



| Working Seminar • 17 December 2008 |



Focusing on civil society organisations' accountability, responsibility, ethics, governance, legitimacy, transparency...

**Citizens' Accountability:  
A Dangerous Burdensome Process  
Or A New Window for Improved Impact?**

**Report**



## Participants

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**Initiative:** The workshop was an initiative of the Foundation for Future Generations, the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation and the Bernheim Foundation, with the collaboration of the Gresea.

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## Introduction

Held in Brussels on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008, at the Café de Fiennes, the workshop aimed to pinpoint through a participatory process the main challenges – burdensome & dangerous or full of potentially stimulating prospects – of the current debate (and process) with regard to “citizens' accountability”, for short.

Following a short power-point enhanced (cf. appendix) introduction by Tanguy Vanloqueren (Foundation for Future Generations) and Erik Rydberg (Gresea) and a dynamic summary of the objectives of the workshop by Barbara de Radiguès (Atanor), the participants shared their experiences in the matter and split up in four working groups to select, for further discussion, the core issues involved.

Several items deemed problematic and noteworthy emerged:

- Technical problems such as: is there but one method to ensure accountability & how is one to assess which one is best?
- Fundamental soul-searching exercises such as: do we really want to be part of this accountability process or is it only a matter of compliance (and then, to whom?)
- Quasi-judicial questions such as: should the process be framed by voluntary charters and the like or by binding regulations?
- Political aspects such as the definition of criteria measuring CSO representation and how does that link up with legitimacy: same thing?
- Practical issues such as: how do CSOs look beyond the simple rules of the game in order to use this new tool for better capacity-building;
- Lastly but certainly not “leastly”, prospective interrogations with regard to the long-term dimensions of the accountability process...

Out of these, four large areas of debate were chosen for deeper discussion, again, through four ad hoc working groups brain-storming separately in preparation for the plenary debate.

In order of appearance, these four issues subsequently involved

### 1. Why do we, CSOs, wish to be accountable? And, if so, what would our legitimacy be based upon?

This question does, naturally, come first. If we know the answers to these two related questions, we will know what to do next.

In its approach to this issue, the working group identified two specific lines of enquiry:

- Line number one can be summed up by the external pressures CSOs are subjected to, i.e. requirements to be met that are set by third parties (politicians, media, corporate...) asking CSOs to be dutifully accountable of each and every action they undertake (the backdrop, here, is the increased role played by CSOs in public and political decision-making arenas, but also a grass-root call for more participatory democracy;
- Line number two is, on the other hand, more “internal”, i.e. related to solving problems linked to the implementation of CSOs missions in order to increase their own impact and, thus, among others, by being be more accountable to their beneficiaries...

Linked to the former, the legitimacy issue, in turn, raised many thought-provoking areas of enquiry and, especially, with regard to its definition. What should CSO legitimacy be based on and, thereby, be defined by?

"Legitimacy" can mean a great many different things. The participants identified a series of elements of answer:

- CSOs legitimacy comes from the notion of *citizenship*. The action of CSOs is seen within the context of active citizenship and participatory democracy;
- CSOs legitimacy comes from knowledge and experience. The ad hoc working group noted that this criteria cannot suit all organisations and needs to be nuanced, as it would mean that a brand new organisation, f.i., will have no or very little legitimacy at the start;
- CSOs legitimacy comes from all or part of the following: publicly made CSO statements and objectives, knowledge accumulated on the field, partnerships, public support, transparency to the objectives, the internal functions, methods, actions, results (cf. Oxfam Belgium's Statement of legitimacy and accountability: although this statement doesn't fit all CSOs, the working group did appreciate this text very much.)

