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WORKING PAPER 4

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND SERVICE DELIVERY EFFECTIVENESS:
WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE FOR THE ROLE OF SANCTIONS?

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The GPSA supports a new generation of collaborative social accountability processes which engage citizens, communities, civil society groups, and public-sector institutions in joint, iterative actions to solve development problems that affect people's daily lives, such as in the delivery of public services and governance of vital sectors. GPSA partners seek to harness existing service delivery systems, government policies and World Bank operations in order to enable uptake and scaling of social accountability practices, with the support of the GPSA Secretariat and World Bank Country and Sector teams. The GPSA makes financial grants for civil society-led coalitions, and supports implementation and capacity strengthening, with focus on adaptive programming and learning, and fit-for-purpose social accountability approaches. The GPSA convenes a global network of CSOs, research institutions, think-tanks, multilateral institutions, foundations and governments to advance knowledge and practice and build constituencies for social accountability.

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Executive Summary

Understanding how civil society can get government to respond to their needs, preferences and demands, and deliver goods and services is a central concern in social accountability initiatives (approaches to accountability that rely on *civic engagement*). It is widely argued that sanctions make a key difference to service delivery outcomes, and that without them, transparency and accountability interventions are less likely to be effective and less likely to be sustainable (Anderson et al., 2020; Arugay, 2016; Fox, 2020; Goetz and Jenkins, 2005; Grandvoinnet et al., 2015; Joshi, 2010; Joshi, 2017; McGee and Gaventa, 2011; Molina et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2019). In this paper, sanctions refer to the threat or imposition of a punishment for transgressing a rule or norm.

Yet, what evidence is there to support the claim that sanctions are king? How much do we actually know about social and formal sanctions and their effectiveness in improving service delivery? Looking at 11 meta-reviews and 35 cases, this working paper presents key findings from a realist review to shed light on these questions and the conditions under which sanctions promoted in social accountability interventions may have contributed to improved service delivery.

Sanctions, both social and formal, feature very prominently in the scholarly literature on accountability, so much so that some scholars have argued that accountability has become synonymous with punishment (Mansbridge, 2014; Schedler, 1999). While it may not be true that these concepts are fully synonymous, this trend in scholarship significantly influenced the thinking of donors such as the Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank over the last two decades (Grandvoinnet *et al.*, 2015; Malena and McNeil, 2010; Moore and Teskey, 2006; World Bank, 2003). As a result, sanctions also feature prominently in the dominant models, or theories of change, in the social accountability sector. However, in reviewing 11 meta-reviews in the transparency and accountability sector we found that while there is substantial theoretical argument asserting the potential effectiveness of social and formal

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sanctions, there was limited empirical evidence to support the claim that sanctions were key causal factors.

Our review of 35 cases revealed five mechanisms of change related to social and formal sanctions. These were: (1) "sticks" – response to punishment; (2) "big brother is watching" – response to threat of formal punishment; (3) "diagonal accountability" – response to threat of formal punishment by horizontal accountability agencies; (4) "litigation" – response to legal investigations or lawsuits supported by community paralegals and legal aid organizations and; (5) response to "naming and shaming" by civil society and/or media.

Through our evidence review, we challenge the dominant view in scholarship that harder social sanctions and enforcement of stronger formal sanctions are either necessary to the achievement of higher–level service delivery outcomes or that they will deliver better and more sustainable outcomes. We find that both social and formal sanctions *can* contribute to improving service delivery outcomes across a variety of country contexts in certain circumstances. In half of the 35 cases reviewed we were able to establish a *likely* link between social or formal sanctions and intermediate effects over the short term with some degree of confidence. These effects included: increased service provider awareness and motivation; increased availability of funding, staff, and materials; improved infrastructure quality; and, in a minority of cases, impact level changes such as improved test scores.

However, the role of sanctions in achieving outcomes was often unclear, outcomes were almost never sustainable, and in close to half of the 35 cases reviewed there were substantial negative effects. These effects included: reducing transparency and funding; discrediting, relocating, and reprisals for advocates and whistle–blowers; threats of violence to collaborating government actors; damaging staff morale; reducing staff attendance; and generating conflict and damaging trust among staff, between staff and community members, and between staff and patients. There are therefore some serious ethical dilemmas associated with sanctioning efforts which need to be

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carefully considered. We argue that imposing sanctions without building relationships or systems to promote good behavior are unlikely to improve service delivery outcomes in a sustainable way.

Another, perhaps surprising, finding was that there are some actors that are regular targets of sanctions, and in many cases, these actors are a lot weaker than is commonly assumed. Three broad types of actors were the most common targets of punishment: (1) absentee nurses or teachers who had their pay or allowances reduced; (2) offending officials who were either suspended, relocated, or fired; and (3) contractors who had to cover the cost of rejected materials or faced lawsuits, alongside civil servants involved in contracting.

We suggest that closer relationships may perhaps reduce stakeholders' appetite to impose sanctions. Particularly in the health sector, we found that more proximate relationships created disincentives for confrontation, and in such circumstances a "policing" approach to monitoring was deemed inappropriate and counterproductive. Conversely, it seems that actors generally prefer to sanction "others," i.e., when an actor/organization was *outside* the group. Short-term consultants, contractors, and suppliers were easy (and quite vulnerable) targets for harder sanctions. In several cases, interventions were designed with insecure labor contracts for staff, and this made it easier to punish these actors. Yet, in both the cases sampled and elsewhere in accountability literature managers often find good reasons (e.g., staffing shortages) not to severely punish payroll staff or those with whom they have close personal relationships (Beasley and Huillery, 2012; Nxumalo et al., 2018; Zeitlin et al., 2011).

