

Assessing the Direct and Indirect Outcomes of Social Accountability Interventions at the Household, Community, And State Levels: A Case Study of Kalulushi and Solwezi

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the direct and indirect outcomes of social accountability interventions at household, community and state levels in two contrasting Zambian districts: resource-rich but service-constrained Solwezi, and economically depressed Kalulushi. Using a mixed methods design, the research combined structured surveys with community members, semi-structured interviews with officials, CSOs, faith leaders and service providers, focus group discussions, document review and non-participant observation of accountability processes. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlations, while qualitative data were examined thematically and triangulated across sources.

Findings show that social accountability is significantly associated with improved welfare and governance outcomes. Higher engagement in social accountability mechanisms correlated with lower reported poverty levels ($\rho = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$), better access to basic services ($\rho = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$), improved health and education outcomes ($\rho = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$), enhanced livelihoods ($\rho = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$) and reduced perceptions of corruption ($\rho = -0.48$, $p < 0.05$). Respondents reported increased awareness of rights, greater civic participation, more timely and transparent service delivery, strengthened community structures and more efficient, less corrupt management of public resources.

Qualitative evidence highlights shifts from passive receipt of services to active citizenship, especially among women and youth, and documents cases where citizen monitoring exposed ghost projects, inflated contracts and fake beneficiary lists, triggering corrective action and procedural reforms. Indirect outcomes include greater empowerment, social cohesion, trust and institutional legitimacy, contributing to more collaborative state–society relations. The study concludes that when embedded in supportive legal, institutional and informational environments, social accountability functions as both a direct driver of service improvements and an indirect catalyst for inclusive, poverty-reducing and democratic governance.

Keywords: social accountability; governance; citizen engagement; service delivery; community monitoring; corruption; empowerment; Zambia

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Globally, social accountability has emerged as a critical component of good governance and an indispensable tool for enhancing the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programs. As governments and development agencies increasingly prioritize inclusive development, the role of citizen engagement and oversight has gained traction across a range of sectors, from education and health to social protection and infrastructure (World Bank, 2017). Social accountability refers to the various strategies and mechanisms through which citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs) faith groupings, and the media seek to hold public officials and service providers accountable for their performance and responsibilities (Fox, 2015). These mechanisms may include community scorecards, public expenditure tracking, citizen report cards, participatory budgeting, and formal grievance redress systems.

Research and practice have shown that when communities are empowered to demand accountability, public service delivery outcomes improve significantly. In turn, development interventions become more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012). Moreover, citizen participation fosters transparency, trust, and local ownership, all of which are essential for democratic governance and long-term development impact.

One of the more recent global efforts to institutionalize social accountability was the World Bank's introduction of a results-based scorecard in 2023. This innovative tool is designed to enhance transparency, track progress, and measure the outcomes of development programs in critical areas such as climate change mitigation, gender equality, and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2023). By emphasizing results over inputs, this approach reflects a broader global shift towards performance-based management and increased citizen engagement in monitoring development outcomes.

In Latin America, Brazil's "Zero Hunger" programme stands as a powerful example of how social accountability principles can be integrated into national poverty alleviation strategies. The programme combined conditional cash transfers, school feeding initiatives, and robust civil society participation to reduce hunger and poverty levels (da Silva, 2013). Its success helped position Brazil as a global leader in pro-poor policy innovation and culminated in its key role in advocating for the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, launched during the 2023 G20 summit (FAO, 2023). The Brazilian experience highlights the importance of linking service delivery mechanisms to grassroots participation, institutional responsiveness, and global advocacy.

Across the African continent, social accountability is increasingly being adopted to tackle persistent governance and service delivery challenges, particularly in sectors such as health, education, and water and sanitation. In many African countries, formal accountability institutions—such as parliamentary oversight committees and national audit offices—struggle with capacity limitations and political interference. In this context, citizen-led accountability initiatives have proven to be valuable complements to formal oversight, offering bottom-up pressure for improved performance (McGee & Gaventa, 2011).

The Mwananchi Programme (2014), a multi-country initiative implemented in six African countries—Zambia, Ghana, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, and Uganda—provided valuable lessons on the effectiveness of context-sensitive, actor-oriented approaches to social accountability. Rather than applying one-size-fits-all models, the programme emphasized tailoring strategies to local contexts. It successfully employed community scorecards, participatory budgeting processes, and strategic media advocacy to foster more responsive and transparent governance (Tembo, 2013). The findings underscored the importance of understanding the local political economy, leveraging trusted intermediaries, and combining various accountability tools to strengthen citizen-state relations.

Kenya's Huduma Programme further illustrates the potential of social accountability when institutional frameworks are aligned with feedback and response mechanisms. Huduma—meaning "service" in Swahili—was designed to improve public service delivery through citizen feedback tools and the establishment of centralized service centers. The initiative showed that connecting citizen voices to administrative action can enhance public trust and encourage greater service uptake (Mbate, 2018). However, challenges remain, including limited civic space, the politicization of public programs, and institutional capacity gaps, which threaten to dilute the impact of social accountability initiatives (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012).

In Zambia, various poverty reduction programs have been implemented with support from bilateral and multilateral development partners. Chief among these is the Social Cash Transfer (SCT) program, which provides financial support to vulnerable households. While the SCT has demonstrated positive impacts in terms of improving household welfare and reducing extreme poverty, critiques point to weaknesses in program accountability, sustainability, and community participation mechanisms (Tembo, 2019). These shortcomings highlight the need for more robust and community-anchored accountability frameworks.

