Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the commitment, guidance, cooperation, and kindness of many people, only some of whom I can acknowledge here.

My PhD journey brought me to Northern Malawi where I enjoyed the company and support of many. I am especially grateful to the people who allowed me into their homes, health facilities and offices in the districts I visited and where I conducted interviews. My deepest gratitude goes to the women I engaged with, their partners and family members, to health committee members and local councillors, nurses and clinicians. Without their knowledge, experience, generosity and support, nothing that is described here could have been accomplished. I also express my sincere gratitude to the members of the National Health Science Research Committee in Malawi for their valuable feedback on the research protocol and their approval of my research. The implementation of the research would not have been possible without the interest and commitment of the district health offices of Mzimba North and Mzimba South, as well as the Area Development Committee chairmen in these districts who welcomed the study. Mrs Nyirenda, Mr Mkandawire, Mr Msukwa, Mr Simbale, Mrs Lungu, Mr Kamanga, and Mrs Gondwe provided valuable insights on the research protocol and initial findings. My conversations with them deepened my understanding of the Malawian political, social and health system context and I am grateful for that.

I would like to express my most profound appreciation to Mrs Mkandawire Jere and Mr Botha of the Foundation for Children’s Rights (FCR) in Malawi. Jenipher, I am extremely grateful for your hospitality, both at the office and at home and for introducing me to authorities, colleagues and friends. Kondwani, I will never forget our exchanges on the road; they have strengthened my analysis of the local governance system as it is understood and practiced in the communities. Many thanks also for bringing along gigabites of African music during our fieldtrips. I would like to recognize the assistance of William and Nancy for their administrative support, and my thanks extends to all the other staff of FCR, Jessie, my host, as well as the interpreters, and transcribers who were crucial for the communication with, and understanding of, research participants. Lastly, I would like to thank Loan Liem from Simavi, who introduced me to FCR and their community participation programmes.

An important part of the fieldwork for this thesis was conducted in DRC, Benin and Guinea by a team of great researchers, research assistants and supervisors from the partnering institutes of public health. I would like in particular to thank Eric Mafuta,
Acknowledgements

Thérèse Mambu, Adolphe Kpatchavi, Barry Bano, Marlyatou Bah, and Grazziella Ghers-quiere for their inspiring collaboration, valuable insights and contributions to the research project and paper on health committees.

I wish to thank my supervisor Jacqueline Broerse and co-supervisor Marjolein Dieleman for their valuable insights and comments at different stages of the research process. Their critical review of the chapters and the thesis both challenged and improved my work. Jacqueline, thank you for the space you provided me to craft my research project and for believing I would finish it. Marjolein, it was a great pleasure to work with you; your pragmatism and provoking questions always helped me to structure my ideas. Thank you also for your personal support and encouragement.

Thank you, members of the Committee, for taking time to assess my thesis. I am also grateful to the numerous (anonymous) reviewers who critically read and commented on the different chapters that appeared in the form of articles in scientific journals; all of these were great learning gifts, and I thank them for their time and commitment.

I want to express my thanks to the Athena Institute for enabling me to be a PhD candidate at the VU University and to my Athena colleagues who have inspired and helped me in different ways. A special thanks to Professor Tjard de Cock Buning for the coordination of the research project and inspiring conversations about social accountability in Africa. Thank you, Willemijn, Yadira, Ona, and Ruth for being great roommates and all other colleagues for the chats and entertainment, helpful intervention sessions and writing days. Eric and Prosper, we started this project together, and I really appreciate the moments we had together in Bujumbura, Cotonou, Cape Town and Amsterdam to share our findings, surprises and questions. I sincerely thank the master’s students of the Athena Institute who conducted literature reviews or parts of the fieldwork with me. Annabel, Kirsten, Eef, and Rosanne conducted exploratory research on social accountability in Rwanda, Ghana and Uganda. Kyra, Joyce and Christine were my indispensable research partners in Malawi; thanks for having joined me on this exciting journey, the many talks and fun on the way and your contributions to my research. I am especially grateful for the colleagues and friends who helped me (copy-)editing and designing this thesis, in particular Sarah Cummings who carefully copy-edited parts of the manuscripts, Margot Bogaards and Harry Coleman who helped me with the text layout and references and Femke Hoogland who designed the fabulous cover of this book.

This research could not have been carried out without the support and understanding of my employer, the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), the Sustainable Economic Development & Gender and Health teams, and, in particular, Mr Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to take the PhD dive and for your patience with me surfacing again. My work at KIT, and previously at SNV Mali and Ghana, has
been the source of inspiration for this research. I could draw on insights from past and current governance and gender projects, and in particular on support, collaboration and friendship from a range of colleagues from the past 15 years for which I am very grateful.

Finally, this research and thesis could not have been realized without the grant of the Netherlands Council for Scientific Research (NWO/WOTRO) and funding from Unicef, Cordaid and Simavi.

I am deeply grateful for the continuous support and encouragement from my friends and family. Aleid, Anne, Judith, Petra, Iris, Liesbeth, Youssef, Annelies, Anna, de ‘Utrecht-club’, Jolanda, Robert, Melanie, Ona, Wieke, Marco, Frits, Marjolijn, Lodewijk, Margot, Michiel, buren, neven en nichten en vele anderen, bedankt voor de afleiding in de vorm van feestjes, wandelingen, concerten, creativiteit en zo veel meer. Papa, je bent er altijd bij, in gedachten en in fictieve gesprekjes over mondiale samenwerking en gelijkwaardigheid. Ik denk dat je trots zou zijn op mijn promotie, en nog wel bij de VU! Mama, dank je dat ik altijd op je kan rekenen; alleen als jij het zegt, geloof ik dat het altijd goed komt. Annewyke, dank je voor het spiegelen en sparren over het leven en mijn onderzoek, ik ben blij met jou als zus. Dank je, Niels, voor het steunen van mijn ambities, en voor je geduld en zorg tijdens mijn reizen, ook als ik verdwaalde. Jilde, mijn boekje is eindelijk af, ik hoop dat je het er mooi uit vindt zien. Feija, je was het beste intermezzo in mijn promotietraject. Meiden, ik kom van zolder, laten we spelletjes doen!

I dedicate this book to Niels, Jilde and Feija.