The political economy of accountability ecosystems

Charting a new course in the Pacific

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Lisa Denney, Glenn Bond, Aidan Craney and Allan Mua Illingworth

Photo: A woman does traditional weaving at Pepeyo Cultural and Educational Site in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Credit: Oratai Jitsatsue

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Executive Summary

Accountable and responsive governance is essential for states to deliver on the needs and interests of their publics. But despite investments in strengthening accountability over many decades, these approaches have often failed to gain traction and accountability continues to fall short of meeting people's needs and expectations. This is true in the Pacific – the focus of this paper – where development partner approaches to accountability have largely focused on importing external standards and forms that often produce only thin results. Wider questioning within the development community of good governance and the open movement underline the need for new approaches.

This synthesis builds on six country studies spanning the North and South Pacific, undertaken in 2023 and 2024, in the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Palau, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. These studies examine the accountability ecosystems at play in each country, recognising that there are a range of accountability stakeholders across government, customary, religious and other spheres that interact. The studies also unpack political economy of why these ecosystems work in the ways that they do – recognising that the status quo is a political outcome of particular contextual features, rules, power, interests and relationships. This synthesis distils the key findings across the case studies to identify common political economy features that shape accountability ecosystems; and what these tell policymakers and practitioners across governments and development partners about how we might change the way we work on accountability.

HOW ACCOUNTABILITY IS UNDERSTOOD AND PRACTICED

Understandings and interpretations of accountability vary between and within countries. While the term 'accountability' may be considered foreign, concepts related to accountability were considered familiar across all country studies, although interpretations are distinctly local, sometimes even varying sub-nationally. An important feature of the way accountability is interpreted relates to social closeness and relationality – with proximity and deeply held loyalties shape understandings and practices of accountability. This social closeness has both positive and negative implications for accountability.

WHY ACCOUNTABILITY WORKS THE WAY IT DOES

Nine political economy dynamics are identified as key to shaping the ways accountability operates across the country studies.

- Small populations spread across archipelago geographies limit the reach of national accountability initiatives. Resulting social closeness contributes to highly localised approaches to accountability.

- Colonial histories and international donors have narrow approaches to improving accountability that rely heavily on international 'best practice' forms and standards. These approaches can unhelpfully orient accountability externally, away from publics.

- Formal accountability institutions are often prematurely overloaded and expected to perform functions based on their form that are not in keeping with functional capacity.

This undermines the confidence and legitimacy of these accountability institutions.

- Formal accountability institutions have proved more effective when adopting an educative approach that emphasises supporting understanding of and engagement with accountability processes, instead of punitive approaches. Such collaborative approaches are regarded as more culturally appropriate in contexts where relationships are core to community values and social networks are dense.

- Customary and religious institutions play a central role in accountability ecosystems alongside formal institutions. This is formalised in law in several settings and leads to a localised intertwining and overlapping of accountability understandings and practices.

- Accountability institutions do not operate in discrete 'formal' and 'informal' silos. Rather, they are intertwined and combine to create a hybrid ecosystem of accountability. This means customary and religious influences must be appreciated and understood – not as separate to or in tension with formal ideas of accountability, but as inherently part of them.

- Politics is hyper-localised, making national-level priorities challenging to support. Electoral success is largely based on delivering for a leader's constituency, rather than for a policy agenda. While this can be a form of direct, localised accountability – and in some cases can expand to 'translocalism' – it can also lead to patronage and vote buying.

- Accountability across ecosystems is dominated by older men, which means it reflects their needs and interests and excludes those of women, youth, people with disability and other marginalised groups.

- The powerful rarely champion accountability and accountability champions are rarely powerful. This underscores the fact that there are vested interests in maintaining the status quo and generating collective action on accountability will require bringing together select reform-minded leaders and strategically amplifying the voices of less influential actors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nine recommendations are made to reorient the way support to strengthening accountability is undertaken by governments and development partners.

1. Move beyond 'best practice' to understand local conceptions of accountability and support accountability ecosystems to identify 'good enough' approaches tailored to their context.

2. Develop distinct strategies for strengthening accountability for different political settlements, recognising that opportunities and constraints will be different across political contexts.

3. Focus on the functional capacities of formal accountability institutions, emphasising an educative approach and set more realistic, incremental goals for delivery.

4. Work with the grain of hybrid realities and see these as opportunities for local articulations of accountability that may well look different to external models.

5. Support coalitions or collective action across the accountability ecosystem to bring together identified reformers and expand accountability by connecting local levels.

6. Support civil society and media to play a stronger advocacy role, elevate their influence and protect civic space.

7. Tackle accountability through issue-based programming, using accountability as a tool to help solve problems that communities face and that garner political traction.

8. Beware accountability being oriented externally towards donors and away from publics, undermining accountable governance and the social contract.

9. Build stronger social accountability into development partner programming to improve their own accountability and provide an example and demonstration effect.

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Introduction

Accountable and responsive governance has been a hallmark of both the good governance agenda that dominated international development in the 1990s and 2000s, and the focus on building effective states that followed. Methods for stimulating accountable governance have evolved over time – from vertical to horizontal to social accountability and 'sandwich strategies' (Ackerman 2004; Brinkerhoff 2001; Fox 2015). While there have been efforts to make the tone of accountability support less normative and prescriptive, and despite refrains that programming should be 'context relevant', many of the approaches for pursuing accountability remain surprisingly familiar across geographies (Guerzovich 2010;Person et al. 2013). And while all of these efforts are ongoing, accountability continues in many places to fall short of meeting people's needs and expectations. Resources continue to be allocated not in the collective interest; and decision-making continues to benefit the few over the many. This is not to say that governance is universally declining or that no progress has been achieved – but the rise of authoritarianism, growing inequality and the ongoing struggle to mobilise collective action to address global challenges suggests that accountable governance is far from being realised (see also Anderson et al 2022). Or, as Krafchik and Evans (2024) put it in relation to shifts in global political discourse around openness, 'we are not in Kansas anymore.'

We have arrived, it seems, at an impasse. A lot is known about small-scale wins for more accountable service delivery, improvements in civic participation and the power of coalitions to drive change (Rocha Menocal and Sharma 2008; Wild et al. 2010; Scrigemour and Erasmus 2021). Yet the systemic challenge of political settlements organized around protecting elite interests remains unresolved (Khan 2018; Kelsall 2022). It is in this uncertain context that we have been undertaking research over the past two years on accountability ecosystems in the Pacific. This research was premised on the recognition that externally-imposed accountability efforts have largely failed to gain traction; and that Pacific countries possess their own understandings and practices of accountability that should be the starting point. Over 2023 and 2024, six country case studies have been undertaken across the North and South Pacific, exploring the 'accountability ecosystems' that exist in each country and why these operate in the ways that they do. The six countries included are: the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Palau, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

An ecosystems approach was considered a useful framing because of the known hybridity that characterizes governance and social life in the Pacific (Boege et al. 2008; Forsyth et al. 2018). There are thus a range of accountability stakeholders across government, customary, religious and other spheres that interact – together forming an accountability ecosystem (Halloran 2021; Nadelman et al. 2022). An ecosystems approach also enables different understandings of accountability to be explored, without foreclosing possibilities because of who 'counts' as a accountability actor, which can privilege formal systems. In addition, the political nature of these ecosystems is key to understanding why accountability works the way that it does. These ecosystems are shaped by a constellation of contextual features, formal and informal rules and power, interests and relationships of diverse actors (Armour 2012; Halloran 2021; Santiso 2006). A political economy lens has thus been used across the case studies and provides a politically-informed view of the constraints and opportunities for change.

This report synthesizes what emerges across the six country case studies. It is not a regional report on accountability in the Pacific. Rather, it brings together key messages, similarities and points of difference that emerge across the case studies to offer insights *from* the Pacific but not *of* the Pacific as a whole. The report thus does not aim to represent the way accountability operates across the Pacific but speaks to how it operates in some Pacific countries, with lessons that may be relevant to a

range of other countries in the Pacific and beyond. It is targeted at practitioners and decision makers striving for better accountability outcomes in the Pacific and further afield, as well as those interested in the value of a political economy approach to supporting accountability. The aim is to distil what has been learnt from an exploration of the accountability ecosystems across six Pacific Island countries and what this tells us about future directions for supporting more accountable and responsive governance.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it presents the diversity of understandings of accountability that emerged across the country studies, speaking to local interpretations. Second, the bulk of the paper explores the various political economy factors that shape how accountability is practiced in the Pacific countries covered in this study. That is, it synthesizes why accountability works the way that it does. Finally, it details the implications for how accountability is supported in the Pacific, opening up new avenues for pursuing responsive governance. Ultimately, the call is for more contextually-relevant and politically-informed approaches to accountability that are genuinely tailored to the particular opportunities and constraints of different contexts. This should see a much wider suite of accountability approaches being pursued by development partners, starting with existing practices in each location.

