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# Systems-Aware Social Accountability

## Harnessing Practitioner Insights for More Responsive Governance

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# Introduction

Pact has more than 20 years of experience contributing to more responsive and accountable governance by strengthening local governments and communities, often represented by civil society organizations (CSOs). Social accountability is a key approach in Pact's portfolio to strengthen local governance systems and support outcomes in other sectors, particularly social services.

In 2022, Pact set out to understand *what defines its approach to social accountability*, with an eye to understanding how Pact teams design and implement interventions in complex environments. Interviews with staff in five countries—Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe—revealed that Pact teams contextualize social accountability interventions within each project's unique system, positioning it to deliver results and strengthen the wider system at the same time.

Pact distilled the formal and informal approaches its teams employed across these projects into an emergent framework entitled *Systems-Aware Social Accountability* (SASA), complementing those insights

with a targeted global literature review. SASA's principles demonstrate how practitioners connect discrete social accountability interventions with systems thinking and illuminate how they have sought to understand how and the conditions under which those interventions can catalyze greater accountability.

**This report presents the SASA framework, articulates how social accountability practitioners make strategic and tactical decisions, and offers insights for practitioners interested in developing, implementing, and managing SASA projects or integrating similar approaches into their portfolios.**

# The Systems-Aware Social Accountability (SASA) Framework

SASA is an approach to programming that operationalizes how and the conditions under which a social accountability intervention works with and through a system to catalyze more-responsive and accountable governance. The approach elucidates four inter-related principles that emerged throughout the design and implementation process: **use a holistic lens**, **right fit the approach**, **orchestrate across the system**, and **manage adaptively**. These principles are not exclusive to social accountability

interventions; for example, Pact has published tools on how to use [political economy analysis](#) or integrate [adaptive management principles](#) into programming. Rather, the principles highlight how — including mindsets, management approaches, analytic approaches, and tools — practitioners develop and apply a deep understanding of a system to improve relationships within it, in support of greater accountability and improved service delivery.<sup>1</sup>

## Use a holistic lens

Recognize that there is always a system and consider patterns at work to up the odds of local actors delivering on outcomes.

## Right fit the approach

Focus on the sphere of influence where one and one's partners are better/ reasonably placed and have a credible strategy to make a difference within the system.

## Orchestrate across the system

Capitalize on convening power to orchestrate the most-promising alignments across projects implemented within and beyond portfolios.

## Manage adaptively

Monitor, evaluate, and learn for sustainability, keeping an eye on outcomes that matter, while reflecting on emerging patterns of data, evidence, and learning and on contextual shifts to inform decision-making.



# What's different about SASA?

**A**ccountability is a common term and a critical objective of many development programs, but its definition and usage can vary widely. For example, some organizations clearly differentiate between government *responsiveness* and government *accountability*, while others use the terms interchangeably. *Social accountability* is sometimes

used as a synonym for monitoring and feedback tools, such as community scorecards or social audits, with less emphasis on how these tools are used to strengthen dialogue and inform decision-making. This table presents working descriptions for “accountability” and “social accountability” to clarify Pact’s approach and clearly distinguish SASA from other terms.

Concept	Working Definition
<b>Accountability</b>	Accountability entails a proactive set of <b>processes and practices</b> anchored in a <b>social relationship</b> between a power-holder (an actor who performs a task) and an account-holder (those for whom the task is performed or who are affected by it). In this relationship, the powerholder is, in practice, obliged to explain and justify their decisions, behaviors, and results ( <b>answerability</b> ) with <b>information and transparency</b> . There is the possibility of dialogue among the parties, and the account-holder can pose questions and ask for remedies, corrective action, or problem solving ( <b>accountability processes</b> ). As a result, the account-holder can pass judgment and the power-holder can face some form of consequences. These consequences can be formal and explicit (e.g., <b>sanctions</b> in the case of malperformance, censure) or informal and implicit (e.g., <b>increased social pressure</b> ). <sup>2</sup>
<b>Social Accountability</b>	Social accountability interventions seek to influence the relationship between power-holders and citizens (account-holders) in order to make citizens and communities leading agents of “their own localized ... development story”. <sup>3</sup> Social accountability interventions (1) <b>aim to improve the quality of goods and services</b> , primarily through (2) <b>monitoring and oversight of those goods and services</b> , and (3) <b>rely on citizens’ collective, rather than individual, efforts</b> to hold power-holders (primarily <b>service providers and bureaucrats</b> , secondarily politicians) to account. <sup>4</sup>  Because evidence and recent experience suggest that the value of social accountability is found in its ability to strengthen relationships between stakeholders, a new fourth characteristic is emerging, that (4) social accountability can <b>provide a concrete mechanism to rework the social contract</b> , as interactions between citizens and powerholders can transform state-society relationships and the norms and power dynamics associated with them.
<b>Systems-Aware Social Accountability (SASA)</b>	SASA is an approach to programming that operationalizes how and the conditions under which a social accountability intervention works with and through a system to catalyze more-responsive and accountable governance. This includes four, inter-related principles applied throughout the design and implementation process: use a holistic lens, right fit the approach, orchestrate across the system, and manage adaptively.

