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Evaluation and democratic accountability

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Introduction
Evaluation for accountability has become more and more important nowadays. The audit society, promoted by the new public management (NPM) discourse, brings the accountability question to the front (Behn, 2001; March & Olsen, 1995; Power, 1997). This discourse creates particular expectations concerning accountability. Mainly, accountability is conceived from a principle - agent perspective which claims a need for clarifying who is accountable to whom and for what and then the accountable person is supposed to take the full responsibility for any failure or wrongdoing (Behn, 2001; Weber, 1999). However, how evaluation for (democratic) accountability is carried out varies over time and also the conceptualisation of democratic accountability (Weber, 1999:453). An opposite discourse emerges in participatory and discursive policy in which active citizens search new and more authentic ways to undertake evaluation for accountability (Behn, 2001; Ryan, 2005; Weber, 1999). Although this trend is not that broad, it needs attention because it carries a different notion of democratic accountability with it. Thus, there is a need to take a step back and rethink democratic accountability and consider how evaluation can support democratic accountability in various ways.

The traditional notion of democratic accountability, referring to external scrutiny in which politicians are accountable to citizens and the administration accountable to the elected representatives, is too narrow to meet the needs of a dynamic environment (Behn, 2001; Weber, 1999). The traditional system of democratic accountability is supposed to work in all governance structures, however, the information needs are not the same in all situations and policy contexts (Hanberger, 2006a; Ryan, 2005; Weber, 1999). Basically, an evaluation for democratic accountability should provide a story for accountability holders to be used for holding the accountability holdees to account. Useful accountability evaluations should indicate whether expectations concerning finances, fairness or performance of public policies have been met (Behn, 2001). However, the traditional system of democratic accountability is not all that appropriate to deal with accountability for performance (ibid.). A critical question is who sets the performance expectations and what kind of performance account do citizens need?

In the traditional model of democratic accountability the elected representatives and mandated public reviewers (state inspectors and auditors) have been given the responsibility to carry out the accountability function on behalf of citizens (Behn, 2001; March & Olsen, 1995; Mulgan 2000). It is only when citizens vote in elections that they formally can hold the government, on different levels, to account (cf. Behn, 2001; Hutchings, 2003; Mulgan, 2000). However, the accountability system is now being challenged in the practice of participatory and discursive policies (Behn, 2001; Hanberger, 2006a; Ryan, 2004, 2005; Weber, 1999). Citizens search new and old ways (cf. Hanberger, 1997) to hold those in charge accountable and reclaim their principal role. Citizens not only have expectations on politicians, but also on civil servants and service providers in the public and private sector. Performance measures used by the central level are not very useful at the local level and are questioned in the participatory policy discourse. Democratic accountability for school performance, for example, demand more realistic and rich accounts to indicate progress and failures (Ryan,
Moreover, participatory public policy challenges the traditional notion of democratic accountability and uncovers that this way is not sufficient for dynamic environments in which more direct forms of democratic accountability evolve (Behn, 2001; Ryan, 2005; Weber, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss democratic accountability from a citizen perspective and pay attention to the shifting conditions for, and implications of, evaluation for democratic accountability. First, the concept democratic accountability is discussed and the paper clarifies what aspects of accountability this paper focuses on. Second, attention is paid to the ways that citizens can evaluate public policy and programs and how those in charge can be held to account. Third, the second question is discussed in the light of a Swedish study of five public reviewers’ implications for democratic accountability.

Rethinking democratic accountability

Rethinking democratic accountability implies adopting the concept to a dynamic environment. Citizens participating in public policy and sharing responsibility should then be included in the concept.

