

# ACCOUNTABILITY LAB STRATEGY



2021 Update

# Summary

The [Accountability Lab](#) makes governance work for people everywhere by supporting active citizens, responsible leaders and accountable institutions.

We are reimagining how to build accountability to support a world in which resources are used wisely, decisions benefit everyone fairly, and people lead secure lives.

In late 2019, Accountability Lab developed a new global strategy for the 2020-2023 period. [The strategy](#) outlined why we care about accountability, what we have learned from almost 9 years of work on these issues, where we are going now and how we'll get there. In the 2020-2023 period we will focus on:

1. shifting norms and behaviors- around issues of accountability to ensure that integrity becomes the expected behavior within societies (campaigns);
2. equipping reformers for collective action- inside and outside government- with the knowledge and tools they need to push for better governance through training and learning (knowledge); and

3. influencing policies, processes and practices- around critical accountability issues, through growing coalitions and advocating for change (communities).

Operationally, this means that by 2023, the Accountability Lab will work in 12 countries globally, and with partners in an additional 5 countries; with a global budget of \$3.1 million; and a team of 100+ staff.

Refer to our 2020-2023 operational plan for more details and our budget for this work [here](#).

## ADAPTATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 has fundamentally transformed global politics, economics and societies; and has dramatically changed accountability dynamics everywhere. The pandemic has highlighted the deep-set challenges of corruption within healthcare systems; and the policy responses have demonstrated how critical integrity and accountability are to longer-term recovery. At the same time, the pandemic has also generated an important sense of urgency and collaboration within civil society that can provide the basis for renewed legitimacy and transformed advocacy in the future. During this period, the Lab has moved quickly and built on our existing ideas, approaches, networks and assets to evolve our work to these new realities. This has included a focus on:

1. **Ensuring the wellbeing of our teams-** as our staff are our highest priority. This has included a push to provide ongoing and accessible duty of care resources to all team members (physical, psychosocial, digital and mental) through partnership with [LifeWorks](#); improved health insurance, more time-off and other wellness and leadership training and mentorship; the provision of emergency capacity and surge support as needed throughout the organization; growth of our safety and security fund (for emergencies); and improved planning processes across teams.

2. **Citizen feedback-** on COVID-19 responses using our Civic Action Teams (CivActs), groups of trained volunteers in communities that we have been working with for years to close feedback loops with citizens and powerholders on critical issues. During this period this has included a focus in particular on misinformation and rumors related to the pandemic and related governance challenges. Read more [here](#) and [here](#); and learn more about our partnership with the UN's Verified Campaign on these issues [here](#).
3. **Creative, bottom-up approaches-** through support to our networks of “accountapreneurs” who are working on these issues in their communities. This involved small innovation grants to existing accountapreneurs that they have used to super-charge local solutions to corruption challenges; and the launch of a new virtual accountability incubator (in Kenya, Uganda and Guinea Bissau) for civic activists and changemakers with new approaches to ensuring the accountability of the COVID-19 response.
4. **Adaptive learning-** both within and across our teams and more broadly beyond the organization. This has included internal collaboration grants to spur new ideas by team members; regular “open board calls” to discuss challenges and solutions during this time; work to track COVID-19 spending (“following the money”) that has evolved into a key input into local understandings of fiscal flows in various contexts; an OpenGov Digital Youth Summit with 1,000+ young people sharing ideas around open governance; and ongoing learning collaborations related to the COVID-19 response

5. **Working within systems-** to support reformers to improve their responses to COVID-19 accountability challenges. This has included capacity support to previous Integrity Icons on the frontlines of the response; cross-sectoral learning opportunities among Icons; collaboration with sub-national governments to solve accountability challenges related to the pandemic; and integration of ideas related to accountability of COVID-19 recovery efforts into national reform processes (such as the Open Government Partnership) and international advocacy efforts (as Chair of the [C20 Anti-Corruption Working Group](#)).
6. **Inclusion-** to ensure that our work during this period not only allows for inclusion of our existing communities at a time when this is challenging, but grows our efforts into new places where important voices need to be heard. This has included [collaborations to push for greater equity within development](#) as a whole; the use of lower-bandwidth tools such as Whatsapp channels and trainings; “accountabilitea” discussions with new audiences; a focus on diversity within existing programming including in relation to gender and people with disabilities; and adjustments to budgets (for the provision of stipends to participants to cover data costs for example).
7. **Building translocal networks-** to ensure that across our Labs we have a shared sense of purpose and understanding; and a collective support network for any challenges we might face during COVID-19. This has included an effort to diversity, grow and localize our global team to ensure contextualized support (now based in the US, Pakistan, South Africa and Bamako); tap into local expertise exchange around COVID-19 programming (with local Labs filling gaps and providing support for others); joint programming across countries and within regions (such as the Sahel for example); and partnering in ways to bring out the best in other local organizations that we can then push forwards.



