



# SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY SUMMIT

## 1. Introduction

As a strategic pathway for change that is firmly anchored on a rights-based approach, social accountability informed the emergence of Oxfam Pilipinas as a new national civil society group in the country with a global footprint in the Oxfam confederation. **Social accountability refers to citizen-driven monitoring and assessment of public policies, programs and services as well as constructive and critical engagement with powerholders to claim their rights and demand accountability.**

In its new country strategy “Patas na Bukas 2022–2027,” Oxfam Pilipinas, along with program partners, stressed the critical role of active citizens in nurturing truly transformative social change by pushing for more accountable governments that invest adequate resources and effectively implement policies and programs relevant to the needs of women and marginalized groups.

Midway through their current joint programming, 30 leaders from Oxfam Pilipinas’ four portfolio teams and 11 partner organizations that have carried out or are implementing various social accountability actions with other civil society organizations, sectoral groups and vulnerable communities in the country convened on January 22–23, 2025 in Manila to take stock, draw out insights, and forge new priorities and ways forward.

The learning event gained significance with the rise in recent years of populist, authoritarian, sexist, anti-human rights and elitist political regimes in the country that present new challenges to the work of achieving more inclusive and accountable governance. This brief outlines processes that the partners and Oxfam Pilipinas program teams went through, the emergent insights and consensus initially reached and further learning questions posed during the Social Accountability Summit.

The learning brief hopes to **show how partners and Oxfam Pilipinas teams have transformed and deepened the way they understand social accountability work in the current context and encourage more actors within and beyond the country to join such collaborative learning journey and to support feminist and strategic social accountability actions in the future.**

other program participants, many of whom were still reeling from recent threats and direct attacks to civic rights in the country, a viable space to engage with receptive public officials and push for common advocacies. The approaches to integrate it into ongoing project intervention with local actors, frame it as a collaborative assessment or research process or present it as a collective response strategy for urgent concerns (e.g., anticipatory action in the face of drought and El Niño) contributed to social accountability's acceptability as an overall framework and mode of engagement.

In some cases, capacity building efforts at the grassroots and shared assessment tools like score cards also inspired trained community-based groups to assess their own interventions and internal accountability mechanisms and practices. Actions like the local gender-based violence (GBV) referral pathways monitoring solicited initial responses from local officials (e.g., review of the role of traditional leaders in these referral mechanisms in light of their reported efforts to facilitate amicable settlements of rape cases between perpetrators and affected women and girls).

Other insights from the partners' social accountability work during the past three years include the following:

- It is critical to **ground the scope and focus of social accountability initiatives on needs of partner communities and marginalized groups** to facilitate their ownership of the action. In the case of the localized care policy score card, while the broad array of care policy areas reflected in the original assessment tool point to important care issues, partners had to focus the engagement on more relevant concerns like water, electricity and transportation that resonated more with mobilized groups.
- There may be a need to further **broaden the current framework of constructive, albeit critical, and demand-side accountability engagement in doing social accountability** towards that of highlighting more the

## 2. Gains and insights from the past three years

A panel discussion provided a space for the program partners to reflect on their experiences, insights and gains in designing and implementing social accountability actions with other local actors. The first group shared on actions currently being conceptualized or are still ongoing which include a civil society-led review of the national law on domestic workers, piloting of care policy scorecard with partner local governments, scoping of existing accountability mechanisms for just energy transition projects and a climate finance accountability initiative. The next group of panelists reflected on completed social accountability efforts such as monitoring of local referral pathways for gender-based violence cases, an assessment of food security policies and programs of 10 partner local governments and participatory design process for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao's anticipatory action protocols.

The ensuing interaction highlighted initial gains from these actions. Social accountability provided allied citizen groups, partner local communities and



collaborative learning process with local service providers and decision-makers. Both past and ongoing efforts point to the efficacy of such an approach in reducing the latter's initial resistance to the process while forging commitment to finding solutions and ways for improving public services.