It has also been widely argued that there may be productive combinations of collaborative and confrontational tactics, i.e., hybrids (Anderson et al., 2020; Fox, 2016; Joshi, 2017). We found that many supposed confrontational and collaborative hybrids were, in fact, dislocated in time and space. It seems likely therefore that many so-called "inside-outside" strategies are a potential mischaracterization. We also found, as Fung and Wright (2003) argued nearly two decades ago, that adversarial forms of engagement cannot be easily redeployed for collaborative purposes.

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It is widely asserted that supposedly "weaker" forms of citizen engagement are less effective than those with "strong enforceability" (McGee and Gaventa, 2011). We found no compelling evidence to support this contention. A quarter of cases reviewed were collaborative for certain periods or in certain locations. On average, these were slightly more successful when compared with periods or locations when imposing sanctions were a key strategic emphasis. So, we found that soft power can also be powerful. Rather than one approach necessarily being superior (confrontational, collaborative, or hybrid), we argue that the best approach is likely to be the one most appropriate to the context at a particular moment in time.

We were unable to identify strong trends of contextual factors which enabled social and formal sanctions to play a role in enhancing service delivery. However, we identified several conditions which we believe offer the greatest promise when promoting sanctions as a key strategy. These conditions were: (1) supportive leaders who played a role as champions; opening doors or accompanying civil society efforts; (2) high capacity and legal authority of oversight agencies; (3) competitive elections, which provided windows of opportunity for CSOs to combine political and social accountability efforts, and; (4) vulnerable public servants and service providers already in relatively precarious situations and are thus easy targets.

Overall, our study finds that sometimes sanctions can be effective, but punishment is not the answer to all the world's problems. Given these limitations, we recommend that it is time to reconsider the use of "carrots" and enquire further into the enabling conditions for bureaucrats and service providers. Relatedly, scholars, evaluators, and program teams should look more closely at the motivations of service providers or civil servants and take context into account more seriously, making better use of theory-based and participatory methods. And perhaps most importantly, donors and practitioners need to carefully consider and mitigate the potential for backlash from sanctions-based approaches.

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Introduction

Reviews and syntheses of the effectiveness of transparency and accountability interventions suggest that the evidence is mixed (ePact, 2016; Fox 2014; Gaventa and Barrett, 2010; Kosack and Fung, 2014; Lodenstein et al., 2016; McGee and Gaventa 2011; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008; Tsai et al., 2019; Waddington et al., 2019; Westhorp et al., 2014). This has prompted scholars to question why some interventions showed positive results in improved service delivery (Alhassan et al., 2016; Björkman and Svensson, 2009; Gullo et al., 2017; Mohanan et al., 2020) whereas others did not (Arkedis et al., 2019; Raffler et al., 2019). To date, no fully satisfactory answer to this question has been forthcoming.

In the past decade, a growing set of stakeholders have argued that mixed outcomes are, in large part, the result of weak or inexistent sanctions. For example, an evidence synthesis from Tsai et al., (2019) argues that success is more likely in contexts with relatively stronger top–down sanctioning of local officials by those in higher levels of government. Many scholars have advocated for a greater emphasis on sanctions (Anderson et al., 2020; Fox, 2014, 2016, 2020; Joshi, 2010; McGee and Gaventa, 2011). Capacity to sanction most commonly refers to governmental capacity to apply negative sanctions (legal or administrative). It also commonly refers to pressure from below generated by different efforts to litigate, to name and shame service providers and public officials, or protest – i.e., social sanctions.

However, scholarship on the effectiveness of sanctions on service delivery outcomes offers a contradictory picture. Westhorp et al.'s (2014: 69, 70) realist synthesis of accountability in the education sector found 'few examples where sanctions had actually been applied' and 'very limited evidence of the application of such sanctions,' thus raising questions about whether other scholars' hopes regarding the power of sanctions are based on evidence, or faith. Another systematic review of the field which looked across sectors (though not education), questioned the effectiveness

of confrontational approaches and challenged the argument that social sanctions are likely to be effective in changing the balance of power between service providers and service users (Waddington et al., 2019).

It thus seems reasonable to ask what evidence is there that sanctions are either a necessary condition for success or a key contributory factor towards achieving success. It is commonly recommended to employ a combination of tactics at multiple levels, bridging supply and demand (Fox, 2014; Gaventa and Barrett, 2010; Joshi, 2017; McGee and Gaventa, 2011; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008). However, relatively little attention has been paid to demonstrating *how* these tactics interact, and under what conditions, for instance, collaborative and confrontational tactics are complementary or contradictory. A focus on sanctions enables us to unwrap intervention packages and draw attention to the need to demonstrate these connections empirically and show their contribution to service delivery outcomes.

This working paper first situates the review in theoretical context and how this has influenced theories of change in the social accountability sector. After briefly explaining the key parts of the review's methodology we then assess the evidence on the role of sanctions in 11 meta-reviews in the sector. We outline five sanction-based mechanisms of change from 35 case studies and consider the positive and negative effects of sanction-based approaches, and also their sustainability. After this, we consider how different sanctions are tailored to different stakeholders, and we assess the empirical case for confrontational and collaborative hybrids and whether harder forms of accountability are more effective or not. Finally, we look at potentially important contextual features to support sanction-based approaches and end the paper by offering conclusions and recommendations.

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Accountability Becomes Increasingly Synonymous with Sanctions

There is no consensus on what "accountability" means, and thus a variety of definitions of accountability exist (Bovens et al., 2014; Honig and Pritchett, 2019). However, Andreas Schedler's (1999: 14 – 16) definition of political accountability is commonly used in social accountability definitions. His focus on 'punishment,' 'sanctions,' 'impeachment,' 'destruction of reputation through public exposure,' 'dismissal' or 'legal sanctions' established a particularly punitive tone in accountability scholarship. Jane Mansbridge's assessment of the term in different languages over the last few decades suggests that accountability has begun to 'connote sanctions (Mansbridge, 2015: 56)' and has 'become synonymous with punishment (Mansbridge, 2014: 55).' While this may be a slight exaggeration, there has doubtless been a clear trend in this direction.

