

Social Accountability: Better infrastructure in action

A collection of impact stories across Latin America and Africa

Across CoST members, social accountability is delivering measurable improvements in infrastructure, leading to safer schools, better access to health facilities, and more inclusive public spaces.

Yet social accountability delivers far more than improvements to individual infrastructure projects. It strengthens legal mandates and drives long-term institutional change, while equipping citizens and the media with the skills and confidence to engage in infrastructure issues that might otherwise appear inaccessible or overly technical. In doing so, it builds trust, civic capacity and shared ownership.

Ultimately, social accountability transforms infrastructure governance from a closed, technical process into one grounded in evidence, dialogue and lived experience.

Across diverse contexts, members have applied a range of tools — from structured **social audits** and community monitoring forums, to digital feedback systems and university-led oversight — translating transparency into tangible results.

Key learning points:

■ Institutionalising participation drives long-term governance reform

Moving from ad hoc engagement to formalised systems creates durable change. In Jalisco, Mexico, university-led social audits contributed to a legal regulation institutionalising citizen oversight of public works. In Panama, social accountability has been embedded within national higher-level educational systems, applying oversight to nationally significant projects such as high-speed rail and the Panama Canal, whilst training the next generation of accountability leaders.

CoST – the Infrastructure Transparency Initiative – is a leading global non-profit that works with governments, civil society, and the private sector to help ensure that when governments spend money on infrastructure the process is transparent, money is used efficiently, and the infrastructure built meets community needs.

WHAT IS SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY?

In the context of CoST’s work, social accountability refers to the actions through which local residents — directly or through civil society, media and academia — use public infrastructure information to hold decision-makers to account and ensure infrastructure meets local needs.



Photo of attendees to one of Jalisco’s social audit sessions

■ **Social accountability directly improves infrastructure quality and usability**

Citizen monitoring and social audits have led to tangible improvements on the ground. In Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana, facilities that were technically “complete” but unusable, including schools and health centres, were made operational following social audits that identified missing equipment and functionality gaps. In one school, this delivered a 20% increase in the number of children able to receive an education.

■ **Structured oversight strengthens public understanding and can rebuild trust after crisis**

When embedded within formal systems, social accountability helps restore confidence between citizens and decision-makers. In Ecuador, independent academic oversight and strengthened communication around the Quito Metro contributed to rebuilding public trust following corruption scandals and supported the project’s successful delivery. In Uganda, convening a multi-stakeholder dialogue helped resolve a community dispute over land early, preventing stalled construction.

■ **Data publication is the foundation of effective public participation**

Data must be publicly available, usable and easy to understand in order to enable informed citizen oversight, media scrutiny and meaningful engagement with decision-makers. Like in Malawi, where their data platforms’s ‘reg flag’ feature makes data use a two-way accountability channel.

■ **The social accountability model is adaptable and scalable across contexts**

From Latin America to Africa, CoST members have driven social accountability based on principles of use and publication of infrastructure data, multi-stakeholder working and citizen engagement but in ways tailored to local realities. The consistency of these principles, combined with contextual flexibility, has enabled both delivery improvements and systemic institutional change.


Between 2019-2025:



398

Media appearances online on TV, radio and print highlighting infrastructure issues identified through social accountability

Between 2019-2025:




54

Government actions taken in response to social accountability to improve the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of infrastructure projects

WHAT IS A SOCIAL AUDIT?

A social audit is a structured process where civil society, media and/or academia monitor and evaluate infrastructure projects, often through site visits and use of published data, to see whether they meet community needs and then make recommendations to decision makers.

Between 2019-2025:



4,556

Civil society representatives and journalists trained to use infrastructure data to hold decision makers to account



One of Panama’s social audits, focused on open procurement and transparency in public infrastructure.

Embedding into education to shape future leaders

Social accountability becomes transformative when it moves from occasional consultation to structured, institutionalised oversight embedded within governance, educational and legal systems.

