1. Introduction

Accountability for Water is a new global programme of action & research which will improve water governance and water service delivery, and accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Accountability can be defined as the ability to review, explain, and report performance against rules, responsibilities, and obligations, and to react constructively to improve performance through sanctions, incentives, or corrective measures. Accountability is essential for universal access to safe water, sanitation, & hygiene; sustainable water resource management and for resilience to climate impacts such as flooding and drought. To fully harness the potential of stronger accountability, better knowledge is needed about ‘what works and why?’ in different water management contexts.

Stakeholders in Ethiopia have identified an urgent need to understand what stimulates and sustains citizen and government engagement in accountability processes, and how an enabling environment can be nurtured.

Over the next 24 months, the Accountability for Water Programme will work with stakeholders across three workstreams:

1. Research and knowledge generation: Professional Research Fellows will be supported to do research of practical value to their organisations.
2. Outreach and uptake: Peer-to-peer learning, events, practice papers, methodological guidance, case studies, webinars and an online knowledge platform at www.accountabilityforwater.org.
3. **Ensuring legacy**: Support for the community of practice and learning to develop country, regional and global Accountability for Water strategies, and a new dynamic research group.

Although lessons and outputs will have global relevance, in response to interest from stakeholders, the initial phase of work will focus on Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia, as well as at a pan-Africa scale.

To be successful, this programme must deliver valuable and usable knowledge for stakeholders in Ethiopia. To support programme stakeholders in Ethiopia, and as an entry point for further discussion, this briefing note therefore sets out some of the emerging knowledge priorities already identified. Its contents are drawn from:

- The results of key informant interviews and workshops in 2019 with over 36 senior sector stakeholders from the government, academia, NGO and donor community in Ethiopia.
- The results of a global review of available literature and evidence which identified seven papers, reports and articles on the topic in Ethiopia.¹

The contextual setting is briefly introduced, followed by reflections on the knowledge priorities identified by stakeholders and those emerging from the literature, before concluding with a summary and way forward.

**2. The Ethiopian Context**

![WASH access](image)

Nearly 60% of Ethiopians lack access to a basic water supply, over 90% lack basic sanitation and over 90% lack basic hygiene.

Despite impressive progress against the government’s target of providing universal access to water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) by 2020, Ethiopia and its citizens still face multiple water-related challenges.

Only around 40% of Ethiopians use at least basic water services, and basic sanitation and hygiene use is below 10% of the population. Over 30% of Ethiopians don’t use an improved water source of any kind, and over 80% don’t have access to improved sanitation.²

The implications for economic and social progress are significant, with poor WASH services attributable for up to 80% of communicable diseases, and 70,000 under-five deaths per year due to diarrhoea.³

Commentators note that it is often limitations in the governance of public services which
undermines provision. Accountability for operation and maintenance is a particular challenge, with around one-third of rural water supply projects estimated to be non-functional.vi

Alongside the imperatives for improved domestic and municipal WASH, Ethiopia’s development trajectory is closely tied to improved water resource management and resilience to climate shocks. Whilst Ethiopia enjoys relatively abundant water resources, it is considered to be water stressed because of rapidly escalating demand and uneven distribution of rainfall both in time and amount, and faces economic water scarcity, limited infrastructure and human capacity to satisfy demand for water. Rapid increases in water abstraction are planned and underway to drive the country’s economic growth plans, through rapid expansion of irrigated agriculture, abstraction for industry, and hydro-electric power generation even though achievement is way behind potential in all respects. High levels of fluoride and salts throughout the groundwater of the Rift Valley, a highly variable climate with regular flooding and drought events, which are expected to become more intense and frequent as a result of climate change exacerbate the challenges facing sustainable water management, together with expanding urbanization. In this context, the effective governance, allocation and protection of Ethiopia’s water resources, and sustainable watershed management are national and regional priorities. Implementation of Integrated Water Resource Management in Ethiopia has been assessed as low – to medium-low.vi

Significant effort has been invested in improving water security by the Ethiopian government and its development partners, and the current institutional arrangements and focused leadership offer great potential to lever improved water services and governance, with a multiplier effect for economic and social progress. Stakeholders from both within and outside government recognise the key role of stronger accountability in these efforts to address Ethiopia’s water challenges. The country’s evolving political economy, and existing experience and track record in accountability initiatives offer an important platform to build from. For example, the Ethiopia Social Accountability Programme has been working for many years to enhance the voice of citizens and response of government to improve basic services like WASH, and offers a fantastic opportunity to generate and scale lessons.

An estimated 93 percent of all water withdrawals in the country (surface water and groundwater) are for agricultural use, much higher than the global average of 70 percent. Rapid expansion is planned to exploit the country’s available renewable water resources.

