



ACCOUNTABILITY LAB STRATEGY

2023 - 2026

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Cover image: Accountability Lab Zimbabwe's first quarterly reflection meeting in 2022.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Accountability Lab makes governance work for people.** We are seeking a world in which resources are used wisely, decisions benefit everyone fairly, and people lead secure lives.
- **By 2026, the Lab will be the leading eco-system building organization within the accountability field.** What we mean by this is that we are actively convening, coaching, mentoring and developing the next generation of accountability thinkers and practitioners. Going forwards, **our aim is to ensure that everyone in the accountability space has in some way been positively influenced by our work.**
- This strategy is for Accountability Lab version 3.0. Over the past decade, we have experimented and learned (version 1.0); tested again (version 2.0) and now that we have significant buy-in for our work, we are scaling up our efforts as the new way to work within the accountability field (version 3.0).
- Key strategic assets for the Lab include **our values, people, diversity, positivity, networks, brand, generosity, delivery, knowledge and ownership** of our work.
- Our strategic focus is now on **operationalizing the idea of a translocal network and collective decision-making across Labs** to improve effectiveness. By a “translocal network” we mean a network of organizations that share values, approaches and ideas and can connect together to reinvigorate the social fabric and build trust over time.
- Our programmatic focus remains on three core areas of work: **shifting norms and behaviors** (campaigns); **equipping reformers for collective action** (knowledge); and **influencing policies, processes and practices** (communities).
- We **center learning in everything we do** and aim to measure the impact of our work in ethical, non-extractive ways that place a primacy on lifting the stories of our communities and networks. Read our key impact metrics and indicators [here](#).
- We will continue to invest in our people, and over the next three years we will work to **support leadership development at every level across the Lab and grow our duty of care and staff support** programs.
- We made great progress during our previous strategy but we need to do more in terms of **integrating programs, building out our research, improving our learning, connecting advocacy efforts, deepening our networks and bolstering organizational governance.**

BACKGROUND

Accountability Lab began over a decade ago as an effort to support local change-makers within specific communities to develop creative ideas around governance issues. We have grown into a global translocal network of Labs that is building an eco-system for accountability around the world. Externally, this means convening and supporting others within the accountability space to push towards collective goals. Internally, this means actively coaching, mentoring and developing the next generation of accountability thinkers and practitioners. **Our vision remains the same as it has, because it is ever more important- a world in which resources are used wisely, decisions benefit everyone fairly, and people lead secure lives.** Our mission is to make governance work for people through supporting active citizens, responsible leaders and accountable institutions.



The Accountability Lab Nepal team.

STRATEGIC PROCESS

This strategy builds on our **2017-2020** and **2020-2023** strategies. It is the result of a year-long strategy development process that began in early 2022. It involved seven core steps: i) management review of the 2020-2023 strategy; ii) an **external organizational review**, carried out by **The Better Org**; iii) a strategic retreat with the senior management team and Country Directors in Zimbabwe in June 2022; iv) ongoing feedback and ideas from peers and stakeholders in our work; v) a period for public comment and feedback on the strategic draft in September/October 2022; vi) country-level feedback and orientation with our Labs; and vii) finalization and approval of the Lab's Board of Directors across all Accountability Labs in November and December 2022.

We have used this process as a way for us to collectively renew commitment to our values; build a shared vocabulary and language for our work; and to ensure a mutual understanding of who we are and where we are going as an organization. We see this strategy as a living document that we will update and adapt over time as we grow and improve.

CONTEXT

The global crises of the past three years have reconfirmed the centrality of accountability and open governance to any efforts to create a more fair, just and equal world. **The problems we face are intersectional- we cannot talk about pandemics, climate change or social and political exclusion, for example, without understanding that these are problems of governance as much as anything else.** Politics everywhere is becoming more contentious; extractive global systems are exacerbating global divides; and inequality is increasing dramatically.

At the same time, there is plenty of room for hope. We are finding in our work that communities are ever more engaged in local decision-making; that innovation is driving the kinds of change needed; and that there are many people of integrity working to improve systems. We are working to change decision-making in ways that produce a more fair and equitable distribution of resources. We intend to highlight, support and grow connections between these people and ideas- to consolidate positive change and push back against what can sometimes feel like overwhelming challenges.



Team Nepal on retreat.