Efforts to strengthen accountability in service delivery have also been undertaken by civil society organizations in Zambia. World Vision Zambia's Citizens Voice and Action (CVA) program, implemented from 2009 to 2016, focused on building community capacity to engage with service providers and local government officials. In districts such as Lufwanyama, the CVA approach enabled communities to advocate for better teacher-pupil ratios

and improved access to health services by tracking government budget allocations and facilitating constructive dialogues with authorities (World Vision Zambia, 2016).

Similarly, the Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR) implemented the Voice and Accountability Project in 2021, which aimed to enhance community monitoring of local government service delivery, especially in the education sector. By training citizens in budget tracking, performance monitoring, and advocacy, the project contributed to greater transparency and responsiveness at the local level (CSPR, 2022).

Despite these positive developments, significant barriers remain. Chinsinga and Zulu (2014) identify several persistent challenges in Zambia, including weak institutional frameworks, limited access to timely and relevant information, and entrenched systems of political patronage. These factors inhibit meaningful participation and reduce the effectiveness of social accountability interventions. Furthermore, many initiatives lack systematic evaluations, making it difficult to assess their scalability and long-term impact.

Geographic and socio-economic diversity across Zambia also influences the performance and relevance of social accountability mechanisms. Solwezi and Kalulushi are two districts that exemplify contrasting development contexts. Solwezi, situated in the mineral-rich North-Western Province, has experienced rapid population growth and infrastructure demands due to a surge in mining investments. Yet, despite increased fiscal resources, service delivery—particularly in education and health—has lagged, raising questions about how social accountability can help bridge governance and performance gaps in high-growth settings (GRZ, 2020).

In contrast, Kalulushi grapples with economic stagnation following the decline of mining activities. Public infrastructure is underfunded, and service provision suffers from chronic neglect. In such environments, social accountability initiatives may serve as a critical lifeline, offering citizens an avenue to advocate for equitable resource allocation and policy attention. These contrasting scenarios offer a valuable opportunity for comparative analysis. Through examining how social accountability mechanisms operate in both resource-rich and resource-constrained districts, researchers and policymakers can gain a nuanced understanding of what conditions enable or constrain effective citizen engagement.

Ultimately, the Zambian experience, like that of other developing countries, stresses the importance of institutionalizing social accountability as part of broader governance reforms. It also highlights the need for adaptive approaches that consider local dynamics, empower citizens, and link grassroots monitoring efforts with formal state accountability systems. Future efforts should prioritize integrating social accountability into national development planning, ensuring sustained investment in civic education, digital tools for feedback, and supportive legal frameworks to protect citizen participation and civil society space.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design to assess the direct and indirect outcomes of social accountability interventions in Solwezi and Kalulushi districts, Zambia. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled both measurement of outcomes and in-depth understanding of the processes and contexts through which social accountability influences service delivery and poverty reduction.

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants directly involved in or affected by social accountability interventions. These included community members (especially beneficiaries of poverty alleviation and social protection programmes), local government officials, representatives of civil society and faith-based organizations, and frontline service providers in sectors such as education, health, and social welfare. The two districts were chosen for their contrasting socio-economic profiles—Solwezi as a resource-rich but service-constrained area, and Kalulushi as a resource-constrained district facing prolonged economic decline—allowing comparative insights into how context shapes the functioning of accountability mechanisms.

Conceptual Framework: Direct and Indirect Outcomes

The study adopted a conceptual distinction common in governance literature (Fox, 2015; Joshi & Houtzager, 2012) to guide the research design and analysis:

- **Direct outcomes** refer to proximate, observable changes resulting from citizen engagement, such as improvements in service quality, access, and reductions in corrupt practices.
- **Indirect outcomes** encompass longer-term, diffuse changes in relationships, norms, and institutional capacities, including shifts in citizen empowerment, trust, social cohesion, and state legitimacy.

This framework informed the development of data-collection tools and the analytical strategy, ensuring that both types of outcomes were systematically captured and examined.

Measurement Strategies

Multiple data-collection methods were employed, each tailored to measure specific dimensions of the outcomes.

Quantitative measurement was achieved through structured surveys with community members. The survey operationalised key constructs into measurable variables. Engagement in social accountability was measured using a composite index based on participation frequency in mechanisms such as community scorecards, interface meetings, grievance redress systems, and budget-tracking activities. Outcome variables were measured as follows:

Outcome Construct	Operational Measurement
Poverty Levels	Self-reported household economic status and a multi-item index assessing the ability to meet basic needs.
Access to Basic Services	Likert-scale ratings on the availability, reliability, and proximity of water, health, and education services.
Health & Education Outcomes	Proxy indicators (e.g., reported child school attendance, frequency of health-facility visits, perceived quality of care).
Enhanced Livelihoods	Indicators of economic opportunities (e.g., access to agricultural inputs, grants, skills training).
Perceptions of Corruption	Scales measuring the perceived frequency of corrupt practices in local service delivery and welfare programmes.

Survey data were coded and analysed using descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlations to assess the strength and direction of association between the level of social-accountability engagement and each outcome variable.

