

Reinventing Accountability for the 21st Century

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Simon Zadek, chief executive of AccountAbility, introduces a new debate on openDemocracy that explores a new generation of accountability mechanisms focussed on the horizontal, not the hierarchical.

Democracy is above all about being able to hold governments to account. Elections are crucially important for doing this, but by no means the only accountability mechanism required for a flourishing democracy. This requires that all centres of power and influence, including business and indeed civil society and labour organisations, can be held to account by citizens and their (also accountable) representatives. Throughout history, progressive social movements have pushed for more appropriate, and more effectively enforced accountability as the bedrock of their democratic demands. And how this has been done has changed over time, sometimes relying more on the law, sometimes relying on public pressure and ideas and sometimes, sadly, through violent means.

Today, there appears to be more accountability mechanisms than ever before, and an almost incessant public debate on the topic. But does it add up to a healthier, democratic society, or are all the techniques and chatter a sign that accountability is not delivering the goods?

[Confusing accountabilities](#)

Once upon a time, we knew who was accountable to whom and for what. The deal was usually unjust,

leaving citizens with little or no recourse to the impact on them of the abuses of power by their landlords, employers, and political leaders. But everyone knew more or less what was what.

Today, there is a lot more accountability around. Indeed, we are overwhelmed by the proliferation of laws and standards and auditing and targets that aspire, at least on paper, to hold those with power to account. But to most of us, the world feels anything but accountable. Quite the reverse, things seem seriously out of control.

A soon-to-be-released opinion poll carried out by AccountAbility and Edelman about what people think about the state of accountability confirms that people are very unsure about who should be held to account (let alone how) for the things that matter most to them. This is true for local issues like crime and unemployment, but even more so for so-called “global public goods” issues like climate change, disease, and poverty.

It’s all very confusing. We sense the need for justice, whether through a taught morality or triggered, as some suggest, within an ancient, genetic recess that leans us towards ‘right’ relationships. Using this compass, often intuitively, we rightly demand

accountability from those who impact on the lives of others without voice or power.

But even as we as individuals demand, we are collectively silenced by our own accountability lapses. Our apparent proximity to each other in the global village is illusory and disorienting. Three billion people consume far beyond their needs, and yet behave charitably towards those they are complicit in excluding. Our institutional expression of to whom and for what we and others are or should be accountable, has yet to catch up with our lived experience. The more entangled the world becomes, and the more we see just how interrelated things are, the clearer it is that something has gone badly wrong on the accountability front.

There is, to say the least, a need to reinvent our practice of accountability.

The accountability waves

Accountability is the stable core of civilised communities. Without it, we would not travel unarmed in the streets, pay our wages into a bank, get on a train or eat food prepared by the hands of others. Without accountability, we would have no expectations of others, let alone sanctions against them if things went wrong. Without a bedrock of accountability, it is impossible to imagine any sort of stable society. The darker, sadder pockets of our past and present are often terrifying fragments of a world without accountability.

Yet it is a curious truth that there is an absence of any conscious historical narrative on accountability. Certainly we have histories of many of its fragmented parts: we know about the histories of human rights, of the labour and the women's movements, of the campaign to abolish slavery and the struggles throughout history against colonisation and empire.

These are vital fragments in their own right, of course. But in isolation they fall short in providing the narrative of an accountability lens on history, or still better a historical lens on accountability, that might shed new light on how best to address the contemporary challenge of civilising power.

Each generation offers new insights on accountability, driven by their most pressing challenges and opportunities. Jot down your own list of top ten accountability innovations in the last century. Some of them may be obvious and more or less benign, such as the United Nations and the European Community. Others illustrate the failure of accountability

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innovations, such as Mao's China and the Soviet Union, envisioned to challenge the inequities of domestic feudalism and yet in both cases also establishing a living hell for hundreds of millions of people. Another candidate might be the experience of nationalisation, the accountability through public ownership that swept through Europe, and was exported throughout Africa and other post-colonial domains. And of course we have the market, for better and worse: by no means a recent invention, but raised during the twentieth century to an exalted position within the hierarchy of accountability mechanisms, increasingly and unexpectedly mediating between the powerful and those they impact.

Accountability innovations are not really sequential. Like waves, they overlap, converge, and collapse into each other. Today's failing institutions are the living proof of last century's capacity to innovate in accountability. The United Nations and the European Union are today the most criticised international bureaucracies, often pronounced unviable in their current forms. Yet they were extraordinarily important twentieth century accountability experiments, marking our early, faltering steps to overturn the rights

of individual sovereign states to determine their own, or our futures in an interconnected world.

Accountability innovations emerge with the times, both replaying and resisting the experiences of others that have gone before. The tools used by the women's movement of the twentieth century were informed by their specific lineage, but also by the available experiences and perceived possibilities for political and social mobilisation. The technological options open to them through which solidarity could be built and impact achieved, for example, were very different to what is available today. Mobilisation against the business community itself in pursuit of the movement's aims was not core to its collective imagination, as for example it might be today.

Conversely, each wave carries the DNA of yesterday's innovations, the very structures and processes that it often seeks to overturn. The corporatist professionalism of many transnational civil society organisations embraces the very same undemocratic tendencies that brought them into being in the first place. Today's "smart mobs" of internet-based, networked campaigners, have inherited the genes of self-centred, unaccountable individualism that has undermined traditional forms of collective action.

Accountability is permeable, almost organic in how it manifests in particular forms that prosper for some time and then degenerate and decay. And this should not be surprising. If accountability concerns the civilizing of power, then those with power will seek to evade or crush it. We strive to build values, ideas, norms, standards and the rule of law to stabilise this organic process. But specific accountability mechanisms (even the ones we cherish most), like all living systems, erode over time, and need reinforcing, upgrading and ultimately replacing.

There is no obvious reason to suppose there are exceptions to this historical process.

Horizontal accountability

So accountability is dynamic and contested, we have no choice but to continuously innovate. The question, then, is what will be this generation's underlying approach, what is it abandoning, and what is it seeking to carry forward from the past? Most of all, is it likely to advance us in addressing today's pressing problems?

AccountAbility, in exploring these questions, has launched an initiative, Accountability 21. Building on a decade of our own work, and standing on the shoulders of many others who have and are advancing accountability innovations focused on specific concerns, issues and communities, A21 aims to play a role in identifying, developing and promoting innovative, progressive approaches to reinventing accountability for the 21st century. Core to our work is our belief, as Anne Marie Goetz and others have suggested, that there is an emerging new accountability agenda underpinned by a discernable pattern, or wave of innovation.

Today's accountability wave is rooted in the principles and practice of what might variously be called open source, dialogic, horizontal, people-centred approaches to bringing power to account. You can easily see this wave if you know what you are looking for and stop seeing images of the past.

- Anne-Marie Slaughter identifies it in describing what she calls "disaggregated governments", essentially sovereign bodies that have unbundled into barely visible (and often unaccountable) inter-state professional and bureaucratic networks that are setting many of today's global rules
- Look closer at the carefully coordinated spectacle of Live 8 on the eve of the G8 Gleneagles Summit. Crass and, perhaps cynical politics at play, but it marks a shift in our understanding of what it takes to build legitimacy and influence

- Notice the new generation of structured, civil regulatory mechanisms like the Global Reporting Initiative and the Forest Stewardship Council, governed by a curious blend of commercial, elected and civil actors that oversee the design and maintenance of an emerging new global standards architecture made up of quasi-voluntary standards sitting uneasily with their statutory cousins

The World Social Forum is, at its best, a carefully nurtured experiment in surfacing, at scale, imminent new forms of political organisation without falling foul of the corporatism and loss of energy that has blighted previous attempts to organise globally

The current accountability wave is a response to the interconnected, trans-boundary nature of today's issues, impacts and influences. Poverty, climate change, disability rights, demographics, internet control and urban planning can no longer be understood or adequately addressed in isolation, as separate causes.

