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# Holding officials to account

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**Introduction**

*For years, the farmers in Akembe have had trouble getting their produce to the market town during the rainy season. The road turns to deep, impassable mud. During election campaigns, candidates come by and promise to do something about it, but nothing happens once they are elected. Farmers despair about selling their crops when prices are strong, and they wonder how they can make enough money to look after their families.*

*And then – miracle of miracles – you find that there is money in the regional budget to fix the road this year. But then months go by, and nothing happens.*

*You are the host/producer of the farmer radio program that covers the village of Akembe. What can you do? How can you help hold officials accountable to the public for their actions – or inaction?*

One thing you can do is interview an official who has some responsibility and authority to fix roads. You might interview the *elected councillor who* represents the people of your area. Or you might interview the *government bureaucrat* who is responsible for fixing roads. Both of them have some *responsibility* (or obligation) to serve the needs of his constituents. And they also have some *authority* (or power) to take action.

**Interviews – and accountability interviews**

Accountability interviews are different from other interviews. Most interviews are straightforward. For example, you interview a farmer who knows how to interplant beans with maize. This expert farmer shares her knowledge. If her replies are not clear, you ask more questions, or you clarify things in your own words. You accept at face value what she says. If you know that some other farmers are opposed to interplanting beans with maize, you ask your expert farmer to respond to those concerns. At the end you have helped your farmer-listeners to know the pros and cons of interplanting beans with maize.

Accountability interviews are different from other interviews because the person being held accountable might have a different motivation than most interviewees. Their motivation is different because they have a responsibility to the public and the authority to pursue improvements in the public interest.

Your bean-planting farmer’s motivation is probably quite straightforward. She might feel some obligation to share her experience so that others can benefit. However, unlike the official, she has no responsibility or authority on the public’s behalf for the cropping system.

The motivation of an official is more complex.

The job of an *elected official* is to serve the needs of the people of Akembe and beyond. But he is also motivated by the desire to get re-elected, or to keep his job. And that might, at times, conflict with his service to the farmers in your area. He might not want to be interviewed at all. He might ask for your questions in advance. In his replies, he might just spout the “government policy” and not deal with specifics. It is your job to persuade the elected official that he will be treated fairly. That he will not be “ambushed” with questions far beyond the topic at hand. It is also your job to persuade the elected official that it is in his best interest to be interviewed by you, because so many of his constituents listen to your program.

The job of a *public servant* is to serve the public by implementing the policies and programs of the government. Often a public servant has no news to share because someone in the government has instructed him not to speak to the press. If he speaks freely, he could lose his job. It is your job to persuade the public servant that you only want him to talk about something that is approved by the government, something that will make the government look good *if* the government is doing good things.

So when you interview the politician, you have to be specially prepared. Otherwise, the interview might only serve the interests of the politician, and not your farmers.

Here is an example of an interview with a politician that does *not* serve your farmers.

**HOST:** Today we are fortunate to have Councillor Smith with us to discuss the Akembe Road. Good morning, Councillor.

**GUEST:** Good morning, Sarah. Let me first say that I am honoured to appear on your farmer program. Nothing is more important for me than my dear friends, the farmers of this region.

**HOST:** Thank you, Councillor. Today I want to ask you why we are not seeing work being done on the Akembe Road. We know there is money for it in this year’s regional budget. When will we see changes?

**GUEST:** Thank you for asking that question, Sarah. As you know, ever since I got elected, I have been fighting for the farmers of this region. We have a wonderful fertilizer subsidy program in place now. And there are plans for a medical clinic. And only last week I was in the capital where I talked to officials about the need for better roads here. However, you must understand that things are very complicated in politics. Things take time. I am pleased to tell your listeners that I have their interests at heart and the road will be fixed in due course.

**HOST:** Councillor. I know you are a busy man. Thank you for coming on my show today.

That was *not* an accountability interview. The interviewer might have thought that she got whatever she could out of the official. She might have thought that it was enough to learn that the road will eventually be fixed.

