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02/15/2005 Readings: Accountability and Legitimacy of NGOs

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The four main readings, collectively, provide a good overview of the complexity of two terms that pervade NGO discourse: accountability and legitimacy. These readings underscore that there is hardly a consensus about either the definition or the relative importance of these two terms. The chief messages that emerged from the readings, as I understood them, are the following:

Wapner (2003) makes a compelling case that the thrust of the accountability argument should not be an attempt to judge whether NGOs are more or less accountable than states, but rather, an attempt to dissect the ways in which NGOs are “differently accountable” compared to states. Wapner analyzes six ways in which NGOs are held accountable differently than states: (i) loss of membership for NGOs happens at very different rate than it does for state officials (ii) members vote for NGOs with their pocketbooks (iii) boards of directors play a critical in NGOs (iv) other NGOs and IGOs fulfill the role of checks on power and constituencies of another NGOs (v) NGOs must be responsive to IGOs that they seek to collaborate with (vi) NGOs are, to a certain extent, accountable to states.

Sikkink (2002) offers a thought-provoking account on “soft power” and the role of NGOs within the realm of soft power. Of the various definitions of soft power that Sikkink offers, only one seemed to resonate with me: Sikkink quotes Keohane and Nye stating that the “capacity of nonstate actors to contribute to restructuring world politics by altering the norm structure...is called “soft power””. One of the norms that Sikkink focuses on is democracy. Sikkink contends that for many organizations, democracy has become a “master frame” and this, in turn, has turned the attention of many to the internal democracy of NGOs.

Slim (2002) focuses on international NGOs and the notion of accountability. Slim’s analysis underscores an NGOs “voice” as one of the most hotly debated areas of NGO accountability and legitimacy. He distinguishes between voice accountability and performance accountability. The latter refers to the idea of an NGO either speaking as,for,with, or about the poor. Slim’s is the only article that provides working definitions of legitimacy and accountability and list of the sources of each.

Edwards and Fowler (2002) put forth, what I think, is the most coherent and compelling argument of the four readings. It is both useful and insightful to reflect on the evolution of NGOs with respect to a concrete policy or event. The specific policy that Edwards and Fowler focus on is the ‘New Policy Agenda’. The authors explain that the two central tenets (organized around neo-liberal economics and liberal democratic theory) to the New Policy Agenda is (i) that markets and private initiatives, as opposed to government intervention, are the most efficient mechanisms for achieving economic growth and providing services and (ii) NGOs are perceives as key vehicles for democratization under the rubric of the New Policy Agenda. Edwards and Fowler process to describe the way that this recent reality has had profound impacts on the accountability and legitimacy of NGOs.

Questions based on the Readings:

- One comment that Wapner (2003) makes that merits further discussion is that “NGOs are arguably accountable to global citizenry than states”. To what extent is this a widely held belief? What are some of the arguments supporting and refuting such a claim?
- The “voice” of an NGO as describes by Slim (2002) is an interesting way to begin to think about NGO legitimacy and accountability issues. How would one define the voice of some of the leading international NGOs in the world today? Can an NGO have multiple voices; if so, what effects would multiple voices have

on legitimacy and accountability?

- Edwards and Fowler (2002) posit that given that there are few performance measures in NGO evaluation and no single bottom line, negotiating among stakeholders is central to accountability. How would one differentiate between effective and ineffective negotiating? How does one operationalize effective negotiating?