



Social Accountability in Tunisia: Processes of Learning in Civic Innovation Between 2011 and 2021

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Abstract This chapter explores the different conceptions of social accountability held by Tunisian civil society actors and public officials in the context of the country's transition from authoritarian rule between 2011 and 2021. It analyses the strategies and methods used by civil society actors to engage citizens in demanding accountability, to exact accountability from public officials and to enforce commitments. The chapter draws on qualitative research methods, namely semi-structured interviews, one focus group discussion and three in-depth case studies conducted between April and September 2021. We find that four main factors were important to the success of SA initiatives: first, the need for civil society to build credibility with both citizens and officials over time;

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second, the importance of tackling both ends of the accountability equation by working with citizens and officials to strengthen the commitment of both to accountability; third, the need to build coalitions of CSOs and local–national civil society linkages; and fourth, utilising cooperative as well as confrontational strategies towards officials that involve multiple methods, such as media campaigns, community mobilisation and training for officials. When these factors were present, SA initiatives were seen to advance downward accountability and reshape state–society relations.

Keywords Social accountability · Participation · Civil society · Democratisation · Tunisia · Local governance

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses the different conceptions of accountability and social accountability (SA) held by Tunisian civil society actors and public officials. It explores (a) the multiple ways in which local actors understand the word ‘accountability’, (b) the strategies they use to mobilise fellow citizens and exact accountability from public officials and (c) their perceptions of the value of SA in getting power holders to deliver on commitments. We find that conceptions of accountability cover a wide range of notions, from answerability—the right of citizens to question public officials—through to citizen participation in decision-making.

We find that Tunisian civil society actors and public officials broadly view SA as a set of initiatives undertaken by civil society or citizens aimed at achieving governance based on rule of law, transparency, integrity, citizen participation and inclusive development, and as a means of putting an end to a governance model dominated by corruption, nepotism, legal impunity and exclusionary policies that serve a narrow elite close to power. SA is viewed as a broad set of strategies and tools to *supplement* classical forms of accountability, such as elections and representative institutions, rather than replacing them. Between 2011 and 2021, several advances were made in Tunisia in adopting and enabling legal framework for accountability, including new laws on transparency and access to information, conflicts of interest, declarations of interest rules, etc. However, in the face of continued resistance by some public officials and institutions, as well as interest groups, civil society had to pursue strategies to

‘activate’ these laws, using various methods to pressure public officials and institutions to adhere to their legal obligations.

In the political opening since the 2011 uprising, the range of SA methods available to citizens significantly expanded. We find that social media in particular provided a cheap and accessible tool for ordinary citizens and civil society groups to expose wrongdoing and pressure officials to respond to public demands. To some extent, the ability to film and broadcast acts by public officials and the existence of free media able to amplify social media posts caused a shift in the traditional relationship between ruler and ruled, making public officials more vigilant about the risks involved in flouting legal standards. In some instances, as we explore below, SA tools were effectively used to force government institutions or individual public officials to account for decisions, reverse specific decisions or adopt changes to government policy.

However, while effective in some cases, SA tools have been of limited value where public officials were able to disregard them without any consequences, and where citizens were unable to apply sufficient pressure to force officeholders to respect the law. For example, access-to-information obligations introduced since 2011 have been flouted by some powerful ministries, which simply refuse to comply with information requests without facing any sanctions. Thus, the ability of SA to deliver results is highly variable. It appears to be most successful when there is a combination of bottom-up pressure from citizens together with responsiveness from allies within public institutions willing to overcome institutional resistance and give SA ‘teeth’.

We also observe that civil society actors’ efforts to exact accountability using SA tools are frustrated by short-term, project-based approaches. Civil society organisations (CSOs) that depend on international donor funding complain that accountability cannot be built through projects of one to two years requiring immediate, demonstrable results. Instead, SA is seen as involving long-term, iterative processes, where CSOs can experiment with different strategies, learn from failures and build up social capital in the form of engaged citizens, organisational credibility and experience. This effort is undermined by the project-based approach of most international donor support, which typically requires CSOs to focus on short-term aims and demonstrate measurable short-term results.

Finally, the findings show that all the civil society actors involved in the SA initiatives covered by the study concluded, through a process of experimentation, that SA tools are most effective where they use both

collaborative and confrontational strategies to exacting accountability. Many of the SA initiatives examined began by using confrontational methods alone when seeking to forcing public institutions to be accountable. However, over time, they developed more collaborative approaches that involved cooperating with public institutions and identifying allies within them who could help them achieve their demands. Through a process of learning, civil society actors shifted towards SA approaches that worked on building alliances with reformers within public institutions while also placing pressure when needed, in order to overcome resistance. Through iterative processes, civil society actors learned how to analyse institutional dynamics, negotiate with officials and develop strategies using a mixture of confrontation and collaboration to pressure, persuade and cajole public institutions to account for their actions and respond to the needs of ordinary citizens.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 4.2 sets out the methodology used in the study. Section 4.3 provides a background to the political and institutional context in Tunisia, with a focus on changes following the 2011 uprising. It also describes the legal framework on SA in Tunisia at the time that the initial phase of research was conducted (April–June 2021). Finally, it examines the emergence of SA as a concept since 2011, providing examples of SA initiatives involving state institutions and civil society actors identified through the mapping phase. Using Hickey and King's (2016) typology of SA initiatives, these were categorised into three groups: (a) *transparency* initiatives aimed at increasing citizens' access to information on public decisions; (b) *contentious actions*, such as public demonstrations, public campaigns and public interest litigation; and (c) *participatory governance* initiatives, aimed at involving citizens in decision-making processes. Sections 4.4–4.7 constitute the main body of the chapter and seek to answer the main research questions in the study, as set out above. The chapter ends with a section setting out key themes and conclusions.

4.2 METHODOLOGY

The chapter draws on a range of qualitative research methods, namely semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion (FGD) and in-depth case studies conducted between April and September 2021. The first phase involved desk research, through which we mapped SA initiatives in Tunisia based on an Arabic-language online search using Google, the

official civil society database IFEDA (Centre d'Information, de Formation d'Études et de Documentation sur les Associations), civil society platform Jamaity and Facebook, the most popular social media platform for Tunisian CSOs.

The mapping exercise identified a number of documents on SA, which include annual reports of CSOs, assessments, charters, government and UN reports. This exercise helped identify the main actors in the SA field. Since the research questions focused on how *local* actors view SA, the choice was made to focus on domestic actors, specifically Tunisian CSOs, as the primary actors leading SA initiatives. In addition, we decided to include a small number of Tunisian government officials in the FGD, given that state institutions are involved in SA initiatives. The discussion thus provided an opportunity to juxtapose the differing conceptions of SA that civil society and governmental actors hold and the interaction between these two groups in the context of SA initiatives.

We organised the SA initiatives identified through the mapping according to (a) the type of lead actor (state institution, national or local CSO, bi- or multilateral organisation) and (b) the type of SA initiative, based on Hickey and King's (2016) categorisation, as set out in Sect. 4.3.2. An interview list was prepared that sought to cover all three types of lead actors and the three types of SA initiative (transparency initiatives, contentious action and participatory governance initiatives). Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 representatives of Tunisian CSOs and one expert on SA initiatives (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Interview sample categorised by type of SA initiative

Transparency initiatives	Al Bawsala ATIDE Pole Civile Min Hakki Nsaalek Network
Contentious action initiatives	El Comita I Watch Tunisia Green Network
Participatory governance initiatives	Action Associative iChange Jasmine Foundation National Federation of Tunisian Municipalities WeStart

Based on the sampling, a hybrid FGD was organised with 14 participants—four public officials (one elected municipal official, one national-level bureaucrat and two municipal bureaucrats) and 10 civil society representatives. A gender balance was sought, with eight male and six female participants attending.

The initial research plan included a third phase of case studies involving participant observation of three SA initiatives. However, due to Covid-19 health restrictions imposed in May–July 2021 the research plan was modified. Instead, interviews were carried out within the Tunis area with representatives of three CSOs that were leading SA initiatives. The selection drew on the initiatives identified in the mapping, interviews and FGD and was designed to compare SA initiatives according to the typology of the three different approaches to exacting accountability developed by Hickey and King—one transparency initiative, one contentious action initiative and one participatory governance initiative. All interviews and the FGD were conducted in Tunisian Arabic dialect. They were recorded, transcribed and analysed manually.

4.3 ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE TUNISIAN CONTEXT

After its 2010–2011 uprising, Tunisia underwent significant political and constitutional change, including holding free and fair elections, greater competition in political life and a significant growth in civil society activity. Street protests, strikes and other forms of social contestation increased significantly across the country (Forum Tunisien de Droits Economiques et Sociaux n.d.). The number of registered CSOs rose from approximately 9,000 in 2011 to 23,700 in 2020, with particular growth in associations working on election monitoring, rule of law, citizen participation and a range of themes related to institutional reforms, as well as development (IFEDA, 2021). The political transition also brought about an influx of international organisations and donor funding.

Successive governments between 2011 and 2021 adopted an agenda of ‘good governance’ reforms. Tunisia joined the Open Government Partnership in 2014 and made a range of ‘open gov’ commitments relating to access to information, promoting public participation and combating corruption (Open Government Partnership Tunisia n.d.-a). Numerous ‘good governance’ initiatives were launched, such as the creation of a national anti-corruption agency (Law no. 59, 2017, on the Good Governance and Anti-Corruption Authority); a national good governance and

anti-corruption strategy; an online platform to promote transparency in procurement processes (2013); a code of conduct for public officials (2014); a new governmental decree on public procurement designed to strengthen transparency and complaints mechanisms (2014); the creation of Governance Units within all ministries, governorates, large municipalities and state-owned enterprises to implement good governance principles (Decree no. 1158, 2016, on Establishing Governance Units in Public Institutions); the creation of the position of coordinator for relations with civil society and citizens in most ministries, the presidency and Parliament, tasked with responding to and managing relations with civil society and citizens; the adoption of a law on the right to access to information (Law no. 22 of 2016) and a law protecting whistle-blowers (Law no. 10, 2017, on Reporting Corruption and Protection of Whistle-Blowers); the introduction of an obligation to introduce a citizen charter for all public authorities in direct contact with the public (2018); and legislation on declarations of assets and conflicts of interest for all public officials (Law no. 46, 2018, on Declaration of Assets and Interests and Combatting Illicit Enrichment and Conflicts of Interest), among others.

The Constitution adopted in January 2014 set out a number of principles to guide the work of public authorities, including ‘transparency, integrity, efficiency and accountability’ (article 15, see Constituent Project, n.d.). It also stipulated the creation of a number of independent constitutional bodies to oversee the protection and promotion of good governance, anti-corruption, media freedoms and human rights. Chapter 7 of the 2014 Constitution also introduced an obligation for local authorities to ensure citizen participation in decision-making (article 139).

