Facilitation is the Key
The role of facilitation in the implementation of the Social Accountability Framework in Cambodia

The Implementation of the Social Accountability Framework (I-SAF) aims to strengthen social accountability in Cambodia by introducing and nurturing a new culture of constructive engagement between citizens and authorities and by ensuring skilled people and organizations are able to facilitate social accountability processes. This policy note explains why skilled facilitation is considered critical to the success of the I-SAF, how facilitators contribute to program activities and outcomes, and how the program aims to train and mentor a new cadre of local-level accountability facilitators.

A defining characteristic of social accountability is its objective of strengthening understanding, trust and constructive engagement between state and non-state actors. Social accountability approaches aim to establish productive working relationships between citizens and the state based on principles of mutual respect and “critical collaboration”, i.e. seeking collaboration rather than confrontation, and recognizing that it is the legitimate role of citizens and civil society to question and (constructively) criticize the actions and decisions of public authorities and service providers.

The creation of spaces (such as public forums and joint committees) and the introduction of mechanisms (such as systems of participatory monitoring and public reporting) that allow citizen-state engagement to take place is an important aspect of social accountability. Experience shows, however, that the creation of new spaces and mechanisms for citizen-state engagement is not enough. Social accountability involves ensuring that those spaces are “safe” and inclusive and that all participants (from both government and civil society) have access to relevant background information, are adequately prepared to interact with one another and have equal opportunity to speak and be heard.

Left to their own devices, state and non-state actors often lack the capacity and skills needed to effectively engage with one another and reach desired outcomes. In order to achieve productive and impactful social accountability outcomes, it is essential to support and facilitate citizen–state interactions. Especially where there is a history of mutual distrust, or lack of engagement, explicit efforts and interventions to help build trust, guide dialogue and promote constructive working relations between state and non-state actors are required.

Trained facilitators, therefore have a key role to play in the implementation of social accountability processes. Facilitators can help to: inform and prepare (both state and non-non-state) participants; organize and guide participatory approaches; ensure representative participation of different social groups (including women, youth and poor people) in multi-stakeholder processes; promote active and equitable voice (of representatives of different social groups); manage any tensions or conflicts that may arise; facilitate processes of dialogue, participatory decision-making and collective action planning; and; ensure meaningful follow-up. The I-SAF acknowledges this important reality and places facilitation of social accountability processes and relationships at the center of its implementation strategy.

What is a “facilitator”?
Facilitation is the act of making something easier. In the context of multi-stakeholder engagement and participatory approaches, a “facilitator” is someone who works with a group of people to help them have a dialogue, reach agreement, or plan future actions. The facilitator is a helper and enabler who contributes structure and process to interactions (including preparation before the interaction takes place and follow-up afterwards), while allowing participants to control the content and outcomes.

A key element of the I-SAF is the training and mentoring of Community Accountability Facilitators (CAF) to support and implement social accountability activities at the local level. Under the ISAF, four volunteer CAFs from each target commune are identified by local NGO partners, in consultation with community-based organizations and local leaders, and trained to both: (i) initiate and implement social accountability practices, and (ii) facilitate and mediate dialogue, collaboration and negotiation among and between state and non-state actors. According to current operational timelines, this will result in the creation of a cadre of more than 2,000 trained Community Accountability Facilitators over the next three years. By building this critical mass of local actors in social accountability and facilitation skills, the I-SAF aims to not only support constructive engagement during the initial period of program implementation, but to establish the capacities and skills necessary to sustain ongoing constructive citizen-state engagement in the country over time.

Local NGOs play a key role in mobilizing, training, mentoring and accompanying community accountability facilitators - providing these community-level actors with the knowledge, skills and support they need to successfully implement program activities. CAF candidates are identified by local
NGOs, in collaboration with local community-based organizations, and selections made according to transparent criteria. Recognizing the important role of women and youth as agents of change, the program specifically targets these groups, ensuring that at least half of CAFs are women and that at least half of CAFs are under the age of 30. 