How accountability is understood and practiced

The term accountability has different connotations across the sample of six country studies. In Vanuatu, for example, research participants viewed the term as a Western idea that features predominantly in the Constitution modelled on Western terminology and ideals. In Kiribati, conversely, accountability was described as deeply entwined with the shared national values of egalitarianism and communalism. In Solomon Islands, the term was seen to generally be associated with accountable use of public funds and largely limited to discourse in and around the capital city of Honiara.

Yet while the *term* is interpreted differently in different places, the *concept* of accountability can be linked to more familiar values, or what Pasquino and Pelizzo (2022) describe as cultural determinants of accountability. In Tuvalu, for instance, while the word 'accountability' was described by research participants as introduced and difficult to translate into the Tuvaluan language, they linked the concept with Tuvaluan values such as *tautua* (to serve) and *ava mot e fai mea tonu* (respect and integrity). Similarly, in the Federated States of Micronesia, each state has a different language and terminology that encapsulates elements of accountability – such as the Pohnpei term 'Pwukoah' (responsibility) and the Chuuk terms 'túmwún' (care) and 'tupwpwén' (righteousness). In this way, while the term 'accountability' may be considered foreign, concepts related to accountability were considered familiar across all six country studies, although interpretations are distinctly local, sometimes even varying sub-nationally.

Each accountability eco-system includes its own formal accountability infrastructure. This includes a legislature, judiciary and executive, with key ministries and various government established entities (often including offices for the Ombudsman, the Auditor General and the Public Prosecutor) fulfilling ancillary accountability functions. Additional committees and offices, such as Anti-Corruption authorities and Right-To-Information offices, are in place in some but not all of the six locations. These

formal structures experience widely varying degrees of financial and political support, and co-exist alongside customary and religious institutions. These co-existing structures are long-established and as such enjoy a deep legitimacy with citizens and communities, particularly outside capital cities.

An important feature of the way accountability is interpreted relates to the social closeness of communities in each of the country studies. In these settings, as in many parts of the Pacific, individuals tend to identify relationally: 'inevitably and permanently connected to other people and entities as a feature of their existence' (Finau et al 2022: 1). These spatial and personal relationships are articulated in different ways throughout the Pacific, incorporating both proximity and a deeply held loyalty to families, clans, ethnic groups and other community connections (see for instance Reynolds 2016). Social closeness can offer great potential for responsible behaviours and accountable leadership, particularly combined with small populations often densely concentrated. As described by Piazza in reference to Palau, 'given the connectedness of the community and size of the population, access to political leaders was often as simple as going to a local restaurant or bar' (2006: 119). There are numerous such examples of citizens enjoying direct access to political, religious and customary leaders across the six reports and references to relationality incentivizing accountable leadership.

Yet while proximity to leaders can increase visibility and access for citizens to raise issues of concern (see Craney and Tanielu 2024), social closeness can also be a constraint to accountability. Obligations to maintain community harmony, positive relationships and strong networks may dissuade citizens from challenging the behaviours of people with high status and compel leaders to deliver favourable treatment to some groups or individuals. Fear of political, social or financial implications for individuals or their kin can constitute a powerful disincentive for calling out behaviour of leaders (see Illingworth and Mori 2024). Moreover, power inequities within communities and hierarchies of relationships mean that some people have privileged access to leaders and relational accountability can therefore favour some more than others. In particular, women, young people and other groups experiencing disadvantage can lose out.

Kinship or *wantok*[1] connections can also act as a significant challenge to staff within formal accountability institutions seeking to investigate or prosecute suspected cases of impropriety (see Craney and Besebes 2024; Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023; see also Moran 2024 for examples from Papua New Guinea). And for the power brokers – for political, religious or customary leaders – there are many examples of personal relationships or personal gain being privileged over effective governance (Walton and Jackson 2020; Walton and Hushang 2022). Social closeness thus consistently emerges as both a potential constraint and opportunity for strengthening accountability. Or, as Corbett puts it: 'smallness provides mixed blessings – it is neither entirely beautiful nor endemically despotic' (2015: 51).

Within this layer of the accountability ecosystem a deeper complexity exists. In small populations where people hold multiple roles and there are few degrees of separation between citizens and leaders, a tension can emerge between the personal and the professional. This extends beyond community leaders to include elected officials, public servants, employees of accountability institutions and development practitioners, among others. These actors do not sit outside of the wider culture and relationality and responsibilities of their communities (Moran 2024). For these individuals too, cultural norms that prioritise personal relationships and the maintenance of networks in a context of dense social networks must be balanced against formal accountability responsibilities (see Simeti

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[1] The word wantok translates as *same language* or *one talk* and refers to a range of informal social networks across Melanesia. The term denotes a reciprocal relationship of favours between kin and community members (see Walton and Jackson 2020).

and Mua Illingworth 2023). Yet Pacific Islanders routinely navigate this tension. In some cases participants describe being able to keep personal and professional spheres separate; in other cases respondents did not understand these as separate 'spheres' but as a more holistic way of being that was normal and accepted.

This finding is akin to research on leadership in the Pacific, which notes that:

> Leadership socialisation in the Pacific involves observed and absorbed local contextual values and practices that may or may not sit well with ideas about leadership introduced from afar based on other cultural contexts. (Sanga et al. 2023: 4).

The combination of 'observed and absorbed' local notions of accountability with introduced notions of accountability creates, on the one hand, the possibility of delivering governance or leadership that is accountable to a broader collective (beyond immediate kin or clans to communities, islands or even countries). On the other hand, it can also create tensions between different perspectives on and approaches to accountability.

A recurring theme is that location-specific analysis is critical to understand the accountability ecosystem of each context. Understandings and interpretations of accountability vary between and within countries. Characteristics of social closeness have the potential for both positive and negative implications for accountability, yet these are experienced differently at family, community and state

Contextual features shaping accountability ecosystems

Histories of colonialism and foreign influence shape accountability institutions and can orient accountability outward, rather than inward to citizens.

Small population size creates socially dense networks that offer opportunities and constraints for accountability.

Archipelago geographies make service delivery and social cohesion challenging, with hyper-localised politics limiting nationwide accountability.

levels. Finally, the implications of social closeness are experienced on a more personal and nuanced scale than a binary *leaders and citizens* model might imply. These diverse understandings of accountability and the role of relationality directly shapes the manner in which accountability is either promoted or compromised in a given setting.

Why accountability works the way it does

Political economy analysis (PEA) is used here to understand what lies behind the ways in which accountability is understood and operates: why things are the way that they are. While it has been described as 'the dismal science of constraints' (Duncan and Williams 2012) because of its focus on obstacles to (and opportunities for) change, this is with a view to being able to chart a path towards change that is feasible given the realities of the wider political context. This is in keeping with the recognition that governance reform is a deeply political process (Booth and Unsworth 2014; Rocha Menocal 2014; Teskey 2017; Evans 2024) and the absence of sound political analysis is a recurring flaw in international efforts to support reforms. As Krafchik and Evans note 'This is the gap that we need to fill, not just by saying we will be 'politically savvy' but by using political analysis to direct how we use data and action to target dialogue and reform' (2024: 2).

This section sets out some of the key political economy considerations that emerged across the six country case studies, to identify why accountability operates in the ways that it does. These considerations may well have applicability beyond the six countries studies and beyond the Pacific. They aim to shed light on the constraints that efforts to strengthen accountability need to be conscious of and operate within in order to be meaningful and – as Krafchik and Evans recommend – to direct how we might target dialogue and reform going forward.

GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY LIMIT THE REACH OF NATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES

The countries studied are archipelagos, with small populations dispersed across a number of islands. In several cases the total territorial size of the country is vast, yet the landmass and population remains small. Kiribati, at the extreme end of this spectrum, has a total size of 3.5 million square kilometres yet only 810 square kilometres of landmass and less than 120,000 residents. Populations of the countries vary widely – with 11,000 in Tuvalu and 825,000 in Solomon Islands. Such geography means that significant physical and cultural distances exist between communities, complicating communication, service delivery and interaction between citizens. Small populations spread across diverse geography also means that, as noted above, localised social closeness is a feature common to all cases, with tight-knit local communities working in close cooperation with each other (see Corbett 2015). There are diverse cultural and linguistic groups across each sovereign state, and concepts of nationhood are relatively new, with boundaries between states shifting from pre-colonial, colonial and independence periods. FSM, for example, first identified as a state as recently as 1979. In Solomon Islands, former Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni captured this sentiment in 1988, claiming that Solomon Islands was a 'nation conceived but never born' (Kabutaulaka 2001).