While the legal framework is largely praised by civil society activists, implementation leaves much to be desired, as discussed below. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019), corruption costs represent 54% of Tunisia’s GDP. Public opinion points to high levels of dissatisfaction with governance, with 67% of Tunisians believing corruption had increased in a 2017 poll (OECD, 2019). Institutional reforms to strengthen accountability and combat corruption have run into obstacles, with independent bodies such as the National Anti-Corruption Authority (Instance nationale de lutte contre la corruption, INLUCC) and Truth and Justice Commission complaining of having their work obstructed by other state institutions (Amnesty International, 2018).

Within the context of accountability initiatives, both the national government and international donors have emphasised civil society's role in pushing for the implementation of legal and institutional frameworks that promote accountability. Since 2011, legal restrictions on civil society have been lifted and it has significantly expanded, in terms of both the number of CSOs and their areas of work, from election monitoring, judicial reform, women's rights, transitional justice and human rights to development and job creation. A number of national organisations have emerged that enjoy significant visibility and regularly appear in the media to comment on public affairs. The status and credibility of civil society have also been enhanced through the involvement of CSOs in shaping key laws and brokering dialogue, such as the 2013–2014 National Dialogue Quartet, which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This international recognition reinforced the legitimacy of civil society and its role as a countervailing force and check against abuses of power (Kherigi, 2020).

This chapter considers the period from March 2011 until September 2021, when fieldwork was completed. It should be noted that during the fieldwork, significant political changes occurred following the declaration of a state of emergency on 25 July 2021 by the President of the Republic Kais Saied. This included freezing Parliament, dismissing the prime minister and government, dissolving the Supreme Judicial Council and suspending the INLUCC. This had significant implications for the context in which CSOs were operating. Presidential decree No. 117 issued on 22 September 2021 suspended the Parliament and transferred all legislative powers to the president, as well as placing all presidential decisions above any judicial scrutiny. Decree 117 suspended large parts of the 2014 Constitution, which had been drafted by an elected constituent assembly between 2011 and 2014, and granted the president virtually all executive and legislative powers, deepening concerns about rights and freedoms (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Following these steps, the president appointed an advisory committee to draft a new constitution to replace the 2014 Constitution. The constitution-drafting process was swift and largely opaque. The public referendum on the draft text, held on 25 July 2022, witnessed very low levels of public participation, leading to questions being raised about the legitimacy and credibility of the new text (Venice Commission 2022). Nevertheless, it was officially promulgated in 2022, thus replacing the 2014 Constitution. Civic space has also been under threat, with the promulgation of new laws such as Decree-law No. 54 of 2022. This

decree and other legislation such as the counter-terrorism law have been widely used to prosecute political and human rights activists and ordinary citizens for making statements that are critical of the government or president. Decree 54 has been met with widespread criticism by civil society organisations such as the journalists' union, whose president described the decree as '*a clear and deliberate political manoeuvre to suppress press freedom, restrict media operations, and hinder the defence of rights and freedoms*' (Ben Ismail, 2023). Government repression has intensified since February 2023, with the arrest and imprisonment of dozens of opposition figures (Amnesty 2023).

In the light of these restrictions, CSOs have had to adapt their strategies to take account of these changes. Initiatives involving local government have also faced challenges, as it seemed that Saied might dissolve all elected municipal councils after accusing them of being 'states within a state' (Reuters, 2023). The municipal councils continued functioning in a climate of uncertainty for approximately a year and a half until they were abruptly dissolved by decree in March 2023. This has had implications for SA initiatives, as CSOs have been forced to adapt to a shifting institutional context.

4.3.1 *Social Accountability in the 2014 Constitution*

Between 2011 and 2021, the legal framework on public authorities' obligations to account for their actions was generally an enabling factor for SA initiatives in Tunisia. The 2014 Constitution (still in force at the time fieldwork was conducted) set out key principles and obligations related to the accountability of public officials and institutions. The Preamble refers to a 'democratic and participatory system' and a civil state that

guarantees freedom of association in conformity with the principles of pluralism, an impartial administration, and good governance, which are the foundations of political competition, where the state guarantees the supremacy of the law and the respect for freedoms and human rights, the independence of the judiciary, the equality of rights and duties between all citizens, male and female, and equality between all regions. (Constitute Project, n.d.)

Article 15, cited by a number of civil society actors interviewed in this study, also refers specifically to *musāʿala* (accountability). Despite the

difficulties in implementing these provisions, as cited above, civil society actors interviewed found these provisions useful to draw on to justify their accountability efforts when challenged by officials.

The articles of the 2014 Constitution most frequently cited by civil society actors when discussing SA were the following:

- Article 10: ‘The state shall ensure the proper use of public funds and take the necessary measures to spend it [sic] according to the priorities of the national economy, and prevents corruption and all that can threaten national resources and sovereignty.’
- Article 11: ‘All those who assume the roles of President of the Republic, Head of Government, member of the Council of Ministers, or member of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, or member of any of the independent constitutional bodies or any senior public position, must declare their assets according to the provisions of the law.’
- Article 15: ‘Public administration is at the service of the citizens and the common good. It is organized and operates in accordance with the principles of impartiality, equality and the continuity of public services, and in conformity with the rules of transparency, integrity, efficiency and accountability.’
- Article 32: ‘The state guarantees the right to information and the right of access to information and communication networks.’
- Article 137: ‘Local authorities shall have the freedom to manage their resources freely within the budget that is allocated to them, in accordance with the principles of good governance and under the supervision of the financial judiciary.’
- Article 139: ‘Local authorities shall adopt the mechanisms of participatory democracy and the principles of open governance to ensure the broadest participation of citizens and of civil society in the preparation of development programmes and land use planning, and follow up on their implementation, in conformity with the law.’

Civil society actors and officials cited these provisions as important principles that provided a legal basis for their work and for persuading public institutions to involve citizens in public decision-making. In addition, the 2014 Constitution guaranteed the right to participate in public affairs, political pluralism, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, freedom

of association, media freedoms and access to information, among others. *Decree-Law No. 88 of 2011, the main legal text that regulates the creation and functioning of CSOs since 2011 (still in force as of writing)*, is also described by civil society as enabling their accountability efforts, as it largely simplifies and facilitates the creation of an association (although CSOs interviewed did complain of administrative obstacles in practice). These findings are confirmed by a 2020 survey by the Arab Network for Social Accountability (ANSA), which found that CSOs participating in the survey found that the legal framework in Tunisia enabled the exercise of SA (ANSA 2021).

4.3.2 *The Emergence of the Concept of Social Accountability*

The term ‘accountability’ (*musāʿala*) features several times in the 2014 Constitution, the constitutional framework in force at the time the study was conducted. Article 15 states that ‘[p]ublic administration ... is organized and operates ... in conformity with the rules of transparency, integrity, efficiency and accountability’. Article 103 refers to the judiciary’s accountability for any violations of professional standards, and article 130 sets out the mandate of the Authority for Good Governance and the Fight Against Corruption, which includes ‘strengthening the principles of transparency, integrity and accountability’. However, accountability has no official definition under Tunisian law. The term is used in the 2014 Constitution in a number of different ways and often in conjunction with transparency, integrity, good governance, open governance and participation. It is also frequently used in relation to the role of Parliament in questioning members of government through special sessions known as *jalsāt musāʿala* (accountability sessions, see ʿAmārī, 2021).

However, the term ‘social accountability’, or *al-musāʿala al-ijtimaʿiyya*, makes no appearance in Tunisian law and is less common in civil society and public discourse. It does not appear to have been used at all before 2011, due to the absence of freedoms and the restrictive institutional and legal environment for civil society actors (ANSA 2021). After 2011, a large number of civil society initiatives were launched that centred on the themes of public participation, monitoring of public institutions, transparency and combating corruption. Few of these used the term ‘social accountability’, although they would fall under the broad definition of SA as ‘any citizen-led action beyond elections that aims to

enhance the accountability of state actors' (Vloeberghs and Bergh, 2021, p. 8).

Below, we draw on Hickey and King's (2016) useful categorisation of SA initiatives into three main types: *transparency* initiatives aimed at increasing citizens' access to information on public decisions; *contentious actions*, such as public demonstrations, public campaigns and public interest litigation; and *participatory governance* initiatives, aimed at involving citizens in decision-making processes. We provide examples of SA initiatives involving state institutions and civil society actors identified through the mapping, although this list is not intended to be exhaustive.

Transparency Initiatives—Increasing Citizens' Access to Information

- Open Gov partnership: in 2014, Tunisia signed up to the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which promotes transparency and the use of new technologies to strengthen good governance (<http://www.ogptunisie.gov.tn/en/>). Civil society representatives sit on the national steering committee alongside government representatives and monitor the implementation of the National Action Plan.
- Platforms that enable citizens to monitor their elected representatives, such as Marsad Majles by Al Bawsala (<https://majles.marsad.tn/fr/>).
- Initiatives that promote dialogue between elected officials and civil society, such as Parliament's online platform for civil society (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018) and the Eselni platform for parliamentarians, municipal officials and civil society by the Action Positive association (US Embassy in Tunisia 2021).
- Publishing information on public policies and decisions, including the Jasmine Foundation's Nebni project, which promotes local government transparency using various tools, such as citizen bulletins on municipal government decisions and budgets (Jasmine Foundation n.d.); Al Bawsala's Marsad Baladia, an online platform to publish data on municipalities (<https://baladia.marsad.tn>); and the Open Baladiati platform to publish data relating to municipalities, an initiative by Onshor association (<http://openbaladiati.tn>).
- Online platforms to help the public submit access-to-information requests, such as the Informini platform by the Onshor association in partnership with the Tunisian Association of Public Auditors (Association Tunisienne des Contrôleurs Publics, ATCP) (<https://www.informini.org>).

- Online platforms to monitor public investment projects, for example the Cabrane platform by the ATPC (<http://www.cabrane.com>).
- Publication of citizen guides on monitoring public investment projects, such as those published by the ATPC (n.d.).
- Transparency indices that evaluate the transparency of public bodies, including those by Al Bawsala (such as its ranking of municipalities, see Al Bawsala, n.d.-b) and ATPC (in relation to state-owned enterprises, see ATPC, 2016).
- Citizen monitoring of public services, such as Mourakiboun's Primary Health Care (PHC) Monitoring Initiative, which deployed citizen monitors to health centres to measure the quality of medical services and provide data to decision-makers and advocates to make improvements (La Presse, 2017).
- Citizen monitoring of the extractive sector, such as the Tunisian Network for Transparency in Energy and Mines. This network is composed of 13 organisations that promote transparency in the extractive sector, including advocating for the government to adopt laws on transparency in the extractive sector (RTTEM, n.d.)

