



## Social Accountability in Morocco: Recurring Pressures and Sporadic Concessions

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**Abstract** Amongst the institutional and societal changes that Morocco experienced in the last decades, accountability is becoming pivotal. The first article of the 2011 Constitution correlates responsibility with the rendering of accounts. However, important limitations to institutional accountability remain. This chapter aims to delve into local meanings and practices of social accountability, asking what accountability looks like for people in Morocco. After providing contextual information on Morocco's overall accountability environment, the chapter looks at four dimensions of citizen engagement with social accountability: the multiple meanings that citizens ascribe to this notion, how these translate into diverse mobilisation methods, how authorities respond to citizen engagement and the overall outcome of these processes. This research showed that while the limited efficacy of institutional protocols for accountability taints citizens' hopes for change, they still engage in a plethora of

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social accountability initiatives. Yet, such initiatives are far from systematically producing results. Local officials' complicated relationship with civil society and limited ad hoc concessions further nuance the assessment of bottom-up demands for accountability. Regardless, civil society actors remain resolute in their struggles for change.

**Keywords** Responsibility · Tokenism · Citizens' power · Civic action · Morocco · Social accountability

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the notion and practices of social accountability (SA) in Morocco. Within this research, SA refers to citizens holding state officials (elected or appointed) to account for service delivery outside of elections. After the uprisings of 2011, Morocco implemented a series of institutional changes that—amongst other objectives—aim at ‘completing the process of establishment of the rule of law and of democratic institutions’ (from the Royal Speech of 17 June 2011 announcing the constitutional reform; my translation). Accountability occupies a prime position, as the first article of the 2011 Constitution establishes the correlation between responsibility and the rendering of accounts. This has resulted in a series of reforms and institutional changes formally aimed at reinforcing both top-down and bottom-up accountability processes. Beyond this institutional recognition, international donors working in Morocco have paid substantial attention to accountability issues. Notably, donors working with citizens and civil society directly have invested substantially in the support of bottom-up actions and processes of accountability. At the same time, both institutional changes and donor action are taking place in a context of wide and enduring social mobilisation. Actions such as demonstrations for improved public service delivery or broader actions demanding that decision-makers uphold their responsibility have been common in Morocco since well before the 2011 Constitution. This context of diverse actions, in which different stakeholders collaborate and clash depending on their goals and strategies, provides a rich field of meanings and practices of accountability in Morocco.

Fundamentally, this research explores the different ways in which citizens and civil society actors talk about and engage in accountability initiatives, how authorities respond to them and whether these efforts manage to exact accountability. The research revolves around the following main research question: *What does accountability look like for the people on the ground?*

This key question has been further unpacked into four subquestions, namely:

1. Multiple meanings: what do local citizens understand by the word ‘accountability’? How do citizens engaged in SA mechanisms refer to it and ascribe meaning to it?
2. Mobilisation methods: how did local activists get the attention of fellow citizens (mobilising them) and of the officials in power responsible for providing certain types of information or services?
3. Responses from authorities: how did local activists maintain momentum in terms of mobilisation and how did they get power holders and officials to commit to providing the information and services?
4. Outcomes: how did activists get power holders to deliver on their commitments? Did they succeed in exacting accountability at all, and if so, to what extent? And are there some signs of their commitments being institutionalised? What are the reasons for successes and/or failures?

This chapter is divided into five sections. This short introduction will be followed by a methodology section, in which the main research methods will be presented and positioned in the actual research process. Next, I present a non-exhaustive account of SA initiatives in Morocco with the goal of providing a broader picture of the experiences in the Moroccan context, followed by an empirical section in which I answer the research questions by presenting the data gathered during the fieldwork. Finally, a conclusion summarises the main findings while sketching out the lines of further research on this topic in Morocco.

### 3.2 METHODOLOGY

This section will outline the methodological approach of the research, presenting the methodological choices made, the methods employed for data collection, the limitations faced while conducting fieldwork and the ensuing adjustments made throughout the research. The goal of this section is to position the findings of the study within the wider context in which the research has been carried out.

Overall, this research is grounded in a strongly qualitative approach. It is based on fieldwork in Morocco conducted between August and November 2021 that explored the question and subquestions mentioned above. Given my focus on the multiple understandings and practices of SA in Morocco, I used qualitative research methods that enable research participants to provide dense descriptions of their interpretations of the notion of SA, of their actions and of the wider context these occur in. The strong qualitative focus aimed at ‘getting closer’ to the phenomenon at the centre of the research in order to improve its understanding (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This methodological choice was also translated into the development of this chapter, which relies heavily on direct quotes from research participants. Bringing to the fore the latter’s voices represents a concrete engagement with the main goal of this research: finding out what accountability looks like for the people on the ground.

The data collection process started with desk research aimed at obtaining a wide picture of SA initiatives in Morocco, using general and academic search engines (Google, Scopus and Google Scholar) as well as the main social media in Morocco (Facebook and Twitter). In an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, these searches were conducted in English, French and Arabic. Table 3.1 summarises the search terms employed.

Following the desk research, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key civil society actors, scholars, journalists and activists who have engaged with SA initiatives. A broad interview guide based on the four subquestions guided these interviews but was not followed strictly. Indeed, interviewees were given broad room to discuss and explore local meanings and practices of accountability. Two interviews were held with two participants at the same time, as both worked for the same organisation. Half of the interviews were conducted remotely (via telephone or online), since some interviewees preferred to minimise the risk of exposure to Covid-19 and others could not travel to meet in person (also due to Covid-19 restrictions). Ten interviewees gave permission to

**Table 3.1** Search-term matrix for desk review

<i>English</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>Arabic</i>
Accountability Morocco	Redevabilité Maroc	<i>musāʿala al-Maghrib</i> <i>muḥāsaba al-Maghrib</i>
Accountability initiative Morocco	Initiative redevabilité Maroc	<i>mubādara musāʿala al-Maghrib</i> <i>mubādara muḥāsaba al-Maghrib</i>
Social accountability Morocco	Redevabilité sociale Maroc	<i>musāʿala al-ijtimāʿiyya al-Maghrib</i> <i>muḥāsaba al-ijtimāʿiyya al-Maghrib</i>

record the interview for transcription purposes, while six interviewees did not. In these cases, I took notes that were used in the analysis, but I could not quote them verbatim. I conducted interviews in both English and French, using specific Arabic words at times.

Following the interviews, I presented some preliminary findings in an online validation workshop with five interviewees, aimed at substantiating the preliminary interpretation of the data and collecting further inputs for the analysis. A presentation of preliminary research findings was followed by a discussion that covered both the specific research findings and the overall context for SA in Morocco.

In terms of limitations, the Covid-19 pandemic (and the related policy response) presented an obstacle to the fieldwork, as some interviewees preferred not to meet face-to-face and the policy response of the Moroccan government included limitations on intercity travel and a curfew that, at times, did not allow for in-person meetings. However, resorting to remote interviewing mostly mitigated this limitation. The local political context also influenced the fieldwork process. First, local and general elections held on 8 September 2021 monopolised the debate during most fieldwork activities. This made it harder to focus on accountability *beyond* the elections. Second, some interviewees believed that accountability was a sensitive topic and that debating it could result in retaliation from public authorities. A notable case is a participant who refused to do the interview since I did not possess an authorisation issued by a Moroccan administration. Even though I informed him that I had

submitted an application for a research permit and that Moroccan authorities were aware of my research, this interviewee was advised by a police officer he knew not to do the interview if I lacked written authorisation.

### 3.3 ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE MOROCCAN CONTEXT

This section briefly tackles the wider socio-political environment in Morocco and reviews some of the main contextual factors that influence the development and effectiveness of SA initiatives. Hickey and King (2016, p. 1277) review the variety of contextual elements that may have an impact on SAI, including

the role of different kinds of political institutions, the type and capacity of civil society actors involved in promoting social accountability, and a wide range of different ‘relational’ factors, whether in the form of state–society relations or relations between groups and citizens.

Therefore, this section will start by reviewing the legal framework of accountability in Morocco, including public policies and the prerogatives of institutional bodies related to accountability mechanisms. Then it will delve into the ‘relational factors’ that influence SA dynamics, such as the political will to act, officials’ support, political opposition and CSOs’ capacities.