Access to resources, infrastructure and information varies widely, particularly between urban (or capital) and remote citizens, and understandings or experiences of accountability vary similarly. Information technology and information access are significantly more limited outside of capitals and other large centres, with a stark digital divide separating urban from rural communities. Moreover, formal notions of accountability, introduced through colonial powers and promoted by governments and international donors, do not extend in language or in relevance very far beyond the administrative capitals of most of the countries studied. The one exception to this is the example of Kiribati, where the term accountability is seen to comfortably echo customary values of egalitarianism and communalism (Craney and Tanielu 2024).

This lack of penetration beyond urban centres means that the formal mechanisms of accountability that governments and donors have put in place are often not known or accessed by rural communities (Craney and Tuhanuku 2023; Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023). Limited awareness of anti-corruption policies and governance standards provides opportunity for poor practice or outright corruption, while also inhibiting public awareness of available recourse through anti-corruption policies and programs (Barcham 2009). Efforts to address this gap in awareness, for instance through Vanuatu's Freedom of Information Office, have not yet seen significant uptake of citizens demanding information, in part due to connectivity challenges that limit information flows (Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023). For accountability efforts, geography, demography and connectivity emerge as key constraints that limit the diffusion and uptake of national accountability processes. These constraints also mean that regional statements and commitments may be perceived as detached or discordant with accountability at national and local levels (see box 1 below). This tension between regional commitments but more fragmentation beneath this has similarly been noted by Shiu et al (2023) and is routinely managed, rather than resolved.

Box 1: Local, national or regional accountability: The case of climate change

While Pacific countries have representation in regional fora and a voice in wider global discourse, a disconnect between accountability to local and national concerns and accountability to regional commitments is sometimes apparent. This is most keenly felt in response to the climate crisis, which poses an existential threat to many Pacific countries, and presents a challenge for leaders in representing diverse communities (Tangney et al. 2021; Bond 2024). The urgent need for political consensus and international action on climate adaptation has prompted a range of regional commitments that governments are accountable to. Accountability to these regional commitments, however, must be balanced against accountability to pressing local concerns related to food security, health and survival at the sub-national level (see Simeti and Mua Illingworth 2023). A national or regional strategy focused on accountability to regional or even global commitments, while essential, is unlikely to demonstrate accountability to the more nuanced and localised expectations of communities at imminent risk. This is especially the case given the diverse geography within Pacific countries and the many ways in which climate risks are experienced. Thus, being accountable for commitments to act on climate change at the regional level is not one and the same as being accountable to the varied and particular concerns of communities that are similarly caused by climate change.

COLONIAL HISTORIES AND INTERNATIONAL DONORS HAVE NARROW APPROACHES THAT ORIENT ACCOUNTABILITY EXTERNALLY

All six countries studied have a history of colonisation and share some common experiences of dispossession and marginalization of their indigenous communities. Each country studied also inherited foreign, legal-rational governance structures[2] and religious doctrines, which introduced new patterns of authority that often competed with or overlay customary governance practices. None of these colonial histories is exactly alike, with important variances shaping the systems and relationships of contemporary society. In Vanuatu, for example, the bifurcated system of parallel French and English colonies, alongside certain shared functions under the joint colonial agreement (and later *the condominium*), were experienced as three different systems with discrete laws and regulations. Contemporary understandings of accountability for ni-Vanuatu are shaped by this distinctive political and religious history, alongside Vanuatu's own customs and traditions, in a combination unique to Vanuatu. Palau has experienced multiple colonial powers, infusing different political legacies that shape contemporary governance. Each country studied has a similar singularity to how colonialism has shaped their own accountability ecosystem.

For two of the country studies in the North Pacific, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the role of the United States is an important feature of their accountability ecosystems. Both countries have complex colonial histories with numerous nations laying claim to these territories over the 19th and early 20th centuries. This included colonial rule by Spain (1885-1899), Germany (1899-1914) and Japan (1914-1945), prior to the United States taking up this role in both countries at the end of the Second World War. The most recent change saw both countries transition from trustees of the US to independent states (FSM in 1986 and Palau in 1994). At the time of independence, both nations signed Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements, which provides high levels of funding to the COFA states and preferential migration pathways, in return for US military bases and forward positioning in the region (see Craney and Besebes 2024; Mua Illingworth and Mori 2024). This close relationship with the US has led to the replication of US models of governance in many formal structures (the political system, justice system, public sector and others). US standards and models also directly inform accountability in Palau and FSM. In part, this means US-style accountability standards are applied, but it has the distorting effect of orienting accountability outwards via reporting to the US Department of the Interior (Office of Insular Affairs), rather than domestically to citizens.

International donors similarly remain influential in the accountability ecosystems across the countries studied. Global norms and donor narratives shape the way formal accountability is defined, promoting international models and standards against which countries should be judged (Armour 2012). Colonial histories and the ongoing presence of (and at times, dependence on) international donors have oriented accountability *outwards,* with governments seeking to demonstrate the template approaches and pre-determined aspirations of international standards (Grindle 2004; 2007). This is at the expense of efforts to orient accountability downwards to domestic publics (Andrews and Okpananchi 2021). In Solomon Islands, for example, more than thirty years of investment in accountability infrastructure has supported the creation of accountability mechanisms and institutions that appear strong on paper yet remain limited in efficacy and do not meaningfully connect with social norms or traditional accountability systems (see Craney and Tuhanuku 2023).

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[2] Legal-rational governance means governance or authority based on formal rules and procedures that are impersonal. This is in contrast to traditional authority that is based on tradition and can be more personalised. Legal-rational governance is associated with 'modern' governance and was considered by Wax Weber to be the most efficient form of government. (Weber 1947: 325-7).

This external facing accountability discourse that seeks to replicate foreign 'best practice' standards also tends to be limited to formal accountability actors in urban centres, compounding the exclusion of remote communities and denying the cultural and linguistic diversity apparent in each of the six countries studied. Accountability ecosystems in the countries studied thus demonstrate the ongoing influence of international actors – initially through colonisation and later through donor emphasis on transplanted systems and standards – both in shaping formal accountability institutions but also in exacerbating the implementation gap with accountability practice. This echoes recent findings of gaps in global governance support, where the focus on logistics and delivery in international programs ignores the reality that the major constraints to progress are political and institutional rather than technical. In taking a logistical focus, these programs tend to ignore contextual understandings of governance and can undermine local institutions (Yuen Ang 2024). It has become clear that 'we are reaching the limits of solving problems through logistical efficiency' (Just Systems 2024: 4).

FORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY INSTITUTIONS ARE OFTEN PREMATURELY OVERLOADED

Formal accountability ecosystem actors regularly include Ombudsman Offices, Auditor-Generals, Anti-Corruption Commissions and a range of parliamentary budget review committees. In some countries there are Leadership Codes and Leadership Commissions that also play a role in overseeing behaviour of elected leaders and civil servants. Indeed, on paper, most of the countries studied have impressive formal accountability ecosystems that give the impression of robust action (see for instance Craney and Tuhanuku 2023 and Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth).

In practice, however, many of these institutions run into challenges of delivering on their intended function. They are examples of 'isomorphic mimicry' – of delivering on the form of accountability but not on its function (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2017). In the country studies, this was described as *paper* accountability, where institutions may appear robust on paper yet do not have the human resources, financial resources and especially the political power to fulfil their prescribed role (Craney and Tuhanuku 2023). This is due to a combination of inadequate financing, shortages of human resources, and political interference. It is also due, in some cases, to accountability generally being a low political priority – so even where there may not be explicit political interference, there may be a sort of stasis in which no political leaders or civil servants are actively making accountability a key political agenda (Simeti and Mua Illingworth 2024).

