Gangsterism: A New Form of Power

Can the Accountability Movement Respond?

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Introduction

On the 9th of March, the BBC ran a story about the growing cocaine route to Europe via Ecuador (Wells, 2025). It got me thinking about the increasing risk of the demise of decency towards gangsterism. Rule by might and not by law. Our civilisation, whatever is left of it, faces the risk of being overthrown not by popular insurrection but by a greedy and violent cabal. These cabals come in various shades; the ones reported by the BBC are known as a mafia from Albania. Yet others are in suits and running our governments and corporations. They are united by one vision - grand accumulation. They will not allow anything or anyone, including basic laws of decency, to stand in their way. They have many tactics. The Albanian mafia, we are told, will shoot if one dares to disagree with them. Other cabals run governments and use prisons as a way of silencing anyone who would dare to criticise them. Some are so popular they steal in the name of the people. There is only one way to describe the situation we are in - **the end of decency and widespread acceptance of greed**. We are in trouble.

Is there a way out, you may ask? The progressive forces that remain are analysing their situations in isolation from each other. We are not connecting the dots. To others, this is about threats to democracy and the rise of authoritarianism- they are right. To others, it's about the rise of the lucrative global trade in drugs- they are also right. To others, it's the new wave around intolerance of groups that had seemingly won the battle, such as the LGBTQI movement. They are right, as well.

We have abandoned analysing how the base (economy) affects politics, culture and society. Could it be that the real problems are in the economy? For us in Africa, it is a challenge of the lack of industrialisation and the weakening of commodity prices. To exacerbate the situation, our productivity levels in agriculture are the lowest when compared to other regions. There is limited value addition- we produce primary goods. The only site of accumulation is within the state. What is left of the private sector mostly depends on providing services to the government. Political power has come to mean economic power. The new elite have connections with government-based actors. The stage is set for the deepening of primitive accumulation. When supplying the government, a US$450.00 laptop might as well just cost US$4,500.00.

In the Global North, on the other hand, many had abandoned manufacturing, preferring instead to outsource to other regions (starting with Mexico, then China, Vietnam, etc.). Today, that strategy has come back to haunt us.

Globalisation has disrupted the global order. Rather than benefiting the authors of the strategy, it has been to China's benefit and other late industrialisers. The Trump administration is busy trying to undo what was America's signature project, commonly referred to as the Washington Consensus. The arsenal of tools is based on bullying and gangsterism. They reflect both deep-seated desperation and a very clear misunderstanding of how the world has changed. Whilst the US remains an important player, it is mostly seen as a net consumer of finished products. There is less of 'made in the USA' compared to 'made in China'. Reversing that will take decades of economic stagnation in China and a significant decline in demand for manufactured goods from other regions outside of the United States (US). However, the US will most likely throw everything they have against China. Desperate gangsters- these ones.

Others with lesser political power will wade into the murky waters of criminality. The new drug shipping routes are heavily policed, and yet the drugs still make their way to the United Kingdom and other territories. Criminal money is a more attractive incentive to turn a blind eye, not just by a junior officer but by governments.

While they struggle against illicit drugs in developing countries, poor African countries must contend with the smuggling of their precious minerals (gold and diamonds) at unprecedented levels. The smuggling benefits only a few, especially those in power. Could it be that gangsterism is a new framework to use in understanding power and accumulation in this current moment?

Is there a counter to these new and unprecedented forms of abuse of power? At the beginning of the year, I made a big bet on accountability as an important pillar in strengthening democracy (Murisa, 2025). Admittedly, the façade of 'democracy' has led many to think that we have tamed the leviathan called the state. Last year alone, a total of 15 African countries held elections. The results were a mixed bag. In some countries, we saw new political parties winning and, in some, the return of parties and leaders that have been in government before. But there is no tangible evidence so far that all these elections have led to better lives. Elites within and outside of the state have coalesced to diminish the redistribution capabilities of the state. Instead, it continues to serve a tiny minority.

