

Communities, NGOs and Accountability

Briefing Paper 2: Strengthening the Accountability of NGOs

The Community Driven Accountability Study

Oxfam has been working with Monash University on a 3 year research project in Cambodia, exploring how communities impacted by large-scale development projects, such as dams and urban infrastructure, understand accountability and its implementation, and how different stakeholders, including NGOs, influence and shape this process. The research, funded by the Oxfam-Monash partnership, has been conducted in close partnership between Monash academics and researchers and development and human rights practitioners from Oxfam Australia and Equitable Cambodia.

The research examined three case studies of communities in different geographic locations in Cambodia, both rural and urban, and each affected by different projects or challenges to their way of life, and each with different levels and types of engagement with local and international NGOs. One part of the study was to examine how the NGOs who supported the affected communities viewed their own accountability to the communities and to other stakeholders.

The case study NGOs

- Oxfam Australia worked for almost twenty years implementing integrated community development projects in remote villages in Cambodia. The research study looked at two of these villages situated along the Mekong river in the provinces of Kratie and Stung Treng. The Oxfam approach was known as a tripartite system of program implementation in which the projects and activities were designed, developed and implemented by communities in partnership with Oxfam Australia and government counterparts at district level. The approach was seen to be beneficial in terms of facilitating interaction between the local authorities and communities, thereby strengthening community access to government services and decision makers and enabling the local government to have an improved understanding of the needs of the rural communities.
- The Boeung Kak lake community in Phnom Penh, known for their activism to keep their homes and land in the face of a luxury urban development project, was supported by a number of NGOs who, in the early years collaborated together as the Boeung Kak Lake Working Group. The NGO comprised human rights groups such as the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), local and international NGO working on housing and land rights, including Bridges Across Borders Cambodia (BABC), Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT) and the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), and a legal resource centre, the Community Legal Education Centre (CLEC). The NGOs supported the Boeung Kak communities to organize and mobilize, to clarify their demands and to create and implement an advocacy strategy which included high-level advocacy and lobbying of the World Bank.
- Villages in Sesan district in Stung Treng province currently face imminent resettlement from their ancestral villages as the Lower Sesan 2 dam project moves ahead. The NGOs involved with the Sesan communities include a wide range of actors, some working directly on water management and advocacy around dams, and others working more broadly on community-based natural resource management. At local level the communities work closely with local NGOs such as the Three Rivers Protection Network (3SPN), My Village (MVI) and the Cultural and Environment Preservation Association (CEPA). These NGOs in turn work with national organizations and networks, such as the NGO Forum Rivers Coalition of Cambodia (RCC), and in partnership with international NGOs such as Oxfam who provide funds and technical support.

What do we mean by NGO accountability?

In the context of globalization and rapid economic development, NGOs in Cambodia are becoming more and more involved in social, political and economic issues that require them to support poorer and more marginalized groups to seek accountability when impacted negatively by external development projects. This requires NGOs to work beyond the community with new stakeholders such as national and regional governments, companies and international finance institutions. NGOs who are working in these contexts have to be vigilant regarding their own accountability and legitimacy as they support communities to demand accountability from others. NGOs have to be able to demonstrate their own effectiveness, reliability and legitimacy as actors working towards the goal of good governance and equitable development.

However, accountability is a complex responsibility for NGOs as they are situated in the middle ground between multiple stakeholders to whom they must to some extent be accountable. It has been suggested that NGOs typically have about six different stakeholders to whom they could be accountable.¹ These include donor, governments, the general public, the NGO staff, other NGOs, social movements, beneficiaries of services, global organizations and the private sector. Often these lines of accountability between the different stakeholders pull in competing directions.

What NGOs said about their accountability

NGOs who took part in the research studied tended to mention three main groups of stakeholders to whom they felt they had to be accountable. These were donors, government and the communities with whom they work. Interestingly none of the NGOs mentioned accountability to other NGOs, although there was frequent mention of the need for NGOs to work together, which also requires some degree of accountability. Here we consider NGO accountability in terms of “upward”, “horizontal” and “downward” accountability.

