



Co-funded by
the European Union

Power and Resilience – Shifting Grounds:
Navigating Power, Partnership and Persistence



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1:
*Accountability as Political Practice:
Strengthening Legitimacy from Within*



How do movements practise accountability in ways that strengthen – rather than strain – their legitimacy?



The opening session of ***Vuka's Power & Resilience Dialogue Series*** confronted that question through lived reality, navigating authoritarianism, founder dominance, digital organising without trust, and funding structures that reward paperwork over principle. **This was a reckoning with what accountability actually means in practice.**

Co-hosted by Vuka! Coalition, Accountable Now, Accountability Lab Global, and the Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA), the dialogue brought together activists, movement practitioners, and accountability specialists from across continents.

Three things became clear:

1

Accountability is culture, not checklist

Policies and procedures don't create accountability – daily practice does. What matters is whether accountability lives in difficult conversations, shared commitment to values, and how movements actually treat each other.

2

External pressure sacrifices internal accountability

Too often, movements write reports for donors whilst lacking channels to be accountable to their own members. When accountability points upward to funders rather than inward to communities, it stops being transformative and becomes transactional.

3

Dynamic accountability as strategic infrastructure

AGNA's 21 years navigating trust-based relationships with 85+ member networks proves that intentional, values-driven accountability isn't bureaucratic overhead – it's what sustains movements through crisis, growth, and inevitable conflict.

These insights are grounded in practice, not theory. Here's how.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Power and Resilience – Shifting Grounds:
Navigating Power, Partnership and Persistence



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1:
*Accountability as Political Practice:
Strengthening Legitimacy from Within*

Accountability Reimagined

Accountable Now's listening project reached 50 voices across 22 countries – activists in Syria, journalists in South Africa, learning specialists working with movements from Spain to Uganda. The question was simple: **What does accountability mean to you?**

The answers revealed a fundamental gap between how institutions talk about accountability and how movements live it. For movements, accountability is:



A compass

What keeps movements aligned to values and principles when external pressure tries to knock them off course.



Power relationships

Navigating dynamics internally, externally, transactionally, and foundationally.



Trust relationships

Without internal trust, formal mechanisms become meaningless paperwork.



Relational practice

Not a checklist you complete, but a living commitment you maintain.

As one participant put it:



“Being accountable isn’t about perfection. It’s about being in relationship across all our differences.”

This reframing is political. It challenges the dominance of upward accountability to donors and re-centres the communities and values that movements exist to serve.

The Global Context:

Pressures That Shape (and Distort) Accountability

Accountability doesn't happen in a vacuum. External pressures shape – and sometimes distort – how movements practice it. The session surfaced five dynamics reshaping how it works globally:

1. Authoritarianism & Shrinking Civic Space

Movements under constant threat deprioritise internal accountability to focus on survival – keeping members safe, avoiding arrest, responding to immediate crackdowns. One participant noted: **“When you are under constant threat it's harder to focus on internal harmony but that's when trust matters more.”**



Co-funded by
the European Union

Power and Resilience – Shifting Grounds: *Navigating Power, Partnership and Persistence*



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1: *Accountability as Political Practice: Strengthening Legitimacy from Within*



The paradox: authoritarianism uses lack of trust as a fragmenting tool, yet that's precisely when movements most need internal coherence.

2. Donor Pressure & Professionalisation

When accountability means following donor agendas and filing quarterly reports, it stops being about impact and becomes about compliance. A South African activist put it bluntly: **"We changed the language to meet the funding code, not our own objectives."**

Another added: **"Sometimes we write accountability reports for donors but have no clear channels to be accountable to our own members."**



The result: upward accountability to funders crowds out downward accountability to communities.

3. Digital Organising & Disconnection

Digital tools enable rapid mobilisation but often fail to build the face-to-face connections that create responsibility to one another. Leadership becomes unclear. Misinformation spreads easily. Movements report losing powerful leaders because "without face-to-face connection it's hard to feel responsibility to one another."