## PROGRESS AGAINST THE STRATEGY IN 2020

Despite the challenges, we have seen important learning and growth for the Lab in 2020 across our three core areas of work, as laid out in our [Theory of Action](#). In keeping with the goals in our strategy and our operational plan for 2020, we have achieved the following:

- **Shifting norms and changing behaviors-** continued progress to grow the Integrity Icon, Voice2Rep and other campaigns that can support positive narratives, change norms and lift-up role models. This has included a deepening of our work in our existing countries, building more engagement, creating dynamic networks among winners and growing our learning (with partners) around what works and what does not. It has also included expansion of these campaigns to new countries including Zimbabwe, Morocco, Ukraine and Somalia.
- **Equipping reformers for collective action-** consolidation and codification of our [Accountability Incubator](#) including a shift towards a virtual learning journey complemented by in-person events and support where feasible. The incubator has also grown in 2020 to 3 new countries (Kenya, Uganda and Guinea Bissau); and we have hired new staff to our teams to lead implementation. Our SDG16 Innovation Competition has also grown in Nigeria to become a regular semi-annual process; and we have worked to build partnerships for new training programs on accountability issues across government (with civil service training schools) and the private sector (with Chambers of Commerce).
- **Influencing policies, processes and practices-** at the local level through our [CivActs](#) work and contextualized efforts to push for reform around COVID-19 accountability issues. We also grew our international-level advocacy and influencing work dramatically in 2020, as [Co-Chair of the C20 Anti-Corruption Working Group](#); as Chair of the [Transparency, Accountability and Participation \(TAP\) Network](#); with our Executive Director as a Steering Committee Member of the [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\)](#); and as a member of informal and [formal expert groups](#) advising the World Bank on issues of Citizen Engagement. We also convened new and diverse networks around issues including [diversity](#) with the ONE Campaign; and with OGP around [youth and open government](#).

## ADAPTING OUR COLLABORATIVE SPACES

Part of our strategy to build skills, knowledge and networks has been through the [OpenGov Hub](#) collaborative and innovation spaces we have been growing around the world (in Nepal, Pakistan, Mali, Liberia- known as [iCampus](#)- as well as through the Hub in Washington, DC). The pandemic has been a significant challenge to any kind of physical co-working and events. We have adapted our hubs in a variety of ways:

- **Virtual programming-** a shift to a variety of virtual meetings, events, gatherings and trainings, with an emphasis on growing our audiences and ensuring diversity;
- **Revised office policies and procedures-** adhering to all public health guidelines and with flexible work-from-home policies for all staff;
- **Socially distanced events-** where these have been feasible, observing safety protocols and using outdoor spaces;
- **Focus on community building-** in new ways, including through making more of our resources and policies open source online, and through WhatsApp channels and trainings.

## WHAT WE HAVE NOT ACHIEVED AND WHY

At the same time, this is an incredibly challenging time to be pushing for accountability around the world, and for the Lab itself. We see these challenges manifesting themselves in the following ways that have stymied some elements of our work:

1. **Closing civic space-** across the countries in which we work, with governments using the COVID-19 crisis to restrict speech, movement and assembly, curtail rights of all kinds and undermine processes for transparency and accountability. This has affected our teams- both emotionally and physically in terms of efforts to push back against our work; and practically in terms of impeding our programming efforts. Areas of our work have been curtailed, delayed or abridged as a result of this pandemic-related roll back of civic space.
2. **Operational challenges-** despite the changes we have made to adapt our systems during this period. For example, team members and their families have become sick with COVID-19; team coherence has been difficult to maintain within Labs during long periods out of the office; hiring and onboarding of new staff members has been complicated; and it has been more difficult to vet partners in new contexts where programming has begun. We have seen several false starts with new programs and a number of missed programmatic opportunities.
3. **Greater prominence-** as the Lab has grown and become better known within the accountability space across countries. This has meant that we have become more of a target for forces aligned against accountability; and we are being asked to take a stand on issues publicly in ways we were not always in a position to do previously. This has meant we have sometimes had to avoid certain topics and partnerships that we would otherwise have looked to develop; and that we are increasingly careful about how we are perceived. During COVID-19 it has been difficult to ground-truth these dynamics effectively.