By building social accountability capacity across education systems and getting young bright minds to spend time on social audits, CoST members are helping to ensure sustainable impact, both in terms of improving infrastructure itself as well as developing students' professional norms that prioritise transparency, participation and accountability

CASE STUDY: PANAMA



In Panama, social accountability has been embedded within an Open Government and Integrity Master's Degree, at Universidad de Panama (University of Panama), positioning oversight not as an external intervention but as part of formal professional training. As part

of the "Transparency, Infrastructure and Open Contracting" module, students conduct in-depth research on major infrastructure projects across sectors including health, transport, education, markets and sport.

Students engage directly with relevant stakeholders, analyse published infrastructure data and submit structured recommendations to public entities.

CoST's Senior Latin American Manager and CoST Panama's Manager contribute to the programme as Professor and Assistant Professor respectively, ensuring practical expertise and alignment with international good practice. In addition, university students have been trained in dedicated social audit tools, strengthening their technical capacity to conduct structured oversight.

These mechanisms are not limited to classroom exercises. They are now being applied to nationally significant investments, including high-speed rail and the Panama Canal, demonstrating how accountability can be integrated into strategic infrastructure planning at the highest level.

Through these projects, student committees work with locally affected communities to ensure their needs are reflected in recommendations, whilst also deepening communities understanding of infrastructure projects in their area.

“By bridging academia and real-world infrastructure oversight, we are building the next generation of transparency leaders—equipped with practical tools and aligned with international good practice.”

Manuel Gonzalez, Professor and CoST Senior Regional Latin American Manager, 2026



Professor and CoST Senior LATAM manager, Manuel Gonzalez, with Assistant Professor and CoST Panama Manager, Aida Martinez, with students from MA programme

CASE STUDY: JALISCO, MEXICO



Through a structured partnership between CoST Jalisco, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO) and public authorities, social audits are integrated into university degree programmes, transforming academic coursework into applied public oversight. Students and professors conduct social audits, including interviews with residents and technical evaluations. Their findings and recommendations are formally submitted to government authorities. As a result, as well as increasing infrastructure transparency, this work has delivered:

1. Strengthened access to infrastructure data

Beyond improving individual infrastructure projects, students' use of published infrastructure data through social audits has strengthened the governance systems that underpin them. The initiative generated recommendations to improve Jalisco's data platform, including disability-friendly accessibility settings and technical enhancements to platform design and maintenance. Their platform also makes it clear if a social audit has been carried out on a project. These changes improved usability and broadened public access to infrastructure information across a wider range of the public, including marginalised groups.

2. Building future leaders' capacity and understanding of integrity

Students gain hands-on experience monitoring infrastructure projects and participating in government decision-making processes, including presenting recommendations directly to the administrative bodies, CoST Jalisco's multi-stakeholder group, private and public sector organisations and civil society organisations. This embeds accountability skills and professional norms within the next generation of engineers, planners and public officials.

3. Replication across universities

The success of this model has led additional universities to establish Social Accountability Committees, expanding structured citizen-led oversight across Guadalajara. CoST Jalisco created a manual with guidelines on creating committees to support other universities replicate their model.

4. Legal reform embedding citizen oversight into public works

Building on the success of university-led social audits and committees, a formal regulation — *Mecanismo de Vigilancia y Control Ciudadano para las Obras Públicas de Guadalajara en la Plataforma de CoST Jalisco* — was adopted to institutionalise independent citizen participation in public works oversight.

The mechanism formally recognises citizen audit committees; establishes clear procedures for their operation; creates official channels for submitting findings and recommendations; and links oversight directly to the CoST Jalisco platform.

Within six months of adoption, five citizen audit committees were established. This shifted social accountability from ad hoc engagement to a structured, legally backed system.



Cynthia Cantero Pacheco, Secretary of Planning and Citizen Participation of the Government of the State of Jalisco, and CoST LATAM and Government Representative Board member, attending a Jalisco social auditing event with stakeholders.

Strengthening trust

Social accountability delivers value not only by improving infrastructure quality, but also by restoring legitimacy especially where corruption or weak oversight has undermined public confidence. When scrutiny is structured and visible, it signals that institutions are responsive — and that public concerns matter.

CASE STUDY: ECUADOR



This was seen in Ecuador, where social accountability played a central role in restoring public confidence in the Quito Metro following corruption scandals. With support from the Inter-American Development Bank, the CoST Ecuador Multi-Stakeholder Group trained academic institutions to provide independent technical support and strengthen compliance with international standards during the Metro's construction.

At the same time, stakeholders were supported to improve public communication, helping to ensure that information about the project was clearer, more accessible and more responsive to citizen concerns. This combination contributed to rebuilding trust, culminating in the successful launch and operation of the Quito Metro as a nationally significant infrastructure project.



Ecuador's social accountability capacity-building workshops for government

Improving the quality and usability of infrastructure

Social accountability ensures infrastructure works for the people it is meant to serve. By engaging service users throughout the project cycle, it replaces one-size-fits-all delivery with people-centered design, improving quality, usability and long-term sustainability.

CASE STUDY: SEKONDI-TAKORADI METROPOLITAN ASSEMBLY, GHANA



In Ghana, the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolitan Assembly (STMA) embed social accountability through District Citizens Monitoring Teams trained to conduct social audits on infrastructure projects. Teams bring together media, civil society, and the public, including representatives from marginalised groups. The CoST Sekondi-Takoradi Secretariat train them to take a four-pronged approach to social audits, including:

- conducting site visits
- speaking with affected community members
- utilising published data
- developing recommendations and follow up.

Social audit findings were shared with the public through local community radio programmes and presented directly to government assemblies in the Western Region of Ghana, creating public and institutional accountability. This led to concrete improvements across schools, healthcare, emergency services, and disability access.

Since 2021...

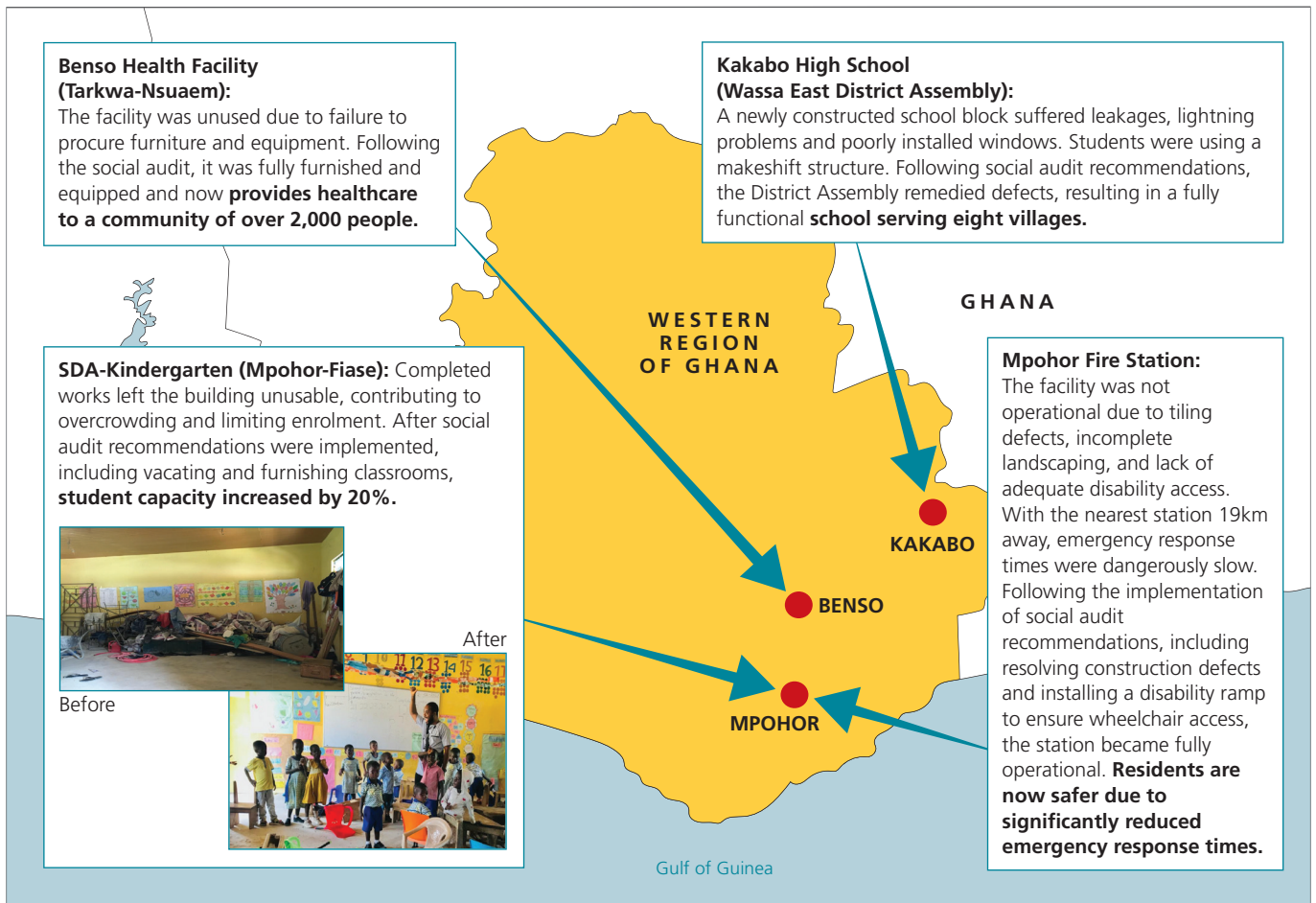
These teams have carried out social audits on:

14

projects across

8

procuring entities



CASE STUDY: UGANDA



In Uganda, a community dispute over land ownership temporarily halted construction of the Katalamwa Road project in Kampala after Makerere University raised concerns that part of the proposed road alignment crossed its land.

To address the issue transparently, CoST Uganda brought together a multi-stakeholder dialogue on-site, including the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), the university, the contractor and an engineering consultancy to have an open dialogue and ensure

affected stakeholders could raise concerns and access information. Stakeholders reviewed the concerns directly at the project location; agreeing that detailed survey maps were needed to clearly define the land required for the road works, and clarifying planned improvements to drainage infrastructure at site.

The process demonstrates how social accountability in infrastructure delivery can help resolve grievances early to overcome stalled construction, build trust between public authorities and stakeholders, and support more sustainable and responsible project implementation.



Photo taken during the construction of Katalamwa road

Using digital innovation to engage citizens

Digital tools can amplify social audits and community forums by enabling real-time reporting, creating public records of concerns and tracking how issues are addressed, resulting in shortened feedback loops between citizens and decision-makers.

They also generate patterns and trends that help identify systemic risks, while increasing visibility in ways that can deter poor performance. In doing so, digital innovation helps embed accountability more firmly within infrastructure governance systems rather than relying solely on periodic engagement.

CASE STUDY: MALAWI

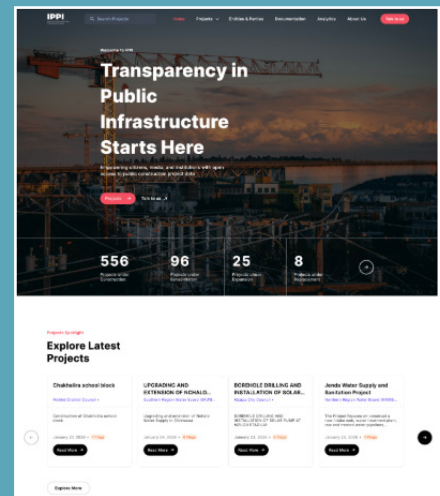


Most transparency portals are one-directional; the government publishes, and citizens read and use the data. In Malawi, they have implemented a 'red flag' feature into their **Infrastructure Platform for Public Infrastructure (IPPI)** which turns passive data publication into a two-way accountability channel.

When a citizen identifies a concern with a specific project, such as stalled construction, missing materials or cost irregularities, they can raise a red flag directly on that project's record within the platform.

The concern is then logged publicly alongside the project data, and both the citizen and wider public can track whether and how the procuring entity responds. This means that government action, or inaction, on reported issues becomes part of the project's public record.

The red flag system has received multiple awards from the Malawi Anti-Corruption Civil Society Support initiative, recognising its effective use of technology, strong project management and measurable results.



Malawi's IPP platform homepage

Conclusion

Our members have shown through an array of engagement mechanisms that social accountability becomes transformative when scrutiny is sustained, visible and impossible to ignore. This requires reinforcing oversight channels where citizens, media, academia, and civil society each play distinct but connected roles.

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