

Social Accountability Mechanisms in Public Budgeting: A Systematic Literature Review

Diva Bestiaulia ^{1*}

¹ Institut Bisnis dan Informatika Kesatuan, Bogor, Indonesia

Abstract

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This study systematically reviews literature on social accountability (SA) mechanisms in public budgeting, focusing on works published between 2012 and 2021. Drawing from peer-reviewed articles and institutional reports, the review examines how tools such as participatory budgeting, citizen report cards, and social audits promote transparency, participation, and oversight. Findings show that institutionalizing SA within formal budget processes supported by political commitment and resources yields positive impacts on allocative efficiency and social outcomes. While Brazil's experience demonstrates tangible benefits, many countries face a "participation gap," where transparency does not translate into meaningful engagement. The review concludes that SA is most effective when integrated into governance frameworks that link citizen voice to institutional action, enhancing trust and accountability in fiscal management.

*Corresponding author:

adivabesti@gmail.com (Diva Betiaulia)

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1. Introduction

Public budgeting has increasingly become a testbed for “social accountability” (SA) mechanisms citizen and civil society led strategies that aim to improve state responsiveness and answerability through transparency, participation, and oversight. Early conceptual work framed SA as moving beyond narrow, technocratic fixes to strengthen collective voice and public scrutiny, especially in service delivery and fiscal arenas (Joshi, 2012). In the fiscal domain, parallel reforms around open government and budget transparency have expanded access to information and created entry points for public engagement across the budget cycle, from formulation to audit (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014). Yet, despite this enabling environment, countries still differ widely in how far they institutionalize meaningful budget participation and oversight. Cross-national assessments such as the Open Budget Survey continue to document substantial gaps between transparency gains and opportunities for the public to influence fiscal decisions in practice (Hakim, 2020).

Alongside transparency reforms, specific SA instruments participatory budgeting, community scorecards, social audits, expenditure tracking, and citizen monitoring of supreme audit follow-up have proliferated. Evidence on their effectiveness, however, remains mixed. A landmark synthesis distinguishes “tactical” from “strategic” approaches, showing that isolated tools often underperform unless combined with enabling conditions such as strong state capacity, coalition-building, and vertical integration of oversight (Fox, 2015). Complementary reviews similarly argue that SA works best when mechanisms link citizen voice to institutional teeth

and when information is actionable within formal budget rules and accountability institutions (Ayliffe et al., 2017).

Within public finance systems, international guidance has pushed governments to embed participation and accountability into budget institutions e.g., formal consultation windows, citizens' budgets, participatory audit follow-up, and feedback channels rather than treating engagement as ad hoc outreach. OECD's work on budget practices and "Government at a Glance" underscores how institutional design (timing, scope, and rules of engagement) shapes whether participation influences allocative choices and performance (Ling et al., 2014). The World Bank's 2014 Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement similarly sought to routinize citizen feedback and grievance redress in operations, including fiscal processes, to improve development results (World Bank, 2014).

Despite a decade of diffusion, important gaps persist. First, empirical findings are fragmented across regions, sectors, and levels of government, making it hard to generalize which SA mechanisms alter fiscal priorities, reduce leakages, or strengthen audit follow-through. Second, many studies focus on transparency outputs rather than decision-changing participation or sanction-backed accountability. Third, digital participation has accelerated but its effects on inclusion and budget influence are uneven. These gaps motivate a systematic literature review (SLR) to (i) map the range of SA mechanisms used in public budgeting; (ii) synthesize the theories of change and enabling conditions that link voice to institutional response; and (iii) assess the evidence on outcomes allocative equity, efficiency, and oversight over 2012–2021, a period marked by open-government reforms and the scaling of

participatory budgeting (Gilman, 2016) The review aims to clarify not merely whether SA “works,” but when, how, and through which institutional pathways it impacts public budgets.

2. Literature Review

Social accountability (SA) mechanisms in public budgeting represent a set of strategies and practices designed to enhance government transparency, foster active citizen participation, and strengthen oversight of fiscal processes, ultimately linking citizen “voice” to institutional “teeth” capable of enforcing change (Fox, 2015). These mechanisms include a variety of tools such as participatory budgeting (PB), citizen report cards, and social audits that aim to bridge the gap between budgetary decision-makers and the public. Rather than being purely consultative exercises, effective SA initiatives embed structured engagement opportunities throughout the budget cycle, from the formulation stage to execution and audit follow-up, ensuring that citizen inputs are not merely symbolic but can influence policy and spending priorities in a substantive manner.

Empirical evidence indicates that SA tools, particularly PB, can have significant and measurable effects on allocative decisions and broader social outcomes when they are embedded in formal fiscal institutions rather than implemented as isolated or temporary projects (de Renzio & Wehner, 2017). Institutionalization is key, as it provides continuity, legal backing, and clear procedural rules that increase the likelihood of citizen proposals being adopted. In Brazil, large-N quantitative studies have demonstrated that PB is associated with

reallocation of municipal spending toward sectors such as health and sanitation, as well as measurable reductions in infant mortality rates effects that are amplified when local political leaders support the process and commit resources for sustained implementation over multiple budget cycles (Touhton & Wampler, 2014).