#### 3.3.1 *The Reform of the Constitutional Framework: Plus ça Change...?*

As mentioned in the introduction, most interviewees underlined the central role of the 2011 Constitution in relation to accountability dynamics in Morocco. Even if the societal demands for increased accountability preceded the last constitutional reform (scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person), the fundamental law may be seen as a step towards Morocco’s democratisation: it establishes the ‘correlation between the responsibility for and the rendering of accounts’ (article 1, paragraph 2, Moroccan Constitution 2011) as a founding principle of the state. Further, it makes provisions for a series of bodies and mechanisms with the mission of monitoring and evaluating the performance of public powers and allowing citizens to exercise their sovereignty and act as a counterpower. Indeed, a plethora of institutions are officially

mandated to oversee the actions of public authorities (and, ideally, hold them to account), including the Court of Auditors (Cour des Comptes), the Competition Council (Conseil de la Concurrence) and the National Authority of Integrity, of Prevention and the Struggle against Corruption (Instance Nationale de la Probité, de la Prevention et Lutte contre la Corruption; INPPLC). In addition, the 2011 Constitution introduced new measures granting citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) new roles and innovative tools to engage with the state. For instance, civil society is identified as a partner of the state in the development, monitoring and evaluation of public policies (article 12), while citizens are granted the right to participate by submitting petitions and legislative motions (articles 14 and 15, respectively). The right to access information is also established (article 27). Furthermore, the 2011 Constitution states that public services are subordinated to, amongst others, the principles of transparency, responsibility and rendering of accounts (article 154). The relevance of the 2011 shift is summarised well by this interviewee:

I think we have to talk about a pre-2011 and a post-2011. We have always talked about accountability in the sense of incriminating corrupt officials. ... There always was this debate in Morocco about the possibility of seeing public officials, and especially to bring politicians (ministers, political leaders, etc.) before the courts and punish them in a criminal way. ... The context in which accountability was included in the 2011 Constitution, in the first article, in the second paragraph... it was very, very important to put it in that place. ... So, the context gave accountability more of a political meaning than a criminal one. ... it was another way of expressing the new step of democratisation of the Moroccan political system. That is to say, to link governance, to link power (in part) to the popular will and to the decision and intervention of the people. (Journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person)

The involvement of citizens and CSOs in the political system is determined by a framework of ‘participatory democracy’, which is both evoked as a founding principle of the state (article 1, paragraph 2, Moroccan Constitution 2011) and materialised in the laws and regulations that implement the rights mentioned above. Specifically, a series of organic laws define the right to present petitions and legislative motions and the right to access information and its scope.

Overall, the renewal of Morocco’s constitutional framework greatly advanced the legal arsenal that citizens and civil society can use to become

more engaged in its political system. However, the concrete realisation of these rights and the implementation of this ambitious framework were immediately recognised as being a challenge (Bendourou, 2012). Furthermore, the 2011 Constitution also crystallised a specific power balance, reaffirming the central role of the king in Morocco's political system (as, amongst others, the head of state, commander of the faithful and supreme arbiter between institutions; see articles 41 and 59 in the 2011 Constitution on the monarchy) while failing to provide any means to balance his power or even debate or question his decisions. In short, not only does the 2011 Constitution provide the monarch with decisional power in most strategic areas of the country's governance, but it also explicitly affirms that the king is inviolable—thereby curtailing any possibility to hold him to account, in spite of his far-reaching prerogatives. As another interviewee describes:

The head of state has enormous powers on the judicial level, on the religious level, on the military level, etc. There is nothing in the Constitution that allows to question him, at least, to do a minimum of *musāʿala* ... or of social accountability. (Scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person)

Hence, the intention of correlating responsibility and the rendering of accounts outlined in the first article of the Constitution are put into question by the consolidation of the monarch's position in Morocco's political system. The fact that the 2011 constitutional reform does not provide any mechanism to hold the monarch to account represents a first ceiling to accountability in the Moroccan context: both newly created and reinforced state institutions and citizens and civil society formally lack the prerogatives to exact accountability from the primary decision-maker in Morocco.

### 3.3.2 *Institutions for Top-Down Accountability: Great Prerogatives, Meagre Results*

Although they lack in providing counterbalance to the prerogatives of the monarchy, the innovations brought forward by the 2011 Constitution play a key role in defining the wider environment in which accountability dynamics interplay in Morocco. As introduced above, the main institutional bodies with prerogatives related to accountability dynamics

are the Court of Auditors, the Competition Council and the INPPLC. While the constitutional reform renewed the mandates of these institutions and increased their prerogatives, research participants presented concrete examples of how and why all three ultimately fail to achieve their objectives. Such a limited performance record fundamentally questions their power and ability to exact accountability.

The example of gas prices at the Competition Council is a case in point. The Competition Council is an independent institution that aims at ensuring transparency and equity in economic relations through the analysis and regulation of competition in markets and the control of anticompetitive behaviour and operations related to monopolies. It was established as an advisory body in 2000 by Law no. 06-99 on the freedom of prices and competition. In 2014, a new law aimed to amplify its prerogatives, including the capacity to act on its own initiative and, crucially, the power to sanction enterprises found guilty of anticompetitive practices by imposing fines amounting to up to the 10 per cent of their revenues (“Le Conseil de la Concurrence”, 2015). In 2015, a parliamentary inquiry investigated the increase in fuel prices after the liberalisation of the sector and concluded that the main providers had expanded their profit margin. This inquiry estimated that an excess profit of around 17 billion dirhams (MAD)—approximately 1.56 billion euros (EUR)—was made compared to the previous market situation (Berrada, 2018). After seizing this case, the Competition Council imposed a fine of 9 per cent of the turnover of these companies at the end of July 2020. However, in the following days some of its members stated that the president had not followed internal procedures. The king put the decision on hold, swiftly appointing an ad hoc commission to investigate the proceedings. This commission concluded that there had been various irregularities in the decision-making process. However, further details about these irregularities are not available, since the investigation was conducted behind closed doors and the report was submitted only to the king (El Hourri, 2021a). Ultimately, this process prompted a revision of the Council’s internal regulations and of the legal framework regulating competition (“Conseil de la Concurrence”, 2021).

One of the central elements that short-circuits the institutional protocol around accountability is the preference for extrajudicial dynamics over legal avenues. Instead of following the normal procedure (in this case an appeal to the administrative tribunal), the dispute was managed

in a top-down fashion through a royally appointed commission. As two interviewees outlined:

Miraculously, [the Competition Council] delivers a sanction. But they decided on the sanction on a Thursday in July, and the following Monday it was blocked. The behaviour of the president has been denounced and an ad hoc committee was appointed by the head of state and then the president was replaced. All this to tell you that the implementation of laws, even when they are very limited... the extra-institutional power has the capacity to make sure that the law is useless, through appointments, through commissions. (Scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person)

You saw how [the former president of the Competition Council] was dismissed... In a way that has no basis: creating a commission composed by the president of the Parliament, the head of the government... to investigate and then to say ‘ah, he didn’t respect [the internal regulations] and now he is dismissed’. And now we don’t have a Council. (Journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person)

Moreover, the review of the internal regulations of the Competition Council arguably decreased the transparency of its decision. Specifically, even though the Council is still legally bound to publish its decision, the proceedings of its deliberation are now excluded from publication and covered under professional secrecy (El Hourri, 2021b). Infringement of such secrecy may lead to fines between 1,200 and 20,000 dirhams for Council members, as stated by Law project no. 40–21. The situation is further complicated by an evident conflict of interest, since the current government is headed by the owner of one of the companies implicated in the affair and will have to oversee the revision of the competition law (Dalil, 2021). At the time of writing, even after the nomination of the new president of the Council in March 2021, no decision had been taken on the fine for the fuel companies involved in anticompetitive practices.

The case of the Competition Council highlights the limitations that these institutions face: extrajudicial practices, ad hoc decisions and an overall environment that is not favourable to exacting accountability. Specifically, the malfunction of institutional bodies to enforce accountability is seen as going beyond a flawed legal framework. Different interviewees identified a lack of political will to ensure accountability at the institutional level, which is evident both from the inaction of

these bodies and from the barriers put up to further pieces of legislation that could ameliorate the situation. In the words of three different interviewees:

We have some reports prepared by the Court of Auditors. The reports produced by this institution are very good, they're very legal, they're incredible. They tell you 'look what this company has done, [look what] this deputy has done, etc.' And all is very well written and they provide the accounts of the thefts that there have been, but in the end... these reports go directly to the archive. There are no actions. (Civil society actor 10, personal communication, 24 September 2021, in person)

The great witness of this situation is the law that criminalises the illicit enrichment of officials. It was the obvious case where we felt that there was no longer this political will to exercise accountability over officials. It was a bill that was introduced in the last months of the first Benkirane government by the Minister of Justice and that remained frozen in Parliament. ... In spite of the significant modifications made to the text, which practically emptied it of its meaning and made it ineffective, it remains blocked. Overall, this reflects the absence, the loss of the political will to exercise this principle [of accountability]. (Journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person)

There is a general situation of impunity and the problem is not just technical or with the laws. It's many things combined and, ultimately, it's the political system that does not tolerate accountability as it is. (Scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person)

In sum, institutional bodies aimed at exacting accountability suffer from a weak political will to engage with these mechanisms and a limited efficacy of the rule of law. Their increased prerogatives have yet to be matched by improved results: the fact that the political system is not open to a systematic exercise of accountability obstructs the action of these bodies.

### ***3.3.3 Institutional Mechanisms for Bottom-Up Accountability: A Missed Opportunity***

Besides increasing the prerogatives of the institutions in charge of top-down accountability, the 2011 Constitution also outlines several innovations that open bottom-up institutional avenues for accountability.

Citizens and CSOs can use these mechanisms to attempt achieving accountability. In particular, institutional petitions<sup>1</sup> can be used to make specific requests of national authorities (i.e. the Head of Government and the Presidents of the two chambers of the Parliament) or to propose the discussion of specific issues in the council of local governments. Citizens can also submit requests to obtain certain pieces of information to national and local authorities, as regulated by Organic Law no. 31-13.<sup>2</sup> Requests can be filed directly at the administration concerned, via email to the administration's contact point for access to information and via the dedicated online portal Chafafiya ('Transparency').

Citizens and CSOs have been using these mechanisms to demand accountability from decision-makers. However, as in the case of the institutions in the previous subsection, concrete experiences with these mechanisms call into question their promises. Both institutional petitions and requests to access information encounter key obstacles and generally do not lead to concrete results, casting doubt on the use of these tools as systematic mechanisms to achieve accountability.

The issues related to the right to information partly depend on its regulation (the features of Organic Law no. 31-13) and on how officials approach such requests. Organic Law no. 31-13 defines the procedures to access information held by national and local authorities as well as the limitations to this right in the form of a list of 'exceptions'. Critics have pointed out that such a list of exceptions is ambiguous and leaves substantial room for manoeuvre for authorities to decide which information gets published—and which does not ("Droit d'accès à l'information", 2019). However, the Access to Information Law's main issue is that it does not establish sanctions for officials that fail to provide information (Belghazi, 2014). In the words of an interviewee: 'If you look at the Access to Information Law alone: ... it has been designed to reduce as much as possible its scope and the access to information' (scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person). Even the appeal process cannot compel officials to provide information. The administrative court can be used to enforce a legal decision to provide the information, but only once internal appeal processes have been exhausted and only if the citizen can bear the legal costs.

Simply put, officials in charge of providing information can decide whether to provide the information without the risk of incurring a sanction. In practice, citizens' ability to access information depends on the

inclination of the information officer they reach. Indeed, research participants highlighted a general attitude that obstructs the right to access information. As summarised by this interviewee:

The grounds rule are set, but things are different when it comes to practice. And it's not about the regulation, it's about the culture. Even in the Moroccan culture we got used not to share information. When you ask for something, especially when you ask for the budget etc., the answer is 'why you need it?' ... I am a Moroccan citizen, I have this constitutional right, but that's the response. (Civil society actor 5, personal communication, 3 September 2021, online)

The lack of a culture of transparency has already been identified (Shalaby & Bergh, 2020). Together with the issues in the legislative framework this creates a situation in which citizens have no guarantees that they will receive a response. Even the Commission for the Right to Access to Information (Commission du Droit d'Accès à l'Information, CDAI)—which is supposed to monitor, ensure and improve the implementation of the right to access information—does not have the power to enforce decisions. The experience of two interviewees highlights these difficulties:

We filed 80 requests through the portal. We got 17 responses and 63 non-responses. About those 17, either the response is negative or positive, but there is a response. It was an exercise for everyone, both the ministries and us, to see who responds to what. For those 63 that did not reply, we followed the appeal process: first we wrote to the head of the administration, then CDAI. After [asking the head of the administration], we got zero responses, then [after asking the CDAI] we also got zero responses. (Civil society actor 5, personal communication, 3 September 2021, online)

The deadlines for receiving information are about 20 days, which can be extended by another 20. I can tell you that nothing is respected in this regard ... we have been asking for four months for the convention of delegation of the management [procurement contracts] of water, electricity and sanitation in Casablanca. We made a complaint to the National Commission for the Right to Access to Information [CDAI], which is the body that manages these cases, and it told us that it will follow up on the case, but we will certainly be called upon to go to court for this. (Civil society actor 7, personal communication, 16 September 2021, in person)

These accounts show that requests to access information do not generate a systematic response. This is partly due to shortcomings in the regulation of the right to access information but is ultimately an issue related to the lack of response of those responsible for providing information. In turn, this limits the potential of exercising the right to access information as a strategy for SA.

Similar considerations apply for institutional petitions to place an item on the agenda of local government councils. The regulation of this right provides a certain degree of insurance that claims filed through this mechanism will be taken into consideration by officials—provided that they comply with strict criteria. In other words, if citizens and CSOs comply with the formal conditions to present a petition, they should be guaranteed that authorities will take the topic of the petition into consideration. Indeed, institutional petitions have been used as a strategy to hold local governments to account for their actions (or lack thereof). For instance, an association in Sefrou presented a petition to demand the municipality's intervention in solving the issue of uncontrolled waste dumping; another association in Figuig presented a petition to the municipal council demanding better management of the water resources dedicated to local oases. Nonetheless, the regulatory limitations of this right and contextual constraints put into question the feasibility of institutional petitions as a systematic avenue for bottom-up accountability.

The regulation of the right to petition is fundamentally flawed in its lack of coercive force, but there are also challenges related to the implementation of citizens' initiatives. At the national level, citizens can present a petition that will have to be taken into consideration by the relevant authorities. Yet, there is no guarantee that they will come to a decision on the petition (Colin, 2023). Furthermore, since the promulgation of the organic laws necessary to implement the right to petition in 2016, out of 12 initiatives presented to authorities only three were accepted, and none has been implemented so far.<sup>3</sup> At the local level, where the conditions make it much easier to present a petition to the local council, the implementation of citizens' initiatives still faces considerable issues. Notably, the limited autonomy of local governments, especially in terms of budget capacity, represents a main obstacle. Most petitions that were accepted, particularly those related to infrastructure and service delivery, did not result in actual improvements on the ground. For example, the citizens of a rural municipality next to Larache submitted a petition for the sanitation of the groundwater tables, but over five years since its approval

by the municipal council the issue still needs to be solved, due to the lack of funds. In the end, although institutional petitions can be a viable option to voice citizens' concerns to authorities, especially at the local level, actual results are rarely achieved.

The overall assessment of institutional mechanisms' potential to bring about SA is that the promises on paper largely fall behind the actual results of these mechanisms on the ground. Citizens and CSOs have seized these tools, which has sometimes led to increased accountability, but neither requests to access information nor institutional petitions currently represent an effective tool to obtain SA.

### 3.4 REVIEWING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES: WHAT DOES ACCOUNTABILITY LOOK LIKE FOR THE PEOPLE IN MOROCCO?

This section reviews some of the SA initiatives that have been developed in Morocco since the early 2000s and then proceeds to provide the main findings in response to the research questions. This review includes initiatives that explicitly define their actions as fostering SA as well as other grassroots dynamics that attempt to exact accountability from power holders at different levels. The goal of this review is to present a wide range of initiatives, not limited to 'classic' tools and actions. The inclusion of localised dynamics also aims at identifying how SA takes shape in Morocco. Indeed, in contexts where typical accountability initiatives may not thrive, particular attention should be paid to how citizens and CSOs develop alternative and spontaneous forms of political engagement (Gaventa & Oswald, 2019, p. 11).