Echoing Schedler, Enrique Peruzzotti and Catalina Smulovitz (2006: 10) define social accountability as a 'nonelectoral yet vertical mechanism of control of *political* authorities (our emphasis),' the lion's share of scholarship and work from major donors such as DFID and the World Bank effectively embraced Schedler's definition, its sequencing, and its hierarchy (see Grandvoinnet et al., 2015; Malena and McNeil 2010; Moore and Teskey, 2006; Staplehurst and O'Brien, 2005; World Bank, 2003;). Relatively few scholars have seriously questioned whether sanction-based forms of accountability are desirable or whether they necessarily lead to better outcomes (see Honig and Pritchett, 2019 on "trust-based" or "deliberative" forms of accountability, and Mansbridge, 2014). This, then, is an important gap in the literature.

Sanctions Influence Theories of Change

Stephen Kossack and Archon Fung (2014) have argued that there should be different approaches for different contexts in transparency and accountability work. However, to date, the social accountability field has been largely divided by two archetype theories of change: providing information; and generating incentives through carrots and sticks (see Funnell and Rogers, 2011). Today it can be argued that the most prominent is the carrots and sticks archetype because theories influenced by the information archetype have also increasingly used sticks with their focus on sanctions through "transparency plus" i.e., transparency *plus* a mixture of monitoring and social and formal sanctions (see Tsai et al., 2019: 7). Funnell and Rogers (2011) underline that carrots and sticks are best conceived as *separate* theories of change because rewards can be given to all whereas penalties are applied to the exceptions to the rule. Despite this, we find that, where causal pathways are made explicit, sanctions feature far more frequently than rewards (Fox, 2014; Molina et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2019; Waddington et al., 2019).

Sanctions are also argued to be key to effectiveness. Anu Joshi (2010) suggests that without the threat of strong, formal sanctions, transparency and accountability mechanisms are less likely to be effective and less likely to be sustainable. The assumption here is that social accountability mechanisms will not have impact without strong formal sanctions. This was later paired with the hypotheses that 'confrontational tactics on the outside [i.e., social sanctions] might shift the terms of the debate, enabling broader collaboration within,' and that the 'threat of confrontation nationally may […] provide incentives for the government to collaborate (Joshi, 2017: 168).' So, combining different forms of sanctions at different levels has been argued by some scholars to be the most effective strategy.

Two other systematic reviews also suggest that social and formal sanctions are fundamental to causal pathways to service delivery outcomes, at least in certain sectors (Molina et al., 2017; Waddington et al., 2019). As such, it is worth reviewing the evidence to support these arguments.

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Methodology

This review employs a realist approach which focuses on the importance of context, mechanisms, and outcomes. Rather than proposing grand theory, a realist approach aims to build middle-range theories which are specific enough to apply to particular programs but abstract enough to apply across programs (Westhorp et al., 2014; Pawson and Tilly, 1997). Mechanisms (actors' reasoning in response to opportunities and resources) are context-dependent, and thus they are not expected to be present in all programming. So, findings may transfer to comparable contexts, but are not intended to be fully generalizable. We also employed Hagen-Zanker and Mallett's (2013) guidance for conducting an evidence-focused literature review as part of our methodology.

Our proposed research questions were:

▸ What do meta-reviews in the transparency and accountability sector tell us about the contribution that sanctions make to service delivery/performance?

▸ Under what conditions and how have social and/or formal sanctions contributed to enhanced service delivery/performance from social accountability initiatives?

We define social accountability as 'an approach to accountability that relies on *civic engagement*, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations that participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability (Malena et al., 2004: 2).' In this definition, interventions may include participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, monitoring of public service delivery (e.g., social audits and scorecards), investigative journalism, public commissions, and citizen advisory boards, among others. Increased service performance and "service delivery" are considered conterminously in this study.

Social sanctions will include efforts by citizens to "name and shame" service providers or civil servants, with the aim to damage their reputation (Rocha Menocal and Sharma,

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2008: 5 – 6). This may also comprise marches, protests, riots, or other expressions of voice such as media exposés which share this aim. They also include different types of litigation pursued by citizens' groups. We will also include in-group sanctions by reference groups who may threaten social shunning or ostracism. Formal sanctions relate to what Malena et al. (2004) term "conventional accountability mechanisms." This form of sanctions is threatened or imposed by state actors such as the courts, auditors' offices, ombudsmen (i.e., legal/judicial sanctions), as well as punishments imposed within government ministries or service delivery organizations (i.e., organizational, or administrative sanctions) where these are triggered by citizen engagement efforts. So, these may include indictment, criminal conviction, firing staff, issuing fines, pay deductions, or other forms of disciplinary measures.

We reviewed 11 meta-reviews in the sector, conducted a database search, and consulted 19 experts from academia and practice. This allowed us to select 35 cases to review. We considered intermediate and higher-level effects such as increasing the provision of information by service providers, the provision of infrastructure or materials, increases in budgets, teaching quality or quality of care, and perceptions of trust, as well as deeper human development outcomes (or impacts) such as student enrolment, attendance, retention, and learning outcomes, stunting rates, and mortality rates.

Cases were iteratively coded against a set of hypothesized causal mechanisms, teasing out whether there was evidence of an intention to trigger a response via one of the proposed mechanisms, whether there was evidence of such a response, and whether there was evidence of stakeholders' reasoning which underpinned that change in behavior.

Findings from Evidence Reviews

As Figure 1 shows, since the World Development Report in 2004, evidence reviews have mostly focused on transparency and responsiveness rather than answerability or enforcement (e-Pact, 2016; Fox, 2014; Gaventa and Barrett, 2010; Hanna et al., 2011; Kosec and Wantchekon, 2020; McGee and Gaventa, 2011; McNeil and Malena, 2010; Molina et al., 2017; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008; Waddington et al., 2019; Tsai et al., 2019). However, we can see that there were a significant number of references to sanctions.

