

Electronic governments in Mozambique and the dilemmas of vertical accountability in the covid-19 context

Abstract

With the COVID-19 pandemic, considering governance practices that value social distancing and ensure government transparency and accountability, as central in democracies was an emergency. Despite the electronic government being a decades-old phenomenon and practice in some States, in the context of COVID-19, it has proved to be a significant avenue for presenting accounts in all democratic States. In this sense, this research sought to understand how the governments of Mozambique were responsive to the citizens in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic via their portals. To meet these objectives, we resorted to asymmetric observation in government portals, by which we found that the governments of Mozambique were not compliant to the analysed requisites, and continue using traditional methods, which, in the context of COVID-19, jeopardize the good governance and develop actions linked to corruption.

Keywords: electronic governments, Mozambique COVID-19, vertical accountability

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the socio-political landscape of several states around the world. Since it was first confirmed at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, a city in the People's Republic of China, the virus has spread around the world, destroying countless lives, mainly in Italy, Spain, the United States, India and Brazil.

This pandemic has forced a change in the lifestyle of the global population by forcing the sovereign bodies of states to decree states of emergency and calamity, which in turn have affected various socio-political agendas, and in countries with less solid and developing democracies, has jeopardized a series of postulates linked to good governance with a focus on accountability.

When the World Health Organization (WHO) advised social distancing, governments were forced more than ever to adopt accountability channels that valued physical distance. In this sense, e-government was seen as an efficient mechanism, since it would reduce the risks that the pandemic posed to good governance through its ability to inform and interact with citizens regardless of geographical space. In this way, it was possible to present account management to citizens through its various tools, such as graphs, photos, videos and tables.

Thus, although e-government is a phenomenon that has been around for more than two decades and has been practiced by a few countries, with COVID-19 it has come to play a key role in maintaining government transparency and accountability in all states that have opted for democracy as their political regime.

In Mozambique, the decision on social distancing as a new normal comes in a context where the dominant knowledge around e-government indicated negligible coverage, a lack of up-to-date information, no accountability reports and no mechanisms in 2018.

In the concrete sense of being equipped with tools for holistic interaction between voters and elected officials; providing relevant information and databases as well as up-to-date accounts of

governance, which allow citizens, from an invulnerable environment, to exercise oversight, control, verification, exposure and punishment.

Within this framework, this research paper aims to understand whether the context in which social distancing has become the daily imperative, and e-governance an effective and secure alternative to the continuity of democracy, has contributed to a change in the accountability paradigm of Mozambican governments through their portals. In order to realise this objective, we took an asymmetrical look at the electronic portals of Mozambican governments, taking into account the variables of accountability, transparency and participation/interaction. From the perspective of Fabiano Maury Raupp and José Antonio Pinho,¹ these variables serve as an explanatory model for accountability on government portals and, through their indicators, can indicate the level of accountability on each electronic portal, which can vary between low, medium or high.

Since accountability is not an isolated process, the transparency variable is a fundamental element to observe, since it implies the availability of information on government activities, allowing citizens to exercise oversight, monitoring, control and verification of public funds. On the other hand, the participation/interaction variable allows voters, through interaction, solid grounds for questioning, compensating or punishing elected officials for their actions.

The analysis of the data collected tended to be more qualitative, however, given the numerical size of the existing governments, namely one central government, ten provincial governments and 53 municipal governments, the data analysis incorporated some quantitative aspects with a focus on the provincial and municipal governments.

Political accountability: concepts and problematisations

Accountability was adopted by the democratic regime as one of the angels that would keep public officials loyal to the rest of society. Thus, accountability spaces and voters serve as its foundation, as they give it power and legitimacy, requiring elected officials to explain and justify their actions.

Accountability has played a crucial role in the development of democracy. There is a consensus among theorists who have looked into this issue, such as Francisco Lopes and Geovana Freire,² who emphasise that:

Accountability is so relevant to the relationship between state and citizen that without its existence there is no democracy. In fact, accountability should be understood as democratic action. The more advanced democratic practice is, the greater the interest in accountability. Government accountability tends to accompany the advance of democratic values such as human dignity, participation and representativeness.

According to Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino,³ accountability is defined as the obligation of elected political leaders to answer for their political decisions when asked by voters or constitutional bodies. For his part, Andreas Schedler,⁴ defines accountability as an act that involves the right to receive information and to fulfil obligations, showing all the necessary details. Under these conditions, it is understood that accountability is a phenomenon of different institutions, however, the one linked to public agents is called political or democratic. According to Mark Bovens, Thomas Goodin and Robert Schillemans,⁵ this type of accountability refers mainly to issues of public interest, such as the spending of public funds, the exercise of public powers or the conduct of public institutions. For his part, Michael Dowdle,⁶ suggests that this type of accountability expresses faith that people with public responsibilities will be able to be accountable to the public for their performance.

