Building A Community-Focused, Collaborative and Impartial Framework for NGO Accountability

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There is widespread recognition of the success of NGOs over the last two decades in reaching out to the poorest with timely, cost-effective and innovative programs at the community levels and advocating vociferously for the rights of marginalized groups nationally and internationally (Lewis, 2001). Their growing success, budgets, clout and advocacy, which frequently challenges the policies and practices of powerful political and economic forces, has led to a strong and multi-directional backlash from governments and politicians in the North and South, multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and WTO, multinational and other corporate interests, and militants groups. The backlash has consisted of increasing public criticisms, greater controls on operations and access at the field level, the formation of new regulations for controlling NGOs, questioning of their legitimacy and representativeness and in the worst cases even physical attacks (Jordan and Tuijl, 2006).

The common denominator in the backlash from these diverse stakeholders has been a call for greater accountability of NGOs. While part of this reaction is based on a genuine concern to improving the performance of NGOs, a large part of this campaign is political in nature (Edwards, 2006) and is a reaction to the criticism of the policies and practices of these stakeholders by NGOs. Several NGOs have already embarked on accountability processes which focus on enhancing downward accountability, i.e., to beneficiary communities. However, the calls from these external stakeholders focus on upward or horizontal accountability and ignore and distract attention away from downward accountability. This trend represents the most fundamental serious challenge in the new millennium to this important sub-group of the third sector, having the potential to seriously cripple all aspects of their work, ranging from inception, registration, fund-raising and operations. Thus, it is crucial that an objective basis for NGO accountability be developed that one the one hand contributes to improving NGO performance and on the other hand protects them from politically motivated actions to undermine their activities and their ability to hold governments, firms and international agencies to account.

A number of diverse approaches have been developed for NGO accountability in recent years, including certification systems, rating systems, infrastructure and management capacity tools, self-regulation, codes of conduct, and monitoring and evaluation tools (Lee, 2004). However, there is still little consensus within the field and the existing approaches suffer from a number of shortcomings, including (Jordan, 2005):

- prioritizing accountability to donors and governments rather than beneficiaries
- being highly controlling rather than collaborative,
- being divorced from the reality and the context in which NGOs work
- setting unmeasurable or unrealistic goals and
- placing heavy cost and time burden.

Based on a thorough review of the literature on accountability as well as NGO accountability, an analysis of the accountability approaches used for other sectors, such as government and inter-governmental agencies, private firms and other types of civil society agencies, the author’s practical experience of working in and with non-profit agencies and the findings from a project at the Mack Center for Non-Profit Management at the University of California at Berkeley on ‘NGO Best Practices’, which includes a major component on NGO accountability
practices around the world, this paper undertakes a thorough review of the issues in NGO accountability. The paper uses Schedler’s (1999) definition of accountability: “A is accountable to B when A is obliged to inform B about A’s (past or future) actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct” and incorporates the 8 dimensions of accountability proposed by Dwivedi and Jabbra (1988) namely: moral, administrative, political, managerial, market, legal/judicial, constituency relation, and professional in developing the framework.

With the use of these analytical tools, the paper develops a framework for NGO accountability with two major objectives, namely having an NGO accountability framework that enhances NGO performance and transparency and empowers NGOs to deal with politically motivated attacks. These twin objectives are achieved through three distinctive features of this framework which sets it apart from current frameworks. Firstly, unlike existing approaches and frameworks, it covers accountability to a variety of stakeholders, including governments, donors, trustees, general public and most importantly beneficiary communities. Secondly, it also goes beyond existing frameworks by identifying relevant accountability criteria for specific NGO activities, including formation and registration, fund-raising, operations and ultimate exit from a community/country. Thirdly, the framework provides benchmarks for the credentials and capacities that an agency undertaking NGO accountability must possess in order to be able to do an objective, effective and meaningful job. Thus, the framework provides a neutral, objective, cost and time-effective, flexible, in-depth and comprehensive, practical and measurable basis for undertaking NGO accountability.

Citations


Lee (2004), NGO Accountability: Rights and Responsibilities, Programme on NGOs and Civil Society, CASIN, Geneva, Switzerland