PROGRESS TO DATE

Accountability Lab started as an experiment- a desire to build a movement of individuals and organizations that have the tools and resources to build accountability through positive and creative approaches. This strategy is for Accountability Lab version 3.0. Over the past decade, we have experimented and learned (version 1.0); tested again (version 2.0) and now that we have significant buy-in for our work, we are scaling up our efforts as the new way to work within the accountability field (version 3.0).

In the coming years, we are looking to embed our approach further and truly operate as a **translocal network**. We hope to be the network through which anyone thinking and working creatively on these issues finds solidarity, support and energy. Through our organizational review and at our strategic retreat we reviewed the Lab's 10 key assets:

- **Values**- which we live by and use to inform decision-making on a daily basis;
- **People**- we have incredible people at every level within the organization, and our human capital is our greatest resource;
- **Diversity**- within teams, embedded within a model that allows all voices to be heard;
- **Positivity**- a constant focus on the positive and on collective solutions to problems;
- **Networks**- deep networks both from the community level upwards and from the global level downwards, across a variety of different stakeholders;
- **Brand**- a respected global brand that is associated with integrity, compassion and equity;
- **Generosity**- we develop close partnerships wherever we can so we know what not to do and what others do better than us; and we lift up others at every opportunity;
- **Delivery**- we have teams that are able to deliver outcomes effectively, even in the most difficult of circumstances;
- **Knowledge**- we have deep knowledge of the contexts in which we work which can ensure our efforts are effective and we stay safe;
- **Ownership**- of our work by the Lab teams but also by the communities and networks with which we work.



Executive Editor of The Philadelphia Citizen, Roxanne Patel Shepelavy, our partner on Integrity Icon Philadelphia.

ACCOUNTABILITY LAB AT 10: BY THE NUMBERS

In March 2022, the Lab celebrated its 10th anniversary (read our [10th birthday digimag here](#)). Over the past decade, we have, among other efforts:

- Grown the Lab from a pilot in Nepal to a translocal network of 13 local Labs with combined teams of 130+ staff and 200+ volunteers;
- Carried out more than 220,000 individual conversations and surveys and 170 multi-stakeholder townhall meetings as part of our **Civic Action Teams** leading to key reforms related to inclusion, open governance, and gender equality;
- Run **Integrity Icon** campaigns in 13 countries with over 15,000 nominations and 245 winning Icons, with subsequent support from the Lab allowing these winners to put in place new processes, policies and ideas to build integrity;
- Expanded our **Arts4Change** programming to 9 countries, training more than 50 young filmmakers around the globe and reaching 500,000+ participants with multi-media content that has shifted understandings of accountability issues;
- Trained almost 300 “accountapreneurs” in 13 countries as part of our **Accountability Incubator**, super-charging their ideas and impact, facilitating collaborations and growing a global network of next-generation changemakers;
- Become a leading global advocacy voice around issues of transparency, accountability and anti-corruption including through Co-Chairing the **C20 Anti-Corruption Working Group** between 2020 and 2023; and through membership of the Steering Committee of the **Open Government Partnership**.

The Lab fills an important gap in the governance and accountability space- we have written previously about what might happen **“if the Lab did not exist”**. Our organizational review also indicated our value in three key roles: as a catalyst, sparking and incubating ideas and idea makers; as a convener, bringing together like-minded parties to create change; and as a connector, creating structural networks of changemakers. It indicated that the Lab is well positioned to take on two further roles- as a campaigner, to build and support social movements; and as a challenger, advocating for political change.

We think we can do this and more- through becoming the hub within the accountability space that supercharges the future of the field. We have made great progress building the organization we want to be and want to work for- now we want to ensure we are building the accountability field. We are in a position in which our programs generate learning for others around how to change systems; our networks can become the spaces in which young people learn about these issues; and our ways of working set new standards for other organizations. Our strategic pillars outlined below include further details as to how we are stepping into these roles.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

While there were **some goals we did not achieve** during our last strategy, we feel that much of the Lab's approach is working- and that this strategy represents a shift rather than a wholesale change in approach.

The key strategic thrust of the Lab over the next three years is to truly ensure that we operate as a **translocal network**. Translocal networks provide a way to break down big ideas- like accountability- into more manageable pieces; and understand how local efforts to problem-solve are both essential and instructive. They allow us to see how what appear to be smaller fixes can actually connect together to change the social fabric and build the trust we need over time. For us at the Lab, being a translocal network means five, inter-connected things, that we think make the process of development better:

- **Ensuring proximity-** working deeply in communities and among the networks in which we hope to support accountability;
- **Focusing on growth-** not for growth's sake, but through organic and intentional efforts to connect dots and fill gaps where we are best placed to do so;
- **Centering learning-** to inform and improve practice in real-time across the network and build momentum for change;
- **Building a shared discourse-** implicitly in what we do and explicitly through our messaging around our cause. This allows us to build narratives of change that provide an alternative to the status quo and the entrenched systems that perpetuate it;
- **Prioritizing partnerships-** not in the transactional sense but in the more meaningful sense of sharing resources and capacities and putting the eco-system as a whole ahead of individual or organizational recognition or goals.