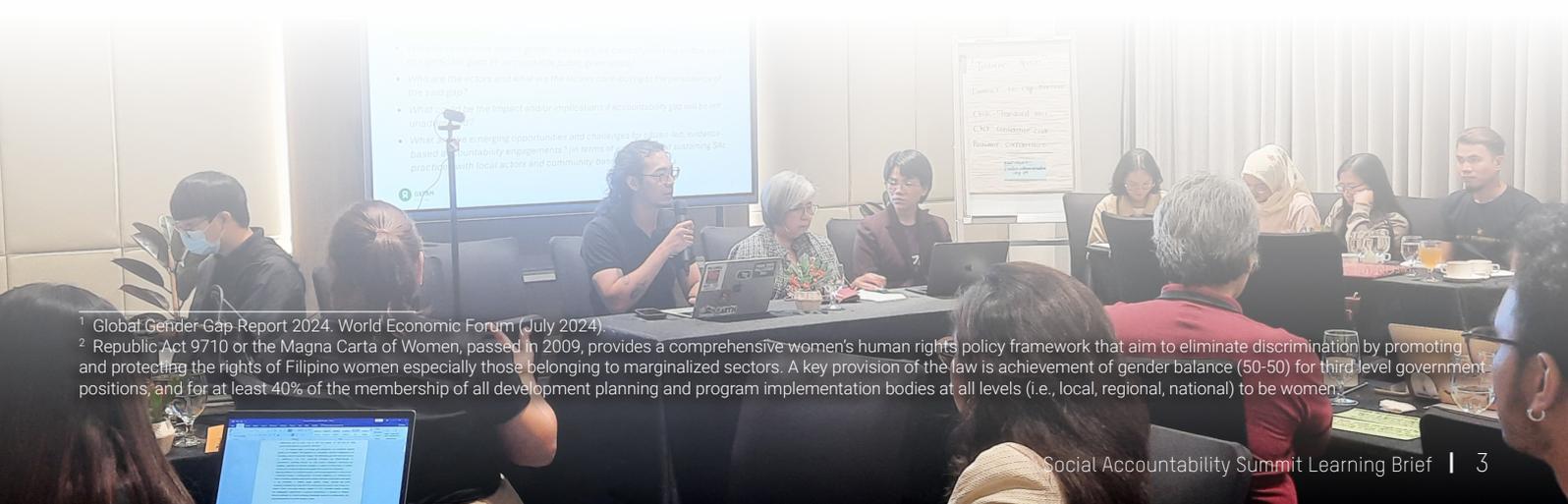
- An important aspect of social accountability work is **nurturing more participatory and action-oriented research practices and capacities of civil society groups and other local actors**. Such aspect is considered a pillar of partners' community organizing approaches and a wellspring of an evidence-based demand-side accountability process. Available official public data can be complemented with more inclusive and qualitative data generation methods (e.g., collecting stories) that can help prompt deeper reflection and sensemaking with communities and public officials on emergent findings.
- Sustainability of social accountability initiatives may not only be a matter of securing financial resources (partners' past actions have clearly shown how these actions can be effectively embedded in ongoing program interventions), but also through **improved uptake of** (and concomitant uptake planning around) **citizen-generated monitoring results, capturing and disseminating processes and insights from social accountability actions, getting more actors and groups** (e.g., academe, religious groups, young people) **on board in the movement for more accountable governance, and giving institutionalization** (e.g., active citizenship curricula) **due consideration**.

### 3. Accountability gaps: the work ahead

Summit participants also reflected on their current joint programming, which covers resilience-building, gender justice, climate justice and humanitarian response, to identify key concerns that still point to significant gaps in relation to more active citizen engagement and accountable governance and could therefore represent possible priorities for future social accountability work.

Echoing the recent Global Gender Gap ranking<sup>1</sup>, which saw the country slipping from 16th to 25th place (with its overall gender parity score of 79.1% in 2023 dropping to 77.9% in 2024), participants noted how weak implementation and monitoring of the Magna Carta of Women's provision around achieving gender balance in government positions and all levels of development planning and program implementation bodies<sup>2</sup> have contributed to palpable limits both in the level and quality of women's leadership and participation in governance.

Summit participants also pointed to the provision of adequate and quality public services to address the barriers that prevent women and girls from taking on activities of their choice including livelihood projects and paid jobs (e.g., unpaid care work burden at home, sexual and reproductive health issues, gender-based violence) as another significant accountable governance gap. More than a decade since the adoption of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act in 2012, for example, aggregated local governments' investment on mandated services and programs have rarely gone beyond 10% of the total for any given year, while



<sup>1</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2024. World Economic Forum (July 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Republic Act 9710 or the Magna Carta of Women, passed in 2009, provides a comprehensive women's human rights policy framework that aim to eliminate discrimination by promoting and protecting the rights of Filipino women especially those belonging to marginalized sectors. A key provision of the law is achievement of gender balance (50-50) for third level government positions, and for at least 40% of the membership of all development planning and program implementation bodies at all levels (i.e., local, regional, national) to be women.

households have continued to take on above 40% of the total annual expenditures.<sup>3</sup> The absence of comprehensive programs for women’s economic participation, particularly at the local level, continue to limit government interventions to one-time and short-sighted provision of services that effectively promotes political patronage more rather than real empowerment.

