

A Brief Presentation

On

Using ICT to promote Social Accountability

by

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Mr/Madam Chairperson, Ghana Integrity Initiative is very appreciative for this opportunity to share its thoughts on the topic “Using ICT to promote Social Accountability” at this forum.

## About GII

Madam Chair, GII is the local chapter of Transparency International (TI) – the world’s leading non-governmental organization devoted solely to curbing corruption. GII was launched in December 1999 as a non-partisan, non-profit, civil empowerment organization, focused on the delivery of essential themes necessary for the creation of a National Integrity System. As the accredited national chapter of TI, GII is a member of an international anti-corruption movement, working at both national and international levels to curb both the supply and demand sides of corruption. At the national level, TI chapters (like GII) work to increase levels of accountability and transparency, monitoring the performance of key institutions and pressing for the necessary reforms in a non-partisan political manner.

Mr. Madam Chair, Social accountability (SAc) is an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement in which the potential beneficiaries of public policies and programmes, ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations (CSOs), participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability aimed at ensuring effective and efficient service delivery and value for money. It usually refers to a broad range of actions that citizens, communities and CSOs can use to hold government officials and bureaucrats accountable but also covers actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other actors to promote or facilitate these efforts.

These include citizen participation in public policy making, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, citizen monitoring of public service delivery, citizen advisory boards, lobbying and advocacy campaigns. Mechanisms that involve participation of citizens in the process of managing public resources have proved to be particularly effective. The main arguments underlying the importance of Social Accountability are that it promotes good governance, increases development effectiveness, and empowers the people.

Mr. Madam Chairperson, in recent times, many donors, including the World Bank have shown interest and support for social accountability initiatives based on the goal of promoting poverty reduction and effective and sustainable development in poor and developing countries such as ours. Thus, the Bank’s Social Accountability model is often used in these countries. The model consists of the participatory public expenditure cycle in which civil society may participate. These are:

1. budget preparation/formulation (participatory budgeting),
2. budget analysis,
3. expenditure tracking and
4. performance monitoring.

The annual budget is a fiscal expression of the social priorities of the country as nothing can be done without the allocation of resources through the budget for its execution. Thus, civil society and, in fact, citizens in general have a stake in not only the policies that go into the budget but also in ensuring that adequate resources are allocated to implement the budget policies. They intervene in the stage of crafting that expression by making inputs into the budget and scrutinize it to ensure that it addresses social development concerns. These non-governmental organizations then check to see if the funds on paper have indeed been disbursed and spent on the committed programs. Also, in collaboration with state players such as the Auditor General, they and ordinary citizens will grade the final outputs, most commonly the performance of government agencies.

An interested part may decide on an issue to address and then mobilize around an entry point for addressing it. The problem could be low enrolment in school or poor health delivery. The required action may be adding more resources to the education and health budgets, closing gaps in resource flows from the Ministry of Finance to the relevant ministry or preventing diversion of resources at the level of service delivery.

Distinguished invited guests, for any successful execution of these processes, one would need to build an evidence-based data that will be used to hold public officials to account. One would need, for example, budget commitments and expenditure records not only for their own analysis but also for the information of the public. Thus, the intervening group may go public, rally support and build coalitions to demand answers from office holders. They could also advocate and negotiate change, push for reforms in programs, policies, budgets and laws. These activities are all aimed at enabling citizens to exact social accountability of the state and other actors that promote the developmental agenda of governments.

Mr./Madam Chairperson, the traditional approach of most citizens or CSOs has been to undertake public demonstrations, protests, advocacy campaigns, investigative journalism and public interest law suits. Yet, mobilizing the required numbers for most of these actions will be impossible without get the information out there and communicating with like-minded people and institutions. This is where ICT has come to play an important role. Besides, the recent expansion in the use of participatory data collection and analysis tools alongside the enhanced space and opportunity for citizen/civil society involvement in policy-making as well as social accountability practices are now greatly enhanced by the use of ICT.

