

Balancing NGO accountability in international development-a red herring?

What is accountability?
 -"Being called 'to account' to some **authority** for one's actions"
 (Mulgan 2000)

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What's interesting about accountability in development NGOs?

-Upward accountability to NGOs' donors tends to take precedence. Downward accountability to intended beneficiaries is often neglected (Edwards & Hulme, 1996).

-Raises fundamental issues for NGOs' raison d'être.

-Major focus in the last 15 years on increasing 'balanced' accountability, many initiatives, much goodwill but somehow, changes are not apparent.....why?



Understandings of accountability across all sectors problematic

-Accountability seen as a panacea "magic wand" (Ebrahim, 2007) by policy makers/practitioners

-Term 'accountability' is now used widely and its meaning is ambiguous. Nonetheless, seen as a good solution (even if the problems are not well understood)

-Literature shows that accountability is actually difficult and complex, and that its mechanisms can have serious perverse effects (which can fail to be noticed if it is assumed to be inherently positive), e.g. Hard to measuring performance, many information gaps between 'principals' and 'agents'.



Balanced accountability particularly challenging for NGOs

-The public sector should be accountable to voters, the private sector to customers, but NGOs face a structural barrier since the only 'authorities' that they are answerable to are donors and governments which provide funds and permission to operate.

-Intended beneficiaries within communities do not vote in NGOs or pay for goods or services. 'Downward' accountability to them is thus voluntary, which makes it an oxymoron, according to the widespread definition of accountability above which hinges on the concept of *authority*.

-Thus, donor priorities tend to dominate in NGO accountability as NGOs need external funds to survive.

"If you have your hand in another man's pocket, you must move when he moves". (African proverb)



-Yet within NGO accountability literature, this fundamental structural issue tends to be neglected (*the elephant in the room*).

Weak literature on accountability exists to guide NGOs

-Little is academic (mostly practitioners or commissioned academics)

-A-historical nature of literature, which fails to look at the past or explore possible structural issues (such as the funding issue)

-Normative and a-theoretical nature of literature which focuses on finding solutions, neglecting the issue of how accountability is understood

-Accountability initiatives/solutions are often proposed, but there is little literature on what happens when they are tried in practice.

So what's needed?

A theoretically-driven, historically situated study of **accountability conceptualisations and practices** within a development NGO.

My Research Question:

How is accountability conceptualised and practiced in development NGOs?

Elements of the research question:

- 1) How is accountability being conceptualised in development NGOs and how can we explain this?
- 2) How is accountability being practiced?
- 3) What are the implications of the conceptualisations for the practices?

Research Plan:

- ❖ A qualitative "intrinsic" **case study** (Stake, 2005)
- ❖ Using an **ethnographic** approach, particularly participant observation to study gaps between policy and practice
- ❖ Unit of analysis/case is an **accountability initiative** within a development NGO --an attempt at the practice of 'balanced accountability'

Case Selection:

act:onaid

-Development NGO ActionAid launched an accountability initiative, the Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS) in 2000 in an attempt to overcome 'clash' of accountabilities.

-ALPS is widely recognised as cutting edge (O'Dwyer & Unerman 2008, Jordan 2007) and internationally lauded for its intentions and principles.

-However, there has been little external research on ALPS-in-action, and no research that has asked how accountability is being understood by different ALPS stakeholders.

-I plan to spend 6 months with ActionAid Uganda studying the conceptualisation and implementation of ALPS.

-Uganda was initially considered to be one of the top implementers of the ALPS system amongst ActionAid's 35 country programmes, but has undergone significant change since 2003.

Methods:

- Semi-structured interviews with staff, beneficiaries, partners, donors
- Participant observation, especially of ALPS processes in action
- Document analysis of plans, strategies, reports

Mapping the Case Study:

