

Civil Society Governance: NGO Values and Accountability for Empowermentⁱ

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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 (World Bank, 1996; White, 1999; Jorgensen, 1996; Nelson, 1995; and Krut, 1997). 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 (Tandon, 2001; Korten, 1981; Najam, 1999).

This paper argues that it is 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 its NGO values that relate to their *Weltanschauung*, or world view, that play 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 (Kabeer, 1999; Giddens, 1984; Lukes, 1974).

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; Nelson, 1995; and Gaventa, 1999), they generally are not membership based, governed, or financed (Fowler, 2000a). That is, they lack a defined accountability path to constituents that a representative structure provides (Najam, 1996; Salamon, Hems, & Chinook, 2000; and Mulgan, 2003): in the final analysis ‘downward’ accountability is discretionary and little more than ‘grace or favor’ (Mulgan, 2003, p. 137).

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 (Vakil, 1997; Fisher 1997; Salamon and Anheier, 1999; Salamon *et al.*, 2000; Lissner, 1977). Generally, they are in some way formally registered by the state (Salamon and Anheier, 1999), and adopt non-violent approaches to their work (Martins, 2002). The driving force of these Public-Benefit NGOs is their values, which generally in the broadest terms are about a desire for a ‘better world’ (Gerard, 1983; Lissner, 1977; Fowler, 1996; and, Edwards and Sen, 2000). 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. 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).

Lissner's discussion is important because he relates values more to ideology by moving the discussion away from some behavioral characteristics of NGOs to the idea that NGOs through their values promote a world-view or '*Weltanschauung*' (p. 74): the more permanent and deeply held values that NGOs hold that are based on a certain philosophy or way of seeing the world. These *Weltanschauung* based values are quite different from other types of values that are derived from *inter alia*: supporter interests; third world or recipient interest; and internal policy maker interests, all of which are more temporal. They are also different from 'organizational' values that drive the way NGO work is undertaken, or 'terminal' values that indicate an end point, such as relief from poverty (Padaki, 2000, p. 424). While the intersection of these more temporal values is important, it is the notion of values relating to *Weltanschauung* that is important to many NGOs, and is what I will focus on in this paper.

Table 1: *NGO Values*

Category of NGO Values	Typology
<i>Weltanschauung</i>	Represents a World View or philosophy e.g. religious faith, humanism.
Temporal Values	Represents Immediate concerns e.g. humanitarian relief, human rights, self-help, individual autonomy.
Terminal Values	Represents and end point to be reached such as an end to poverty; universal education etc. e.g. the Millennium Development Goals.
Organizational values	Represents those of the organization and how it operates e.g. honesty, integrity, accountability etc.

The question then is how an NGO can be seen to be accountable to these *Weltanschauung* values which by their very nature are internal to an NGO, and so poorly understood by outsiders; and they are also more nebulous (and less measurable) than, say, the work of an NGO. Any broad group of NGOs exhibit a range of *Weltanschauung* values: they sit on a continuum from what might be called solidarity-based NGOs at one end; to those that are more instrumental in their origins in the middle ; and finally, to those that are more based on dogma and may have religious origins, at the other end of the continuum. This paper argues that it depends where an NGO sits on this 'values continuum' that will, to some extent, determine how they will see their accountability obligations.

Accountability

Accountability is about the conduct and performance of an individual, a group, or an organization, and how these are assessed (Day & Klein, 1987; Jenkins & Goetz, 1999; Mulgan, 2003). Accountability then is about power, authority, and ownership (Day & Klein, 1987; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Mulgan, 2003; Gray, Day, Owen *et al.*, 1997) — and defines the relationship between actors through identifying who can call whom to account, and who owes a duty of explanation and rectification (Day & Klein 1987; Mulgan 2003): by defining the lines and directions of accountability the distribution of power is also defined. Thus it can be argued that NGO accountability is empowering when it opens an NGO up to scrutiny and some degree of control by its members, constituents, or beneficiaries (Peters & Pierre, 2000; Murthy, 2001; Conger & Kanungo, 1988). The problem for NGOs is that this constituent scrutiny is difficult as the accountabilities that they have to respond to are multiple, complex, and diffuse (McDonald, 1999); and the tools of enforcement are limited, in that they lack a formal constituent membership to whom they are required to be accountable (Ferejohn, 1999). The relationships that do exist between NGOs and their constituents are not matters of civic entitlement, but rather lie in the realm of ‘grace and favor’ (Mulgan, 2003).