Contentious Actions

- Winou el Petrole, 2015: online and street campaign demanding transparency on Tunisia's natural resources management.
- Manich Msemeh, 2017: protest movement against a proposed amnesty for bureaucrats and businessmen accused of corruption under the former regime.
- El Kamour, 2017: sit-in at an oil and gas facility in Southern Tunisia to demand jobs and development and a review of oil and gas contracts.
- Public interest litigation: legal challenges to government decisions, such as I Watch's legal challenges to ministerial decisions (e.g. legal action against former Prime Minister Youssef Chahed and former Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh for financial corruption, see Webdo.tn 19; Webdo.tn, 2020) and the Tunisian Green Network's challenge to a government decree on the use of plastic packaging in the concrete industry.

Participatory Governance

- Public consultations: the creation of a governmental online platform for consultations related to draft statutes and decrees (Tunisian Republic, n.d.).
- Parliamentary liaison with civil society and the public: between 2011 and 2021, the Parliament had a dedicated contact point for civil society and citizens.
- Participatory budgeting: an initiative involving citizens in deciding how to spend a portion of the municipal budget, first launched by the association Action Associative (n.d.).
- Participatory annual development plan: a programme led by the Ministry of Local Affairs requiring all municipalities to include participatory mechanisms in their annual investment planning process (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2016).
- Citizen charters used by various Tunisian CSOs such as Jamaity, the ATCP and the Jasmine Foundation.
- Citizen score cards, community score cards and other participatory tools for monitoring and evaluating public services, used by International Alert (health sector, see International Alert, 2021); the Jasmine Foundation (municipalities and local development, see Jasmine Foundation 2017); the Tunisian General Labour Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT), Tunisia's largest trade union federation funded by the Global Partnership on Social Accountability (GPSA); and article 19, also funded by the GPSA, on citizen participation in monitoring and evaluating public health and education investments (see ARTICLE19, 2014).

While the term 'accountability' is commonly used in government documents, public debate and the civil society arena, the term 'social accountability' is used less frequently (see, for example, INLUCC, 2020b; Al Bawsala, n.d.-a; Instance d'Accès à l'Information [INAI], n.d.; "Al-Siyāsa", 2001). Its earliest visible uses in the Tunisian context can be back traced to the World Bank's Programme d'Appui à la Relance Économique (PARE) in 2011–2013, which introduced various mechanisms for participatory citizen evaluation of public services, as well as the issuing of governmental decrees on participatory monitoring,¹ making Tunisia 'the first country in the region ... to adopt an official policy on the performances of public services' (Espace Manager, 2013).

However, this programme was not cited by any of the research participants, which suggests that it was not significant in popularising the concept of SA. Instead, several civil society actors stated that SA became a concept of relevance to Tunisian civil society with the launch of the Tamkeen project by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, n.d.) in 2015. As one public finance expert who worked on the programme explained, ‘There were many [SA] experiences like participatory budgeting before 2014 but they didn’t specifically refer to social accountability. They mainly focused on participation because people had been excluded from so long from decision-making’ (expert consultant to the UNDP on social accountability, personal communication, 16 August 2021, online).

The Tamkeen programme’s declared objectives centre on building civil society capacity, with the second objective being to ‘give [CSOs] the necessary skills for their active participation in the domain of social accountability [*redevabilité sociale*] and the fight against corruption’ by ‘finalising the implementation of the legal and institutional framework’ and creating ‘islands of integrity at the local or sectoral level’ (UNDP, n.d.). The programme refers to SA in association with ‘the fight against corruption’ and development, with these three being linked repeatedly throughout programme documents. The programme focused largely on the demand side of governance by strengthening the role of civil society in activating legal and institutional frameworks through monitoring, awareness-raising and engaging citizens in decision-making. However, it also worked on the supply side of accountability by seeking to strengthen institutional and legal frameworks on combating corruption. As the first large-scale programme on SA, it is seen as having introduced the term to the Tunisian context and popularised its usage among civil society actors and officials.

4.4 MEANINGS: FROM CONSTITUTIONAL IDEAL TO APPLIED CONCEPT

Social accountability (*al-musāʾala al-ijtimāʿiyya*) lends itself to multiple meanings. The term contains the word *musāʾala* (accountability), which is interpreted in different ways. As several interviewees mentioned, the term occurs in the 2014 Tunisian Constitution, but no national definition exists. There is confusion among officials, civil society actors and ordinary citizens about what *musāʾala* entails. Often, there is an overlap

between the use of *musāʿala*, which carries the notion of answerability—being questioned and required to provide answers—and *muḥāsaba*, which means being held liable and carries more punitive connotations. In Arabic, *muḥāsaba* is etymologically linked to *muḥāsabāt* (financial accounting) and is used to refer to bodies that carry out legal and financial accountability, such as the Court of Auditors (*dāʿirat al-muḥāsabāt*). *Musāʿala* and *muḥāsaba* are often used interchangeably, both in official documents and among CSO officers. As one civil society activist noted, ‘Political officials are scared of the term *musāʿala*, as if we will judge them. It doesn’t necessarily mean the citizen will judge you, that if they monitor your work, they will sanction you or place pressure on you’ (representative of ANSA, FGD, 23 June 2021).

Here is a selection of the definitions put forward by civil society activists when discussing accountability and SA:

- ‘Accountability is about two things – about state institutions’ respect for the law and their performance ... meaning delivering for citizens’ (project coordinator I Watch, 21 June 2021, in person).
- ‘A set of tools that citizens can use to influence decisions and improve public services and policies’ (project coordinator Jasmine Foundation, 2 September 2021, online).
- ‘Social accountability is any accountability initiative initiated outside state institutions’ (project coordinator I Watch, personal communication, 21 June 2021, in person).
- ‘Social accountability is the bridge that will take us to transparency ... and fighting corruption’ (representative of ANSA, FGD).
- ‘Accountability ... is when the ordinary citizen is able to ask the state, whatever their rank, to account for their actions, whether the prime minister, head of state, judge, no matter what, they are all subject to accountability of all kinds’ (lawyer and co-founder of Tunisia Green Network, personal communication, 29 June 2021, in person).
- ‘Accountability is a type of support for officials – having a citizen who is aware, who has the right mechanisms of accountability, who knows how to deal with a problem or issue’ (Access to Information Authority [INAI] ambassador for Freedom of Information, FGD).

Meanwhile, definitions proposed by government officials tended to focus on accountability as a means to make governmental action more effective and facilitate the work of public institutions:

- ‘The decision-maker has a duty to respond to the demand for justification of the decisions taken or decisions not taken – why did/didn’t you decide this? ... Today to ensure we can attract investors and bring investment, we need to emphasise this kind of governance ... All economies have to guarantee this governance ... alongside participation, efficiency, transparency, etc.’ (director General of the Ministry of Local Affairs, FGD).
- ‘The aim is to build a relationship of transparency between institution and citizen. The more transparent it is, the more citizens reduce their questions’ (board member, Action Positive, Tunisia Accountability in Politics Programme, FGD).

4.4.1 *The Multiple Meanings of Accountability*

Below, we distinguish further between local actors’ understanding of accountability. In particular, we explore the various understandings of SA encountered during our fieldwork. We detail the main elements that feature in local actors’ discourse on accountability and SA, organised in the order in which they were most frequently cited in the FGD.

Led by Civil Society and/or Citizens

The main common element that distinguishes SA from other forms of accountability, as viewed by research participants, is that it is led by civil society and citizens. SA depends primarily on civic engagement, unlike other forms of accountability such as political or legal accountability, which are implemented and led by official institutions, such as parliamentary oversight of government, as a form of political accountability, or the role of public audit bodies and courts, as a form of legal accountability. Notably, SA is also a term used more commonly by civil society than officials. While the term ‘social accountability’ appeared in the discourse of civil society actors—both among those interviewed and in the civil society documentation reviewed during the desk research—government documents do not use the term ‘social accountability’ but rather refer to ‘transparency’, ‘open governance’ and other, related terms (see, for example, INLUCC, 2020a; Open Government Partnership Tunisia, n.d.-b).

Targeted at Public Institutions

Secondly, SA is seen as being focused on the accountability of *state* institutions, rather than non-state actors, such as the private sector. All the examples of SA given by research participants centred around efforts to bring about accountability by public bodies or officials. This raises the question of whether and how citizens can hold private companies accountable, for example, for environmental harm or failure to respect their legal obligations where the state does not take action.

SA initiatives in Tunisia in 2011–2021 focused on a very wide range of public institutions. Our research revealed two trends. First, a strong focus on local state institutions, particularly municipalities. A vast number of SA initiatives targeted municipalities, such as participatory budgeting, citizen score cards, town hall meetings, online information platforms, etc. This appears to be due to the proximity of local government and ease of access to it. As activists explained, municipalities are more easily accessed because of dense social ties at the local level and the proximity of local officials. Local decisions, programmes and budgets can also be more easily monitored given their proximity and visibility, e.g. spending on local infrastructure projects. In contrast, civil society actors found it more difficult to locate points of access in central ministries, which are seen as more opaque and harder to access. In addition, the political settlements—or ‘balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes’ (Di John & Putzel, 2009, p. 4)—that regulate local government institutions appear to be easier to shift than those in other sectors.² Finally, it is easier for CSOs to create public pressure on officials at the local level using relatively simple and cheap means, such as local Facebook groups, local radio and public protests.

Second, SA initiatives in Tunisia in 2011–2021 appeared to be mainly focused on elected officials but less so on bureaucrats. This may be because bureaucratic officials are more difficult to access and engage with, or because they are not seen as the real decision-makers. However, civil society actors appeared to have begun shifting their strategies to focus more on engaging the public administration. This is particularly the case for SA initiatives at the local level, which are increasingly engaging with municipal general secretaries (chief executives). As one former civil society activist (who was an elected municipal councillor at the time of the study) noted,

A very important point ... is that we didn't involve and develop the local administration. Today we're talking about open data, open gov, social accountability, we're working on this in civil society. But elected officials are not the implementors, we set strategies and policies. Implementation is the role of the administration. Thus, we need to work on the administration ... Progress needs to go in parallel between municipal officials and administration, so that they go in the same direction and not in conflict'. (representative of ANSA, FGD)

Accountability as the Duty to Give Answers

A third common element in civil society's and officials' conceptions of accountability is that accountability essentially means requiring officials to *answer for their actions*. It is seen as the right of citizens to demand explanations regarding public decision-making and the corresponding obligation of officials to provide these. Research participants described accountability as being about 'citizens asking questions', 'seeking information' and 'requesting officials to explain' (FGD participants). As one civil society activist explained, 'When we said we would hold the mayor to account [*sā'il*] ... [he thought] we were going to try him! We just want to clarify things for public opinion, sit with you and clarify things for people. That's all' (INAI ambassador for Freedom of Information, FGD).