For us, being a translocal network also means distributed, decolonized and equitable leadership- we are working to ensure that the Accountability Lab is led through a progressive, collaborative and shared network of leaders across the countries in which we work, all of whom support decision-making both locally and globally. We also hold ourselves accountable to each other in a variety of ways- through **local governance processes across Labs** and through the **Accountable Now self-assessment** process, among other efforts.

During the strategic development process, we thought hard about what we do that is uniquely valuable. We collectively agreed to continue to focus on the three core areas of work we have developed over the past three years:

i) Shifting norms and behaviors- around issues of transparency and accountability to ensure that integrity becomes the expected behavior within societies (campaigns). Examples from our work include **Integrity Icon** and **Voice2Rep**;

ii) Equipping reformers for collective action- inside and outside government- with the knowledge and tools they need to push safely for better governance through training and learning (knowledge). Examples from our work include the **Accountability Incubator** and the **Integrity Innovation Labs**;

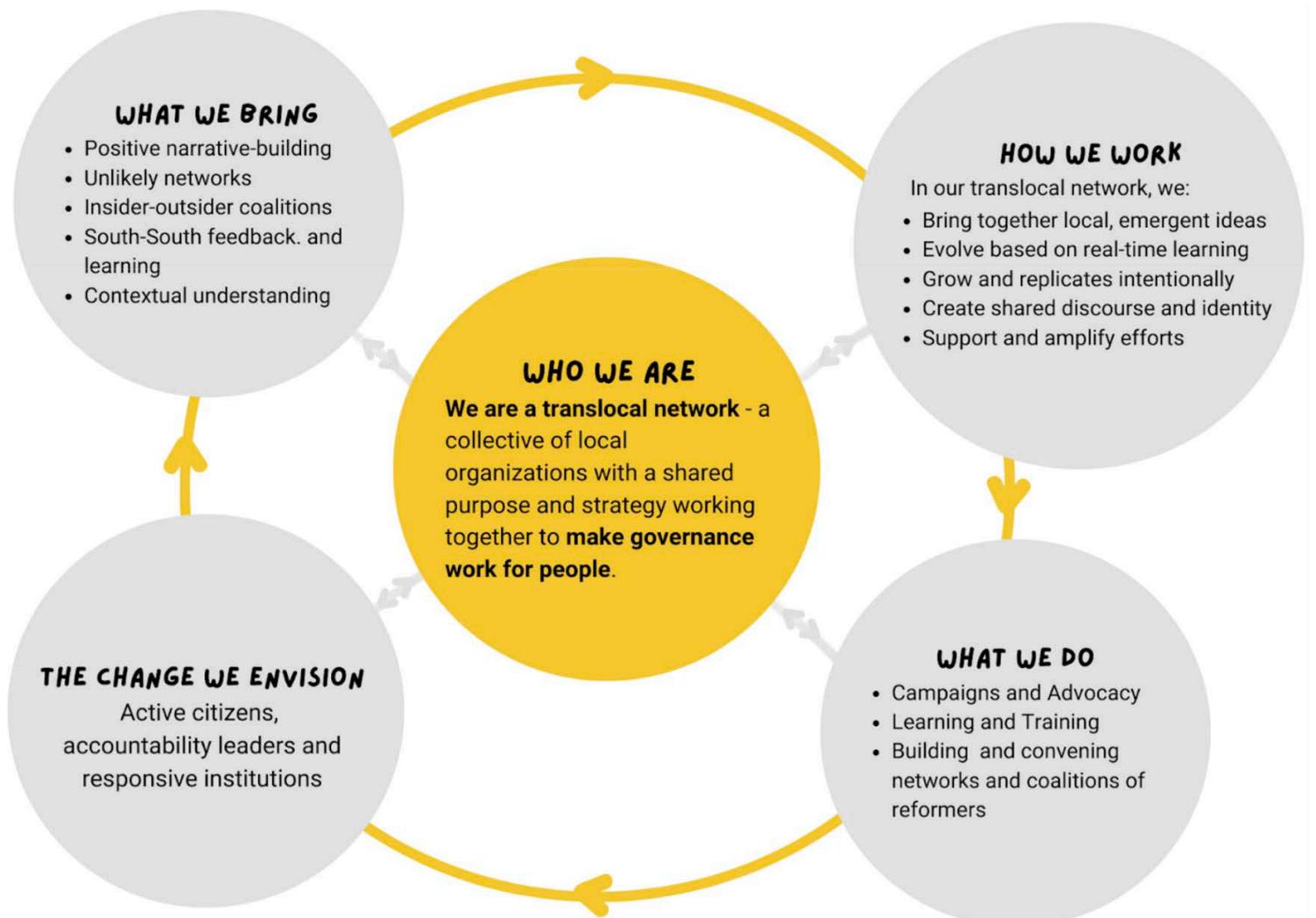
iii) Influencing policies, processes and practices- around critical accountability issues, through growing coalitions and advocating for change (communities). Examples from our work include the **Civic Action Teams (CivActs)** and our advocacy through fora including the **G20**, among others.