Qualitative measurement relied on triangulation across several methods to provide depth, context, and verification:

Method	Role in Measuring Outcomes
Semi-structured interviews (officials, CSO representatives, faith leaders, service providers)	Explored institutional responses, enablers and barriers, and documented specific cases of corrective action (e.g., cancelled contracts, removed ghost beneficiaries).
Focus group discussions (with women, youth, programme beneficiaries)	Captured shared experiences of empowerment, shifts in participation norms, and changes in community dynamics and social cohesion.
Non-participant observation (of community meetings, feedback sessions, service-delivery points)	Verified self-reported data, revealed unspoken power dynamics, and recorded real-time responsiveness and transparency in processes.
Document analysis (project reports, policy documents, budgets, monitoring tools)	Provided objective records to cross-check reported activities, budget allocations, and policy changes.

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents were analysed thematically, with iterative coding and categorisation into key themes such as participation, responsiveness, effectiveness, barriers, and enabling conditions.

Attribution Strategy

To link observed outcomes to the social-accountability interventions, the study employed a multi-layered attribution strategy that acknowledges the complexity of causal inference in real-world settings.

1. **Statistical Association:** Strong, significant correlations (e.g., $\rho = -0.62$ for poverty) provided initial evidence of a systematic link between accountability engagement and outcomes.
2. **Process Tracing via Qualitative Data:** Detailed narratives illustrated the sequence of events—for example, citizens used a specific tool (scorecard) → identified a problem (drug stock-outs) → engaged officials → secured a response (regular supplies)—thereby connecting the intervention to the outcome.
3. **Triangulation Across Sources:** Findings from surveys (what people reported) were checked against observations (what actually happened) and documents (official records), increasing the validity of the attribution claims.
4. **Comparative Contextual Analysis:** Comparing results across **Solwezi** (resource-rich) and **Kalulushi** (resource-constrained) helped identify which outcomes were robust across contexts and which were mediated by local factors.
5. **Temporal Sequencing:** Qualitative accounts emphasised *change over time*—e.g., moving from “not knowing who to ask” to actively engaging—suggesting that the intervention preceded the outcome.

Methodological Rigor and Limitations

The mixed-methods design was a key strength, allowing for **complementarity** (quantitative data showed breadth, qualitative data showed depth) and **convergence** (triangulation of results). Standardised data-collection procedures, pilot testing of tools, and the use of multiple methods enhanced the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of the study.

The study also acknowledges several limitations:

- **Causality:** While correlations and process-tracing provide strong suggestive evidence, the cross-sectional design cannot definitively prove causation. Unobserved confounding variables could influence both engagement and outcomes.
- **Self-reported Data:** Surveys and interviews are subject to recall and social-desirability bias, though observation helped mitigate this.
- **Generalizability:** Purposive sampling in two districts yields rich, contextual insights but limits statistical generalizability to all of Zambia.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided the entire research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and efforts were made to minimise potential risks, particularly when discussing governance and accountability issues. Necessary permissions were obtained from relevant institutional, church, and district authorities.

Overall, this methodology provided a comprehensive framework for examining the direct and indirect outcomes of social accountability mechanisms in Solwezi and Kalulushi, and for understanding the conditions under which

these mechanisms most effectively improve service delivery, strengthen state–society relations, and contribute to poverty reduction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on social accountability shows that citizen-led mechanisms such as community scorecards, citizen report cards, social audits, participatory budgeting, Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys (PETS), complaint systems and digital feedback platforms can generate both direct and indirect outcomes for governance, service delivery and poverty reduction, though the strength of the evidence and the clarity of causal pathways vary considerably (Malena et al., 2004; Joshi & Houtzager, 2012; McNeil & Malena, 2010; Fox, 2015). Direct outcomes are observable, proximate changes that follow the introduction of such mechanisms. Across multiple countries and sectors, studies report improvements in the quality, accessibility and responsiveness of public services. In health and education, community scorecards and report cards have reduced staff absenteeism, improved provider behaviour and client–provider relations, increased availability of drugs and learning materials, and led to repairs or expansion of infrastructure (Bjorkman & Svensson, 2009; CARE International, 2012; Ho et al., 2015). In Uganda and India, community monitoring and social audits of primary health care and employment schemes reduced leakages, improved timeliness of payments and contributed to better maternal and child health indicators (Bjorkman & Svensson, 2009; Pande, 2012, 2021). Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre redirected municipal spending toward poor neighbourhoods and basic services such as water, sanitation and housing, with measurable gains in coverage and living conditions (de Sousa Santos, 1998; Fedozzi, 1997; Harnecker, 1993). PETS and public audits in Uganda and elsewhere have exposed significant leakage in education and health budgets and, when combined with media exposure and civil-society advocacy, have led to corrective action and better alignment between allocated and actual expenditure (Reinikka & Svensson, 2011; Khagram et al., 2009). In Zambia, similar tools used by organisations such as the Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR), World Vision, ActionAid and the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) have improved transparency and targeting in the Social Cash Transfer scheme, strengthened facility-level management in health and schools and prompted more responsive behaviour from local officials (CSPR & ActionAid Zambia, 2014; Schaaf, Topp & Ngulube, 2017; Luyt, 2010).

