

Posted: Feb 15, 2005 8:11 AM

Defending Accountability in NGOs, Paul Wapner

The author argues that critics exaggerate the lack of accountability of NGO's and give states more credit for accountability than they deserve. He points out that nearly 40% of worldwide regimes are not democratic and reminds that accountability in democratic states is far from perfect. Wapner claims that NGOs and states are both imperfectly accountable and that they are accountable in different ways. He identifies a number of forms of accountability for NGOs: 1) to members and donors who can vote with their feet and with their \$, 2) to Directors or Advisors who provide outside oversight 3) to other NGOs because of the need to collaborate, 4) to IGOS to gain participation rights, 5) to states, if NGOs want to be insiders or partners in policy formation. Wapner also suggests that the need to maintain credibility for survival makes NGOs accountable, and that the need to be responsible globally (rather than just in one state) creates greater accountability demands for NGOs than for states. Wapner's general point is well-taken, but he glosses over many details of this NGO accountability, including: the fact that most NGO's aren't membership organizations, that Boards may represent narrow interests, and may, or may not actually provide much oversight, that accountability to the state, as he describes it, may raise more accountability questions than it answers.

NGO Performance and Accountability: Introduction and Overview, Edwards and Hulme.

The authors say that the growth in numbers and size of NGOs is dues, at least in large part to the "increasing popularity of NGOs with governments and official aid agencies." He calls this the New Policy Agenda and identifies two beliefs: 1) market and private initiatives are the preferred mechanism for economic growth and service provision, and 2) NGOs are a vehicle for democratization. They are concerned that NGOs may not be able to be effective with both the economic and political goals the New Policy Agenda – that achieving economic goals (which may require large scale bureaucratic and hierarchical agencies, greater dependency on governments) will conflict with the political goals. They identify issues that make accountability difficult for NGOs and conclude that accountability needs to be negotiated among NGO stakeholders. Given that they raise concerns that official donor agencies "may reorient accountability upwards, away from the grassroots, and bias performance-measurement towards criteria defined by donors".

By What Authority? The Legitimacy and Accountability of Non-governmental Organizations, Slim

Slim reviews NGO efforts to wrestle with the issue of accountability. He argues that within the NGO community voice ("do NGOs speak as the poor, with the poor, for the poor or about the poor") has replaced fundraising /administration ratios as the key indicator of NGO legitimacy. He notes that neither is a measure of NGO effectiveness, but rather of their probity and for their legitimacy/credibility. He says legitimacy is derived from morality and law, and generated by "veracity, tangible support and more intangible good will". Slim argues the onus is on NGOs to respond to critics by demonstrating that they can be legitimate without being democratic. He defines accountability as "the process by which an NGO holds itself openly responsible for what it believes, what it does and what it does not do in a way which shows it involving all concerned parties and actively responding to what it learns". His view is that stakeholder analysis is a key first step to designing appropriate accountability mechanisms. Accountability is more than financial accounting, it's about "reporting on relationships, intent, objectives, method and impact". The basic framework offers a helpful way of thinking about how to design accountability mechanisms and recognizes the need to tailor accountability to the

realities of each organization.

Restructuring World Politics: The Limits and Asymmetries of Soft Power, Sikkink

Sikkink argues that NGOs democratize international institutions “by providing voices and ideas that were previously absent”. “Transnational advocacy groups contribute to restructuring world politics by altering the norm structure of global governance.” This is soft power or communicative power and relies on persuasive information and communication. The “stress is on changing discourses and practices” “by creating and publicizing new norms and discourses, transnational advocacy groups help restructure world politics.” She says NGOs need to address accountability issues in order to enhance their own internal democracy as they democratize international institutions, although she says NGOs should not be measured against an ideal standard, but rather against the standards achieved by existing international institutions. Against that standard, Sikkink thinks NGOs measure up pretty well. Although Sikkink does talk about the importance of accountability, she raises the concern that more democracy within the groups will impede their effectiveness. Sikkink’s emphasis is somewhat different than the other authors, she seems to emphasize that NGOs need to address accountability issues to maintain their legitimacy in the face of attacks from states, more than for their intrinsic importance.