# SASA happens when practitioners infuse systems thinking with social accountability approaches.

In the last decade, many “traditional” social accountability projects tracked metrics such as the number of formal rules influenced, the number of stakeholders participating in monitoring activities, or whether public information is easier to access. These measures often were prioritized over capturing the less-tangible contributions of social accountability work, such as changes in mental models or the improving quality of relationships. A SASA approach invites stakeholders to consider the range of outcomes and their connections, rather than solely focus on one component (or type of component) over others. By accepting that all projects are a part of and operate within a **system**, i.e., a set of inter-dependent actors interacting as part of a complex whole, practitioners must focus on the context in which they and other stakeholders are embedded and the factors that affect their behavior. Therefore, practitioners seeking to develop systems-aware social accountability are **working to understand how social accountability interventions fit within a broader system and how and the conditions under which the system can deliberately create dynamics that contribute to making the whole more than the sum of its parts.**<sup>5</sup>

SASA practitioners answer this key political question by resetting their expectations about the **outcomes that should matter most** for a specific intervention. While historically social accountability interventions focused on improving policies, practices, and resource flows, SASA practitioners care equally about nudging relationships and

connections, power dynamics, and mental models to be more supportive of and to catalyze more-responsive and accountable governance.

**Even in instances where an improved relationship has not resulted in greater government responsiveness, social accountability’s ability to build social capital, trust, and sometimes collective action among parties that did not engage with each other (or even think to engage with each other) is often a valuable outcome. The process of fostering constructive engagement between stakeholders can open pathways to improve service delivery, but, equally importantly, to improve the relationship between citizens and government (i.e., the social contract).**<sup>6</sup>

# SASA updates practices from the recent past, where social accountability literature under-valued outcomes that practitioners and communities consider critical to support healthier systems.<sup>7</sup>



LONG TERM

## TRADITIONAL SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Aim for a permanent solution that directly tackles a known problem.

Set pre-determined milestones, such as the number of accountability institutions or policies developed.

## SYSTEMS-AWARE SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Aim for an incrementally stronger system that can address problems as they emerge and evolve to respond to new challenges.

Continuously review and revise key milestones, including complex indicators that assess forces within the system that can continuously innovate how power holders are held accountable.



NEAR TERM

### Policies

Governmental, institutional, and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions

### Practices

Espoused activities of institutions, coalitions, networks, and other entities targeted to improve social and environmental progress

### Resource Flows

How money, people, knowledge, information and transparency, carrots and sticks, and other assets, such as infrastructure, are allocated and distributed

### Build Relational Capital

Improving the quality of connections and interactions between actors in the system

### Power Dynamics

The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and formal and informal influences among individuals and organizations

### Mental Models

Habits of thought, i.e., deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think and talk and what we do