Integrity Icon filmmaker and trainer, Steve Lawrence, with Integrity Icon Fellow, Rashid Rafiki Khoza

THEORY OF ACTION

Our Theory of Action for the Lab has evolved over the course of the past decade (see a diagram of this evolution [here](#)). As a general approach, **we find it important to pause and reflect on our mission, vision and programs as often as possible, and recalibrate where necessary.** This not only helps us understand whether we are still doing valuable work, it also mitigates potential mission creep and aids us in prioritizing how we allocate our resources. For the 2023-2026 period, we are focusing on ensuring that our programs collectively come together to shift accountability systems.



PRIORITY STRATEGIC THEMES

Accountability Lab is not a traditional social accountability organization- we have the unique ability (through our creative approaches and focus on accountability as a value, not a theme) to frame a multiplicity of challenges as accountability issues, and in this way drive long-term solutions that get to the heart of the problems. This also allows us to build unique coalitions and “unlikely networks” that break down silos that may exist.

That said, we have identified a number of strategic themes around which we feel we would like to grow our learning, networks, programming and advocacy in the 2023-2026 period.

We chose these themes for four key reasons: i) a series of conversations across our Labs and with a variety of stakeholders within our efforts indicated that these are core concerns of those with which we work; ii) we feel we already have existing or potential capacity to develop significant expertise on these issues internally over the next three years; iii) we have found increasing demand from our partners for the Lab to lean into these topics; and iv) we feel we can bring something new, useful and different to accountability work on these issues through the Lab. These themes are:

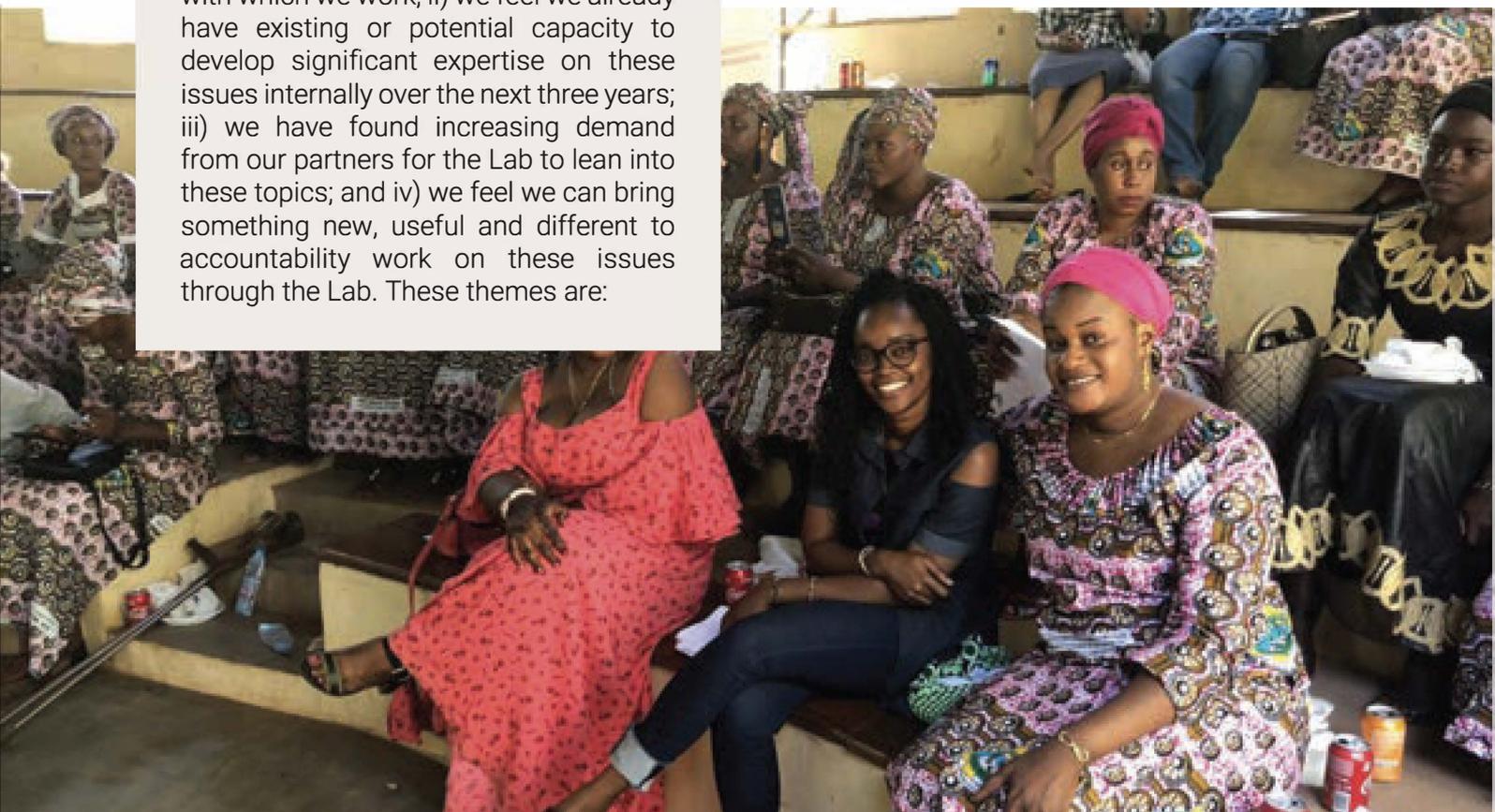
i) Inclusion- including a specific focus on the voices of women, young people, people with disabilities and those that might be most excluded from decision-making due to language, geography, religion or other issues;

ii) Climate justice- including a specific focus on strengthening inclusive governance of natural resources and land, climate adaptation and resilience programs, and a just and equitable energy transition;

iii) Digital governance- including leveraging **technology** to enhance good governance, disinformation, digital rights and data protection/privacy, and digital surveillance;

iv) Civic agency- specifically strengthening participation in democratic processes, including through access to the right to information, media freedoms and electoral processes.

These themes are inter-connect and in 2023 we will develop a set of materials that explain in more depth how they correspond to our activities, where we see the gaps we can fill and where we see the synergies between these themes.



A meeting hosted by Accountability Lab Mali in Bamako.



The Integrity Icon Pakistan awards ceremony in 2022.

WHAT WE WILL NOT DO

As an organization we have got better at understanding where our strengths lie, where we can support others to achieve complementary goals, and when to say no to possible programming in places and spaces where we do not have a comparative advantage. In the next three years we will not:

- i) Take on work that does not allow for the meaningful participation and voice of the communities with which we work;
- ii) Attempt to operate in places where we do not have sufficient contextual knowledge or networks to build this knowledge quickly;
- iii) Narrowly define accountability in ways that exclude people that are interested in and would benefit from our efforts from a variety of sectors or organizations;
- iv) Carry our work that in any way would contravene our safeguarding policy or cause harm to our partners and other stakeholders;
- v) Crowd out other local organizations, or attempt to benefit from opportunities that would be better taken by others;
- vi) Work on issues where the Lab does not have a comparative advantage or dedicated expertise just because we have the opportunity or proximity to do so;
- vii) Accept support that does not correspond to our organizational values (see our funds acceptance policy here);
- viii) Carry out academic research that does not build upon or support our operational work or build on our internal data collection and synthesis ability.

OUR PEOPLE AND LEADERSHIP

We want Accountability Lab not to be simply the best civil society organization to work for within the accountability space, but to be the best place to work for anyone interested in changing the world, period. We know that our people are our greatest resource- but we also understand that our work can be challenging. Therefore, we are working to intentionally center the well-being of our team members in every possible way (read more about our duty of care [here](#), safety and security fund [here](#) and inclusion policies [here](#), for example); improve our talent management to identify and retain the very best people; and to put in place capacity strengthening plans that build or bring in the knowledge we need to achieve our strategic goals.