Yet even where governments have supported accountability initiatives, the result is not always accountable governance. This is apparent in Solomon Islands, for instance, where government budgetary commitments to anti-corruption efforts have largely been sustained following substantial donor investments (Walton and Hushang 2022). A lack of delivery capability despite 'best practice' institutional forms and sustained funding suggests that these accountability institutions may suffer from 'premature load bearing' – when institutions are asked to perform tasks before they are capable of doing so (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2017: 53). There are several examples across the country studies of premature load bearing on nascent institutions, where they are expected to deliver on accountability outcomes that lie well beyond their means (Craney and Tuhanuku 2023; Simeti and Mua Illingworth 2023). This can result from the expectation that 'best practices' are universally applicable and lead to sustained capability traps, where the unrealistic demands lead to paralysis of the institutions (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2017: 53).

Recurring examples of isomorphic mimicry and the high prevalence of 'paper' accountability serve to caution against the assumption that institutional *form* implies institutional *function.* While the formal

accountability ecosystem may appear similar to those of other (often donor) countries, this does not mean that they operate in the same ways, or should be expected to.

Box 2: Politics and systems change: Beyond templates for accountability institutions

A recent working paper by Just Systems found that politics is the most significant determinant of systems change, but that donors and practitioners are disposed to shirk politics (Just Systems 2024). Drawing on over 50 initiatives aimed at state capability building and more than 100 interviews with leaders and practitioners globally, they found that emphasis is most often placed on 'generating and selling evidence and impactful, technically sound projects, but these fail to gain traction because they do not address political constraints and government priorities. Similarly, accountability is also weak because it takes little account for how power works in practice and can easily subvert formal contracts and official rules of the game' (Just Systems 2024: 2).

Across the six country studies informing this synthesis, there are numerous examples of formal accountability institutions supported by donors that, in addition to bearing operational demands too soon, have limited interaction with or influence over the formal and informal politics that shape accountable governance practice. In Vanuatu, for instance, this manifests as an increasingly robust set of formal accountability institutions that lack the teeth and political possibility of holding political leaders to account (Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023). In Tuvalu, by contrast, low political prioritisation of accountability limits the effectiveness of formal accountability institutions (Simeti and Mua Illingworth 2024). And in FSM, a layering of different accountability institutions at both federal and state levels undermines the development of stronger accountability practice (Mua Illingworth and Mahoney 2024).

FORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY INSTITUTIONS HAVE PROVED MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN ADOPTING AN EDUCATIVE APPROACH

Where formal accountability institutions have opted for an educative approach, this has often proven effective in the countries studied. Educative approaches emphasise supporting understanding of and engagement with accountability processes, instead of or alongside the punitive approach taken in many international templates in response to perceived failures or shortcomings. The Kiribati Audit Office and Office of the Public Auditor in Palau, for instance, have worked cooperatively alongside other parts of government and civil society to improve their accountability practices. Civil society advocates spoke favourably of this style, including members of *Te Toa Matoa*, a disability-focused NGO in Kiribati, who reported that the cooperative approach improved their internal accountability capacity and built a strong relationship between NGOs and the Auditor General (Craney and Tanielu 2024). In another example, the Vanuatu Office of the Ombudsman is actively focused on awareness and education initiatives in addition to traditional investigative functions (Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023).

Such collaborative approaches are regarded as more culturally appropriate in contexts where relationships are core to community values and social networks are dense. These and other examples demonstrate a shift away from a universal 'best practice' model to what might be described as a 'good enough' approach that is more locally appropriate and gains greater traction (Grindle 2007). Their relative effectiveness supports the notion that minimal conditions might be better suited than global best practices to help foster political and economic development (Grindle 2007: 554).

CUSTOMARY AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEMS

In each of the six country studies, customary and religious institutions are fundamental to the way the accountability ecosystems operate. Taking different forms between and within countries, these include largely unwritten, locally conceptualized and understood social norms and mores (Vella 2014). Customary practice is also expressed through the decision-making power that most often rests with chiefs and elders, yet can also apply to other individuals with family, clan and village units. In several instances, customary practices extend to formal governance structures such as the *falekaupule* in Tuvalu and *unimwane* in Kiribati. International interpretations of accountability as a technical endeavour tend to overlook the importance of these customary institutions.

The Christian church is similarly central to accountability ecosystems in most of the countries considered. With the exception of Palau and parts of FSM, where the church was thought to have limited everyday influence, citizens and government representatives in each of the other countries look to the church for leadership on personal and social values, including related to accountability and appropriate leadership conduct. While church interpretations vary, accountability may be seen first and foremost as one's responsibility to God and often incorporates the concept of stewardship of God's earthly domain (Pasquino and Pelizzo 2022). Citizens are accountable to Church leaders on earth and to God in heaven (Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023). This may be seen to promote responsible leadership and civic mindedness, yet may also diminish the value placed on earthly accountability mechanisms that hold leaders to account, given God is the ultimate judge. This means that religious influences on accountability can either support or undermine formal accountability institutions.

The importance of custom and Christianity results in a triumvirate model, where the state, customary leaders and religious leaders are simultaneous custodians of integrity and responsibility. This is formalised in law in several settings (such as *the three pillars* of the Vanuatu and Tuvalu constitutions) and leads to a very localised intertwining and overlapping of accountability mechanisms (see Simeti and Mua Illingworth 2023). Religious and customary leaders hold significant local power and there remains an historic reticence to be critical of these leaders. When unchecked, the influence and interference of powerful individuals, or *big men* in the Melanesian context, can impede efforts to promote transparency and accountability (Craney and Tuhanuku 2023). In this way, while faith and custom are sources of great cultural pride and can be seen to model social responsibility, they do not necessarily go as far as sanctioning impropriety by leaders.

The relative power or influence of one institution over another is unique to each local ecosystem. In FSM, notably, the power of traditional chiefs vis-à-vis Christian leaders varies radically from state to state – with the Church considered to be more powerful in the state of Yap, while customary chiefs are more powerful in Kosrae. The same is true at very local levels in many of the country studies, depending on unique local histories and patterns of leadership. In Kiribati, for example, the church is highly influential in urban settings while traditional leadership plays this role in rural areas. In all settings, however, religious and customary leaders can also be political leaders or, where this is not the case, political leaders tend to have personal ties to the religious or customary leaders of their constituencies. As such, the manner in which accountability is promoted or constrained, and the extent to which less powerful voices are heard, is determined in large part by the relative influence of power brokers across the ecosystem, who may be part of formal, customary or religious institutions.

These different sources of accountability cannot be neatly categorised as being in opposition, or mutually reinforcing in terms of how accountability gets delivered. Rather, they are highly personalised, which means that in some places customary, religious and formal accountability

institutions may be supportive (this was most obviously the case in Kiribati, for instance). In other places, there may be divergences with these institutions pulling in different directions on accountability – as can be seen in FSM for instance. Ultimately, this analysis must happen in context, taking account of the individuals within those institutions and the relationships between them.

This prevalence of customary and religious actors in the accountability ecosystem means that there are far more players involved than a mapping of the usual accountability suspects of formal institutions would suggest. It also means that the nature and locus of power is more complicated and difficult to decipher. While formal political authority might sit with particular formal institutions or roles, the legitimacy of customary and religious institutions may mean that they are often more powerful in practice. Understanding this requires nuanced local knowledge that recognises the role of customary and religious institutions that may sit more out of view from top-down schematics of the accountability ecosystem.

THERE ARE NOT DISCRETE 'FORMAL' AND 'INFORMAL' ACCOUNTABILITY INSTITUTIONS BUT INSTITUTIONAL HYBRIDITY

Importantly, religious and customary institutions that influence accountability practices do not operate discretely or separate from formal accountability institutions. While we might conceptually distinguish them, in practice they are intertwined and combine to create a hybrid ecosystem of accountability. This is apparent, for instance, in the way that understandings of accountability are talked about by staff occupying positions of formal accountability in Kosrae and Yap (in FSM) and Tuvalu. These understandings draw on not just the laws and responsibilities of the formal institution they sit within, but also on religious and cultural influences that shape those institutions. In this way, 'culture' and 'custom' are not separate from formal ideas of accountability – they infuse them. While leaders and office bearers are well-aware of the requirements of their formal office, they do not leave their religious and customary influences at the door when they come to work. This is in keeping with wider literature on hybrid governance in the Pacific (Boege et al. 2008; Forsyth et al. 2019) and echoes the connectedness described by one government employee in the Pacific: 'I don't sit in any room by myself. Emotionally, spiritually, socially; I never sit in any room as an individual' (cited in Smith et al. 2024: 1526). As with individuals, institutions also straddle the formal and informal divide (see box 3).