4. Call-Out Culture & Burnout

Critique is vital. But call-out culture without restorative practices becomes punitive rather than transformative. Multiple regions described losing their strongest people because of how disagreements were handled.

One participant captured the loss: **"Some of our strongest people left because of how we handled disagreement."**

5. Global Solidarity & Interconnected Movements

On a hopeful note, **movements are more interconnected than ever.** This global solidarity strengthens accountability across struggles, creating peer learning, shared strategy, and mutual support that simply did not exist a decade ago.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Power and Resilience – Shifting Grounds: *Navigating Power, Partnership and Persistence*



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1: *Accountability as Political Practice: Strengthening Legitimacy from Within*

The Challenges: *External and Internal Fault Lines*

The dialogue mapped a set of intertwined challenges that undermine accountability both from outside and within movements.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

- 1 **Political Co-option & Ideological Capture**
The transition from activism to formal politics often drains movements of experienced leaders and shifts priorities away from grassroots needs.
- 2 **Funding Constraints & Conditionality**
Movements adjust leadership profiles and programme goals to meet funder expectations – sometimes at the expense of grassroots needs.
- 3 **Media Narratives & Fragmentation**
Pressure to appoint singular spokespersons makes movements vulnerable to attacks and weakens collective ownership. When accountability rests on one person, the movement's story can be hijacked.
- 4 **Corruption & Broken Systems**
Movements operating in corrupt environments often mirror the dysfunction around them, eroding internal trust.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

- 1 **Power Hoarding by Founders**
Movements with long-serving founders struggle with leadership renewal. Younger members feel disempowered.
- 2 **Lack of Clear Processes**
Unclear decision-making leads to lobbying, confusion, paralysis. Movements described having "strong energy but no mechanisms" – which leads to rapid burnout.
- 3 **Expansion Without Integration**
Rapid growth without proper onboarding leaves new members unclear on values, roles, and expectations. The movement gets bigger but loses committed members.
- 4 **Conflict Without Repair**
Internal disagreements – especially in digital spaces – escalate quickly when there are no restorative practices in place. Critique becomes punitive rather than generative, and unresolved tensions accumulate until movements fracture.

Pathways Forward: *Principles, Practices, and Political Commitments*

Despite these pressures, movements identified a set of principles that guide accountability as a lived practice rather than a bureaucratic requirement.

Five core principles

1. Trust is Foundational

Trust is built face-to-face. You cannot sustain accountability when interactions happen only on WhatsApp. **Movements need to know each other's stories to build a shared narrative and a shared sense of responsibility.**



Co-funded by
the European Union

Power and Resilience – Shifting Grounds:
Navigating Power, Partnership and Persistence



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1:
*Accountability as Political Practice:
Strengthening Legitimacy from Within*

2. Culture Over Structure

Policies matter, but culture determines whether accountability lives or dies.
Accountability must be a lived value expressed in daily practice, not a bureaucratic requirement that sits in a document.

3. Adaptable, Accessible Tools

Avoid theoretical frameworks that require extensive resources or external expertise. Movements already know what works for them – **the task is to make tools adaptable, accessible, and co-created rather than imposed.**

4. Culture Change Can't Be Outsourced

No consultant or external organisation can manufacture accountability. If the push does not come from within the movement, it will not stick.

5. Balance Transparency with Security

Movements must be transparent enough to build trust, but cautious enough to protect members under threat. This balance is context-specific and constantly shifting.

Models in Practice: *What Organisations Shared*

The dialogue moved from diagnosis to practice through two organisational examples that illustrated accountability's central tension: **structure without culture fails, but culture without intention doesn't scale.**

Blair Glencorse from Accountability Lab Global opened with a provocation:



**"We can't ask other people to be accountable
if we ourselves are not accountable."**

And then, he shared Accountability Lab's own governance crisis:



Co-funded by
the European Union

Power and Resilience – Shifting Grounds:
Navigating Power, Partnership and Persistence



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1:
*Accountability as Political Practice:
Strengthening Legitimacy from Within*

A few years ago, board members in one of their network labs fundamentally disagreed with the network's direction. The problem: **the organisation was legally accountable to its board, not to the network that had built it. When values diverged, formal structures became meaningless.**

Resolution required revoking collaboration agreements and creating entirely new legal structures – a painful process that exposed a critical limit: **governance mechanisms fail when culture and values don't align.**



The lesson: You can have perfect structures. But if culture and values aren't shared, those structures fail.