In essence, political accountability includes answerability, as the ability to force someone to provide information and explanations of their actions, and enforcement, as the ability to impose sanctions on those who violate their public duties. These two dimensions allow the concept of accountability to be inclusive, valuing inspection, monitoring, control, verification, reprimand, exposure and punishment.⁴ For accountability to occur effectively, informational and explanatory elements are important, i.e. the transparency of elected leaders and the participation/interaction between them and voters. Voters punish or reward political leaders as the second phase of accountability, evaluating the degree of information made available through interaction with elected officials, seeking procedural explanations of activities carried out or not.

Political accountability is characterised by the use of three accountability mechanisms: vertical, horizontal and social. These function as a system for capturing the accountability of public officials, emphasising the bottom-up and top-down logics. Despite referring to the other accountability mechanisms, for the purposes of this research we are focusing on vertical accountability, which concerns the relationship between the voter and the elected official. In this exercise, vertical accountability is seen in the order of agency theory. In fact, agency theory is a useful reference in analysing accountability.⁷ In this framework, the machinery of government is conceived as a game in which a principal (voter) delegates to an agent (elected official), a certain set of instruments to execute certain objectives under the control of the former.⁸ In this case, following agency theory, the agent has an obligation to act on behalf of the principal.⁷

However, the process of delegation is not without considerable political tensions due to the existence of heterogeneous interests and asymmetries between the principal and the agent. Elected officials and voters may have conflicting interests, the former may only be interested in enriching themselves while in office, or, even if they are honest, their ideas may differ from what the public itself wants.⁹

By considering these dimensions, the theory emphasises the thorny side of delegation in the chain of command of accountability.⁷ However, despite these vicissitudes, the exercise of vertical accountability is considered to be of paramount importance, given that the promise of electoral democracy is that even in circumstances of dissimilar interests between principals and trustees, the former can hold politicians accountable for their political choices and thus guarantee a close connection between will and public policy.¹⁰

In this respect, Guillermo O'Donnell,¹¹ argues that the existence of vertical accountability ensures that countries are democratic, in the specific sense that citizens can exercise their right to participate in choosing who will govern them for a given period and can freely express their opinions and demands.

For Diamond and Morlino,³ vertical accountability means the obligation of elected political leaders to answer for their political decisions when asked by voters. From Schedler's perspective,⁴ this capacity has three main characteristics: information, justification and punishment or compensation, which roughly describe the stages in which citizens learn about public actions, listen to the reasons for these actions presented by leaders and decide whether to punish leaders or protect them.

In this type of accountability, elections are a fundamental part of holding elected leaders to account. For voters to enforce or reward leaders for their actions, elections appear to be the most constitutional avenue. In this sense, for Campos,¹² taking into account that the electoral process alone is not agile enough to safeguard the public interest, social accountability emerges.

This strand of accountability is an approach to accountability based on civic responsibility in which ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations participate directly or indirectly in accountability. Mechanisms in this strand can be initiated and supported by the state, citizens or both, but are often demand-driven and operate from the bottom up.¹³

Like vertical accountability, social accountability does not guarantee that civil society, especially in developing democracies, will gather enough information to hold the government to account. In this sense, horizontal accountability emerges, characterised, in O'Donnell's view,¹¹ by the existence of state agencies that have the legal right and power and are in fact willing and able to carry out actions, from routine supervision to legal sanctions or even impeachment against actions or emissions by other state agents or agencies that could be qualified as criminal.

Through the three accountability mechanisms, political or democratic accountability creates the conditions for greater accountability of public officials, insofar as if one of the mechanisms is constrained, the others can hold public officials accountable from below (vertical and/or social) or from above (horizontal accountability).

Governance through e-government

With the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially the internet, traditional communities have migrated to an information age. In this process, in order to adapt to the new social realities, several states, after the first forum in Washington in 1999, adopted e-government as part of the reform of their administrations.

According to Lamartine Vieira Braga and Ricardo Corrêa Gomes,¹⁴ states adopted e-government when they realised that the internet

in general enables greater access to information and knowledge, allowing for a decision-making process that is both more dispersed and transparent, increasing the level of accountability of politicians and public servants. Under these conditions, Rodrigo da Costa Vasconcellos and Paludo Fontana,¹⁵ assume that citizens have at their disposal instrumentalised means of obtaining information, making complaints and holding politicians to account.