Other emerging public accountability gaps or concerns cited by participants included: a) cross-boundary issues like just energy transition, anticipatory action in the face of emergencies and climate change adaptation that highlight the need for better collaboration among local governments, b) national government’s social protection programs (e.g., AKAP<sup>4</sup>) which have been receiving criticisms lately due to possible duplication with other similar cash transfer schemes, allegations of corruption and how it also promotes patronage, and c) programs and services for persons with disabilities (PWDs) including compliance with the law’s<sup>5</sup> provisions regarding collection of data on PWDs and accreditation of their organizations.

The plenary discussion also highlighted the usual lack of responsiveness among government decision-makers (e.g., citing insufficient funds, lack of alignment with current priorities and citizens’ recommendations not falling within their mandates as reasons for inaction) as a key contributing factor to observed accountable governance gaps. Failure by civil society groups in facilitating social accountability actions to “walk their talk” and ensuring accountability within their organizations, according to participants, could impact negatively on the credibility of such groups and on the efficacy of the whole social accountability initiative. Finally, the inability of social accountability mobilizers to link such actions to the needs of local groups and partner communities reduces the latter’s ownership of such actions, discouraging more sustained engagement with powerholders and contributing to persistence of accountability gaps.



## 4. Challenges and emerging opportunities

The workshop discussions on the first day of the summit pointed to a number of challenges that continue to pose constraints to the type of citizen-led, evidence-based and more critical engagement that the social accountability framework advances. **Internalized sexism and patriarchal practices within religious and cultural systems** still limit women’s leadership, economic participation and exercise of rights while energizing opposition to recent policy gains (e.g., Prevention of Child Marriage Law or R.A. 11596). The **installation of a populist and authoritarian regime post-2016** not only created a culture of impunity with its war on drugs, disregard for human rights and direct attacks on civil society groups, but also relegated the agenda of citizen participation and more gender equal governance at all levels to the side while resuscitating conservative and patronage-based politics.

<sup>4</sup> Ayuda sa Kapos ang Kita (literally, “assistance to those with insufficient income”) is a social amelioration program of the national government that is being implemented through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), and targets low-income and minimum wage-earners. Assistance could be in the form of cash transfers or guarantee letters (for the provision of medical, funeral services, and/or food items).

<sup>5</sup> Republic Act 7277 or the Magna Carta of Disabled Persons, approved in March 1992.

The **anti-terrorism-state security discourse** has cast communities and marginalized groups demanding government accountability for detrimental policies and programs in a negative light. Such discourse has also led to “red-tagging” (labelling or accusing such groups as communist organizations) and outright threats and violence in many cases.<sup>6</sup> With the sudden shift in the national government’s priorities, individual champions of more accountable governance in national agencies and decision-making bodies found it even more difficult to manifest support to civil society actors or were subsequently eased out of the bureaucracy.

Summit participants lamented the **persistent focus of many local officials on simply complying with established procedures and their lack of relevant capacities for more responsive and empathetic public service delivery.**<sup>7</sup> Local planning, in areas such as disaster preparedness/risk reduction, climate change adaptation, resilient development, women’s economic empowerment and just energy transition (where program partners and Oxfam Pilipinas teams have been working these past three years) often excluded perspectives of women and other disadvantaged groups.<sup>8</sup> Established platforms (e.g., local development councils, local special bodies, CSO desks, feedback mechanisms) in many cases were not able to substantively live up to their supposed functions of facilitating more demand-side public accountability and more sustained engagement of rights-holders with duty-bearers.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, summit participants also noted some level of **“participation fatigue” among partner communities and local civil society groups**, especially if initial commitments to change by local decision-makers and frontline service providers take some time to be realized or do not redound to significant improvement in services or government investments in proposed solutions. In light of these challenges, the group surfaced the need for current programming by actors

like local program partners and Oxfam Pilipinas to level up collaborative learning and “re-energize” movement-building efforts on social accountability initiatives and reaching still unorganized sectors.