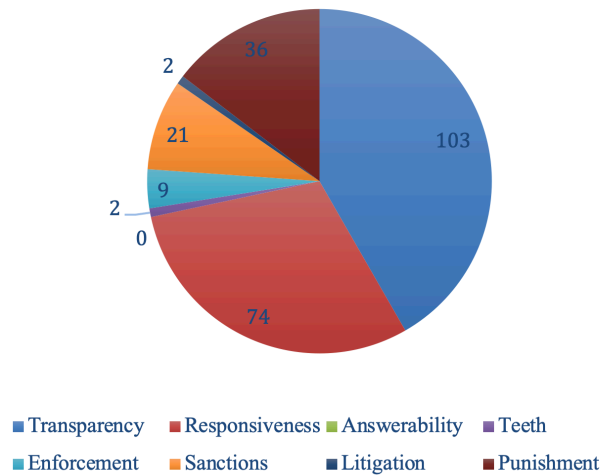*Figure 1. Reviews of Transparency and Responsiveness*
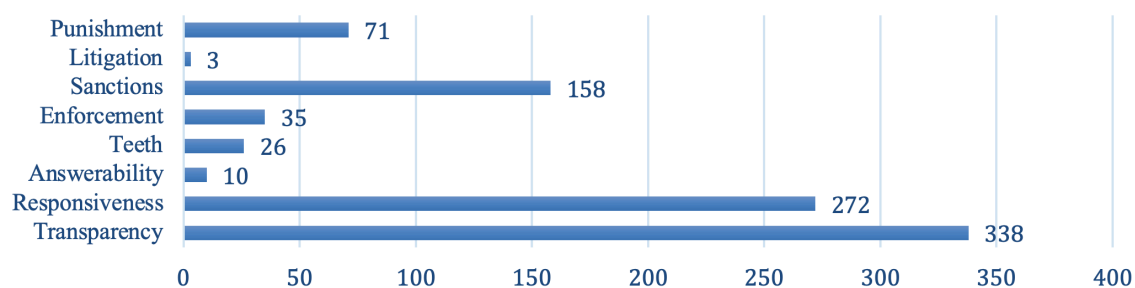
Source: *Own construction*

Nonetheless, there was significant variation between evidence reviews. Some of the reviews had no references to sanctions, but other reviews – particularly Hanna et al.'s (2011) anti-corruption review – included many references. Another key finding was that most references to sanctions in evidence reviews were not empirical, but theoretical (or hypothetical). As Figure 2 illustrates, of the 158 references to sanctions, only 21 of these were empirical references, and most of these came from the same anti-corruption review.

Figure 2. Few Empirical References to Sanctions

Legend:
- Transparency
- Responsiveness
- Answerability
- Teeth
- Enforcement
- Sanctions
- Litigation
- Punishment

Source: *Own construction*

Therefore, we found that the empirical basis to argue for the effectiveness of sanctions based on evidence reviews is weak. It is thus important to search for evidence within individual studies to assess the effectiveness of sanctions in improving service delivery outcomes.

Findings from Individual Studies

Drawing on Westhorp et al. (2014), the study identified five sanction-based mechanisms of change from 35 case studies:

Mechanism	Notable Examples[1]	Cases
Sticks: in which service providers and civil servants respond to the actual application of formal sanctions such as fines, pay deductions, or other disciplinary measures (i.e., response to punishment), who are alerted by citizens	Kecamatan (subdistrict) Development Project (KDP) (infrastructure, Indonesia) Improving Teacher Performance and Accountability – KIAT Guru (education, Indonesia)	17
Big Brother is Watching: in which service providers and/or civil servants respond in anticipation of the application of formal sanctions from superiors (i.e., fear of being caught and punished), who are alerted by citizens	Philippines Textbook Program (education, the Philippines) Seva Mandir (education, India)	15
Diagonal Accountability: in which service providers and civil servants respond to the threat or imposition of formal sanctions by horizontal accountability agencies such as courts or Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs), which responded to CSOs' complaints (i.e., response to investigation findings)	Social audits in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme – MGNREGS (social protection, India) Local Governance and Community Development Program – LGCDP (social protection, Nepal)	10
Litigation: in which service providers or civil servants respond to legal investigations or lawsuits supported by community paralegals and/or legal aid organizations (i.e., response to investigation findings), prompted or led by civil society efforts	Human Resources for Health (HRH) campaign, (health, Uganda) Community Defenders of the Right to Health – REDC-Salud (health, Guatemala)	11
Naming and Shaming: in which service providers and civil servants respond to citizen efforts to name and shame them and change their behavior as a result (i.e., response to sense of shame)	Human Resources for Health (HRH) campaign (health, Uganda) I am Aware Project (multi-sector, Ghana)	15

Table 1. Sanction-Based Mechanisms

1   Further information on these examples is available Aston and Zimmer-Santos (2022).

HOW EFFECTIVE WERE INITIATIVES IN CONTRIBUTING TO IMPACT?

In half of the 35 cases reviewed, we were able to establish a *likely* link between social or formal sanctions and intermediate effects with some degree of confidence. Effects included increased service provider awareness and motivation, increased user satisfaction, reduced staff absenteeism, increased instruction time, increased availability of quality textbooks and medicines, lower levels of missing expenditures, improved infrastructure quality, increased funding and staffing made available, and parents increasing investments in their children's education. In a minority of cases, we also found impact level changes such as improved test scores and provision of food subsidies. The review found that both social and formal sanctions have the potential to contribute to outcomes in various aspects of service delivery in the short term.