To start with, what do the two words actually mean? The meaning of accountability has extended in several directions during the last decades (Behn, 2001; March & Olsen, 1995; Mulgan, 2000; Weber, 1999). The word accountability has its roots in the Latin computare. Com means together and putare count or consider (Behn, 2001:7). The traditional notion of accountability, referring to external scrutiny and counting, is based on the assumption of a clear distinction between politics and administration (Finer, 1941; Mulgan, 2000). 1

 Democracy has a core meaning which has extended in different directions. Mainly, ‘democracy’ refers to a regime where the people or “demos” govern public affairs. Today a distinction can be made between three notions of democracy: the elitist, the participatory and the deliberative or discursive (Dryzek, 1996, 2000). These notions of democracy are not contradictory to representative democracy but indicate three different directions which a democracy can take (Hanberger, 2001, 2006b). Accountability should be considered in relation to different notions of democracy because the conditions for accountability vary in different models of democracy.

The traditional notion of democratic accountability refers to ways that citizens can control its government and the mechanisms for doing this. According to Edward Weber, the meaning of the term has shifted over time and “Each conceptualization emphasizes different institutions and locates the ultimate authority for accountability in differing combinations and types of sectors (public, private, intermediary), processes, decision rules, knowledge, and values” (Weber, 1999:453). He distinguishes between five conceptualizations of democratic accountability (ibid.) and is most concerned with accountability in Grassroots Ecosystem Management (GREM). The ‘GREM’ conceptualization of accountability implies shared authority between levels of government, and between government and citizens. It is not the

1 Carl Friedrich (1940) includes inner responsibility (to conscience, moral values) of civil servants in his use of the term.
aim of this paper to discuss all aspects of democratic accountability. Mainly, the focus is on how citizens can hold those responsible for public policy accountable.

As been said, democratic accountability can refer to either finances, fairness or performance accountability (Behn, 2001). Accountability for finances has to do with controlling how well the responsible individuals or departments have performed their obligations and functions. A key question in this type of accountability is to what extent the resources have been used wisely according to explicit rules, procedures and standards (ibid. p.7). Democratic citizens also have an interest to find out whether those in power, individuals or departments, have paid due attention to ethical standards such as fairness and equity. According to Robert Behn the process of creating accountability for fairness has many similarities with the process of creating accountability for finances. Rules, standards and procedures are set for the values we want an organisation to pay sufficient attention to. In both of these forms of accountability the standards and rules are set to create expectations (ibid.). It is assumed that public organizations shall live up to finances and fairness expectations and that bureaucrats, and professionals, can be held accountable if they do not pay due attention to the rules of conduct. There is also a need for holding government and public organisations accountable for performance, outcomes and consequences of public policy. As in the first two types of accountability there must be expectations to which performance can be assessed. Performance, however, is not about rules and compliance (ibid.) and can not be evaluated in the same manner as accountability for finances and fairness. Setting performance expectations is a critical question in a democracy. For whom and against what should government or governance performance be assessed? It is not reasonable, in all notions of democracy, to just permit those in power to set the expectations and then assess to what extent these have been met. From a participatory or deliberative democratic perspective it is justifiable to permit all those affected by a policy to “contribute feedback” concerning performance. Behn uses the term “360-degree accountability” when referring to feedback from the concerned accountability environment (ibid. p 203).

Following Behn there is a need for introducing a new concept of democratic accountability which changes how we think about the phenomenon. He suggests that democratic accountability should refer to "a compact of mutual, collective responsibility" (ibid, 2001:125). Instead of searching someone to blame and punish it moves attention to the responsibility of all those that constitute the accountability environment, that is, all those affected by public policy. If one views accountability from the perspective of deliberative democracy, for example, collective responsibility comes to the fore. In this notion of democracy, the focus is not to look for individual scapegoats, but to think of justification of public policy and collective responsibility for policy failure and success. A “web of mutual accountability” (ibid. p 203).

2 Weber reminds us that peoples’ concern with accountability is much older than democracy and has to do with a fundamental need for controlling misuse of power in all societies. All regimes create procedures for holding those in power to account, that is, for legitimatizing power execution. According to Behn “Accountability for the use (or abuse) of power is nothing more than accountability for finances and fairness” (p.9).

