A TIME FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

A narrative of the empowered women of Karamoja and Acholi sub-region who are leading the drive to make leaders accountable for quality service delivery and effective resource allocation.
For communities to demand good governance and hold decision makers accountable, they must be well prepared for the task. Diakonia in partnership with the Forum for Women in Democracy received support from the European Union under the Democratic Governance and Accountability Programme (DGAP) to implement the Community Empowerment Project (CEP). In Kotido, Abim and Kitgum, the CEP builds the capacity of communities to participate in community governance and social accountability. The success of this project is highlighted in the Village Budget Clubs through which community elected leaders become experts at monitoring service delivery, budget processes, and advocacy to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people.
Akol had never imagined that she could ever change anything in her village. That role was for leaders—men who had the right. In her paternal society, women were treated like children—seen, not heard. Even though she had been selected by the community to lead their Village Budget Club, Akol was not aware that she could advocate for change in the use of resources in her village. It was an 8 hour journey organized by FOWODE under the Community Empowerment Project, to Mityana district that enlightened her.

During this week long exchange learning visit Akol was inspired by the Mityana Village Budget Club. It was a vibrant group that had not only become expert at budgeting and village savings but had also started profitable vegetable and plantain growing projects. The club also promoted healthy lifestyles such as family planning to encourage manageable family sizes. It was a club with a mission to change their circumstances.

Akol was both amazed and surprised that the Mityana Village Budget Club working as a team had advocated for the dismissal of an abusive head teacher in a community school and championed the construction of new classroom blocks. The club had also reported corrupt nurses at the Banda Health Centre who were fired for misconduct.

When she returned to Kanawat, an inspired Akol took charge, encouraging her club to advocate for change. The club solicited the support of their local councilor and other leaders and quickly formed their own savings group. They also successfully requested for allocation of land from the sub county through an existing government development program that they had never considered.

“...Our group has been given about 10 acres, by this sub county...because if you present your group idea there, they support you. They are the ones to plough; then you plant seeds”, says Mariam Akol. The group has successfully planted and harvested millet, sorghum and simsim.

FOWODE uses experiential learning including exchange visits to help concretize and improve relevance of the skills that they are building in the communities. When communities witness that others in similar circumstances can succeed at advocating for change they are spurred into action.

The Kanawat club now has 180 members, 108 of them women who are proactive and seeking economic opportunities. Improvements in household budgeting, hygiene, health and education are visible.

Christina, a club member says: “Now there is sanitation and hygiene in my family. I know how to budget things, for school for my children and for feeding my children. And even about health. There is even unity between me and my husband and my children.”

“There is change also because men at first were high above women. But now everybody is equal due to what FOWODE is doing. Everybody must be equal”, says Mariam. “I now believe that both men and women have the power to make leaders keep their promise.”

"I now believe that both men and women have the power to make leaders keep their promise.”
Mariam Akol, Village Budget Club leader
These women are different. Their approach is unique.” - Gwang, sub county Chairperson, Gulwotoro

The women of Gulwotoro like other women in the developing world are mostly poor, their voices unheard, rights and opportunities to social and economic development minimal. When Gwang, the sub county Chairperson says: “These women are different, their approach is unique”, it is not difficult to understand why. Avor Mariana, a member of the Gulwotor Village Budget Club (VBC) explains. “Before this we thought we were unimportant people and never saw ourselves talking to district leaders like Education Officers. But now we do, and are proud to represent our people”.

The women of Gulwotoro VBC now have a high self esteem, confidence and advocacy skills. Akecha one of the group members admits she was very timid before joining the group. Today she confidently states: “I am brave, I answer for myself”.

The women are particularly quick to mention that their most meaningful achievement is taking back their power at home. Like Akecha, Mariana’s household has been positively influenced, she is in charge of budgets and there is shared decision making with her husband. “We share responsibilities, we are not just confident, we are free. At home we make decisions together”, says Mariana.

For communities to demand good governance and hold decision makers accountable they must be well prepared for the task. The Village Budget Clubs build the capacity of regular citizens to understand their rights under the law and effective ways in which to get their leaders to pay attention and act accordingly.

The women of Gulwotoro take back their power

A people owned approach to advocacy

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Mariana Avoro, Village Club member

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“Service delivery begins from government but it’s the community leaders’ responsibility to sensitize the rest of the community to demand for services”

Esther Awor and Charles Abura, Community Budget Advisors, Longlelep

In post conflict Northern Uganda, many communities are still fragile and ignorant of their rights to quality social services. The tendency is for citizens to treat the provision of social services as a gift or favor from the government. As such, the capacity of citizens and civil society organizations to influence and demand for improvement in service delivery by the duty bearers is weak.

In a community where leaders share one bicycle, to reach distant areas advocating for fair accountable governance, their commitment is admirable. Esther Awor and Charles Abura are such leaders, trained as Community Budget Advisors, and they started a thriving Village Budget Club with 20 members, whom they mentor. This club has successfully held interface meetings with local leaders to lobby for better social services.

