Exploring Dynamics of Stakeholders' Participation in Social Audit Process of a Community School: A Case Study Approach

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Abstract

This article explores overlaying research questions of how contextual factors and power dynamics influence stakeholders' experiences of participation in the social audit process. It is field-based research for a single unit of analysis of a case of a community school. Field information was collected using multiple sources such as discussion and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, available research documents, and review of empirical studies. The selection of a community school in Kathmandu was purposive because the school has a history of conducting social audit over the years. School's participatory culture of organizing social audit regularly has been an enabler for participation of stakeholders. Formation of social audit committee and conduct of social audit report sharing program every year has created positive impact on the stakeholders. Knowledge and resource asymmetry among stakeholders played the role of barrier for some participants especially students and parents while other group of stakeholders especially teachers and those with good education and better socio-economic background were empowered to participate actively in the process. To sum up, four layers of influence created by institutional participatory culture, design process of social audit, knowledge and resource asymmetry among stakeholders have positively or negatively influenced the participation process.

Keywords: social audit, participation, power dynamics, knowledge, asymmetry

Introduction

Social Audit is a process in which, details of resource, both financial and non-financial, used by public agencies for development initiatives are shared with the people, often through a public platform (Dwivedi & Singh, 2010). Social audit has been understood and practiced as a platform where citizens can assess the use of resources and quality of public services being delivered by a public entity to ensure accountability, transparency and effectiveness in resource management and public service delivery. Social audit has been practiced globally as a tool for a systemic evaluation of an institution or a public service agency in participation of concerned beneficiaries. Social audit is intended to analyze every risk factor and give recommendations for possible means for their mitigation (Nikonova & Sucharev, 2002). Besides systemic assessment of an institution, social audit as a mechanism is more concerned with social contribution or impact of activities of an agency.

In Nepal's context, social audit started getting momentum with initiatives form civil society organizations in years after democratic restorations in early 1990s. Practice of social audit entered government sector formally in late 2000. This initiative got formally institutionalized during 2008 in education sector with Department of Education enacting social audit directives for schools (Department of Education [DoE], 2008). The social audit directives were amended in 2014. The Education Regulations (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016) provisions that each community school should conduct social audit annually. A seven-member committee comprising of chair of Parent Teacher Association as a coordinator of Social Audit Committee (SAC) is fully responsible to organize social audit. Preamble of the social audit guidelines clearly states that need of annual review and assessment of overall school performance has been realized with engagement of stakeholders in the process for generating ownership and make school activities accountable and transparent with efficient use of resources to ensure quality of education. Social audit guidelines (DoE, 2008) envision that one of the objectives of social audit is to engage stakeholders and to promote accountability and transparency in operation of community schools.

Participation is a process that describes the activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues (Nabatchi, 2012; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Roberts, 2008). This definition tries to unpack participation as a way and a process for citizens to claim their stake in discussions with their concerns, needs and interests heard and responded on issues of public interest and matters. Going a step further, some authors (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014) define participation as being direct and indirect. They argue direct form of participation is the best because it encourages stakeholders and citizens to get personally involved and actively engaged in the process for providing input, making decisions and

solving problems while in indirect forms of participation citizens try to influence or affect decisions through their representatives. Use of participatory tools like social audit is designed to serve as direct form of participation where citizens and stakeholders discuss jointly and try to influence decisions (Regmi, 2017). Even within form of direct participation, authors (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014) have tried to classify them into different categories. Direct participation can happen in many ways and occur in many different contexts. Over the last two decades, direct participation has coalesced into three main forms—thick, thin, and conventional (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). Each of which encompasses a wide variety of processes and activities that share common features. Participation has been understood and practiced in different sector including social audit in various forms and modes. Participation of parents and students in social audit of community schools has been more ritual with token representation (Regmi, 2017). Token representation can be linked with conventional mode of participation. Implementation of social audit in a more ritual manner just to meet the legal and policy requirements has limited opportunities for interactive and deliberative discussion among participants (Timalsina, 2015).

The research article has tried to answer two main research questions; a) how do stakeholders feel about their participation in the social audit process, and b) how do power dynamics influence stakeholders' participation in the social audit process? The article has used theory as referent to make meaning out of information collected from the research participants. Theoretical referents helped look at the phenomenon of how social audit has engaged stakeholders and how different layers influence have shaped experiences of participation. Theoretical referents differ from frameworks in terms of the relationship between the researcher and the theories used in the research (Luitel, 2009).