3 The word ‘compact’ refers to “an ethical commitment and not a legal document”, and ‘responsibility’ refers to “obligations willingly accepted” (in contrast to punishment imposed). The word ‘mutual’ refers to a commitment and “personal sense of duty to others, not a detached debt to some abstract rule”. The word ‘collective’, finally, implies “…that the members of the compact are accepting responsibility as a team and abandoning the search for individual scapegoats.”(Behn, 2001:125)
“Responsibility” implies holding the mandated politicians responsible for imposing additional performance requirements, budget cut backs which make it impossible to achieve the tasks and performance targets that public agencies have been given, for example (ibid).

“Responsibility compact” also includes journalists’ responsibility to highlight any mistakes, failures but also accomplishments and not the least “for educating citizens about who, specifically, will need to do what if government is to improve performance” (ibid. 127). What about citizens themselves – are they included in Behn’s concept? Citizens are definitely part of the accountability environment and citizens have more responsibility than holding the elected to account which implies that participatory and discursive notions of democracy are embedded in Behn’s concept of democratic accountability.

“A compact of mutual, collective responsibility holds citizens responsible and, if necessary, accountable for paying attention not only to agency performance that affects them directly but also to government performance as a whole. It is a compact under which citizens not only have their constitutional right to complain about the poor performance of public agencies but also a democratic obligation to ensure that public agencies have the resources necessary to produce results’” (ibid.128).

This argument could be taken a step further to include the implications for accountability of citizen participation in policy making and implementation. Discursive democracy assumes an active and responsible citizenship, and when this is realized in public policy the citizen has a shared responsibility for both failures and achievements. If the traditional notion of democratic accountability is extended to include democratic dialogue, the concept becomes useful for all forms of democratic governance.

**Key accountability questions to be considered in democratic accountability**

“Who are accountable” and “to whom are they accountable” are two basic questions that need consideration. The accountability discourse prerequisites two types of actors (Behn, 2001), those that can be held to account, referred to as the accountability holdees, and their counterpart, that is, those holding them to account, the accountability holders.

A distinction should also be made between citizens, elected representatives and civil servants when accountability holdees and holders are discussed. In the traditional system of accountability citizens are accountability holders in relation to the elected representatives whereas the elected politicians are accountability holders in relation to civil servants. In representative democracy citizens’ principal role is assumed to be delegated to the elected politicians through the act of voting in elections. In representative democracy, and mainly in the elitist notion of democracy, citizens are not accountability holdees. However, in participatory and discursive democracy citizens do get involved and take responsibility and by doing so they partly adopt the role of accountability holdee. From a citizen perspective, civil servants are both accountability holdees and holders, but in the formal system of accountability they are only accountability holdees in relation to the elected representatives.

Another issue that needs consideration is that of individual and collective accountability (Behn, 2001; March & Olsen, 1995; Mulgan, 2000). In order to resolve the accountability
problem in terms of individual and collective accountability there are at least four options available (SOU:2005, annex 5 p.498):
- institutional accountability (juridical person)
- hierarchical accountability (minister, board president, CEO)
- collective accountability (all individuals of an organisation)
- modified personal accountability

Each type of accountability has its own advantages and disadvantages (ibid.), but these will not be discussed further in this paper except in relation to democratic accountability. If the appropriateness of these options is considered in relation to different notions of democracy, one could assume that in elitist democracy it is most appropriate to demand accountability holdees of flesh and blood, and then the hierarchical and modified personal accountability type would best match this model’s accountability needs. In contrast participatory or discursive democracy goes well together with collective accountability (or perhaps inter-collective accountability would be a better word) and this form of accountability is more in line with an active citizenship and many principals.

“By whom?” is a key question to be consider in all accountability systems. A distinction can be made between public review and reviewers that have a formal commission and those that formulate their commission themselves. Municipality auditors, EU (in Europe) and state inspectors have a formal commission specified in laws and regulations. External evaluators undertake evaluations on commission to meet the knowledge and information need of politicians, officials and other stakeholders. By contrast, citizens, NGOs and the media have created their own commission. Who carries out an public inquiry, and how, has implications for the account or story that the elected representatives and citizens shall base their accountability decision on.