The initiatives have been divided into three broad categories: transparency, advocacy and participatory governance initiatives (Vloeberghs & Bergh, 2021). The choice of inclusion in one category rather than another was guided by the main focus of the initiative, but there could be overlaps with other categories. Indeed, many initiatives were developed with a multidimensional approach (such as advocacy initiatives aimed at increased participation or transparency initiatives that enable participation in governance), reminding us that the borders between these categories are often blurred. Table 3.2 showcases the initiatives reviewed in the framework of this research.

**Table 3.2** Review of social accountability initiatives in Morocco

<i>Transparency initiatives—increasing access to information and oversight capacity</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Open Budget Index, developed by the International Budget Partnership (and implemented locally by Transparency Maroc) to measure the availability of information concerning the national budget as well as citizens’ inclusion in its development and its overall implementation</li><li>• Legal aid centres for victims of corruption and for whistle-blowers (Centre d’Assistance Juridique et d’Action Citoyenne, CAJAC), developed by Transparency Maroc in Rabat and Nador since 2009, including an online desk to submit complaints</li><li>• Series of training sessions on public finances targeting professionals in the media sector, aimed at increasing the quality of their media coverage of questions related to public finance, organised by Transparency Maroc with the support of Oxfam Novib in 2016</li><li>• Publication of disaggregated electoral data to foster independent analysis of electoral outcomes by the think tank Tafra</li><li>• Nouabook.ma, an online platform developed by the association SimSim – Participation Citoyenne, that provides a space to pose questions to (and receive answers from) Moroccan MPs</li><li>• Article27.ma, an online platform developed by the association SimSim – Participation Citoyenne to follow up on the implementation of the right to access information and facilitate citizens’ submission of requests to access information</li><li>• Project ‘Mobilisation Citoyenne Pour La Redevabilité Des Finances Publiques’ (2016–2018), carried out by the association Espace Associatif and the Association Troisième Millénaire pour le Développement de l’Action associative au Sud-Est (ATMDAS), aimed at reinforcing citizens’ participation in public finance through different activities—including training in mechanisms to monitor budgets, a national meeting on civil society strategies to hold municipalities to account and regional advocacy campaigns—in the Souss-Massa region, the Beni Mellal-Khénifra region and the Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region, as well as different studies on local budgets</li><li>• Project ‘Paroles de jeunes’, carried out by Transparency Maroc in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation office in Rabat (2018–2021), aimed at reinforcing youth’s awareness of issues related to the lack of SA as well as their capacity to act and demand accountability through artistic means</li><li>• Project aimed at reviewing and following up on the ecological commitments of political parties, carried out by the association Prometheus Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (2021–2022)</li></ul>

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*Advocacy initiatives—informal pressure for accountability*

- Consumers' boycott of products of the main dairy producers and water and gas distributors in Morocco, which originated in a demonstration against the rising cost of living but became a wider demonstration against social injustice and unfulfilled promises of the county's elites (2018)
  - Birthday parties to celebrate the anniversary of citizens' demands of local authorities to repair potholes, in Taddart Anza, Inezgane (Agadir) and Ouled Nemma (Fqih Bensalah province) (2019)
  - A call on political parties to express their commitments to women's rights by feminist collective Masaktach (2021)
  - 'Wanted' posters made by the ultras group Cap Soleil to denounce the malpractices of the football team Difaa Hassani El Jadidi with pictures of its management team, reading 'resigning and taking accountability' (2021)
  - Recent social media campaigns for accountability (2021): #Justiceforyoussef to demand accountability from police officers involved in the death of a young man; #MeTooUniv to support the voice of victims of harassment in Moroccan universities and hold perpetrators to account
  - Project to be carried out by Transparency Maroc to develop civil society networks aimed at advocating for increased accountability of state institutions (2021–2023)
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(continued)

Table 3.2 (continued)

<i>Participatory governance initiatives—direct participation to improve governance systems</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participatory budgeting: the well-known participatory experience born in Porto Alegre has been implemented in different Moroccan cities, starting in the city of Tiznit in 2003–2004 due to the autonomous initiative of the municipality (Moussalih, 2021). Next were Tétouan, Chefchaouen and Larache in the framework of a project by the Foundation An-Mar. Finally, it has been deployed in Tangiers after a petition of the Centre Ibn Batouta</li><li>• Implementation of SCORE Cards by CARE Maroc in Dar Bouazza (Casablanca) to empower citizens to hold local officials to account (2013–2014)</li><li>• LEAD Project, developed by CARE Maroc aimed at the development of an SA tool targeted at the improvement of primary education institutions in urban (Casablanca-Settat region) and rural (Marrakech-Safi region) areas (2015–2018)</li><li>• Accountability dashboard, an online platform developed by the association ICT4Dev to link citizens’ and associations’ avenues for local participation to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals; three sub-platforms have also been developed for the cities of Sefrou, Tangiers and Tan-tan to provide a space for citizens and associations to facilitate the direct presentation of institutional petitions to their respective municipalities</li><li>• Project ‘Li Tgal Yddar’ (meaning ‘what is promised is due’) carried out by the association Racines in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation office in Rabat (2015–2017), aimed at increasing citizens’ capacity to demand and obtain accountability, especially in relation to the management of taxes and in the framework of the electoral cycle</li><li>• Project ‘Les Jeunes et la redevabilité sociale, manière de renforcer la démocratie et la participation citoyenne’ (2019–2020), aimed at training youth to use SA as a tool to strengthen local democracy, carried out by the Réseau Al Amal (Al Hocéma)</li><li>• Project ‘Les leaders de changement’ (2019–2020) carried out by the Centre Ibn Batouta (Tangiers) and aimed at reinforcing SA and local participation of youth through training</li><li>• Alloeco.org, an online platform developed by the Observatory for the Protection of the Environment and of Historical Monuments in Tangiers (Observatoire pour la protection de l’environnement et les monuments historiques, OPEMH) to allow citizens to submit complaints related to environmental protection (2019)</li><li>• Project ‘Agendas Associatifs Locaux pour l’Égalité: pour un monitoring, plaidoyer, et partenariat efficaces et responsables autour du Plan Gouvernemental de l’Égalité’ (2015–2018) by Espace Associatif and the ATMDAS, aimed at reinforcing the role of civil society actors in the monitoring and implementation at the local level of the Governmental Plan for Equality, including Social Accountability Training (2018)</li></ul>	

The presentation of the main findings will follow the four research questions that guided the study. These questions are linked by the overarching research goal of exploring what accountability looks like for the people on the ground and will therefore be explored by putting the voice of the research participants at the centre.

### 3.4.1 *Multiple Meanings*

The first research question explored the multiple meanings that citizens ascribe to accountability as well as the diversity and nuances of the terminology used on the ground. ‘Accountability’ and accountability dynamics have different connotations for interviewees; moreover, different terms are used depending on the context and the language employed.

From a linguistic perspective, accountability is translated in French as *redevabilité*. SA follows the same reference and is translated as *redevabilité sociale*. This is also the term international donors mainly use. The Arabic translation of accountability falls between *musāʾala*, more related to the practice of questioning, and *muḥāsaba*, which mainly refers to the rendering of (financial) accounts. The different nuances of the terms and their implications for the meaning of accountability were highlighted by several interviewees:

In Arabic, it is difficult to translate... we use *musāʾala ijtīmāʿiyya*, which means ‘social questioning’ if you wish. But when you translate it as *musāʾala ijtīmāʿiyya* you lose the question of rendering of accounts, of accountability ... For civil society that worked on social accountability, we included, the translation that is most used is *musāʾala ijtīmāʿiyya*. (Scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person)

When asked whether accountability translates into Arabic as *muḥāsaba*, one interviewee said: ‘That’s how it’s written in the constitution, ... that is, linking responsibility (*masʾūliyya*) with accountability (*muḥāsaba*). But accountability doesn’t translate very well... *musāʾala* is closer to accountability. It is as if you’re almost guilty already [laughs]’ (journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person).

In spite of the different nuances, it seems that the meaning related to the rendering of accounts—and consequently of holding power holders to account—is the most common amongst interviewees. For instance: ‘In my mind, accountability is holding people accountable to their promises’

(civil society actor 2, personal communication, 11 August 2021, in person).