## OUTCOME TYPES OF GREATEST INTEREST

# 1

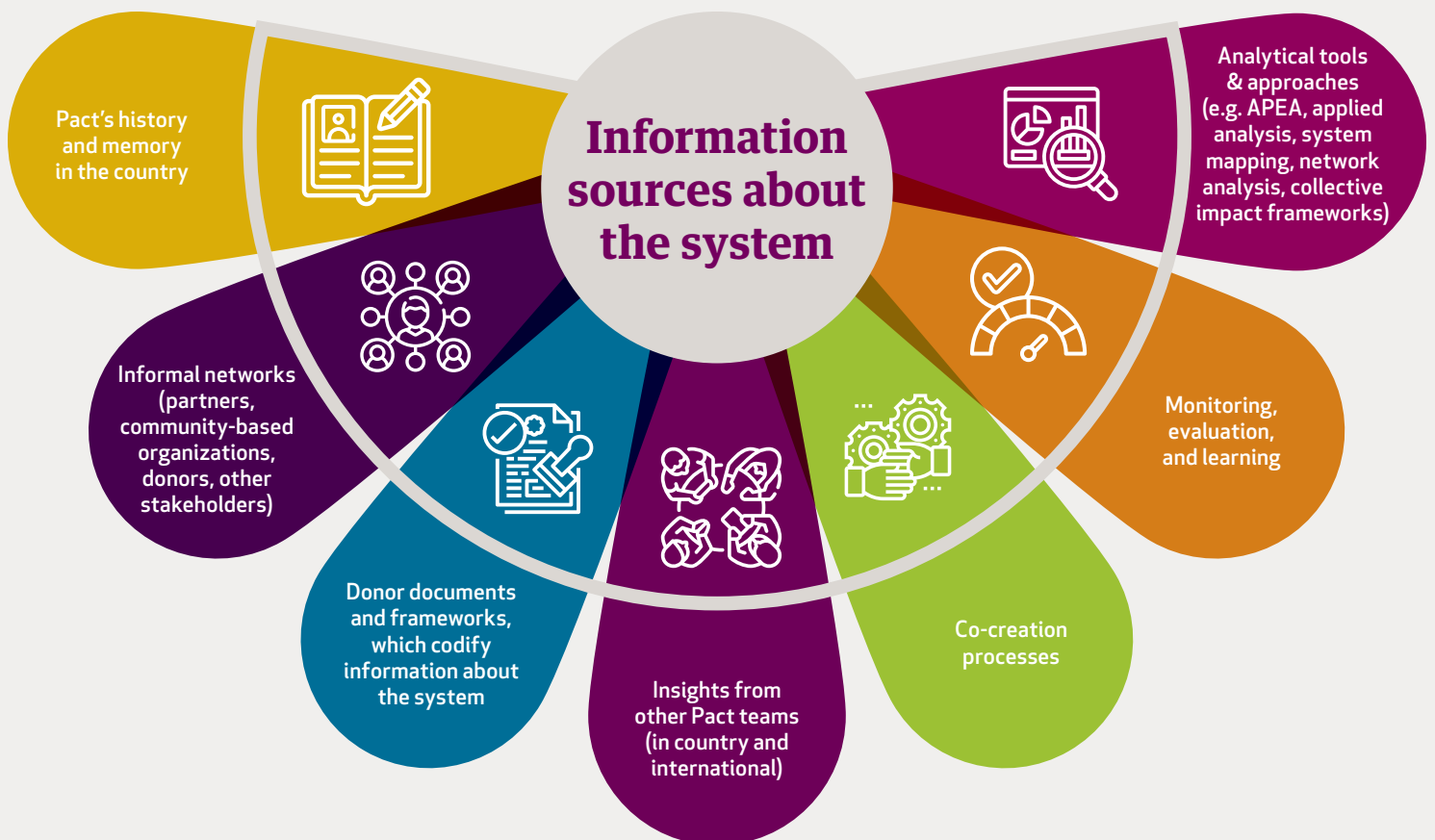
## SASA PRINCIPLE 1

# Use a Holistic Lens

Recognize that there is always a system - understand and engage with it.

Developing a strong understanding of the system in which a project works and effectively integrating this knowledge into implementation increases the chances that local actors will sustain the interventions. Effective SASA programming requires practitioners to consider which tools, such as those illustrated in the figure below, will improve and augment their existing knowledge to understand what dynamics are at work in the local system and how they may affect prospective social accountability

interventions. Pact's experience has demonstrated that the right tools, developed with a clear purpose in mind that collect both enough and the right kind of information, can increase the odds that their intervention will be congruous with the existing system and support it to become healthier—in other words, to produce accountability or related outcomes.



## SASA PRINCIPLE 1: Use a Holistic Lens

Information gathered through a holistic lens also supports teams to action other components of the SASA framework (*right-fitting, orchestrating, and managing adaptively*) by informing project decisions, such as ongoing dialogue with funders and programmatic shifts in response to context.

As a result, information sources seem most useful when they reflect a project's embeddedness in a system and support a project team's understanding of both the system and their role in it.



### PUTTING PRINCIPLE 1 INTO PRACTICE

- **Prioritize capturing and analyzing the tacit knowledge that project staff have. These relationships with donors, partners, communities, and public officials provide critical insight into a system.**
- **Developing a holistic lens should not lead to “analysis paralysis.” Focus on selecting the right tools that will generate enough information to positively inform implementation, and use ongoing analyses to fill in emergent gaps.**
- **When developing the scope for foundational assessments, include a focus on the accountability ecosystem in which the project plans to work. For example, examine the factors influencing how empowered a government ministry is to respond to citizen feedback.**
- **Include a clear focus on understanding where a project is within a system (i.e., its embeddedness).**



# 2

## SASA PRINCIPLE 2

# Right Fit the Approach

Equipped with a holistic understanding of the context, teams identify where they have a comparative advantage in a specific system. In other words, they identify where their resources, expertise, and partners have the greatest potential for impact, then set realistic targets.



Identify the concrete places from where to intervene in a system, e.g., through sectoral programs.



Setting realistic expectations for what a project may achieve given the nature of the strategy in a particular local system given the resources, building blocks and time available to it.

### Sphere of influence

### Leverage points

### Credible strategy

### Realistic targets

Understand where in the system the project is better placed to make a bigger difference to the system (or not).



Develop a credible plan to make a difference that brings bear capacities to unlock, rather than impose, change within a local system.



**BE AWARE THAT THE SPHERE OF INFLUENCE MAY CHANGE OVER TIME, AND COURSE CORRECT ACCORDINGLY.**

## SASA PRINCIPLE 2: Right Fit the Approach

When implementing in dynamic contexts, especially over many years, finding a project's "right fit" may resemble more of a winding road than a straight line. Project teams will calibrate their approaches as circumstances and a project's comparative advantage evolve.

