Beyond Fundamentals: Learning About Social Accountability Monitoring Capacities and Action in Southern Africa.

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Summary

●**The Public Service Accountability Monitors' Regional Learning Program (PSAM/RLP) supports social accountability monitoring (SAM) in Southern Africa**. Its 3-tier strategy includes: a) training about a systemic approach to Public Resource Management systems and social accountability monitoring (Fundamentals of SAM); b) progressive and continuous enquiry into the context for public resource management and opportunities for demand side actors to engage, c) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. A PSAM/RLP assumption has been that the process of continued application of the approach is, in essence a process of learning over time about the factors that make the approach applicable or not, including learning more about the factors that affect applicability. PSAM/RLP has made efforts to broker a regional learning conversation about the applicability of SAM.

●**In 2016, a group of SAM practitioners diagnosed that there is a gap between practices in organizations and the learning conversation.** Largely, the knowledge about practice and results is tacit and held by a number of colleagues and partners on the ground. Since August 2016 with the assistance of a team of technical consultants, PSAM/RLP and four partners engaged in a learning exercise to develop practitioners' capacities to learn more consciously and proactively through and from practice for improved outcomes and impacts (fulfillment of the right of social accountability and service delivery results). The learning exercise was also aimed at and improving their monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) functions and approaches with their overall strategies and social accountability practices.

●**This paper identifies and analyzes the practice/learning gap using a tailored analytical framework. This framework focused on understanding why and how different organizations have experimented and adapted PSAM's approach to their contextual and organizational characteristics over time.** An inductive-deductive approach was used to trace and analyze the SAM journeys of organizations in four countries. These are: Tanzania (Policy Forum, Agricultural Non-State Actors Forum, Mbozi Ileje &Isangati Consortium and SIKIKA), Zimbabwe (Southern African Parliamentary Support Trust), Zambia (Zambia Governance Foundation, Friends of the Needy, God Visits Orphans, St John's Home Based Care, Maluba Home Based Care, NZP+ Mpika) and Mozambique (Concern Universal, Mocuba SAMCom and Quelimane SAMCom). The process – beginning from the selection of the partners to the write up of this document – has been an effort to maximize resources, time and information available, while striking a balance for the different parties and audiences.

•The quick analytic narratives of these partners' SAM journeys were developed and compared using a combination of tools, including, but not limited to stakeholder analysis, chronological analysis of organizational/countries histories and monitoring and evaluation documentation and data, political economy, in-depth interviews, in-country reflection meetings and counterfactual analysis. The bulk of the 4 weeks spent in the field was used to capture tacit knowledge from practitioners and their environments. Theory helped focus the analysis of individual trajectories to strive for meaningful, yet bounded insights about individual partners that make sense for the collective. Theory also contributed to the methodical collection and analysis of data.

•The hope was to move beyond a macro, overly general statement about SAM, context, organizations and learning towards a better understanding of how the range of practical capacity development and learning tools used by PSAM/RL and partners in practice contributed to improving understandings, developing capacities and influencing behaviours of SAM practitioners and other PRM stakeholders. Have they done so in in concrete contexts or across contexts?

•**What do SAM journeys look like? SAM journeys start with a common technical understanding of systemic public resource management systems (Fundamentals).** SAM practices and strategies are based on awareness and understanding of the public resource management system.

•**They unfold in gradual, uneven manner.** SAM practitioners, contribute, to milestones through contextually relevant multi-pronged social accountability strategies over time rather than one-off engagements with SAM documents, processes, actors and tools. The pathways show forward movement and, sometimes, regression. The road includes allies and obstacles.