The elections-dominated democracy paradigm has reduced citizens into voters without an adequate appreciation of what the current moment requires - a new form of active engagement with the state and, at times, confronting power using similar, if not more extreme, measures of resistance. There is a need for more on the part of citizens.

Lessons learnt from elsewhere suggest that effective governments are usually found in countries where there are active citizens in various public spaces. Effective governments, where they once existed, rarely governed alone; they did so in partnership with active citizens in various associational platforms.

The struggles of the past era may have led to the assumption that once colonial or apartheid authorities and even post-colonial authoritarian and military regimes have been removed, then democracy will resolve everything.

The continent has a rich history of struggle up until now. However, the current moment is ambiguous for several reasons: (i) many have been recruited around partisan agendas and will defend their political party even in instances of poor performance, (ii) organised civil society has weakened mobilisation by placing itself at the centre of agitations for change. Citizens have retreated from the public square under the impression that organised civil society has the wherewithal to confront governments and secure change, and (iii) many post-colonial governments have been brutally violent when confronted by dissenting citizens. There are notable levels of fatigue amongst citizens who have been engaged in decades-long protests and abuse of power.

We hold to the firm belief that for democracy to work as it should, citizens should be involved beyond just voting. The citizens must come together in various formal and informal associational and institutional platforms to demand performance from officeholders at both national and local levels.

We hold to the belief that those holding public office and power must be held to a higher standard of accountability.

Furthermore, the proposed accountability framework will most likely vastly improve the quality of our democracies across Africa. Only when officeholders are held accountable based on existing standards, frameworks and even commitments they make on their own shall we see improvements in how governments function and ensure effective delivery.

A Brief Background on Citizen-Driven Efforts for a Democratic Outcome

World history as we know it can be viewed from the perspective of resistance to various forms of oppression. Each form of oppression led to the emergence of a particular coalition of social forces, which we have, at times, reduced to a particular social movement. These range from liberation, labour, democracy, debt justice, and land movements, amongst many others. To date, most of these movements have achieved their missions. The liberation movements, the ANC being the oldest of them in Africa, led to decolonisation across the entire continent.

The labour movement, initially established to defend workers' rights, morphed into broader governance concerns and became what others have called the 'democracy' movement. Zambia's Movement for Multiparty Democracy was one of the first to imagine post-independence liberation and demand multiparty democracy. These movements led to the undoing of the single-party project towards a multi-party democracy. Alongside these bigger political movements, there were others, mostly focused on social and economic justice.

The gender (feminist) movement was, on the one hand, Afrocentric but with global inspiration. The Beijing conference seemed to have spurred on its popularity and perhaps helped surface the ills of patriarchy to a wider audience. Ever since, we have seen the introduction of the 16 Days Against Gender-based Violence, the International Day of the Girl Child, Women's Month, the Green Belt Movement, Menstrual Hygiene Day, World Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and the White Ribbon Campaign.

In the late 1990s, social forces from around the world gathered under the banner of 'another world is possible'. This was a direct critique of the business and government elites gathering at Davos. The debt justice (Jubilee) movement received unprecedented global attention. Several coalitions focused on debt cancellation emerged. There was a consensus around debt justice. Many felt that the Global South had been hamstrung from transformation due to the huge amounts of debt that it had to carry. Furthermore, some of this was odious debt - a claim that the debt is illegitimate since a previous government acquired it. For example, the Zimbabwean government inherited a USD 700 million debt at independence from the Rhodesian government, and the ANC had to pay off the debts of the apartheid-era government when it came into power in 1994.

The debts inherited by the current governments of South Africa and Zimbabwe from previous governments and rulers are not limited to financial debt alone but are rather complex and multifaceted. In South Africa, for example, the Apartheid regime policies like the Group Areas Act of 1950 created a legal framework for varying levels of government to establish neighbourhoods as "group areas" where only people of a particular race were able to reside. This displaced hundreds and thousands of people. Breaking up families, friends, and communities. Negative manifestations of these policies are seen in the Post Apartheid regime, where there were several economic inequalities and poverty in the country. This is evident through significant disparities in education, wealth, and healthcare.