Box 3: Examples of institutional hybridity

In Tuvalu, the *Falekaupule* serves as both a customary and formal governance institution. As the traditional council of elders, it holds decision-making authority on local matters, yet it is also formally recognized in the Constitution, thereby mixing traditional values with state governance. This dual role allows the Falekaupule to act as a bridge between government initiatives and community priorities, ensuring that accountability practices resonate with both formal standards and cultural expectations (see Simeti and Mua Illingworth 2024).

Similarly, in Vanuatu, the *Malvatumauri* Council of Chiefs is also recognised in its Constitution and operates as both a customary and formal institution. This council embodies traditional authority, holding significant sway in local governance while also interfacing with formal government systems. By bridging these two systems, the Council reinforces accountability through both indigenous values and state-sanctioned frameworks, ensuring that formal governance aligns with customary laws,

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norms and traditions known in Vanuatu and elsewhere in Melanesia as *kastom*[3] (see Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023, Jupiter 2017)

Constituency development funds (CDFs) are another example of hybridized accountability in some Pacific countries. These combine formally legislated funds intended to enable elected leaders to be responsive to the needs and priorities of their communities through direct support to projects (Gordon and Cheeseman 2024). In practice, there is often little formal oversight of CDF spending and how funds are allocated are often influenced by relationships of reciprocity, religious and cultural obligation, as well as personal networks and power dynamics. They are thus a formal form of public finance that, in practice, are influenced by informal rules in terms of allocation and use – with the formal and informal rules pulling in competing directions.

Efforts to strengthen accountability therefore need to appreciate that the accountability ecosystems in Pacific countries are not purely formal institutions – even if they give the appearance of replicating familiar institutional forms from donor countries. Rather, they are hybrid entities unique to each country, that bring together formal, customary and religious ideas of accountability. This means those customary and religious influences must be appreciated and understood – not as separate to or in tension with formal ideas of accountability, but as inherently part of them (see also Walton and Jackson 2019: 25). It also means that there are more relationships at play that need to be taken into account. That is, while there is a line of accountability between states and citizens (however attenuated that line may be) this is intermediated by other lines of accountability – to Church, kinship groups, customary institutions, and so on. Accountability ecosystems in the Pacific countries studied are thus much more complicated with multiple relationships at play, meaning that efforts to strengthen accountability must take account of broader webs of relationships, interests and influences than might otherwise be the case.

POLITICS IS HYPER-LOCALISED, MAKING NATIONAL-LEVEL PRIORITIES CHALLENGING TO SUPPORT

Across the country studies, politics is highly localised – with leaders focused on delivering for (some of) their immediate constituents but not necessarily for the 'greater good'. Politicians mostly present themselves as independent candidates with a primary intention of representing their constituents and not a party – and even when they are aligned to a political party, allegiance is often transient. Electoral success is widely understood to be based on effectively delivering for a leader's constituency, rather than for delivering on a particular political platform or policy agenda.

Constituency development funds (CDFs) are a good example of this, introduced in many countries as a mechanism to 'bypass institutional blockages to ensure that development resources reach all citizens' (Gordon and Cheeseman 2024: 3). In some ways, CDFs are a form of very direct accountability – leaders provide funds to projects in their constituencies and constituents re-elect them or do not. How well a leader is seen to deliver for the community thus has a direct electoral consequence. Yet this localism also favours the powerful within communities – political leaders are more likely to seek favour with those who are seen to be influential within the community – most often older, wealthier men and those with religious or customary clout (Soaki 2017; Walton and Jackson 2020). It is less likely to include those who are younger, poorer and women (see Craney and Tanielu 2024). As a result, those

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[3] Kastom is a term used in parts of Melanesia and encompasses 'all forms of cultural heritage, practice, and traditional knowledge, including place-based practices and relationships' (Toa et al. 2024: 14).

who are more disenfranchised and whose voices tend to be less well-represented continue not to be the focus.

More broadly, this hyper-localism means that political leaders are focused on re-election via gaining favour with local support bases, rather than by delivering on broader policy agendas. There are thus tensions between responding to short-term needs and interests of constituents and acting on broader collective interests over the longer term in a less personalised manner. In part, this localism is fuelled by weak political party structures in the countries studied. With no broader, shared policy agenda that political aspirants tie themselves to, voting remains based on local fealties and interests, rather than wider public policy issues. This also means that the oversight and disciplinary structures that can exist within political parties are not present.

For accountability, this means that political leaders are held to account by citizens for what they deliver locally, rather than for their contribution to wider national service or agendas. The personal networks and personalities of leaders can become more important than the issues they represent, contributing to the idea of 'big men' leadership. Governance also risks becoming fragmented as individual leaders focus on local issues. In some cases, this localization of politics may be a form of 'constituency service' that acts as an important vehicle for citizens to access the state, via the mediation and brokering of their elected official (albeit in a personalised manner) (see for instance Bussell 2019: 6-7; see also Power 2024). Alternatively, this localization of politics can undermine accountable governance due to the potential for leaders to deliver favourable treatment to (some of) their own constituents and to engage in patronage, in some cases including vote-buying (Armour 2012: 114-115). Recent research in Vanuatu, for instance, has found that: 'voters have come to see their vote as a transaction in exchange for an emergency handout from their MPs' (Toa et al. 2024: 36). In such contexts, formal accountability institutions may struggle to build popular support and gain legitimacy for their efforts to hold leaders accountable for their wider conduct, particularly where those leaders are individuals who are powerful and have significant personal support through their constituency networks that protect them.

While common approaches to respond to hyper-localised politics have been to try and strengthen the hand of top-down accountability institutions, others have highlighted the possibility of 'translocalism.' Translocal approaches maintain the benefits of localised politics (knowledge of and responsiveness to local demands and relationality) but move beyond the immediate clan or village identity to connect up multiple such groups and expand legitimacy and the bounds of inclusion (Harris 2007: 37-38). Harris documents this in PNG and translocal approaches have also been documented in the Solomon Islands, focused on how local leaders can, in some instances, rally communities around a unifying vision and overcome the more personalised interests and incentives that get in the way of collective action or the wider 'public good' (McLoughlin et al 2023). This offers an important alternative route to accountability that works with the grain of localised politics – harnessing its ability to work relationally to bring groups together in the common interest.

ACCOUNTABILITY ACROSS ECOSYSTEMS IS DOMINATED BY OLDER MEN

Customary, religious and formal accountability institutions are largely comprised of older men in the countries studied (Craney and Besebes 2024, Craney and Tanielu 2024). While in some cases the most powerful customary settings are reserved for men (such as in the *unimwane* n Kiribati); in other cases older men have conventionally been appointed to or attained positions (such as in the Church or formal accountability institutions). This, of course, brings a particular vantage point across all accountability institutions and means that particular views are privileged and others hidden (Simeti and Mua Illingworth 2023). As Kalpokas Doan (2022) notes of politics more broadly in Melanesia:

> The way politics is played in Melanesian countries has very little national inclusivity about it – in terms of participation by and representation of both men and women at the national level. The role of women is, almost exclusively, to vote, and not to actively play the game itself. And because men occupy that … space, they are the ones who make and dictate the rules.

Across the Pacific, women and youth face a range of obstacles to participation in governance and politics and this is also true for accountability (Gurney 2022; Craney 2022; OECD 2016). While there are important forums and spaces in which women and youth do exercise voice and influence (for instance, the Women's Conferences in Palau (Craney and Besebes 2024)), it is important to recognise that accountability ecosystems are routinely dominated by older men and thus are likely to miss important needs, interests and ways of working that may enable greater participation from women and youth. There was no discussion in the case studies about the accessibility of accountability institutions across ecosystems for people with disability. This, in itself, suggests that people with disability remain an even more invisible group that are not actively considered as 'core' to issues of accountable governance.

THE POWERFUL RARELY CHAMPION ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY CHAMPIONS ARE RARELY POWERFUL

Analysis in each of the six countries studies included a mapping exercise that sought to identify key stakeholders and to document their relative support for, and influence over, strengthened accountability in that context. These were compiled based on the feedback from interviews and focus group discussions at the country level. They thus represent an aggregation of the views of those consulted. Overall, the stakeholder maps present a surprisingly positive picture – with many actors clustered as being both supportive of improved accountability and influential. This raises the question as to why, then, stronger accountability has not resulted? It is likely that the reality is a more varied picture with stronger opposition to change or weaker advocates than the stakeholder maps depict. Here, the overall picture that emerges of support for and influence over accountability is sketched out.