Accountability “for what” is another key question that should be considered closely. As indicated, “for what” could either refer to “fairness”, “finances” or “performance”. A critical question is who is allowed to decide “for what”. Mainly, one can separate between who set the standards and goals in public policy and who is responsible for the implementation and results and consequences. In practice performance standards and goals are often set by civil servants for which they can not be held accountable. Even if politicians legitimatize policies and performance standards, the implementing agencies escape responsibility. The ideal of a clear division of roles between politics and administration is a fiction (Behn 2001:66). The fact that citizens meet civil servants more often than politicians and the former make binding decisions affecting citizens has become a pressing problem in contemporary democracies. That is, citizens can not hold civil servants and professionals to account for consequences of policy and program implementation.

To sum up, the traditional notion of democratic accountability is too narrow and linked to formal rules and the delegation of power in representative democracy. The concept has to be extended and include democratic dialogue to be useful in representing prevailing forms of accountability in democratic governance.


**Evaluation for democratic accountability - a citizen perspective**

What then are the options for citizens to evaluate public policy and how can those in charge be held to account? Citizens can make use of prevailing evaluations and public reviews or with their own eyes assess processes and consequences of public policy, in particular if they are actively involved in public policy. Mainly, democratic accountability, viewed from a citizen perspective, can be carried out in two ways – the direct or indirect way (cf. Behn, 2001:125; Weber:1999:453). Citizens can, besides voting in elections, which is the main direct way for democratic accountability in representative democracy, communicate his or her assessment of a policy/programme to a an elected representative directly or write in a newspaper to bring attention to consequences of a policy or program, for example.

In the formal accountability system the elected representatives and public reviewers have the mandate to carry out the accountability function on behalf of citizens. From a citizen perspective this is an indirect way of democratic accountability. It is assumed that citizens have delegated its principal role of accountability holder to the elected representatives. However, not all citizens are aware of this delegation and some people think that the current system for democratic accountability is insufficient. In new modes of governance and particularly when citizens get actively involved in public policy, the conditions for accountability change and the formal institutions for accountability are not really matching the new needs. Active citizens are both accountability holders and accountability holdees, implying that the role of citizens is many-sided in a participatory or discursive democracy (Hanberger, 2006a).

Table 1 summarizes salient characteristics of the direct and indirect ways of democratic accountability. It indicates how citizens can undertake evaluation for accountability in various ways of democratic accountability. A distinction is made between who are accountability holders and holdees. The direct and indirect ways of democratic accountability also differ regarding the accountability mechanism and what notion of accountability is being promoted.

Election is the main direct way through which a citizen can hold those in power to account for public policy. The assumption is that citizens not only choose between competing parties and candidates who run for government when they vote, but also hold the present government accountable for the previous period’s public policy. To back up the democratic accountability decision a citizen could use prevailing evaluations and public reviews for their own consideration. Although the deliberation takes place in the heads of citizens and in discussions with their fellow citizens, this can be referred to as a kind of meta-evaluation of public policy. The majority role is an accepted mechanism for changing government and the key mechanism in this form of democratic accountability. This pathway promotes a notion of democratic accountability as a chain of delegated power and a clear division of responsibility between citizens, the elected and the administration. Furthermore, the elected representatives are the sole accountability holdees in relation to citizens. It maintains the notion of an ideal division of power and responsibility where the administration and professionals are accountable to the elected representatives.
### Table 1 Democratic accountability and public policy - a citizen perspective