Accountability to Values

The mechanisms used by NGOs to mediate the accountability to their broad values — their *Weltanschauung* — are internal, and given the level of abstraction involved it can only be through proxies that this accountability occurs. These proxies may include staff procedures such as selection and staff appraisal criteria, or program appraisal criteria that reflect the NGO’s values. While Keohane (2002) argues there are no entities to whom the NGO can be held to account with respect to values, I would argue that the NGO Board or governing body is the final arbiter of an NGO’s adherence to its values — and a congruence of values is usually a key selection criterion for Board membership in NGOs.

If the agency has humanist or solidarity based values that foster participation and local control of activities, then ‘downward’ accountability mechanisms may be put in place to reflect these values. *Weltanschauung* values, however, can just as easily constrain an NGO in the strength and degree of ‘downward’ accountability it wants to see, particularly when there is a potential values conflict between the constituency and the NGO. NGOs will usually wish to see their values adopted by the constituencies to some extent, and they have the power to pursue this. Joshi and Moore (2000) argue that this position of power that NGOs hold can present a moral hazard for NGOs when they start presenting their own values as being the values of their constituents — a major source of criticism of NGOs (Zaidi, 1999). The next section will examine this process in more detail.

Accountability to Constituency

Because there are no requirements for ‘downward’ accountability, NGOs have accountability mechanisms in place that range from the formal to the very informal. To make sense of this process I have developed a schema of downward accountability for NGOs that is based on both the ‘depth of accountability’ and the ‘level of formality’ of the NGO processes. ‘Depth of accountability’ refers to the feedback arrangements the NGO has to its constituency: for example the frequency and the range of topics discussed when meeting with the constituents, and the extent to which they select the topics for discussion. While this notion of ‘depth’ does not assure ‘rectification’ or impose a direct cost on the NGO *vis a vis* its constituency, it can be an indicator of the likelihood of rectification occurring. Some indicators of the depth

of accountability might include: the degree to which groups' members had access to NGO management; what knowledge they had of the NGO; and what topics were typically discussed at meetings; and who generally was speaking at these meetings. Measuring these processes for comparative purposes is by its nature imprecise, and involves some level of judgment, but nevertheless comparisons can be validly made.

Level of formality indicators include *inter alia*: meetings being regular or discretionary; timing (weekly, monthly, etc); openness of the formal agenda i.e. can views of the constituency be formally aired, and the formal response of the NGO — as reflected in minutes and the like. It can be expected, but not assured, that the more formal arrangements the greater the likelihood of 'rectification' by the NGO and so some level of ownership and control by constituents.

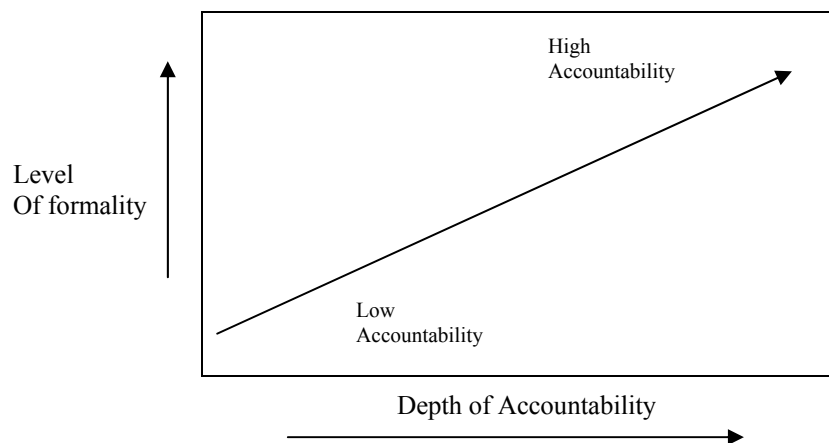


Figure 1. *NGO Downward Accountability*

In conclusion, it should be remembered that there are other accountability pressures that act as a disincentive for strong constituent based accountabilities — typically these are to the NGO patrons typically the state and the donors. The state is a source of NGO legitimacy, and it demands NGO accountability both via formal legal sanction and through registration processes (Najam, 1996). The state is often a donor, providing NGOs resources either as direct grants or tax concessions. The requirements of the state and donors can have the effect of moving the locus of accountability away from the constituency (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Foley & Edwards, 1998; Fisher, 1994; Fox & Brown, 1998; Zaidi, 1999; Elliot, 1987; Robinson, 1995; Najam, 1996).

A Case Study Of NGO Accountability in Empowerment Programs in India

A comparative analysis of 15 Indian NGOs working with women's self-help groups (SHGs), in two states of India - Maharashtra and Karnataka - was undertaken to examine the role of accountability in empowerment outcomes in development activities.ⁱⁱ India was chosen as it has relatively few institutional constraints to empowerment-based work: it is a modern, liberal democratic state, with a federal system, and a commitment to decentralization/devolution of local level decision-making to local government structures.

