.

One of the primary benefits of the Net Promoter Analysis is the grouping of respondents into different categories. The fundamental goal is to address and appropriately respond to issues voiced by detractors and passives, who, as a result of changes made in response to their concerns, hopefully become promoters over time. Moreover, an often-forgotten challenge is to ensure that current promoters remain content and do not shift into the passive or even detractor category. The disaggregation into Net Promoter categories and pairing with qualitative questions, allows for a more nuanced visualisation and understanding of why respondents provided the scores they did and what can be done to improve these scores. It is more valuable to examine how these categories change and hopefully improve over time as part of a continuous process rather than to focus on scores from one particular instant in time.

Accountability survey challenges and mitigations

If designed and executed correctly, the surveying process itself can be a way to engage constituents, improve trust and strengthen relationships - all of which can lead to an improve sense of accountability - in a relatively light-touch and low-cost way. However, there are some challenges with our approach to measuring accountability that should be considered:

- **Timeframe**: Accountability can take time to build, and depending on the length of your engagement, this may mean that we do not see significant accountability improvements over the project period. This is certainly the case with the Resilient Roots initiative, for which the period being measured is approximately twelve months. One way we intend to counter this challenge, is to support pilot partners not only focus on large long-term accountability mechanisms, but also smaller manageable measures that are achievable within the given timeframe.

- **Sample size and composition:** Considering the diversity of the pilot partners, it is expected that the surveyed constituent groups vary in size and composition. This can result in small sample sizes and difficulty comparing data sets between organisations due to different cultural attitudes towards the issues covered in the surveys. One way in which we have responded to such challenges, is ensuring that the survey questions are easy to understand and concepts such as "accountability", which leave room for interpretation, are thoroughly explained. Moreover, Resilient Roots uses intermediaries and consultants to tackle language barriers or interpretation issues caused by cultural differences.

- **Power dynamics:** Survey respondents can sometimes feel uncomfortable or unable to provide truthful answers out of fear that it may affect the support they are receiving or their job at the respective pilot partners. Having a third party such as the Resilient Roots team lead the accountability survey, and ensuring anonymity in the process thereof, can curb some of these fears.

- **Courtesy bias:** Power dynamics can also be a contributing factor in what is commonly known as courtesy bias - where survey respondents give more positive responses to questions than they truly feel to be the case. Courtesy bias is also often attributed to cultural factors, for example in cultures where it is unusual or even frowned upon to voice negative opinions. Using Net Promoter Analysis can reduce courtesy bias by setting a high bar for what is considered a 'positive' response (9 or 10 out of 10). This approach is taken directly from the customer satisfaction industry, where empirical evidence shows that people giving ratings in the middle or just above the middle of the scale (i.e. 7 or 8) are normally understating their dissatisfaction. These scores are considered 'passive' and are not included in the NPS calculation, which focuses only on those that give outright scores (9 or 10) and negative (0-6) scores.

- **Response rates and survey fatigue:** The response rate for the survey may be low in certain circumstances or respondents may run the risk of suffering from survey fatigue. One way we intend on preventing/coping with such issues, is to combine surveys where possible and keep surveys short and concise. Moreover, we often find that response rates are lowest in situations where feedback has not previously been sought - respondents have no evidence that the effort involved in responding to surveys will be rewarded with any meaningful change in behaviour. In these instances, response rates can be seen to improve over time as respondents are presented with potential rewards for their efforts - i.e. services that are more attuned to their needs.

- **Unrealistic expectations of accountability activities:** Pilot partners have proposed and designed their own accountability measures which may ultimately be less effective than anticipated. By providing support throughout their implementation phase as well as fostering our community of practice, we hope to make the proposed measures as effective as possible.