For me social accountability is the rendering of accounts from the part of public authorities, trade unions, political parties, NGOs, on any programme that is implemented. There is a duty to be accountable for the objectives that have been assigned, for the whole cycle of these policies, of development projects, or of a societal project, as in the case of political parties. (Civil society actor 15, personal communication, 15 October 2021, online)

In parallel, some interviewees evoked SA in relation to the role of civil society in monitoring and evaluating public policies. In this sense, SA is seen rather as a technical tool to observe and evaluate public policies. In the words of one interviewee: ‘We believe that [SA] is one of the most important pillars for civic democracy. It is meant to monitor and evaluate local policies and action plans, and to help citizens understand the extent of implementation of policies’ (civil society actor 3, personal communication, 1 September 2021, online). Another respondent stated:

Accountability goes beyond a sanction if you break the law. It is also about how much you are satisfied with the promises that have been made. And here, civil society is still building the tools to measure and learning to evaluate... because it is about the evaluation of the public policies. (Civil society actor 2, personal communication, 11 August 2021, in person)

At the same time, different interviewees recognised that these concepts are not really discussed in Moroccan society. Further, they acknowledged that they are mostly imported and used in the framework of international cooperation—and often ‘laundered’ by political elites to void their original meaning and impact (civil society actor 14, personal communication, 5 October 2021, online). Furthermore, while citizens recognise practices related to the lack of accountability (such as corruption, unfulfilled electoral promises or non-transparent practices), they are less aware that they can demand accountability from power holders (civil society actor 4, personal communication, 2 September 2021, online). This is partially attributed to a self-imposed lack of legitimacy to take action and partially to the feeling that even if they do demand accountability, nothing will change. As one interviewee states, in relation to the lack of accountability:

If you see that the majority of Moroccans do not vote, if you see that even 50 per cent of those who are registered on the electoral lists do not vote, it is because of this: because they say why am I going to vote, if when they steal, nobody makes them responsible for their actions? (Civil society actor 10, personal communication, 24 September 2021, in person)

More generally, other interviewees clarified that SA is not recognised as an explicit societal demand in Morocco: ‘Honestly we don’t talk much about social accountability in Morocco’ (civil society actor 14, personal communication, 5 October 2021, online). ‘From the side of citizens too, very few people are really looking for this social rendering [of accounts], this social accountability’ (scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person).

The supposed lack of a societal demand for accountability sheds light on another key interpretation of SA in Morocco: it is understood as a claim that needs to emerge from citizens and CSOs, as a ‘counter[vailing]-power’ (journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person) that can spur actions aimed at reinforcing the rule of law and moving towards a more solidary society (civil society actor 14, personal communication, 5 October 2021, online). In the words of one interviewee: ‘Accountability is at the heart of participation and political action, but it needs to be a demand that is brought forward by citizens’ (civil society actor 4, personal communication, 2 September 2021, online). Another respondent stated:

We work on social accountability, but not explicitly in relation to the concept. Rather, we use [the notion of] citizen power and we think that informed citizens who know their rights well are the starting point to make many things evolve in our country. ... Social accountability is a bit the other side of the coin of citizen power. Because if there is one, there is the other. If there is citizen power, it will demand accountability. And if there is accountability, surely there is citizen power behind it. (Civil society actor 16, personal communication, 15 October 2021, online)

As hinted by the quote above, another key feature of SA initiatives in Morocco is that often, those who are engaged in them do not refer to them explicitly as SA. Amongst the variety of bottom-up initiatives aimed at holding officials to account, including those reviewed in the beginning of this section, SA is explicitly mentioned mostly when actions are carried out in the framework of a project with international donors. In spite of

the overall lack of a societal demand for accountability highlighted by research participants, an increasing number of initiatives aim at identifying the responsibility of power holders in different instances—with the final goal of holding them to account for their decisions and actions.

Ultimately, the understanding that SA is a demand that needs to emerge from the citizenry binds together its multiple meanings related to measuring and evaluating public policies, the questioning of people in positions of responsibility and the process of holding them to account for their promises and actions. However, the emergence of such a demand is dependent on citizens self-identifying as rights bearers—which cannot always be taken for granted. Nonetheless, over the course of the fieldwork interviewees provided different examples of actions that they identified as SA initiatives, even if this term was not explicitly employed. In the following section, I review the different methods used by citizens and civil society actors to engage in SA initiatives.

### 3.4.2 *Mobilisation Methods*

The second research question aimed at reviewing the strategies that citizens and civil society actors employ to demand accountability and mobilise the population around common issues. Even if the rather limited capacity to mobilise has been identified as an issue for civil society in Morocco (civil society actor 1, personal communication, 11 August 2021, online; civil society actor 16, personal communication, 15 October 2021, online), this research found a wide set of mobilisation strategies showcasing different approaches, scopes and arenas of action. By reviewing the initiatives listed above I identified three broad mobilisation strategies: building tools and creating spaces, raising awareness and boosting pressure. Although I reviewed the mobilisation strategies separately, actors engaged in SA initiatives do not limit themselves to one strategy or another. Rather, citizens and CSOs combine multiple strategies, aiming at the best possible combination to achieve the desired result.

#### *Building Tools and Creating Spaces for Social Accountability*

One of the main strategies is to develop and apply specific SA tools. This has been more common for organisations that engaged explicitly in SA initiatives—especially in the case of donor-funded projects. For instance, CARE Maroc developed a project aimed at the integration of SA in primary education, which included the development of a tool to facilitate

collaboration amongst stakeholders aimed at solving schools' issues in a participatory fashion. The tool was named Bayan Attaakoud Al Madrassi, which roughly translates as 'schools' contractual declaration'. By bringing together 'users' and administrators, this tool sought to build consensus on realistic objectives to improve the quality of education and the physical environment in the primary schools targeted by the project (CARE International Maroc, 2019, p. 26). The collaborative spirit upholding this tool is summed up by an interviewee who worked on the project:

The goal was to develop a tool that can be used to create a dynamic between the stakeholders of the school, such as the pupils, the parents, the teachers, the administrators, the directors, etc.... to take charge of the problems in a contractual spirit. (Scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person)

This 'contractual spirit' represents a key feature of this tool. Specifically, it aims at going beyond promises and moving towards more binding forms of engagement between stakeholders. However, different research participants explained that securing the participation of public officials (in this case of the Ministry of Education) is challenging and cannot be taken for granted (see Sect. 4.3 for more on authorities' response to SA initiatives). Therefore, it is quite rare for this type of SA initiatives to reach the stage of signing a binding engagement between societal stakeholders (such as parents' associations or schools) and authorities.

Another prominent feature of mobilisation strategies closely linked to the development of tools for SA is to create a space that gathers citizens, civil society actors and (elected and appointed) decision-makers. These gatherings seek to reduce the gap between citizens and officials, increasing available information for citizens and creating a space to question the work of decision-makers. Civil society actors mediate the encounter between decision-makers and the citizenry, opening the possibility of a dialogue between the two. In the words of an interviewee: 'We are aiming to connect the elected officials, authorities and citizens in order to give the latter more access to information in relation to the Municipal Councils' (civil society actor 8, personal communication, 17 September 2021, in person). Another said:

We had, for example, a space where representatives of the municipalities presented their action plan. There were questions on the follow-up and

evaluation of the projects that are in the process of implementation, or the projects that are already implemented, as well as on the follow-up of the advisory opinions of the bodies directly linked to the municipalities. (Civil society actor 3, personal communication, 1 September 2021, online)

Officials' encounter with citizens and civil society actors is seen as an opportunity to start a mutually beneficial discussion: officials can showcase the work done and receive feedback on the actual issues on the ground, while citizens improve their understanding of the work that has (and has not) been done as well as the issues that the municipality faces. This is especially true at the local level, where the geographical proximity of citizens, CSOs and officials enables easier engagement as, simply put, people know each other already.

The development of such tools and spaces is not limited to the physical encounter of citizens and decision-makers: digital platforms that aim to bridge this gap have been proliferating in recent years. They include Nouabook and Alloeco, which create a space where citizens and decision-makers connect around a specific issue. These platforms create direct avenues to present citizens' claims to decision-makers and also reinforce citizens' capacity by providing information on decision-making processes and the framework for citizen action. However, CSOs developing these platforms had to engage in substantial advocacy efforts to secure officials' engagement to participate (civil society actor 6, personal communication, 13 September 2021, in person). Moreover, while such platforms potentially increase authorities' capacity to respond to bottom-up claims (since they are more aware of citizens' demands), this does not mean that authorities are more willing to do so (Peixoto & Fox, 2016).