The training offered to CAFs is comprehensive, in-depth and practical. CAFs receive a total of 16 days of classroom training interspersed by an equivalent number of “learning-by-doing” days, during which they are supported and mentored by the local NGO partner. Key aspects are:

- Training takes place at district level, bringing together CAFs from all target communes.
- Training of CAFs is based on principles of experiential and learner-centered adult education.
- Training design emphasizes active participation and exchange among the participants and local NGOs trainers, within an informal and collaborative learning environment.
- The training includes interactive presentations, the use of visual aids, story-telling, individual reflection, group brainstorming, small group discussions, learning games, role play, opportunities for corporeal expressions of concepts, mock exercises, field practice and feedback.

The training is delivered in four 4-day modules, conducted approximately every 6 weeks over a period of 6 months. Mentored learning-by-doing activities, during which CAFs gradually take on increasing levels of responsibility and autonomy, are undertaken after the delivery of each training module and extend through the full annual (12 month) ISAF cycle. These activities are strategically designed to directly contribute to the implementation of key program activities and the achievement of program goals, while simultaneously providing an opportunity for CAFs to consolidate and deepen their learning by applying in practice the principles and skills they have learned in class. Learning-by-doing activities include: conducting public awareness-raising events about the I-SAF; presenting and explaining the content of I4Cs at community level; mobilizing support community support for citizen monitoring processes; facilitating community scorecard meetings; disseminating collectively agreed Joint Accountability Action Plans (JAAP) at community level; and, supporting the work of the commune-level JAAP committee. CAFs do not receive a salary, but are reimbursed for all expenses incurred in carrying out I-SAF activities.

A number of state actors (selected local officials and service providers) are also invited to participate in the CAF training program. Experience shows that joint training not only ensures that state and non-state actors learn a common vocabulary and develop a shared understanding of social accountability principles and practices, but it also enhances familiarity, trust and collaboration between government and civil society actors. This is critical to sustaining constructive engagement over time and in helping to overcome difficulties or conflicts that may arise along the way.

At the end of the training period, all trainees who have successfully completed the course, will receive a certificate confirming their status as a certified Community Accountability Facilitator. Successful graduates are also invited to join a Community of Practice and are offered support in marketing their skills. While CAFs receive no financial compensation for their participation in the program, the skills that they learn, the status they gain in the community and the fact that they earn certification are all considered to be important incentives.

Training Curriculum of Community Accountability Facilitators

Module 1: An Introduction to the ISAF
An introduction to the concepts of social accountability, responsive governance and active citizenship; practical information about the organization and delivery of education, health and commune services; and, an overview of the I-SAF.

Module 2: I4Cs, Open Budgets and Awareness-Raising
An introduction to rights and standards in the sectors of health, education and sub-national governance; how to understand a budget; an overview of budget and performance data in the target district; and, awareness-raising and public education skills.

Module 3: Citizen Monitoring
An introduction to citizen monitoring; how to implement the community scorecard process; how to organize and facilitate assessment meetings; and, facilitation and conflict management skills.

Module 4: Supporting Collective Action for Change
An introduction to citizen-state relations and joint action planning; how to facilitate interface meetings and support the preparation of a Joint Accountability Action Plan; and motivate follow up.

Challenges moving forward

The I-SAF recognizes skilled facilitation as an essential element for the success of the program, while acknowledging that current capacity in this area is limited. Ongoing training and mentoring of CAFs is critical and will require significant and sustained effort on the part of local NGOs, many of which will themselves require initial capacity development in this area. Two principal inter-related challenges are to help CAFs to gain the confidence they need to be effective in their roles, while also helping community members and authorities to understand and respect the role of CAFs. Finally, CAFs are only likely to engage with the program on a sustained basis if: (i) the program succeeds in delivering concrete benefits to communities, and (ii) CAFs also feel they are personally benefiting from the program by gaining skills, status and new opportunities.