The ensuing assessment identified emerging opportunities for social accountability actions and other efforts to push more accountable governance that, according to summit participants, gave much hope in pursuing active citizenship as a pathway for broader systemic change. At the outset, the **midterm elections in May 2025 offers another opportunity for civil society groups to exact accountability from those who are running for office.** Amidst the continuing rightist drift in the aftermath of recent elections in other countries and the continuing resurgence of a personality-focused and patronage-based politics in the Philippines, recent congressional inquiries on the misuse of public funds by the Office of the Vice President, albeit elite-led and driven, have enhanced the stature of similar accountability processes in the public’s consciousness a few months before the election.



<sup>6</sup> According to the 2024 NGO Witness report, the Philippines ranked third in the list of most dangerous countries in the world for environmental activists and groups, next only to Colombia and Brazil. The country’s total of 298 land or environmental activists disappeared or killed between 2012 and 2023 was higher than that of Mexico.

<sup>7</sup> In a study on the use of the mandated Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Fund (LDRRMF) carried out by resilience program partners and Oxfam Pilipinas, research participants from partner local governments and community/sectoral groups were asked to generate their own indicators and rate the performance of the local DRRM body/system based on such metrics. Most of the metrics identified by local government officials had to do with meeting internal processes and deadlines of their respective agencies or local departments. Community-generated indicators were more around ensuring local preparedness, protection of women and other vulnerable groups, and delivery of adequate and quality support services during emergencies.

<sup>8</sup> When partners and Oxfam Pilipinas teams started their resilience programming with partner communities in Eastern Samar in 2022, many barangay DRRM committees were lacking sectoral representatives and/or have not updated the composition on their working sub-committees which should have had similar representations.

<sup>9</sup> This supports an earlier assessment during a social accountability orientation workshop in September 2023 by participating local officials and CSOs from 10 partner local government units under the SPACES project.

Partners and Oxfam Pilipinas teams have noted **increased interest in their programs' advocacy calls and strategies**, including social accountability work, among partner communities and local civil society groups as the links between such actions and their own concerns or needs get appreciated. Policies and spaces for citizen engagement to address community issues and influence allocation and use of government resources for relevant programs are already in place and may just need to be reviewed, monitored and assessed. So-called **"budget regimes"** that set up public funds for specific uses (e.g. gender and development or GAD budgets, local DRRM funds) and **"reporting regimes"** that incentivize government agencies and units (e.g., the Seal of Good Local Governance and related reporting requirements) can present strategic points for more social accountability engagements.

**Emerging spaces** (e.g., revival of women's rights organization-driven monitoring and assessment of the implementation of the new National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security or NAP-WPS) and **available pathways for more inclusive governance** (e.g., the adoption of comprehensive local or regional participatory governance codes, people's councils, working committees on women's economic empowerment, local energy planning bodies) can provide opportunities for further shaping and "re-inventing" such spaces and pathways towards enhancing or institutionalizing demand-side accountability systems. The Oxfam confederation and other civil society actors have developed tools and methodologies for assessing civic space that are readily adaptable and can support such initiatives.

## 5. Towards more strategic social accountability

Summit participants also reflected on their current joint programming, which covers resilience-building, gender justice, climate justice and humanitarian response, to identify key concerns that still point to significant gaps in relation to more active citizen engagement and accountable governance and could therefore represent possible priorities for future social accountability work.

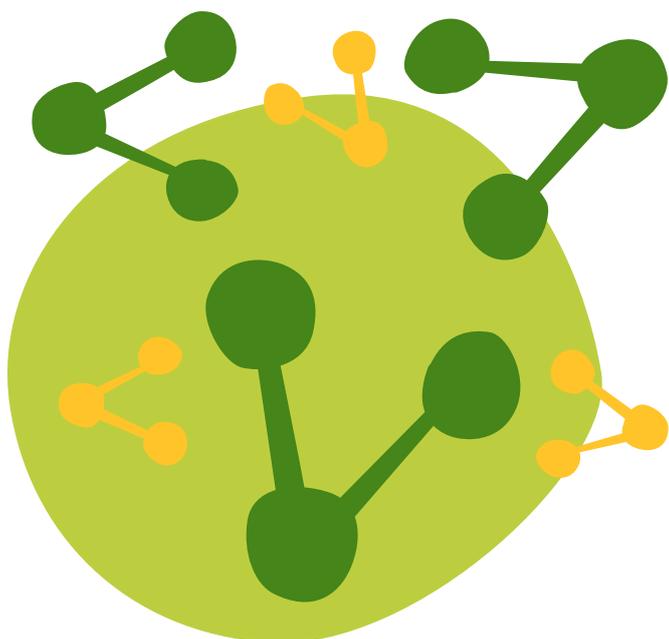
The second day of the social accountability summit featured thematic sessions that allowed participants to reflect on particular aspects of their work and forge some consensus in terms of future directions and priorities. Oxfam Pilipinas' Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Social Accountability (MELSA) manager Rande Cabaces shared ideas from the emergent Human Learning Systems framework in public management that revolve around "learning and systems stewardship" in response to the apparent limitations of the earlier performance management-based system in addressing the complex context of public service delivery and achieving developmental outcomes. The said sharing prompted participants' thinking around more relevant tracking of social accountability results as well as enhancing more reflective and broader learning processes with key actors in social accountability work.