- **Interpretation of questions and scaling**: One of the main challenges when conducting an accountability survey with such a diverse group of pilot partners, is the interpretation of questions and scaling. One example of such an instance is when a question such as

“*How likely are you to recommend this organisation to a friend of colleague*” is followed up with “*why did you give this score?”*. Ideally, the respondent is asked to explain why they gave a negative, neutral or positive score. However, sometimes respondents will give a negative score and then explain why they would still recommend the organisation as opposed to the reason for the low score. This can be mitigated by providing instructions or guidance for each question.

This is not an exhaustive list and we will no doubt face other, unexpected challenges over the course of the initiative. There is no perfect approach to measuring accountability but we believe that this approach is the most suitable given parameters of this initiative. Moreover, as initiative partners that ‘practice what they preach’, the Resilient Roots team asks its pilot partners for feedback on a quarterly basis throughout the course of this initiative to help us improve our approach to measuring accountability, amongst others.

Guidelines on measuring your accountability

While we only recently executed the baseline survey and still find ourselves in the learning phase, there are certain key aspects that may provide insights or act as a useful guide, should you choose to replicate or adopt a similar approach to measuring accountability through a baseline and endline survey. These are very broad aspects/questions to consider, as the parameters of each accountability survey are context-specific and bound by a unique set of parameters.

Before diving into surveying your constituents, here are a few questions you might want to ask yourself to help you shape your objectives and your strategy.

1. **Content and purpose** *(you can find our answers to these questions in this blog)*:
    a. Who are you surveying?
    b. What are you trying to measure?
    c. Why do you want to measure it?
    d. How are you planning on measuring it?
    e. What indicators or questions can you ask to ensure that you are asking the appropriate and relevant questions for the type of data you are trying to collect?
    f. How does this fit into the grander scheme of what you are trying to achieve through this survey?
    g. How do you intend to use/act on the data?

    (It may make sense to test your questions with a smaller sample of respondents to check for relevance and whether the intention of the questions is well understood.)

2. **Time-period:** What time-period are you looking at for the surveys? Is it feasible? Is there enough time between these surveys to allow for new accountability measures to be

introduced? The core set of questions posed in the baseline and endline survey should be identical to allow for comparison.

3. **Sample:** Are there any aspects (role, gender, age, ethnicity, location, etc.) by which you would like to disaggregate the data? If so, you will need to consider collecting this type of data in the survey as well. Are you trying to reach a diverse and representative group of your constituents?

4. **Data collection method:** What data collection methods are available to you? If possible, try to use multiple data collection methods (e.g. surveys, interviews, emails, documents, online form, in person, over the phone, through mobile applications) to allow for validation of data as well as a more in-depth insight. The possibilities are many, but the specific approach should be designed according to the accessibility needs of the population you are trying to survey and making use of the current ways you already engage with them. Try to use a mixed method approach when possible, to get a wide variety of information and trigger different kinds of conversations with your constituents. Moreover, hiring an independent third party to conduct the survey can generate more honest results as well as generate more trust from those you seek to survey.

5. **Data analysis:** "Start at the end!" Spending time before you embark on your survey to think about the kind of analysis you will want to do and how you will use the information that arises from it can save time and effort in the process. Consider whether the tools at your disposal are sufficient for the kinds of analysis you want to carry out, or whether you need to invest time and possibly resources in new systems such as "R", an integrated suite of software tools. This will depend on the complexity of the questions you are asking and the kinds of reports you want to produce. Sharing results through visuals is one way to ensure they are easy to understand and require little translation and/or elaboration. Make sure you consider how you will clean, analyse, visualise, and report the data you have collected.

6. **Triangulation:** Related to the previous point on data analysis, it is important that you consider what kind of triangulation will be necessary and relevant for you in terms of drawing relevant conclusions from your data. In our case, this includes triangulating data on changes in accountability with concurrent data on changes in organisational resilience; and triangulating data on changes in perceived accountability from an organisation's constituents, with data on actual accountability changes from the pilot partners themselves (in terms of how they are using and responding to feedback received). Triangulation should be a tool to test your accountability data and deepen your understanding of the results it provides.