However, as the accountability literature highlights, accountability is composed of two components: *answerability*, 'making power holders explain and give reasons for their actions', and *enforcement*, 'ensuring that poor or immoral performance is punished in some way' (Hickey & Mohan, 2008, p. 236). While research participants frequently mentioned answerability, there was little mention of enforcement. Overall, there were three different ways of thinking about how SA relates to the enforceability of legal obligations.

The first approach sees SA mechanisms as *alternative mechanisms* to obtain compliance with legal frameworks *without imposing legal sanctions*. For example, a large CSO working on access to information at the municipal level at first used litigation as a central plank of its strategy. However, it soon concluded that the legal route was lengthy, expensive and ineffective, after INAI's decisions in its favour were ignored by some public bodies.³ The association shifted its efforts from applying legal pressure to applying reputational pressure, creating a national transparency index that rated municipalities' level of transparency. This was found

to be a far more effective tool for enforcing access-to-information laws than litigation, since it exposed municipalities to reputational pressure. Thus, CSOs pursue SA as a shorter and more effective means to exact accountability through *informal* sanctions, such as public disaffection and reputational pressure, while abandoning the idea of obtaining compliance through legal sanctions, seeing the latter as implausible or ineffective. Here, SA tools operate *in parallel with* traditional accountability mechanisms.

A second way of thinking about how SA relates to enforceability of legal obligations is to see it as *a means to implement legal frameworks* and enforce legal sanctions. Thus, the role of SA here is to reinforce and activate legal mechanisms, rather than bypassing or despairing of them altogether. Peruzzotti and Smulovitz define SA in the following terms, ‘Social mechanisms constitute an alternative mechanism for imposing costs on political actors *and are a necessary condition for the operation of those institutional mechanisms that have mandatory sanctioning capacities*’ (2006, p. 26, our emphasis). This understanding is adopted by, for example, Tunisian whistle-blower associations such as I Watch (www.iwatch.tn/ar), which use accountability tools—such as litigation, investigative reports, monitoring of natural resource contracts and social media campaigns—as a means of pressuring the state to *enforce* legal frameworks and impose sanctions on individuals or institutions. Thus, some civil society actors framed SA as a method for ‘activating’ the implementation of laws and sanctions. Here, SA tools operate as a way to help *enforce* traditional accountability mechanisms.

A third way is to see SA as being *distinct from but complementary to legal sanctions*. In this view, SA tools can be utilised alongside other tools involving legally enforceable sanctions. SA mechanisms here are seen as helping ‘enrich and support the effectiveness of legal sanctions’, where ‘legal mechanisms and social accountability mechanisms can provide different tools in the toolbox of activists to help get state institutions to deliver on their promises and obligations’ (expert consultant to the UNDP on social accountability, personal communication, 16 August 2021, online). Here, SA tools operate *to reinforce* traditional accountability mechanisms.

Accountability as Citizens' Access to and Participation in Decision-Making

A fourth common element in discussions on accountability was the notion that citizen participation is key to accountability. When asked how they understood accountability, both civil society actors and officials at the local and national levels focused on citizens' right to be consulted by decision-makers and effectively participate in decision-making by putting forward their needs and demands, proposing solutions and monitoring the implementation of decisions. In the context of a transition from an authoritarian system in which there were few institutional spaces for ordinary citizens to express demands freely and seek to influence public policies, the post-revolution period saw citizens and civil society demand to be included in decision-making through a variety of forms, from street protests and sit-ins to media and online campaigns. In addition, in a context in which institutional mechanisms for accountability and levels of trust in state institutions were weak, the role of the citizen in holding public institutions to account becomes even more central. Accountability, thus, requires citizens to be active agents throughout public decision-making processes. As one research participant stated,

Accountability is the process of moving from a situation where the citizen isn't exercising influence or oversight, isn't represented or participating, or aware of public policies and their implementation to a citizen who is following, participating, influencing positively, understanding. It means moving from a dictatorship where the citizen is just a statistic to a system where the citizen influences public policies at all stages. (project coordinator Nebni Local Citizens' Observatory, Bizerte, FGD)

Participation is thus a central element of SA initiatives by national and international NGOs working in Tunisia in 2011–2021. Participatory budgeting by organisations such as Action Associative, for example, involved citizens in holding local governments to account and setting priorities for local public spending through a process of public deliberation. Organisations such as International Alert used SA methods such as citizen evaluations of public services as tools for highlighting inequalities in access to public services and placing citizens at the centre of public decision-making. International Alert's citizen evaluation of public healthcare in the Southern region of Tataouine defines SA as 'genuine

societal participation in all the stages of decision-making and implementation' (2019, p. 18). Similarly, ANSA states that '[s]ocial accountability goes beyond [public institutions] simply justifying activities, actions and outcomes and takes into account citizens' participation and especially the monitoring of local public authorities by citizens' (2021, p. 4).

In discussions with civil society actors, SA is seen as key to building a new relationship of trust between the state and citizens through participation, enabling citizens to monitor and take part in decision-making processes. This, in turn, is closely tied to the idea of generating a sense of public ownership of public decisions and policies and, ultimately, of the state itself. By opening up decision-making processes to citizens, SA initiatives that focus on citizen participation are seen as providing part of the solution to the crisis in trust between citizens and the state, which is so profound that it undermines the notion of citizenship and belonging. As one anti-corruption activist put it,

When you feel a sense of injustice, when you have no mechanisms for obtaining your rights, you do not feel you belong to the state. You no longer feel belonging to that state, and this is what makes many people say, why do our youth leave? Simply because they do not feel a sense of belonging, of ownership of this country, of this earth, and they no longer feel any social solidarity. (lawyer and co-founder of Tunisia Green Network, personal communication, 29 June 2021, in person)

Accountability as Transparency

The fifth common element in defining accountability is transparency. When discussing accountability, civil society actors frequently referred to three related elements:

- Access to information (*naḥḍh lil ma'lūma*): accountability is obtained through citizens having access to information on how public decisions are made and how public funds are spent.
- Monitoring (*raqāba*): accountability is obtained through citizens' continuous monitoring of decision-making processes in order to hold officials responsible for decisions and their outcomes, and to expose wrongdoing.
- Transparency (*shafāfiyya*): citizens' ability to access information on decisions by the government and state institutions and the creation of channels of communication between the government and citizens.

Here, accountability is seen as requiring the state to divulge information to citizens and enable them to have access to decision-making processes. The three elements outlined above were all mentioned in relation to the fight against corruption, an issue that dominates public debate in Tunisia. In this context, the widespread nature of corruption calls for transparency as a first step to exacting accountability. When discussing accountability, civil society actors frequently returned to the idea of SA as a set of tools or mechanisms for *monitoring* public decision-making in order to prevent the misuse of public authority, such as corruption in public procurement, demands for bribes when accessing public services and the awarding of public jobs based on personal relations or bribes. As mentioned above, it is the inability of traditional accountability mechanisms—e.g. legal frameworks, internal regulations, financial controls, judicial processes, elections, etc.—to ensure that public institutions behave in a fair and honest way that makes SA mechanisms necessary. As one civil society activist stated, ‘Social accountability is the bridge that will take us to transparency ... and fighting corruption’ (representative of ANSA, FGD).

Accountability as the Rule of Law

A sixth element used to define accountability is the concept of the rule of law. Accountability is often described by civil society actors as a central element of a system of government based on the rule of law (*dawlat al-qanūn*). In the aftermath of a revolution that was driven by anger at vast inequalities and the usurpation of state resources by regime allies, it is unsurprising that *dawlat al-qanūn* is primarily defined by civil society actors as equality before the law: state institutions, public officials and ordinary citizens are all subject to the law, and the law is implemented equally, regardless of status. As one civil society activist stated,

You cannot talk about a state based on the rule of law and its institutions without accountability ... a state that respects the hierarchy of legal texts in form and content respects the Constitution’s supremacy in form and content, where the one who has the authority to do something does it, and the one who does not have the authority to do something doesn’t do it, and everyone who exceeds these powers must be held accountable. (lawyer and co-founder of Tunisia Green Network, personal communication, 29 June 2021, in person)

Accountability as Decent Public Service Provision

An alternative conception of accountability held by some civil society actors is accountability as a *means* to improve public service provision and make it more just. Both civil society actors and public officials defined accountability as being key to achieving public services that meet citizens' needs. Accordingly, SA was seen as 'a set of tools that citizens can use to improve public services and policies in line with their needs and demands' (project coordinator Jasmine Foundation, personal communication, 2 September 2021, online). In this sense, accountability is seen to improve several aspects of service provision, including:

- Equality: accountability as a means to ensure equal access to public service provision for all citizens, without discrimination or privilege.
- Quality: accountability as a means to improve the quality of public services by monitoring the use of public funds and the management of public services and infrastructure, thus reducing corruption and fraud.
- Responsiveness: accountability as a means to direct public institutions to respond to the demands and changing needs of citizens. As one activist noted, 'When it comes to accountability, we want to help with the efficiency of the political process. In the end it's about how to ensure our budget of one million [dinars] or whatever we have goes to priorities. This is what it's about' (project coordinator Al Bawsala, FGD).
- Effectiveness: accountability as a set of mechanisms to help inform decision-making so that policies will reflect real needs, as opposed to decisions imposed from above, which fail to solve problems or are not accepted by the public.
- Efficiency: accountability as a means of achieving greater efficiency in the provision of services or the implementation of policies by identifying problems in the design and delivery of services and enabling the timely adjustment of services or policies to citizens' needs. As one administrative official explained,

We municipalities ... try to make participatory sessions succeed because through them we can achieve an efficient and effective programme. There is no point proposing non-effective projects that get stuck later in implementation with citizens ... When we have participation from the beginning, we target what the citizen wants ...

and we don't get stuck later in implementation, because the citizen accepts it'. (board member Action Positive, Tunisia Accountability in Politics Programme, FGD)

4.5 MOBILISATION METHODS: CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGIES TO MOVE FROM CONCEPT TO ACTION

This section analyses the strategies used by citizens and civil society groups to exact accountability, organised in the order in which they were most frequently cited in the focus group. It examines the strategies used to engage other citizens, mobilise officials and ensure the latter's fulfilment of their commitments.