### *Raising Awareness of Fellow Citizens*

While the creation of tools and spaces for SA enables citizens and CSOs to improve their access to information on certain matters, many organisations directly engage in actions aimed at raising awareness on accountability and citizens' potential role in it. In the eyes of many interviewees, the lack of awareness of the principle and practices of accountability and the limited knowledge of citizens' opportunities to hold officials to account are key barriers to the development of a 'culture of accountability' in Morocco. In other words, access to information is paramount.

Generally speaking, actions aim at raising awareness of how to identify issues related to the lack of accountability (such as corruption, mismanagement of public funds, clientelist practices and void electoral promises) and showcase the opportunities citizens have to resist them. Fundamentally, these actions present SA as a means to concretely improve people's livelihoods. Actions aimed at enhancing the right to access information provide a clear example:

The idea is to develop the mindset in which access to information [is used] as a tool for advocacy and good governance. We don't want to file access-to-information requests for the sake of it, but we want to have citizens think about their issues and the potential solutions to them. (Civil society actor 5, personal communication, 3 September 2021, in person)

Furthermore, these activities tend to focus on actors that are less engaged in traditional forms of political action (such as youth). This also means that actions' approach needs to be adapted to the specific population they target. This results in the dissemination of notions and practices of accountability through a variety of means, ranging from video clips to theatre pieces. Indeed, art and cultural activities are seen as particularly fit vectors to share these messages. In the words of an interviewee:

One of the first things we realised is the need to vulgarise [i.e. simplify the jargon around] those things to make sure that the youth is interested. That's when they hear words that are not so technical for them, that it is something that everyone can grasp and that, of course, that it's not something that is way beyond their interests. (Civil society actor 1, personal communication, 11 August 2021, online)

Another interviewee stated: 'We also know that when you package a message in an artistic medium, it gets across much better' (civil society actor 7, personal communication, 16 September 2021, in person).

To sum up, these activities aim at fostering a culture of accountability, engrained in a wider understanding of citizens' rights and materialised in their daily practices. Without this 'reflex' of accountability, it is much more complicated to convince fellow citizens to mobilise to hold power holders to account.

*Boosting Pressure: Advocacy, Litigation and Actions in the Public Space*

The last mobilisation strategy relates to the variety of tactics that citizens and CSOs deploy to increase pressure on decision-makers with the goal of holding them to account. Advocacy is a key component of mobilisation strategies employed to improve accountability. This research identified two main advocacy strategies: first, some organisations focus their efforts directly on decision-makers and attempt to influence policy-making directly. For example, some civil society actors engage in constant advocacy activities aimed at promoting (and improving) pieces of legislation related to accountability, including regulations on corruption, budget transparency, citizen participation, etc. The development of association networks is also perceived as a useful strategy, as they increase civil society's weight and pressure on political actors. Second, other CSOs aim at identifying responsible stakeholders and accountability mechanisms—or the lack thereof—in an effort to systematically tackle the lack of clarity surrounding policy-making and the implementation of projects. According to an interviewee:

We must also ensure a reflection, but also an advocacy, to define the roles and responsibilities of public authorities ... What kind of policies are involved in this rendering [of accounts] and questioning by the legislative system? What other policies and projects are not subject to this system and for which there are no accountability measures? So, all of this can also be an advocacy plan by civil society: to point the finger where we can monitor and where there is a total blackout. (Civil society actor 15, personal communication, 15 October 2021, online)

On top of 'pointing the finger' to actors at home, some actors have leveraged international dynamics to hold Moroccan decision-makers to account for their engagements. Specifically, CSOs have called upon Morocco's status as signatory to international covenants concerning human rights as well as other multilateral initiatives, such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP), to pressure the government to uphold its international commitments. For instance, in the framework of the Universal Periodic Reviews (UPRs) by the UN Human Rights Council, local CSOs provide their assessment of the situation on the ground. In this way, the government is put in a situation in which, at the very least,

it has to provide an answer to civil society's remarks. The importance of these moments is expressed by an interviewee:

I just wanted to point out the good practice that human rights associations are doing regarding parallel reports and all that. In the frame of the United Nations Human Rights Council, at the international level, that meet in Geneva to monitor the situation, for example, of the respect of human rights, or the situation of the rights and conditions of children or of women. So that's a way of accountability. It is a moment of social accountability that brings together public authorities and civil society on these and other issues. ... it has become an annual exercise that is essential for civil society. It is an important moment even for the government, which puts a significant effort to answer questions, to respond to various comments and remarks. (Civil society actor 15, personal communication, 15 October 2021, online)

Nonetheless, research participants have highlighted how engagement with international dynamics also has its shortcomings. Notably, international organisations are criticised for being more concerned with formal compliance with a framework than with the actual situation on the ground. Often, they focus on the delivery of outcomes and fail to engage with the underlying political issues and power balances (Gaventa & McGee, 2013, p. 56). In other words, they tend to pay attention 'more to the indicator than to the result' (civil society actor 14, personal communication, 5 October 2021, by telephone). The case of the OGP and the Access to Information Law consolidates this argument. Morocco's engagement in this initiative has greatly accelerated the promulgation of the law, for which civil society had been advocating well before Morocco signed up to the OGP. Indeed, the promulgation of a law on the right to access information was a necessary condition to access the OGP. As soon as the law was passed, Morocco was able to join this initiative. However, as we have seen in Sect. 3.3, civil society has been harshly criticising the text of the law, as its regulatory framework imposes important limitations on the enjoyment of this right.

In other instances, some CSOs manage to mobilise (and sometimes obtain) SA through action in court, opting for a direct confrontation with officials to hold them accountable. This has been the case of corruption cases related to the mismanagement of public funds and property, but also of other cases where the rights of citizens were adversely affected. For instance:

Sometimes we are active as a civil party in certain cases where corruption is proven. ... we recently won a case against the president of a district in Marrakech who had sold a piece of public land for a tenth or a fifteenth of its [market] value in exchange of gifts. So he was punished with a few years in prison, as well as the acolytes who were with him. (Civil society actor 7, personal communication, 16 September 2021, in person; see also El Hourri, 2020)

We have made protests [against the illegal use of wheel clamps in Tangiers], we have created a Facebook group that now has more than 50,000 members, and we have done a lot of things, a lot of demands, a lot of letters to the *wilāya* [regional government], to the municipality... and at the legal level we have won the trial in the first instance and in the second instance. (Civil society actor 10, personal communication, 24 September 2021; see also Zine, 2018)

As the quotes show, judicial action can bear results in some cases. However, it is also a costly process and thus not accessible to everybody. Even civil society actors find it difficult to engage with this process consistently. In relation to the lack of response to access-to-information requests, an interviewee explains that the financial burden of judiciary procedures is a key obstacle: ‘There were some participants that wanted to proceed to the administrative court. However, it became a matter of financial means to recruit a lawyer and we could not proceed further’ (civil society actor 5, personal communication, 3 September 2021, in person).

Finally, demonstrations in public space remain a central mobilisation strategy for citizens and civil society actors. In Morocco, the increasing engagement in forms of protest and social movements has been identified as a response to the limitations provided by traditional mechanisms of accountability (Saadi, 2012).

Although a presence on the street is still seen as the most effective strategy to get the attention of authorities, the increasing repression of demonstrations in public spaces means that they are becoming an increasingly risky endeavour. Officially in effect until March 2023, the measures introduced in the framework of the government response to the Covid-19 pandemic further limited the possibility to engage in street-level action. This has contributed to increasing mobilisation on social media, which research participants have identified as a key strategy to foster SA. Social media are valued for their potential to reach fellow citizens beyond one’s geographical position, and thus federate a larger number of people

around common issues. Another advantage is the relative (legal and physical) protection offered in comparison with street-level mobilisation. As explained by an interviewee:

You can be anonymous and act digitally. And it's not the same thing when you go out on the street: you are seen and identified, you will be either arrested or prosecuted afterwards. Digital technology ensures this anonymity... this protection, if you can say that. ... Everything that is missing in the real world, you find it online. But the risk [of being identified and prosecuted] is still there... it exists, but at home, it's less compared to the street. (Journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person)

It is difficult to assess the impact of social media campaigns, as they often provide the 'illusion of participation' (civil society actor 4, personal communication, 2 September 2021, online). There are different examples in which they have been strategic in supporting a mobilisation aimed at achieving accountability. For example, the recent case of sexual harassment at various Moroccan universities (known in the media as 'sex for grades') has been bolstered by the unprecedented number of women who came forward on social media to share the harassment they suffered. This wave of testimony has been supported by different social media campaigns, including by the collective #7chak and the movement Moroccan Outlaws, who have been relaying these messages while ensuring the women's anonymity.