Natural variability in rainfall patterns and distribution, punctuated by extreme climatic events, has thrust many regions into conditions of extreme water scarcity, degraded water quality and chronic food insecurity. At the other extreme, flooding is a significant problem in some parts of Ethiopia. Compounding the unpredictable nature of the country’s rainfall is the shortage of existing water related infrastructure.

Improving river basin governance, the administration and allocation of water between and within sectors, the protection of ecosystem and landscape services, the prevention of pollution and building resilience to drought and floods are pressing priorities. Accountability of water users, sectors and institutions responsible for these functions will be a central pillar in the country’s growth.

Over 180 stakeholders from many countries were consulted as part of the programme development. This process identified four accountability questions facing the sector globally:
• What mechanisms and approaches have been shown to enhance accountability and why?
• What stimulates and sustains citizen engagement in accountability and advocacy?
• What stimulates and sustains government responsiveness?
• What knowledge and support is needed to strengthen accountability, and how can this be delivered in sustainable and legitimate ways?

To be successful, this programme must be relevant and deliver valuable and usable knowledge for stakeholders in Ethiopia. It must contribute towards enabling them to address their priorities. This briefing note therefore sets out some of the emerging knowledge priorities already identified for Ethiopia. The contents are drawn from:

• The results of key informant interviews and workshops in 2019 with senior sector stakeholders from the government, academia, NGO and donor community in Ethiopia.

• The results of a global review of available literature and evidence which identified seven papers, reports and articles on the topic in Ethiopia. vii

In the remaining pages of this briefing note, the contextual setting is briefly introduced, followed by reflections on the knowledge priorities identified by stakeholders and those emerging from the literature, before concluding with a summary and way forward.

3. Emerging research priorities

All the issues raised by stakeholders have been grouped here into thematic areas: Citizen dynamics—community capacity and incentives; Governance dynamics—inter-agency accountability and implementation of rules and regulations; and enabling environment—opening civic space and expanding access to data and information. These themes are not an exhaustive list of potential areas for research, rather they are the priorities identified by stakeholders consulted, supported by the evidence review.

3.1 Citizen dynamics: community capacity and incentives

Stakeholders identified prevailing attitudes and priorities among some water users as a barrier. Specifically, they highlighted how water availability is taken for granted as a ‘free’ resource, externalising costs and without attributing concern or value to its sustainability. The focus on maximising abstraction limits attention on how to protecting and conserving water sources, including sustaining the utilities of existing facilities.

Stakeholders also emphasised considering how citizens become aware of their entitlements and rights to water. Better understanding the motives for citizens’ participation may improve water outcomes through a more inclusive policy, planning and programming processes. Accountability issues were prioritised - how could communities be empowered to hold service providers accountable? And, where relevant, how to ensure community capacity to manage water facilities and monitor accountability (for example through training, contributions or ownership).
The evidence review showed the importance of new research and analysis to understand how trust can be cultivated and a sense of ownership instilled, through exercises to identify local priorities, and ensure that community labour in water resources management is recognised and valued. ‘Participatory’ models with ‘narrow and inflexible’ channels for citizen participation may deter and create additional burden on poor or low-income community members and basic service providers (health extension workers, for example) whose capacities maybe already overstretched. In a context of under-resourced and over-stretched public services, payment for additional labour may therefore be required as in the Productive Safety Net Programme.

Evidence from Ethiopia’s ESAP 2 programme supports the importance of consensus building and shared knowledge to achieve change. Knowledge of water standards and agreeing on user fees, supported by training and participatory meetings between water users and service providers at kebele, woreda and higher levels were found to improve access to drinking water facilities of rural communities. This improved the attitudes, motivation and skills of stakeholders. Finally, budget tracking has shown promising results to date in participatory WASH programmes and could benefit from further study into its additional applications.

3.2 Governance dynamics: inter-agency accountability, implementation of rules and regulations

Stakeholders appealed for greater attention on the enactment of rules, regulations and responsibilities. This included investigating the adequacy of the rules and regulations related to water allocation and pricing for non-potable water, pollution control and conflict resolution. It is then necessary to assess the extent to which these rules, regulations and responsibilities are adequate and implemented, monitored and evaluated. It will then be essential to identify the challenges facing their implementation processes. For example, to scrutinise how the clarity and harmonisation of roles, and enforcement of relevant laws, rules and regulations can be addressed through strengthened accountability.

