

Social Accountability Learning Paper

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IT TAKES

Advancing Community Engagement through the Social Accountability Approach in Haiti

Context

Haiti is facing a severe humanitarian crisis driven by political instability, recurrent natural disasters, and escalating violence, resulting in widespread food insecurity. These conditions have triggered large-scale displacement, with the number of internally displaced persons rising from 315,000 in December 2023 to over 1.4 million by September 2025. Throughout 2025, living conditions further deteriorated as armed groups targeted neighbourhoods, leading to frequent looting and the destruction of homes and health facilities. The crisis has also eroded social cohesion, deepening divisions between communities and fostering fear, loss of belonging, and limited ownership over living spaces. In 2025, an estimated one in two Haitians experienced acute food insecurity.

Overview

Social accountability promotes advocacy efforts to be conducted by community members, ranging from individuals to informal groups to civil society organisations. These efforts target authorities and decision-makers at all levels (local, national, international), with the following objectives:

- Strengthen citizen voice and agency.
- Improve the accessibility, equity, and quality of services.
- Build trust between communities and institutions.
- Foster inclusive, participatory, and accountable governance.

The use of violence is spreading in Haitian society, with over 8,100 people killed by violence related to armed groups in 2025, a 44% increase compared to 2024. Violence is increasingly seen as the only way to bring any form of change. Social accountability is used to show that change can be brought about through non-violent means, to show that energy can be used in a constructive rather than destructive way.

There are two prerequisites for social accountability to work. Firstly, to engage with legitimate arguments based on evidence, without violence, to force the authorities to take responsibility by exercising their institutional mandate. Secondly, any group (formal or informal) must be accountable to the population they aim to represent. Social accountability is subsequently able to contribute to better governance in three focal ways:

1. Constructive civic engagement for greater participation in community, public or political affairs, instead of violent protest movements that are the common form of expression.
2. Changing perceptions among community members on the mistaken belief that they cannot transform their lives for the better and take part in political activities, except through violent means.
3. Introduce accountability mechanisms, to prevent corruption and foster a culture of transparency and trust.

The Social Accountability approach is not a one-off intervention, but a continuous process that gives agency to citizens, especially those who are often excluded, to hold duty-bearers accountable for service delivery, transparency, and good governance.

The approach aims for long term impact, in the way that the changed perceptions and accountability mechanisms will survive the period of Concern's direct intervention. As this approach continues to be integrated across our programmes in Haiti, it offers a meaningful pathway to sustainable, community-led development anchored in human rights and social justice.

The Approach

In 2021, the Haiti Country Programme made a strategic commitment to embedding the Social Accountability approach into its programming, recognising its potential to transform how communities engage with governance structures and service providers. This commitment led to intentional efforts to build staff capacity in the approach and to strengthen the role of project participants as collaborators and agents of change.

Strengthening Community Engagement and Participation

As part of this commitment, and with the broader objective of laying the groundwork for mutual accountability, where citizens and institutions engage in a two-way dialogue anchored in rights, responsibilities, and trust, a series of training sessions were organised for Concern staff. These sessions focused on equipping staff with the tools necessary to support communities in understanding and claiming their rights, in engaging meaningfully with the institutions that affect their lives, and in fostering an enabling environment in which public institutions are responsive to citizen voices.

Subsequent training sessions were organised for Concern's local partner Community Mobilisers and Protection Focal Points from Cite Soleil, Ouest Department, and with members from REFAF, a Women's Network the Centre Department, to deepen their understanding of the Social Accountability approach and its core mechanisms, emphasising their practical relevance in resource allocation, participatory decision-making, and performance monitoring at the community level.

Integrating Social Accountability into Programming

Within four months of Concern's strategic commitment in 2021 to embed the Social Accountability approach into programming, tangible results emerged. One notable example was in Cité Soleil, where community members voluntarily provided training spaces for project activities. This marked a significant shift toward increased local ownership and shared responsibility, clear evidence of growing community investment in collective development outcomes. However, at the same time some legacy practices, such as the routine provision of transportation stipends for training participants, remained in place. This was reviewed the following year, with a focus on transitioning to strategies that foster intrinsic motivation, sustained engagement, and community leadership.