Beyond these immediate results, the literature identifies important indirect outcomes that operate over longer timeframes and through more diffuse mechanisms. A recurring finding is that social accountability interventions increase citizens' knowledge of their rights, legal entitlements and service standards, and demystify administrative and budget processes (Narayan et al., 2000; Malena et al., 2004; Papp, Gogoi & Campbell, 2013). This information, when coupled with structured opportunities for engagement, tends to build confidence, collective agency and willingness to question authority—particularly among previously marginalised groups (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Participatory processes such as multi-stakeholder forums, parent–teacher associations, school and children's councils, community health committees and thematic coalitions create or strengthen local institutions through which citizens can articulate priorities, negotiate with officials and sustain monitoring efforts (Chambers, 1997; Hamusunga, n.d.; World Vision International, 2016). At the same time, repeated, structured interaction between citizens, service providers and officials can improve state–society relations: studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America describe emerging patterns of more regular dialogue, mutual understanding of constraints and co-produced solutions, with associated increases in trust and perceived legitimacy of local government agencies (Gaventa & McGee, 2013; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Malena & McNeil, 2010). In Zambia's CVA programme, for example, citizens and health workers jointly set priorities and developed action plans, contributing to a shift from “favours” to “entitlements” in how communities perceived their relationship with the health system (Schaaf et al., 2017). Where embedded in rights-based approaches and gender- and child-sensitive tools, social accountability also contributes to more inclusive governance, giving greater visibility to the concerns of women, children, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, as seen in gender budgeting, child-focused monitoring and school-based accountability initiatives (UNCRC, 2009; Transparency International, 2015; Hamusunga, n.d.).

However, the literature also highlights significant limitations and unresolved questions, especially regarding the depth, distribution and sustainability of these outcomes and their translation into poverty reduction. First, despite many positive case studies, rigorous causal evidence directly linking social accountability to household-level poverty indicators is scarce. Most evaluations focus on process improvements (participation, transparency) and

intermediate sectoral outcomes (service quality, reduced leakage), without systematically tracking impacts on income, consumption or multidimensional poverty over time (Joshi, 2010, 2013; McGee & Gaventa, 2011; McNeil & Malena, 2010). Designs are often cross-sectional or short-term, and rely heavily on qualitative or descriptive methods, making causality difficult to establish and limiting comparability across settings. Second, while intermediate outcomes such as empowerment, trust and social cohesion are frequently cited, they are rarely measured with standardised indicators or incorporated into explicit theories of change that connect them to poverty reduction; as a result, it remains unclear which groups benefit most, under what conditions the poorest are reached and whether gains are equitably distributed or skewed toward better-connected communities and local elites (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Fox, 2015). Third, the role of context and power dynamics, though widely acknowledged in principle, is not always analysed with sufficient depth. Many accounts are tool- or project-centric and optimistic, underplaying the effects of patronage networks, elite capture, partisan competition, weak rule of law, limited civic space and fear of reprisals (Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Fox, 2010; World Bank, 2013). Evidence from African cases shows that in some settings participatory spaces can be dominated by local elites or co-opted by political actors, blunting pro-poor impact or even reinforcing existing inequalities (Malena & McNeil, 2010; Friis-Hansen & Ravnkilde, 2013).

Fourth, questions of scalability, cost-effectiveness and institutionalisation are weakly addressed. Numerous “success stories” are based on donor-funded pilots or NGO-facilitated projects in a limited number of sites; far fewer studies examine what happens once external support declines, or how models fare when adopted at scale by government systems (McNeil & Malena, 2010; World Bank, 2011). The literature provides much less detail on the “long route” whereby local experiments inform formal legislation, national policies, budget reforms and oversight architectures that can lock in accountability gains (World Bank, 2004; Fox, 2015). In Zambia, for example, important initiatives in health, education and social protection have not yet been matched by a comprehensive national legal and policy framework for social accountability; instead, accountability is dispersed across constitutional clauses and sector laws, with variable implementation (Mubanga, 2013; Mutuma & Kamau, 2017). Methodological weaknesses compound these limitations: indicators used to assess accountability, empowerment and state–society relations are often project-specific and not standardised, which hampers synthesis and meta-analysis; longitudinal panel studies that can speak to the durability of both direct and indirect outcomes are rare; and there is little systematic cost-effectiveness analysis comparing social accountability to alternative investments in governance reform or service delivery (McGee & Gaventa, 2011; Joshi, 2013). Emerging digital approaches—SMS platforms, online portals, social media—are expanding opportunities for feedback and mobilisation, but robust evidence on their reach among the poorest, their resilience to manipulation and their actual influence on decision-making remains limited (Open Institute, 2012; World Bank, 2011).

Finally, potential negative or unintended consequences are underexplored. Only a small subset of studies examines risks such as backlash against activists, increased social tensions, disillusionment when expectations are not met or “participation fatigue” where citizen input is solicited but not acted upon (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; McNeil & Malena, 2010). In summary, existing literature supports a cautious but positive view: social accountability mechanisms can and do produce meaningful direct improvements in service delivery and governance processes and generate important indirect gains in empowerment, trust and more responsive state–society relationships. These are plausibly linked to poverty reduction, particularly where poor people rely heavily on public services (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Fox, 2015). Yet the evidence base is still fragmented and often methodologically weak in isolating and quantifying these effects, especially over time and across diverse contexts. There is a clear need for more rigorous, longitudinal and context-sensitive research that explicitly distinguishes and traces both direct and indirect outcomes and examines the institutional and political conditions under which social accountability contributes most effectively to sustained poverty reduction—particularly in countries like Zambia, where promising but relatively isolated experiences coexist with weak legal frameworks, uneven institutional capacity and pronounced differences between resource-rich and resource-constrained districts (Malena & McNeil, 2010; Schaaf et al., 2017).

