

Gender-sensitive Local Auditing: Initiatives from India to build accountability to women

By Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins

Participatory planning and budgeting, which are key elements of progressive decentralization programs today, provide opportunities for better local accountability to the poor. But the only way of verifying that both national and local-level budgetary commitments, such as spending in areas of particular concern to women, are actually implemented is through direct auditing by poor communities and service users. Participatory auditing measures, however, are almost never included in public-sector accountability reforms. As a result, poor people, and particularly poor women, do not normally closely scrutinize government spending at the local level. Financial auditing is seen as the preserve of skilled officials. Equally unusual is the engagement of poor service users in 'social audits' that involve detailed monitoring of public-service delivery and the use of official mechanisms for actionable complaint. And yet, experience suggests that the most effective means of improving the quality of public spending from the point of view of poor women is to ensure that they engage in gender-sensitive processes of monitoring and auditing public services.

Several current state- and civil society-initiated efforts in India are engaging the poor, particularly women, in closer scrutiny of local spending and policy implementation. What is notable about these initiatives is that they are neither cosmetic gestures towards 'consultation' with the poor, nor do they substitute for poor public services by replacing them with NGO-run alternatives. They are efforts to hold the state accountable for its commitments to gender equity and anti-poverty measures. Ultimately, they aim to enhance public-sector accountability.

The two important arenas in which women and the poor are trying to engage in local budgeting and auditing are decentralized government and the implementation of centrally funded safety-net programs such as food-subsidy systems and employment-generation schemes. Auditing government spending at the local level enables citizens to witness and comment upon the direct links between revenue generation and expenditure, and between planning and the actual implementation of public policies. Local-level auditing contributes to more gender- and poverty-sensitive planning and policy implementation in that it makes it easier to pin-point both poorly targeted spending and outright corruption.

Monitoring gender-sensitive budgets

Following the passage of the 73rd amendment to India's Constitution in 1993, state governments have not only created multi-tiered systems of elected local government, but some have gone even further, vesting village assemblies with powers to both plan and audit local spending. Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, and lately Rajasthan have gone furthest in legislating for people's audits of local planning and spending, and have also enacted measures to ensure women's participation in these processes. All three states have 'right-to-information' provisions through which villagers can, in theory, have access to documents detailing official expenditures. All three states not only have provisions ensuring that one-third of elected representatives on village councils are women, but also that a minimum proportion of village assembly participants must be women for the (required) public meeting to constitute a quorum. For instance, Kerala has earmarked 10% of local planning funds for women's development, and women-only sub-committees within the village assembly decide on how this should be spent. This last provision gives women a direct interest in seeing that spending plans are implemented properly.

It is too early to judge the effectiveness of any of these novel measures. Early evidence however, suggests that women's engagement in local accountability systems cannot simply be legislated into existence. In Kerala women's groups have been rebuffed by local politicians and government officials when they tried to follow up on how the earmarked funds for women's development have been spent. Local power relations obstruct effective use of such provisions, even in Kerala, where the poor and women enjoy comparatively high degrees of literacy and social welfare. When poor people challenge local decision-making and spending patterns, the interests of local elites and officials are profoundly threatened.

Verifying anti-poverty spending in Rajasthan

Given the risks this implies for the poor, as well as the technical difficulties of effective monitoring of public spending, civil society mobilization or social movement support for accountability struggles is critical. Two examples from elsewhere in India reinforce this point. In Rajasthan, a small organization, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakthi Sangathan (literally, the Workers and Peasants Power Association) has pioneered methods for the participatory audit of local spending. Women represent about 60% of the approximately 1000-strong membership of this group, and the MKSS has focused on challenging official corruption on public works programs that provide women with employment during the dry season. These women are routinely denied the statutory minimum wage for their work on rural roads, culverts, and drains, often on the grounds that they were not moving the minimum quantum of earth per day. The MKSS's own research indicated that the actual quantity of work being done by the women was routinely under-measured. False entries in employment registers enabled project foremen to underpay women, and thereby to pad the registers with bogus names whose payments the supervisors then pocket. Other malpractices include inflated estimates for public-works projects, the use of poor-quality materials, and over-billing by suppliers. To combat

these forms of fraud, the MKSS sought (and sometimes obtained) access to official expenditure documents – such as employment registers and receipts for the purchase of materials – that could be verified by MKSS workers investigating each of the recorded transactions.

The MKSS's struggle to obtain such documentation became the basis for a national campaign for legislation granting citizens a right to information. Government accounts are thus submitted to a process of collective verification by the villagers – the very people most likely to know whether funds have been spent as claimed. At public hearings, employment registers are read aloud, and women who were underpaid come forward to contradict official accounts showing them to have been paid the minimum wage.

Surveillance of subsidized food distribution in Mumbai

In the city of Mumbai a coalition of 40 community-based organizations of women from low-income neighborhoods has worked since 1992 to make the government's network of fair-price shops – the Public Distribution System (PDS) – more responsive to the poor. Though a critical resource for the food security of the poor— and women, who manage household food supplies— the PDS suffers from a number of management problems, but above all, from a 'leakage' of subsidized grains by the licensed PDS shopkeepers to the open market, where they are sold illegally at higher prices. The Rationing Kruti Samiti (RKS), or Action Committee for Rationing, sought originally to cut these leakages by working closely with concerned state officials. The PDS is, in theory, monitored and 'performance-audited' by citizens' vigilance committees. In practice, these are controlled by local politicians who, for a fee, shield crooked shopkeepers from prosecution. The RKS has formed parallel informal Vigilance Committees composed of five women consumers for each PDS shop. The women attempt to track the amount and quality of subsidized commodities that arrive in the shops from government warehouses, and to monitor their sale by constantly checking shop ledgers. This system, which flourished in the early to mid 1990s broke down in the latter part of the decade, largely because it relied upon the support of one high level bureaucrat, who was ultimately transferred to another department. The RKS experience showed that women's illiteracy was not necessarily an obstacle to scrutinizing policy implementation. The RKS's bureaucratic ally had required the shopkeepers to attach sealed samples of the displayed bulk products, such as foodgrain. This allowed the women monitors to compare the quality of the product delivered from the government warehouse, as seen in the sealed transparent bag, against what was on sale for PDS consumers. Any adulteration could be visually detected, thus providing prima facie evidence for an investigation by the ration inspectors into whether the cause of the discrepancy was 'leakage' of some portion of the original consignment onto the open market.

However, even before the departure of their high-level bureaucratic patron, the women in the vigilance committees lacked another important resource – the time needed for effective monitoring. Keeping track of the arrival and 'leakage' of commodities required constant surveillance over the shops. Although women deployed children to keep an

eye on the shops, they could not get around shopkeepers' tactics, like arranging deliveries in the middle of the night to avoid inspection.

Citizens' efforts to audit directly the activities of development programs are an important complement to official monitoring or auditing mechanisms. Our examples show that social movement support is critical in overcoming gender-related constraints (such as illiteracy or intimidation by officials) to women's efforts to improve the functioning of official accountability processes. But, in India and elsewhere, citizens' efforts to hold officials accountable can trigger significant resistance. The MKSS has encountered obstruction from the local administration. The RKS has been forced into retreat. These experiences suggest the importance of seeking public-sector allies for citizen-based monitoring and auditing.

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