

Accountability for Empowerment: Dilemmas Facing Non-Governmental Organizations

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Summary. — The accountability of NGOs, particularly their “downward” accountability to their beneficiaries, affects NGO effectiveness in the process of empowerment for the poor and marginalized in developing countries. While debate about the accountability of NGOs and various pressures they face is well traveled, much less consideration is given to the broad values of the NGO and how they may affect their approach to downward accountability. This paper looks at evidence from a number of case studies of NGO programs with poor women in India, on the role of accountability in empowerment outcomes, and the role NGO values play in these outcomes.
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1. INTRODUCTION

A recurring theme in modern development discourse is the role that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play in providing mechanisms for strengthening civil society, and with it local governance, to lift marginalized communities in developing countries out of poverty (Jorgensen, 1996; Krut, 1997; Nelson, 1995; White, 1999; World Bank, 1996). This process involves “empowering” marginalized communities, not only to alleviate material poverty, but also to overcome the structural disadvantage that marginalization brings. Empowerment, so the argument goes, results in the greater participation of the poor and marginalized in the economic, social, and civic domains within their communities, thereby gaining improved access to government and community resources (AusAID, 2001; Narayan, 1999). NGOs, in turn, are seen to be ideally placed to perform this task, given their relatively close proximity to the poor communities they serve (Korten, 1981; Najam, 1999; Tandon, 2001).

This paper argues that it is the NGOs’ “downward” accountability to their constituents—the beneficiaries of their work—that is important in their effectiveness as empowerment agents: but as values-based public benefit organizations there are few incentives for them to be accountable in this way. The paper goes

on to argue that it is the NGO values that relate to their *Weltanschauung*, or world view that plays a part in their approach to “downward” accountability. By using data from research based on 15 local NGOs in India, this paper will explore the mechanisms for “downward” accountability adopted by these NGOs, its role in empowerment, and how their values played a part in this process. Empowerment in this context is about the expansion of choice, influence, and action by poor and marginalized women (Giddens, 1984; Kabeer, 1999; Lukes, 1974).

The focus on “downward” accountability is based on the proposition that, for an NGO to be effective in empowerment, it should have some level of formal or semi-formal accountability to those it wishes to see empowered—its constituents (Couto, 1998; Kilby, 2004; Smith-Sreen, 1995). There are three issues that

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NGOs face in being downwardly accountable: first, they are generally not required by law or regulation to provide their constituency the necessary control for genuine accountability (Keohane, 2002; Mulgan, 2003); second, the “required” accountability the NGO has to other stakeholders such as Government and supporters affects the “strength” of the accountability relationship they can have with their constituents (Edwards & Hulme, 1996); and finally, it is the broad values-base, the *Weltanschauung*, of an NGO that can determine the approach they take to “downward” accountability (Lissner, 1977).

While most NGOs that work in development will argue that they are part of civil society, and can play both an empowering and representative role (Abramson, 1999; Gaventa, 1999; Nelson, 1995), they generally are not membership based, governed, or financed (Fowler, 2000). Rather, these NGOs are largely guided and driven by staff, self-appointed Boards, or very small numbers of formal members; and the driver for their work emerges generally from a religious or ethical base—their values (Thomas, 2004). The role of these NGOs is in advancing what they see as broader community interests such as *inter alia* alleviating poverty, addressing marginalization, achieving social justice, and advancing human rights—i.e., they are *public benefit organizations*. The lack of a defined accountability path to constituents that a representative structure provides is the major weakness of Public Benefit Organizations (Mulgan, 2003; Najam, 1996; Salamon, Hems, & Chinnock, 2000), and leads to an “accountability gap” (Salamon *et al.*, 2000, p. 9): in the final analysis “downward” accountability is discretionary and little more than “grace or favor” (Mulgan, 2003, p. 137). That is, while NGOs purport to represent the interests of their constituency, such as advancing the cause of the poor and oppressed, there is no clearly defined path by which they can be held to account by that constituency (who have little power in the relationship) in how they represent those interests (Najam, 1996). This paper first examines NGOs and their values-base, with Section 3 going on to look at the accountability processes NGOs face, focusing on NGO accountability to their constituency; Section 4 examines these processes in practice through case studies from India; and finally, Section 5 draws together the findings and points to policy and practice implications for NGO programs.

2. NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND VALUES

NGOs are self-governing independent bodies, voluntary in nature, and tend to engage both their supporters and constituency on the basis of values or some shared interest or concern, and have a public benefit purpose (Fisher, 1997; Lissner, 1977; Salamon & Anheier, 1999; Salamon *et al.*, 2000; Vakil, 1997). Generally, they are in some way formally registered by the state (Salamon & Anheier, 1999), and adopt non-violent approaches to their work (Martens, 2002). From this broader typology of NGOs, this paper is concerned with those NGOs based in developing countries that see themselves involved, at least in part, in the “empowerment” of the poor as an approach to poverty alleviation and development (Elliot, 1987; Rajasekhar, 2000; Vakil, 1997). This is not a small subset of development NGOs, but rather represents an increasing number of NGOs in developing countries: for example, in India, of the one million registered associations, around 100,000 of them identify themselves as being involved in development work using self-help (empowerment) methods (Salamon & Anheier, 1999).

The driving force of public benefit NGOs is their values, which generally in the broadest terms are about a desire for a “better world” (Edwards & Sen, 2000; Fowler, 1996; Gerard, 1983; Lissner, 1977). It is the values-base that enables NGOs to pursue public benefit objectives, rather than profits or social/political benefits for members which mutual benefit organizations pursue. The language of values is strong in NGO literature, for example: “. . . [NGOs are] the heartland of the social economy since they are marked by distinctive value systems. . .” (Paton, 1993, p. 6); “NGOs are values-base participants representing the concrete interests of marginalized groups” (Nelson, 1995, p. 41); “. . . [NGOs] expand moral space” (Edwards & Sen, 2000, p. 614); and it is the values that “condition the rules of the game” (Fowler, 1996, p. 17). Lissner defines NGO values as:

. . . the basis on which agency [NGO] policy makers interpret trends and events. It emanates from religious beliefs, historical traditions, prevailing social norms, personal experiences, and similar basic sources if human attitudes . . . [they] cannot be directly translated into concrete action because of their degree of abstraction . . . yet they are still sufficiently clear for the policy makers to take their bearings from them when deciding on the fundamental direction of their agency (1977, p. 74).

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