In general, while there was substantial resistance to these by staff members, the threat or imposition of financial punishments (e.g., pay deductions or loss of contracts) were more effective than the less credible and more contingent yet more serious threat of being fired or criminal conviction. Actual punishment is not always necessary to influence behaviour. In several cases, the credible threat of punishment appears to have sufficed.

Social sanctions tended to be imposed in short bursts during perceived windows of opportunity, particularly during election or budgeting cycles. We found many cases which promoted more confrontational approaches to advocacy, particularly at sub-national and national levels. Social sanctions through naming and shaming can be an important strategy to influence policies or budgets, but relatively few interventions reviewed targeted policy or budget outcomes. Those that did achieved influence through multi-stakeholder campaigns of substantial scale with dozens or even hundreds of organizations forming coalitions and where the advocacy issue was highly politically salient. For sub-national policy or budget change (Ghana and Mozambique), naming and shaming through media exposure was argued to play an important role (Anderson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2019). Naming and shaming was, however, a highly hit-

and–miss strategy, with evidence of success in only a quarter of cases in which this was a potential mechanism. Media exposure was widely argued to be important in the reviewed cases, but compelling evidence for this was very rare. Ghana's I am Aware project was a convincing exception that demonstrates that it can be an effective strategy, particularly with less powerful government actors (Jones et al., 2019).

SUSTAINABILITY AND SYSTEMIC EFFECTS

Sustaining sanctions–based approaches is challenging, and their effects appear to be rarely sustainable. For many of the cases reviewed, specific data on sustainability was unavailable. However, where the question was asked, sustainability was a recurrent issue. A quarter of these cases showed that interventions which focused on applying social or formal sanctions were not sustainable, and in some cases, effects dissipated within only a few months. More severe punishments were also more difficult to disburse and enforce, and the likelihood of deterrence longer–term was highly questionable, as we found in Ethiopia, Nepal, and Indonesia **(**Ayliffe, 2017; Fox, 2020; Schøjdt, 2017). We found that within administrative units asked to enforce administrative punishments such as in India's education and health sectors, staff blocked and sabotaged efforts, and there was a disbanding of campaigns in both Uganda and the Dominican Republic (Banerjee et al., 2007; Duflo and Hanna, 2005; Larsen, 2015; Poli et al., 2019). This lack of sustainability suggests that positive effects from sanctions are unlikely to be systemic.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Efforts to impose sanctions may have significant unintended costs. In just under half of cases reviewed, we found negative effects, and in the vast majority of these cases, negative effects were directly linked to sanctioning efforts. These effects included: discrediting advocates or champions; threatened loss of funding; reprisals for advocates

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and whistle-blowers, including court cases and staff relocated for speaking up (e.g., Aslam, 2017; Feruglio, 2017; Hernández *et al.* 2020); denial of access to services; increased concentration of poorly performing staff (Ayliffe, 2017; Schøjdt, 2017); and even threats of violence to MPs and cabinet reshuffles for those who collaborated with campaigners in Uganda (Bailey and Mujune, 2021; Larsen, 2015).

Imposing both social and formal sanctions can be counterproductive. Some interventions were said to have damaged staff morale, reducing their attendance, generating conflict among staff and between staff and community members and between staff and patients, damaging trust (Gaduh et al., 2020; World Bank, 2020). Some sanctioning efforts decreased organizational leverage with government counterparts; caused accountability operations to temporarily shut down; and decreased budget or contracting transparency (Aston, 2018; Bailey and Mujune, 2021; Edwards et al., 2020; Larsen, 2015).

Other interventions which appear to be more inspired by a "principal-agent" approach to accountability and typically disbursed administrative sanctions also had significant negative effects, such as a decrease in the attendance of some staff in India and Indonesia (Banerjee et al., 2007; Gaduh et al., 2020). Given the high likelihood of under-reporting of negative outcomes, the proportion of negative effects is almost certainly higher than we found in this study. Many of the studies where negative effects were reported had clear incentives to promote successes and downplay failures. Some were even purposefully selected case studies of success, which just so happened to concede failures. In several cases, it was only possible to find reporting on negative effects by triangulating complementary studies of the same interventions or wider reform processes linked to those interventions. As some interventions indicated, the cost of achieving some service delivery outcomes via a sanctions-based approach can sometimes be outweighed by wider social repercussions within communities which damage community relations more generally. So, the high proportion of negative effects should be taken seriously.

DIFFERENT SANCTIONS FOR DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS

Some actors appear to be the preferred targets of sanctions. We found that three broad types of actors were the most common targets of punishment: (1) absentee nurses or teachers who had their pay or allowances reduced, (2) offending officials who were either suspended, relocated, or fired, and (3) contractors who had to cover the cost of rejected materials or faced lawsuits, alongside civil servants who were involved in contracting. It does not appear that this was because the transgressions of these actors were easier to observe or that they behaved significantly worse than other members of staff.

Closer relationships may perhaps deter stakeholders' appetite to impose sanctions. As we saw in Niger, Peru, Mozambique, and Nepal, closer relationships created disincentives for confrontation, and a "policing" approach to monitoring was also deemed inappropriate and counterproductive (Aston, 2015; Beasley and Huillery, 2013; Feinglass et al., 2016; Gurang et al., 2019). Instead, we found an endorsement of "constructive" and "partnership" approaches. This was most notable in the health sector.

Actors may, instead, prefer to sanction "others." We found a different approach when the actor/organization targeted was perceived to be outside the group. This is most notable in cases where the community and state apparatus both appear to have incentives to seek harder sanctions on short-term consultants, contractors, and suppliers. We found this across sectors and geographies in Bangladesh, India, Kenya, the Philippines, Uganda, Colombia, and Indonesia (Aiyar, 2010; Arroyo and Sirker, 2005; Buntaine and Daniels, 2020; Feruglio, 2017; Herrera and Mayka, 2019; World Bank, 2020).