Formal accountability institutions were widely seen as supportive of stronger accountability and were, to varying degrees, seen to be influential, but often lacked the resources, expertise or operational bandwidth to realise this. While such institutions are often in place and well intentioned, they tend to be inadequately resourced and empowered to fulfil their mandate. More importantly, but less widely discussed, is that they also lack the political power or positioning to effectively deliver on their function.

Development partners and civil society groups (including women's and youth organisations) were largely seen to be supportive of improved accountability but generally lacked the power or influence to enact change (although in some cases donors were considered to be more influential). Executives, individual politicians, churches and customary systems were generally seen as the most influential actors but varied in how supportive of accountability they were seen to be. Churches and customary institutions were considered variable in their support for improved accountability – in some cases seen to be supportive and in others less so. Executives were widely seen to oppose stronger accountability, representing a key constraint in efforts to improve accountable governance. Individual MPs, while largely seen as not supportive of stronger accountability, were sometimes disaggregated with particular individuals appearing as supportive. Across the case studies, examples emerged of such reform minded actors emerged – such as MPs electing to publish their CDF spending, or customary leaders vocally pushing for stronger collective action on accountability across government, Church and customary institutions (see Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023). These offer examples of possible coalitions that have the potential to 'open up accountability work and generate greater engagement around core issues' (Scrimgeour and Erasmus 2021: 2).

These broad commonalities, however, belie a deep complexity at the intersection of power and accountability. Understanding this diversity is key to identifying alliances, coalitions and reformers that may offer opportunities to focus support on, while developing strategies to work around key blockers.

Those with the power and resources to enact change may also have an interest in maintaining the status quo (Cheema 2007). While there may be some reputational incentives associated with promoting a more equitable or transparent sharing of resources, there are also competing incentives to prioritise kinship and other relational ties. Customary practices and religious institutions, often highly localised in focus, may also compete with aspirations for more widespread accountability at community or regional or national levels. In short, it cannot be assumed that the most powerful actors will prioritise accountability over their own immediate interests.
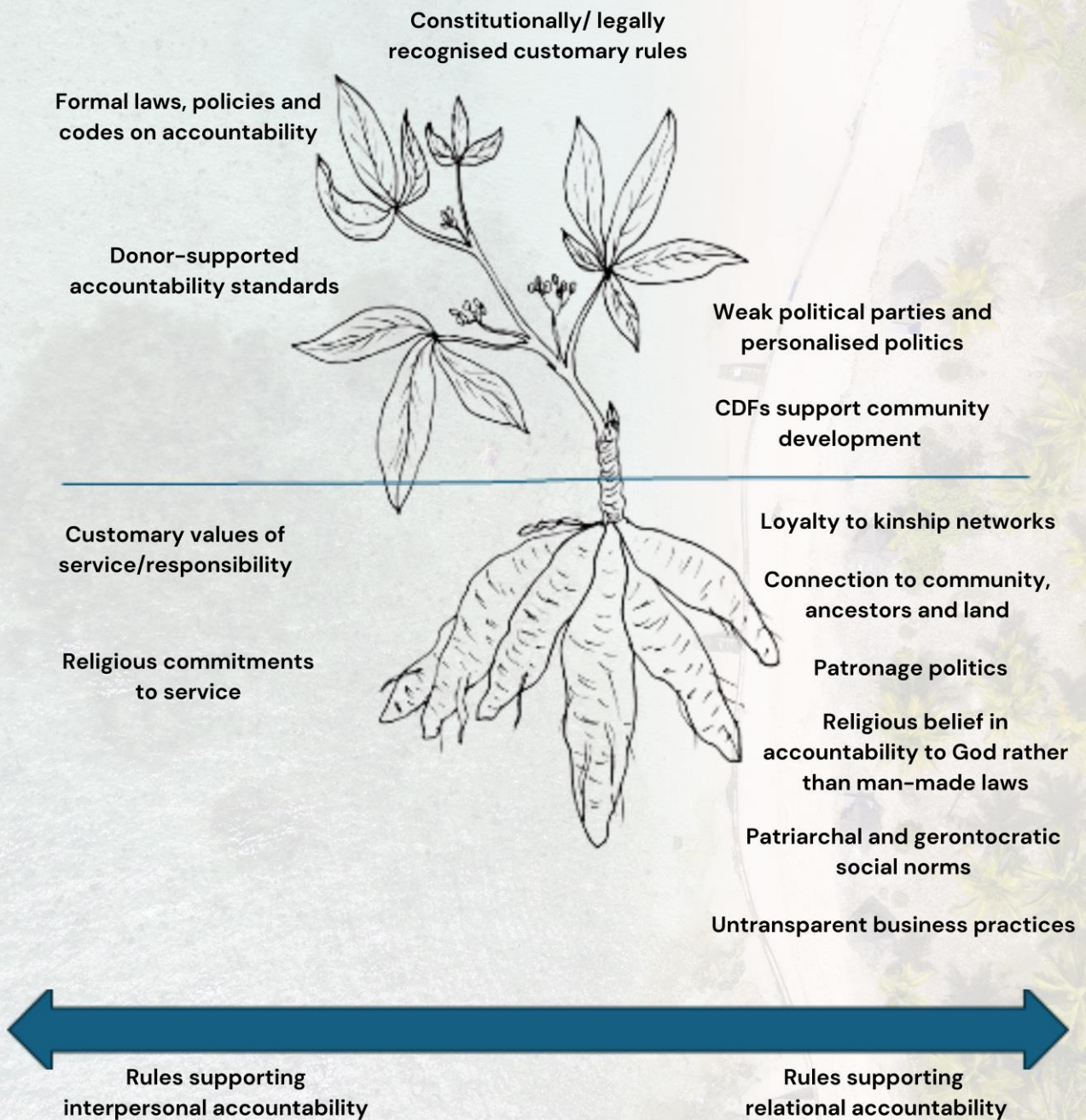
Conversely, only occasionally do champions of accountability control the power and resources necessary to accelerate change. Civil society groups, including women's groups, youth councils and a range of community-based organisations, are seen as advocates for transparency and inclusion yet lack the power to demand change. Other voices are largely missing from the accountability conversation, notably for women and people living with disabilities (see Craney and Tanielu 2024), or as a result of the accountability discourse taking place only among urban communities and elites, often in or near the national capital (see Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023). Across the six country studies the role of the media in promoting accountability was uneven, limited by the number or size of media institutions, and the political space afforded them and issues of social closeness and relationality. But importantly media, and particularly the rise of social media, were also pointed to as providing opportunities for deepening accountability conversations and putting the issue of accountability more firmly on the public agenda.

The analysis of stakeholder power and interests go some way to revealing the political constraints to accountability which have tended to be overlooked in some of the 'open movement's'[4] efforts to promote transparency as a tool for accountability (see Krafchik and Evans 2024). What emerges, despite the more positive image that some research participants shared, is that quite apart from advocates for accountability not having the tools to hold the powerful to account, the vested interests of incumbent political leaders and their deprioritisation of accountability also push against change (DLP 2018). This speaks to the importance of the nature of the prevailing political settlement – in some countries a more inclusive political settlement prevails, providing opportunities for more fruitful interaction between citizens and states, a stronger role for civil society and media and an openness to working with parts of government to drive change (Rocha Menocal 2015; Kelsall 2022). In other cases, more exclusive political settlements create greater obstacles for advancing accountability – suggesting that different approaches may be needed that work with reform-minded actors where they emerge, or that focus on building the power of those outside of government.

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[4] The *Open Movement* refers to more than twenty years of research, analysis, dialgoue and activism intended to strengthen transparency and access to information, with the aim of improving accountability and equitable development outcomes. (Tarkowski et al. 2023: 3; Krafchik and Evans 2024).

Formal and informal rules influencing accountability

Constitutionally/ legally
recognised customary rules

Formal laws, policies and
codes on accountability

Donor–supported
accountability standards

Weak political parties and
personalised politics

CDFs support community
development

Customary values of
service/responsibility

Loyalty to kinship networks

Connection to community,
ancestors and land

Patronage politics

Religious commitments
to service

Religious belief in
accountability to God rather
than man–made laws

Patriarchal and gerontocratic
social norms

Untransparent business practices

Rules supporting
interpersonal accountability

Rules supporting
relational accountability

So now what?
Implications for policy
and practice

Understanding how accountability is understood and why it operates in the ways that it does is a necessary precursor to identifying next steps. This puts what is politically possible at the heart of devising strategies for change. Having set out the political economy conditions that emerge across the six country studies, this final section turns to recommendations of new directions for strengthening accountability in the Pacific.