<table>
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<th>Democratic accountability</th>
<th>Direct ways</th>
<th>Indirect ways</th>
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<td>Thru election</td>
<td>Thru policy participation</td>
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<td>Citizens’ evaluation for accountability</td>
<td>“Meta evaluation” based on prevailing accounts</td>
<td>Citizens’ own evaluation</td>
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<td>Accountability holders</td>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>Citizens</td>
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<td>Accountability holdees</td>
<td>Elected representatives</td>
<td>Elected representatives, administrators, professionals, active citizens</td>
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<td>Accountability mechanism</td>
<td>Voting, majority rule</td>
<td>Public critique, removal of legitimacy</td>
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<td>Promoted notion of accountability</td>
<td>Formal chain of democratic accountability</td>
<td>Mutual and shared responsibility</td>
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A second way of direct democratic accountability is when citizens continuously hold the elected, the administration, professionals and themselves responsible for any progress or failure in public policy. This form of democratic accountability evolves when citizens are actively involved in public policy, thus in various forms of participatory and discursive democracy. The citizen, acting as an interpretive practitioner, will at the same time take on the role of policy maker and/or implementer, that is, act as an accountability holdee in combination with accountability holder. Thus, an active citizen combines the two roles. A new accountability mechanism develops in new forms of governance. Public critique and removing legitimacy are the mechanisms of democratic accountability in this case of democratic accountability. By contrast, mutual and shared responsibility will be promoted and thought of as reasonable ways of democratic accountability. Active citizens can evaluate policy processes and outcomes in a more authentic way through first hand experience. Authentic evaluations take place when citizens participate in walking tours, site visits and meetings with those in charge, for examples (Weber, 1999). National indicators and standardized performance measures are not very helpful for knowing what to do about low scores in schools, elderly care and nurseries, for example. Useful accounts for democratic accountability and deliberation about future action include qualitative data and measures indicating problems, made progress in processes and outcomes relevant to local conditions (Hanberger et al, 2005; Ryan, 2005). This form of democratic accountability could carry a
problem because it gives active citizens more power and violate with the principal of one man - one vote. However, many citizens decide not to vote in the first place (turnover is low or decreasing in many countries) and have already given away the power of accountability to the representatives that their fellow citizens have voted for.

Similarly, citizen organisations can hold those in power to account by arranging public hearings, undertake a citizen inspection of the situation in schools, nurseries or local environment, for examples. There are citizen organisations that not only act as accountability holders, but also take responsibility in public policy (indicated by the bracket in the Table). A citizen organisation can act as an interpretive practitioner, that is, both as an accountability holder and holdee. Active citizen organisations can also evaluate policy processes and outcomes in a more authentic way if they are actively involved. Likewise, mutual and shared responsibility will be promoted and public critique and removing legitimacy are the main mechanisms in this form of democratic accountability. The question of representativeness can become a problem if a distance between the citizen organisation and the ordinary citizen evolves.

The first indirect way of democratic accountability indicated in the Table refers to when elected representatives, assisted by public reviewers, scrutinize the elected in office and/or the administration. The elected representatives in the opposition parties are accountability holders in relation to the elected in power whereas the elected are accountability holders in relation to the administration. A problem with this model, which follows the formal chain of accountability, is that citizens cannot hold the administration and professionals to account for policy implementation and for decisions affecting their ordinary lives. They are supposed to express any discontent to the formally accountable politician and party. The mechanisms in this pathway of democratic accountability are mainly to take back authority or grants and undertake disciplinary action. It maintains a notion of accountability closely linked to the formal chain of accountability.

Another indirect way of democratic accountability open to citizens is through media. Media has different roles in a democracy, in particular for the process of democratic accountability. From a citizen perspective media is a public reviewer with a commission to scrutinize those in power and public policy on behalf of citizens, not only before elections but all the time. Media undertake their own reviews, report on other reviews and provide a forum for deliberation related to their own and other actors’ reviews and inquiries. Media’s two additional roles can impact the influence of other reviewers work. How media carry out the

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4 When citizen organisations carry out evaluations of policies and programmes this could be seen as either a direct or indirect way depending on from which citizen perspective it is viewed. Although this way have some similarities with the indirect ways discussed below, in that it carries the problem of representativeness, it is referred to as a direct way in this paper.