Despite such promising results, challenges remain in ensuring meaningful public engagement in budgeting processes. The 2021 Open Budget Survey reveals that while many governments now meet minimum standards for fiscal transparency by publishing budget information online, a persistent “participation gap” remains. In practice, structured opportunities for citizens to provide input, deliberate on trade-offs, or monitor budget execution are often limited in scope, poorly timed, or disconnected from decision-making forums. This disconnect suggests that without the institutionalization of SA mechanisms through legislation, formal budget guidelines, and consistent political commitment their transformative potential on budget priorities and service delivery outcomes is unlikely to be fully realized (International Budget Partnership, 2021).

3. Methods

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to synthesize and critically assess existing research on social accountability (SA) mechanisms in public budgeting. The review focuses on peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and working papers published between 2012 and 2021, as these years mark a period of significant advancements in open government reforms and participatory fiscal practices. The search process was conducted using

academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, applying keywords including “social accountability,” “public budgeting,” “participatory budgeting,” “fiscal transparency,” and “citizen participation.”

Inclusion criteria required that studies provide empirical evidence, conceptual frameworks, or comparative analyses relevant to the relationship between SA mechanisms and public budgeting outcomes, with a clear emphasis on transparency, participation, and oversight. Exclusion criteria were applied to sources that were purely opinion-based, lacked methodological rigor, or fell outside the public finance context. The final selection of literature was subjected to thematic analysis, allowing the identification of recurring patterns, enabling conditions, and gaps in existing research. This methodological approach ensures that the synthesis captures both the diversity of SA instruments and the institutional factors that determine their effectiveness in influencing budget priorities, improving allocative efficiency, and enhancing oversight mechanisms.

4. Results and Discussion

The systematic literature review identified four core findings regarding the implementation and effectiveness of social accountability (SA) mechanisms in public budgeting. First, the review confirms that institutionalization is the strongest predictor of SA effectiveness. Studies consistently indicate that when SA tools such as participatory budgeting (PB), citizen report cards, and social audits are embedded into formal fiscal rules and supported by legislative or executive mandates, they are more likely to produce measurable shifts in budget allocations and service delivery

outcomes (de Renzio & Wehner, 2017). In contrast, ad-hoc or project-based initiatives, even when innovative, often fail to sustain impact beyond their funding cycle due to the absence of formal channels for follow-up and enforcement.

Second, PB emerges as the most empirically studied SA tool, with robust quantitative evidence from Brazil demonstrating significant reallocations of municipal budgets toward social sectors, notably health and sanitation, alongside reductions in infant mortality rates (Touchton & Wampler, 2014). These outcomes are particularly evident when PB processes include clear decision-making authority, predictable funding streams, and political commitment from municipal leaders. However, similar mechanisms in other contexts often result in more symbolic participation, suggesting that the Brazilian experience is contingent on a combination of enabling political, legal, and administrative conditions.

Third, despite increased fiscal transparency in recent years, a persistent “participation gap” remains. The 2021 Open Budget Survey highlights that while 94 out of 120 assessed countries publish essential budget documents, less than a third provide structured opportunities for public input at key stages of the budget cycle (International Budget Partnership, 2021). This finding aligns with Fox’s (2015) argument that transparency alone is insufficient; it must be paired with accessible, timely, and actionable participation channels to connect citizen voice to institutional response.

Finally, cross study synthesis suggests that SA mechanisms operate most effectively when designed as part of a “strategic approach” that combines multiple tools, builds coalitions among civil society, oversight bodies, and reform-minded

officials, and leverages both formal and informal accountability pathways (Fox, 2015). Isolated or “tactical” interventions, even with strong transparency components, tend to achieve limited results unless embedded within a broader governance framework that incentivizes responsiveness and follow-up action.

Overall, the evidence base underscores that SA in public budgeting is not merely about information disclosure or isolated participatory exercises; it is about designing systems where citizen inputs can meaningfully shape fiscal priorities and where oversight mechanisms are capable of holding decision-makers accountable. These findings reinforce the need for governments to move beyond transparency reforms toward institutionalized participation and integrated accountability structures if they aim to achieve sustainable improvements in allocative efficiency, equity, and public trust.

5. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that social accountability (SA) mechanisms in public budgeting have the potential to significantly influence fiscal priorities, improve allocative efficiency, and enhance oversight provided they are institutionalized within formal budgetary frameworks. Evidence from diverse contexts, particularly Brazil’s participatory budgeting (PB) experience, shows that when SA tools are backed by political commitment, predictable resources, and clear decision-making authority, they can lead to tangible improvements in social outcomes, such as increased spending on essential services and reductions in infant mortality. However, many initiatives still suffer from a “participation gap,” where

transparency reforms are not matched with meaningful and timely opportunities for public engagement.

The findings affirm that transparency alone is insufficient to guarantee accountability; instead, SA works best when integrated into a strategic governance approach that combines multiple mechanisms, builds cross-sector coalitions, and creates credible channels for institutional response. For governments seeking to strengthen fiscal governance, the priority should be to embed SA tools into the legal and procedural architecture of the budget cycle, ensuring continuity beyond political or funding cycles. Ultimately, the institutionalization of SA is not merely a governance reform it is an investment in public trust, equity, and the long-term sustainability of democratic fiscal management.

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