Accountability requires constant cultivation of alignment, especially with people in governance roles.

AGNA: Dynamic Accountability as Institutional DNA

Where Accountability Lab's story surfaced what goes wrong, AGNA's 21-year practice shows what's possible when accountability is intentionally embedded from the start.

Daniela Hiche from the AGNA Secretariat presented **dynamic accountability – trust-based relationships with all stakeholders, proactively adopted as institutional culture rather than reactive bureaucracy.**

AGNA operates within stacked accountability layers. **With 85+ members – all of them membership-based organisations themselves – accountability isn't a single relationship. It's an ecosystem: AGNA to CIVICUS, AGNA to its members, members to their members, everyone to communities served.**

Historical vs intentional accountability

Daniela distinguished between two trajectories:





Co-funded by
the European Union

Power and Resilience – Shifting Grounds:
Navigating Power, Partnership and Persistence



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1:
*Accountability as Political Practice:
Strengthening Legitimacy from Within*

- **Historical accountability develops reactively as organisations grow.** At 10 members, you manage informally. At 90, you need policies and procedures. This often becomes bureaucratic – policies created because donors required them, not because they respond to operational reality.
- **Intentional accountability is proactively adopted as core institutional value and constant relational practice.** It's embedded in culture, not retrofitted through structure.

The paradox AGNA members describe: **"The more transparent and accountable we become as networks, the less trust we receive from the public."** Compliance hasn't translated to legitimacy – which is why dynamic accountability matters.

These are the mechanisms that anchor the practice:

- **Legitimacy, Transparency and Accountability Working Group** – Peer-driven governance guiding AGNA in good practices and course correction.
- **Global Accountability Week** – Awareness-raising on what dynamic accountability is, why it matters, and how to practise it.
- **90-Day Accountability Challenge** – Members use the Render App assessment tool, choose one or two improvements, receive technical support, and demonstrate progress in three months. The 90-Day Challenge counters the perception that accountability is too complex or bureaucratic. Once the methodology is refined, it will open to any civil society network, movement, or coalition.

What This Means for Movements

The dialogue closed with a synthesis: **accountability needs to take place within an ecosystem model.**

Multiple organisations doing the same work, aspiring toward the same accountability goals, creates conditions for movements to connect beyond single conversations and build sustained practice.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Power and Resilience – Shifting Grounds: *Navigating Power, Partnership and Persistence*



KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #1: *Accountability as Political Practice: Strengthening Legitimacy from Within*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

FOR MOVEMENTS

Accountability isn't an afterthought or a donor requirement. It's political infrastructure. When movements treat accountability as a foundational strategy – investing in emotional literacy, building collective support, creating culturally appropriate mechanisms – they become more effective, sustainable, and powerful.

FOR DONORS

Upward accountability to funders crowds out downward accountability to communities. If you want principled movements, fund accountability to communities, not accountability about them in quarterly reports.

FOR NETWORKS & COALITIONS

AGNA's 21 years prove that dynamic accountability – maintaining trust-based relationships across complex stakeholder ecosystems – is what sustains movements through crisis, growth, and conflict.

FOR ALL CIVIC ACTORS

The question isn't whether you're accountable on paper – it's whether you're accountable in practice. Daily decisions, difficult conversations, and how you actually treat each other: that's where accountability lives.

Looking Forward

You can't build resilient movements without internal coherence. You can't shift power without addressing who holds it and how. You can't demand legitimacy from states whilst losing it within your own organisations. That's why this session opened Vuka's Power and Resilience series with accountability – not as bureaucratic requirement, but as political practice.

The question the conversation leaves with every participant is: **How do we move beyond compliance and into connection?**

Because as this dialogue proved, that's where accountability actually lives.