In the rural space, we saw the emergence of the land occupation movement, especially here in Southern Africa, as part of an attempt to resolve skewed land ownership patterns. Zimbabwe led on this. There were contestations about the autonomy of the movement. Was it state-sponsored? Was there a real land question in Zimbabwe? The results speak for themselves - one of the largest property transfers in the 21st century. No doubt, the process had its contradictions, especially the way politicians and the politically connected elites benefited. Furthermore, the government has recently announced plans to issue private and bankable tenure to land beneficiaries. Will this undo the benefits of the redistribution exercise? Beyond the land movement, there emerged other niche-based but equally important streams of thought around ecological concerns and attempts at undoing the control of agriculture by very few multinational corporations. In one instance, there emerged an ecological movement which, for all intents and purposes, has morphed into the food sovereignty movement.

Timeline of Accountability Movements

Liberation Movements
The colonial and apartheid eras sparked liberation movements like ZANU-PF, ANC, Frelimo, and SWAPO. These movements aimed to end oppression and fight for independence.

Jubilee Movements
Severe economic strain and debt levels prompted the Jubilee movement, which campaigned for debt forgiveness to relieve the burden on developing nations.

Land Movement
Post-settler land disparities, particularly in Zimbabwe and South Africa, led to the land movement, advocating for land redistribution and equity

1   2   3   4   5   6

Trade Union Movements
As capitalist production grew, trade unions emerged, advocating workers' rights and supporting liberation movements, boosting the fight for independence.

Economic Justice Movements
Resistance to Economic Structural Adjustment Programs (ESAP) in the 1990s gave rise to the economic justice movement, which sought fairer economic policies.

Food Sovereignty and Agro-ecological Movements
Monopoly capitalism in agriculture drove the food sovereignty and agro-ecological movements, focusing on sustainable farming and fairer food systems.
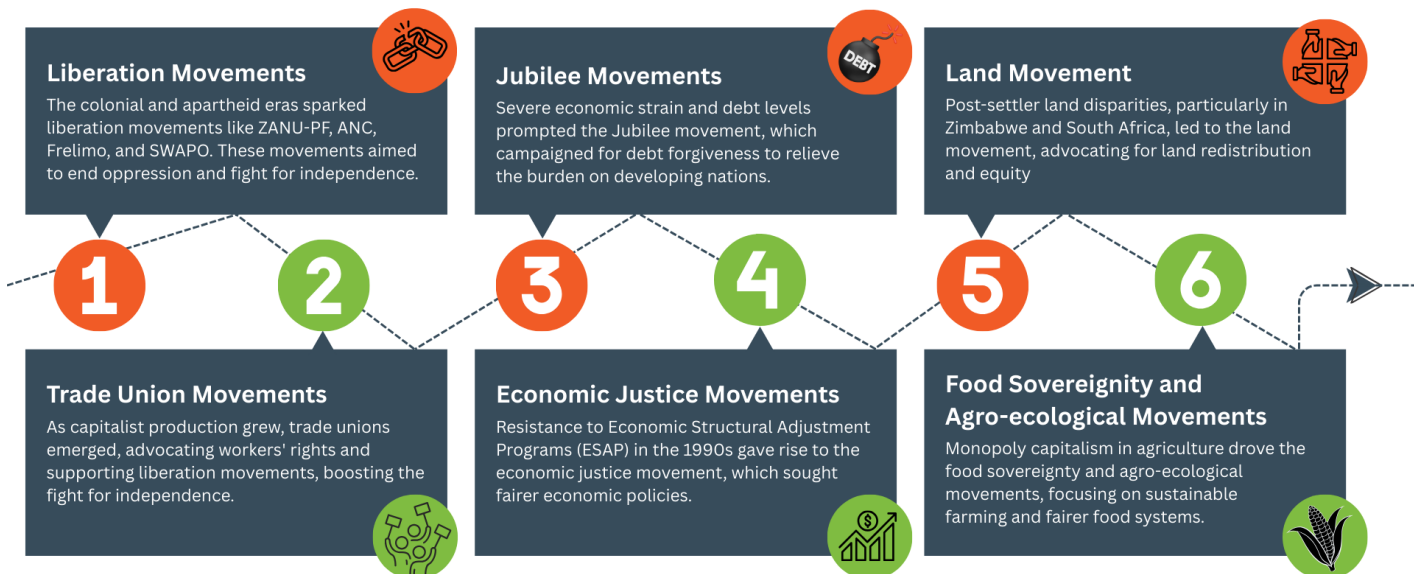
Figure 1: Timeline of Accountability Movements in Africa

