“CSO strategy and CSO accountability: do we have a deal?”

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Civil society organizations (CSOs) have gradually become more professional, adopting several management processes that have been long used by businesses, including strategic planning. At the same time, their growth in scope, quantity and resources has increased demand for their accountability. While both strategy and accountability have been extensively explored by scholars and practitioners, less attention has been directed to the relationship between these two fields and the implications for CSO performance and legitimacy.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining unexplored connections between CSO strategy and accountability, guided by the following research question: what is the relationship between strategy and accountability? Several issues derive from this broad mandate: are CSO strategy and accountability processes really planned before they are implemented? Should they be? Is the strategic planning process accountable? Is participation a component of strategic planning and of accountability? Are these processes related? Should one be driving the other?

In order to examine these questions, this investigation will perform a revision of current literature on strategy and accountability, particularly regarding CSOs. In other words, these fields of study will be contrasted and weighed against each other as they pertain to CSO performance. The aim of the research is to identify similarities and differences between these fields of study and to ascertain whether their connections, explored or not, lead to any incompatibilities (i.e., the need to privilege one over the other) or present any opportunities to enhance CSOs ability to plan around and adapt to crises.

Several definitions for accountability can be found with democratic theory literature and civil society scholars and professionals. Both standpoints are similar in viewing accountability as encompassing responsibility, reporting, explanation, justification and account-rendering. It is the differences between interpretations, however, that are most revealing. Civil society’s interpretation has the advantage of enhancing both the quantity and quality of accountability relationships, respectively by involving multiple constituencies and encompassing more dimensions and by acknowledging variations in the actual power of each audience (Ebrahim, 2003; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Jordan & Van Tuijl, 2006). The democratic theory perspective, on the other hand, boasts two essential elements — (i) control or authority and (ii) sanction or punishment (which concepts are inter-related, given that the right to apply sanctions derives from the exercise of authority) — that are not ensured or even found in all dimensions of the stakeholder model (Przeworski, Stokes & Manin, 1999); thus, it is limited precisely in the lack of formal provisions that ensure an organization’s accountability to all constituencies in all dimensions.

From the strategy perspective, a traditional viewpoint since the 60’s is that planning and implementation are very separate phases (Ansoff, 1965; Andrews, 1971; Chandler, 1962; Christensen et al., 1982). In the 70’s and 80’s, however, this perspective began to be criticized, based on the reasoning that day-to-day managerial decisions are complex, not always fitting into simplified frameworks, and defining goals and actions are often simultaneous and inseparable occurrences. Mintzberg (1978) proposed the concept of “emergent strategies” — akin to Lindblom’s (1959) concept of “muddling through” public administration (i.e., performing without a defined plan) —, arguing that strategy design
encompasses both the result of explicit planning (strategy formulation) and those that "emerge" throughout an organization's performance.

Myriad issues can arise from connecting these two fields of study. For instance, incorporating the concept of “emergent” strategy into accountability studies can help scholars and practitioners to understand how “unplanned” responses are given to “unexpected” demands and how accountability processes function in the event of unanticipated crises. Another potential inference is that incorporating accountability concerns into CSO strategy could strengthen its ability to respond to environmental changes with help from more engaged stakeholders, which may in turn may lead to accountability having a more central role in an organization’s culture (thus enhancing its accountability as a whole).

Thus, exploring the theoretical connections between strategy and accountability and their practical implications for CSOs – determining whether there are any incompatibilities to be addressed or opportunities to enhance CSO resilience – will help strengthen our understandings of both strategy and accountability and will allow the formulation of hypotheses for future investigations and identification of material issues to receive closer attention in CSO performance and legitimacy.

Key-words: civil society organizations (CSOs), strategy, accountability, performance.