The idea of e-government arose in order to achieve the goal of democratising governments and achieving greater transparency and social control.¹⁶ E-government refers to the idea of using ICTs, particularly the internet, in order to facilitate access to the official websites of public administration bodies and to achieve greater transparency and control.

information or guidance on certain procedures, as well as filling in documents more conveniently than the traditional way.¹⁷

E-government has reduced public administration spending and improved the use of resources, as many services can now be carried out electronically by society itself and at any time, reducing the number of civil servants and/or outsourced workers who previously carried out bureaucratic activities.¹⁶

In this way, e-government proves to be more efficient than traditional government in its administrations. As Helen Margetts,¹⁸ argues, with the internet there is greater openness and it is much more difficult for government institutions to restrict information, and much easier for citizens to conduct their own surveillance, as well as generating an open culture that benefits everyone.

In the analysis of Hélio Goes and José Carlos dos Santos Damasceno,¹⁹ e-government is divided into three categories or three institutional players: citizens, companies and services, and government departments. These actors are respectively characterised as follows:

1. G2C - government to customer - refers to the actions that the government carries out in order to make services and information pertinent to the public sphere available to citizens by electronic means;
2. G2B - government to business - corresponds to the relationship that the government has with companies, examples of which are the acquisition of goods and services from the productive sector;
3. G2G - government to government - involves the government itself, in its horizontal relationship with its own bodies and in its vertical relationship between governments of different spheres.

Through these three categories, e-government has proved to be an important tool for deepening democracy. It allows for greater flexibility, transparency, accessibility to strengthen the exchange of information, services, scheduling of public policies and, above all, accountability and transparency in management.²

E-government is an important channel for exercising democratic accountability. Especially in the context of public calamities, it prevents democracy from being depleted by enabling interaction and access to information on governance, while reducing illicit practices by public servants who may take advantage of the distance from the voter, providing the latter with the material necessary to hold the elected official accountable without exposing themselves to the hostile environment of pandemics.

However, the problem of delegation highlighted by principal-agent theory highlights the need for an appropriate institutional design

for accountability systems to function effectively.⁷ This includes the need to make electronic portals and account management information available, especially in developing countries, to contextualise internet fees and/or make access to portals available free of charge, and to train citizens to use electronic portals. On the other hand, the sophisticated development of government portals is important, which in turn, according to Braga and Gomes,¹⁴ boosts electronic participation, and the latter, the level of accountability effectiveness.

Mozambican governments and e-governance

The democratically elected governments in Mozambique came into being after the approval of the first multi-party constitution in 1990. Before that, Mozambique was a state without any political government elected by universal vote. In this context, the practice of vertical accountability was almost non-existent, and citizens did not have the prerogative to demand an explanation from the government about its actions, let alone take any action related to punishing the government for poor performance. However, in 1994, Mozambique's first democratic central government was elected. Unlike the first, it and its successors were obliged to be accountable to the citizens, and the latter had the prerogative to reward or punish the government through elections.

In 1997, Law 2/97 of 18 February was passed,²⁰ which established municipal governments with their own powers. In this way, Mozambique was made up of a central government and 33 municipal governments. However, despite the fact that decentralisation implied governance close to the citizen, efficiency was still constrained, and it was important to adopt new mechanisms, such as e-governance, to solve this dilemma.

As in other states, Mozambique has adopted e-government as part of the reform of its public administration, with a view to improving governance and the provision of services to citizens. The first step was taken by drawing up the Strategic Information Technology Policy Plan in November 2000, and later by approving the information technology policy in the same year by Resolution 28/2000 of 12 December.

In 2002, the Information Technology Policy Implementation Strategy was approved and a Technical Unit for the Implementation of Information Technology Policy was created by Decree 50/2002 of 26 December. In 2006, the e-Government Strategy was approved,²¹ and the government portal was launched along with the information and communication technologies observatory. The eGovernment, whose implementation would be completed by 2010, aimed, among other things, to: make standardised forms and procedures for all government services available via the internet (web); ensure that all levels of government (down to district and municipal level) have access to the government's secure communications network; establish mandatory data sources to be available for citizens' use and benefit; empower communities to participate effectively in local governance; and allow public access to government information and services at district and municipal level.