However, despite the successes of the movements listed above, the continent continues to be characterised by growing authoritarianism, inequality and poverty. The democracy question has not been adequately resolved. There are still concerns about the electoral-based dynasties that have emerged in the post-one-party state consensus. Political parties that emerged from the liberation movements are still in charge constitutionally. The supposed democratic constitutions have not yielded democracy. They have instead led to entrenched oligarchs or a new form of kleptocracy. The various economic justice-focused movements have partially been successful.

For instance, the debt movement led to the forgiveness of debt in many highly indebted countries, only for new and unprecedented levels of debt to return within a decade because of uncontrolled government spending.

We are not sure about the kind of movement needed for today. What are the various forms of oppression that we are confronting? First, we have 'seemingly' resolved the issue of one-partyism and, in its place, replaced it with constitutionally elected governments. However, our experience so far has been that electoral democracies do not necessarily yield transformative development. If left unchecked, they tend to behave just like any other undemocratic regime. Elites in politics across most of Africa have used their offices for private accumulation. ***Africa's development project has stalled.***

Towards an Accountability-focused movement

In this instance, accountability refers to the practice of being held to a certain standard of performance. It is a very simple idea: a government is responsible for its actions, and if that government chooses unfavourable actions, it will face consequences. The quickest sanction against a government should be a loss at an election. Yet, we have seen underperforming administrations being re-elected several times. Officially, the legislative arm makes laws and is expected to provide oversight to the executive to ensure compliance. However, the members of the legislature belong to the same political party as those in the Executive. In many instances, public decisions related to the allocation of resources and accountability on the same are made via the political party line. How do we expect actors from the same party to watch over each other and ensure adequate state effectiveness? It is difficult to ensure accountability given the clear conflict of interest. Governments are increasingly associated with allegations of corruption and major scandals.

In some instances, the offices of the Public Protector, Auditor General, and Ombudsman, together with opposition party-led parliamentary portfolio committees, have called attention to instances of official malfeasance. However, there is a lot more work that needs to be done. The private media (where it exists) has played an important role in exposing incidents of corruption and abuse of power, usually after the fact. There is a need for a more proactive approach to enhancing accountability.

Several civil society-based formations have tested many models of enhancing public accountability. These include tracking possible cases of corruption, ranking the performance of legislators, compliance of governments with international and regional protocols, and tracking public finance through budget instruments.

The Accountability Movement in Motion

The behaviour of the government and related public entities is, in most instances, put under scrutiny during elections. It is the missing component in the discussion around re-imagining democracy.

Governments not only have to be elected to office, but they also must perform to ensure that inclusive development is effectively implemented. Unfortunately, we have devoted significant energy towards ensuring that elections are conducted in a manner that allows for credible results. We need to move beyond elections.

Currently, most accountability-focused initiatives are led by formal civil society organisations. At times, these have been complemented by ad hoc protests such as the ones recently seen in Kenya. Currently, social movements and other citizen-led platforms emerge from within the context of a sharp crisis around the failure of public policy. They proceed to hold a variety of activities, including protests, as part of an attempt to secure reforms from the state. They are usually successful in securing short-term policy gains, but they do not have an in-built mechanism for longevity. They are ephemeral in nature. Their asks, although popular, can also be short-term in nature. They do not establish collaborations with the existing formal civil society-based organisations already working on accountability or with the capacity for a longer term.