1. MOVE BEYOND 'BEST PRACTICE' TO UNDERSTAND 'GOOD ENOUGH' ACCOUNTABILITY APPROACHES TAILORED TO CONTEXT
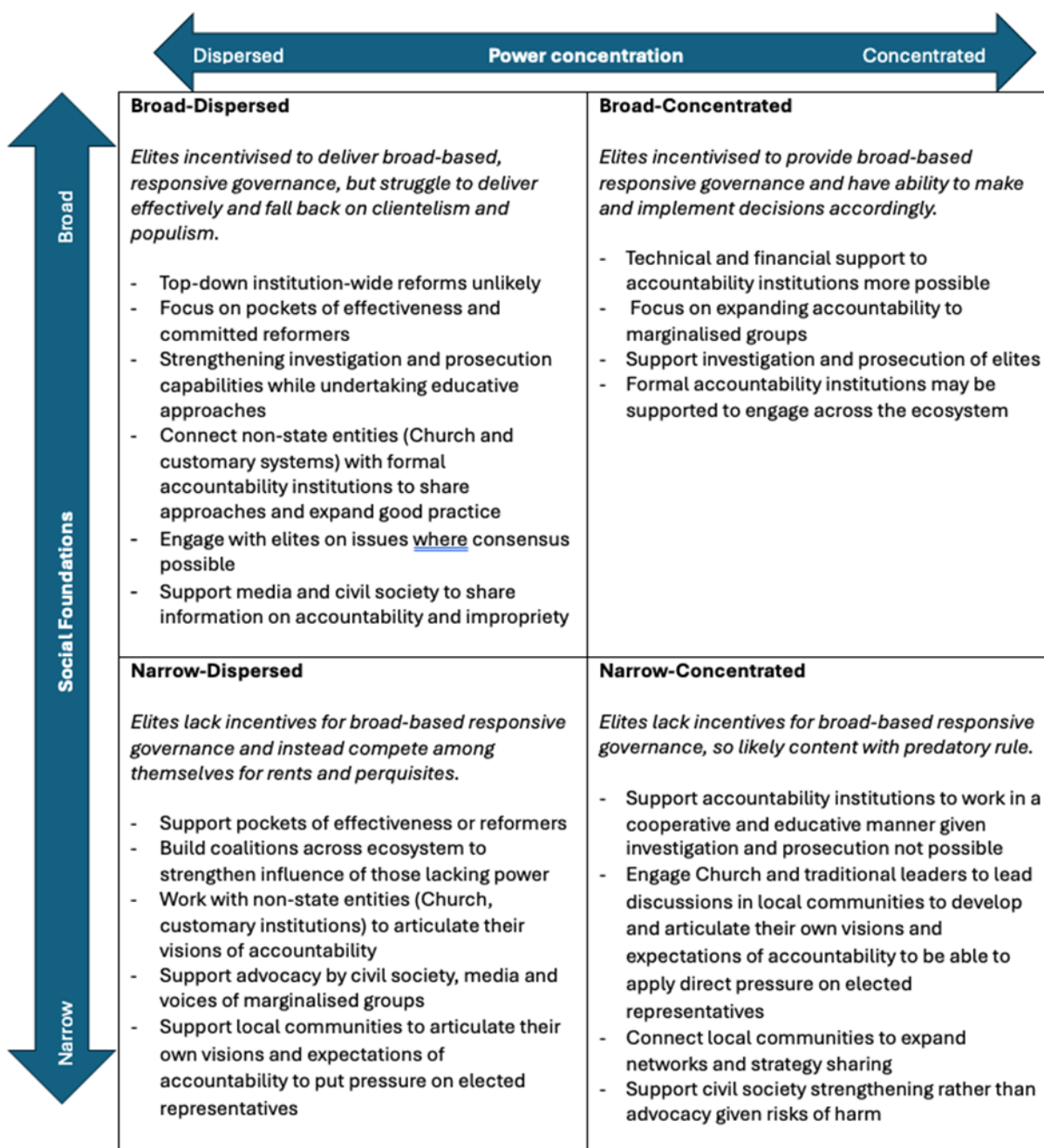
Recognising the limited traction of international 'best practices' promoted by donor-supported governance reforms in the Pacific, a shift is required (Nimbtik 2016). Beyond rhetoric about tailoring to context, accountability efforts should retire the standard suite of interventions that seem to be rolled out from place to place in favour of developing accountability approaches that are meaningful in a given context. Such approaches fit Grindle's idea of 'good enough' governance that recognises best practice standards are not universally applicable or feasible (Grindle 2007).

A first step towards such approaches is investing in understanding the accountability ecosystem already in place and how this works on its own terms and according to its own logic – not simply as a dysfunctional version of externally-imposed standards. In the Pacific, this will likely help to reveal more relational forms of accountability that, again, should be explored for what they enable, not just for their deficits (Craig et al 2016; DLP 2023). Aided by this understanding, accountability ecosystem stakeholders can then be brought together to agree what accountability looks like for their context and what feasible goals might be set. The focus should be on iteratively designing steps that achieve incremental progress relevant to the context, rather than long-term goals that are broad and idealistic. As a result, the suite of accountability support options from development partners should broaden significantly, as they evolve in response to the diversity of accountability ecosystems and the approaches that emerge as best fit. Design of development partner interventions to support accountability – beyond facilitating local understanding and agreement on goals – should occur *after* realistic local goals have been set.

2. DEVELOP DISTINCT STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR DIFFERENT POLITICAL SETTLEMENTS

The nature of the political settlement (a common understanding, usually forged between elites, about how power is organized and exercised (DFID 2010: 22) fundamentally shapes the opportunities for improved accountability. Those seeking change neglect it at their peril. Different political settlements across countries mean that there are different obstacles to improved accountability and different opportunities. Political settlements rubrics (see for instance Kelsall 2018) capture more dispersed and concentrated power amongst elites, on the one hand, telling us what ability leaders have to do the things they want to do. On the other hand they capture narrower and broader social foundations, telling us how broad a group of people elites have to satisfy to maintain power. The two-by-two matrix

that this creates has been used to identify politically relevant opportunities for peace negotiations and service delivery and may be adapted to identify opportunities for strengthening accountability. Building a political settlements rubric out could help to identify potentially appropriate accountability approaches in line with the unique concentration of power and social reach in each country context. Such an approach would help to put the political constraints of improved accountability at the heart of identifying appropriate reform strategies, as well as opening up a wider range of change strategies. As example of what this might look like is provided below as a starting point for developing this thinking further (this builds on the work of Kelsall (2018) and seeks to apply an accountability lens). This is early thinking that would need to be tested for its utility and relevance to the Pacific, with adaptations as required. It should also not suggest that only one quadrant is necessarily relevant to a given country at any point in time. Rather, it should be used to prompt thinking about how the political dynamics of a given country and sector might influence what strategies for change are likely to be most effective.

	Dispersed ← **Power concentration** → Concentrated	
Broad	**Broad-Dispersed** *Elites incentivised to deliver broad-based, responsive governance, but struggle to deliver effectively and fall back on clientelism and populism.* - Top-down institution-wide reforms unlikely - Focus on pockets of effectiveness and committed reformers - Strengthening investigation and prosecution capabilities while undertaking educative approaches - Connect non-state entities (Church and customary systems) with formal accountability institutions to share approaches and expand good practice - Engage with elites on issues where consensus possible - Support media and civil society to share information on accountability and impropriety	**Broad-Concentrated** *Elites incentivised to provide broad-based responsive governance and have ability to make and implement decisions accordingly.* - Technical and financial support to accountability institutions more possible - Focus on expanding accountability to marginalised groups - Support investigation and prosecution of elites - Formal accountability institutions may be supported to engage across the ecosystem
Narrow	**Narrow-Dispersed** *Elites lack incentives for broad-based responsive governance and instead compete among themselves for rents and perquisites.* - Support pockets of effectiveness or reformers - Build coalitions across ecosystem to strengthen influence of those lacking power - Work with non-state entities (Church, customary institutions) to articulate their visions of accountability - Support advocacy by civil society, media and voices of marginalised groups - Support local communities to articulate their own visions and expectations of accountability to put pressure on elected representatives	**Narrow-Concentrated** *Elites lack incentives for broad-based responsive governance, so likely content with predatory rule.* - Support accountability institutions to work in a cooperative and educative manner given investigation and prosecution not possible - Engage Church and traditional leaders to lead discussions in local communities to develop and articulate their own visions and expectations of accountability to be able to apply direct pressure on elected representatives - Connect local communities to expand networks and strategy sharing - Support civil society strengthening rather than advocacy given risks of harm