With the adoption of e-government in Mozambique, one of the state's main responsibilities was to promote the dissemination of information and bring citizens closer together, producing relevant content that would stimulate transparency and democracy. In this logic, the benefits of e-government were seen as vectors of transparency and accountability of public officials towards citizens, insofar as they would improve the monitoring of the actions of the Public Administration and the State.²²

By 2007, the e-government strategy had begun to register notable changes. The central government had an electronic portal and

municipal governments were being prepared for the new governance model. Meanwhile, local authorities were expanding in number. In the third municipal elections held in 2008, a further ten new municipalities were created through Law No. 3/2008 of 2 May. In the 2013 elections, the number of local governments increased to 53 as a result of the creation of another ten new municipalities, which resulted from the approval of Law no. 11/13, of 3 June.

On the other hand, with the constitutional revision in 2018, which provides, among other things, for the election of ten provincial governors from 2019 onwards in place of the appointment model, Mozambique is now made up of the following members by three governments, namely a central government, ten provincial governments and 53 municipal governments. Consequently, the electronic portals of the provincial governments had to be tools that enabled vertical oversight mechanisms, insofar as the governors were now elected by the citizens and no longer appointed by the President of the Republic.

In the same year, two instruments were approved: the Organic Statute of the National e-Government Institute, through Resolution no. 19/2018, and the Information Society Policy, through Resolution no. 17/2018 of 21 June, which repeals the information technology policy of 2000.²³ Despite the considerable development in the implementation of information and communication technologies, and the approval of various documents that enable this progress, the rear-view mirror around e-government, before the COVID-19 pandemic, indicated several constraints to its realisation, especially for accountability.

In 2014, a study by the Human Rights Centre of Mozambique (2014) suggested that the coverage of the eGovernment network was insignificant, as it only covered the central level, the provincial capitals and part of some districts, with just over forty Community Multimedia Centres having been set up across the country.

On the other hand, data from the main international indices associated with ICTs show that, in comparative terms, Mozambique is at the bottom of the table, as are other African countries. The country went from 147th place in 2016 to 150th place in 2017, out of a total of 176 positions, of which Eritrea is the last.²³

In 2018, Mozambique was ranked 160a,²⁴ which meant that the country had evolved negatively. Despite the country's failures in the comparative analysis, the United Nations (UN) 2018 maintains that Mozambique has advanced from a lower to a higher eGovernment Development Index group (low EGDI to medium EGDI).

However, as in other states that have advanced in the development index, inequalities persist in terms of access to digital media in Mozambique. The level of access to and use of ICTs is quite disparate when comparing the capital, where most of the technology and qualified users are concentrated, with the other urban centres and rural areas.²³

In this respect, research by Dias and Pinheiro,¹² reveals that the country is one of the regions where there is a profound bottleneck in terms of the distribution and mastery of ICTs, with extremely low levels of internet connection compared to developed countries. Despite the existence of online pages in almost all ministries and provincial governments, there are clear deficiencies in the functioning of e-government, characterised by network failures and a lack of constant updating of the information provided.²⁵

Furthermore, Marisa, Uate and Perreira,²⁶ note that a considerable proportion of citizens with computers and internet access use them through private operators. Prices such as internet access and telephone use are still exorbitant for a rural population that lives on less than a dollar a day, making it a major challenge to expand the public computer network.

Following the declaration of the second state of emergency and reports of more severe waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that there was an emergency need to change government portals, with the central government spreading the idea of virtualization using work, education and pandemic-safe governance mechanisms, which suggested the end of the current paradigm.

E-governments and vertical accountability with COVID-19

With the confirmation of COVID-19 in Mozambique, the modus operandi in the country has required, as in other states, different ways of dealing with governance. As a result, access to various institutions has been relatively restricted. With fears of contamination, the flow of the public to governance institutions to scrutinise public accounts followed suit.

On the other hand, governments continued to run their territorial jurisdictions on the basis of public funds. From then on, various partners supported the state with monetary funds to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, the government received 700 million dollars from international partners, of which, as the principles of vertical accountability dictate, governments are obliged to make the management of these funds available through different means of information, especially in the context of electronic portals for the purpose of social control.

Unlike other information and communication technologies, such as television and radio, e-government is entirely geared towards governance, providing information on government actions and decisions at all times and in any space. It also has various mechanisms for accountability, such as graphs, photos, videos and tables.

In this sense, as part of the pandemic, the central government has promoted various initiatives linked to digitalisation, including online education and intentions to boost e-government in order to give continuity to social and political life while the pandemic prevails, suggesting that internet fees would be reasonable for all citizens, if not making government portals available free of charge, including up-to-date information, more effective communication mechanisms and public account management data.