In one case, the VBC discovered that at a privately owned-government supported facility patients were being charged high consultation fees. The costs were unaffordable for most residents and so residents were avoiding the centre and suffering from easily treatable diseases. The VBC and their club members tirelessly protested these high costs and through several negotiations with hospital management, the club was able to get the prices reduced by more than 50% for children from UGX 5000 to UGX 2000 and from UGX 7000 to UGX 5000 for adults.

Esther is also particularly pleased about the changes they influenced at the local primary school where the VBC discovered that the head teacher was sending pupils to the bush to fetch firewood and water for the school, in a village with high insecurity due to cattle raider activity. Through the VBC advocacy, the school and community devised a solution where parents would collect firewood for the school in turns.

The club also convinced the community leaders to repair boreholes near the school to ensure close access to a safe water source. Additionally, Esther and Charles used their training to mentor club members in gender responsive budgeting by local government and household financial management. Most of the members had never even realized that government policies were intended to be gender responsive.

The group has successfully used community radios as part of their outreach activities to ensure advocacy messages reach a large part of the population.

“People were fearing, just because in our community here, it always men who are supposed to command. Women are not supposed to even respond to anything which is coming out of the men’s mouth. But now I even see them speaking up, they can… with no fear”, says Esther.
Caroline Ocheng, the LCV Councillor for Alerek sub-county, is also known as a woman of her word in the community.

Following her participation in Effective Legislative Engagement (ELE) training for women leaders to foster good governance and social accountability, Caroline was selected as the Chairperson of the women’s caucus formed in Alerek. The caucus developed an action plan to address key issues in the community focusing on the high maternal mortality rate and poor student performance at the local primary school.

The caucus’ initial visit to Alerek health centre III was distressing. The filth strewn on the premises and the dilapidation in the maternity ward was disheartening. Being mothers themselves, the team shed tears as they walked through the ward. “Where the newborns are placed had rusted, the washing containers were very dirty, they even had blood stains. I don’t know how many days it was left there. The single bed where the mothers rested after delivery had rusted”, observes Caroline.

As part of documenting the problems, photographs were taken to ensure there was a record for accountability. Caroline mobilized her caucus along with Village Budget Clubs from other sub-counties and together they took matters in their own hands. They bought soap and cleaning supplies and scrubbed the health centre. The health staff, ashamed at seeing the community cleaning up, started shoveling rubbish away from the premises. Word of the determined cleaning team led by the councillor spread fast. By the time the cleaning team arrived at Koya and Wilia health centers the staff had cleaned up their health centres. To concretise their achievements Caroline and her team requested an official meeting with the sub county chief and asked him to summon the Alerek Health center In-charge.

At the meeting, the VBC team tasked the health centre director to explain the dangerous and deplorable conditions. He revealed that the health center was understaffed as they had just lost a team of midwives. The caucus team while sympathetic recommended new health measures immediately.

When the team visited the centre on a follow up trip, new health staff had been hired and the premises were clean. Today more women are having their babies at the health centre and antenatal care attendance has increased, due to regular community outreaches by the health center. Between 2009-2011, only about 5 to10 mothers per month received care at the health centre, presently, 10 to 30 mothers deliver at the center per month. The community now trusts the health centre to deliver quality services. The journey began with Caroline’s determined action to lead the change they wanted to see.
I knew we had made progress the day a VBC (Village Budget Club) member at Alerek called me to witness the deplorable conditions at the health center. Much to my surprise I hadn’t been called to merely witness, the VBC had already taken to cleaning using what little they had, to purchase soap and cleaning supplies. This was the beginning of a full blown advocacy effort that resulted in new staff, a spotless health center and several other spotless health centers where managers had been warned of the unstoppable Alerek Village Budget Club.

Across Abim, Kitgum and Kotido, communities which were once ignorant of their rights or even that government owed them anything, are demanding accountable governance. Most gratifying is watching the club from day one where club members come to trainings unaware of their rights and power to demand change, and then seeing them evolve into aggressive advocates skilled in approaching leaders tactfully and persisting until desired change and promises made are fulfilled by the leadership.

David Obonyo, FOWODE field officer in Abim
Results focused advocacy

Male involvement in advocacy efforts is critical for results oriented approaches. In the Community Empowerment Project men are key partners in improving service delivery.

“the VBCs have opened the eyes and minds of duty bearers... we are now careful in the way we conduct ourselves...”
- Sub County Chief, Kotido

Reach in numbers

9 Village budget clubs reaching 3,000 people

60% of the VBC members are women

30 Civil society organizations trained in gender budgeting, monitoring and service delivery tracking

1,500 Gender Budget Guides developed to facilitate VBCs in tracking utilisation of resources by district authorities.