(Available online: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/accounts/legitimacy.html>)

## 2. What does accountability encompass?

### 3. And how is accountability linked to representation?

The second and third working group reflecting on these issues found that accountability encompasses:

- Firstly, three different aspects, viz. responsibility (feeling responsible), transparency and liability (references to rules: ethical, social, political...);
- Secondly, the distinction to be made between "internal accountability" (with regard to your members, board, general assembly ...) and external accountability to third parties (public authorities, donors, beneficiaries, public opinion and so on). Added to this, there's also the question of the CSOs paid teams and whether these workers should be regarded as "internal" or "external" parties: sometimes internal and external accountability may contradict each other, given the real-life constraints. The key here is how to deal with conflicting priorities;
- Thirdly, an approach of accountability that analyses the issue with regard to the CSO objectives (long, medium, short term), to its means (are you efficient?), and to its methods.

Investigating the links between accountability and representation (and the issue of participation), the working group set forth the following observations:

- CSOs should state publicly the people they propose to represent and, quite a different proposition, who and what they work for, and how. They (usually, but not always) propose to represent the interests of their members or "constituents", in the framework of a general cause (f.i. "animal welfare" ...), that is not for the sole sake of their own organisations' future welfare.
- CSOs should, at least, be accountable to the people they've set out to represent and, better, also to those that may be affected by their actions ("beneficiaries", "stakeholders", etc.) In this respect, it would be useful to distinguish internal accountability (members) and external accountability (downward: beneficiaries; upward: sponsors and authorities; horizontal: peer organisations);
- The working group expressed the view that a typology of organisations (at least a basic one) could help CSOs to see more clearly: there are important differences

between f.i. service-delivery CSOs and interest groups, whether they are of the advocacy kind (such as Amnesty) or of the representative kind (such as consumer organisations). A single CSO may however belong to several categories. The degree of representation varies greatly between these categories.

- When CSOs express a concern that exists in society, they are not speaking on behalf of their constituents the way politicians would do. Often, decision-makers do not distinguish between these two aspects of representation.
- Back to the roots: what does represent actually mean? To represent = making present again, show something or somebody that isn't present there. In that sense, you can speak for a category of persons without being part of them or having them as members. If CSOs are "spokespeople", they should, however, encourage people to speak for themselves – they do not have a monopoly on "citizens voices".

#### 4. How do we take the long-term picture into account?

Last but certainly not least, the long-term perspective, uncluttered by all present constraints, whether donor-induced, institutionally abducted or downloaded as the latest trendy craze. This working group had the honour, and pleasure, to lift the debate to new heights. As to the matter of how do we take care of the long-term dimension of CSO accountability in order to achieve real change in society, we'll have, again and alas, to be content with its "shorthand" result...

The views expressed here and debated during the plenary were:

- We – CSOs included – live in a "quick-fix culture", requiring immediate measurable results: long-term perspectives are rarely taken into account.
- A great many CSOs think and act (forcibly, often) in a project-orientated framework, due among others to the donors' short funding cycles (3-5 years at most).
- Product-oriented impact, i.e. "projectisation" of development work and governance issues precludes any analysis of the negative impact immediate results may have in the long run (f.i. delivering access to drinking water in remote areas is fine, but not taking care of the cleaning and maintenance can later lead to the development of diseases);
- CSOs need feedback in order to correct previous decisions. They need to measure, evaluate. They must therefore set up feedback structures at the beginning of the project, in order to evaluate it in the long term, many years later.
- CSOs relationships with public authorities at all levels need to be independent from public funding if they want to enjoy real freedom of speech. Consequently, CSOs should find diverse sources of financing, what can be a long term objective.
- There is a clear relationship between the degree to which CSOs are driven by external factors and their difficulty to be accountable.