Stakeholders identified the need to improve accountability between the multiple levels of government responsible for water, where lines of accountability are currently weak. Inter-agency accountability could present a useful focus for future research, investigating how accountability monitoring influences priority setting, efficiency and synergy in government interventions. According to stakeholders areas of research that could help resolve issues include:

- How the method of revenue collection can promote accountability of service providers and customers
- Why more attention is given to the construction of new facilities, compared to the repair of broken facilities (20-30% are dysfunctional at any time) and sustainability of facilities.

3.3 Enabling environment: shared data and open civic space

Access to reliable data and information emerged as a key component of equitable and accountable decision making. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of balancing attention between the different sub-sectors of the water sector (WASH, agriculture, forestry, industry, environment), and the need to address latent (and sometimes overt) conflict between upstream and downstream
catchment communities. They stressed the need for further knowledge to understand the dynamics of the Rift Valley areas facing huge water shortages, which are under stress from climate disruptions, growing urban demand, and accelerating development pressures. Stakeholders also flagged the opportunity to learn from long-term and wide-scale accountability initiatives such as ESAP and the 20 Towns Programme to help shape the formation of a new water regulator and its citizen engagement platforms. Both the consultative meetings and the national review highlight the need for more balance among the different water sector contexts, with agricultural water management being particular blind spot, despite its significance to Ethiopia’s economy.

The appetite for developing a new water regulator and citizen engagement platforms calls for good understanding of the conditions that enable accountability mechanisms to succeed. Particular attention must be paid to the role of explanation, education and training to ensure ownership of accountability tools and processes. Assessing the impact of the Millennium Water Alliance Ethiopia programme, Dundon and Jaleta (2013), observe how collaborative design processes could result in a common framework, minimum standards and set of indicators to strengthen monitoring and auditing practices. Evidence finds that improved access to data can nurture and strengthen accountability initiatives, through the creation of simple, purpose-built, information systems that can be placed at the disposal of communities, funders and other stakeholders. This could cultivate a positive learning environment, with project staff well-aligned to community needs.

Demonstrating the positive impact of accountability can be an effective way to win policy champions in government. On the transformative impact of gender responsive budgeting, Nass et al, 2018, found that Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) could transform attitudes and bring ‘abstract gender equality principles to life’. However, this required sustained pressure, proper explanation and training as well as openness of both communities and public officials.

Maintaining Ethiopia’s recent opening of civil space will be an important enabling factor. Authoritarian political culture and restrictive laws on civil society could limit the flow of reliable information, hinder evidence-based policymaking, and constrain the abilities of donors and CSOs to pursue rights-based advocacy.

Social accountability instruments such as the woreda budgetary block grants could similarly be compromised by autocratic government. Openness to improved accountability is variable at the various levels of government, so accountability practice could benefit from knowledge on the most appropriate strategies to navigate unfavourable political and institutional conditions. For example, by considering how civil society can leverage influence in tightly controlled political contexts, or identifying public officials who are willing to champion the accountability agenda.

**3.4 Additional considerations**

The evidence review also found that evidence-based advocacy mechanisms were largely overlooked in the published research, with no studies investigating the effects of lobbying, freedom of information or media campaigns, and only one considering dialogue processes. Similarly, there was little or no evidence found on the effects of formal statutory accountability mechanisms, including ombudsman services, citizen oversight panels, or public interest litigation.
4. Conclusion

The emerging research agenda identified by stakeholders and confirmed by the literature review can be organised according to three broad clusters. These are citizen dynamics, governance dynamics, and enabling environment. Pursuing this research agenda will provide guidance and direction to generate greater inclusion, improve the functioning of water management institutions, and open space for citizen input through civil society organisations.

Citizen Dynamics:

Key questions identified for research in this priority research area are:

- How do citizens learn about their water rights and entitlements?
- How can this stimulate them to take action mobilising accountability mechanisms to improve water outcomes?
- Taking into account the lessons from the experience of customer forums to scale up accountability in both urban and rural contexts, what are the barriers to community capacity and incentives?

Governance Dynamics:

How to improve clarity and harmonisation of roles and responsibilities, and to ensure that those trying to implement policies are supported by the system rather than undermined by it. Specific concerns include:

- The obstacles to effective enforcement of rules and regulations, especially as they relate to water allocation and pricing for non-potable water, pollution control and conflict resolution
- Assessing how rules, regulations and responsibilities are implemented, monitored and evaluated
- Identifying how regulatory bodies could improve the accountability of service providers.

Enabling Environment

External donors could play a constructive role supporting accountability in Ethiopia’s political context. Research into strategic efforts to help government sectors better coordinate and civil society navigate constraints could benefit accountability in the water sector. Specifically, it should consider:

- Building relationships with accountability champions in government to advance the accountability agenda
- Defending the integrity of an independent civil society which itself is held to account.
- Common standards and indicators to improve access to data
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