In some contexts, social accountability is an important project priority, but may not be a realistic short-term goal. To navigate this, SASA practitioners often leverage their holistic knowledge to implement interventions that capitalize on their comparative advantages, in other words, seeking to maximize impact and minimize unintended consequences. For example, this may influence the sector on which a SASA intervention focuses, the stakeholders engaged, and setting realistic expectations for results.

In contexts where Pact has worked across project cycles, such as Zimbabwe and Myanmar (see graphic on the next page), project teams continuously calibrated their approaches and ambition to shifts in the context. For this reason, right-fitting can resemble a long and winding road instead of a straight line, as project teams use different approaches when windows of opportunities open and when the context is more hostile and social accountability work might do harm. SASA practitioners should aim to strengthen the system or key stakeholders so that partners are well-positioned to raise their ambition when the next window of opportunity opens.



### PUTTING PRINCIPLE 2 INTO PRACTICE

- **Identify other initiatives working to advance accountability-related outcomes, and determine how to complement their initiatives. This could include the work of other implementing partners, projects in a country office's portfolio, and donor projects in-country.**
- **Develop processes and practices that allow projects to identify changes in the context and right fit approaches accordingly. This could include formal project processes, such as pause and reflect sessions; using a flexible grant pool; conducting dedicated analyses before pivotal moments in the context, such as an election; or maximizing informal ones, such as regular dialogue with funders or external stakeholders.**

# SASA PRINCIPLE 2: Right Fit the Approach

## IN PRACTICE: Pact's Myanmar Portfolio from 2011-2021

### ► Project's Sphere of Influence Expands

To take advantage of a comparatively less-restrictive civic space, the donor adds a governance focus into Shae Thot, an integrated program, at its midpoint. The "community institutions" pillar obscured the focus on improving village-level governance while creating a pathway to strengthen village structures.

### ► Leverage Point

Donor expresses increased interest in integrating participatory approaches into existing health programs (cross-sector integration)

### ► Credible Strategy

Pact develops an approach to strengthen community institutions and village governance by adapting existing organizational development approaches, including coaching and mentoring.

### ► Window of Opportunity Opens

Donors feel optimistic about the progress of reforms and the potential for democracy and peace in the post-2015 Myanmar election period, which changes the dynamic of donor and implementer dialogue about what participation and accountability work to prioritize. This spurs new, more-ambitious expectations among stakeholders for what could be accomplished in the next project cycle, leading the donor to explore doing community-based governance work inside Myanmar and to the development of the Advancing Community Empowerment (ACE) program.

### ► Project Determines Sphere of Influence

ACE begins with more-ambitious goals from the donor to strengthen local governance. The transition from military to civilian administration also inspired new thinking about how to seize the window of opportunity, including working in areas of mixed control between government and ethnic armed organizations.

### ► Leverage Point

ACE is empowered to integrate governance and accountability work into multi-partner, multi-sector programs and to use adaptive management principles.

### ► Credible Strategy

To do this work in a politically savvy manner, the project seeks to support engagement between service providers and communities and to build trust between communities and government ethnic service providers. The project also seeks to support trust-building activities across government and ethnic service providers, for example, in the health sector, based on political economy analysis findings. Building on ACE, the Pact team pilots improving responsiveness at the village tract level to support more-systematic connections between citizens and sub-national government through the Village Tract Accountability Fund project.

### ► Project Sphere of Influence Shrinks

The COVID-19 pandemic leads the project to suspend the majority all in-person programming. Trust-building between Myanmar's governmental and non-governmental bodies is extremely challenging, if not impossible, in a virtual environment.

### ► Credible Strategy

Unable to work on social accountability, project resources shift. Before the 2021 coup, which entirely suspended governance interventions to avoid drawing unwanted attention from the military junta, ACE planned to continue supporting ethnic service providers so that when another window of opportunity opened, those partners were well-positioned to continue community feedback and trust-building efforts.

# 3

## SASA PRINCIPLE 3

# Orchestrate Across The System

Practitioners take a networked, rather than a top-down approach, to capitalize on their convening power and maximize opportunity to facilitate the most-promising alignments across and within their projects, portfolios, and systems.