'Stakeholders' experiences of participation in the social audit of community school' is a central theme of the journal article. For these, the article looks at the participation of stakeholders in the social audit process from the context and power dynamics. Context includes participatory culture and institutional design process. The organization's participatory culture, the former experience of engagement and the inclusive and participatory institutional design process of the social audit itself acts as enabler or barrier for stakeholders' participation in the process. Thus, the premise of the theory of participation is that unequal resources and knowledge among participants create uneven power relations. This asymmetrical power relation created by resources and knowledge reduces opportunities for equal and active participation by all stakeholders. Asymmetries in power relations give some participants more privilege while some feel less empowered for constructive and meaningful participation.

A theory of participation (Challies et al., 2017) has been employed to analyze stakeholder's participation from the context and power dynamics prevailing when the social audit took

place. The theory argues that institutional contexts of participatory culture and the design process of social audit significantly influence how stakeholders engage and participate in any interaction or discussion affecting the outcomes. According to participation theory, the effectiveness of participation is influenced by unequal power dynamics among stakeholders because of knowledge and resource asymmetry. Asymmetrical power relation discourages some participants. It gives more power to some stakeholders creating an uneven playing field. Thus, the theory of participation contends that any prevailing asymmetrical power relations among stakeholders and the local context in which participation takes place significantly influence the mode of participation. Since the research has explored experiences of stakeholders' participation in the social audit process, findings have been theorized with the theory of participation from the lens of the institutional context of participatory culture and design process of social audit and power dynamics resulting from knowledge and resource asymmetries among participants creating unequal power relations among them.

Methodology

I have used qualitative approach in case study as strategy of inquiry, and it is field-based research for a single unit of analysis of a case. As Gerring (2004) states that case study research is an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time. During the research process, I collected information through multiple sources such as discussion with research participants, available literature and review of empirical studies on the topic. I used multiple sources for gathering information. They are focus group discussion, document reviews and semi-structured interviews with the participants. I chose a community school in Kathmandu. The selection was purposive because the school has a history of conducting public audit over the years and engaged a wide range of stakeholders in the process. Regarding selection of participants, it was also purposive.

Findings and Discussions

This article has presented a case study of five key stakeholders whose individual experiences of participation in the social audit process has been positively or negatively influenced by contextual factors and power dynamics. The findings have explicitly reflected those participants with little knowledge/information about issues in the school and those coming from poor socio-economic background were not able to participate in the process as actively as teachers and ward chair. The findings have also opened up new dimensions of participation on how unequal power relations gives some privilege to a group of participants making them more confident and empowered to participate while deprives other group of their capacity to participate in the process on equal footing. Analysis of stakeholders' experiences demonstrated how contextual factors of institutional participatory culture and social audit design process including power dynamics of socio-economic status and knowledge asymmetry influences the

participatory process in the social audit. With contextual factors and unequal dynamics from the findings, the article has identified the barriers and enablers for participation of stakeholders in the social audit process.

Institutional Participatory Culture and its Positive Impact on Participation

The article has identified four layers of influence that worked as negatively as barriers or positively as enablers for participation experiences of stakeholders in the social audit process. Institutional participatory culture and design process of social audit impacted positively on participation of stakeholders in the process. It was found that school's participatory culture of conducting social audit on regular basis was an enabler for participation of the stakeholders. Formation of social audit committee and conduct of social audit report sharing program every year created positive impact on the minds of stakeholders because it provided a forum for them to at least participate in the process. Participatory institutional culture was an enabling factor for the participation. Research participants experienced that social audit is a regular part of the business at school that happens every year where they must participate and contribute to the discussion.

However, their contribution to the discussion during the social audit process was more limited and lacked two-way exchange of ideas and information. Sharing of rights and responsibilities and other crucial information with the citizens and stakeholders is the most important step toward the legitimate citizen participation in terms of active and meaningful participation (Arnstein, 2010). Research participants especially student and parent representatives shared that they were not informed of their roles and responsibilities in the social audit process which constrained their engagement and participation in a more meaningful way. School's practice of organizing social audit for the last three years in a way made the participants familiar with the process but lack of information sharing and empowering them on their responsibilities equally deprived them of opportunities for active participation in the social audit.

Challies et al. (2017) underscore that participation of stakeholders in the social audit process is positively influenced by contextual dimension of organization's participatory culture. Research participants felt that institutional participatory culture during social audit acted as enabler for stakeholder's participation in different phases of social audit implementation process. Thus, participatory culture adopted by the school was an enabler for stakeholders' participation while lack of proper design process of social audit in terms of communication, systematic, inclusive representation of key stakeholders was found a barrier for ensuring meaningful participation of stakeholders. Institutional contexts of participatory culture and social audit design process helped promote physical participation to an extent but was more a kind of ritual representation of stakeholders without active participation and two-way collaboration.