Ladies and Gentlemen, an examination of the activities of civil society groups engaged in social accountability initiatives has shown that both civic groups and governments have realized the value of information in their advocacy activities. This is why there is a struggle for the enactment of Freedom of Information legislation in most countries where they do not already exist. In some countries, governments, while yielding to pressures to enact these laws, have sought to include clauses that will protect various types of information and, in some cases, even intimidate the press, in their reluctance to make information easily accessible. This reluctance can be addressed through the effective use

of ICT to put in the public domain information that governments would not have put out there.

ICT is a readily usable medium of sharing information about social accountability initiatives among civil society groups not only in Ghana but all over the world. It can be used as a medium of sharing experiences, successes and failures as well as lessons learnt in their work among such groups. Global NGOs like OXFAM, Christianaid and Actionaid have put various reports and papers on their websites to inform, educate and share experiences with all types of stakeholders the world over. Transparency International (TI) and its local chapters such as GII, which work to curb corruption, have put similar information and reports of surveys on corruption at their websites aimed at promoting accountability in society. What other way could have been used to share such information worldwide other than ICT?

Recent times have also seen the signing of letters from individuals and civil society groups across continents demanding certain actions from national governments and multilateral institutions. The pressures for the release of certain prisoners who have fought against corruption and for social accountability brought to bear on authorities through the Internet are signs of the benefits of ICT. The removal of the World Bank President could have been attributed to this type of global civil society action whereby somebody could sit in Ghana and append a signature to the letter calling for the resignation of Mr. Wolfowitz from office. Thanks to ICT.

The use of ICT has helped push the fight for access to information for citizens and groups that work on social accountability issues. It is commendable that Ghana's Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning puts its annual budget on its website the very day it is presented to Parliament for world wide information. This generates reactions from Ghanaians all over the world which help Parliament in its debates of the documents. One does not need to go to the Ministry to find out what has been allocated to one's ministry, sector or area of interest. Unfortunately, however, information on budget execution is not put on this website. This would have been a plus for Ghana and citizens and civil society groups fighting to promote social accountability. This is because putting fiscal information in the public domain via the Internet would have helped to block opportunities for corrupt deals.

Moreover, through procurement, government agencies could compare prices offered by various sellers, get the contracts most advantageous for them but more importantly, this would enable ordinary citizens to challenge office holders who inflate prices and contracts. South Korea adopted this initiative, which has since been replicated across Asia with the Philippines' budget department putting names of blacklisted firms on its website. Of course, this requires political commitment that may not be easily copied by us but the opportunity is available. Bangladesh made public all pertinent data on infrastructure projects, a sector often prone to corruption. We could publish all ongoing major contracts at the website of Ghana Highways Authority and the MMDAs could publish similar contracts with costs and specifications that can be used to contest poor and shoddy work.

Of course, Ghana has not developed to the stage where ICT facilities are available at the grassroot level for them to use it in demanding social accountability. In Ghana, there are several limitations in the use of ICT including the availability and the lack of skills to effectively use ICT. It is rare to find grassroots CSOs with websites. Even those in the cities do not regularly update the information on their websites. Most government websites suffer similar fates. Moreover, any information sharing is as good as what you want shared and the quality of that information. Information put at a website may, therefore, not be adequate and of the required value for social accountability purposes. The civil society groups who work on social accountability initiatives themselves may not even have the skills to produce quality research information that can be put on a website for use for social accountability purposes. Finally, Ghanaians are not yet used to sending letter and gathering signatures on pertinent issues to the Executive, Legislatures or any other authority as a way of pressuring them to take certain actions. It is an opportunity CSOs can explore.

M. Madam Chairperson, to conclude, I wish to state that ICT has come to stay. It has several benefits and provides several opportunities for exacting social accountability from office holders. Ghana cannot be left behind. We must take advantage of its availability and benefits in whatever we do, including social accountability initiatives.

Thank you for your attention.