However, the interviewer simply provided the official with an opportunity to tell farmers how hard he is working for them. What she did was provide free publicity for the councillor.

Let’s look at how this could have been an accountability interview. The interview starts in exactly the same way, with the first four paragraphs above, but then the host, rather than closing the interview, goes on.

**HOST:** Councillor, doesn’t the regional budget provide money to fix this horrible road *this year*?

**GUEST:** Well, yes it does. But of course it provides amounts for many projects, and this kind of work is complex and requires expert planning. Rest assured that I will look after the needs of the farmers of Akembe.

**HOST:** Councillor, we are already in the seventh month of the year. Please tell our listeners *when* the roadwork will get started. The rainy season will soon be upon us again.

**GUEST:** Yes, the rainy season will come once more, and the good farmers of Akembe will be very resourceful once again.

**HOST:** Yes Councillor, you can count on the resourcefulness of the farmers. But can we count on *you* to make sure that this road is fixed over the next *five* months?

**GUEST:** I have made it clear how important this project is to me, and it will be done when it can be done. That is all I have to say at this time.

**HOST:** Councillor, I want to play you a brief clip from a meeting last night. Here is what the head of the Akembe Farmers’ Co-op had to say:

*The number one issue for Akembe farmers is the road. There is money in the budget but nothing has happened. Where is Councillor Smith when we need him to fight for us?*

**GUEST:** Ah, but things take time.

**HOST:** Councillor, your constituents have just heard you say that you can provide no date for when the roadwork will start, in spite of the fact that there is money for it in this year’s budget, and in spite of the fact that if the work is not started soon, your constituents will suffer from not being able to get their produce to market. Have I stated things correctly?

**GUEST:** Sarah, I am a busy man, but I have taken the time to come on your program to explain at great length the progress I am making for the farmers of this region. And now I have important matters to deal with and must go.

**HOST:** Thank you, Councillor Smith for appearing on our farmer program today. Your constituents will be disappointed that you can’t provide any new information about getting the road fixed. Perhaps we can call you next week and hope that you will be able to give us a date for the start of the roadwork.

*That* is an accountability interview. While the guest tried hard to promote his record of good work, the host relentlessly kept steering him back to the main topic, and kept reminding him of his responsibility and authority.

Doing a successful accountability interview does not come easy for most of us. In our discussion with someone, we want to please them. However, you are the host/producer of a farm radio program. Your *responsibility* is to serve your farmers, and you have the *authority* to do so!

Here is a checklist to help you do an effective accountability interview.

**🗌 Start small** If at all possible, do your first accountability interview on a small, simple, clear issue. Learn from your experience and then go on to tougher issues. Start with a small issue and with a friendly organization. Learn from that before you tackle a big issue with a potentially hostile or resistant government department.

**🗌 Know the issue** In this case, it is about getting the road fixed before the next rainy season. In your questions, stick close to this one issue. Otherwise, the official will be glad to talk about something else that is easier and more useful for him – and avoid the main issue.

🗌 **Know the facts** What official document states that there are funds this year for the road repairs? Did your official have any role in getting this item put into the budget? Is this official promoting other projects at the expense of the Akembe road repairs?

🗌 **Know whom to hold to account** Who is the elected official for Akembe? Who is the government civil servant responsible for road repairs? In order to get the full picture, you might have to do an interview with one, and then the other.

**🗌 Look at the issue from the official’s point of view** Officials are generally not bad people. They are just busy people trying to juggle an impossible load of priorities with insufficient resources and time. At the start, convey an attitude of support for the official. Help him do his job better for your farmer-listeners. But don’t let him off the hook. He is responsible, and he has authority. He should be accountable to his constituents.

**🗌 Serve the farmers, not the official** A farm radio program should respect farmers and give voice to their concerns. This is a huge responsibility to carry. Before doing an accountability interview, find out the information and the answers that farmers want and need.

