

Our Members at a Glance

Interview with Nicholas Hepworth*



What organization do you work for? How does it support social accountability?

I act as Director of Water Witness International. Distinct from other NGOs operating in water our core expertise lies in water resource management. We work to improve the way that rivers, streams, lakes and aquifers in developing countries are managed. Our principal focus is on the institutional processes that determine whether people and ecosystems can access the water they need and how the sources of their water may be protected for future generations. We work at a local, national and global scale, driving improved water security through action, research and advocacy focused upon improving the functionality and accountability of the public sector offices responsible for the management of water.

We deliver on our mandate through four programmes: Helping Vulnerable Communities, Driving Water Stewardship, Improving Governance and Aid, and Advancing Knowledge and Communication. All of our work is guided by the principle that governments, water managers, donors, iNGOs and other actors determining the future of water resources in developing countries should be accountable to the most water insecure.

Our Helping Vulnerable Communities programme uses social accountability monitoring to activate and drive effective implementation of water resource policy and law. We work with disadvantaged communities to help them understand their rights as water users, and the legal responsibilities of water resource management institutions to them. We connect communities with responsible authorities, and equip them to formally challenge duty bearers so that their rights on water are realised.

In our water stewardship work we work with the private sector to guide their engagement in water management and water policy so as to ensure water security for all and not just the few. We have played a leading role in shaping the corporate water stewardship agenda. As a founding board member of the Alliance for Water Stewardship we supported the development and testing of their International Water Stewardship Standard, which stands as the primary mechanism for ensuring social accountability in multi-stakeholder water stewardship initiatives involving businesses, governments and international NGOs. We are the implementation lead for the AWS Standard in Africa. Parallel to this, with our partners at the UN Global Compact's CEO Water Mandate and other thought leaders on water, we have co-authored guidance for responsible business engagement in water policy and a framework for ensuring equity and integrity in water stewardship initiatives.

We know that governance in the water sector is critical, but there is very little evidence available to tell us how to improve governance so that aid can be assigned to those interventions that will

*This interview was done by Janet Oropeza Eng, Coordinator of the Knowledge Management Area at Fundar, Centre for Analysis and Research, in February 2016.

best support water resource management institutions that are effective and socially accountable. As a result, some efforts by donors and NGOs have been misguided and ineffective. In response to this challenge, we conducted a systematic review of 30,000+ pieces of evidence intended to shape policy and action. Our review revealed the small pool of reliable knowledge and set out strategic and practical responses for researcher and practitioner interventions to ensure greater accountability to the citizens and ecosystems on whose behalf development is ultimately targeted. As part of this process we have also begun tracking the spending on water by international donors and developing country governments in order to hold them to account on their investments and actions. Through making these actors accountable for their work we can ensure integrity and diagnose improvements where needed.

How would you define SAcc and, according to you, why is it important?

Social accountability is a process through which ordinary citizens and civil society organisations monitor and assess institutional performance, and engage with duty bearers in order to drive greater accountability and responsiveness to their needs.

Water security has been defined by economists at the World Bank as being *‘the availability of an acceptable quantity and quality of water for health, livelihoods, ecosystems and production, coupled with an acceptable level of water-related risks to people, environments and economies.’*² Water security for all and not just the few depends on effective and socially accountable water resource management institutions.

International donor funded reforms of water policy and water laws have taken place across developing countries in an attempt to build stronger water resources management institutions. However, in many countries these institutions are still not as effective as they need to be. Low levels of performance can be traced to limited political will, inadequate financial investment, and low levels of public awareness about the roles and responsibilities of institutions, and the rights of citizens in relation to water.

Social accountability is crucial in this context for citizens and civil society organisations to demand improved performance from responsible institutions, donors and the private sector, and to raise the profile of water resources management so that it receives the attention, political support and funding that it needs.

What are the main lessons you have drawn by supporting organizations’ social accountability projects?

In 2009, we pioneered our approach of social accountability monitoring of water resources management with our partners in Tanzania, Shahidi wa Maji. Our work flagged how water use by the poor was unrecognised in the eyes of the law, and was impacted by pollution and conflict. We tracked these problems to poor performance of basin authorities, in turn related to late or partial receipt of budgets and skewed, unrepresentative composition of decision-making boards. When

² Grey D and Sadoff C (2007) Sink or swim? Water security for growth and development, Water Policy, vol 9, no 6, pp 545-571.

we reported these findings to the review of the USD \$600 million Water Sector Development Programme, the World Bank labelled our work as '*a vital oversight mechanism*'.

Our Fair Water Futures programme scales up our social accountability monitoring work and aims to improve water security for over half a million vulnerable people living in Tanzania and Zambia. The programme is delivered in collaboration with our partners, Shahidi wa Maji in Tanzania, and the Zambia Country Water Partnership in Zambia.

To date our work has achieved improved water security for vulnerable people through new legal entitlements, new enforcement action to remedy water pollution, conflict resolution efforts, initiatives to establish Water User Associations, and plans to manage the impacts of flooding and drought.

In the course of delivering this work, we have drawn a number of lessons about the implementation of social accountability projects. Some of the key lessons we have learned are:

- Working through pre-existing civil society structures or groups who can quickly organise, leverage action, have legitimacy and be reached more easily than individuals is beneficial.
- Tenacity and long-term engagement are required to drive change, and multiple strategies for influence need to be adopted.
- Initiatives should be based on an in depth understanding of the political contexts in which they operate.
- For maximum effect, initiatives should be planned and adequately resourced over a minimum of 4 or 5 years, and ideally long-term core funding should be available to enable CSO's to deliver this role effectively.

Are there particular projects or publications that you would like to share in the platform or its newsletter?

Yes, we would like to share more information about our field experiences, the evidence we have gathered and the innovative, transferable methodologies we have developed. In particular, we wish to share project and case study briefings and reports, as well as a handbook which outlines our approach to using social accountability monitoring for effective and equitable water resources management. In particular, we are keen to share our methodology and results via a webinar in partnership with GPSA.