•**The SAM practice that shapes these gradual pathways is an "advanced" version of Fundamentals (Fundamentals Plus).** SAM practices & strategies seem to become actionable when interacting with a range of contextual factors, capacities, and capacity development processes that go beyond the common technical core of SAM. These are the four key elements that make up 'Fundamentals Plus' practice.

    i.*Identifying the problems motivating the use of SAM.* In SAM and development it is common to aim for the achievement of broadly stated, aspirational goals. The centre of the SAM cycle as it states its goal is the realization of human rights and capabilities. However, focusing on a concrete problem helps learning and advancing reform efforts. What are the specific problems SAM practitioners are trying to address? Attention to specific problems greases the wheels of most, if not all, SAM journeys traced in this paper. SAM partners rely on people who care about access to water and medications in their communities. These service delivery issues point to the direction of the journey, those who will come along in the journey, and the way in which SAM practitioners learn and problem-solve. A learning conversation about SAM among partners who are focused on different

problems risks being unproductive unless there is a collective understanding on what problems are being prioritized in that conversation at a point in time.

ii. *Navigating Salient Systemic Interactions.* The PSAM is a pioneer on systemic thinking in the social accountability field. Partners who have been trained in the SAM approach think about the public resource management processes as part of an interconnected system. They map the legislative, regulatory and normative aspects of the public resource management in law and practice. Partners apply this knowledge to their work. This does not mean that they tackle all the public resource management components, all the time. Part of their savvy, is to know when and what to prioritize given contextual factors. These like many other decisions that shape what SAM journeys look in practice stem from the interaction of the PRM system with concrete aspects of their context. Two systemic interactions with the PRM system are salient in all journeys – the systems that shape how power is exercised and how civil society operates. While these factors are critical to set expectations and learn about SAM practice, they have not been systematically present in the regional learning conversation.

iii. *Applying concrete capacities.* The paper identifies four types of skills and abilities that SAM practitioners need in order to make and execute decisions and achieve results, as they go about their Fundamentals Plus journeys. These are: analytical, organizational and operational, civic, and adaptation capacities. This finding is consistent with insights from the broader social accountability field (Guerzovich and Poli 2016). The capacities are considered to some extent in the PSAM/RLP documentation and work, but this focus is new and has not been as explicit in the regional learning conversation.

iv. *Nurturing capacity enhancing processes.* The paper also identifies three types of mechanisms through which organizational, contextual and strategic resources are linked to the development of SAM practitioners' understandings, capacities and behaviours. These three sets of capacity-development/learning tools have different starting points and vehicles. The first one draws on experts' ability to inform behavior by imparting their technical knowledge/expertise about appropriate or desirable actions. The second one expects action in accordance with lessons drawn from relevant experiences of one's own or from peers. The third one seeks to strengthen and leverage the PRM ecosystem whilst strengthening the capacities of multiple types of stakeholders all at once. The three mechanisms are present and interact in SAM journeys, though it has been challenging for the PSAM/RLP community to support reflective practice through communal learning.

- **SAM's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms have not contributed to supporting the development of Fundamentals Plus capacities.** M&E systems at the organizational and regional level have been deficient for many reasons. The paper argues that an important reason for this failure is the failure to put the users and uses of M&E front and center in the definition of strategies, mechanisms, processes, and

tool. In a complex environment such as SAM practice this is first and foremost a political decision that requires organizational compromises, as well as a keen awareness of the operational conditions and feasibility of those agreements. Technical decisions should follow those bargains.

- **One of the critical decisions ahead for the regional SAM community may be the need to rethink the assumptions that shape their joint learning questions and agendas.** The four elements of Fundamentals Plus are not clearly embedded in the current ones. The paper concludes presenting a "menu" of options from which PSAM/RLP and partners can select as they ponder the way forward, preferably with a learning agenda that is better able to link learning with actual practice at the local, regional, and global level.

- **The paper seeks to support thinking about ways to close the practice/learning gap by pointing to challenges and opportunities available to SAM practitioners and PSAM/RLP, rather than making decisions for them.** Ultimately, the paper is intended as a critical conversation in an ongoing dialogue for the PSAM RLP community of practice that will help inform its choices- not only at the PSAM Regional Learning Conference scheduled for August 2017, but as part of going forward as a regional learning community. The paper concludes with a tentative menu of forward-looking options to help kick start these conversations.