- **Accountability to donors**

Upward accountability refers to the mechanisms for ensuring accountability between donors and NGOs. These accountability mechanisms are normally strong as there is a power relationship between the donors and the NGOs related to the transfer of funds. In order to maintain these funds and guarantee future funds, it is in the interest of NGOs to be answerable and responsive to the contractual obligations required by the donors. The NGOs interviewed during the research study stated that accountability to donors was important. Reporting, monitoring and evaluation, and auditing were all aspects of upward accountability to donors that NGOs are familiar with. However, NGOs also noted that there were many challenges in terms of being accountable to donors. The most commonly cited challenge was the concern that donor priorities are so influential that they often take priority over accountability to other stakeholders, primarily the communities with whom the NGOs work. Because of the power relationship between donors and NGOs and the reliance of NGOs on diminishing funds in an expanding market place, NGOs are often afraid to challenge donors, to highlight difficulties and failures and to provide more nuanced and truthful accounts of their activities. As one NGO donor commented, “I think that most people would think that if they are too critical their funding might stop.”

- **Accountability to Government**

¹ Jordan, Lisa. n.d. *Mechanisms for NGO Accountability*. GPPi Research Paper Series No.3. Berlin, Germany: Global Public Policy Institute

NGO accountability to government is also based on an upward power relationship. The government of Cambodia creates a legal and regulatory environment within which NGOs function and in this respect the government has significant leverage. NGOs interviewed during the study referred to their accountability to the government in terms of respecting and working within the laws of Cambodia, sharing information to government departments and being open and transparent on their activities. It was also noted that to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the government it was important to be professional, to work within the laws and to have strong-evidenced based research. Some NGOs also involved government departments in activities to build relationships of trust, develop capacities and in efforts to link communities to government. However, at a workshop held with representatives of the NGO community in February 2014, it became clear that some NGOs, particularly those involved in advocacy around government accountability, felt that it was challenging for them to be accountable to government. As one NGO representative noted, “In fact the government seems far away because they look at us as if we are the opposition.” Some NGOs also argued that they felt they didn’t have to be accountable to the government, indicating an increasing polarization between the more active rights-based organizations and the government.

- **Accountability to other NGOs**

In the current context in Cambodia there are many benefits from NGOs working more closely together on key issues and strengthening actions towards common goals. While in Cambodia there are some good examples of NGO collaboration and the emergence of networks designed to foster collaboration around key issues, it appears there is little consideration of what is sometimes termed as “horizontal” accountability between NGOs, and none of the NGOs interviewed mentioned their accountability to other civil society actors, including emerging community networks and social movements. While NGOs may not be in a position to hold each other to account for issues such as financial mismanagement and other contractual obligations required as part of upward accountability, there could be more accountability between NGOs in terms of transparency and representation issues in relation to downward accountability to communities. The research found that in some cases a lack of collaboration and accountability to others in the NGO sector can to some extent have a detrimental impact on communities, resulting in contradictory advice, NGO competition for target groups, and sometimes inaction, all of which detract from the importance of the issues facing the communities. This collaboration and accountability between NGOs is particularly important when there is a need to build strong alliances and political influence to challenge rights abuses and to hold more powerful actors to account.

- **Accountability to communities**

The NGOs interviewed during the research study, almost without exception, stated that their primary responsibility was to the needs and aspirations of the communities with whom they worked. This is often referred to as “downward” accountability. However it seems that while in theory accountability to communities is something NGOs strive towards, in reality it is one of the most challenging aspects of accountability for NGOs to define and implement.

According to the NGOs interviewed, it appears that the normal way of dealing with accountability to communities is through ongoing processes rather than through formal tools and mechanisms, as is the case with upward accountability. Accountability to communities is not based on an act of delegation of power (unlike the donor NGO relationship) but rather a relationship of credibility and reputation.

“Before we do something, we ask the villagers. The villagers take responsibility on their own first, they make their own decision first and then we follow. Our accountability is on the villagers decision making, we will not make the decision for

them, but will explain all the reasons to them, talk about the laws, economy etc. So right or wrong, they will not blame us. And what their decision is, we will follow them.” NGO Representative, Phnom Penh.

