



Legitimacy & accountability

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Fact sheet 2

Definitions:

- **Legitimacy** - Legitimacy is the right to be and do something in society. It provides a sense that an organisation is lawful, admissible, and justified in its chosen course of action. It refers to the perceptions by key stakeholders that NGOs are justifiable and appropriate.
- **Accountability** - Accountability is a responsibility to answer for particular performance expectations to specific stakeholders. It describes the rights and responsibilities that exist between people and the institutions that affect their lives, including governments, civil society and market actors.

Why are legitimacy & accountability important?

Strengthening the role and voice of civil society and improving NGO development effectiveness relate directly to issues of legitimacy and accountability. If NGOs leave questions about their legitimacy and accountability unanswered, they risk undermining organisational identities and capacities that depend on values and voluntary commitments.

How do you determine legitimacy? There are three types of NGO legitimacy:

- Official legitimacy as determined through legislation and government recognition
- Democratic legitimacy is determined in relation to NGO primary constituencies and the public at large
- Legitimacy of purpose is determined by expertise and value added in particular in policy and programme areas.

How do you determine accountability?

Accountability in NGOs is very complex and multi-dimensional. NGOs are usually not accountable to any one set of clearly defined stakeholders.

NGO accountability lines run in four directions:

- **upwards** to donors, governments and foundations
- **downwards** to their primary constituents - poor and marginalised populations
- **inwards** to the organisation's staff, members and Board
- **horizontally** to peers and partners.

Accountability issues

Full accountability can be impossible: Dealing with all the different accountability claims may be extremely difficult. Where stakeholders have different or contradictory interests, being fully accountable to all of them is impossible

Loose downward accountability: Rather than being grounded in contract or law, NGO accountability is often shaped by a moral obligation rooted in their organisation's mission and values.

Upward accountability bias: Accountability may be skewed upwards towards the most powerful stakeholders (governments & donors) weakening downward accountability. As a result of this, the legitimacy and accountability of NGOs may become disconnected from its democratic base.

Accountability in North/South NGO relations: Northern NGOs need to demonstrate they are demand-driven and are responding to the needs and capacities of their Southern counterparts. Southern NGOs should guard against dependency and upward accountability at the expense of horizontal and downward accountability.

For more info:

Brown D. and Jagadananda, "Civil Society Legitimacy and Accountability: Issues and Challenges", World Alliance for Citizen Participation and Center for Youth and Social Development, 2007.
http://www.civicus.org/new/media/LTA_ScopingPaper.pdf