Data was collected through focus group discussions with 77 groups — around five SHGs per NGO. A range of open-ended questions were used to explore empowerment outcomes: these related to what the women have learned, how their lives have changed, and what material assets they have obtained since joining the groups. The data from the survey was analyzed using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods (Sandelowski, 2000; Hines, 1993). Qualitative data was scored, ranked, and tested, and from the results those statistically significant variables that affect empowerment were identified.

The independent variables examined were: accountability of the NGO to the groups; leadership of the groups; endowments of group members in terms of caste, education levels and land holdings; village social capital; and the number of years the groups had been meeting. A Two-Stage-Least-Squares regression was used to control for endogeneity, and the results showed that the statistically significant explanatory variables for empowerment were ‘downward’ accountability, and a composite measure for leadership(4). Therefore, accountability for the NGOs in this study is presented as a composite of the two dimensions of depth and formality and the categorising of the NGOs in the study is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *Categorization of Study NGOs according to their Accountability Mechanisms*

Category 1: Informal	Category 2: Semi-Formal	Category 3: Formal
Good News, Myrada, Jagruti, Prakruthi, Maharashtra Gram Vikas.	KIDS, Chinyard, BGSS, Disha Kendra, RORES. The Development Academy, YUVA,	IDS, SNDT, Grama Vikas.

‘Downward’ Accountability - to the Constituency

The NGOs surveyed all saw some level of accountability to the constituency as an important aspect of their work. For some it was to gauge the relevance of their interventions (an empowering process in and of itself), while for others it formed an integral part of the relationship with their constituents. The processes adopted by the NGOs ranged from: informal and irregular meetings of the SHGs with NGO management; more regular meetings; having SHG representative structures; and formal monthly or quarterly meetings.

For example, SNDT, had the strongest and most formal mechanisms of ‘downward’ accountability. The SNDT constituency were the most marginalized *dalit* women ‘ragpickers’ whose livelihood was from scavenging waste from the streets of Pune City. However, over a ten-year period, with support from SNDT, the women became unionized and gained legitimacy in the process of municipal waste management as a result of their own interventions with the Municipal Corporation and other local authorities. SNDT held monthly meetings with its staff and two representatives from each slum area where they were working (100 in all), and it was in this forum that all program and organizational issues were discussed. This open process allowed the tensions, from conflicts of interests relating to different values and priorities between SNDT and the ‘ragpickers’, to be managed, as decisions were made as equals rather than the NGO being perceived by the ‘ragpickers’ as being an ‘outsider’. This solidarity approach, with the NGO being seen as an ‘insider’, was an integral part of what SNDT saw as a ‘just way’ to act with integrity, and gain legitimacy with the constituency. SNDT still had the power to reject directions from the constituency on matters of values; such as when the constituents from time to time favored a more communalist approach in certain social situations, or where they supported child marriages.

SNDT *Weltanschauung* values included dedication to pluralism, diversity and non-violence, and they made this quite clear to their constituents. Similar processes were adopted by the other NGOs in Category 3 in this Study.

On the other hand, the NGOs in Category 2 (Table 2.) were aware of the importance of involving its constituency in some of their programming processes, but for them the purpose of these accountability mechanisms was so the NGO could stay in touch and remain relevant. They were not comfortable in becoming beholden to what they saw as a particular, and arguably, narrow constituency: for them their mission was to a broader constituency. While several of the NGOs in this group had mechanisms for accountability to their constituency, or were developing mechanisms; unlike SNDT, none saw this level of accountability as a central function of their institution. Most of the NGOs in this group preferred to use the term ‘participation’ rather than ‘representation’ in a strict accountability sense to describe their relationship with their constituents. Finally those NGOs in Category 1 had not formal mechanisms, preferring informal processes and used terms like ‘the door is always open’ (for consultation) with the implication being that the constituency had to make the first move.