NGOs interviewed have established a number of processes and approaches to try and ensure accountability to communities they work with and to allow communities to be able to feedback to them on their work. These included:

- Relationship building with communities through regular close contact to gain an in-depth understanding of communities and so communities get to know the intent and actions of NGOs
- Sharing information about NGO projects (goals, plans and budgets)
- Using participatory and consultative processes to involve community members in making decisions about issues that affect them
- Holding regular meetings with communities to raise concerns
- Conducting monitoring visits with feedback requests from communities

Some NGOs had also tried out more formal accountability mechanisms, including erecting comment boxes in the community or establishing community advisory committees to enable the communities to give more formal feedback to the organization. While it was generally felt comment boxes were not very successful, the advisory committees were too new to have yielded any real results. Organizations who had taken advocacy and lobbying action on the behalf of communities also spoke of the importance of seeking informed and written consent from the communities prior to taking the action.

Strengthening NGO accountability

The research identified a number of challenges for NGOs in terms of strengthening their accountability to different stakeholders, and particularly their accountability downwards to communities. Listed below are some suggestions as to how NGOs can continue to improve their own accountability, particularly to the communities they serve.

- It is important for NGOs to provide more critical and honest feedback to donors, pointing out where donor priorities might conflict or detract from community priorities. Reports to donors should be more reflective of the realities and challenges being met in the field so that donors can also begin to better understand the situation and tailor their support in more practical ways.
- Understanding the need for accountability to government is important. As NGOs take a stronger role in promoting good governance, citizenship and accountability, it is important that they also demonstrate the same accountability and good governance. While NGOs may not always agree with government actions or policies, they are still required to work within the law of the country and to ensure communities they are supporting also abide by the law.
- The research found that collaboration can often be challenging when there are many NGOs working around similar issues in the same communities. Differing NGO priorities and activities can work against building the strong alliances needed to push for accountability and policy change, and multiple advice offered from NGOs in the same communities can be counter-productive. There is a need for NGOs to work together, to share resources, skills and experiences more consistently to support communities mobilize and network around rights issues.
- While donors and government demand accountability from NGOs, the research found that communities are not demanding accountability from NGOs and tend to have a sense of trust in the NGO being there to work for the good of the community. This perhaps indicates a lack of real analysis of NGO goals and how they align with their own. Linked to this, there is often a

power dynamic between NGOs and communities that prevent communities (who are often poorer, less educated and un-organized) holding organized, professional and salaried NGOs to account. There are also no obvious means and mechanisms by which communities can hold NGOs to account. Presenting NGO support as a service, requesting feedback on the service so that it can continually be improved, and providing mechanisms for communities to do so could perhaps counter these power dynamics to some extent.

- There is often an assumption by the NGOs themselves that because they are supporting and helping the community and providing professional expertise, that is adequate in terms of being answerable to the community. The research found there was a lack of real analysis by NGOs on the impacts and harm that their work had the potential to cause in communities. NGOs should continually document and learn from experiences of working with communities so that potential harms can be identified and minimized.
- It is often a challenge for NGOs to be accountable to the whole community rather than just a few community representatives who they work with on a regular basis. It would be beneficial for NGOs to establish methods, perhaps through specific peer groups (youth, women, elders, poorest of poor), to understand broader community concerns other than just working through key people such as community representatives.
- The mechanisms for NGO learning and downward accountability to communities are less well developed than the mechanisms for upward accountability. NGOs need to spend more time and effort focusing on developing mechanisms and learning around downward accountability.
- International NGOs who primarily work with affected communities through local NGO partners have a further challenge of ensuring accountability to communities when they are often distant from those communities. International NGOs need to discuss and develop strategies for ensuring downward accountability to communities with local NGO partners.
- In the face of rapid development, with communities being impacted by large-scale projects in a short time-frame, ensuring appropriate accountability mechanisms and processes such as adequate consultation, meaningful participation and feedback between the communities and NGOs can be problematic and perceived to be less important than securing accountability from the project developers. NGOs need to have a set of key, workable mechanisms that can guide their accountability to communities in these situations.