COLLABORATION AND/OR CONFRONTATION?

It has also been argued in scholarship that there may be productive combinations of collaborative and confrontational tactics – i.e., hybrids (see Anderson et al., 2020;

Bukenya et al., 2012; Fox, 2014, 2016; Joshi, 2017). Various cases reviewed illustrated a productive relationship between civil society and state actors at certain moments in time. In Peru, the Philippines, Uganda, and Colombia, for example, state actors were able to provide tangible support or opened spaces which clearly contributed to outcomes (Larsen, 2015; Herrera and Mayka, 2019; Majeed, 2011; Vargas, 2013). However, these cases generally did not combine collaborative and confrontational tactics in time and space. Where they did, some positive citizen–state relationships were sacrificed for others (e.g., Uganda and The Philippines) (Edwards et al., 2020; Larsen, 2015).

Collaborative and confrontational tactics often tend to happen in different locations, even if these are within the same broad strategy. Perhaps, in part, due to the risks of blowback, several cases reviewed employed different tactics in different locations but at the same level of government and/or different tactics at different levels of government. This was notable in both Guatemala and Uganda (Joshi, 2017; Walker, 2017). Like Anderson et al's (2020: 32) findings from DFID's accountability programming, we were unable to find any compelling evidence that confrontational tactics enabled broader collaboration within government and, in turn, led to more effective policy implementation.

Moreover, we found that horizontal accountability agencies generally offer weak protection, and typically have limited leverage to pressurize other government actors. There was notable backlash in Peru and Guatemala when confrontational approaches were employed, despite supportive relationships with oversight agencies (Aston, 2015; Joshi, 2017). The same lack of protection also applies to several political actors, as one Uganda case illustrates (Larsen, 2015). Only in Colombia did we find an exception where there was leverage from oversight agencies or the judiciary, but here civil society efforts played only a minor role (Herrera and Mayka, 2019).

We also discovered that confrontational and collaborative approaches were often not employed concurrently. Chronology matters, and we found *periods* of collaboration and periods of confrontation were employed, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Redeploying confrontational and collaborative approaches is difficult. We saw this in

Peru and South Africa, in particular (Aston, 2015; Feruglio, 2017).

We found that soft power can, in fact, be powerful. A quarter of cases reviewed fit the more collaborative mold at least for a period or in particular locations. While civil society actors were potentially able to trigger formal sanctions in some cases, their approach was viewed by service providers and civil servants as being constructive, including in legal empowerment and diagonal accountability. Service providers saw civil society's efforts as helping them understand users' perspectives and deal with issues of blame. Sanctions were not a priority in these cases and their likelihood of being disbursed was low. The focus was instead on building relationships and implementing policy commitments. This was notable in Peru, Mozambique, Kenya, Nepal, and Colombia (Feinglass et al., 2016; Feruglio, 2017; Gurang et al., 2019; Herrera and Mayka, 2019; Vargas, 2013). This finding suggests we need to disentangle legal enforcement and sanctions, or to unbundle the concept of "teeth."

In his expansive definition of teeth, Fox (2014: 8, 23, 28) refers to state and public sector responsiveness, state capacity to respond to voice, institutional capacity for accountability (i.e., to apply *negative* legal or administrative sanctions), investigating and verifying complaints and grievances, changing public sector incentive structures to discourage abusive or wasteful behavior, deploying preventative measures to reduce opportunities for corruption or abuse, and even *positive* incentives for following citizen recommendations, as well as pressure from below generated by protest (i.e., voice). It is therefore unsurprising that scholars and practitioners have interpreted the concept in substantially different ways.

While there was some potential in the cases reviewed for diminished prestige if service providers or bureaucrats did not live up to expectations, this was not a zero-sum and adversarial contest as commonly found in the other mechanisms. Instead, responsiveness (and service delivery) was primarily achieved by the soft power of deliberation, persuasion, and an appeal to mutual interests. This better fits with deliberative approaches such as collaborative social accountability (Guerzovich and

Poli, 2020; see also Fung, 2020; Mansbridge, 2014).

We saw that harder forms of accountability are not necessarily more effective. Case sampling for this study was primarily designed to find successful cases of harder sanctions. Yet, the success rate for initiatives which had periods or locations which pursued a more collaborative approach through persuasion was slightly higher than those which pursued more confrontational strategies and harder sanctions (sticks, big brother is watching, and naming and shaming mechanisms). These initiatives tended also to have fewer negative effects. We also found this for legal empowerment and diagonal accountability mechanisms.

A brief comparison with interventions in broadly similar contexts to those within the sample – Uganda, Ghana, Malawi, Peru, and India – suggest that comparable positive effects in service delivery may be achieved with predominantly collaborative approaches, and where data is available, there is also some evidence that such approaches might well have more sustainable outcomes (Alhassan et al., 2016; Aston, 2015; Björkman and Svensson, 2009; Donato and Mosquiera, 2016; Gullo et al., 2017; Mohanan et al., 2020; Mwale and Msiska, 2020). Overall, then, our findings cast doubt on previous arguments which suggest that *weaker* forms of citizen engagement are less effective than 'strong enforceability (Joshi, 2017; McGee and Gaventa, 2011: 11).' This contention seems to be without firm empirical foundation.

This does not, however, mean that one approach (confrontation, collaboration, or hybrid) is necessarily superior to another across different contexts. Though further study may perhaps reveal the relative advantages and disadvantages. Drawing on the evidence in this study, we suggest that some time–bound contexts may be more conducive for certain types of collaboration or confrontation than others. One of the key benefits of a realist review is that rather than spuriously suggesting that the same recipe will work the same everywhere, it demonstrates that few, if any, recipes are universally effective. So, we need to pay greater attention to when, where, and how a particular approach or a hybrid of approaches may best fit a particular context.