### 3.4.3 *Response from Authorities*

As is evident from the findings related to mobilisation in public spaces, the choice of strategy is deeply influenced by authorities' responses. The particular stance of local authorities, ranging from national decision-makers to the security apparatus, plays a key role in determining the margin of action for citizens and CSOs.

Beyond the need to acknowledge the multiplicity and diversity of CSOs in Morocco, and thus the plurality of the relationships with authorities, this research uncovered some recurring features in the experiences of actors and organisations engaged in SA initiatives with authorities at different levels. At the same time, the important differences between types

of authorities (elected-appointed, local-national, etc.) and their interaction have to be taken into consideration when exploring their response to SA initiatives. On the one hand, there is a contradictory stance: while there is a general sensitivity to these initiatives, as reflected in a dominant government discourse calling for increased citizen participation and engagement, the authorities put in place many serious obstacles to effective citizen engagement, as we have seen. On the other hand, this contradictory stance needs to be nuanced by the important differences between the responses of national and local authorities, the responses in specific localities and the factors that can prompt such responses.

The contradictory stance of Moroccan authorities towards accountability has already been discussed as part of the overall context of accountability in Morocco. While the Constitution and the ensuing institutions seem to provide a promising legal and policy framework for effective accountability, actual results on the ground are disappointing. In turn, the limited efficiency of institutional protocols is attributed to the lack of a political will for strengthened accountability. Research participants highlighted the reality of these contradictions by describing their experiences with securing officials' engagement for their initiatives.

#### *A Complicated Relationship with Civil Society*

The generally limited engagement of Moroccan authorities with SA initiatives can be explained by the overall nature of the relationship between authorities and civil society. This relationship is often characterised as antagonistic, as authorities (especially those composed of elected officials) look at CSOs as an opposition force—competing for popular approval and support. Research participants believe that officials avoid engaging directly with CSOs, since their participation could lead to them 'being exposed' for their mismanagement of and misconduct in specific issues as well as their lack of knowledge of the situation on the ground (civil society actor 4, personal communication, 2 September 2021, online; civil society actor 1, personal communication, 11 August September 2021, online). Indeed, the different appreciation of the situation on the ground often fosters such conflict:

When you bring someone, for example, from the ministry, they present you something official, but they have no idea what's going on in the field. ... Civil society actors know exactly what's in the field and so decision-makers

feel attacked. Usually, it's not a very positive discussion. (Civil society actor 1, personal communication, 11 August 2021, online)

In spite of this underlying tension, research participants observed that it is easier to engage with public officials in smaller towns than in bigger cities. This is also the experience of those implementing projects targeting Morocco as a whole, which shows that officials are more responsive in small cities than in larger urban centres. In smaller localities, the proximity between officials and civil society actors implies a certain degree of collaboration. Not only is civil society closer to the citizenry and has an increased capacity to mobilise, but it also works in closer contact with public officials. Hence, the chances of positive collaboration increase.

Finally, a good relationship with local authorities is sometimes a necessary condition for CSOs to carry out their actions—including SA initiatives. This is especially true for participatory governance initiatives, whose success relies on a certain degree of collaboration. If CSOs want to work directly with municipalities, schools, health centres, etc., they have to develop a good relationship with the authorities that manage these institutions. However, the need for a good relationship goes beyond participatory governance initiatives, and CSOs often depend on such relationships to carry out other initiatives, especially in public space. This need may also impact the overall stance of CSOs towards local authorities, as explained by this interviewee:

[Local CSOs] try to be as critical as they want, to a certain level, and try to ask for accountability as well. But they would still try to maintain a good relation with the authorities, because they definitely need it to occupy the public space. (Civil society actor 1, personal communication, 11 August 2021, online)

Once again, it is the specific relationship between local authorities and CSOs that structures authorities' collaboration with and participation in CSOs' actions—including in SA initiatives. Authorities tend to participate in CSOs' initiatives when the risk of conflict or exposure is limited, and this happens especially in smaller cities, where proximity binds authorities and civil society to the same locality and thus ensures a certain level of collaboration. This risks being problematic for SA, as attempts to hold local officials to account are in tension with the need to maintain a good

relationship with local authorities—implicitly limiting the extent to which local actors can be critical.

*Bottom-Up Demands, (Some) Top-Down Responses*

Researching authorities' participation in SA initiatives sheds further light on the discretionary nature that characterises Moroccan authorities' approach to accountability. Research participants observed that authorities' engagement is dependent on the specific relations they have with the citizenry and with CSOs. Similar observations emerge in relation to authorities' concrete responses to grassroots initiatives, which are often guided by ad hoc considerations rather than a comprehensive approach to bottom-up demands for accountability.

A key trend is that responses are prioritised when the situation could escalate towards wider demands or increased unrest. Research participants stressed that Moroccan authorities are not oblivious to popular demands. On the contrary, they are able to react promptly where and when needed. For instance, Moroccan authorities are believed to be extremely aware of the differences in terms of mobilisation capacities and propensities in the different regions of the country, allowing them to prioritise responses in specific areas. This is motivated by the potential 'snowball effect' of mobilisation in sensitive contexts: regions that have showed an increased tendency to mobilise, especially where precarious socio-economic conditions could further amplify the intensity of demonstrations, receive a swift response from Moroccan authorities. This interviewee provided some examples:

When [citizens] react, I think that the state has the means to know, to test, to understand the expectations of these people and finally, if and how it should act ... historically, certain areas of the country were much more militant than others, whether during colonialism or during the fight for liberation. ... If there is a problem in this or that area, they will react quickly because they know that Casablanca, it's not a joke. When it bursts, it is practically impossible to control ... from what I see, you can have the same problem in Jerada and in Ouarzazate, but the state prefers to act quickly in Ouarzazate because it has other issues in that area. The state prefers to respond to that area and according to other criteria rather than accountability itself, showing that other considerations push for this or that choice. (Civil society actor 16, personal communication, 15 October 2021, online)

Besides taking into account the specific situation of different localities, the responsiveness of Moroccan authorities is also associated with the contextual factors of citizens' initiatives for accountability. Here, the relative mediatisation of initiatives plays a key role. Moroccan authorities are believed to be very attentive to public debate (in both traditional and social media): when an issue becomes the concern of public opinion, it is more likely that a response will follow. For example, a draft law aimed at regulating social media was approved by the government some days after proclaiming the state of emergency to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, but it was rescinded after a wide mobilisation on social media. The impact of contextual factors on this matter was highlighted by this interviewee:

It was taken off the government agenda, officially. ... It was the effect of social networks, but I think the context contributed to that. The context of lockdown and Covid-19 ... the state needed the minimum of problems and unrest and that's why they withdrew the law. (Journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person)

To sum up, authorities' responses to SA initiatives depend first and foremost on the specific relations between citizens and civil society actors promoting the initiative on the one hand and the concerned administration on the other. A good relationship can be conducive to a positive response by authorities, but latent frictions between authorities and civil society greatly limit this possibility. In parallel, authorities have showed responsiveness to bottom-up initiatives, but in the form of a 'drip system of accountability' (civil society actor 16, personal communication, 15 October 2021, online) instead of a systematic approach to state–society relations. Such a drip system resembles forms of tokenism, where power holders maintain the discretion to decide which popular demands they will follow up. Instead of structural change, limited top-down concessions are the main form in which Moroccans experience accountability. As an interviewee eloquently put it, 'in Morocco, accountability only happens when the regime decides to dismiss elected officials' (journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person).

#### 3.4.4 *Outcomes*

This section concludes the empirical portion of the paper by reviewing the outcomes of SA initiatives. To avoid overlap with the sections above,

it will present additional elements to nurture reflection on the conditions that enable SA initiatives to have an impact and on the obstacles that limit them.

