THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ACCOUNTABILITY

Workshop Report

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Organized collaboratively by:

ACCESS, CIVICUS and the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations

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Introduction

The workshop was designed and organized by CIVICUS, ACCESS and the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, collaborating through their work on civil society accountability. The objectives of the workshop were to explore some of the present and future accountability challenges faced by civil society and the steps that can be taken to advance the agenda.

Designing the workshop towards a vision of the future was intended to improve participants' conception of present priorities and to drive a debate on accountability that is rooted within civil society.

Initial remarks where provided by Thierno Kane, Director of Civil Society Organizations Division at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Thierno addressed the participants from the standpoint of a lifetime's experience as a civil society leader, and emphasized the potential for accountability to have a positive impact on those being held accountable. Thierno's opening remarks sparked a series of questions and comments from the group, through which key themes of civil society accountability were identified. The group then split into two working groups to explore the key challenges faced by civil society and then presented their results. Alnoor Ebrahim, from the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech University, brought the workshop to a close by highlighting the learning points and issues that emerged throughout the three-hour session.

Alejandro Litovsky presented ACCESS. Launched in September 2004, ACCESS aims to introduce an approach to accountability that profiles organizational performance in a way that engages NGOs and their stakeholders in a process of continuous learning. By facilitating cycles of organisational learning through field projects, ACCESS aims to create simple, reliable and appropriate mechanisms that track and communicating organisational performance. These reporting models will be context-specific, encourage transparency and strengthen accountability through effective stakeholder engagement. ACCESS is currently working in South Africa together with the grantees of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Shuttleworth Foundation's Innovation Bazaar; and the Southern African Grantmakers' Association (SAGA); and in the Philippines together with the Philippine Council for NGO Certification (PCNC).

These models and working methods will be openly shared with other organizations that wish to evolve their own systems, via a global learning network called Open Voices for Accountability and Learning (OVAL) where different civil society communities of learning will come together to share and reflect on different practices and tools. OVAL is developing the architecture to facilitate a global discussion about the principles that should drive civil society accountability. It is intended that southern organizations take both the discussion of principles and the development of tools to their own networks in the field, therefore linking the local and global processes in an open, inclusive and pluralistic way.

CIVICUS has been running a programme which seeks to foster NGO's awareness and capacity to establish and maintain their legitimacy and accountability so that they can take advantage of their growing opportunities to play constructive roles in social innovation and governance. For this, CIVICUS is working with the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations in a research project to determine the nature and extent of the accountability challenge faced by civil society. This analysis will provide a working framework for conceptualising issues around legitimacy and accountability of NGOs, where future responses to this challenge can be framed. Also, and in the interests of promoting a wider process of learning, it is envisioned that CIVICUS will be one of the main convenors of the OVAL network.

Keynote opening and discussion
With Thierno Kane

In the spirit of the World Social Forum, the opening remarks dealt with the issue of accountability of civil society from a political point of view.

Does engaging with our own accountability and reporting give us more power or render us powerless? To address this question, Thierno distinguished the internal and external dimensions of accountability.

(1) **Internal accountability:** Refers to the degree of internal democracy of an organization. What is the role of the board and staff of an organization in developing a culture of accountability that deals, for example, with the issue of leadership renewal in the organization? The issue of leadership renewal was emphasised by Thierno as being one of the most critical issues in civil society accountability.

(2) **External accountability**: The relationships with our partners, government, donors, international organizations, and constituencies. How do we ensure that this issue is well focused? Our understanding of accountability should not be to report to government, but to communicate what we do in an open way, which is meaningful for stakeholders and for the organization itself. As civil society organizations work on issues of the 'public good', they are first and foremost accountable to society.

In improving external accountability, organizations need to communicate their vision of change and report to society. However, it is important that powerful stakeholders, such as donors, do not influence the vision and mission of the organizations they support.

(3) **Reporting:** It is important to understand how information relationships are established. This deals with the issue of who gives what information to whom. There is a need for reciprocity of accountability with donors. Accountability should not be thought of as unilateral but as a relational process.

Looking forward: civil society accountability in 2020

Thierno shared a vision of the future, in which civil society has been strengthened through the sharing of information and relationships amongst civil society organizations has been strengthened. In that vision, the North-South civil society dialogue has evolved and northern organizations have become more accountable to their southern partners. Accountability is thus conceived as the driver of integration and empowerment, enabling southern NGOs to find ways in which to cooperate, network together and increase their influence.

The conversation that followed Thierno Kane's remarks allowed for the following issues to emerge:

- **It is not always easy to understand and identify who our stakeholders are:** NGOs stakeholders are defined in a complex way.[1] In the vision towards 2020, a participant expressed that civil society accountability mechanisms should enable leaders and organizations to identify and adequately relate to its stakeholders. Another participant expressed the need for *inclusive* systems of accountability, which give the excluded communities the voice to participate in these processes.

- **A broader view of civil society organizations and their accountability:** A participant shared her vision that in 2020 civil accountability mechanisms should be also used by popular movements to acquire voice and legitimacy, and to communicate the ways in which they are contributing to social change.

- **Accountability, empowerment and legitimacy:** Does engaging with accountability mean that civil society loses power? The discussion evolved around the idea of accountability as a matter of responsibility to society and the enhancement of legitimacy and leverage for organizations working on issues of public good.

  The group considered the factors that promote and challenge the legitimacy of civil society organizations, and how those have changed over time. Thirty years ago civil society legitimacy emanated directly from its work for the public good. However, the increasing power and influence of civil society organizations over public matters and decision-making processes has made the need for legitimacy more prominent. Corruption scandals, however isolated cases, have challenged the bases for civil society legitimacy and claims of representation. The emerging response was to find ways to deal with one's accountability without loosing contact with one's mission.

