The GEM 2017 theme of Accountability in Education is critical, especially in developing countries. The high student dropout and low levels of learning are reflections of the insufficient attention given to accountability, particularly with regard to the education of poor, disenfranchised, and at-risk communities across the world. The key questions that surround accountability listed in the Concept Note are relevant, timely, and comprehensive. Even though the concept, practice, and results/consequences of accountability are critical to the SDGs in education, there is a dearth of information, analysis, and discussion on this topic. The GEM 2017 focus will be invaluable to the education sector’s challenges of improving quality and learning.

I would like make the following suggestions as the GEM report team explores this concept in developing countries:

(i) In the section on defining accountability, an interesting avenue to consider, taking into account the recent World Development Report on Human Decision Making, is the ways in which thinking about accountability undergird financial, professional, market and participatory accountability mentioned in the Concept Note. The WDR 2015 highlights the impact of professionals’ (donors, policy makers, NGOs, and implementers) thought and decision-making on effective reform. The report describes three ways in which people think—automatically, socially, and with mental models. Taken-for-granted world views and social frameworks that are shared and define accountability influence the way people think and in turn frame their actions. Capturing ways in which public and private sector professionals (such as policy makers, education administrators, and teachers), conceptualize accountability would then determine and explain accountability practices.

(ii) It might be useful to examine how this concept of accountability has been used and incorporated in externally financed programs over the last few decades. It is possible that certain assumptions were made concerning system level accountability, which entailed the bypassing of interventions related to accountability. Take for example the interventions in projects addressing teacher quality. It was assumed that systems were in place for teacher accountability. Therefore, the primary focus of interventions was to improve teacher quality by providing a variety of certification avenues or professional development programs. However, training could have an impact only if the teachers were coming to school and teaching.

(iii) As stated in the Concept Note, decentralization drives in-country differences in system accountability. Accountability at the country level has also become “fuzzy” as systems transitioned into deep and extensive decentralization. In this scenario, social, political and economic histories of sub-national entities influence levels of accountability, making an analysis of this concept more complex and multifaceted within a country. Using a comparative qualitative methodology at the sub-national levels would help uncover the concept and practice of accountability at the provincial/districts levels. I have tried to do this
Another dimension that has had an impact at the country level is the expansion of systems over the last few decades. Handling oversight and accountability issues for millions of students and thousands of teachers involves significant resources, technology and managerial skills. Systems have reacted in different ways to this situation. Some countries have reacted by ignoring the problem evident in the absence of paperwork necessary for accountability (i.e., Teachers’ service records). In other countries sophisticated and detailed systems of teacher oversight which existed before independence have been simplified. For example, in Cameroon, at the time of independence, in order to simplify the system (financially and technically), a uniform performance monitoring system was put in place for all civil servants (police, medical personnel, teachers etc.). Unlike student enrolment, which EMIS systems are beginning to effectively handle, staff databases critical for the practice of accountability are still far from satisfactory in most developing countries. Thus distinguishing between deliberate subversion of accountability and the genuine constraints (technical and managerial) for effective mechanisms of oversight would be important.

The need to increase learning is critical. Learning is dependent on student attendance/retention. I would suggest responsibility for learning be coupled with attendance as an overarching category for financial, professional, market and participatory accountability. The circumstances in which measurement and reporting with regard to learning was more or less effective as discussed in the Concept Note is very appropriate. The point is also related to the above discussion on human decision-making. For example, Pratham has been in existence for over a decade. However, there is very little information on how different states in India reacted to the information that this survey generated. Another issue with regard to learning in addition to high stakes testing is the lack of testing manifested in the automatic promotion in primary grades, which allows students without grade specific knowledge to proceed to next level.

The lack of conclusive information generated by Randomized Control Trials on the role and contribution of community and parental voices suggests that this by itself is insufficient to force actors to be accountable. Identifying situations where voice can play an effective role in enhancing accountability would be useful. Perhaps, system level accountability for personnel and items that are being financed would be a must before community and parent voices can further enhance and improve education.