Up to this point, we have been dealing with theoretical issues and problematisations. The following exercise will analyse each government portal in Mozambique to understand how, in the context of the pandemic, they remain transparent, interact and account to their voters in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and maintain democracy through e-government.

Central Government

The Central Government of Mozambique was the first to adopt e-governance when the government portal was launched in 2006. Through this portal, the traditional government agreed to respond to the new social and political realities, providing citizens with all the fundamental information on governance, including the accountability indicators described in Table 1.

Table I Analysis of accountability in the Central Government

Transparency Indicators	Central Government	Level
Institutional Information	X	Bass
News	X	
General Information	X	
Legislation	X	
Search tool	X	
Download doc.	X	Medium
Site map	X	
Links to the sectors	X	
Links to other sites	X	
Explanatory videos	X	High
Publicising different stories	X	
Public Acts Section		
Publicising plans and actions		
Accountability indicators	Central Government	
Out of date	X	Bass
Partial and/or untimely disclosure of all legal reports		Medium
Disclosure of all legal reports on time		
Partial disclosure of the set of legal reports in simplified versions		High
Disclosure of all legal reports in simplified versions		
Management reports on expenses incurred		
Participation/Interaction Indicators	Central Government	
E-mail	X	Bass
Phone numbers	X	
Electronic forms		
Indication of analysis of incoming e-mails		Medium
Monitoring user actions		
Ombudsman	X	High
Reply to emails received		
Individual and/or collective chats		
Blog for debate		

Source: Prepared by the author.

In order to respond to the context of COVID-19, the Central Government presents relevant information about the pandemic on the front page of its portal and provides means such as email, landline numbers, mobile phones and exclusive websites for issues related to the pandemic, thus allowing citizens to be informed and know how to deal with the new paradigm.

In addition, we found that the portal of the Central Government of Mozambique presents all the indicators recommended at the low level of transparency, but some indicators are not displayed as expected. Much of the news is out of date and presented late.

In terms of medium-ranking indicators, the government portal fulfils the necessary conditions for transparency. By satisfying these conditions, it allows citizens to access data related to the management of public accounts through the various ministerial links available on the Central Government portal, when there is no data on the management of public accounts on the portal.

On the other hand, as the level of transparency indicators rises, the government systematically ignores some useful transparency indicators. At the high level, 50% of the indicators are not filled in, and those that are presented, such as videos, do not deal with the issue of explaining government accounts. The action plans are not revealed in any specific document or tool for citizens to access, leaving them to discover the government’s actions on the Ministry of Economy and

Finance (MEF) link or on the list of late or outdated news on the Central Government portal.

Looking at the participation/interaction indicators, we can see that the dilemma of excluding the indicators persists as the level of the indicators rises. At the low level, electronic forms are ignored and only e-mail and two mobile phone numbers to be charged to the citizen are presented as means of communication and ombudsman.

In this sense, contact between the government and the citizen would be constrained by the high costs required by mobile phone operators to contact the government. Furthermore, the government portal does not allow citizens to check the emails they have received and/or rejected. As a result, the ombudsman process via e-mail on the central government portal does not guarantee that citizens’ requests will be considered.

The lack of monitoring of the number of citizens who access the government portal, and a holistic debate mechanism, conveys the idea of an isolated citizen accessing the page, and as a result, with the absence of this tool and a green line, a culture of low level of debate and lack of social pressure for accountability from the Central Government is nurtured.

In these terms, it is suggested that without the minimum of questions to the government, the dilemmas of agent and principal are

added, in which the government as the agent and holder of complete information on public funds, and the citizen as the principal, in cases of doubt, is seen as incapable of questioning the agent about its actions due to the lack of efficient means to do so.

Despite presenting an extensive site map, the Central Government’s electronic portal does not have any tools linked to public accountability. The analysis suggests that the government responds to this responsibility through the MEF portal, given that, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Central Government has not presented any documents related to accounts to citizens through its portal, but has resorted to the MEF.

The MEF portal reveals the government’s attention to publishing plans for the amounts donated by the international community in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but, as Leila Constantino,²⁷ notes, the fifth progress report on commitments to cooperation partners in the context of COVID-19 up to December 2020, made public in February 2021, does not explain in detail on what basis services have been purchased and contracted to deal with the pandemic, and the document does not provide details on the plan, disbursement and execution of funding.

