



Strategic activity: Co-responsibility for the control of public action

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WHERE THE STATE NO LONGER HOLDS A MONOPOLY ON PUBLIC policy, governance consists in setting up a dialogue between the diverse categories of actors henceforward involved in public action (civil society, public institutions, private sector, private citizens). In the framework of its “Co-production of Public Action” program, the IRG takes a keen interest in these processes of interaction between public institutions and non-state actors (social organizations, economic actors etc.) In order to further its examination of the impact of these multi-actor discussion forums, it is more particularly interested in the processes designed to reinforce **the accountability¹ of all the actors participating in public action.**

The control of public action is one way to arrive at this accountability. Through its range of modalities, it helps reinforce the effectiveness of public action and its impact: it has notably been instrumental in the reduction of discrepancy between public policies’ stated aims and the results of their implementation. More broadly, it is an important factor in the re-connexion between the populations and their public institutions and thereby the latter’s legitimacy.

1. Accountability is here concerned with the principle and the mechanisms whereby public policy actors are expected to account for the action they have implemented before those who entrusted them with the task. It denotes the reinforcement of public action actors’ “answerability”, a key concept of democratic governance in the implementing rules of which are many and manifold.

The control of public action and its evolution

The control of public action refers to the full array of practices, sectoral or general, collective or otherwise that aim to ensure the accountability of the actors involved in the management of public affairs – notably through greater transparency. Control activities seek to inform, sometimes to alert but also to influence or re-direct public action. The aim of this control is to arrive at a more effective and more legitimate public action, that is a public action consistent with its legal framework but also with the populations' demands.

Whereas such control was conducted on state institutions mainly by independent public institutions, it tends nowadays to be carried out by a range of actors and to be more broadly concerned with the implementation of public policy.

Towards a greater number of actors exercising control of public action

Traditionally, the control of public action is on the whole conducted “horizontally” by public institutions as is the case with parliamentary and judicial control, public finance control and more broadly with the diverse forms of administrative control.

In recent decades a new, “vertical” form of public action control, “social accountability” has emerged. It refers to the active participative practice enabling citizens, social organizations or the media to monitor the unfolding of public affairs by holding public policy makers accountable² for the outcomes of their actions. Via a broad range of actions, its aim is to ensure that the use of public (human and financial) resources be assigned to policies that effectively answer the populations' needs and aspirations.

The emergence and prevalence of these new practices have been vastly encouraged by international cooperation agencies (notably the UNDP and the World Bank) who put forward the concept of “social accountability” so as to bolster calls for a more democratic governance. Some international conventions (e.g. the Aarhus convention) also tend to favour a strong implication of non-state actors in the control of public policies. At the same time, at national level, some pieces of legislation also fostered control of public policies and actions initiatives (e.g. the 1991 constitution in Colombia; also laws about access to public information in many countries).

2. Clearly, this scrutiny is not narrowly focussed on accountancy but instead on accountability for the implementation of public policy as a whole. (cf. mon e-mail: ceci va sans dire en anglais)

A plethora of monitoring practices and modalities came into being in very diverse sectors and at diverse territorial tiers of public action. Public policy and action control then became a fully integrated part of many civil society organizations' activity. The latter, structured in networks at both the national and international levels, have played a crucial role in the proliferation of control mechanisms and practices by claiming a role in their own right in the control of public action.

The control of public action is thus carried out by an extended range of public and private actors. This new **multi-actor dimension of control** has found diverse expressions according to context, from control run in parallel by diverse types of actors to the less frequent joint control that involves them together.

From the control of public institutions to the control of public action

The proliferation of “governance” actors and its complexification have resulted in an evolution of the issues raised by the concept responsibility for public action. For instance, in the current context, some public services are implemented by private actors, be they businesses or civil society organizations. Against this background, the control of public action henceforward entails the responsibility of all the actors involved and not just one particular actor. Accordingly, state actors can no longer, theoretically, be considered as solely responsible for the implementation of public policies. This entails in turn the evolution of the hitherto prevailing format and modalities of control.

Time has come to move from the control of public institutions to the control of public action conducted within a particular context. The modalities of control will then vary according to the nature of the public action at stake (public water policy, the building of a bridge, a town's overall budget), the government tier and the actors involved in implementing it.

A prime target for IRG scrutiny: The control of public action in a multi-actor context of shared responsibility

The IRG has undertaken the study of this new multi-actor context of public action control, notably of the interactions that may or may not exist between the different actors involved. For instance it monitors and analyses the implementation of public policy and action control

exercises in several Colombian municipalities. More broadly, the IRG seeks to develop its activity around the following questions.

The object of control. In which way does the nature of control differ according to the (all-embracing/sectoral) type of public action and according to its (local/national) level of application? To which extent do control activities also develop around businesses and civil society organizations rather than only public institutions? More specifically, does the plurality of control actors cause the range of control of public policies to evolve, notably by taking them into account as a whole and throughout their entire duration (from their devising to the evaluation of their outcomes)?

The structuration of multi-actor control. How are the interactions between private and public actors structured in the framework of a control activity? Where is the balance of power between the diverse control actors? To which extent can the involvement of new actors in public action control complement or shake up existing state control provisions? How do synergies between “traditional” (parliamentary, judicial) control mechanisms and new social accountability control practices come into being (or not as the case may be)? To which extent do new hybrid control practices arise from these interactions?

The modalities of multi-actor control. In which way do these control modalities differ according to the actor (public institution, social organization) conducting the control but also according to the control’s territorial level (local, regional, national)? How do control tools evolve in a multi-actor context? What resources have been allocated to the control exercises? More specifically, how are control exercises funded? How is the independence of the control exercises, hence that of its actors, ensured? To what extent does the use of new technologies and social media transform the modalities of control?

Impact and outcomes of multi-actor control. To what extents do these new forms of control practices call into question the role and operation of state institutions and cause them to evolve? How does this impinge on the relations between the different administrative/institutional actors who may be diversely responsive to control exercises? How do they also transform other actors’ *modus operandi*, notably that of civil society and the private sector? How does the whistle blowing that may result from a control operation affect the existing multi-actor consultative process? To what extent can an ongoing control initiative impact the outcome of a public policy? More broadly what is the impact of multi-actor control on the content, the implementation and the eventual results of public action? To what extent does it add to the legitimacy of public policies?

The context of control. The questions above are closely dependent on the context in which the control is conducted. Particular attention must be given to the political regimes and public institutions’ openness to control exercises, be they run by public outfits or civil society

organizations. To which extent does the ready availability of data assist the control? How can the control be optimized in the particular context of fragile states where the capacity of different actors is very weak?

Offer of practical activities

Creation of forums for debates and multi-actor work: organization of symposiums and exchanges of experience between diverse control practitioners (hailing from public institutions and/or civil society organizations), researchers, and experts in this field.

Production of studies:

- On a control experience or a specific control process
- On a specific aspect of control (e.g. defining control indicators)
- Comparison of control experiences conducted in diverse regions of the world.

Accompaniment of control processes:

- Lead jointly or by a specific (public or social organization) actor in a sector and/or a given territory
- Undertake the systemization, capitalization/evaluation aimed at drawing the lessons from a control exercise.