Another example emerged from REFAF's advocacy efforts on behalf of the Health Centre in Savanette, a town located 150 km from Port-au-Prince. During the Social Accountability training in December 2021, community members identified the lack of critical infrastructure, such as bridges, water points, roads, and health facilities as key barriers to equity and service quality for Savanette. In response, the group collaboratively drafted and submitted a formal request to the Departmental Ministry of Health and Population. Two months later, following sustained follow-up, the Health Centre in Savanette was equipped with both an ambulance and a full-time nurse, an early but significant outcome of locally led accountability and engagement.

Although these two initiatives represent 'quick wins', their success also highlights several critical enabling factors: political will and space for civic participation; strong facilitation and capacity-building; clear follow-up mechanisms and feedback loops.

It is important to recognise that sustaining the outcomes of Social Accountability efforts requires time, persistence, and a long-term commitment to building trust and promoting inclusive governance. Fostering civic engagement,

strengthening dialogue between communities and institutions, and cultivating shared responsibility are all essential for reinforcing systems that are truly responsive to the needs of the people.

Empowering Youth Through Civic Engagement and Peacebuilding

While the Social Accountability approach continues to evolve through ongoing engagement with project participants, its impact is also visible, particularly among the youth involved in the Semans Lape (Seeds of Peace) project, funded by the UN Peacebuilding Fund. In 2021, a series of training sessions on Social Accountability, Communication, and Civic Engagement were delivered to youth from Bel Air, Cité Soleil, and Saint Martin. These sessions equipped the youth participants with the tools to reframe conflict narratives, take active roles in local peacebuilding efforts, and engage with multiple stakeholders to advocate for change. This emerging confidence, voice, and engagement among young people reflects a promising foundation for sustained peacebuilding and inclusive governance and underscores the transformative potential of the Social Accountability approach when tailored to the aspirations of youth in fragile urban settings.

Since 2022, a continuous cycle of training and refresher sessions on the Social Accountability approach has been delivered to youth groups across the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince and Savanette, leading to the formation of Youth Consultative Committees. These sessions equipped young leaders with the tools to promote civic engagement and responsive governance, resulting in a series of impactful youth-led initiatives, including community forums, political dialogues, and theatrical presentations. With support from Concern, two of these groups (Rasanbleman Sitwayen ak Sitwayèn Kominote Aktif Pou Devlopman Dirab (RASSKADD) and Teyat Fanm Angaje Pou Devlopman Moun An Ayiti (TEFADMA)), based in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince achieved legal recognition in 2024 from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MAST).

Since their registration TEFADMA has organised four theatre-debate presentations, reaching 369 women and 233 men, focusing on the impact of conflict on women. Whilst RASSKADD has led a range of initiatives including a consultation with 63 women and 16 men on early pregnancy and its link to violence; a community awareness campaign with 686 participants and a Civil Society Forum involving 56 women and 34 men.

These achievements reflect the growing capacity and influence of youth as key actors in advancing social accountability and inclusive local governance.

Initiatives implemented since the establishment of the Social Accountability in Concern

- Following training in social accountability in 2022, REFAF members have been able to mobilise the community around gender issues and community needs on health. This led to the Centre's health department providing the commune of Hinche with an ambulance service.
- RASSKADD members have undertaken a multi-stage initiative. Following a survey conducted by RASSKADD on the number of young victims of early pregnancy, the association organised a campaign against early pregnancy between late 2023 and 2024. This included the organisation of a forum with civil society actors and a political dialogue with members of parliament to present the report on early pregnancy in their communities. This was widely recognised as a priority and the forum allowed community members to detail the reality of the issue to their representatives in Parliament.
- A network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including RASSKADD, organised a forum on corruption in Haiti in December 2024, with the participation of the anti-corruption unit (Unité de Lutte Contre la Corruption, ULCC), the main body responsible for combating corruption in Haiti. CSOs have been able to discuss directly with ULCC investigators to share what they perceive as being the oversights and priorities in tackling corruption.