The plans that were published monthly by the government on the status of commitments to partners in the context of COVID-19, through the MEF, followed the methodology addressed in the report

cited by Constantino,²⁷ so it seems sensible to agree with the researcher that the publication of monthly status documents by the government through the MEF does not make sense for society if the government does not publish the plan detailing the execution of the seven hundred million dollars disbursed by donors.²⁷

In this scenario, the overwhelming asymmetry of relevant information for citizens to scrutinise the government’s actions through its portal or sectors is remarkable. A detailed accounts plan, as suggested by Constantino,²⁷ is essential for citizens and other entities with an interest to be able to monitor the plans and gauge the degree of achievement and transparency in accountability, because without these, the dilemma between the agent (government) and the principal (citizen) becomes more pronounced and develops behaviours parallel to good governance.

Provincial Governments

Within the framework of the 2006 e-government strategy, taking e-governance down to the lowest governing bodies was an avenue that was travelled for many years until the current period of elections of governors by universal vote. In this exercise, governors began to account for their actions to society, valuing the principles of participation and transparency, which consists of the obligation to publish all administrative activity through various means, including electronic portals, observing the indicators mentioned in Table 2.

Table 2 Analysis of accountability in provincial governments

Transparency Indicators	Provincial Governments										Level	
	Maputo	Gaza	Inhambane	Sofala	Manica	Tete	Zambezia	Nampula	Niassa	Cabo Delgado		
Institutional Information	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Bass	
News	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
General Information	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Legislation	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X		
Search tool	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Download doc.	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	Medium	
Site map	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Links to the sectors												
Links to other sites	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	High	
Explanatory videos												
Publicising different stories	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Public acts section												
Publicising plans and actions												
Accountability Indicators	Maputo	Gaza	Inhambane	Sofala	Manica	Tete	Zambezia	Nampula	Niassa	Cabo Delgado	Level	
Out of date	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		Bass
Partial and/or untimely disclosure of all legal reports												Medium
D. the set of legal reports on time												
D. partial set of legal reports in simplified versions												High
D. the set of legal reports in simplified versions												
D. management reports on expenses incurred												

Table 2 Continued...

Participation/Interaction Indicators	Provincial Governments										Level
	Maputo	Gaza	Inhambane	Sofala	Manica	Tete	Zambezia	Nampula	Niassa	Cabo Delgado	
E-mail	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Phone numbers	X		X		X		X				Bass
Electronic forms											
Indication of analysis of incoming e-mails											Medium
Monitoring user actions											
Ombudsman	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Reply to emails received											
Individual and/or group chats											High
Blog for debate											

Source: Prepared by the author.

As a result of late provincial decentralisation, provincial e-governments have a similar architecture to the central government. Before decentralisation in 2018, the central government administered the provinces through governors appointed by the President of the Republic, whose main interest was to be horizontally accountable to those who appointed them. As a result, most of the procedures on the provincial governments’ portals continue to follow the central government’s *modus operandi*. In each variable analysed, the provincial governments also ignore the indicators that are fundamental to effective accountability as the level of accountability rises.

Like the Central Government, the Provincial Governments present relevant information and contacts for COVID-19 issues on the front page of their portals. However, we found that only 80 per cent of the Provincial Governments present all the low-level transparency information, and 20 per cent of the governments, namely Tete and Nampula, do not present legislation on their portals.

With regard to the medium-level transparency indicators, we see that 80% of the governments have 60% of the indicators, and the Sofala and Nampula governments have 40%. Despite this difference, all the provincial governments’ portals do not have links to the sectors that make up their administrations, which reveals, at least in terms of their portals, a lack of administrative deconcentration. As for the high level indicators of transparency, we found that all the provincial governments only publicise different matters in news reports and ignore 75% of the high level indicators for transparency, namely explanatory videos on public accounts, a section on public acts and publicising action plans. Under conditions where these indicators are addressed, they are revealed without detail in news items published without updates.

In relation to the participation/interaction indicators, we found that all the governments have emails that also serve as ombudsmen, but because these do not allow voters to check the indication of the analysis of emails received and the monitoring of user actions, mobile phone contacts become important for interacting with the governments.

On the other hand, only two of the ten provincial governments (Maputo and Zambezia) provide mobile phone numbers and charge

the citizen for the call. On the other hand, the governments of Gaza, Sofala, Tete, Nampula, Niassa and Cabo Delgado did not provide any form of telephone contact, and the remaining governments (Inhambane and Manica) are limited to emails and landlines, in a context where the citizen exclusively has a mobile phone that operates through mobile telephones. On the other hand, we found that none of the ten government portals has a blog for a holistic debate between voters and governors. On average, only 60 per cent of the government portals have account management reporting tools ranging from 2011 to 2015, namely Cabo Delgado; Zambezia; Nampula; Inhambane; Gaza and Maputo. On the other hand, the rest of the governments do not have any tool linked to accounts or a provincial management report.