Accountability to Values

While the values that drove NGOs in Category 1 varied, the origins of the values for these NGOs came from a moral, or sometimes a religiously based ethic based on the Hindu notions of *dharma* (personal obligations), *jeev daya* (humanitarian concern and concern for all living things), and altruistic notions of ‘what is right’ — all of which are very powerful sources of *Weltanschauung*. The second Category of NGOs (sem-formal process) were driven by what could be called strong notions of justice and fairness, and so were sensitive to the needs of their constituents, but did not feel they were obliged to them. They avoided formal processes that implied a level of power sharing: for example, KIDS (a child rights NGO) saw itself as being very sensitive to the plight of its constituents (abused and neglected children, and marginalized women), and included them in specific program issues but not in discussing the strategic direction of the agency. Finally, while those agencies with formal processes however while having differing ideologies, they all had a strong focus on solidarity and accompaniment with their constituency as central to their approach. SNDT articulated this in the clearest terms, when they spoke of solidarity and the rights of the women they were working with. The role of staff in transmitting and reflecting their values was very important to the group of agencies with solidarity-based values. These NGOs were at pains to point out that the personal values of staff were very important and should reflect the organization’s values. This generally was described, not in instrumental terms, but rather in the relationship with the constituency: terms were used such as ‘partnership’ or ‘solidarity’; and ‘integrity’ and ‘sincerity’ in how the work is undertaken; and that these values should be imparted to the constituency. Two of the ‘solidarity’ NGOs — SNDT and IDS — indicated that they had particular staff selection criteria, and development and support programs, to ensure the staff values reflected the organization’s values. Few NGOs, however, had specific mechanisms for being accountable to their *Weltanschauung*, and understandably so given the level of abstraction.

SNDT, who had the clearest articulation of their broader value base, described it in terms of ‘justice and equality’ for their constituency, which had clear implications for the organization and its staff behavior in relation to that constituency. In providing this support SNDT rejected the notion of the NGO as being an ‘outsider’, rather viewing their values as reflective of the notion of equality with the constituency: the staff ‘... cannot talk of doing the work for the people; they [the staff] do it for themselves’. This formulation of the staff motivation

moves away from the notion of altruism towards one of solidarity. As this is the core value of the organization, accountability to SNDT's values is inexorably tied up with accountability to the constituency and how that is exercised. As a consequence SNDT has a very strong (in terms of depth) and formal accountability mechanisms to the women rag-pickers its constituency. At the other end of the spectrum, The Good News Society – a Catholic Mission – saw its role as one of service to the poor with a strong welfare ethic based on altruism. The poor in this process had largely a passive role rather than an active role, and The Good News Society did not see any value in more formal processes of accountability, beyond providing some of the constituents information on their programs, but having no formal obligations to them.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the proposition that the broad *Weltanschauung* values of an NGO have a strong effect on how 'downward' accountability occurs; and from this how a true civic society can develop in poor communities. This paper argues, however, that the commonly practiced informal accountability processes are insufficient and at best link NGOs instrumentally (that is through their work), but not structurally, to their constituencies (Fox and Brown, 1998); or in a way that leads to strong empowerment and civic outcomes. The findings of the research support the view that more structural (formal) links deliver stronger civic outcomes, supporting Joshi and Moore's (2000) argument that the presence of formal processes establishes a right for the constituents, and therefore is empowering – i.e. there is an opportunity for 'rectification' or being able to impose a cost, albeit a small one.

A lack of accountability to values can leave NGOs vulnerable, as those accountability pressures that require specific mechanisms can be privileged, leading to an erosion of the broader values, and so weaken relationships with constituents. On the other hand, if the values are not based on some form of solidarity then developing downward accountability mechanisms likewise will be difficult. Najam's (1996) suggestion of developing a paradigm where both parties (NGOs and constituents) 'are both clients simultaneously' to each other (p. 347), may be an ideal with SNDT from this study being a prime example – however, 'legislating' for such an approach is another matter.

The world view or *Weltanschauung* of an NGO has to reflect the necessary views of constituencies so that they are genuine and comfortable with the openness implicit in 'downward' accountability mechanisms. From a policy point of view, there is a strong argument for a re-examination of the accountability relationship of NGOs to move the debates away from the accountability to their donors and supporters, towards looking at workable mechanisms to ensure accountability to their constituency in a way that enables them to be true to their values, while at the same time ensuring their constituencies can engage more fully in the development processes that affect them. This is an important area for both policy work and NGO discourse, if empowerment programs are to meet the real objective of the poor being able to challenge power relationships at all levels in their lives.

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ⁱ This paper is based on Kilby, P. (2006) 'Accountability for empowerment: dilemmas facing non-governmental organizations', *World Development*, 34(6):951-963.

ⁱⁱ In Karnataka the study looked at four NGOs; Gram Vikas, Myrada, RORES (Reorganisation of Rural Economy and Society), and Prakruthi, Chinyard, BGSS, KIDS (Karnataka Integrated Development Service), Good News, Indian Development Society, and Jagruti. In Maharashtra the NGOs studied were SNTD (Shreemati Nathibhai Damodar Thackersey) Women's University Pune Campus, Centre for Continuing Education, Disha Kendra, YUVA (Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action), and Maharashtra Gram Vikas.