Direct and indirect Outcome on Social accountability

The research finding brings out the outcomes of social accountability interventions within the demographic profile of respondents. The sample was almost gender-balanced, with 49.0% male and 51.0% female, ensuring that both men’s and women’s perspectives on social accountability and service delivery were well represented.

Age-wise, respondents were predominantly middle-aged: 46.7% were 35–44 years, 22.6% were 45–54, 8.8% were 55–64, 16.1% were 65+ and 5.8% were 25–34. This reflects strong participation by adults most active in community structures while also capturing the views of older citizens with long-term experience of state–community interaction. Geographically, 64.2% of respondents came from Solwezi and 35.8% from Kalulushi, providing a comparative lens between a resource-rich, high-growth district and a more economically constrained one.

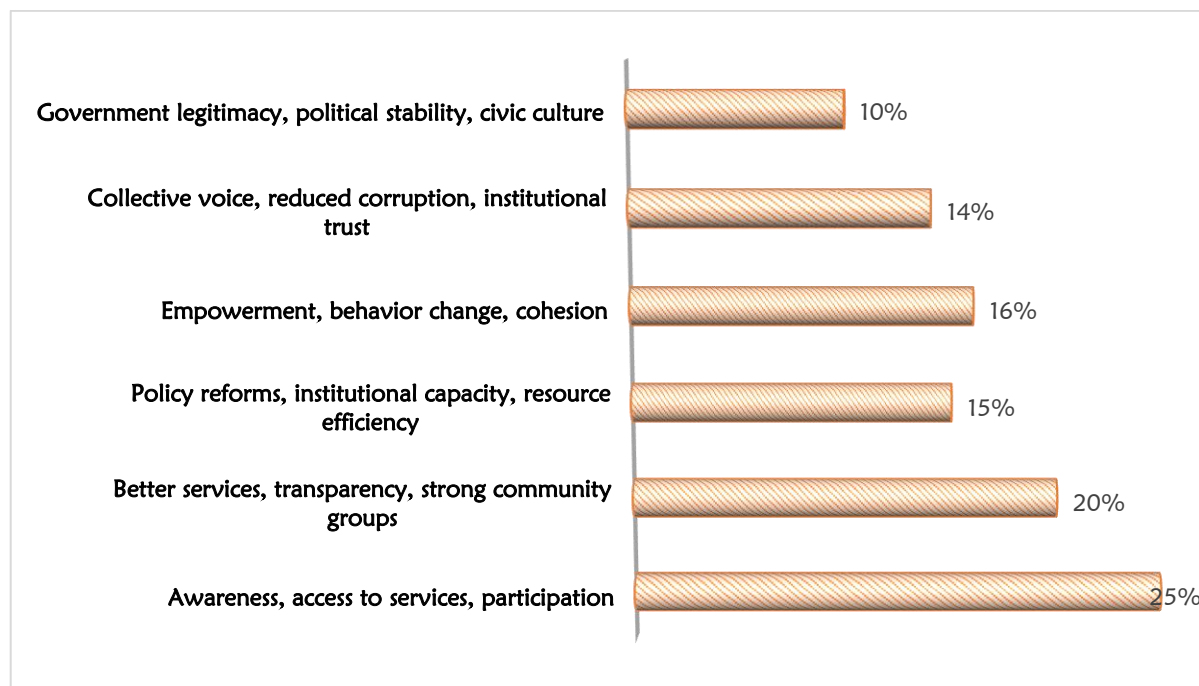


Figure 1: Direct and indirect outcomes of social accountability interventions at the household, community, and state levels

Against this backdrop, the quantitative findings in Figure 1 show that social accountability generated a wide range of statistically meaningful direct and indirect outcomes at household, community and state levels. At the micro level, 25% of respondents reported increased awareness of rights, better access to services and higher civic participation, while 20% cited concrete improvements in service delivery, greater transparency and stronger community group structures. At the systemic level, 15% associated social accountability with policy reforms, strengthened institutional capacity and more efficient resource use; 16% emphasised empowerment, behavioural change and improved social cohesion; 14% linked it to a stronger collective voice, reduced corruption and growing trust in institutions; and 10% pointed to enhanced government legitimacy, political stability and a stronger civic culture.

Outcome Variable	Spearman's ρ (Correlation Coefficient)	Significance (p-value)	Interpretation
Poverty Levels	-0.62	< 0.01	Strong negative correlation
Access to Basic Services	0.55	< 0.01	Moderate positive correlation
Perceptions of Corruption	-0.48	< 0.05	Moderate negative correlation
Health and Education Outcomes	0.57	< 0.01	Moderate positive correlation
Enhanced Livelihoods	0.50	< 0.01	Moderate positive correlation

Table1: Impact of Social Accountability Mechanisms: Spearman's Correlation Analysis on Poverty Reduction and Service Delivery Outcomes

These descriptive results are reinforced by the Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis (Table 1), which confirms that the observed patterns are statistically significant rather than incidental. There was a strong, statistically significant negative correlation between the degree of social accountability engagement and poverty levels ($\rho = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher participation in social accountability processes was associated with lower reported poverty. Moderate, statistically significant positive correlations were found between social accountability and improved access to basic services ($\rho = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$), better health and education outcomes ($\rho = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$) and enhanced livelihoods ($\rho = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, there was a moderate negative correlation between social accountability and perceptions of corruption ($\rho = -0.48$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that greater citizen oversight was linked to lower perceived corruption in welfare and service delivery programmes. These coefficients, all significant at the 1% or 5% level, provide robust statistical evidence that social accountability mechanisms are strongly and consistently associated with reductions in poverty, improvements in service delivery and governance, and shifts in how citizens experience and evaluate public institutions.