However, for the purpose of this discussion, we will focus on accountability initiatives rolled out consistently as a program of a civil society organisation or a media house.

These activities include but are not limited to exposing corruption in public processes (Corruption Watch), ensuring that mining companies comply with international best practices especially around taxes (EITI), conversion of electoral promises into policy programs (African Citizens Watch), budget performance (BudgIT Nigeria), transparency around public debt (ZIMCODD), ensuring compliance with international best practices around the rights of women (Solidarity for African Women's Rights), youths (The African Network of Youth Policy Experts), the girl child (African Child Policy Forum) and implementation of inclusive social policy (Social Policy Initiative). The approaches deployed are usually very technical and expert-driven. To date, they have contributed to several policy reforms, improved understanding of how the contribution of mining companies through taxes enhances development and attempted inclusive social policy measures. However, they are few and far between- there is a need for more accountability platforms spanning the vast spectrum of public sectors, especially including health, education, food security and housing. Furthermore, these processes are not widely known except by development practitioners or experts working within those sectors. There is a need to infuse accountability-focused work within existing and new social movements and other citizen-led platforms.

Case Study One - Tracking the conversion of electoral promises into policy actions

It has become a part of electoral best practice for contesting political parties to come up with a long list of promises of what they will do if they were to win power. These would normally be in the form of political party manifestos. Some of these would be as long as 400 pages. For years, very few people paid attention to these, and some political parties would just clean up the previous manifesto and use it in the next cycle of campaigning. African politics is transitioning towards an issues-driven approach. Voter loyalty is shifting. We have seen liberation movements and other incumbent political parties begin to lose support across most of Southern Africa. The era of blind loyalty to a political party is slowly coming to an end.

The tracking of the conversion of electoral political parties contributes towards better voter decision-making and encourages informed, active civic engagement. The African Citizens Watch platform, established by SIVIO Institute, tracks what the government is doing and implementing against the promises captured in their manifestos and other key policy pronouncements. At the beginning, in 2018, the platform was tracking the government of Zimbabwe, and in the last two (2) years, it has expanded to track the governments of Malawi, Zambia, South Africa and, most recently, Botswana.

Case Study Two - Tracking Agriculture Performance Against the AU's CAADP

In 2003, African heads of state convened in Maputo and committed to revitalising agriculture by allocating 10% of their annual budgets to the sector. This initiative aimed to achieve at least 6% growth in agriculture through the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP). CAADP, a blend of state-led agricultural development and active market participation, focuses on enhancing production, particularly within smallholder agricultural systems. It was the first continent-wide Agricultural Development Plan endorsed by both African states and the international community.

To assess whether consistently allocating 10% of national budgets to agriculture has led to growth in production and productivity, SIVIO Institute developed an online comparative tracker (Version 1 and Version 2). The tracker covers 50 countries across Africa. These countries were categorised into two groups: those compliant with the 10% allocation (green) and those not compliant (gold).

Using FAO datasets, the tracker compares the agricultural performance of these groups. The 10% compliant countries demonstrated higher levels of production and productivity, suggesting that this allocation could be a significant factor in agricultural success.