The group raised the need to interrogate the usual change objectives of social accountability actions and identified metrics used to monitor and assess



such objectives in relation to insights from previous problem and issue analyses. The participants mentioned the importance of **increasingly involving partner communities and local disadvantaged groups in generating outcome statements and success indicators** that are more relevant to their situations and in negotiating with donors and finding creative ways to integrate such measures in the design of social accountability and other programmatic actions (e.g., having “internal metrics” that partners and Oxfam Pilipinas teams agree to track and report on beyond what project donors often require).

Partners and Oxfam Pilipinas teams agreed to **continue looking for ways to include social accountability actions in their joint programming and in operationalizing such priority when designing multi-year projects**. Such proposals need to integrate resources for strengthening institutional capacities not only in carrying out internal reflection and learning reviews, but also in promoting collaborative learning among other program actors in the context of social accountability initiatives. Summit participants also realized that social accountability itself stemmed from the whole performance management-based practice that started out blind to gendered power relations, underscoring the need to highlight such power shifting agenda during project proposal-making and joint social accountability action design exercises.



Joy Aceron, national convenor-director of Government Watch (GWatch) and fellow of the Accountability Research Center (ARC) based in Washington, initiated discussions around strategic social accountability practice and promoting better synergy among promoters and enablers of the approach. Some important points from her inputs included the need to **situate social accountability efforts in the broader movement for progressive reforms** within and outside government, the value of having a **movement-building perspective and institutionalization agenda among practitioners**, having some **recognized spaces for civic engagement to help address tendencies of decision-makers to pass on responsibility to other actors** (or to simply refuse to engage), and **leveraging global networks** to exert additional pressure on policy-makers.

The plenary discussions touched on the value of continuing engagements with champions within the bureaucracy to put in place, review or strengthen guidelines around citizen-led monitoring of public policies, programs and services. Partners’ and Oxfam Pilipinas’ social accountability efforts in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and other conflict-affected areas in the country have further brought to the fore the **need for more safe programming awareness and rigorous risk management practices** when designing and facilitating such forms of civic engagement in view of possible threats, harassment and direct attacks and violence against community members and civil society groups.

While not downplaying the importance of ensuring safe participation in social accountability actions, the group affirmed the value of such rights-claiming approaches in supporting the efforts of civil society actors such as GWatch, the local program partners and Oxfam Pilipinas in pushing for program impact and transformative social change. Participants also highlighted the **role of academic institutions and youth groups in pursuing active citizenship education and addressing the aging profiles of civil society groups and volunteer pools in the country**. Finally, partners and Oxfam Pilipinas teams emphasized the value of **systematic capture and sharing of insights from social accountability actions in strategic practice**.

The next session on synergizing capacity building efforts for social accountability, led by Adel Briones, learning manager of the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA EAP) and his colleagues, outlined the network's framework in carrying out training interventions with communities, civil society groups and government officials regarding social accountability. Building on their past capacity assessments with such actors plus their work in the Philippines and in the Asian region over the past decade or so, they highlighted the understanding of key concepts of citizen monitoring and constructive engagement as well as critical elements of an enabling context for social accountability work.

During the plenary discussion, participants reflected on their own experiences in building capacities in monitoring public policies and programs and in more critical engagement with powerholders, particularly among grassroots organizations, noting the limitations of one-time training or workshops and the need to evolve cost-efficient and effective ways of facilitating more reflective, action-oriented mentoring or handholding types of learning processes. As initial ways forward, the group committed to reframe the capacity building strategies of their respective organizations particularly those focused on women and other marginalized groups in order to embed social accountability and generate more knowledge products that are better suited to local contexts and needs (and written in the local language).