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WHAT CONTEXTUAL FACTORS MATTERED MOST?

Evidence of sanctioning was found across 17 countries. However, as few of the cases reviewed presented much information about contextual factors, it was not possible to find clear patterns across all cases.

We initially explored the potential of contextual variables argued as enabling or disabling factors for accountability, such as levels of democracy, inequality and fragility, and state capacity (Bukenya et al., 2012; Gaventa and Barrett, 2010; Gaventa and McGee, 2010; Gaventa and McGee, 2011; Joshi, 2019). This included reviewing indices of income, inequality, fragility and conflict, freedom, voice and accountability, and civic space, as well as considering potential variation by colonial history. Across the cases, no strong relationship was found between these features and whether civil society actors pursued a strategy which prioritized social sanctions or whether state actors attempted to impose formal sanctions. Nonetheless, we found a handful of factors across subsets of cases which may be worth exploring further.

Government champions can play an important role in supporting accountability generally. The specific leaders that mattered varied across cases, and while their specific motivation may be unknown, they included members of parliament in parliamentary committees in Uganda, chief ministers at state level in India, an undersecretary of education in the Philippines, a regional minister in Ghana, and a World Bank project manager in Indonesia.

Capacity and legal authority likely make a difference to the kind of sanctions we see. The evidence uncovered in this study suggests that citizens require direct access to oversight agencies to make use of them and that state actors require adequate staff and mandates to legally prosecute in the first place. Yet, these conditions are relatively rare. We only found evidence of this in Colombia, Indonesia, and Uganda (Bailey and Mujune, 2021; Buntaine and Daniels, 2020; Herrera and Mayka, 2019; Woodhouse, 2005).

Electoral pressures can also provide windows of opportunity to impose social and formal sanctions. While there is no consistent relationship between elections and the effectiveness of sanctions, we found that electoral pressures were important in several cases (see Waddington et al., 2019). Some initiatives took advantage of electoral windows of opportunity to name and shame governments, and these were connected to social accountability efforts themselves at either local or national levels. It may be that competitive clientelist political settlements in periods of highly competitive elections provided a potentially conducive environment for naming and shaming through the media or protest (both nationally and sub-nationally). Though many organizations prefer to go into purdah in electoral periods to avoid potential repercussions in case their preferred candidates lose.

Top-down governments (i.e., dominant party settlements or authoritarian governments) may favor formal sanctions and upward accountability. This is somewhat paradoxical, yet in line with anti-corruption scholarship. Within our sample, we found evidence from Uganda, Ethiopia, and India which appears to suggest that top-heavy administrations have an appetite for imposing formal sanctions on lower levels of administration (Bailey and Mujune, 2021; Buntaine and Daniels, 2020; Larsen, 2015; Pande and Dubbudu, 2017; Schjødt, 2017). However, we do not believe this association is especially strong, given that cases with an appetite for judicial sanctions were also found under competitive clientelist regimes in Nepal and Colombia (Herrera and Mayka, 2019; Schjødt, 2017).

Yet, top-down governments also appear to impede downward accountability. We found that dominant party contexts were generally less conducive to more critical or adversarial forms of citizen voice. They created barriers for frontline staff escalating concerns that contradicted top-down targets or political narratives, and holding higher-level officials to account (Aslam, 2017; Buntaine and Daniels, 2020; Pande and Dubbudu, 2017).

Related to electoral pressure is the vulnerability of principals (i.e., duty bearers). Recent literature emphasizes the importance of "countervailing power" to reduce and neutralize

the power advantages of ordinarily powerful actors (Fox, 2020). However, we found that various state actors may be less powerful than is often assumed. Several cases demonstrated that actors took advantage of existing state efforts to decrease teachers, nurses, or civil servants' level of security, and this made them more sensitive to pressure from citizens, CSOs, managers, politicians, and donors. This was most notable in India, Kenya, Ghana, and Indonesia (Aiyar, 2010; Banerjee et al., 2007; Duflo et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2019; Kremer et al., 2005; World Bank, 2020). The cases reviewed suggest that sanctions are more likely to make a difference when service providers and civil servants are *already* relatively vulnerable. This therefore leads to an uncomfortable question about the difference sanctions really make to more powerful actors.

Conclusions

In this paper we aimed to help bridge the gap between theory and evidence in relation to the role of formal and social sanctions in the social accountability sector. Overall, we found that there are significant gaps between accountability theory and empirics in evidence reviews in relation to sanctions. We found that there was a conspicuous gap between theoretical conceptualizations of accountability and the empirical evidence for what enhanced service delivery. We revealed that evidence reviews in the accountability sector were generally reviews of transparency and responsiveness, and these reviews rarely substantiated empirically what contribution formal or social sanctions made to improving service delivery.

Sanctions can, however, make a difference to improved service delivery. On a close examination of 35 cases, we found that both formal and social sanctions in social accountability initiatives can make an important contribution to enhanced service delivery. We noted that half of these cases demonstrated connections between sanctions and intermediate results and a minority were also able to contribute to budget changes or downstream impacts for communities. We also revealed that these efforts were able to contribute to a wide range of changes, from increased service provider awareness to

improved student test scores.

We found that there are various contingent mechanisms of change linked to sanctions. This working paper differentiated several mechanisms through which formal and social sanctions contributed to these results. In the background paper to this study (Aston and Zimmer-Santos, 2022), we were also able to demonstrate the connections between sanctioning efforts and (positive and negative) behavior change explicitly in specific cases. We found that these sanction-based mechanisms relied on diverse motivational impulses. Service providers and civil servants were sometimes motivated in response to punishment received, to the fear of being caught and punished by superiors, by the threat of legal punishment, or in response to a sense of shame when their misdeeds were exposed by citizens and the media. These were typically supported by service monitoring from citizens groups. We also noted that some types of actors were more common targets of sanctions than others, and we showed that stakeholders generally preferred softer sanctions for actors with whom they had close relationships and harder sanctions for those with whom they had more distant relationships.