1,900 people reached in Karamoja and Acholi sub region to promote resource allocation and budget tracking at the grassroot level

150 Sub-county and District women councilors trained in Effective Legislative Engagement (ELE) to increase their leadership performance

500 easy to understand, demonstrative posters in local languages developed and distributed to communities to encourage participation in effective service delivery
Promising approaches

Building sustainable community driven change

Empowering communities with the skills they need to seek and participate in democratic governance and social accountability promises to deliver lasting change long after the CEP project has closed.

THE VILLAGE BUDGET CLUB (VBC) MODEL

A total of 180 men and women selected by the community were trained and participated in monitoring service delivery, pro-poor government programs, gender budgeting, resource tracking focusing on marginalized persons. The Village Budget Club is non partisan, with more than 60% of membership being women. The VBCs are leading their communities in demanding for their rights, quality services, equality and opportunity to contribute to democratic governance.

THE COMMUNITY BUDGET ADVISORS (CBA)

To assure continuity of efforts to empower communities in social accountability and participatory governance, the CEP built a team of trainers on the ground referred to as Community Budget Advisors (CBAs). A total of 25 CBAs were taken through a Trainer of Trainers process who then collaborated with district field officers to start, train, and mentor Village Budget Clubs. The CBAs are instrumental in ensuring that competent Village Budget Clubs are built and supported to continue achieving their mission even after the life of the project.

EFFECTIVE LEGISLATIVE ENGAGEMENT (ELE)

For women to lead confidently in a male dominated arena, it requires intentional preparation. Through the ELE training program, 6 trainings were attended by 150 sub-county and district women councillors from Kitgum, Abim and Kotido districts. The women were oriented in their responsibilities as councillors, taught about decentralization, advocacy, local government systems, and rules of procedure during council meetings. Across the three districts graduates of the ELE training are assuming leadership positions, tackling social problems and achieving pro-poor, gender responsive action. For example, Hon Namoe Rose Chilla, secretary for education and health Kotido district local government moved a motion “A road needs to be put up in Kotido east to connect to the two parts of the town” and she was seconded by Hon Beatrice Lanyero. The road which was originally impassable was repaired and it is now accessible by the community.

BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The CEP project trains civil society organizations (CSO) as key partners in advocacy for quality public services as CSOs have proven ability to mobilize locals for change and effectively access local government leaders which is an important way to sustain social accountability at the grass root level. CEP offered trainings to 30 CSO members and promising results already indicate that these organisations are actively engaging in public discourse and influencing local government action. An example was the active participation of CSOs in Abim District in consultative meetings with the National Planning Authority for one of Uganda’s key development strategies “Vision 2040”. The Abim CSOs were also active members in the Karamoja Protection Working group, while Kitgum District Farmers’ Association (KIDFA) participated in the district’s budget conference to analyse the budget and suggest recommendations to benefit the poor and marginalized. These meetings ensure that the real needs of the communities are taken into account.

BUILDING CAPACITY IN GENDER BUDGETING

One hundred and fifty local government councillors from all the sub counties in the districts of Kitgum, Abim and Kotido were trained on gender budgeting. Trainees were able to deepen their knowledge of the budgeting and planning process and understand the importance of ensuring that both women and men and marginalized groups participate in policy and budget development processes. Topics included: gender concepts; gender and the economy; gender and policies; understanding budgets; local government budget cycle; rights based approaches; public accountability; social accountability tools; effective advocacy; participatory democracy.

Participant from Rural Women’s Activists (NARWOA), Kotido district.
About FOWODE

Vision
A just and fair society where women and men equally participate in and benefit from decision-making processes.

Mission
To promote gender equality in all areas of decision making through capacity development, community empowerment, policy engagement and strategic partnerships.

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The European Union comprises 27 Member States who have decided to gradually link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together during a period of 50 years, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.

DGAP is a 3 year programme funded under the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) of the European Union (EU). DGAP is host to a combination of efforts by the Government of Uganda Institutions, the European Union and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to contribute to the evolution of an environment where citizens enjoy their basic and fundamental rights as a precursor to effecting positive change in their socio-economic and political well-being.

FOWODE is a non-partisan Women’s organization operating in Uganda. FOWODE’s Vision is a just and fair society where women and men equally participate in and benefit from decision-making processes. Our mission is to promote gender equality in all areas of decision making through capacity development, community empowerment, policy engagement and strategic partnerships.

Diakonia is a Christian development organisation working together with local partners for sustainable change for the most vulnerable people of the world. Diakonia’s vision is for each and every human being to live a dignified existence in a just and sustainable world. The mission is to change the unfair political, economic and social structures that generate poverty, oppression and violence.

In December 2011, Diakonia in partnership with Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) secured a grant from the European Union under the Democratic Governance and Accountability Programme Uganda office (DGAP) to scale up support for the promotion of democratic governance and social accountability in Karamoja and Acholi sub regions. The project aimed at "Promoting good governance and social accountability through empowering citizens to demand for effective service delivery from December 2011 to June 2013.

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