The implementation and realisation of CAADP goals have been uneven. Nonetheless, CAADP has spurred the development of improved agricultural recovery strategies and attracted new donor funding. Overall, agricultural performance has improved in most countries studied. Ethiopia, for example, increased its production from approximately 3.5 million tonnes in 2001 to 12.4 million tonnes in 2022, a 254% increase over twenty years.
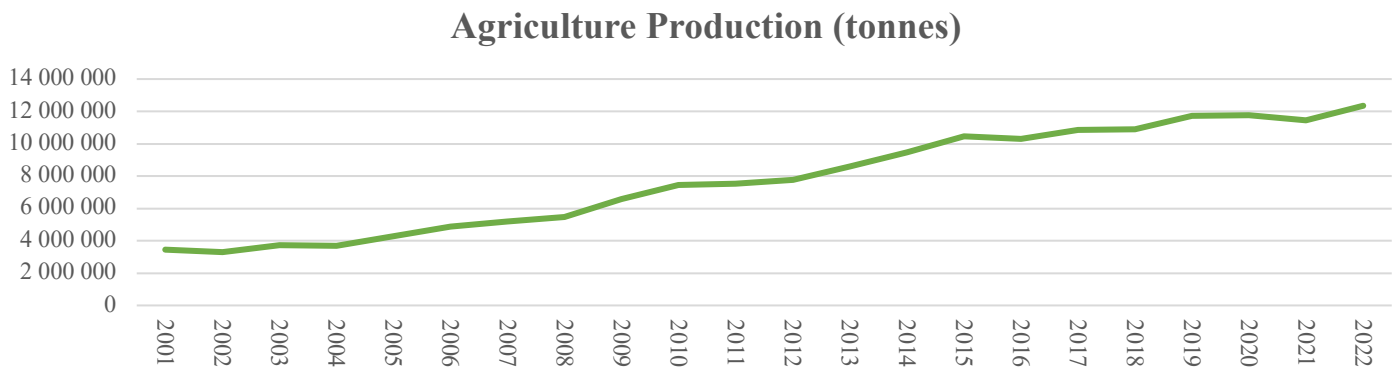
Agriculture Production (tonnes)

Figure 2: Agriculture Production in Ethiopia (2001-2022)

Some governments, like Malawi, increased their expenditure on smallholder agriculture for a while despite initial resistance from multilateral agencies like the World Bank. Investments have flowed into:

1. Developing drought-tolerant maize varieties.
2. New value chain approaches to improve market access and productivity.
3. Developing large tracts of land for agriculture.

Our tracker indicates that countries allocating an average of 10% of their budgets to agriculture over the past 20 years have achieved higher productivity levels, averaging 1.2 million tonnes compared to 365 thousand tonnes for non-compliant countries. This suggests that the 10% budget allocation could be a crucial factor in enhancing agricultural productivity.

Case Study Three - Tracking Budget Performance

BudgIT, established in 2011 in Nigeria, aims to simplify public information to ensure that citizens can understand and oversee their government effectively. One of BudgIT's key initiatives is the creation of infographics that make complex budgetary and public spending data more accessible.

Additionally, BudgIT's Tracka platform enables citizens to report on the progress of development projects in their communities by uploading photos and updates. This tool encourages active citizen involvement and direct monitoring of local projects. A notable example is the advocacy effort to rehabilitate Onda Community Primary School in Nasarawa, Nigeria. Through collaboration with the community and local government, Tracka facilitated the construction of new classrooms and the provision of furniture by 2023, significantly improving student attendance and learning conditions. (Akinmutimi and Musa, 2024).

To date, Tracka is active in 36 states, reaching 7,589 communities to issue reports on 19,644 projects. The platform has received just over a hundred reports that help ensure the delivery and implementation of public projects across Nigeria.
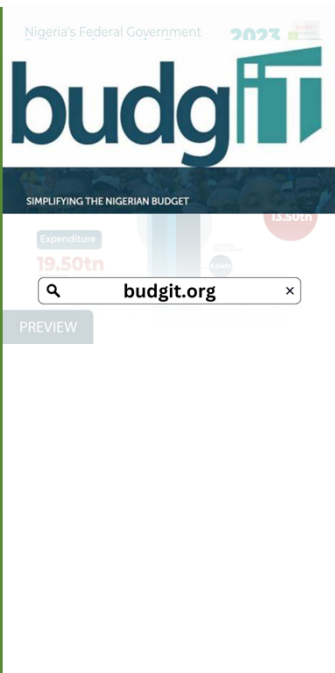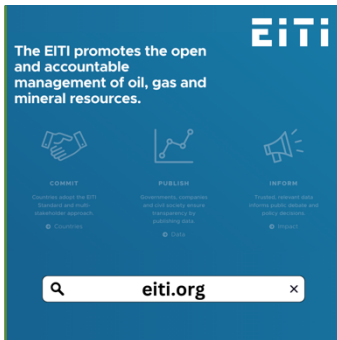
Case Study Four – Tracking Mining Resources