5 The reviews undertaken by public reviewers could be a source of information to be used by citizens when coming to judgement about democratic accountability and used in the next election. However, as indicated in the next section, these reports are generally written for the actors in the traditional accountability system. Citizens could still make use of some of the information, but in a study of local audit reports 1995-2002 in four Swedish municipalities indicate that these are not comprehensive, and not written in a language that an ordinary citizen can understand (Hanberger et al., 2005). Mainly, these reviews serve the needs of the elected representatives, but the reports could be developed to meet the needs of both the players in the accountability system and ordinary citizens (Lundin & Ribberdahl, 1999).
different roles have implications for the discourse on democratic accountability. Citizens can use the stories and evaluations that media presents to come to judgement about democratic accountability which can be referred to as a form of “meta evaluation”. Many citizens rely heavily on the stories on public policy told in the media. On behalf of citizens, the media act as an accountability holder by holding politicians, administrators and professionals to account. The mechanism of accountability is first of all public critique linked to questioning those in power’s legitimacy. Most policy stories maintain a notion of accountability that follows the formal chain of accountability, but sometimes more accountability holders and holdees prevail. Then a notion of “360-degree accountability” is being promoted, that is, the entire accountability environment is let in.

The direct and indirect ways discussed here are democratic accountability options open to citizens. I am not arguing that one way is better than the other, but that the various ways have different implications and can be used complementary. Depending on what model of democracy you want to promote some ways appear more appropriate and supportive. Mainly, the election and the elected representative way support representative democracy and strengthen the elitist notion of democracy. By contrast, democratic accountability through citizen participation and citizen organisations better match a participatory or discursive notion of democracy. The media has mixed implications for democratic accountability. Media supports representative and elitist notion of democracy when focusing on decision makers’ promises, compliance with formal rules and goal-achievements. However, when media support public debate and deliberation related to public reviews, a broader notion of democratic accountability and a discursive democracy is being promoted.

**Public reviewers’ implication for democratic accountability**

What do we know about public reviewers’ work in practice? In this section public reviewers’ implications for democratic accountability will be discussed in relation to five reviewers’ work in Sweden. The lessons learned are drawn from an interdisciplinary research project in which more than 50 decision makers and public reviewers were interviewed about prevailing public reviews in four municipalities 2000-2004 (Hanberger et al., 2005). Four of the reviewers belong to the indirect way of democratic accountability discussed above, whereas citizens and citizen organisations correspond to two direct ways.

The five reviewers are external reviewers undertaking public reviews about execution of power and local policies in decentralized governance in Sweden. These five operate in most decentralized governance systems in modern democracies. Three can be referred to as authorized reviewers, i.e., state inspectors/auditors, local auditors and external evaluators, and two as self-authorized reviewers: the media, citizens and citizens’ organisations.

So far few empirical studies of the implications of public review in decentralized governance have been reported (Johnsen et al., 2001; Hanberger et al, 2005). It is remarkable because local government has an important role in decentralized governance in many countries, especially in the Nordic. Although media researchers study the role, function and significance of local media, not much research has been done concerning how the entire review or accountability

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6 The term public review is here used for various kinds of inquiry of public sector policies and programs, including those in power. ‘Review’ implies some type of systematic and thorough inquiry and assessment.
system works in decentralized governance (Dahler-Larsen, 2000; Johnsen et al, 2001) and what is import here, how the system works from a citizen perspective.

Five public reviewers
Figure 1 illustrates the five external reviewers and their relations to local government which will be discussed. The double-edged arrows indicate the relations between the reviewers and local government and the broken arrows illustrate media’s further roles and tasks (cf. Hanberger et al, 2005). Mainly, citizens and citizen organizations have relations with local governments and the media. From a citizen perspective the five reviewers have different roles and implications regarding accountability for performance.

Figure 1: Local reviewers and local government

Public reviewers’ implications for democratic accountability
State inspectors’ centre of attention is laid on the implementation of state policies/programs. Mainly, state inspectors assist the elected representatives at the national level in holding the subordinated institutions and actors to account. Citizens can make use of national reports dealing with the compliance of central rules and regulations as well as evaluation reports on the quality in schools, home for elderly people, for examples. But state inspections in Sweden do not provide a comprehensive account of the situation in the schools or homes for elderly people. Here results of state inspections are often presented on the county level which makes them less useful to citizens in the local community. In the referenced study state inspectors, operating in policy areas where the local level is an implementation level and steered by exclusive national laws, were considered important accountability holders by local decision makers. However, the citizen organisations interviewed only occasionally considered such inspections useful to them.