But, like many innovations, its potential for progressive application does not make the wave inherently benign or even non-commercial. Just as the new wave has proved invaluable for organising civil rights campaigns and mediating processes that cross traditional barriers to consensus building and collective action, so it can be the organisational basis for national and trans-national paramilitary groups. And just as it provides ways of effective organisation that avoid the commodifying effects of the market, so also it can be used to commercial gain. Ebay is, after all, today's largest, highly profitable online accountability framework, driven not by the tradition of expert-auditors or regulators, but by peer-to-peer assurance set within a broad framework of collectively evolved rules.

Milestones count, and history may well point to an event in New York on 26 July 2000 when Kofi Annan, flanked by the world's most senior global civil servants, hosted the inauguration of the UN Global Compact, a UN-facilitated compact of businesses signed up, somewhat ambiguously, to its (now) ten principles covering labour and human rights, the environment and transparency. On that day, the name plaques announcing those in attendance told the story.

Arrayed around one of the UN's semi-circular chambers normally inhabited by the representatives of the world's sovereign states were a powerful blend of business, NGOs and labour organisations – the would-be architects of tomorrow's world. Present of course were the most well-known corporate giants, including BP, the Ford Motor Corporation, Rio Tinto, Shell and

Unilever, as well as some of the newly emerging corporate titans, such as the Brazilian communications corporation, Globo, the Indian conglomerate, Tata, and the South African utilities company, Eskom. Also in attendance were business' both traditional and new-found partners, including the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Human Rights Watch and the World Wide Fund for Nature. For the record, lining the back of the chamber in unmarked seats were representatives of many sovereign nations, unusually uncomfortable spectators.

Similarly, the World Economic Forum is a quintessential example of our current accountability wave, as I wrote in my Davos weblog this year...

"It brings together the most powerful people and institutions in the world; rock stars, labour leaders, politicians and grassroots Nobel Laureates, each edging forward their individual and collective agendas, visible for a moment in a speech or a news clip, and then engaged with others over champagne dinners and late night coffees; there is no formal 'debating chamber', no parliament, no coherent structure of representation, more than anything, your 'dance card' of meetings reveals your leverage, the more private, the more exclusive, the more jam-packed, the more likely you are to be a mover and shaker."

Of course there were many people not at the table, and some there that I would rather were not... accountability waves clearly can and do cut both ways. Equally, it is clear that such governance mechanisms have little to do with our conventional understanding of accountability. But in looking at the Davos spectacle, it must be said that many of the world's most powerful NGOs and labour unions are there, as are some of the youth culture's most iconic leaders.

Compare this to the UN General Assembly, today's closest attempt at a formal global representative model. Few of us believe for a moment that it offers a credible governance mechanism. This is not because it lacks resources (although it does). And it is not because the UN is full of rather stodgy types making largely pre-prepared statements. The UN has no future

in its current form because its basis of accountability no longer gives it the authority, or legitimacy, it needs for its allotted role.

John Maynard Keynes famously argued that what stops us in creating positive futures is not a shortage of good ideas, but our inability to let go of the past. We are heavily invested in particular ways of thinking about accountability. Not surprisingly, those with power and those who confront it share a common suspicion of today's accountability wave. Businesses rail against the ability of civil society organisations to whip up public opinion against them. Governments are challenging the anonymity of e-campaigners, citing security as the core of their concern. For their part, civil rights organisations dismiss non-statutory standards as at best unenforceable, and at worst a deliberate distraction from the need to regulate.

But the new accountability wave is enough for old power to act. Labour unions mobilise to undermine the swarming, media friendly influence of civil society organisations, sensing the challenge they represent to their own legitimacy and influence. China strikes out to block the mobilising impact of the internet, understanding that this social movement is far more likely to erode inherited power than the more traditional organising style of the labour movement.

Accountability will be reinvented, of that there is no doubt. The question is in what forms, on whose behalf, and to what effect? The increased interconnectedness of both accountability issues and solutions demands new ways of organising, mobilising and, most of all, of learning. There is a need to join up the dots: to raise awareness of the history of accountability and how today's accountability wave can most effectively be mobilised to shape societal outcomes. There is need to provide an incisive accountability lens on the actions and impacts of those with power. Crucially, there is a need to nurture the outcrop of this generation's accountability wave through the cross-fertilisation of experiences and expertise that have historically remained separated by discipline, method and topic.

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