

Berlin Civil Society Center

EXPLORING MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

19 May 2009



OUTCOME

On 11 and 12 May 2009 accountability experts from 27 civil society organisations gathered at the Berlin Civil Society Center in order to explore mutual accountability with a focus on accountability towards beneficiaries.

The workshop started with producing a picture of the state of civil society organisations' accountability towards partners and beneficiaries and, on that basis, identified steps to promote accountability and ways to overcome internal and external obstacles. Some of the key findings are:

The Meaning of Accountability

From early times onward accountability had the function of securing responsibility and stability - not equality.

Accountability is not the final objective. Final objectives are improved performance and, beyond that, improved impact. Better accountability can – but does not automatically – contribute to improved performance/impact.

Accountability is based on mutuality and obligation. If one can choose whether one wants to be held accountable or not, this is not accountability. Mutual accountability means sharing of power.

Mutual accountability plays an important part in the Paris/ Accra processes: donors and recipients should be equally accountable towards each other. The workshop concept talks about a cascading system of accountability. To date, much of this accountability flows upwards towards the donors and very little downwards towards the recipients.

Being accountable is at the core of all CSO work: civil society organisations do not have a choice of being accountable or not – they exist to promote accountability.

INGO Accountability Charter

The INGO Accountability Charter aims at being the umbrella for INGOs' accountability. The Charter aims at integrating the various (sub-)sector specific accountability systems like the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) and others but does not want to replace these. Further effort has to be made to communicate the INGO Accountability Charter's intended function.

On the basis of an interim reporting framework signatories have started reporting against the INGO Accountability Charter. A formal reporting framework is being developed in cooperation with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).

The INGO Accountability Charter's main focus is on accountability towards donors. Accountability towards recipients needs to be strengthened. In this context the workshop "Exploring Mutual Accountability" can play an important role.

The State of Accountability towards Partners and Beneficiaries

There are clear indications that civil society organisations' accountability towards their beneficiaries is deficient: the 2007 Edelman Trust Barometer found that in developing countries (where many CSOs have most of their projects and spend most of their funds) business is more trusted than civil society organisations (while in industrialised countries civil society organisations are more trusted than business). In order to re-establish trust in the countries they work in CSOs will need to strengthen their accountability towards partners and beneficiaries.

With the development of two-way (or, in fact multi-way) communication on the Internet and the rise of so called virtual charities a basis for direct, mutual accountability has been created. And, for this new system to function, direct and credible (e.g. measurable, documentable) accountability is crucial. As a result donors' and beneficiaries' accountability expectations of each other will probably increase. Traditional CSOs will need to provide an answer to these developments.

One of the key causes for project failures is lack of participation of the intended beneficiaries in project design, implementation and evaluation. Another cause is lack of ownership on the side of beneficiaries. Stronger accountability towards beneficiaries will address these challenges and thus help increase the quality of projects.

Many CSOs are at the very beginning of defining an accountability process towards their beneficiaries. Generally accountability towards beneficiaries is further developed in the humanitarian sector while participation of beneficiaries in programming is stronger in the development sector. There is general agreement among the workshop's round table groups that accountability towards beneficiaries and partners needs to be strengthened considerably.

Recently a number of CSOs have made accountability towards partners and beneficiaries a priority. The workshop received reports about activities focusing on accountability in Action Aid International, Amnesty International, Oxfam International and Terre des Hommes Germany.

Strengthening Accountability towards Partners and Beneficiaries

Crucial for the development of better accountability is a much more open approach to communication. CSOs have to learn to publicly talk about their challenges and their mistakes. This requires a different (= more open) approach towards the media. Using the Internet as a platform for CSO accountability will both, require and produce more openness.

The Internet also presents us with the option of using a global "social market place" to promote self-regulation as a basis for stronger accountability. Examples like Kiva or Betterplace show both, the potential and the risks of a vastly un-governed accountability.

Another indispensable element of in depth accountability is a more balanced power relation between the partners involved. As long as nearly all power is with the donor and very little with the beneficiary accountability will remain a one-way exercise.

Other key tools for strengthening accountability are establishing peer reviews, setting and implementing transparency standards, introducing a participatory approach in programming and launching a complaints system.

Challenges on the Way towards Stronger Accountability

In many CSOs accountability towards beneficiaries is still a low priority. This is reflected e.g.: in the fact that accountability is lacking as a key element in the strategic plan; in a lack of interest at senior management level; in a lack of funds to promote accountability; etc.

Often we can observe institutional resistance to change. Resistance to developing better accountability may be due to worries about a loss of power or the explicit lack of willingness to cease power.

Changes in CSO governance to bring about better accountability meet resistance because of the fear that governance may become too complex and that the decision making process will take too long and/or not produce consistent decisions.

Possible Learnings from the Corporate Sector

Companies are involving their stakeholders in joint development of business standards, joint corporate citizenship projects, supervision of the companies' activities, early warning systems detecting conflicts with the companies' business, in the search for new products and the discovery of new market segments.

One of the key elements of successful business accountability is timely reporting (most CSOs take much too long to produce the reports about joint projects which their partners in business need for their CSR reporting).

Companies think in measurable return on investment (ROI). In most companies there is an appropriate framework in place through which policies and procedures are defined and quantitative as well as qualitative information is gathered. Companies have internal control systems through which financial as well as non-financial information is being monitored. CSOs could adapt some of these approaches to their own accountability requirements.

Developing a Framework for Accountability towards Partners and Beneficiaries

It is important to secure a culture of accountability within the organisation. All stakeholders should be embedded into this culture. Therefore mechanisms of involvement should be identified (e.g. staff training on accountability; implementation of accountability mechanisms in programmes).

Without strong and determined leadership, accountability will not develop. The organisation's "political will" to prioritise accountability is crucial. The courage to also publicise negative information – e.g. highly critical feedback from partners and beneficiaries – is indispensable.

Incentives are needed to promote accountability. The most effective incentive driving developments towards more accountability is disclosure, both at a personal and organisational level. Open communication about successes and failures will bring about changes in reaction to the findings. Other incentives can come from best practice in management and governance.

Some of the most promising tools to implement a system of mutual accountability can be found on web 2.0: web-based audio visuals, planning tools and voting systems.

Probably the most crucial question is the question of ownership and power: to whom are we accountable and who "owns" the project. Sharing ownership means sharing power. And the sharing of power is at the heart of every credible accountability system.

One of the round tables proposes to establish accountability systems based on the following rights:

- Right of access to information
- Right to direct resources
- Right to redress
- Right to govern
- Right to organise a collective voice

Generally we need to replace the existing complex and static accountability systems by dynamic and less bureaucratic ones. Existing accountability networks and projects should coordinate more closely in developing tools for implementing a dynamic and impact focussed system of mutual accountability.