Local auditors’ commission is to investigate internal control and the efficiency of local government. Swedish local auditors do not generally have the ordinary citizen in mind when
deciding what kind of auditing they should undertake and the reports are not written in a language that most citizens can understand. Most local auditing deals with how the systems for internal control are designed and work which first of all meet the needs of the elected representatives particularly in the opposition parties. But to citizens such audits are not of any real interest. Citizen need performance audits and accounts informing them how local government policies work and to what extent the expectations they have on public policy have been met. Important to say is that neither local auditors commission nor their reports are well known by citizens. Citizens have never contacted local auditors and requested an audit or asked for an audit report, in the referenced study. Furthermore, in most municipalities the reports are not easily accessible. However, nothing prevents auditors for adopting a citizen perspective. They have the freedom of choice to develop local auditing and audit reports to meet the needs of citizens at the same time as they serve the elected representatives (Lundin & Riberdahl, 1999). At present, local auditors support democratic accountability through the elected representatives at the local level.

Mainly, media’s reviews pay attention to power execution, how local governments live up to promises and how they implement national and local policies. Media has, as been said, more than one important role related to democratic accountability. Although media has a commission to scrutinize those in power and public policy on behalf of citizens, their commission is not always carried out this way. Mainly, media focus on policy goal achievements and citizens in a weak position when telling stories on policy performance. The conditions for media can be summarized as limited time, money, and sometimes even a lack of competence, particularly in small communities. This situation, in combination with the media logic, implies that only news that will sell are considered for publication and brought to the front. In addition, the media was generally pre-occupied with the decision makers’ and the disadvantaged citizen’s issues in the referenced study. Decision makers and citizen organisations underscore the great impact of media. Both actors recognize media’s important role in democratic accountability at the same time as the have experienced that some stories told by media have created a debate with negative implications for local democracy and democratic accountability, mainly because the stories were considered to have little truth.

In case an external evaluator is given a commission it concerns a specific policy, program, organisation model or monitoring system, for examples. However, few external evaluators had commissions to evaluate local policies in the four municipalities under scrutiny. Universities and external consultants evaluated the municipality’s monitoring system for elderly care, water management, for examples. These evaluations were considered very trustworthy and legitimate, and the decision makers said that some of them had significant impact on routines and policies. However, these evaluations were not discussed by any of the citizen organisations that we interviewed. Indeed some citizens could of course have heard about these, but if they had had any major influence active citizens would be the first to know. Thus, the external evaluations had very little significance for democratic accountability when viewed from a citizen perspective.

Citizens and citizen organisations are generally most concerned with how power is executed and issues related to specific policies, first of all policies and programmes that they are actively involved in or affected by. Very few citizens and citizen organisations were actually
involved in undertaking systematic reviews in these four municipalities. That is, few organisations were mentioned as undertaking some kind of evaluation or public review of power execution and municipality policies by the actors in the local accountability system. Typically, citizens and citizen organisations undertook evaluations ad hoc, when an issue was hot and most often without reporting findings in the format of a written report. However, a few national citizen organisations with local units undertook evaluations, an organization for elderly people and one environmental organisation, to name two of them. In one municipality the evaluation of elderly care presented a good score for the municipality which was a surprise for the local organisation and the community. This evaluation for accountability led to diminishing complaints. In addition, some citizens and citizen organisations have participated in local policy and there are a few examples of more direct forms of democratic accountability embedded in participatory policy. Mainly, citizens in small villages mobilized resources and developed civil society policy as a complement to municipality policy. These examples indicate that citizens both take responsibility and undertake some kind of accountability assessment continuously. The participatory citizen observed public policy performance with their own eyes, and deliberated about past and future action in dialogue with other policy actors, i.e., they acted as both accountability holders and holdees. Site visits of municipality policies and services were reported. Thus, the role of accountability holder and holdee is integrated in accountability as democratic dialogue.