4.5.1 *Mobilising Officials*

Between 2011 and 2021, civil society actors used a variety of different strategies to engage officials, which changed over time through iterative processes of learning. Civil society groups used a range of (a) persuasive and (b) coercive methods. They deployed these methods in different ways according to the nature of the local context in which they were operating and the official or institution in question. They also differed in their approach: some adopted a 'friendly' approach, relying purely on persuasive methods, some used coercive methods, while others used a combination of the two, depending on the response of public officials.

While the choice of mobilisation methods is important, civil society actors also emphasised the importance of the existence of political will to engage on the part of public officials. The presence of individual officials within public institutions who were receptive to civic initiatives was seen as an important condition to the success and sustainability of accountability initiatives. While civic initiatives were occasionally able to force a change in government policy through coercive methods, sustainable change towards greater accountability was seen to require identifying and cooperating with public officials who were supportive of change. An example of this is access-to-information requests. An association that worked on submitting access-to-information requests to public institutions and tracking compliance with the legal obligation to respond to these requests found that many institutions did not comply and that simply highlighting failure was not sufficient to bring about compliance.

The association found that when it shifted its approach to working with officials within these institutions to identify reasons for failure to comply with access-to-information requests and developing strategies to remedy these failures, these institutions were subsequently more likely to comply with such requests. This also required civil society actors to understand the political economy of specific public institutions, identify and engage allies, and develop strategies to overcome resistance or other obstacles to accountability.

Why some officials cooperate with SA initiatives and some do not was largely seen as being a question of individual values. Civil society actors described their allies within public institutions as being motivated by a personal commitment to accountability, rather than simply interests or incentives. This was expressed in various instances through officials' efforts to promote accountability even at the expense of their material interests. This echoes findings in the literature, which has moved away from a focus on 'incentives' to one on the role of ideas in shaping elite behaviour (Hickey, 2013). This led many associations to adopt a 'go with the grain' approach of working primarily with officials or institutions where political will already existed. This supports the notion of 'a sandwich strategy' formulated by Fox, which argues that in order to break 'low-accountability traps' and overcome resistance to accountability, pro-change actors in society need to empower pro-change actors within the state, 'thereby triggering a virtuous circle ... of mutual empowerment' (Fox, 2015, p. 356). However, other associations engaged using both persuasive and coercive methods, as discussed below.

Persuasion

While civil society actors in Tunisia insist on their right to demand accountability and use a range of methods to do so, many of those involved in the study argued that purely 'hostile' tactics are less effective at exacting accountability. Several noted that when they first began working on accountability, they had adopted a confrontational approach but soon realised this would not be effective. As one community organiser noted,

The methodology [in the beginning] assumed a confrontational relationship. We see the citizen as having rights over state institutions. The citizen is above the institutions of the state ... This is how we started off but little by little, we realised that, to be honest, we are in the Tunisian context, it

is not the French, Canadian or American context. We noticed many times that when we go with a logic of confrontation and force, officials don't engage. It's a logic of power and status, they want to show, 'I'm stronger than you'. (board member El Comita, personal communication, 19 August 2021, online)

Even organisations that used largely 'hostile' methods such as public litigation say that they also used persuasive methods when, for instance, they found that public officials or institutions actually wanted to comply with their legal obligations but were unable to due to lack of resources. As one activist from the organisation I Watch, known for its frequent litigation against public officials and institutions, explained:

We used to use very confrontational methods, which we're known for. But then we found that this isn't a solution. You can't get into a fight with a municipality in Tataouine, for instance, because it did something wrong. I should show it how to do it right, how to write their internal rules of procedure, how to do a public tender. Instead of reporting them for not having a website and respecting access-to-information rules, I can create a website for them. So, we have a new approach since 2019, which is to build partnerships with institutions ... focused on training for their personnel, etc. ... So we moved from confrontation to support [*accompagnement*]. (project coordinator I Watch, personal communication, 21 June 2021, online)

The following are the persuasive methods CSOs used to engage officials (organised according to the frequency with which they were mentioned in the focus group discussion):

Drawing on Personal Relations. Civil society actors noted that engagement with officials is usually mediated through personal relationships based on friendship, ideological or partisan affinity, regional belonging or kinship ties. For instance, one civil society activist from a network of associations noted that it is important for any association to be composed of activists from a range of ideological backgrounds so that they can mobilise officials from their own political orientation through personal relationships. However, while recognising the highly personalist and, in many cases, clientelist nature of relations between officials and citizens, civil society actors were also critical of these modes of interaction as ultimately being

counterproductive to accountability. As one civil society activist noted, ‘I’m not sure we can say we succeeded in social accountability because our cooperation [with state officials] became through personal friendships [*muḥābbāt*] so the people we got used to seeing always came because they knew us’ (co-founder Mīn Hakki Nsaalek accountability network of NGOs, FGD).

Emphasising the Benefits of Cooperation. Both civil society actors and officials pointed to the need to look at the interaction between officials and citizens or civil society as a win-win situation or exchange. When seeking to engage officials in SA initiatives, many activists frame their discourse around the benefits it could bring, such as helping officials find solutions to problems, strengthening public ownership of decisions, making implementation of decisions easier and more efficient and building trust. As one local official explained, ‘Officials want to solve problems, that’s their objective ... If you will accompany me and stay with me until I solve my problem, I will extend my hand to you’ (municipal administrator El Mourouj municipality, FGD). State institutions are perceived as needing civil society support due to their lack of resources. In a context of economic crisis, civil society is able to ‘offer a product or a service that is free’ for under-resourced state institutions (project coordinator I Watch, personal communication, 21 June 2021, online). These resources include providing training for officials, hiring experts to provide expertise to public institutions, designing websites and other communication tools, facilitating participatory processes and observing public procurement and recruitment processes to give them more legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Some civil society groups have thus shifted their discourse to framing SA as a source of assistance to officials. As one activist noted,

Accountability is a process of support [*accompagnement*]. In our project with parliamentarians and mayors, that’s what we called it. There was a conflict in the beginning with them, there was that mentality that we are seeking to sanction them [*muḥāsaba*]. We said no, it’s accountability, it is about supporting you. As a decision-maker, you can’t know everything. We give you information. (project coordinator Al Bawsala, FGD)

This more ‘supportive’ approach to engaging officials was also emphasised by a number of civil society activists, who concluded from their experience that a persuasive approach was conducive to exacting accountability:

You need as a civil society representative to make the official feel comfortable, that you’re not coming to sanction them at all. On the contrary. You need to make them feel ... that you’re going to reduce the pressure on them and [help them deal with] all those people shouting outside their door ... In the beginning, officials closed the door to civil society but when they found many problems, they reopened the door. They realised we can help them ... We need to not accuse them. We have nothing against officials (project coordinator Munadhara Initiative, FGD)

Signing Partnership Agreements. Establishing official agreements with public institutions was also an important means of securing commitment by public institutions to engage with SA initiatives a period of time (see, for example, INAI, 2019). Such agreements bring benefits to both sides. Public officials can use them to improve their public image and demonstrate to the public their commitment to ‘good governance’ and citizen participation. For civil society groups, they provide access to public institutions and a way to institutionalise the relationship by setting out each side’s obligations and procedures for cooperation (see Sect. 4.8.5 for more details).

Building Credibility. An important factor in whether officials engage with a CSO or not is its credibility. Having a strong public reputation, media visibility or partnerships with international donors are all factors that help civil society secure official engagement. As one activist noted, ‘The first question an official asks when you invite them is, who are you? So, your team needs to have strong capacity, skills to engage in dialogue with officials and understand the topic well and have clear messages or demands’ (co-founder of Min Hakki Nsaalek accountability network of NGOs, FGD). Another strategy is to form civil society coalitions centred on common initiatives in order to give them greater weight when engaging officials. As one civil society activist stated, ‘If you’re alone, your impact is weaker. If you work together, as a number of associations ... this makes the official take you seriously and continue working with you’ (ibid.).

Training. Civil society groups also seek to demonstrate to officials the benefits of cooperating with them by offering training on technical issues (public finance rules, planning processes, etc.) and ‘soft skills’ such as communication and conflict resolution. This is particularly common at the local level, where civil society have trained newly elected municipal councils, given their lack of experience.

Coercion

Civil society actors also resorted to more coercive methods to put pressure on officials to cooperate with SA initiatives. These include the following:

Mobilising Legal Arguments. One tactic is to draw on the legal framework to remind officials of their legal obligations to engage with civil society and account for their actions. As one activist explained, ‘We have a constitution and laws that allow citizens to defend their rights and we often start with that’ (project coordinator Nebni Local Citizens’ Observatory, Bizerte, FGD). Being familiar with the legal framework and having access to legal expertise is thus an important resource for civil society actors.

Mainstream Media. Civil society groups frequently use mainstream media, both local and national, to put pressure on officials to engage with civil society or fulfil commitments. Methods include press releases, press conferences, open letters, media interviews and hiring communications companies to help them with media outreach.

Social Media. Social media constitutes one of the most important methods used by citizens to put pressure on officials. Ordinary citizens and civil society groups use Facebook, in particular, to engage directly with officials and demand accountability. Many public institutions have Facebook pages where they post news and developments. This provides citizens with a platform to pose questions. Elected and administrative officials often publicly respond, particularly at the municipal level, given that these platforms have a large audience.

Petitions. Civil society groups and citizens frequently used petitions to create pressure on officials to respond to their demands. Citizens and civil society groups often create informal online public or written petitions with the aim of pressuring public officials to meet with them and engage with their demands. Petition campaigns often

began with mobilising around a specific issue on social media or in public spaces such as cafes, before launching a petition on the issue, then using the pressure created by the petition to secure a meeting with an official to negotiate demands. These kinds of methods were frequently used to raise issues at municipal level, such as demands or grievances around infrastructure, public hygiene and environmental issues.

Street Mobilisation. Citizens and civil society groups frequently used protests and sit-ins as a means to apply public pressure. This was seen to be easier at the regional and local than at the national level because of the proximity and accessibility of regional and local officials. However, where social mobilisation was large enough, it has been able to shift national policies to some extent, such as the El Kamour protests in 2017–2020 (Cherif, 2017; Lassoued, 2020) and Manich Msemeh protests in 2016–2017 (Riahi, 2018).

Mobilising more Senior Officials. One method used by CSOs when officials were unresponsive was to enlist the help of officials more senior in their hierarchy, whether within a public institution (e.g. a minister in relation to a mayor) or within the official's party. This is seen as an effective tool to pressure officials to cooperate.

Mobilising Donor Relations. Some civil society groups utilised their relationships with international donor by asking them to raise an issue with officials in order to get the latter to engage with their demands.