#### Additional issues

Other questions raised during the workshop, though not deemed a priority for further discussions, may be listed as noteworthy. They include:

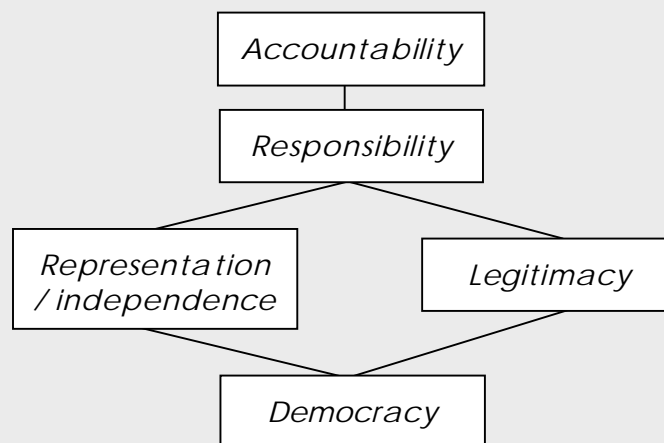
- How do we set ethical criteria for our fundraising?
- How do we relate democracy and efficiency?
- How do we go beyond written procedures and rules?
- Would it be useful to apply one standardised method to deal with CSO accountability? And would we assess it? What is our position with regard to the idea of a voluntary but binding accountability charter? (Binding: i.e. controlled by NGOs) And would one Charter fits all?

## Concluding remarks

At the end of the workshop, Erik Rydberg (Research Group for an Alternative Economic Strategy, GRESEA) took a 'helicopter view' to single out some of the key lessons and perspectives of the day. No easy task, given the manifold richness of the debates and the numerous vistas thereby opened: this will be each and everyone's task through further networking.

One way to sum up this workshop is, in plain English, that we'd all like an easy way out – give us solutions, please! It's only natural. We all feel the pressure to move forward and act. But the accountability issue goes much further than that, it raises fundamental questions that needs to be addressed – a necessary process to which this seminar offered a modest contribution.

So, to conclude on the fundamentals – and this entails at the outset to take nothing for granted – we would be well advised to start with a complete re-think. Here's the picture...



What story does it tell?

Clearly this: that we usually start (top down!) with the matters that ought to be end result of the thought process.

Indeed, we start with "technicalities" (what kind of accountability? responsibility to whom? and so on and so forth), enlarging the concept range to broach matters dealing with legitimacy and representation.

Strenuously so, because this enlargement is in fact restrictively obstructed and predetermined by the technical framework chosen at the outset – in order, finally, to come across the one big issue from which (bottom up!) we should have started in the first place! The **democracy** issue: what is it to us? how do we define it? how will we make it work? When we'll find an answer to this enquiry (no easy process...), the rest will follow suit.

## Additional resources & information

A very short list of additional resources and information introduced during the working seminar.

### • **Slideshow presented at the working seminar**

Taking a helicopter view on the responsibility of citizen associations and some ongoing initiatives: fundamental questions and further elements to make one's own mind when addressing the debate on the accountability and responsibility of citizen associations.

Available on

<http://www.foundationfuturegenerations.org/index2.php?section=news&ID=84>



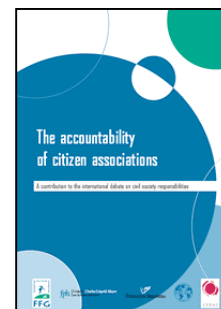
### • **Publication « *The accountability of citizen associations. A contribution to the international debate on civil society responsibilities* ».**

A European survey laid the foundations for this critical publication on the responsibility, ethics and governance of civil society associations. It has involved dozens of representatives from civil society organisations and platforms of NGOs across Europe and at European level, through workshops and interviews. The survey has been carried out since 2003 by the Foundation for Future Generations in partnership with the Bernheim Foundation, the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation, the CEDAC and the GRESEA.

This publication takes a helicopter view and clearly settles down the challenges of citizens associations accountability and governance.

Available in English and French on

<http://www.foundationfuturegenerations.org/index2.php?section=publication&ID=28>



### • **Good third sector governance across Europe**

An initiative of the Euclid Network, that is to be followed in 2009. More information on

<http://www.euclidnetwork.eu/events.php?id=64>

### • **CSO effectiveness**

An ongoing process led by Concord. More information on [www.cso-effectiveness.org](http://www.cso-effectiveness.org)