The qualitative component, aligned with the objective (To Assess the direct and indirect outcomes of social accountability interventions at the household, community, and state levels), explains how these statistically significant relationships are experienced in practice. Five interlinked themes emerged. First, increased awareness, access to services and civic participation: respondents in both Solwezi and Kalulushi described moving from not knowing "who to ask when things went wrong" to feeling entitled and able to engage district officers, attend ward development meetings and speak on behalf of marginalised groups, particularly women. Second, improved service delivery and transparency: community scorecards, interface meetings and citizen monitoring were directly linked to timely responses such as regular medicine supplies, posting budget and project information on public noticeboards and more reliable provision of water and health services. Third, empowerment, behavioural change and social cohesion: women and youth reported newfound confidence to report gender-based violence, organise petitions and support one another, transforming a culture of fear and resignation into one of collective agency and solidarity. Fourth, strengthened institutions and reduced corruption: respondents recounted how citizen monitoring exposed ghost projects, inflated contracts and fake beneficiary lists, leading to cancelled contracts and removal of fraudulent names and making it harder for officials and contractors to misuse funds. Fifth, policy influence, government legitimacy and civic culture: social audits and community feedback led councils to amend guidelines to include community representatives in project evaluation committees, while regular dialogue and budget sharing by officials helped rebuild trust and reposition citizens as partners rather than passive recipients.

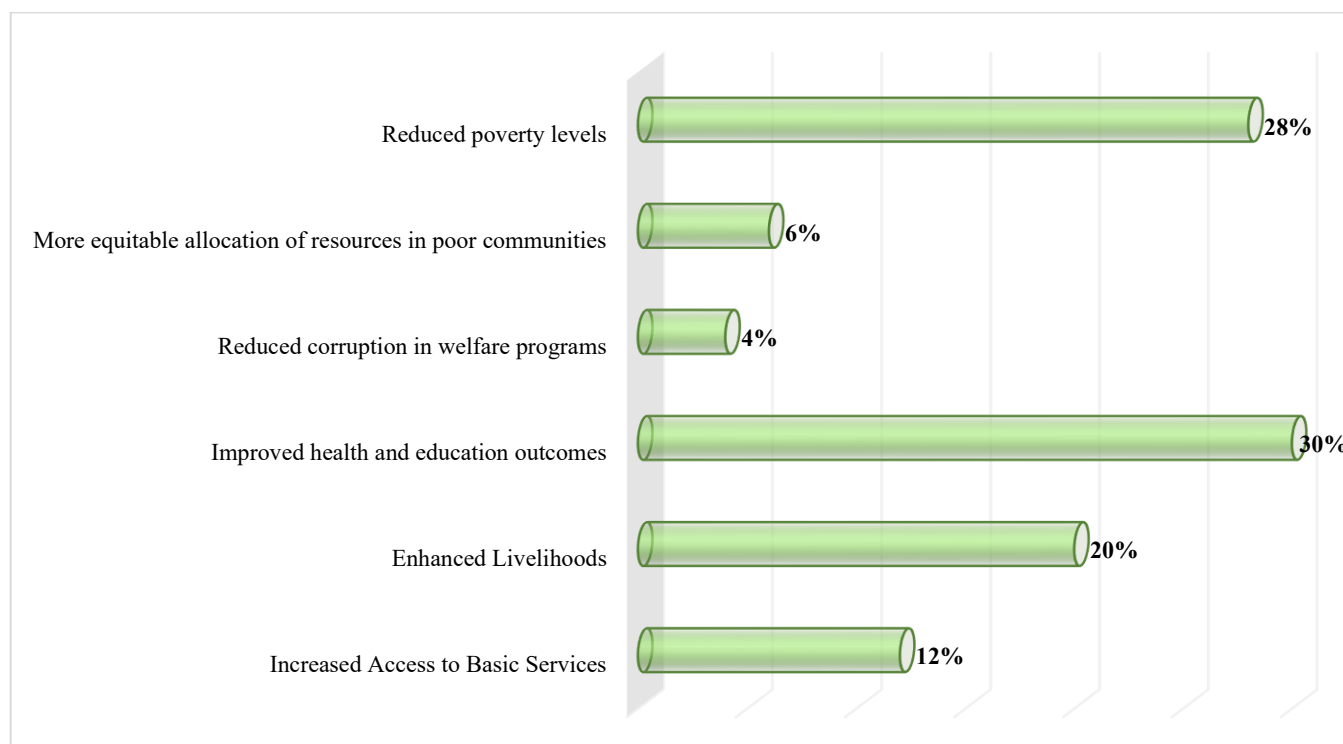


Figure 2: Impact of social accountability mechanisms on poverty reduction, improved service delivery outcomes, and strengthened state-society relations

The same pattern appears in the poverty and service-delivery-focused analysis (Figure 2). Here, 30% of respondents identified improved health and education outcomes as a key impact of social accountability, 28% perceived reduced poverty levels, 20% cited enhanced livelihoods, 12% increased access to basic services, 6% more equitable resource allocation and 4% reduced corruption. These findings are consistent with the correlation results: higher engagement in social accountability is statistically associated with lower poverty, better services and lower perceived corruption. Qualitative evidence illustrates the pathways: communities used ward committees and interface meetings to secure new boreholes and additional health staff; citizens monitored agricultural inputs and cooperative grants to prevent elite capture, prompting leadership changes and more transparent distribution; and public meetings where councillors presented budget allocations and expenditures made “it hard for anyone to steal or mislead us.” Participants also described feeling increasingly empowered to engage directly with councils and district officers, organise youth oversight of skills funds and co-plan projects, which in turn strengthened state–society relations and nurtured a civic culture based on shared responsibility and mutual accountability.