Litigation. This is a central strategy for some organisations but is used by only a minority of the organisations interviewed—three out of 10—due to the complexity of legal procedures, the costs involved and the perception that litigation is slow and ineffective or less effective than other methods.

4.5.2 *Mobilising Citizens*

The public participation literature suggests that how opportunities for participation are communicated and publicised to citizens is critical to the success of participatory initiatives (Hickey & King, 2016). Civil society actors interviewed described using a range of methods that are selected depending on who is being mobilised, since 'each audience has its own

tool' (board member El Comita, Sidi Hssine, FGD). The methods used by civil society to mobilise citizens are summarised below.

Mobilising Key Individuals. According to activists, effective mobilisation depends greatly on the social capital of the individuals doing the mobilising. Being able to mobilise others to act to demand accountability is seen to require skills to mobilise—for instance, gained through past experiences of activism—reputational resources and the ability to draw on strong social ties. These resources can derive from the individual's professional status, family ties, organisational ties or record of past civic activism, among others. As a civil society activist noted,

The charisma of the person who mobilises is very important ... Each area has figures who have status and who, when they write any post, are followed by people in the area. It is those people who can mobilise others and put pressure on officials to change their decisions (project coordinator Munadhara Initiative, FGD)

In some instances, possessing bridging capital—the ability to access people and networks across different cleavages (e.g. social, ideological, etc.) that may exist in a locality—is seen as being important for mobilising citizens. As a civil society activist noted,

How we choose our local observers depends on a number of factors. They have to have a number of years of activism in local civil society. This is the most important, so that they have experience and networks. Political impartiality is also important – at the local level, this is a very sensitive issue, because people know each other locally. So you need to work with someone who is able to talk to and engage everyone. (project coordinator Al Bawsala, personal communication, 31 August 2021, online)

Longevity. Time also emerged as an important factor in the success of SA initiatives. In order to mobilise citizens, civil society organisations need to build credibility with citizens by establishing a steady presence, building their expertise on specific themes and demonstrating visible achievements. In the light of the explosion in the number of civil society organisations and civic initiatives after the revolution, civil society organisations report that citizens have become more selective when engaging with civic initiatives. After an initial period of enthusiasm for all that was related to citizen participation, the allure of participatory mechanisms appears to have worn

off. The continued deep distrust of the state and the resilience of authoritarian structures and mechanisms demonstrate that SA needs to be seen as a long-term process rather than a set of short-term interventions. As the president of one organisation observed,

There are still deep effects from decades of dictatorship. We are still working on rebuilding citizens' trust even in their own power to change something ... So, you have to work on the psychological and social levels to build a belief in the power of collective action (board member El Comita, personal communication, 19 August 2021, online)

However, a key obstacle frequently mentioned by civil society actors is the project-based funding model, which does not permit the sort of long-term community engagement and social mobilisation needed to build accountability.

Achieving Concrete Wins for Local Communities. An important method to engage citizens is showing concrete wins. In areas and neighbourhoods without strong CSOs, it is particularly important to show citizens who have little direct experience of collective action that it can achieve results. Results, even if small, can thus have a snowball effect and help activists engage the public beyond a small core of activists. As one activist explained,

At first when we started to work, citizens were apathetic, but then when they see victories and results, they become more interested, start to demand and participate more. This strengthens a reflex of accountability because it's not a theoretical concept, it's something they can see. (board member Min Hakki Nsaalek accountability network of NGOs, FGD)

Social Media. Social media is a central part of civil society groups' outreach strategy to citizens. The most widely used tool by far is Facebook, used by nearly 70% of the Tunisian population (Kemp, 2021). Social media may be used as a standalone tool or as a pathway to gaining coverage in mainstream media. As one activist explained,

The most frequent tool we use is Facebook. We post on Facebook pages with a large reach. When you raise an issue or a problem, and this happened many times, local radios pick it up and invite you to a talk show, and this gets citizens' attention (project coordinator Munadhara Initiative, FGD)

Direct Engagement in Public Spaces. Activists also emphasise the importance of face-to-face engagement, particularly with certain groups like older people and in working-class neighbourhoods where there is a higher population density. The most popular techniques include inviting citizens to events using loudspeakers in busy public spaces, speaking to people in cafes and conducting ‘micro-trottoirs’ (street interviews) to gather people’s views on a specific issue. Many organisations cite these as a useful means of making themselves known to the public, getting people engaged in specific issues, informing them about a particular event such as a town hall meeting and collecting contact details for future activities.

Maintaining Momentum. In addition to results, another important factor in citizen engagement is returning to citizens to report on progress and explain whether and how their initial participation has led to change. Such dialogue is seen as critical to strengthening trust between citizens and CSOs, especially in a context of a lack of trust.

4.6 RESPONSES: REACTIONS FROM AUTHORITIES TO SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES

The proliferation of SA initiatives to make state officials and institutions more responsive raises the question of how state representatives have responded to such efforts. One obvious question is to what extent accountability has been institutionalised. However, determining the degree to which SA mechanisms have been institutionalised is tricky. The sheer array of initiatives and the speed at which new mechanisms emerged in the Tunisian context in 2011–2021 make it challenging to evaluate their impact and institutionalise them through laws and policies.

However, a number of important examples of the institutionalisation of SA between 2011 and 2021 so exist, particularly in the shape of new laws. Perhaps the biggest success in this area is the introduction of new legislation to strengthen accountability. Civil society groups focused their efforts on pushing for and shaping legislation to advance accountability and found a corresponding readiness among some officials, particularly parliamentarians, to adopt such legislation. This combination of civil society activism and political will led to significant advances in establishing legal obligations and mechanisms on accountability between 2011 and 2021. For example, activists cited their work to secure the adoption of article 139 of the 2014 Constitution (on participatory democracy), the Access to Information Law and the Local Authorities Code (Law no. 29, dated

9 May 2018), among others. The latter introduces obligations for local authorities regarding transparency and participation. Provisions included due to strong civil society advocacy are, for example, article 78—which requires local authorities to create committees to monitor the management of local public facilities, composed of local officials and civil society representatives—and article 29, which obliges local authorities to adopt mechanisms to ensure ‘genuine participation for all residents and civil society at all stages of the preparation, implementation and evaluation’ of local planning.

Civil society actors and public officials gave other examples of the institutionalisation of SA initiatives. For example, agreements between state institutions and CSOs became a common practice used by most organisations covered by the study between 2011 and 2021 (see Sect. 4.5.1.1). These agreements created new pathways for exacting accountability by establishing concrete mechanisms for engagement between authorities, citizens and civil society. These agreements do not carry any formal sanctions but encourage compliance by creating informal sanctions: when officials violate agreements, civil society can apply popular pressure using the methods analysed above. Another common mechanism is to establish steering committees composed of public officials and civil society representatives to follow up on the implementation of commitments made during SA initiatives.

However, despite these advances in the legal framework, civil society activists continue to have deep concerns about the sustainability of their initiatives. Many larger associations rely on international donor funding and are unable to find other sources of financing. The project-based approach used by international donors is seen to undermine the ability to maintain and strengthen local mobilisation for accountability. As one activist explained, ‘Each time a project finishes, we just move on to the next event or project. This is a big weakness of social accountability as we are doing it’ (board member El Comita, Sidi Hssinem, FGD).

There is also ambivalence on the part of civil society regarding the institutionalisation of SA initiatives in the form of legal instruments. While enshrining SA mechanisms in the law could help institutionalise practices and scale them up, this also risks allowing authorities to shape SA mechanisms and water them down in order to undermine accountability. For instance, a CSO that worked on the Local Authorities Code highlighted that the code, while enshrining the right of local residents to present petitions and request a town hall meeting, imposes such high

thresholds that it effectively renders these mechanisms ‘meaningless’, thus ‘giving the right to participation with one hand and taking it away with the other’ (project coordinator Al Bawsala, personal communication, 31 August 2021, online).⁴

4.6.1 *Problematic Aspects of Social Accountability*

While research participants were generally supportive of SA as a means to exact accountability from public institutions, some raised concerns regarding its effectiveness and its relationship with traditional modes of accountability.

Lack of ‘Teeth’

SA mechanisms alone are often insufficient for bringing about accountability, given that those who lead SA initiatives, usually civil society actors, lack enforcement powers. This raises the question of how SA can be accompanied by, or lead to, legal accountability (*muḥāsaba*), a question also posed by Fox (2015).

Lack of Evaluation

A common theme that emerged from the research is the lack of evidence regarding SA initiatives in Tunisia and their impact. Associations working in different localities had few methods for evaluating how and why an SA mechanism produced different results in different localities. There is a strong desire among civil society actors to spend more time reflecting on and evaluating their own experiences to develop more effective strategies. This included a desire to move away from looking at the experiences of other countries as ‘templates’ for action and instead create more fora for civil society actors to come together to compare domestic experiences and develop new approaches.

The Role of Civil Society

The proliferation of SA initiatives also raises questions regarding the relationship between participatory and representative democracy, and the appropriate line to draw between the roles and powers of elected officials and those of civil society actors who seek to hold them to account (discussed below, Sect. 4.6.1.4). The use of participatory mechanisms, in particular, such as participatory planning and budgeting has provoked a debate over the extent to which civil society actors are ‘usurping’

the decision-making powers of public officials. Conversely, some civil society actors are also critical of elements of the participatory democracy discourse for distracting attention away from the state's responsibilities. They also critique SA initiatives that focus on participation as a means to building trust between state and citizens for overlooking the importance of more inclusive and just *provision* of public goods and services as an essential condition to strengthening public trust in state institutions.

In addition, some research participants questioned civil society's capacity to play an effective role in calling to account public officials due to its internal divisions, deep polarisation and competitiveness, weakening civil society vis-à-vis public authorities.

Who Participates and How?

As the participation and SA literatures highlight, citizen participation can reflect and deepen socio-economic inequalities (Cleaver, 2005; Corbridge et al., 2005). Civil society activists emphasised the need to design SA initiatives in ways that do not further marginalise already marginalised groups.

Furthermore, after decades of living under a dictatorship in which an 'official' civil society existed and was used by the regime as *décor*, Tunisian civil society actors are wary of the government exploiting civil society and participatory mechanisms to improve the image of those in power while doing little to deepen accountability. As International Alert notes in its report on the evaluation of health services, participation 'should not just be used with the aim of giving legitimacy to decisions' (2019, p. 18). Participatory mechanisms can be manipulated to involve only those close to officials or those who will say what officials want to hear, a key concern for civil society activists. Donor-supported initiatives, given the significant funds involved, are particularly vulnerable to misuse for the purpose of creating or consolidating clientelist networks through the distribution of resources. These factors all contribute to a wariness on the part of civil society when designing SA initiatives to ensure that they are not exploited for the purposes of strengthening clientelist networks and practices rather than achieving greater accountability to the public.