- In November 2025, a federation of 22 Community Based Organisations was set up and organised a community forum on waste management with the participation of around 100 representatives from government, civil society, NGOs and United Nations agencies. Commitments have been made by waste collection and disposal services as part of this forum, and the community will continue to hold these services accountable against these commitments.

Challenges

- **Participation in political affairs is perceived as dangerous**, due to the levels of violence and a Haitian proverb encouraging inaction (*“Je wè, bouch pe”* / “we see and we remain silent”) so as not to be targeted by armed groups. This has led to a massive decline in citizen participation.

Mitigation: Emphasis on recent successes, and on existing ways to express their voice as citizens with low risk of being exposed to violence.

- **Lack of accountability among certain community actors:** CBO members, as well as authorities, feel uncomfortable reporting (on time) either to us (Concern) for having subsidised them or to the population for whom they are undertaking the initiative.

Mitigation: Concern requires CBOs to implement accountability mechanisms for funded initiatives; and training for both CBOs and state authorities, including the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Civic Action (MJSAC).

- **Disconnect between state entities and local communities**, including ignorance of the role of certain institutions and negative prejudice on the motives of people who get involved in civil service.

Mitigation: We encourage community actors to learn about institutional mandates, meet people who work in certain institutions to increase awareness and dispel some of the existing negative narratives.

Lessons Learned

A community is not monolithic

It is essential to recognise that every community is made of distinct groups that can be antagonistic at times. The work is therefore to identify issues and problems shared by most, and work for a common good beyond groups' divergent interests.

Time investment

Working on any form of behavioural or community change is an effort that requires long term investment in a community. Unfortunately, this work rarely matches the funding opportunities available for aid organisations in the Haiti context.

Difficulties in mobilising the larger community for dialogues

It is difficult to encourage individuals to participate, knowing that they will not receive anything concrete out of their involvement (per diem or a meal). There is a need for a greater level of coordination between humanitarian actors to have a common approach around community engagement. The fact that certain actors constantly use per diems or food to attract people to certain activities creates an attitude of dependency vis-à-vis such giveaways, which in turn reduces the level of engagement in organic community-led initiatives.

Recommendations

Collaboration versus confrontation

A common attitude is one of confrontation when communities or civil society attempt to claim their rights or point to a problem. Blaming and criticising have strong limits in what they can achieve in terms of working towards an improved situation. The recommendation is to frame the effort as a joint one with the authorities targeted, pointing to a solution rather than a problem, proposing to work together on that solution, and to show how this effort will solve a problem that affects not only the population but also the authorities themselves.

Monitoring civil servants in the use of public resources

Accountability to the population can only appear where there is a level of monitoring by that population. It is therefore one of the most essential mechanisms of social accountability. The monitoring or control must be embedded at various stages of decision-making. This can be done through platforms and mechanisms where communication is open and regular and where civil society actors or community members can be involved in budgeting, planning and performance monitoring in relation to the use of public resources.

Good practices within initiatives undertaken by CSOs

Exemplarity is crucial when it comes to the initiatives managed by civil society actors. As civil society actors are asking the authorities to be more transparent and accountable, these same actors must lead by example in the way they manage funds and programmes themselves, applying the principles and values they demand of others.

Allocate adequate time for community dialogue

Developing communication and having an impact on behavioural or structural changes takes time. However, donor-funded projects are often short in the Haitian context, focused mostly on addressing immediate short-term humanitarian needs. This leads to difficulties in developing a strong continuity in the accompaniment provided to local actors, donors must recognise that the work on social cohesion must be undertaken throughout a conflict and cannot simply wait for it to end.

Testimonials

"This type of training is of paramount importance in Haiti. Not only for participants in the Concern programme and members of the community, but it is also crucial for civil servants from various ministries in Haiti to undergo this training to boost the rule of law and democratic governance in Haiti. I recommend that the authorities undergo this training and that it be made widely available." **Senior Official at the Ministry of Youth.**

"Through this training, we have learned to accept others despite differences... we have discovered that we have more in common than we imagined, and even when our opinions differ from each other, this does not make us enemies." **Youth participant, Semans Lape Project.**