Ritualized Participation: The Rules of the Game

Practice of social audit was found to be more of a ritual process in terms of participation contrary to what Social Audit guidelines state. Social audit practice has been found explicitly contravening to the provisions of the social audit guidelines from participation perspective. Research participants shared that existing social audit guidelines doesn't have any incentive of carrot and stick approach. Devoid of such incentive structure has encouraged especially parents and students to be less interested in participating in social audit process making participation more a ritualized devoid of any consultation and two-way exchange of ideas and thoughts. Ritualized form of participation, as Arnstein (2010) calls it a kind of 'manipulation' by powerholders who invite participants in the process as a rubberstamp as committee members who are hardly consulted and heard off in the process.

A teacher, member of social audit committee, as the research participant, observed a different dimension on why participation has been ritualized. Lack of technical knowledge on how social audit needs to be conducted was one of the reasons for ritualizing participation, engagement and consultation in during the social audit practice in community schools. Their observation shows that school authority and social audit committee members lacked adequate orientation and capacity development on the social audit procedure form the perspective of citizen participation and collaboration.

Audit committee members shared that they did not have any training and orientation on the technical aspect of social audit on why citizen participation should be active and consultative. The other reason, as student and parent representative shared, lack of knowledge and sensitization on technical and procedural dimensions of social audit created barriers in making the social audit practice participatory, engaging and consultative. Thus, lack of awareness building on the technical aspect to the social audit committee members contributed to ritualizing the social audit practice. When there is no sufficient technical knowledge among the implementers of accountability tools, implementation of such accountability tool runs the risk of being limited to mere formality or rituality (World Bank, 2012). Thus, the participation of citizens and stakeholders in the social audit process has run the risk of being ritualized with set rules of the game.

Participation without Mutual Collaboration and Consultation

Social Audit aims at improving transparency and accountability with active participation of the key stakeholders by creating bottom-up demand for governance (McNeil & Malena, 2010). Social audit as an accountability tool also has the potentials of catalyzing collaboration and consultation among stakeholders for an improved governance. Research participants shared that their lack of knowledge on the topic and issues about the school discouraged them from collaborative and consultative approach in the social audit process. Physical participation was ensured to an extent which substantially limited collaboration and consultation among the participants. Participation and engagement in any context lead to better informed decisions only when there is a wider range of information inputs and knowledge exchange among stakeholders in the process (Challies et al., 2017).

Parent and student representatives as research participants shared that neither social audit was taken and understood as a tool to provide a forum for among stakeholders for interaction and collaboration on different issues relating to school affairs nor was it practiced as a mechanism to further the collaboration for improved governance in the community school. SAC coordinator did not seem to fully internalize the potentials of social audit as a tool to improve governance, accountability, and transparency through deliberative and consultative process. My observation of the social audit process also triangulated with experiences of my research participants as majority of the participants remained passive and silent during the process. Parents and students present in the social audit event did not deliberate on the issues. The reason behind non-participation in terms of collaboration and deliberation was because of lack of information and knowledge about the different issues of the school and entire social audit process.

Social audit is a tool of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008) because it provides a forum where teachers, parents, school management committee can discuss issues collaboratively to find solutions to problems in teaching learning environment of the school. However, this potential has remained untapped because of ritualized participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. Research participants shared that ritualized practice of social audit has hindered the meaningful participation of stakeholders especially parents and students, depriving them of engaging in critical discussion on finding solution to different issues confronting the school in regard to school governance and accountability. Collaborative governance theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008) reiterate that social audit provides opportunities for critical collaboration among the stakeholders. Interviews, document reviews and observation of the process showed that institutional design process of social audit was a kind of ritual practice where stakeholders were not selected from the perspective of who can actively contribute to the

discussion. Ritual selection of participants was a barrier for active and interactive participation of stakeholders in the process.