*What Can Citizens and Civil Society Actually Do?*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the overall feeling is that citizens and civil society alone rarely manage to hold power holders to account through SA initiatives. Specifically, the success of grassroots initiatives is dependent on a number of factors that go beyond the sole action of citizens and CSOs:

Sometimes it doesn't just depend on [civil society] and on good citizens, it also depends on who is in charge of our context, our environment. Are they listening? Do they respond? Are they attentive or rather not? And how can we use all the means that are available? It is a set of ingredients. (Civil society actor 16, personal communication, 15 October 2021, online)

Institutional shortcomings—in terms of a lack of electoral accountability and the failure of institutional protocols, including the limited impact of institutional mechanisms for citizen participation—give citizens the impression that accountability is neither possible nor desired. SA initiatives manage to reach their expected results only in specific circumstances, when there is a special relationship with a given authority or when contextual factors favour a wide mobilisation. Overall, when efforts are measured against the results obtained, the assessment is rather bleak:

When you analyse all this, everything that has been considered so far, which was supposed to introduce a number of changes in principles, through reforms... All this for that? All these efforts for that little change? Small, big, or medium actions, in terms of results, we simply aren't there yet. (Scholar, personal communication, 6 September 2021, in person)

Even when the results obtained by SA initiatives are recognised, research participants question the extent to which changes at the micro-level can have an impact at the macro-level, given the resistance by authorities as well as the obstacles for citizens and civil society to scale up and eventually institutionalise their initiatives (civil society actor 14, personal communication, 5 October 2021, by telephone).

*Results in the Short Term, Doubts About the Long Term*

Another central limitation of the outcomes of SA initiatives is that results cannot easily be reproduced in other contexts, scaled up or even institutionalised.

First and foremost, the lifespan of donor-funded initiatives is often limited to the duration of such funding—especially if local authorities do not engage with them. This has been noted in the case of participatory budgets in Morocco. Goehrs (2017) demonstrates a key difference between cities that financed an initiative through the municipality's budget and those that relied on international funding alone. In the former, continuity was ensured by the will of the municipality (and materialised in its budget support) while in the latter these initiatives ended at the same time as the project.

Moreover, the engagement of national authorities is a key step in scaling up and institutionalising local initiatives. However, citizens and civil society face significant challenges in reaching higher-level decision-makers. On the one hand, the complex and bureaucratic nature of decision-making in Morocco makes it harder to understand who is the right person to talk to (civil society actor 12, personal communication, 5 October 2021, online). This is related not only to overlaps between multiple administration layers but also to a lack of clarity about who occupies which position (civil society actor 13, personal communication, 5 October 2021, online). On the other hand, this lack of clarity is coupled with limited communication with and availability of high-level decision-makers. This is visible on institutional websites: most ministries' websites list hardly any information on who occupies which position. When names are indicated, there are no contact details except the main telephone number of the ministry in Rabat and generic 'contact@' email addresses. This limited information makes one wonder whether this opacity is a deliberate strategy. In sum, civil society rarely manages to get in touch with, and even less meet, decision-makers that could play a role in the institutionalisation of SA initiatives, such as ministers, heads of directorates and other high-level profiles at the level of central administration (civil society actor 12, personal communication, 5 October 2021, online). This limited availability is exacerbated by the highly centralised decision-making system. As eloquently explained by this interviewee:

Today, the whole architecture is complicated... the decision is not at the local level, but at the national level and the national level has priorities,

they are looking at policies and big strategies. So today we haven't found the magic formula to connect the dots, how to make [national and local authorities] sit together to make things happen. ... There are too many layers for the decision. You have the municipality, the province, the region, then there is the *wāli* [regional governor], then the *wāli* has the Ministry of Interior... there are so many stakeholders. (Civil society actor 2, personal communication, 11 August 2021, in person)

Ultimately, these limitations reinforce doubts about the long-term effects of SA initiatives. If civil society wants to ensure the continuity of its initiatives, it needs to make important efforts to secure the engagement of not only local authorities but also national stakeholders.

*Civil Society's Resilience: The Vital Ingredient for Change?*

The rather pessimistic outlook that has been presented so far does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that citizens and civil society are not standing their ground. On the contrary, actions of citizens and civil society are seen as the main and potentially last hope for achieving any result:

There are lawyers' associations, there are consumer protection associations, there are human rights associations that continue to make their voices heard and to hurt. They continue to hurt by bringing complaints, for example, in court, against officials, etc... I think they resist. They do not bow down like politicians or political parties do. Civil society resists. ... You even see people who have left political parties to focus on civil society work, because they see that there is an impact. Whether it's with activities on the ground, or doing something through the means that exist now, like petitions and all that, or for advocacy. Advocacy is more effective, and it's heard more than political parties. ... To express the same idea, for me, it would be better to do it in the name of the civil society than to do it in the name of a political party: I would have more difficulties to pass the messages with a political position. It is no longer credible. It has been completely discredited. (Journalist, personal communication, 9 August 2021, in person)

As highlighted in this extract, civil society still manages to resist and make its voice heard. Civil society is increasingly occupying the space left by the shrinking role of political parties and trade unions, who have progressively been losing their legitimacy as political intermediaries (Mouna, 2020). In spite of the negative results, actors on the ground are not discouraged:

Not reaching our goal doesn't mean we're going backwards. We'll always keep going forward and doing what we should be doing. For us, if you're not going to do anything, you're not going to change anything. But if we submit, for example, ten petitions and one goes well, we already won one. If we don't submit anything, we won't win anything. We think like that: we are going to do 100 trials, if we win three that's good, if we win five that's good, if we got one that's good too, but if we don't do any, we will never win anything. (Civil society actor 10, personal communication, 24 September 2021, in person)

Civil society actors' experience that continuous pressure can bear results motivates their persistence and resilience. Most of all, the awareness that 'you cannot undo a system that has been developed in 60 years from one day to another' (civil society actor 4, personal communication, 2 September 2021, online) motivates civil society to continue to exercise such pressure. Be it during years of strategic advocacy aimed at improving the legislative framework or through the contentious actions of grassroots groups to hold decision-makers to account for the respect of their rights, civil society continues to exercise a central role in bringing about change in Morocco.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

In Morocco, the institutional context fundamentally influences how SA initiatives are carried out and the impact they have. First, institutional protocols for accountability are in place but have so far not produced many results. The regime's preference for using extra-institutional avenues coupled with a general lack of political will for accountability substantially reduces the 'bite' of the bodies and institutions formally charged with holding high-level stakeholders to account. At the same time, the institutional mechanisms available to citizens to demand accountability have an ambiguous record: they have been used to demand accountability, and sometimes even achieved concrete results, but the combination of built-in limits to what can be demanded and how, in addition to contextual obstacles, undermines their potential as a systematic tool for bottom-up accountability. This research also found that while citizens and CSOs are aware that they have a role in holding power holders to account, the realisation of this role cannot be taken for granted. Centrally, it depends on the degree to which these actors self-identify as citizens and right-bearers

and the degree to which they consider engaging with accountability to be a societal demand. However, the fact that they hardly see accountability applied at the national level substantially reduces their expectations of what they can achieve.

Nonetheless, citizens and CSOs have carried out a plethora of initiatives. They include the development of tools, spaces and digital platforms to connect citizens and decision-makers as well as multiple actions (such as advocacy efforts, strategic litigation and protest) to increase pressure on specific stakeholders and hold them accountable for their actions and decisions. In spite of some positive experiences, the overall response of authorities remains limited. This is due partly to the complicated relationship of authorities with civil society actors—especially with those critical of authorities’ work—and partly to the considerations that motivate the response. Specifically, the logic of avoiding escalation prompts sporadic concessions rather than consistent accountability. This has led to overall pessimism regarding what SA initiatives can achieve, especially in terms of scaling up and institutionalising results achieved at the local level. Nonetheless, the perseverance of civil society actors remains central to improving the situation. Civil society acts with the awareness that results may come in the long run and that limited results today should not diminish their will to achieve change—both at the micro-level and the macro-level.

## NOTES

1. Institutional petitions follow the conditions set out by Organic Law no. 44-14 in relation to national authorities, or the regulation on the right to petition the council of local governments defined in the organic laws on regions (no. 111-14), provinces and prefectures (no. 112-14) and municipalities (no. 113-14).
2. The law also provides for the proactive publication of information by authorities, which has not been mentioned in the text since it does not depend on citizens’ initiative. It is nonetheless relevant for its potential contribution to accountability in Morocco.
3. Data retrieved from <https://www.eparticipation.ma/>, the online portal dedicated to citizens’ participation in Morocco (retrieved 24 January 2023).

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