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[1] "Stakeholders are those individuals and groups that affect and/or are affected by the organisation and its activities. The operational definition of stakeholders used here does not, therefore, include all people who may have knowledge or views about the organisation. Organisations will, nevertheless, have many stakeholders, each with distinct types and levels of involvement, and often with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests and concerns. This is why organisations need systematic processes for managing this complexity in ways that build accountability to stakeholders and overall performance" In AccountAbility (2003) *AA1000 Assurance Standard:* www.accountability.org.uk

Working Groups Session

The accountability challenge ahead

Groups identified present and future challenges relating to civil society accountability and the steps that could be taken to advance the agenda:

1. **Accountability and legitimacy:** Accountability was considered a necessity for civil society. NGOs are being attacked in different countries on the basis of their lack of accountability and, in the absence of accountability systems for civil society, isolated scandals contribute to weaken the sector as a whole. The imposition of accountability standards or regulations may alienate grassroots organizations; while the adoption of accountability systems that enhance an organization's potential to improve performance can considerably contribute to its legitimacy.

2. **Disclosing information on organizational areas that need improvement:** While many organizations work hard to improve their organizational development, there was recognition of an organization's fear of accountability on the basis of being questioned or criticised for the information they disclose. In this view, accountability systems need to reflect areas for organizational improvement in a way that does not threaten their credibility. Alternatively, organizations can be reluctant to disclose their sources of support if they sense this will work to their detriment.

3. **Availability of resources for building systems:** Building and implementing accountability mechanisms usually prove resource-intensive for an organization. Small and medium organizations, especially in developing countries, find it hard to obtain resources for this. There is also a lack of knowledge (in the form of road maps) of how to do it.

4. **Uncertainty about legal regulation:** It is usually the case with small and medium organizations in developing countries that they are not clear of what laws apply to them. This is particularly problematic when national legal systems do not facilitate the institutional development of NGOs and offer contradictory regulation.

5. **Different accountabilities:** Three dimensions of accountability where explored:
   - "Upward accountability" to donors is usually prioritised by existing mechanisms.
   - "Sideways accountability" to an organization's staff and partners needs to be developed within internal processes and in relation to the organization's mission.
   - "Downwards accountability" to the parties that the organization sets out to serve. This is a priority for the civil society accountability agenda;

accountability systems need to integrate stakeholder engagement with communities.

In all of these, practices to promote accountability must support an organization's mission.

6. **Uncertainty about who are the organization's stakeholders:** Accountability mechanisms should enable an organization to identify its stakeholders and also to develop ways in which to relate and communicate with them effectively.

7. **Triple bottom line:** Organizations need to understand and communicate their economic, social and environmental impact.

8. **The accountability of grassroots organizations:** Grassroots organizations are not in a position to develop sophisticated and expensive mechanisms of accountability. The groups found the need to develop simple tools that grassroots organizations can use to develop their accountability.

9. **Tools and certification processes emerging from civil society:** The groups expressed the need for tools and certification processes to evolve from within civil society, since there are distinct characteristics associated with social change organizations that are not reflected in tools developed by other sectors. The groups identified different experiences that can offer valuable knowledge: Philippine Council for NGO Certification (PCNC), the Balanced Scorecard, OSANGO and SEDO in Paraguay.

Conclusions
By Alnoor Ebrahim

The central issue in the discussions about civil society accountability seems to be the question of power. Are we doing accountability for the benefit of others or ourselves?

Civil society accountability mechanisms are becoming increasingly popular and are an effort to regain social trust. These evolve generally around two categories:

(1) Transparency and disclosure, mainly promoted by governments and donors.
(2) Certification and self-certification mechanisms.

Alnoor identified both categories as being, in some way, a reactive response to the accountability challenge. In his view, there is a need to go beyond reaction to conceive accountability as an 'enabler' that enhances an organization's capacity to achieve its objectives and leverage to engage with resources and partners.

While there is no one-size-fits-all model, there is a need to take ownership of the way we think about the accountability process. In this sense, it was highlighted that stakeholder participation in the accountability process can contribute to change an organization. The idea of 'participation' needs to be incorporated into our thinking about accountability.

Drawing from the workshop, Alnoor highlighted three main points:

1. **Accountability and participation:** While it is critical to promote civil society accountability, we have to acknowledge that for us to be accountable to others we must be, first and foremost, accountable to ourselves. This entails a critical reflection to see, for instance, if the way we perceive others' needs is the same way others perceive it themselves. There are examples of organizations working to change the reality of a community in a way that is not consistent with the needs that community identifies for itself. Here, the issue of participation is crucial.

2. **Build 'meaningful' systems of accountability**: We need to avoid the complexity of indicators where simpler systems will work. We need to take into account what systems make sense for different organizations in particular contexts. An additional issue is how to promote these simpler systems with donors.

3. **Promote accountability for achieving our global mission:** Civil society globally has the mission of achieving greater levels of social justice. The empowerment of excluded and marginalised groups must be an integral part of the way we look at an organization's accountability.

Ways forward

This workshop is part of a wider and ongoing dialogue on the principles that can drive civil society accountability. The dialogue is being led by collaboration of several organizations and is framed to enable broad and global participation. It is intended for an increasing number of organizations to contribute to evolve the discussion on civil accountability principles by taking it to their local contexts and partners and feeding back to the OVAL network. Threading local and global spaces in a meaningful way will be one of the key characteristics of a pluralistic, inclusive and diverse dialogue process.

The OVAL network will support this dialogue, where principles for accountability will be discussed alongside the exchange and discussion of practices and resources that embody an understanding of civil society accountability as an enabler of social change.

Please contact us if you wish to explore ways of taking this debate forward: Alejandro Litovsky, alejandro@accountability.org.uk or David Kalete, kalete@civicus.org.