Overall, the statistical and qualitative evidence converge: in a largely middle-aged, gender-balanced population drawn from contrasting socio-economic contexts, higher levels of social accountability engagement are significantly associated with lower self-reported poverty, better access to and quality of basic services, reduced perceptions of corruption and stronger, more trust-based relations between citizens and the state. The verbatim accounts show how these quantitative patterns are produced in practice—through increased awareness, inclusive participation, transparent information, responsive local institutions and sustained capacity building. Together, these elements substantiate the conclusion that social accountability mechanisms in Solwezi and Kalulushi function as both a direct driver of service and welfare improvements and an indirect catalyst for deeper institutional and cultural change in support of poverty reduction and democratic governance.

DISCUSSION

The study demonstrates that social accountability interventions generate a wide range of direct and indirect outcomes at household, community and systemic levels. At the micro level, about 25% of respondents reported increased awareness of rights, improved access to services and greater civic participation, indicating a shift from passive service use to active citizenship. This aligns with Fox’s (2015) and Joshi’s (2017) arguments that when citizens are informed and empowered, they are more likely to claim entitlements, question duty-bearers and participate in decision-making. A further 20% highlighted improved service delivery, enhanced transparency and stronger community-based structures and monitoring mechanisms, reflecting a move from individual complaints to collective civic engagement. These findings are consistent with Tembo (2016) and World Bank (2018) evaluations showing that tools such as community scorecards, citizen report cards and expenditure tracking can improve service quality, staff responsiveness and accountability by creating structured spaces for dialogue between providers and users.

At the institutional and policy level, 15% of respondents pointed to policy reforms, institutional strengthening and more efficient resource use as outcomes of sustained citizen engagement. This resonates with Gaventa and Barrett’s (2015) synthesis of global cases, which shows that where governments provide channels for feedback—such as participatory budgeting, monitoring committees and social audits—social accountability can influence policy revisions, resource reallocations and procedural reforms that enhance transparency and inclusion. The qualitative evidence from Solwezi and Kalulushi illustrates how these aggregate patterns are experienced in practice: many participants reported that they had previously been unaware of their rights or how to approach authorities, but now feel entitled and able to engage health facilities, schools, ward committees and councils. Women and youth in particular described new opportunities to speak in public forums, participate in planning and challenge discrimination, echoing findings from Uganda and Malawi that social accountability can strengthen social cohesion and gender inclusion in governance (Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2016; O’Meally, 2013).

The study also found notable improvements in service delivery and transparency, especially in health, education and local infrastructure. Respondents linked these changes to community-based monitoring tools such as scorecards, suggestion boxes and public noticeboards, which made information on budgets, projects and entitlements accessible and increased pressure on officials to respond to complaints. This mirrors Björkman and

Svensson's (2009) evidence from Uganda that community monitoring can reduce absenteeism and improve health outcomes. Locally, participants reported more reliable drug supplies, additional health staff, better teacher attendance and new or rehabilitated boreholes, attributing these changes to sustained citizen oversight. At the same time, respondents described behavioural and cultural shifts: communities that once feared questioning authority now regularly raise issues, organise petitions and support one another to report abuses, particularly around gender-based violence. These changes in norms and relationships support McGee and Gaventa's (2016) contention that long-term social accountability can rebalance power between citizens and the state, increase trust and build social capital—effects that were especially visible among groups historically excluded from decision-making.

Institutionally, respondents recounted specific instances where citizen monitoring exposed inflated contracts, ghost projects and fake beneficiaries, leading to cancelled procurements, removal of fraudulent names and reallocation of funds to genuine priorities. This supports evidence from Transparency International (2019) and World Vision (2020) that community involvement in planning, budgeting and procurement can reduce opportunities for corruption and improve efficiency. Participants emphasised that the mere possibility of public exposure has a deterrent effect, making officials more cautious and reinforcing norms of prudence and openness. Beyond immediate corrective action, some local authorities were reported to have revised guidelines to formalise community representation in project evaluation and oversight committees. These developments buttress Joshi and Houtzager's (2012) argument that, when backed by political will, social accountability can become institutionalised within governance systems, strengthening legitimacy as citizens see their input reflected in rules and decisions.