Oxfam Pilipinas' Gender Justice Portfolio manager, Jeanette Kindipan-Dulawan, facilitated the discussion around strengthening feminist practice of social accountability by structuring it on two key priorities:

1. **making social accountability processes and tools more inclusive and better aligned with other feminist principles;** and
2. **designing and/or adapting more social accountability actions to contribute to better outcomes for women and other marginalized groups.**

As with other programmatic interventions, the use of a feminist lens in social accountability actions will require practitioners to reflect on intersectionality, collective leadership, gendered power relations and dynamics, barriers to participation, knowledge co-creation and safe participation.

Incorporating good gender and power analyses at the inception phase is key, but is often missed when planning a social accountability initiative. Linking with earlier discussions on the value of adopting learning-oriented monitoring and assessment practices, partners also highlighted the use of more process-oriented evaluation tools (e.g., narrative assessments, most significant change stories) for their social accountability actions. The issue of how the partners' and Oxfam Pilipinas' programming might be creating multiple burdens for members of local women's groups who are often tapped in several projects came out at various points in the discussion. This concern led to an initial consensus within the group around finding effective ways to help prevent such situations and providing support to women and other caregivers and recipients (e.g., people with disabilities) during social accountability actions.

Recent efforts by local implementing partner WEAVERS and Oxfam Pilipinas to **localize the care policy scorecard and adopt it as a social accountability process**<sup>10</sup> and WEACT 1325's monitoring of provision of support services to those affected by gender-based violence in the BARMM represent examples of how partners' and Oxfam Pilipinas' social accountability actions are contributing to better outcomes for women and other marginalized groups.

Efforts to assess substantive implementation of the policy regarding minimum representation of women in all decision-making bodies and the use of GAD budgets to support women's economic empowerment can prove to be strategic for feminist social accountability.

<sup>10</sup> i.e., women's rights organizations and other civil society groups using the scorecard as a comprehensive framework with which to assess local governments' responsiveness to care work issues in terms of policy adoption

## 6. Defining a niche for partners and Oxfam Pilipinas

Oxfam Pilipinas' Gender Justice Portfolio manager, Jeanette Kindipan-Dulawan, facilitated the discussion around strengthening feminist practice of social accountability by structuring it on two key priorities: 1) making social accountability processes and tools more inclusive and better aligned with other feminist principles; and 2) designing and/or adapting more social accountability actions to contribute to better outcomes for women and other marginalized groups. As with other programmatic interventions, the use of a feminist lens in social accountability actions will require practitioners to reflect on intersectionality, collective leadership, gendered power relations and dynamics, barriers to participation, knowledge co-creation and safe participation.

Building on the previous discussions and visualizing their ways forward, the program partners and Oxfam Pilipinas teams proposed nurturing and expanding a social accountability community of practice (CoP) that initiates more feminist social accountability actions with grassroots actors, facilitates sharing of experiences and emergent insights, provides reflective learning spaces, and supports capture of

social accountability knowledge and its effective uptake as a key contribution to the ecosystem of accountable governance actors and initiatives in the country. Such focus best complements the work of other actors – particularly those involved in on-the-ground citizen-led monitoring, organizing and movement building, capacity development, and theorizing – while strategically positioning the partners' and Oxfam Pilipinas' efforts to effectively inform and influence such work.

Partners and Oxfam Pilipinas have committed to explore various strategies in terms of resourcing such strategic direction and related priorities, including piggybacking on on-going program interventions and integrating collective reflection on social accountability and accountable governance efforts into existing learning practices, project design and proposal development that include components of social accountability actions and learning. It will also involve the development of learning materials and other knowledge products on social accountability to promote uptake of the approach and emergent insights among local program actors.





Finally, participants of the first Social Accountability Summit, who are hoping to serve as the core of the envisioned CoP, crafted some questions for future learning engagements:



How do we effectively build on initial gains from our social accountability actions to facilitate more reform efforts within government and help provide more enabling conditions for sustained citizen and civil society engagements in governance?



How can social accountability practitioners, enablers and champions better utilize social media platforms and navigate the evolving digital landscape to better address government repression and help defend and expand the space for civic action?



As we see more private sector actors taking on the delivery of public services, how do we also effectively apply social accountability approaches and tools to help ensure that these actors deliver gender-responsive, adequate and quality public services?



How can social accountability approaches and actions contribute to reflective and collaborative learning among key system actors towards more relevant and empathetic program implementation and better program outcomes?

We would love to hear how this learning brief resonated with your own work, inspired similar reflections and learning in your organizations or networks, and informed social accountability actions in your own contexts. Send your feedback to: [randee.cabaces@oxfam.org.ph](mailto:randee.cabaces@oxfam.org.ph)



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