Unequal Socio-Economic Status: A Constraint on Participation

Unequal socio-economic status of participants was a barrier for participation in the social audit process. Participants especially student and parent representatives coming from poor socio-economic conditions had to skip social audit meetings and discussions because of their priority for livelihood. Unequal social-economic status created unequal power dynamics among participants. Teacher, SAC coordinator and ward-chairperson came from good socio-economic background compared to parents and student representatives. Their poor socio-economic background limited their participation in social audit process because they had other pressing priorities for livelihood rather than taking part in social audit. Because of other daily needs and livelihood issues, they had to skip meetings and give up participation. Power and resource imbalances among stakeholders affect the incentives of groups to participate in the collaborative process (Gunton & Day, 2003). Research participants unanimously accepted that poor financial status was a barrier to their participation in the process because they failed to attend meetings and discussions. Thus, asymmetrical financial status and background of stakeholders of social audit perpetuated a kind of unequal power relations among them making them unable to participate equally in the process.

Majority of parents who send their kids to the community school are from low socio-economic background. Many parents can't attend school programs like social audit because they are busy with their works which is more important to their family than the activities that take place in school. A teacher representative in SAC shared that socio-economic status of the participants was an important and crucial dimension behind (dis)encouraging active participation and engagement of stakeholders in the social audit process. Majority of the parents face daily livelihood issues because of which participating in social audit hardly becomes a priority for them. In terms of resources and financial condition, unlike parents and students, stakeholders like teachers and SAC coordinator are comparatively better off and socially also influential who can afford to participate in the process with active engagement and contribution. But resource asymmetry among stakeholders was disempowering for some stakeholders whereas economically better-off stakeholders were found to be more active and dominant during the discussion in various SAC meetings and the social audit process.

A parent representative in SAC shared that she remained a shy and silent participant all the time. The reason behind her shyness and passivity was also her poor knowledge and information about social audit and her poor economic condition. In one of the meetings, she was requested by the SAC coordinator to share her thoughts, but she could not say anything. A feeling of hesitation was smoldering inside her that demotivated her from

speaking up in front of the socially influential person like teacher and ward chair. Participants will be much more likely to engage in earnest deliberation when alternatives to it—such as strategic domination or exit from the process altogether—are made less attractive by roughly balanced power (Fung & Wright, 2001). She shared that her hesitation and fear were also tied to unequal power relations because some ward chair and teacher belonged to better socio-economic class who were also knowledgeable about issues happening in the school. Research participants especially parents and students unanimously shared a common perspective on their incapability to actively participate and influence discussions in social audit process because of their unequal power relations owing to poor socio-economic conditions.

The discussion reinforces a strong correlation between resource asymmetry (socio-economic status) of participants which also limited the chances of meaningful and active participation. If there are significant power/resource imbalances between stakeholders, such that important stakeholders cannot participate in a meaningful way (Ansell & Gash, 2008). The dimension of resource asymmetry based on socio-economic status and unequal power relations created by it became detrimental to active participation of stakeholders and the barriers they face during deliberation in the social audit process.

Conclusion

Institutional participatory culture played as an enabler for parent and students to participate in the SAC meetings and social audit process. School's culture of organizing social audit on regular basis created a positive impact on the minds of stakeholders. Social audit design process was found not to have taken into account the ground rules and protocols of proper selection of key stakeholders, communication, systematic follow-up, inclusive representation of stakeholders including sensitization of stakeholders on why social audit is being organized and what is expected out of them in the process. Inadequate prior communication, sensitization and information sharing among stakeholders as part of the basic protocols of the institutional design process has negatively affected the participation. Thus, poor institutional design process of social audit has performed as a barrier for meaningful and constructive participation of parents and students. Another key barrier for equal participation was identified as knowledge asymmetry among stakeholders. In terms of knowledge and information school and social audit as such, two groups of people were found in SAC—a group of people like ward chair, teacher and SAC coordinator who were knowledgeable and informed compared to other group of people- student and parent representatives. Parents and students did not know anything about social audit, its importance and other issues related to school. Knowledge asymmetry among these two groups of research participants seems to have created unequal power relations.

Resource asymmetry (unequal socio-economic) performed the role of a barrier for equal participation of certain group of stakeholders in social audit process. In the case of parents and students, they belonged to low socio-economic background whose livelihood depended on menial jobs and daily works. The findings explicitly indicate when stakeholders don't belong to symmetrical socio-economic background, it tends to create unequal power relations among them. Prevalence of such unequal socio-economic status disempowered a group of participants from actively participating and engaging in the process while significantly leveraged the other group of participants. To sum up, there are barrier and enablers for participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. These range of barriers and enablers have helped identify different dynamics which are at play to influence negatively or positively overall participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. Four layers of influence created by institutional participatory culture, design process of social audit, knowledge and resource asymmetry among stakeholders have positively or negatively influenced the experiences of participants in the social audit process in the community school.

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