(Vertical axis label: **Social Foundations**, Broad to Narrow)

3. FOCUS ON THE FUNCTIONAL CAPACITIES OF FORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY INSTITUTIONS, EMPHASISING AN EDUCATIVE APPROACH

While the need for robust accountability tools (including legislation, investigation and prosecution) remains, the country studies suggest that an increased focus on cooperative, collaborative accountability practice may reap greater rewards in the Pacific. Educative approaches in the case studies show promise as a means of moving from awareness raising to practical skill development and they were widely seen to be more culturally appropriate in contexts where relationships are deeply valued. Moreover, by building relationships and skills through an educative approach, the legitimacy of accountability institutions and their aspirations for stronger integrity can simultaneously be enhanced. This relates to recommendation 1 above about setting more realistic, interim goals for building functional capacity. To avoid overwhelming nascent accountability institutions by setting ambitious (and politically unfeasible) goals, instead begin with more modest, incremental goals that can be extended as they are achieved, including educative approaches. In addition, identifying existing good practice (what is also referred to as positive deviance) – across the entire accountability ecosystem – can provide examples of what is possible *within* the context and may be suitable for expansion.

4. WORK WITH THE GRAIN OF HYBRID REALITIES AND SEE THESE AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL ARTICULATIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Across all the country studies, a key recommendation was to work at the intersection of hybrid realities – creating spaces to bring together formal, customary, religious and other relevant accountability ecosystem actors. This is intended both to embrace endogenous accountability approaches, working in the space between formal and non-formal accountability institutions, and to begin to reimagine different accountability arrangements in future that puts this hybridity at the core. While no accountability systems are without their flaws, a more hybrid approach would engage with empirical realities and offer the opportunity of harnessing the strengths of multiple systems. At the same time, it would enable airing and discussion of tensions in understandings and practices of accountability between systems that can undermine how accountability functions. Such hybrid models offer the most promise for a shared understanding of accountability in the countries studied and open up potentially new accountability futures that go beyond existing models. In practice, donors or governments might invest in public dialogues that foster discussion about the opportunities and tensions that arise out of hybrid accountability systems and build consensus around new forms.

5. SUPPORT COALITIONS OR COLLECTIVE ACTION ACROSS THE ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEM

While the commitment and capacity to reform accountability varies widely between actors within each ecosystem, in all settings there are individuals or networks of stakeholders who are potential advocates for change but may lack the power to achieve it in isolation. Collective action and coalitions have demonstrated success in the Pacific of building pressure for and accelerating change (Corbett 2013; Denney and McLaren 2016; Fletcher et al. 2016). This is in keeping with wider international experience in which bringing together key allies across government, civil society and other sectors has enabled targeted change (DFID 2013; Booth and Chambers 2014: 10; The Asia Foundation 2023). As such, bringing selected stakeholders together from across the accountability ecosystem offers great potential to jointly problem solve and press for change. These 'coalitions' need not be inclusive – indeed, it is unlikely that they can be given the competing interests of accountability ecosystem actors (Denney and McLaren 2016). Rather, building smaller coalitions of committed reformers is likely to be more effective and help avoid the risk of 'big tent' approaches that ignore or perpetuate power inequities (Krafchik and Evans 2024).

While there is a role here for development partners, coalitions – especially in socially dense contexts such as many Pacific countries – need to be nurtured lightly. If externally manufactured they risk misreading relationships and motivations among coalition members and failing to take root. Growing coalitions organically and supporting spaces for dialogue and collaboration are more likely to be effective (The Asia Foundation 2023). Similarly, encouraging collective action at the local level by expanding connections between different 'locals' to be more inclusive ('translocalism') may help to achieve more accountable leadership at this level, especially when higher-level political change is unlikely (McLoughlin et al 2023).

6. SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA TO ELEVATE THEIR INFLUENCE AND PROTECT CIVIC SPACE

Civil society consistently emerge as advocates for accountable governance across the country studies but lack the influence to enact change. While in some cases this is related to the small nature of civil society, human resource and finance constraints, it also speaks more broadly to the power of civil society, particularly in advocacy spaces (as opposed to service delivery) in the Pacific. Supporting civil society should not just be limited to funding but actively seek to provide platforms for civil society groups to amplify their voices, form coalitions and gain a seat at the table. This is particularly the case for organisations based in rural and remote areas and groups representing women, youth and people with disability. This would enable civil society to hear and represent more diverse voices, as well as engage in debates about how to improve accountability at sub-national and national levels.

More broadly, while supporting civil society is often seen as the slow route to change, sustained investments here are critical now more than ever to – at the very least – hold the line and push back on shrinking civic space. Support to civil society must also consider the risks of harm to advocates and activists, underlining the importance of political settlements thinking in informing decision-making.

7. TACKLE ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH ISSUE-BASED PROGRAMMING

Accountability in leadership and governance is often not a high political priority – particularly currently when concerns about climate change, geopolitical competition, food security and other issues dominate policy agendas. In such a context, working on accountability is not necessarily the quickest route to delivering improved accountability. Rather, it may be more politically opportune to take an issue-based approach and work on building accountability into climate change adaptation programs, food security programs, or whatever policy issue has traction. This provides the opportunity to demonstrate what accountability looks like in practice, applied to a particular issue, while not necessarily badging efforts as 'accountability programming', which may attract resistance or lack political prioritisation. Already at the regional level in the Pacific climate change adaptation discussions have included a strong accountability dimension. Such issue-based approaches have been less apparent at the national level to date. Experimenting with such approaches offers the opportunity to organise collective action around concrete issues that communities face that have political traction and use accountability as a problem solving tool (Krafchik and Evans 2024).

8. BEWARE ACCOUNTABILITY BEING ORIENTED TOWARDS DONORS AND AWAY FROM PUBLICS

Critically important is recentring the focus of accountability on citizens and publics, rather than on the language, templates and standards of international donors. Outwardly-oriented accountability featured in each ecosystem considered in our research, to varying extents, and was particularly evident in the COFA states of Palau and FSM. As South Pacific states consider their own allegiances

with donor nations, including high level agreements similar to those in the North Pacific that confer significant security relationships, ensuring accountabilities between the state and its public are prioritised is essential. It is state-citizen accountability relationships that underlie more effective and responsive states. Donors and foreign powers should be alert to potential unintended consequences of undermining state-citizen accountability by skewing the focus through their increasing footprint in the region. They must also work to ensure that their support in Pacific countries is aligned to and meets the domestic accountability requirements of the host country.

9. DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS CAN LEAD BY EXAMPLE AND BUILD STRONGER SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY INTO THEIR OWN WORK

Development partners can do more to make themselves accountable to the communities that their programs are meant to benefit. This may involve providing space and funding for social accountability measures that hold their own programs and practices to account. This would put local communities in the driving seat and orient accountabilities downwards to people for impact, rather than upwards to funding bodies for compliance. Development partners could make themselves available, alongside national government representatives, at the community level where their projects are implemented and create forums to report back, listen to feedback and answer questions. Not only would this improve the accountability of development partner programs, but may also provide a demonstration effect of what accountability can look like, leading citizens to demand more of their own governments.

Conclusion

The accountability ecosystems in the Pacific countries studied are not impervious to change – but they have proved resistant to the standard tried and tested accountability approaches that donors have been supporting for many years. While development partners have made some efforts to tailor their approaches to context, accountability interventions have remained strikingly similar from place to place. This suggests that engagement with the political economy of accountability ecosystems remains limited, as we should expect to see quite different strategies for change being pursued in light of different political contexts.

This synthesis paper has sought to distil some of the key political economy features that emerge across the country studies undertaken, with a view to identifying new approaches to change. These approaches aim to take more seriously efforts to be context-relevant and politically-informed – recognising the deep and varied approaches to accountability that already exist in the countries studied, that are often more relationally-grounded. These sit alongside and inform introduced forms of formal accountability, producing institutional hybrids. The resulting unique forms of accountability could be better explored and understood to reveal alternative approaches to accountability than has been supported to date. The recommendations offer a series of jumping off points for policymakers and practitioners working to expand accountability and improve responsive governance both in the Pacific and further afield. As disillusionment with existing accountability efforts grows, we hope that these offer some guide as to charting new ways ahead that are most culturally resonant and politically informed.

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