At a broader development level, the outcomes reported by respondents demonstrate that social accountability contributes to improved sectoral performance and poverty reduction. Around 30% observed better health and education outcomes linked to enhanced community oversight, more equitable distribution of services and greater responsiveness from duty-bearers. A further 28% explicitly associated social accountability with reduced poverty, arguing that empowered communities are better able to influence priorities, demand fair resource allocation and ensure that programmes reach intended beneficiaries. Another 20% cited improved livelihood opportunities due to more transparent access to agricultural inputs, grants and skills initiatives, while smaller but important proportions reported increased access to basic services (12%), more equitable resource distribution (6%) and reduced corruption in welfare programmes (4%). These findings are consistent with evidence from the International Budget Partnership (2017) and Rocha Menocal and Sharma (2018) that citizen participation in planning and monitoring improves targeting, inclusiveness and sustainability of public investment. Overall, the results affirm that social accountability is not only a technical tool for fixing service gaps; it is a political and social process that democratizes development, strengthens accountable and responsive governance and helps create the conditions for more equitable and sustained poverty reduction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Direct outcomes of social accountability (service quality, access, responsiveness, reduced corruption) can be strengthened by:

- Embedding social accountability in law and policy, so tools like scorecards, audits and public hearings are mandatory, not ad hoc.
- Investing in citizen education and training on specific tools, so communities know their rights, can use scorecards, RTI, public hearings and monitoring effectively, and officials understand their obligations to respond.
- Ensuring proactive disclosure of budgets, plans and service reports in accessible formats, so communities have the information needed to monitor services and detect misuse of resources.
- Providing dedicated funding and high-level political backing for social accountability programmes, which stabilises and scales successful mechanisms.

- Building strong M&E systems and research partnerships, so direct effects on service delivery, corruption and resource use are tracked and fed back into programme design.

Indirect outcomes of social accountability (empowerment, inclusion, trust, institutional legitimacy, stronger state–society relations) can be enhanced with the following recommendations:

- Deliberately including marginalised groups—women, youth, persons with disabilities, minorities—and partnering with specialised NGOs to remove participation barriers, thereby deepening voice and equity.
- Expanding inclusive digital engagement and digital literacy, so technology-based platforms broaden, rather than narrow, participation.
- Fostering cross-actor collaboration among government, CSOs, media, faith-based organisations and development partners, which normalises citizen oversight, builds mutual understanding and reinforces institutional responsiveness over time.
- Using systematic evidence to demonstrate positive effects on trust, empowerment and legitimacy, helping entrench social accountability as a core element of democratic governance rather than a project add-on.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the direct and indirect outcomes of social accountability interventions in Solwezi and Kalulushi, and to assess how these mechanisms influence poverty reduction, service delivery and state–society relations. Drawing on mixed methods, the findings demonstrate that social accountability is both a practical tool for improving services and a deeper process of reconfiguring power, participation and trust between citizens and the state.

Quantitatively, social accountability engagement was strongly and significantly associated with better outcomes: higher participation correlated with lower reported poverty levels, improved access to basic services, better health and education outcomes, enhanced livelihoods, and reduced perceptions of corruption. At the household and community levels, respondents highlighted increased awareness of rights, improved access to services and greater civic participation, indicating a shift from passive receipt of services to active citizenship. Communities reported tangible improvements in health, education, water and local infrastructure, linked to tools such as community scorecards, interface meetings, social audits and public noticeboards, as well as more transparent resource allocation and reduced opportunities for misuse of funds.

Qualitative evidence from Solwezi and Kalulushi showed how these statistical patterns are produced in everyday practice. Social accountability platforms enabled citizens—especially women, youth and other previously marginalised groups—to understand entitlements, question duty-bearers, and participate in ward meetings, school committees and health boards. In both districts, respondents described a cultural shift from fear and resignation toward confidence, collective action and mutual support. Citizen monitoring exposed ghost projects, inflated contracts and fake beneficiary lists, prompting corrective action and, in some cases, changes to local guidelines and procedures. In this way, social accountability contributed not only to reactive redress of specific grievances, but also to proactive prevention of corruption and more prudent use of public resources.

At the systemic level, the study found emerging evidence of policy and institutional change. Local authorities in some instances revised rules to formalise community representation in project evaluation and oversight structures; officials increased the frequency and openness of consultations and information sharing; and relations between citizens and state actors became more collaborative. These indirect outcomes—greater empowerment, strengthened social cohesion, improved trust and enhanced institutional legitimacy—are critical for long-term democratic consolidation and sustained poverty reduction. They were visible in both the high-growth, resource-rich context of Solwezi and the more constrained setting of Kalulushi, though the specific entry points and constraints differed.

Taken together, the findings affirm that social accountability, when meaningfully supported, can:

- Improve the quality, accessibility and equity of public services;
- Reduce leakages and corrupt practices;
- Empower citizens and marginalised groups to influence public decisions; and
- Strengthen the legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness of local governance.

At the same time, the study underscores that these gains are neither automatic nor guaranteed. They depend on enabling conditions such as inclusive participation, timely and accessible information, responsive local institutions, sustained capacity building and supportive legal and policy frameworks. Without these, social accountability risks remaining fragmented, elite-driven or symbolic.

For Zambia, the evidence from Solwezi and Kalulushi suggests that integrating social accountability into formal governance systems—not treating it as a temporary project—offers a credible pathway to more effective poverty alleviation and service delivery. Institutionalising citizen oversight in law and policy, investing in civic education and digital inclusion, resourcing local accountability structures, and grounding reforms in systematic evidence would help move from isolated successes to durable, scalable impact. Ultimately, the study concludes that social accountability is not merely an add-on to development programmes; it is a foundational element of pro-poor, democratic governance and a necessary condition for achieving equitable and sustainable development outcomes

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