

ESSAY

Explore Whether Transparency Improves Accountability.

One can hardly argue that societies are characterized by two distinct sectors – private and public; the latter being monopolistic in providing essential services. Government is a particularly effective form of monopoly since government cannot go out of business. In the era of new public management governments are heavily engaged in the process of the institutional reinvention by implementing policies and initiatives to promote transparency and accountability in public administration, and policies which foster an environment of trust in the public sector.

As to Lindsay Stirton and Martin Lodge (2001:476) “transparency in its fullest sense thus requires that citizens be able to exert an influence on (to 'control') the way that public services are provided, based on their views or preferences about how they are provided, as well as knowing about the decisions that are made”. It is stated that transparency has two separate but interrelated functions: first, to ensure effective provision of public services by means of “control of a service providers “and second, it is directly connected with democratic theory, which highlights individual autonomy of citizens in the decision making process to effect their personal interest and thus has moral value.

Moreover, the concept of “transparency” in the past decades has become a fashionable term in development discussion and it has been widely used as a normative reference to policies and practices along side of such basic principle as: accountability, rule of law and legitimacy. In order to legitimize their policies, governments must provide transparency about state actions, as well as about the procedures that underpin the carrying out of state actions. However, we should admit that there are “systematic deviations from full transparency” (Prat A., 2005: 862). As to Andrea Prat even Sweden, the country where the Freedom of Information Act goes as far as 1766, the citizens can obtain information only after the decisions have been implemented. Thus he concludes that “...the intention to take an action, should not be revealed before the consequences of the action are observed”, if not it can lead to “worse performance” (Prat A., 2005: 869-870). Concomitantly, transparency on consequences is positive, whereas transparency on action can have a negative effect.

Another key issue of the public service reforms for better governance is the issue of accountability. In the new public management the idea of accountability is associated with responsiveness, answerability, fault and blame (Gregory., R., 2003). Accountability is always viewed as a challenge

for management in the era of reform, thus there are a lot of concerns on accountability issues, i.e. whether government employees are more accountable after the reform than they were before. As to Barbara Romzek accountability, which is understood as answerability for performance, raises immediate questions for the one held to account. Accountable to whom? Accountable to what? And how?

Various government systems function under different accountability mechanisms, for example: Romsek and Ingham (2002) identify four types of accountability, such as: hierarchical, legal, professional and political. All these types stress the importance of efficiency, the rule of law, expertise and responsiveness. In the last few years the notion of accountability has become a key issue in parliamentary democracies such as UK, New Zealand and Australia. In this context, the following lines are observed: downward accountability of governments to citizens (core of democratic decentralization); horizontal accountability within government (i.e. the accountability of civil servants to elected officials) and upward accountability of peers to related groups (which enables upper tiers of government to verify that public agencies are complying with major policy goals and statutory; monitor or track agencies expenditure and revenues, etc.). In this case another problem arises and that is the problem of veracity: principles must be sure that the accounts that they receive from their subordinates is truthful. The lack of information sometimes can lead to accidents or even to tragedies. In can be best illustrated by the “Challenger Tragedy” in 1986. The widely known details of this tragedy arose different interpretations. Official Presidential Commission report on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident (the Rogers Commission) fail to completely provide answers to why the catastrophe had happened. However, among the factors that apparently caused disaster the Commission mentioned a managerial problem that might “contribute” to the shuttle tragedy: “the decision to launch the Challenger was flawed. Those who made the decision were unaware of the recent history of problems concerning the O rings and the joint and were unaware of the initial written recommendation of the contractor advising against the launch at temperatures below 53 degrees Fahrenheit..... If the decision-makers had known all the facts, it is highly unlikely that they would have decided to launch [the shuttle] on January 28, 1986”. As Robert Gregory notes issues of veracity and trust are interpreted by Mosher’s that of subjective responsibility, the latter focusing attention on moral element of the actions undertaken by politicians and officials. Thus, though accountability as formal answerability is an essential component of responsibility it is not yet sufficient as the individual held to account bares a moral obligation to answer honestly and openly to his actions and decisions instead of hiding the truth or being involved in deceptive performance. Another issue that is to be considered in the Challenger Tragedy is the inappropriate accountability mechanism utilization; the former professional accountability system was substituted by bureaucratic and political mechanism, which eventually fostered the Challenger tragedy. As Barbara Romzek and Melvin Dubnick (2009:236) put it ” Ideally, NASA needs to return

to what it does best, using the form of accountability that best suits its organizational mission, i.e., a professional accountability based on deference to expertise”.

Clearly, transparency and accountability in governance are mutually reinforcing: accountability exercises of powers and discharge of duties with responsibility, consistent with obligations to society, transparency implies an open government, making available information about factors influencing decisions that have a bearing on public interest. Governance concerns the state’s ability to serve the citizens. It refers to the rules, processes, and behaviours by which interests are articulated, resources are managed, and power is exercised in society “The concept of transparency is closely related to notion of accountability, though the two are not identical” Stirton and Martin Lodge (2001:475).

The way public functions are carried out, public resources are managed and public regulatory powers are exercised is the major issue to be addressed in this context. In spite of its open and broad character, governance is a meaningful and practical concept relating to the very basic aspects of the functioning of any society and political and social systems. It can be described as a basic measure of stability and performance of a society. As the concepts of human rights, democratization and democracy, the rule of law, civil society, decentralized power sharing, and sound public administration, gain importance and relevance as a society develops into a more sophisticated political system, governance evolves into good governance.

In short, there is no ideal prescription for a system whereby interconnection between transparency and accountability turns into a successful instrument of governance. The outcome of this relationship depends on individual countries’ environment: the degree of institutional development, peculiarities of public sector structure, political culture, social and economic environment, other underlying factors. The necessity for transparency and accountability and their relationship are contingent on how the supply and the demand side fulfill their functions. More specifically, in countries with solid public sector institutions and developed economies, transparency and accountability may not play a vital role. By contrast, in transitional democracies, transparency and accountability are critical for building public confidence while forming institutions, shaping systems, and reforming laws.

In the so-called developed world, at times, the public sector agencies prefer to keep in-house debates involving sensitive political discussion behind the closed doors. As noted in the above section, Sweden leans towards releasing decisions after the fact. There are however instances where a mixed approach is being used. For example, in the U.K. Parliament, the bill goes back and forth from one House to another with amendments. It is actually quite a public process at each stage. The

compromise amendments put forward by each House are printed and then debated in public, as with any other stage of legislation. Hence, there obviously is a negotiating process behind the scenes, but at least all the elements of the process are visible and one can see what compromise is being made at each successive stage until an agreement is finally reached. People do speak in public and on the record. Overall, it does represent a somewhat mixed system, whereby transparency and accountability intertwine with some negotiation behind the scene, but the bones of negotiation are visible.

As demonstrated above, transparency denotes free access to governmental political and economic activities and decisions. Accountability entails a state being held responsible, by both its people and its elected bodies, for its choices and actions. Calls for transparency, accountability, and equality have emerged in many countries with citizens summoning their governments to reveal their incomes and expenditures, as well as strategies and ambitions.

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