## MOVING FORWARDS

We see the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical juncture, and a moment to reflect and respond to new realities. At the same time, we feel that our existing Theory of Action provides the right basis for our thinking and programming moving forwards. In 2021 and beyond we see our comparative advantage within the accountability space as our ability to shift norms and narratives through positive campaigns; our deep and trusted efforts to grow knowledge and “unlikely networks” from the ground upwards; and our ability to connect the dots to build “insider-outsider” coalitions for reforms. In 2021 and beyond we will incorporate the additional shifts in our work to ensure we maximize impact and meet the challenges that lay ahead:

- **We’re doubling down on learning-** this has always been a key part of what we do as an organization and the way we understand our role, and we will grow our learning efforts going forwards to inform our own work and that of others. This means we will work to improve our data collection efforts; deepen research into what works and what does not around key elements of our work (including norm shifting and campaigns); test new evaluation tools and approaches; and better codify and align our learning outputs, including with our [Accountable Now](#) compliance processes;
  - **We’re focusing on media accountability-** building on our work to counter disinformation around COVID-19 in 2020 and our media-driven programming previously. This means we will grow our [Covid-19 CivActs Campaign](#); pilot a new incubator in South Africa focused specifically on supporting local narrative-builders and story-tellers; and look for new partnerships with media entities around solutions journalism. We are also going to build out our own story-telling platforms including through a new “Ask Accountability Lab Anything” podcast.
  - **We’re adapting how we build and share knowledge-** by expanding our virtual incubator and growing out additional curricula we have developed (on anti-corruption and accountability) to make them relevant for other contexts and with other partners; and to new formats that can allow for low-bandwidth distanced learning.
- COVID-19 has also shown the need to reinforce integrity within public service, and we will grow our partnerships with national and regional civil service training schools to support values-based training for government officials.
- **We’re going to push on donor accountability-** particularly around COVID-19 spending and of multilateral processes and organizations including the G20 and the World Bank. This will include work to maintain and build on the [G20 Accountability Tracker](#) we developed during 2020; collaborative efforts to ensure progress towards SDG16; and continued guidance to the World Bank and other donors. The focus will not be on calling out those that fall short as much as identifying what works and sharing solutions to common problems.
  - **We’re working harder to embed our ideas-** in new ways. This means scaling up to new contexts both through the Lab itself (in places such as Zimbabwe); through a hybrid partnership structure through which we hire local Accountability Lab staff within partner organizations (as in DRC and Somaliland); and through supporting other partners to implement our ideas directly (as in Guinea Bissau for example). It also means a particular focus on working with government officials at the sub-national level to grow their accountability ideas and systems; and working even harder to embed local civil society networks that can push back against accountability challenges related to COVID-19 and otherwise.

## WHAT THIS MEANS OPERATIONALLY

In operational terms, we made significant strides in 2020 in relation to our plan. In terms of human resources, we have worked hard to put in place the support systems that staff need to feel safe, healthy and productive; we have harmonized and improved HR policies; and we have recruited 30+ new staff globally. In terms of financial management, we have moved all teams to Quickbooks, and standardized financial reporting which now feeds into our [open budget tool](#). In terms of communications, we have found new ways to extend the reach of our messaging, strengthened our brand; and piloted new communications tools, such as Whatsapp channels. In terms of learning, we have worked to centralized data, build our learning capacity and develop creative partnerships with leading organizations in the field. And in terms of growth, we have built 1 new country office (Zimbabwe); developed partnerships in 5 additional countries (Morocco, Ukraine, Guinea Bissau, DRC and Somaliland); and increased our budget by almost 100% to \$4.3 million.

In 2021, despite encouraging news recently with respect to COVID-19 vaccines, we will operate under the assumption that our work will continue to be affected by the pandemic throughout the year. We will redouble our efforts to provide wellbeing and duty of care support to our staff; we will conduct our first USAID Uniform Guidance financial audit and refine our Accountable Now compliance and reporting process; we will further grow engagement around our messaging, with an emphasis on bringing in new audiences; we will look to commission external evaluations of our work and build evidence gap maps; and we will look to build a Lab in one additional country as our budget increases by 10% year-on-year, with a particular focus on diversifying funding streams and increasing core support for our work.



## CONTACT US

We are very open to ideas, suggestions and feedback on this strategy- what resonates with you? What are we missing? Where have we got it wrong? Feel free to reach out to us at [blair@ccountabilitylab.org](mailto:blair@ccountabilitylab.org) with any thoughts.

Keep up-to-date with our progress at [www.accountabilitylab.org](http://www.accountabilitylab.org) and on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)