Discussion

This paper argues that there is a need to develop democratic accountability evaluations to match the shifting needs related to public policy performance. Then the concept of democratic accountability must be broad and include democratic dialogue. Evaluations for democratic accountability need to support democratic governance and public policy in which citizens are actively engaged. Concerned citizens want to make their own judgements about public policy performance; just holding the elected representatives to account for public policy every three or four years is not enough. There are plenty of examples of how citizens search new ways to hold policy makers, not only formal decision makers, to account (cf. Behn, 2001; Power, 1997; Hanberger, 2006a; Mulgan, 1998; Ryan, 2005; Weber, 1999).

State inspectors and local auditors, two mandated actors in today’s accountability system, need to develop their accounts and story telling if they intend to meet the needs of citizens. At present they serve the elected representatives and as the referenced study indicates the reviews are not primarily concerned with policy performance. Mainly, these reviews focus on internal control, steering and monitoring systems. In other words these reviews deal with what Robert Behn refers to as accountability for finances and fairness (Behn, 2001). Prevailing state inspection and local auditing maintain, for the most part, the traditional notion of democratic accountability, a notion that follows the formal chain of accountability. Furthermore, it maintains a specific notion of what it is to be a citizen. Citizens are consumers of public services and voters - nothing more.

The media has an important responsibility to support democratic accountability. Media is supposed to work with a citizen perspective in its own reviewing, in reporting on other public
reviews and in providing a forum for deliberation in response to reviews. However, the media logic aim in another direction, that is, selling (policy) stories sometimes have negative implications for democratic accountability. The referenced study indicates a risk that the stories told give an invalid representation of the situation and particularly about policy performance. Part of the problem is that media tend to tell stories about policy performance by focusing on vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens. If citizens use such media reviews for democratic accountability, democracy is being distorted. What citizens need more is media reviews synthesised from a general citizen perspective without too much attention given to special interest groups or consequences for individual disadvantaged citizens. One can always find special interest groups and disadvantaged citizens that are not happy with a policy or programme.

Citizens need better accountability evaluations for assessing performance and consequences of public policy. They also need to develop their own ability to critically assess prevailing accounts and public policy discourses to be able to assess policy performance. Citizens have learned that there is not one truth indicated by the fact that researchers and public reviewers present different policy stories, view the problem situation differently and assess policy progress and failure from different points of view (Fischer, 1995; 2004). Consequently, citizens must develop their own critical thinking and meta-evaluation skill. This in turn will lead to a demand for developing public reviews in ways that better serve citizens’ needs. However, evaluation for democratic accountability should meet the needs of both active and inactive citizens. This paper recognizes that active citizens are both accountability holders and accountability holdees and that this situation changes the assumption that citizens only are accountability holders and activate this role in times of election. Active citizens, sharing responsibility, view accountability as an integrated component of civil and public policy. The active citizen shares responsibility and develops a sense of mutual accountability with other accountability holders or responsibility takers. If more citizens get engaged in public policy we can expect more citizens searching first hand information about public policy in coming to judgement about democratic accountability. Developing more authentic modes of evaluation for accountability, such as site visits, walking tours, offer a way for citizens to make their own judgement about democratic accountability. If the direct ways of accountability are recognized and developed these accountability options could perhaps attract disillusioned and excluded citizens as well.

The freedom of choice for evaluators to design and carry out accountability evaluation to meet the needs in a dynamic environment is not always extensive. However, it is a recurrent challenge for democratic evaluators to push for the citizen perspective (ref. Hanberger, 2006b). Mainly, evaluators can design and undertake the evaluation to maintain the current accountability system and democratic orientation or promote new ways of democratic accountability in support of participatory or discursive democracy (ibid.; House and Howe 1999; Ryan, 2005). Evaluators and public reviewers can to some extent influence what implications their work will have for citizens. The evaluation process and the story an evaluation presents do influence the accountability discussion as well as how democratic accountability is conceived by citizens. Hence, we need to discuss in what ways evaluators and public reviewers can develop their accountability work to better meet citizens’ needs.
References


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