During this strategy cycle we are also working hard to support leadership development at every level across Accountability Lab. This includes creating leadership structures within the organization (such as the [Junior Staff Council](#)); generating access to opportunities for staff across contexts; investing in training and skills-development for team members; and putting in place careful succession plans to ensure continuity of knowledge, networks and programming. **We see ourselves as a hub for the future leaders in this field and understand great people may move on from our organization- we want to make sure wherever they are, they have the experience and skills they need to build accountability.**



Accountability Lab Nepal's volunteers.

WHERE WE’LL BE BY 2026

We realize there are a number of key risks in the work we do that may affect the extent to which we can reach our strategic goals. At the conclusion of this strategy we are also less interested in the impact of Accountability Lab itself as much as the impact we have created on the accountability ecosystem in the places that we work, as outlined in our Theory of Action above. The key transitions we hope to make during this strategy are outlined below- we will provide updates on progress towards these goals as we go.

Where We’re Coming From	Where We’ll be in 2026
Efforts to develop local coalitions and communities on accountability issues	The leading eco-system building organization globally around accountability issues.
A focus on bottom-up programming and community networks	A well-developed translocal network in support of accountability eco-systems
Using our own campaigns to drive specific changes in behaviors or norms	Connecting our campaigns to movements, shared causes and locally-resonant issues
Building communities through programming	Developing a fellowship program- in partnership with others- to support leaders interested in accountability
Data collection on a programmatic basis and intermittently for larger learning documents	Coherent action research capacity and learning outputs around key accountability issues
Making connections across programs to amplify impact	Working to ensure that programming works to shift accountability systems
Intentional about staff support, growth and transitions	Centering the well-being and professional development of our team members in everything we do
Growing our thought leadership in the accountability space	Building our role as an intellectual leader in this field and further expanding our influence
Building our global advocacy efforts around accountability issues	Grounding national, regional and global advocacy efforts in local ideas, data and thinking

There are areas of our organization and our work where we would also like to improve in the next three years. **In particular we’d like to focus on: i) improving follow-up to our programs in ways that further engage stakeholders in our work and improve sustainability of our impact; ii) shaping new narratives that demonstrate how our work is directly relevant to the lives of citizens and how it supports the power of networks; and iii) financial sustainability by developing longer-term funding streams and new partnerships and approaches.**

HOW WE'LL MEASURE OUR PROGRESS

We aim to measure the impact of our work in ethical, non-extractive ways that place a primacy on collective contributions to accountability and lifting up the stories of our communities and networks as much as we can. We will continue to improve our data collection efforts; build learning and training capacity among our teams; carry out external evaluations of our work; and we also hope to build out an evidence map of key gaps in our approaches. Check out our key impact metrics and indicators for the 2023-2026 period [here](#).

We are a learning organization and we understand that we are in a position to try new things to improve what we do and share insights from those efforts with others. We will continue to share continually, including through our visual arts programs, our [Accountabili-tea podcast](#), our growing action research efforts, [regular learning reports](#) and more. In the next three years we also want to continue to learn from others, in particular about how to build and sustain new coalitions for accountability; what kinds of organizational forms are most able to shift power within systems; and how we can better understand the value of the accountability networks we are building. **We'll know we have learned effectively when we change our approaches based on lessons from our work; when others tell us they have used our insights to change what they do; and when elements of our ideas are adopted more broadly within the accountability field.**

WHAT THIS MEANS OPERATIONALLY

In the next three years we will deepen the work in the countries in which we already have Labs, and will expand further where it makes sense to do so and where we think we can add value in meaningful ways (we use a strategic decision-making matrix to understand where this might be the case- [more here](#)).

We expect our team at the global level to grow in size organically over the next three-years, with trans local Labs also growing as we take on more work (in countries such as South Africa and Mexico for example). Our organizational KPIs will be updated on an annual basis during this strategy and we will share these as we go.

NEXT STEPS

Our work to implement this strategy is already underway. The strategy has been approved by each individual Lab Board of Directors. We are aiming to have strategic "check-in" conversations every six months; and a mini-strategic review annually during the lifetime of this document. We will also aim to host a strategic retreat with the management of Accountability Labs globally in 2024.



Accountability Lab Mali collecting nominations for Integrity Icon.



Accountability Lab Niger's Integrity Icon volunteers.

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 info@accountabilitylab.org with any thoughts. Keep up-to-date with our progress at www.accountabilitylab.org and on social media.



<https://accountabilitylab.org>