

A strengths perspective on social  
accountability: informing citizen and  
state action for improved services  
and development

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## **CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Date:

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## **Abstract**

Informed by practical knowledge of research participants and theoretical understandings from strengths-based approaches and dialogue literature, this thesis proposes a redescription of social accountability.

The research is focused on social accountability, an approach within the field of international development, which seeks to increase citizen participation in demanding accountability from the state. In this thesis the notion of strengths-based change is explored and drawn on to offer explanation of social accountability practice.

Citizen Voice and Action (CVA), implemented by an international non-government organisation (INGO), has been used as a case study of social accountability. Data from three sources: learning workshops with INGO staff, case study reports of programs in Uganda and Armenia and interviews with citizens, service providers, local government officials and INGO staff from these two countries, analysed through Grounded Theory, informed the research findings. Action research methodology and an appreciative stance to inquiry framed the research focus.

Drawing on experiences of CVA participants, this thesis demonstrates that social accountability practice includes a strengths perspective to creating change. Eight dimensions of change which incorporate a strengths perspective within the practice of CVA are identified. Valuing the presence of strengths, the practice of dialogue and improving relations between citizens and state workers are described as key enablers of change. A review of social accountability literature highlights that more recent understandings of social accountability resonate with the research findings, though don't offer a complete explanation. Literature on strengths-based approaches, positive psychology and dialogue are explored and are found to provide a theoretical explanation of the experiences of CVA described by the research participants.

The research identifies that whilst a strengths perspective is demonstrated in social accountability practice there is an opportunity for this perspective to be further developed. Founded on the practical knowledge of the research participants, theoretical

foundations of strengths-based approaches and dialogue, social accountability informed by a strengths perspective is conceptualised. Consideration of how this could work in practice is provided along with implications for the development sector more broadly.

This thesis presents the first use of a strengths perspective as a way to explain the practice of social accountability. Based on the practice of CVA revealed in this research and theoretical explanation, the thesis concludes that a strengths perspective is complementary to the practice of social accountability and provides an effective means of transforming citizen–state relationships to support the delivery of quality public services.