Sanctions-based approaches were rarely sustainable and frequently triggered various negative effects. While each of the mechanisms demonstrated the potential to influence service providers' and civil servants' behavior, we found that these results were rarely sustainable. What's more, a high proportion of interventions which placed an emphasis on harder sanctions also contributed to a wide variety of negative effects. Our findings therefore challenge the assumed connection between harder forms of accountability and more significant and sustainable results (Anderson et al., 2020; Arugay, 2016; Joshi, 2010; McGee and Gaventa, 2011; Schedler, 1999; Tsai et al., 2019). In part, this may be because sanction-based approaches often fail to tackle underlying and systemic causes of service delivery problems, particularly in underfunded sectors with poorly supported staff.

Contrary to what is widely argued in scholarship, we found that softer approaches were often at least as effective and sustainable and had fewer negative repercussions. Neither in evidence reviews nor in the 35 cases reviewed in this study did we find a clear connection

between the intensity of sanctions and better results. In fact, we generally found the opposite; "weaker" and "softer" approaches generally had a slightly higher success rate and a significantly lower rate of negative effects. Sanction-focused approaches may indeed contribute to the achievement of some significant outcomes, but they generally have various drawbacks. And in some cases, the negative externalities from a sanctions-focused approach to accountability could be argued to outweigh the benefits.

Finally, we found that redeploying collaborative and confrontational tactics can be difficult. A handful of the cases reviewed were examples of hybrid strategies which employed a supposed mixture of collaborative and confrontational tactics. Scholars have argued that such an approach may motivate government collaboration (Anderson et al., 2020; Joshi, 2017). Yet, from the evidence reviewed, we came to the same conclusion as Fung and Wright (2003: 267, 282) that adversarial forms of engagement cannot easily be redeployed for collaborative purposes. We found that actors commonly *pivoted* from one strategy to another, and that such pivots may be more difficult to manage and may have more negative repercussions than is generally acknowledged. We thus suggest that there is likely to be a time and place for collaborative, confrontational, or hybrid strategies, but that none of these approaches are a panacea.

Recommendations

Punishment (or the threat of punishment) is not the answer to all the world's problems. Both scholars and practitioners should therefore more carefully consider whether there is the opportunity to work with civil servants' positive incentives (carrots) and how to build better relationships with service providers and civil servants before considering the merits of sanction-based approaches. We thus recommend greater attention to so-called "art of bureaucraft" and studying "mission driven bureaucrats (Honig, forthcoming; Joshi and McCluskey, 2017)," as well as further enquiry into the enabling conditions for bureaucrats and service providers not simply to refrain from behaving

poorly, but also to encourage good behavior in a service delivery system.

An important connected point relates to the expansive concept of teeth. Fox (2014) argues that it is better to understand the concept in broad terms. While a broad definition may be helpful to explore potential interaction effects within the concept, as we have illustrated, different stakeholders have understood the concept in contradictory ways and the concept is simply too broad to be operationally useful for accountability practitioners to plan interventions effectively. The many different components proposed need be disaggregated because they entail significantly different stakeholders, tactics, strategies, and approaches to achieve accountability and improved service delivery. Some of these may even lead to contradictory interaction effects.

We noted that relatively few cases we reviewed sought to explicitly shed light on service providers' or civil servants' motivations, and rarely were the perspectives of service providers or civil servants sought to corroborate claims of the influence of sanctions. It is important to focus on supply side actors' motivation, not just citizen voice (see Tendler, 1998). The long-standing bias in the sector towards documenting citizen participation and voice has led to a conspicuous blind spot regarding the perspectives of service providers or civil servants. We also found that many studies failed to provide an adequate explanation of contextual features which may have influenced outcomes. As discussed by McGee and Gaventa (2011), part of this limitation is ostensibly explained by methodological biases towards Randomized Control Trials (RCTs), which generally provided inadequate attention to context and to the reasoning of service providers' or civil servants. So, we therefore strongly recommend a rebalancing of enquiry towards unpacking the drivers of motivation and responsiveness, with greater focus on how contextual factors may enable these.

Evidence reviews have become increasingly theory-based in their approach, and this should be welcomed (see e-Pact, 2016; Tsai, 2019; Waddington et al., 2019). However, reviews are necessarily constrained by their focus, and further granularity is likely beneficial for various areas of enquiry. At a bare minimum, we therefore recommend

greater methodological pluralism in research and evaluation in the sector. We also suggest that the use of theory-based methods such as realist evaluation and process tracing to unpack causal mechanisms in individual cases, could potentially add value.

While we were unable to identify strong trends of contextual factors which enabled social and formal sanctions to play a role in enhancing service performance, we were able to identify four conditions which we believe offer the greatest promise when attempting sanction-based approaches. These conditions were: (1) supportive leaders who played a role as champions: opening doors or accompanying civil society efforts; (2) capacity and legal authority of oversight agencies; (3) competitive elections, which provided windows of opportunity for CSOs to combine political and social accountability efforts; and (4) vulnerable public servants and service providers already in relatively precarious situations. As these are preliminary findings from only a small subset of cases, we believe they offer other scholars the opportunities for further exploration and empirical testing.

Finally, practitioners should carefully consider and mitigate the potential for backlash from sanctions-based approaches. Given the high proportion of negative effects found in the cases reviewed, this is perhaps the most important recommendation of all. These risks indicate that more confrontational tactics are likely come with greater risks (and costs) for a wider variety of stakeholders than is generally acknowledged, even when there is some support from government oversight agencies. These risks should therefore be considered in funders', INGOs', and CSOs' analysis when choosing to prioritize these tactics in a particular context and at a particular moment in time.

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