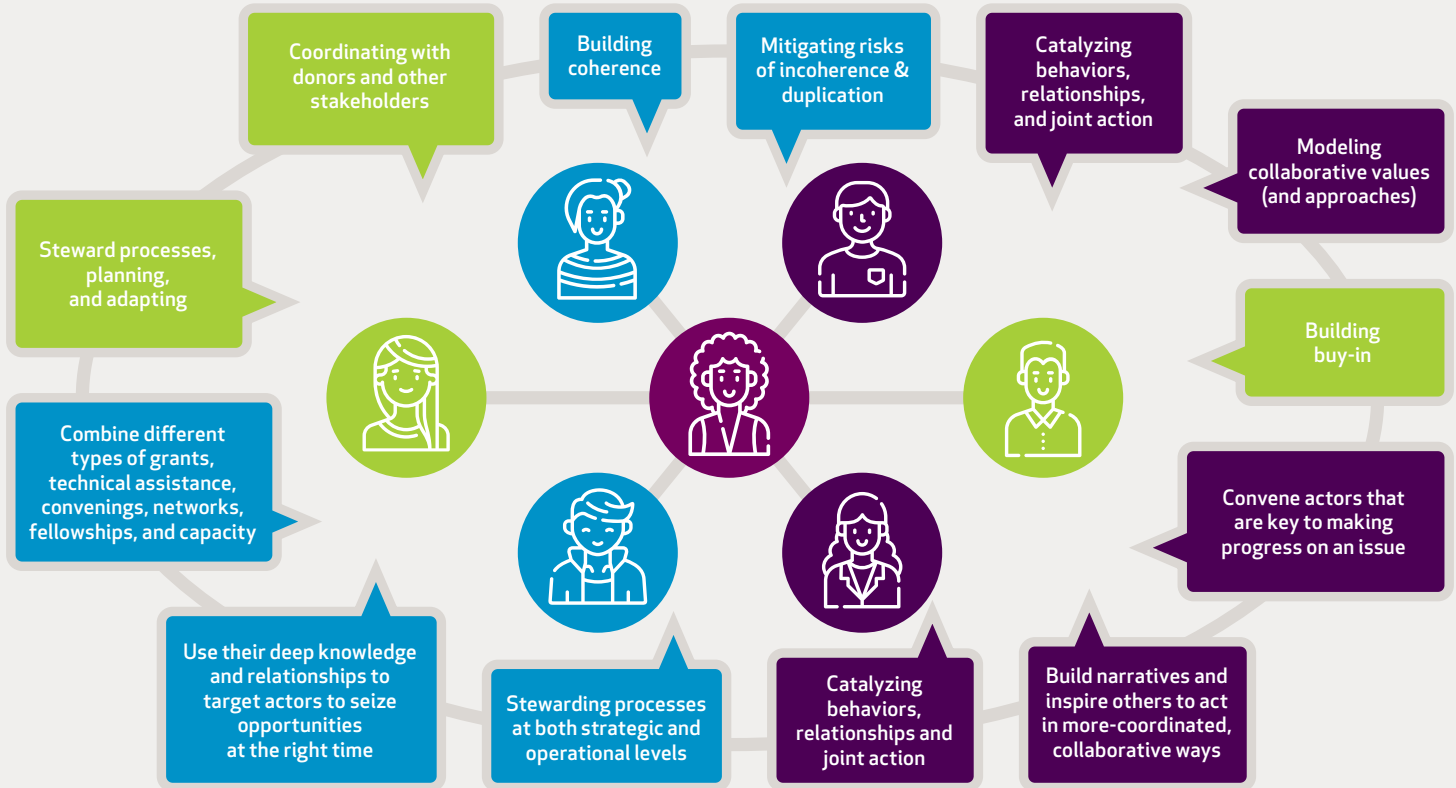
**Orchestration** refers to the collection of connected strategic and operational tasks that someone needs to perform to ensure that reciprocal interdependences, interactions, and synergies across different actors have an additive effect.<sup>8</sup> In other words, orchestrators use their individual power, relationships, and insight into the local system to enable, not impose, promising interactions and mitigate the risks of damaging ones. Orchestrators are rarely a protagonist in a social accountability relationship, but can be vital partners in improving its health, as well as the health of the overall system. Often, orchestrators are actors with their own spheres of influence, including funders, portfolio or project managers, implementing partners, or backbone organizations.

The graphic on the next page illustrates some of the actions and activities Pact's orchestrators carry out. A single action does not make an orchestrator; instead, it is a collection of actions that enables greater coherence (i.e., alignment with the local system) of the social accountability intervention. Orchestration is just as much about brokering relationships as it is about contextualizing interventions, ensuring that communication is politically

savvy, and avoiding imposing a course of action on the local system. Often, successful orchestration resembles loose coordination, or facilitating the exchange of information, across partners, stakeholders, portfolios, sectors, geographies, or time.

**Orchestration should not be conflated with the harmonization of interests among target actors. As part of developing a *holistic lens and right-fitting*, SASA practitioners focus on what is most promising within their sphere of influence and available places in the system to intervene (i.e., their leverage points) to unlock healthier system dynamics and seek to position others to do the same.**

## SASA PRINCIPLE 3: Orchestrate Across The System



### PUTTING PRINCIPLE 3 INTO PRACTICE

- Determine a project's convening power (i.e. determining which actors a project can bring together for a specific) early, and develop activities that maximize it while building trust between stakeholders. This could include, for example, learning exchanges, a community of practice, or trainings between stakeholders that otherwise might not meet.
- As much as possible, work with and through established stakeholders, accountability processes, platforms, and institutions to bolster the existing, locally led social accountability relationship. At the national level, this could include coordinating closely with projects in a donor portfolio or within a consortium. At the local level, explore how to broker relationships between exiting and relevant participatory platforms (e.g., a village health committee).
- Support local actors to become orchestrators, such as a group to become a network convenor.