In the context of COVID-19, none of the governors have presented accounts to voters since their election in 2019. A year after the election, the provincial e-governments have not presented a report on the spending of public funds. On the contrary, the Provincial Governments operate in the dark from a citizenry that is unable to supervise them and evaluate their performance, since the latter has no information on the management of public funds on their portals. In this respect, doubts persist as to whether the portals of the provincial governments have been properly emigrated to adapt to the process of vertical accountability, since they continue with past forms of operation.

Municipal governments

By their nature, municipal governments are the ones that, through governance portals, are expected to be more transparent, accountable and participatory/interactive, as they are governments that are closer to the citizen, and it is therefore their duty, as Law 6/2018 mentions, to be regularly accountable to their voters in the performance of their mandate.

However, not all municipal governments have an electronic portal. In a universe of 53 municipalities, only ten municipal governments (18.86%) have an e-government, of which Nacala Porto’s is still under construction and Maputo City Council’s, while the pandemic was at its peak (2020-2021), was impossible to access, even though the context of local governance proved to be practicable from digital

media, which became a reality after a relative opening and relaxation of restrictive measures to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, while citizens were already attending governance institutions. As a result,

only 16.98% of municipal governments, including Maputo City, which only later introduced an operational e-government in early 2022, had active governance portals, as described in Table 3.

Table 3 Analysing accountability in municipal governments

Transparency Indicators	Municipal governments									Level
	Maputo	Matola	Beira	Dondo	Milange	Quelimane	Moç	C. Nampula	Ribaué	
Institutional Information		X		X			X		X	Bass
News	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
General Information				X			X	X	X	
Legislation		X					X		X	
Search tool	X		X			X	X	X	X	Medium
Download doc.	X	X					X		X	
Site map	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Links to the sectors										
Links to other sites							X			High
Explanatory videos								X		
Publicising different stories								X	X	
Public acts section									X	
Publicising plans and actions	X								X	
Accountability Indicators										
	Maputo	Matola	Beira	Dondo	Milange	Quelimane	Moç	C. Nampula	Ribaué	
Out of date	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Bass
Partial and/or late disclosure of all legal reports										
D. the set of legal reports on time										Medium
D. partial set of legal reports in simplified versions										
D. the set of legal reports in simplified versions										High
D. management reports on expenses incurred										
Participation/Interaction Indicators										
	Mputo	Matola	Beira	Dondo	Milange	Quelimane	Moç	C. Nampula	Ribaué	
E-mail	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	Bass
Phone numbers	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Electronic forms		X	X	X					X	Medium
Indication of analysis of incoming e-mails										
Monitoring user actions		X							X	
Ombudsman	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	High
Reply to emails received										
Individual and/or group chats										
Blog for debate										

Source: Prepared by the author.

With regard to the 83.01% of governments without an electronic portal, we can see that some of these governments opt for social networks, especially Facebook. However, although this network is

a viable alternative for participation and interaction considering the number of users, it is not effective in terms of accountability, as it largely lacks graphic and documentation archiving tools.

Unlike the provincial government portals, the municipal government portals have a different architecture to the central government, with a certain decentralisation in their management. In turn, they have unique characteristics that set them apart from others in their class in their maps, news, ombudsman, among other information and tools.

In general, the municipal governments have an average performance in terms of their portals. Of these, only two, Ilha de Moçambique and Ribaué, show reasonable transparency. In this respect, both governments are better prepared than the provincial governments. When dating from the start of the pandemic to its peak, the portals of Ilha de Moçambique and Ribaué had all the indicators classified as low level for transparency, 80 per cent medium level requirements and 90 per cent high level. In contrast, the rest of the governments are vulnerable in terms of transparency indicators. However, there are those municipal governments that do not consistently fulfil all the transparency indicators, as in the case of the Matola and Dondo governments, but are more up-to-date than the others. Both governments present information on COVID-19, but not as visibly as the Provincial Governments and the Central Government.

In the first 22 months of the pandemic, the Beira and Nampula government portals were out of date in terms of all indicators of transparency, accountability and participation/interaction. The two municipalities with links to the Movimento Democrático de Moçambique (MDM), continued during this period with information and news concerning the two now deceased leaders of the municipalities, highlighting information that goes up to 2018 in both governments. In this context, the worst condition was registered on the Beira municipal government portal, which ceased to exist in 2022. On the other hand, during this period, we note that the Nampula Municipal Council registered significant changes compared to the first scenario, by transforming the site map and digitising the portal, with the new mayor as the focus of the cover. The absence of links to other sectors of government on all the municipal government portals conveys the idea of administrative concentration.