Africa is endowed with abundant mineral resources, including gold, silver, copper, uranium, cobalt, and many other metals, which are key inputs to manufacturing processes around the world. The mining sector plays a significant role in the economic growth of a country. For instance, in 2019 alone, minerals and fossil fuels accounted for over a third of exports from at least 60% of African countries. Additionally, 42 out of 54 African countries are classified as resource-dependent, with 18 countries classified as dependent on non-fuel minerals, 10 as dependent on energy or fuel exports and the rest as dependent on agricultural exports (Signé and Johnson, 2021). However, in many countries, the mining industry has yet to have a positive impact on local economies. Instead, it has had a significant extractive impact on local communities, leading to environmental degradation, displacement, and disruption of regional economies.

Holding mining companies accountable for their impact on communities is crucial to ensure they operate responsibly, mitigate environmental damage, and contribute positively to regional development. Historical and current data have shown that while countries, especially in Africa, are endowed with minerals that have the potential to redefine their economic trajectory, they remain poor. For most schools of thought, this has been attributed to a governance challenge, the failure to equitably manage natural resources.

The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) is a global standard aimed at promoting the open and accountable management of oil, gas, and mineral resources. The EITI has played a significant role in promoting accountability in natural resource governance through its various initiatives.

In countries like Nigeria, the EITI has implemented open data policies that have improved transparency and accountability in the oil and gas sector. This has allowed for better public scrutiny and has reduced opportunities for corruption. Another example is Colombia, where the EITI has facilitated subnational and local participation in the extractive sector, ensuring that resource revenues are managed transparently and benefit local communities. In Indonesia, the EITI has conducted citizen surveys to understand public priorities for resource governance, which has led to more inclusive and responsive policies. These examples demonstrate how the EITI contributes to building trust between governments, companies, and citizens, ultimately leading to more accountable and sustainable management of natural resources.

Currently, 55 countries have committed to implementing the EITI standard, although 8 have been suspended due to their lack of stakeholder engagement and missing report deadlines.

While Zimbabwe is not committed to EITI, SIVIO Institute piloted the [Mining Revenue Monitoring Index](#) (MRMI) platform by beginning to track 13 mining companies operating in Zimbabwe across four minerals. The platform aims to provide comprehensive data on mining revenues to enhance transparency and policy effectiveness, supporting better community and national development outcomes. In 2025, the SIVIO Institute team will begin to expand the platform to track the mining revenues and contributions in 2 other countries (potentially Mozambique and Zambia).

Conclusion

The work has just begun. There is a need for more actors to join. The examples cited provide a broad spectrum of areas where there is a need for improved accountability. Initiatives focused on local-level governance remain limited and mostly unknown. Yet democracy should, by its very nature, have a local expression. There is an urgent need to support residents' associations spread across African cities to hold their municipalities and councillors to account. We hypothesise that democratic cultures are best nurtured at the local level, and there is a strong possibility of then spreading these across the country and eventually creating the capabilities of holding state-level leaders accountable.

The taming or disciplining of officeholders who have resorted to gangsterism will require more than elections. There is an urgent need for progressive forces to re-group, re-consider tools and sharpen what works to restore confidence in public processes and create hope for equitable transformation. Unfortunately, the call for increased mobilisation is taking place within a context of global uncertainty around civil society as an idea. The idea of a justice and democracy-seeking civil society has been a dominant framework since the 1990s, but it is currently under attack from many fronts, including funding and legislative tactics. ***Civil Society Organisations are having to fight a two-pronged battle: one for their survival and another for democracy.***

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