## SASA PRINCIPLE 3: **Orchestrate Across The System**

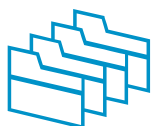
Orchestration looks different in each domain, but the core principle—intentionally facilitating promising alignments within it—remains the same.



**Across stakeholders:** At the local level, this can resemble deepening stakeholder engagement, such as “building bridges” between communities and service providers/bureaucrats or bringing broad sets of stakeholders together through networks, trainings, and events. Often, this work aims to foster the mutual trust and respect between groups that underpins new partnerships, coordination, and responsiveness.



**Across partners:** Pact teams sometimes funded multiple civil society and community-based organizations to lead social accountability interventions and proactively build mechanisms and platforms to incentivize joint goal-setting, coordination, and/or collaboration. Tools such as network analysis helped evaluate linkages among civil society and community-based organizations and identify opportunities for collaboration.



**Across portfolios:** Funders increasingly expect teams to coordinate their social accountability portfolios with other components of their governance strategies. This requires careful communication with other implementing partners to set joint expectations about what kind of coordination is “good enough” and how to overcome some of the practical, operational, and strategic obstacles to deeper collaboration.



**Across sectors (from mainstreaming to integration):** Often, social accountability work is one piece of a broader cross-sectoral project and is integrated with one or more service delivery sectors. To maximize the chances that sectoral stakeholders will respond to community feedback, practitioners should tailor their interventions to respond to each sector’s realities, constraints, and political economy. For example, in Zimbabwe, the team sought to link democracy and governance issues to citizens’ current priorities, including service delivery and livelihoods, which could address barriers to participation. Because funding for livelihoods work was scant, the team orchestrated ad hoc efforts to provide livelihoods support.



**Across geographies:** Many social accountability projects begin either at local or national level and, over time, attempt to vertically connect to additional levels of government and expand their geographic reach to have a greater impact (i.e., making progress on priority issues for communities, funders, or other partners). If geographic expansion is feasible and appropriate, tools such as Applied Political Economy Analysis can help identify which geographies are most promising for investing limited resources and ensuring teams are not stretched too thin.



**Across time:** In some cases, Pact teams orchestrated continuity in a long-term social accountability strategy by informing funders’ plans for the next call for proposals or project with learning from the past programming. Often, this is predicated on building a trusted relationship with the funder or taking advantage of participatory processes, such as co-creation.

# 4

## SASA PRINCIPLE 4

# Manage Adaptively

Monitor, evaluate, and reflect on emerging and patterns of data, evidence, and learning to inform decision-making within and, equally importantly, across project cycles.

To practice **managing within** a project cycle, throughout implementation, practitioners should continuously apply the data, evidence, and learning gathered throughout the project, as well as their updated holistic lens (see Principle 1). For example, Pact teams intentionally use pause and reflect sessions, annual work-planning, and ongoing dialogues with donors and project stakeholders to create

space for reflections and adaptations and to inculcate a more-systems-aware mindset for future work. In Cambodia, a rapid closure of civic space prompted the team to critically reflect, through conversations with the donor and dedicated analyses, on how they could continue making incremental gains toward greater accountability while not exposing the project or staff to unnecessary risks.



## PUTTING PRINCIPLE 4 INTO PRACTICE

### Managing Adaptively *Within* Project Cycles

- Adaptive Management is the intentional process of changing the path to achieve project goals in response to continuous learning and information about project performance and the external environment (i.e., the system or the context). Pact's [Adaptive Management Guide](#) guides practitioners through a three-step iterative process and offers tools, guidance, and practical tips for integrating adaptive management principles into programming. These steps are as follows.
  1. **Review processes** provide accurate and timely information about both project performance and the external operating environment.
  2. **Reflection processes** create space to make sense of available information and for implementers to update their understanding of what is needed to achieve results.
  3. **Response processes** include formal and informal mechanisms to change course as required.

## SASA PRINCIPLE 4: Manage Adaptively

A defining feature of Pact's SASA practice is managing adaptively within and across project cycles, particularly in response to contextual changes. **Managing across project cycles** allowed teams to continue advancing social accountability. When conditions for social accountability were not favorable, Pact teams opted to implement civil society strengthening projects rather than social accountability ones to lay the groundwork for future SA

interventions. When a window of opportunity opened, they seized on it in a new project cycle. Where possible, practitioners should consider how to use "short-term projects to play a long-term game" by linking new projects to the lessons and results of their predecessors and ensuring that they are responsive to the evolving context, particularly opportunities, limits, and risks.