With regard to tools that allow citizens to participate and interact with governments, the governments of Matola and Ribaué were slightly better prepared than the others in their class and the provincial governments. The two governments are the only ones that have presented tools for monitoring voters who have accessed the website. Despite this, the Ribaué municipal government portal was counted as out of date in 2022, in the sense that it was impossible to access. As for accountability to citizens, we found that none of the municipal governments are responsive through their electronic portals. Of the amounts disbursed by international donors to support the fight against the pandemic, 6,453,071.65 dollars was allocated to the eighteen municipalities, however, none of the municipal governments benefiting from the support, at least those with an electronic portal, have published the management of the funds allocated. This result can be stimulated by the institutions that regulate municipalities. Under the terms of Law no. 1/2008 (MOZAMBIQUE, 2008), the appraisal of accounts by the public follows an annual model, in the premises of the municipal authority's headquarters designated for this purpose, following the date and normal opening hours of the services.

This model of accountability rejects the nature of decentralised governance, which in itself aims to bring citizens closer together in the development of local democracy. The annual period stipulated for the voter to assess the government's accounts is long and, to make matters worse, it can be seen that, in cases of irregularities, complaints made on the portals or complaints about the accounts presented by

the municipal executive may not be answered by the municipal governments. Since the law that defines the financial, budgetary and patrimonial regime of the municipalities (MOÇAMBIQUE, 2008) does not provide for the submission of complaints through online mechanisms, but only for the submission of complaints in writing by 31 May, when the accounts are removed from the premises of the municipal authority's headquarters, the dominant culture assumes that complaints are deposited in person on the premises of the municipal authority's headquarters, without resorting to e-government.

It is undeniable that the accountability model used by municipal governments during the pandemic has greatly distanced the principal's control over the agent. As a result, regardless of how well the agent manages local funds, doubts about the fidelity of this management will continue to distance the agent from the principal, where, to reduce this, the latter has been somewhat induced to expose itself to the hostile environment of the pandemic to consult on the management of municipal funds and to present its complaints due to the absence of a contextual mechanism in the pandemic.

Final considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be a major test for models of coexistence and governance in democracies. The virus has moulded the ways in which states act: the traditional had to be replaced by the modern. In this scenario, according to the democratic principle, governments had to continue to communicate and be accountable to citizens without exposing themselves to the hostile environment of the pandemic. It was in this context that digitalisation became more relevant, and territorial governments at all levels were expected to be responsive through their electronic portals. However, we concluded that the e-government model, at government level in Mozambique, produces various constraints that precipitate a lack of public information and accountability.

In a context where social distancing is the predicative factor, traditional forms of governance prevail to the detriment of digital governance, which is more secure. In terms of accountability, Mozambican democracy has shown itself to be fragile. The mobilisation of digital governance tools to publish detailed management of public funds has been little explored.

On the other hand, the central government and especially the decentralised governments have shown themselves to be less communicative and open to citizen participation in their portals. Since the impact of COVID-19, most municipal governments still don't have an electronic portal, and the few that do have a portal, as well as all the provincial governments, have not provided the vast majority of accountability indicators. The mechanisms for access to e-government have not been reviewed: none of the three e-governments studied has made its portal available to citizens free of charge. None of the decentralised governments presented reports on the management of public funds and the management of funds donated by partners to combat COVID-19 on their portals. In turn, the pandemic fund management plans published by the central government through the MEF portal are insufficiently satisfactory for the monitoring process.

As a result, actions deviating from good governance have marked the context of the pandemic. The monthly publication of COVID-19 fund management plans by the central government through the MEF did not resolve the issue of massive embezzlement. Complaints and reports of embezzlement have been heard in different state institutions, such as the Administrative Court and civil society organisations. The lack of e-government portals and, on the other hand, the lack of detailed publication of fund management and participation/interaction,

at least in governments with electronic portals, have transformed the context of the COVID-19 pandemic into one that is fertile for corrupt practices and weak for the accountability of public officials. Our findings suggest that the accountability model that has dominated the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has been largely horizontal rather than vertical, i.e. responding to citizens: decentralised governments have focused their attention on their peer institutions and the central government. On the other hand, as part of the agreements with international donors, the central government was more interested in responding to international aid partners via the MEF portal.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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