4.7 OUTCOMES: NET EFFECTS OF CIVIC INNOVATION

Civil society actors referred to a number of perceived successes that can be categorised into four types: (a) legislative reform, (b) policy changes, (c) normative or behavioural change and (d) the building of trust between state and citizens.

The most frequent successes civil society actors pointed to were legislative changes, perhaps because such change is more easily identified than other forms of change. Tunisian civil society has shaped legislation in a number of areas related to accountability, including article 139 of the Constitution mandating public participation at the subnational level, which has become the basis for many participatory programmes. For instance, one activist involved in the *Min Hakki Nsaalek* (It's My Right to Hold You to Account) network, which advocated for guaranteeing youth participation in elections, reported that 60% of the network's proposals had been incorporated into the 2017 Election Law (board member Pole Civile, personal communication, 19 June 2021, in person). Another activist from Al Bawsala highlighted successes in shaping legislation, stating that the organisation had seen 50% of its proposed amendments to the Local Authorities Code incorporated by legislators (project coordinator Al Bawsala, personal communication, 31 August 2021, online).

To illustrate the diversity in meanings, mobilisation methods and responses by authorities and to better understand the variety in outcomes of SA initiatives in Tunisia, we present three case studies of three CSOs that have led SA initiatives, based on in-depth interviews with their members.

4.7.1 *The Participatory Approach: Action Associative (Case #1)*

Action Associative is a Tunisian CSO set up in March 2012 with the objective of promoting citizenship and human rights. The association is best known for its work on participatory budgeting, which it pioneered in 2013 with a grant from the German Development Cooperation (GIZ by its German acronym). The association adopts a cooperative approach to promoting accountability that aims to build trust between state and citizens (Association Associative, n.d.). Accountability is seen as a virtuous cycle, in which citizen participation at the local level leads to accountability, which leads to increased trust in the state, which leads to better

policies and increased willingness to pay taxes, which in turn enables local government to deliver better services. For the association, improving local services is key to addressing one of Tunisia's greatest challenges—regional inequalities and the 'rural exodus' that contributes to over-burdened cities unable to provide decent services and a decent quality of life.

However, popular participation does not mean the end of representative democracy. Rather, it requires the creation of mechanisms that combine public participation with the technical expertise of public administration while 'allowing elected officials to fulfil their electoral promises' (board member Action Associative, personal communication, 18 August 2021, online). Thus, while participatory budgeting might be suitable for certain policy areas, such as roads or lighting, the association states that this might not be suitable for other areas, such as economic policy or cultural policy where public participation might sideline needed technical expertise and lead to 'the dangerous route of populism' (*ibid.*).

In 2014, the association became aware that a new programme was being designed by the Tunisian government, in partnership with the World Bank, to reform the municipal grant system. The association's relations with international donors enabled it to persuade the World Bank to insert conditions on citizen participation for all municipal investment grants under the programme. However, the participatory element of the programme was not what the association had in mind. According to a board member of the association, the annual participatory investment programme (PAI) imposed on all municipalities under the new grant system was designed by the Ministry of Interior in a way that removed all elements of accountability:

They [the Ministry of Interior] sent a document to municipalities banning the application of participatory budgeting in municipalities, explicitly telling them that the municipality that uses participatory budgeting would not be given any grants or assistance. This is a huge abuse of power. (*ibid.*)

The association contacted the World Bank, mobilised its network of associations and issued press releases to apply pressure on the Ministry to withdraw the document, which it did.

While using the discourse of participation, the PAI programme waters down its substance by limiting the role and powers of elected delegates who, in participatory budgeting, are normally given abilities to monitor

the fulfilment of municipal commitments and have access to certain documents and decision-making processes. As the association's representative explained,

One of the conditions for building trust through participation is accountability. The PAI takes participatory budgeting but removes all the elements of accountability. In participatory budgeting, accountability is ensured through the role of elected delegates who follow the execution of projects that were selected. They have clear roles and powers. In the PAI, the delegates have no role or powers. They [the Ministry of Interior] don't want transparency. The fight against corruption doesn't suit them. (ibid.)

This also illustrates the risks of institutionalising SA mechanisms by imposing a single official SA mechanism that empties SA of its substance, reduces the space for civil society to innovate and further deepens distrust between state and citizens.

4.7.2 *The Transparency Approach: Al Bawsala (Case #2)*

Al Bawsala is a Tunisian CSO active since 2011. The association's work focuses on providing information on the activities of elected officials, advocacy aimed at 'establishing good governance and political ethics' and defending 'social progress and citizen emancipation' (Jamaity, 2020). The association has two main projects on accountability: Marsad Majles (literally: Observatory of the Council), which monitors the work of Parliament, and Marsad Baladia, which monitors municipalities. Both projects extract and publish information on the work of elected bodies through various means, such as information requests, litigation, advocacy campaigns, reporting and media outreach.

The association adopts a more adversarial approach to accountability than Action Associative. Its Marsad Baladia project, which began in 2014 and is funded by the European Union and Oxfam, is a transparency initiative that seeks to 'observe the activity of municipalities through access to information, and communicate it in a clear and updated way' (project coordinator Al Bawsala, personal communication, 31 August 2021, online). The project's theory of change focuses on 'obtaining the maximum amount of information ... and putting it at the service of citizens to access information using technology' (project coordinator Al Bawsala, personal communication, 31 August 2021, online).

The project began with a strategy to obtain information by submitting information requests to municipalities under the 2016 Access to Information Law and litigating against municipalities that refused to respond. Over time, the association moved away from litigation towards other methods, specifically the creation of a local observers' network, a transparency index and an annual report based on this index. As a former project coordinator explained,

We submitted cases to the administrative court and then the Authority on Access to Information once it was created, and we followed the legal process. To be honest, it wasn't very effective. The Authority takes a long time to issue decisions. Even then, the Authority doesn't have the power to impose sanctions. I don't know of any municipality that was sanctioned because it didn't respect these obligations (ibid.)

In contrast, the association found that its transparency index was highly effective in bringing about behavioural change among municipalities. The index ranks all 350 Tunisian municipalities according to indicators on their compliance with access-to-information rules. The four-year grant received by the project enabled comparisons over time to reflect changes in municipal responsiveness. The association found that the best-ranked municipalities were those where both the mayor and the general secretary were willing to provide information and those that had the internal capacity to process and respond to requests for information within the deadline. Over time, the project shifted towards organising visits to the lowest-ranked municipalities to provide advice on how to improve their transparency processes.

Marsad Baladia's shift in strategy from litigation to a more 'supportive' approach illustrates the evolution in civil society actors' strategies towards combining adversarial techniques with cooperation.

4.7.3 *The Advocacy Approach: El Comita (Case #3)*

El Comita is a Tunisian CSO that works on community organising. The association emerged from a project in 2018 in partnership with French community-organising association Alliance Citoyenne, funded by the Institut Français and later the Open Society Foundation. The association applies the community-organising methodology first developed in the US and has community organisers in seven deprived neighbourhoods

of Greater Tunis. Community organising has a particular methodology that seeks to engage and empower ordinary citizens by organising them in collective action. Its philosophy centres on developing the capacities of under-represented groups to influence decision-making. The methodology emphasises the importance of understanding the nature of power, developing indigenous leadership through continuous training, establishing democratic decision-making within communities (through the use of general assemblies, voting and other methods), strengthening social ties, using conflict strategies and securing 'small wins'.

El Comita's approach to accountability differs significantly from the participatory approach of Action Associative and the transparency watchdog approach of Al Bawsala. First, the association strongly rejects the project-based approach to accountability, emphasising instead the importance of long-term movement-building. Rather than working at the national or municipal level, the association adopts a 'micro-local' approach of working in specific neighbourhoods over long periods. Second, the association adopts a confrontational approach to demanding accountability, on the premise that change involves conflict. The main method used is non-violent social mobilisation such as sit-ins, pickets, petitions and street campaigns.

Third, the association eschews most of the language of 'good governance' and 'transparency' and focuses instead on securing tangible public goods and access to services as concrete results that can be enjoyed by citizens. For instance, in 2019–2021, the association mobilised 3,925 households through local campaigns on specific issues. These succeeded in securing access to electricity for 233 households in a poor neighbourhood that was excluded from the electricity network, obtaining changes to traffic rules outside a school to protect pupil safety, persuading the municipality to suspend rent payments for small businesses during the Covid-19 crisis and obtaining a free municipal space for local artisans to sell their goods (board member El Comita, personal communication, 19 August 2021, online). Accountability is thus framed around access to rights for ordinary citizens and to better public services.

The association's strategy is strongly focused on developing local leadership and obtaining commitments by officials through cycles of training, collective mobilisation and negotiation with state institutions. However, it faces challenges in transferring knowledge between micro-local actions and translating this into large-scale policy changes. The association is considering the next steps in its evolution: establish inter-neighbourhood

committees to enable exchange and create two national observatories (on the environment and on access to social rights) to formulate and advocate for policy recommendations. The role of these observatories is to use the learning gained from its micro-local campaigns to shape national or local decision-making.

El Comita's first organisers were taught the community-organising methodology used in the US and France. They were asked to implement it exactly as transmitted but insisted on tweaking it to fit their post-authoritarian context. This meant, for example, adopting a more diplomatic approach to engaging with officials, as discussed above. These adaptations also required developing strategies for dealing with the politics of patronage that characterise state–society relations. El Comita's approach self-consciously seeks to build a rights-based discourse with officials that escapes patronage-based logics. Its organisers recalled that when mobilising officials, they deliberately sought to avoid leveraging personal relations with them. As the head of the organisation explained,

We reject this way of dealing with citizens as if it is a 'favour'. When I come to an official, I am not asking for a favour, I am asking for my right. But if as an activist I come to him through personal connections, or I ask him to come to a general assembly and he does it because I contacted him through a friend, then he will see it as a favour to me and not as his duty to citizens, and this changes the whole dynamic of the interaction. That is not the relationship we want. (board member El Comita, personal communication, 19 August 2021, online)

Accordingly, the organisation trains its members to approach officials through institutional mechanisms in order to discourage the personalisation of relations. It also put in place mechanisms to avoid the development of clientelist relations between its organisers and officials by, for example, banning organisers from working in their own neighbourhoods and moving organisers around different neighbourhoods to avoid the building of patron–client relations between organisers and officials or ordinary citizens over time. The association's mobilisation strategy highlights the importance of building strong relations between citizens over time and of building social capital as citizens are trained in grassroots mobilisation. Community organising's funding model of relying on membership

fees may provide an alternative to the project-based approach of donor-funded initiatives, although the association has yet to move towards this model.