### PUTTING PRINCIPLE 4 INTO PRACTICE

#### Managing Adaptively Across Project Cycles

SASA processes in complex systems consider how a discrete social accountability process interacts with the local system in the short, medium, and long terms. As a result, when possible, SASA practitioners aim to manage adaptively across project cycles, purposively connecting interventions so that new projects:

- Are not carbon copies of previous projects
- Consider the design and lessons of past interventions when conducting needs assessments and designing new projects and right-fitting them (see Principle 2) to evolving contexts, emerging opportunities, limits, and risks
- Use a holistic lens to reflect and adapt strategies, tactics, and goals as needed
- Use ongoing dialogue with donors to inform and align past and future projects



# Summary and Conclusion

A retrospective of Pact’s social accountability portfolio revealed that practitioners were infusing systems thinking into their work for years. Acknowledging that the heart of accountability work is the relationship between citizens and powerholders—a complex, dynamic relationship enmeshed in a wider system—Pact practitioners sought to understand the conditions under which social accountability can deliberately create dynamics that catalyze the development of more responsive and accountable systems. SASA encourages practitioners to put social relationships at the core of intervention

design, implementation, and evaluation. While improving policies, practices, and resources flows are valuable and important outcomes of social accountability work, SASA’s additional emphasis on improving mental models, power dynamics, and relationships and connections can strengthen systems to become more accountable on their own and, by promoting constructive engagement between stakeholders, offer a pathway to rework the social contract. The four principles articulated below capture how SASA practitioners cultivate and apply a deep knowledge of a system to their work in support of greater accountability.

## PRINCIPLE 1

### Use a holistic lens

Recognize that a project is always embedded in a system, and develop the tools and processes necessary for the project to better understand and engage with it constructively.

## PRINCIPLE 2

### Right fit the approach

Equipped with a holistic understanding of the context, identify where the project’s resources, expertise, and partners have the greatest potential for impact; develop a credible strategy; and set realistic targets. Calibrate your approaches as circumstances and a project’s comparative advantage evolve.

## PRINCIPLE 3

### Orchestrate across the system

Adopt a networked, rather than top-down, approach to capitalize on a project’s convening power and to maximize opportunities to facilitate the most-promising alignments across and within projects, portfolios, and systems.

## PRINCIPLE 3

### Manage adaptively

Monitor, evaluate, and reflect on emerging and patterns of data, evidence, and learning to inform decision-making within and, equally importantly, across project cycles.

1

2

3

4

# Annex

## HOLISTIC LENS IN PRACTICE: Nepal

The Social Accountability in the Health Sector (SAHS) programme was one part of an FCDO-funded programme entitled Nepal Health Sector Programme 3 (NHSP III), which from 2017-2022 sought to improve health services in Nepal, particularly for socially excluded groups. The core of SAHS' work was developing knowledge products, particularly applied political economy analyses, that could support the NHSP III team and key stakeholders understand how the federalization process impacted prospects for social accountability within Nepal's health sector. The project took place during a dynamic time in Nepal's history, as the 2015 constitution was recently promulgated, and the newly federalized form of government was being institutionalized, generating significant demand for products that analyzed the impact of these shifts.

Over the life of the project, the team produced 47 knowledge products that documented these dynamics that were shared with, and used by, the NHSP III team, and positively informed other SAHS interventions. The Pact Nepal team leveraged their existing networks and relationships to determine the focus of each piece of research and to improve the design, data collection, and

analysis in support of greater uptake of findings. For example, this updated contextual knowledge contributed to the design of SAHS' CSO trainings, leading to 146 human resource personnel from 93 CSOs across 26 districts and 7 provinces being trained on social accountability and the Budget Expenditure Tracking Survey. SAHS also used these products to support the Nepali Ministry of Health and related stakeholders to promote learning and consistent, coherent adoption of social accountability best practice, tools and mechanisms.

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## RIGHT FITTING IN PRACTICE: Myanmar

Pursuing social accountability work in Myanmar requires a deep understanding of the context, as the essential pre-conditions for it – including a governance structure and culture receptive to feedback – have not been in place for many years. Cognizant of this, from 2008 until the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Pact Myanmar team rarely characterized their work as social accountability, and for many years, framed their work around the “the two-way relationship” between citizens benefitting from services provided by civil society, not the relationship between citizens and powerholders. With this framing Pact teams found, tested, adapted and scaled interventions they believed were credible building blocks towards social accountability outcomes, starting with improved service delivery and building towards a stronger social contract at the local level.

The graphic on page 11 illustrates some of the contextual, strategic and operational factors that drove the team's decisions, paving the windy road followed in pursuit of greater social accountability.

At each juncture, the team had to consider how to “right size” their approach to accountability to Myanmar-specific events and context, Pact's assets, and decisions by funders. Sometimes, right-sizing didn't mean increasing or decreasing their focus on accountability, but changing approaches, because the project and its partners were seen as more or less credible to implement a specific approach or broker relationships. The team also had to consider how to advance accountability work in complex multi-sector programs in which they were only a small component. This required working within parameters set alongside other project components while seeking to apply insights about accountability learned through years of engagement with communities, funders, and during a period, with national authorities.