**🗌 Talk to a person with authority, not to a mouthpiece** If at all possible, don’t agree to do an interview with someone who does public relations for the official or the government. That person will have no real responsibility or authority and they will use the opportunity to make their official look good. Tell them kindly that you will wait until the official himself is available to be interviewed.

**🗌 Be courteous, respectful and professional** Officials are people too. Give them the benefit of the doubt. If you interview aggressively, your official will probably stop cooperating. And your listeners will feel sympathy for the official, not for you. Besides, you will want to deal with this official on other issues at other times. Be respectful, but firm and persistent, and expect respect in return.

**🗌 Let the official speak to his constituents – in a limited way** An accountability interview is a two-way street. *You* want to hold the official to account. *The official* wants to make a good impression with your listeners. In fact, the official might not do the interview unless he knows there will be something of value for him in doing it. So let the official talk about the fertilizer subsidy – briefly. But don’t stop there! Ask the tough questions that oblige him to confront the delays in the road repairs, and then do your best to make him say what he will do to overcome them.

**🗌 Use farmers’ voices** Show that this is a *farmer* concern, not just *your* concern. Record comments by farmers and by officials of the local farmers’ organization or co-op. Play those clips back to the official. Arrange a phone-in show on this topic before you do your accountability interview. Use clips from it in your accountability interview.

**🗌 Use concrete examples** Find out where a road has been fixed on time and on budget. Ask why Akembe is different. And find out how farmers kept pressure on officials to get their road fixed.

**🗌 Summarize what is said** At the end of the call, summarize any new information. Has the official agreed to push for an early start date for the roadwork? Has he agreed to be interviewed in a week’s time to give a progress report? Or has he simply used your interview to get across *his* messages? If so, summarize for your listeners and for his constituents that he has not been able to help move this project forward.

**🗌 Don’t expect success immediately** In the Akembe example above, the host did not get the councillor to say when the roadwork would start. And even if the councillor did give a firm date, he might just do that to get off the hook, and the firm date might not end up being that firm.But the interview was still very useful. The councillor knows that you are watching, and that you will be holding him accountable until the roadwork is done. And knowing that, the councillor might finally put pressure on the road department to fix the Akembe road.

**🗌 Don’t give up** An official might hope that this will be the only interview on this topic and that you will then leave him alone. Make it clear that you are not going away! This is a serious matter for your listeners and you are going to stick with it until it is resolved. This might prompt the official to take action.

**🗌 Record your interview** and make notes of what was said. You might want to play it back to that official at a future date if he denies what he said earlier.

**🗌 Accountability goes beyond governments** There are many officials who have authority and responsibility for activities of concern to farmers, and they are not all government officials. Is the local farmers’ co-op dragging its heels about organizing transportation to the market? Where is the blockage? Why is no progress being made? You have a responsibility to interview the head of the co-op – and ask the tough questions nicely!

**🗌 Practice makes perfect** Role-play accountability interviews with one of your station colleagues. Ask your colleague to be an official who wants to promote his work while avoiding questions about his responsibility and authority. Do sample interviews until you feel comfortable with being both assertive and fair.

**Other ways to exercise accountability** While the accountability interview is often the best way for a radio program to hold an official to account, it is not the only way. You could, for example, have a phone-in program where the official takes questions from your listeners. Or you could hold a panel discussion where selected farmers sit down with the official and you facilitate the discussion. However, an accountability interview by a well-prepared host can be a very valuable service for the program’s listeners.

**NOTE: A word of caution to the broadcaster!** Freedom of the press does not exist in a robust form in all countries. And a radio host, or a program – or even a full station – can be threatened with closure if it speaks out against some kinds of officials. But you do not have to “speak out against” the government in order to do a good accountability interview. In fact, many good accountability interviews are about getting officials to implement policies that the government has already approved! Get good advice from wise people about the boundaries of press freedom in your area. You can’t serve your farmers if you are shut down. Perhaps another organization, like the farmers’ co-op, can push for the road improvements through its national organization. However, do exercise as much freedom of expression as you can. This is one of the most important things a radio station can do for its farmer/listeners.

## Acknowledgements

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