4.8 LESSONS ON SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN TUNISIA

4.8.1 *Formal vs. Informal Institutions*

A frequently recurring theme in discussions with civil society actors and officials regarding the 2011–2021 political transition is the tension between formal and informal institutions when it comes to accountability. While all actors stated that Tunisia put in place a relatively good legal framework that promoted accountability, there was deep frustration that successive legal reforms and advances were not fully implemented due to the continuing operation of informal rules that governed the conduct of public officials and institutions.

It is notable that many civil society actors focused their efforts on amending formal rules. When asked about their biggest successes, many cited the adoption of laws and their role in influencing legal provisions, such as the Access to Information Law and the Local Authorities Code. It appears that large national CSOs focused their efforts on the adoption of laws, given the relative accessibility and openness of Parliament as opposed to the government and the central administration. In contrast, while influencing legislation proved to be relatively straightforward between 2011 and 2021, reforming institutional cultures and practices was more of a challenge. This created a debate on how civil society could ‘activate’ laws when they remained largely on paper. It illustrates the need to shift the debate from a legal one focused on how to enforce laws against individuals or institutions to a more sociological one focused on how to shift organisational culture and change organisational behaviour.

4.8.2 *Demand Side vs. Supply Side*

Many of the SA initiatives studied appear to focus on educating and engaging citizens. Many CSOs worked on raising citizen awareness as a first step towards holding state institutions accountable. They cited many challenges to this, such as prevailing norms and attitudes carried over from decades of authoritarian rule: a lack of trust in state institutions, of a ‘reflex’ to hold institutions accountable and of a notion of public

interest as well as a fear of engagement in collective action. This focus on so-called demand-side initiatives assumes that changing citizens' attitudes and behaviour to achieve greater public participation will strengthen accountability.

Meanwhile, fewer SA initiatives focused on educating officials (both administration and politicians) to strengthen their commitment to participatory mechanisms and engagement with citizens. Our case studies highlight that bottom-up accountability initiatives should be coupled with a focus on the supply side of accountability, that is, strengthening the ability of state institutions to respond. For instance, the Al Bawsala case study highlights the need for civil society actors to work with public authorities to help them understand how to respond to access-to-information requests. Where political will exists to engage with citizens, public institutions may nevertheless lack the ability to do so. In this case, Al Bawsala discovered that in many instances, its access-to-information requests to municipalities went unanswered because institutions did not have internal procedures for managing these requests, were not even aware of receiving them, did not understand legal requirements or lacked the human resources to respond. Thus, failures to respond to requests were not always indicative of a refusal to be accountable. This illustrates the need to understand dynamics within public institutions and the causes behind a lack of accountability in order to develop more nuanced strategies for exacting accountability.

This echoes the shift in SA literature towards a focus on the need to couple bottom-up accountability initiatives (the 'demand side') with efforts to develop the ability of public institutions to respond to such demand (the 'supply side' of accountability) (Brett, 2003). It also echoes findings in the accountability literature that successful accountability initiatives involve building coalitions of reformers in both the state and civil society, who work collectively to change organisational behaviour (Booth, 2012; Fox, 2007, 2015).

4.8.3 The Tensions Between Representative and Participatory Democracy

Many civil society actors and officials argued that elected officials see themselves as enjoying exclusive decision-making authority and see participatory initiatives as an obstacle to exercising this authority. This points to the wider question of the relationship between representative and

participatory democracy (Landemore, 2020). Some officials see participatory mechanisms such as the PAI as creating problems for them and as usurping their legitimacy and powers as elected representatives who aim to implement their electoral programme. Some civil society actors themselves emphasised the need to establish clear mechanisms and rules when it comes to public participation to ensure that representative democracy and participatory democracy are compatible and mutually reinforcing and that representative institutions are not weakened when they are still establishing their authority. Both officials and civil society actors therefore agreed on the importance of establishing agreements between public institutions and civil society or citizen groups that clearly set out participatory and monitoring mechanisms and outline the limits to each side's intervention. This is seen as one helpful way to prevent the overlap of mandates and conflict.

4.8.4 *Tools vs. Contexts*

SA initiatives have come under criticism for prioritising standard tools and their technical aspects to the detriment of paying close attention to the specificities of the context in which they are implemented. As the El Comita case study shows, SA tools cannot simply be transplanted and implemented through a predetermined methodology or 'toolkit'. This echoes critiques in the literature calling for a 'best-fit' rather than a 'best-practices' approach (Hickey & King, 2016) and for distinguishing between 'watchdogs' and 'widgets' (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012). In addition, civil society actors can become enamoured of technical tools to the extent that they seek to monopolise them. For instance, an interesting discussion occurred during the FGD on whether CSOs should seek to copyright an SA tool that they created and to what extent organisations should insist on the implementation of a mechanism in the same way in different regions and localities. In response to the statement by one participant that his organisation was 'trademarking' the SA tools it developed, another civil society representative responded,

The idea of transfer is important. As civil society, we are working on capitalising on previous experiences ... we see what experiences have been done, learn from them, try to implement and improve them ... But this attempt to monopolise a concept is not in line with civil society. (project coordinator Al Bawsala, FGD)

Some participants also referred to the tendency to copy tools and mimic models from other countries. One stated, ‘Our problem in civil society is we’re only focusing on a few mechanisms, like participatory budgeting, citizen score cards. Everyone copies. We’re only implementing models instead of developing our own tools’ (representative of ANSA, FGD).

This illustrates the tensions between different ways of viewing SA: between a technical approach that focuses on the development and application of tools and a more contextualised approach that focuses on developing specific tools and strategies that respond to local needs and contexts.

4.8.5 *Confrontation vs. Cooperation*

In the period between 2011 and 2021, civil society relations with the state evolved as organisations sought to strike their own balance between cooperative and confrontational approaches and to navigate the line between cooperation, conflict and co-optation. While adversarial tactics were important, most civil society actors covered by this study reflected on their own experience that confrontation needed to be coupled with direct engagement, ‘diplomacy’ in communicating with officials and building cooperative relations with them. Such approaches might involve civil society working with local authorities to solve local problems by facilitating public meetings, presenting ideas and mobilising local knowledge. Most agreed on the need for both cooperative and adversarial approaches: the latter to build negotiation power and the former to agree on commitments. Research participants viewed as the biggest advances instances where civil society was able to find willing partners among politicians or bureaucrats who could push in the same direction.

4.8.6 *National vs. Local*

As outlined above, SA initiatives in 2011–2021 tended to be concentrated at the local and regional levels, given the greater ease of access to subnational officials and institutions. Nevertheless, local–national linkages were important to enabling civil society to utilise the expertise and networks they gained through local initiatives in order to shape national policies. The experiences of various organisations, such as Action Associative, Al Bawsala and El Comita, show how these organisations—based in Tunis but with local branches in different regions—tested and developed

SA strategies at the local level and then transferred knowledge between their local branches and to the national level through advocacy activities to ministries and Parliament. By having a presence at both the local and national levels, and by building both their policy advocacy and mobilisation capacities, these organisations were able to create linkages between local SA initiatives and national policy. This demonstrates the importance of building national–local civil society linkages and coalitions and linking local mobilisation to national advocacy efforts. Participants viewed this ability to bridge the local and national levels as giving these associations and their activists greater credibility at the local level—due to their presence at the national level and relations with national-level institutions—and greater credibility at the national level, due to their nationwide networks and knowledge of different geographical contexts.

4.9 CONCLUSION

The large number and range of SA initiatives in Tunisia between 2011 and 2021 demonstrate citizens' desire to establish a more inclusive social contract that delivers social justice, rule of law and basic rights and freedoms for all citizens. Within this struggle, SA initiatives seek to—in the words of their proponents—rebalance state–society relations away from a despotic and clientelist mode towards one based on accountability and equality between citizens.

The experiences of the organisations interviewed for this study demonstrate the importance of four main factors in the success of SA initiatives: first, the need for civil society to build credibility with both citizens and officials over time; second, the importance of tackling both ends of the accountability equation by working with citizens and officials to strengthen the commitment and engagement of both to achieving accountability; third, the need to build coalitions of CSOs and local–national civil society linkages; and fourth, utilising cooperative as well as confrontational strategies towards officials that involve multiple methods, such as media campaigns, community mobilisation and training for officials. When these factors were present, SA initiatives were seen to advance downward accountability and reshape state–society relations. Obtaining 'small wins' was also seen as critical to building credibility, gaining the commitment of citizens to mobilisation and maintaining momentum.

However, SA initiatives face a number of challenges. Resistance by influential actors within or close to the state—politicians, bureaucrats

and private parties—continues to stymie efforts to bring about greater accountability. Political accountability is undermined by an electoral system that disperses power between a large number of parties in the government, and legal accountability is often difficult to enforce. Civil society mobilisation is seen to bring about only slow and limited advances in this area, as in the case of economic reforms, regional development and access to information. Civil society faces internal weaknesses that undermine its capacity to effectively push for accountability. Finally, civil society is itself embedded within a governance system based on patronage, which shapes the nature of its relations and cooperation with political officials and citizens' interactions with the state.

The Covid-19 crisis added further challenges, such as obstacles to mobilisation due to bans on public gatherings, compounded by the emergency measures introduced on 25 July 2021 and the subsequent suspension then replacement of the 2014 Constitution. These changes have further undermined accountability, weakened judicial independence and placed executive decisions above judicial review. Twelve years after the 2011 uprising, Tunisia's civil society is once again on the defensive, facing the challenge of preserving the progress made in the past decade while adapting its strategies in the context of a changing constitutional and political regime.

NOTES

1. La circulaire n °12 datée 2011 relative à l'encouragement de la participation des citoyens dans le processus de l'évaluation des services publics; la circulaire n°13 de 2011 relative à l'activation de l'approche participative dans la prestation des services publics; la circulaire n °14 datée 2011 relative à la démarche participative dans la législation et l'évaluation de la qualité des textes juridiques.
2. Indeed, the SA initiatives in the health and education sectors identified during the mapping largely focused on local or regional health and education services, rather than national ones. See International Alert's program in Tataouine (International Alert, [2019](#)).
3. The Access to Information Authority (Instance d'Accès à l'Information, INAI) is an independent public body created by Organic Law no. 22 of March 24, 2016, to oversee implementation of the right of access to information.

4. Some municipalities have a large number of residents, which would mean that a large number of signatories are required for a petition or meeting request to be accepted.

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