Over time – and across multiple projects - Pact's team sought to support more systematic connections between citizens and sub-national governments, proposing and testing (a previously unthinkable) focus on responsiveness at village tract level, which

is particularly relevant in a top-down and centralized governance structure. At the time, Oxfam's Duncan Green reflected about a peer organization's programming: "the word that recurred throughout my time in Myanmar was 'trust' – seeing our (social accountability) work as an exercise in broader trust-building, bringing people together to build relationships and 'bridging capital' between groups may well be our biggest contribution, rather than rushing to wheel out the toolkits so beloved of (social accountability) adherents in many countries."<sup>10</sup>

As the team's portfolio evolved, the Pact Myanmar team continued advancing beneficiary feedback work and sought to cascade it to local partners. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 coup, and other design and implementation challenges created obstacles that de-prioritized social accountability and the risk of doing harm, by violating COVID safety protocols and in the aftermath of the coup, increased. As the accountability work was scaled back, so were team's ambitions, and funding pivoted to service delivery and humanitarian responses.

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## ORCHESTRATION IN PRACTICE: Pact Zimbabwe

Pact implemented the Civic Engagement for Accountability and Democracy in Zimbabwe (CEADZ) program from 2017-2021. The program's interventions assumed that Social Accountability Monitoring - a method developed, tested and pioneered by the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM), a South African organization - had the potential to increase and sustain citizen participation in governance processes to improve transparency and accountability at multiple levels. One of the innovative elements of PSAM's model is using capacity development activities, trainings, and exchanges that bring government and civic stakeholders together. This sprang from a realization that orchestration across the system was needed: "PSAM stakeholders expressed that continuing to dialogue among people with similar viewpoints and mandates was not likely to lead to resolution of the service delivery problems they were trying to address. The need to interact more openly with the people who had the power and the mandate to address their problems was repeatedly mentioned as a key strategy that social accountability practitioners in these contexts found valuable."<sup>11</sup>

To leverage this approach in Zimbabwe, the CEADZ team brought together Members of the Zimbabwean Parliament or local government, rather than only focusing on civil society. In

addition to interventions at community level, CEADZ established a Community of Practice among networks of CSOs, CBOs, and civic activists engaged in similar programming or campaigns. The goal was to have a mechanism for bringing together diverse practitioners to collectively reflect on their shared experiences and troubleshoot.<sup>12</sup> Through these experiences, the platform also sought to engender deeper mutual respect and trust among groups and, eventually, foster new partnerships and coordination between them.

**"We do a lot of it, simply because the political environment discourages people from self-convening ... we have to convince them of the value of working together ... establish the need .. If you eliminate orchestration, there would be no social will, no political will for (social accountability)."**

– Former Pact Zimbabwe Staff

## MANAGING ADAPTIVELY ACROSS PROJECT CYCLES IN PRACTICE: Pact Ukraine

Success in complex environments is often gradual and requires a long-term vision, iterative experimentation, and managing beyond one specific project's lifespan.<sup>13</sup> A defining feature of Pact's SASA practice is to manage adaptively across project cycles, ensuring new projects proactively build on the lessons and results of their predecessors and right-fitting them to evolving contexts, emerging opportunities, limits, and risks. This process illustrates how social accountability projects are system-aware in practice and, over time, may contribute towards systems strengthening. Short-term projects with seemingly unambitious objectives can look very different when viewed through a long-term lens and understanding those objectives are the necessary preconditions for more ambitious work in the future.

When reviewing the evolution of social accountability projects in Ukraine, it can be useful to think of a relay race, with one project team passing along the "baton" of foundational elements (project learning, approaches, partnerships, etc.) necessary to avoid starting a new project from scratch, with the next project team contextualizing these within the opportunities and constraints of the present moment. In Ukraine, Pact began the UNITER project in Ukraine during a moment of systemic, comprehensive reform in the period leading up to and culminating with the Revolution of Dignity. The UNITER program realized that unlocking deeper change required working with more than just CSOs, but also social entrepreneurs, artists and cultural leaders, media and politically active grassroots thought-leaders.

Picking up where UNITER left off in 2016, USAID's Enhance Non-Governmental Actors and Grassroots Engagement (ENGAGE) project considered pursuing social accountability work after certain pre-requisites (e.g. social capital, networks, etc.) were met and used an incremental approach, testing and iterating approaches, to minimize unintended consequences and maximize opportunities for long-term gains.<sup>14</sup>

Currently, the ENGAGE program supports greater locally-led anti-corruption initiatives and provides stable, multi-year core funding to key USAID civil society partners advancing accountability. To do this, ENGAGE in Ukraine focuses on expanding civic engagement, including active and constructive participation in oversight at the local level, beyond Kyiv-based CSOs. It also seeks to connect actors from different "walks of life" through relationship-building, networking and epistemic communities, among others, to work towards shared goals. The Pact Ukraine team's ability to proactively build on the lessons and results of their predecessors, and right-fitting them to evolving contexts, emerging opportunities, limits and risks, has positioned them to have a significant impact in one of the most difficult contexts.

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