Bridging operations: practices of negotiating accountability at the interface between beneficiaries in emerging and INGO in developed countries

Urs Jäger, Nina Hug

University of St. Gallen, St. Gallen, Switzerland

Research problem, aim of the research and research question

Values created by NPO are often intangible and hard to measure (Campbell 2002). NPO-managers may have implicit knowledge about value-contributions of the organization, but this information is hardly translated into accountability relevant data (Ebrahim 2005). Many scholars currently address this challenge in reference to the whole organization and call for improvement (Benjamin 2008; Morrison 2007). Empirical studies reveal that NPO lack concepts in order to holistically assess their public impact (Morrison 2007). But few studies demonstrate how information on intervention outcomes is gathered at the level of the beneficiaries. This research gap becomes extreme in the context of economic development work. While the potential of economic development for the alleviation of poverty has been fully recognised (Dollar & Kraay, 2002; Senauer, 2002), it is still difficult to assess the impact these approaches have on the livelihoods of the poor (Ravallion, 2001; Deaton, 2001; Mehanna, 2006). International non-governmental organizations (INGO) promoting economic development, are thus confronted with a legitimacy challenge when it comes to acquiring funds from donors focused on poverty alleviation (Moore 2001).

With this paper, we intend to make an empirical contribution to the research stream of nonprofit accountability. We highlight accountability discourses at the interface between beneficiaries in emerging countries and INGO in developed countries. By exploring how beneficiaries value the INGO’s activities, how INGO-managers value their contribution, and how beneficiaries and INGO-managers negotiate accountability we follow the question: How do managers at the interface between beneficiaries in emerging countries and INGO located in developed countries negotiate success?

Theories and concepts

We conceptualize accountability as a relational concept, following Ebrahim’s argumentation that “accountability efforts and mechanisms do not stand alone but are reflective of relationships among organizational actors embedded in a social and institutional environment” (Ebrahim 2005). Morrison and Salipante stress in this respect that accountability means to negotiate the “criteria, measures and interpretations of success” with the organization’s stakeholders (Morrison 2007). By emphasizing that accounts for success are negotiated, we start with the assumption that information on the interventions’ impact is “situated in the interactions between people who share a common context and have the ability to talk face-to-face to one another” (Boland, Schultze 1996).

Hence, what managers of beneficiaries and managers of INGO refer to as success is primarily an “intersubjective construction” (Weick 1995) located in their respective local contexts. When patterns of success are negotiated at the interface between the two parties this involves a need to translate the separately constructed success patterns into mutually shared patterns. As Weick puts it, a “generically intersubjective” understanding needs to emerge (Weick 1995). Therefore we use Weick’s construct of “bridging operations” to refer to the negotiations at the interface looking into processes that are involved when “unique intersubjective understandings […] [are] perpetuated and enlarged by people who did not participate in the original intersubjective construction” (Weick 1995).
Method

To study the phenomenon of accounting for performance in nonprofits, we have chosen the Swiss development aid organization Swissdevelope (a pseudonym) as our case. The development aid sector is characterized by an extremely high number of evaluations and impact assessments demanded by funders. In 2008, two researchers conducted 16 narrative interviews with Swissdevelope’s managers and stakeholders, realized 5 focusgroups and two observations of internal strategy meetings. In 2009, we traveled to Peru in the area of Chanchamayo to a coffee cooperative supported by Swissdevelope. There we conducted 49 narrative interviews and 6 focusgroups. The interviews were fully transcribed and observations were documented by intense field notes from all researchers present. For the analysis of our data we followed a content analysis process (Neuendorf, 2002) combined with invivo coding (Strauss, 1987).

Empirical findings

We found four patterns of bridging operations. (a) INGO-centred bridging operation: The INGO’s managers under study accounted for the impact of Swissdevelope’s activities by referring to their perceived value contribution, independently of the beneficiaries’ perception. We call this pattern ‘INGO-centred’ because the managers refer to accountability discourses centred in developed countries. (b) Beneficiaries-centred bridging operation: On the other hand, the managers of the beneficiaries refer in their accountability discourses to their local operational success, pointing out in what way they profited from Swissdevelope’s assistance. The beneficiaries describe their impact on the social stability, the local infrastructure, education, health care and the rising income of the poor. We call this pattern ‘beneficiaries-centred’ because the involved managers refer to accountability discourses centred in the emerging country. (c) Bridging by common-operation: Explaining their success the beneficiaries as well as the INGO’s managers also refer to common activities, like trainings. We thus call this pattern ‘common-operation’. (d) Bridging by mission-bargaining: In few activities we observed a pattern we call ‘mission-bargaining’. The beneficiaries discussed how they might contribute to support the realization of the INGO’s mission. For example, they reported the information about social impact needed by the INGO for being accountable to their political donors. Similarly, the INGO discussed the information the beneficiary’s manager need to be accountable in their local context.

Literature