And finally, don’t forget to seek your constituents’ feedback on the survey tool itself! It might be that certain assumptions you made about which data collection methods would be most effective, or ways to reach a broad range of constituents, were incorrect. Seeking feedback on the baseline survey tool will enable subsequent surveys to be more effective and improve the value of your data. Again, this process of seeking feedback will also convey a message to your constituents about your intentions to become more accountable to them, and thus improve their perception of your accountability.

Conclusion

Accountability is a complex concept and can take time to understand as well as to build. We are learning a great deal through this initiative about how interpretation and understanding of accountability varies across geographies, cultures, and contexts. We will continue to share our learning with you as we go along, through our blogs and newsletters. The Resilient Roots team of Civicus, Accountable Now, and Keystone Accountability, also have a range of tools and resources that may be of assistance as you embark on your own accountability initiatives. For more information, email resilientroots@civicus.org.

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Annex

Annex 1 - Primary Constituents: Baseline survey questions

Trust and respect

1. Do staff at *{ORG name}* treat you with respect? (never 0-10 always)
2. Does *{ORG name}* do what it says it will? (never 0-10 always)

Voice and responsiveness

3. How likely to do you think it is that *{ORG name}* would respond to your concerns? (never 0-10 always)

Communication

4. What are the main ways you engage with {ORG name}? Choose up to three:
    - events/workshops
    - through the services they provide you with
    - campaigning or advocacy activities
    - regular updates (e.g. newsletters, mailers)
    - social media posts
    - Other (please specify)
5. Do you understand what *{ORG name}* does and does not do? (not at all 0-10 totally)

Accountability

6. How likely would you be to tell others to engage with {ORG name}? (not at all likely 0-10 extremely likely)
7. What is the reason for the score above?
8. Taking all these things into account to what extent do you feel the organisation is accountable to you? (not at all 0-10 extremely)

Demographics

9. What is your age?
    - Under 30
    - 30-60
    - Over 60
    - Prefer not to say
10. What is your gender?
    - Female
    - Male
    - Prefer not to say

11. Would you be willing to take part in a follow up interview? (Yes/No) If yes, please note you will need to give us a mobile number or an email in the line below to contact you. This would be conducted by an individual from outside {org name} and your feedback would remain anonymous.

Annex 2 - Staff and Volunteers: Baseline survey questions

Trust and respect

1. Does *{ORG name}* treat you with respect? (never 0-10 always)
2. Does {ORG name} do what it says it will? (never 0-10 always)

Voice and Responsiveness

3. Is it worth your effort to try to make {ORG name} better? (never 0-10 always)
4. How likely to do you think it is that {ORG name} will make changes as a result of this survey? (not at all 0-10 extremely likely)

Communication

5. To what extent do you feel you get timely and accurate answers that address any concerns you may have? (never 0-10 always)
6. To what extent do you feel the {ORG name} is transparent in its decision making? (never 0-10 always)

Accountability

7. Taking all these things into account to what extent do you feel the organisation is accountable to you? (not at all 0-10 extremely)
8. Why did you give that score above? (open text)

Resilience

9. How safe do you feel undertaking your work? (not at all 0-10 extremely)
10. How confident do you feel that the organisation is becoming more resilient? (i.e. its ability to identify and respond appropriately to external threats (not at all 0-10 extremely))
11. Why did you give that score above? (open text)

Demographics

12. What is your gender?
    - Female
    - Male
    - Prefer not to say
13. What is your age? (again, add in relevant ranges)
    - Under 30
    - 30-60
    - Over 60
    - Prefer not to say
14. How long have you been with *{ORG name}*? (Add ranges here)
    - 0-2 years
    - 3-5 years
    - 6-8
    - 8+
    - Prefer not to say

15. Would you be willing to take part in a follow up interview? (Yes/No) If yes, please note you will need to give us in the line below an email to contact you. This would be conducted by an individual from outside {org name} and your feedback would remain anonymous.